

Sparklehorse: And Your Horse Can Sing; Mark Linkous Steps out of the Mountain

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Somewhere in a wooded North Carolina valley, flanking the Great Smoky Mountains and blanketed in ever-present fog and dew, sits a humble warehouse dubbed Static King Studio. This is where the elusive Sparklehorse has been for the past four years, teasing and coaxing his new album into existence while remaining almost perfectly isolated from society.

Mark Linkous, the man behind the horse, practically gave up on writing and recording due to a debilitating depression and general disinterest in the creative process shortly after his third release *It's a Wonderful Life*. He stayed busy, though he notes "not real busy," producing Nina Persson's solo record (*A Camp*, Universal/Polydor Records), as well as producing a Daniel Johnston record.

Today, Linkous sits in the back of his tour bus across the street from Antone's, characteristically adorned in tinted glasses and disheveled hair with cigarettes close at hand. He has the collected demeanor of many rural Southerners, carefully picking his words, mulling over what he is thinking and what he wants to say. "It was intentional, moving down there," he says of his transition to North Carolina. "A really beautiful, unspoiled area, it's really more pure, pastoral..."



Sparklehorse and Static King had many homes over their eleven-year career, including a farmhouse in Virginia (his home state), New York, Los Angeles and a brief stint in Barcelona. However, this record was considerably unlike the previous records in location, development and style. *Dreamt For Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain* is more of a pop record, as pop as Sparklehorse could get anyway, and it is also a record of stark contrast. Sugary lullabies like "Some Sweet Day" back up against punchy rock songs like "Ghost in the Sky". Where other albums had a constant theme, this seems to skip around, aurally depicting a day in the sun but lyrically bounding between nature and death and promising love, sometimes intertwining the three.

"Some of the songs were written during the recording of *It's a Wonderful Life* and every time I put a pop song [on that album] it seemed like an anachronism so I held 'em for my next record," Linkous says, a record which was by design more up-beat—a divergence from the deliberate and steady tenacity of the previous two records.

Although some of the material for *Dreamt* was already recorded by producer Dave Fridmann (Mercury Rev) during previous *Wonderful Life* sessions (for example hidden track, "Morning Hollow," the Tom Waits collaboration), the new album was ironically the most difficult to write. "It was more like a survival instinct, I guess. I started writing more obviously optimistic and hopeful... it came out of desperation," he says, indicating his struggle with severe depression.

Major encouragement to get back into the studio came from friends sending records and Linkous' own revitalized interest in the mid-to-late Beatles albums. "I really started picking that apart," he says. "Still today, not just the songwriting but every aspect of recording those records is so innovative, and that's the way I learned to record: starting with four-tracks, every instrument had to be absolutely perfect to be sure they would complement the other instruments... I still work that way, very sparingly."

Sparingly with tracks and equipment, maybe, but certainly not when it comes to collaborating with other artists. On *Dreamt*, Sparklehorse teamed up with Steven Drozd of The Flaming Lips, Tom Waits and Brian Burton (a.k.a. Danger Mouse or one-half of Gnarls Barkley)—not to mention his long-time friend Johnny Hott and, of course, Dave Fridmann.

Linkous already has plans for the future, to join forces with Austrian-based guitarist Fennesz in Europe after the current tour to make a record "like no one has ever done before." Linkous is noticeably animated when he talks about his new project with Fennesz, and another with Danger Mouse to allegedly be titled *Danger Horse*. Despite the collaborating artist's style, every Sparklehorse song remains distinctively Sparklehorse. In fact, you'd be hard pressed to say there was collaboration at all if it weren't for the album jacket credits.



The partnership between Sparklehorse and Danger Mouse happened almost by accident when, after ignoring *The Grey Album* in a drawer for months, Linkous learned it “had something to do with The Beatles and Jay-Z, and [he] loved it.” Within a week, Burton joined Linkous in Static King and started working on a few songs Mark couldn’t edit together “with a razorblade and tape.” Thus, Linkous was able to ascend from the artistic void he’d been trapped in and give the completed record to Capitol, after a stunning five-year hiatus.



The self-imposed sabbatical did come with its own consequences, like unpaid bills and a time limitation that left some songs evidently unfinished. “Unfortunately on this record, [a few songs] never did really materialize as I heard them in my head,” Linkous explains. “I was never really able to articulate them on tape like I wanted to.”

Even after all that hard work and compromise, Linkous heard nothing from Capitol Records for months. Capitol had always left Sparklehorse alone in their long, peculiar relationship, but this time it seemed like the label wouldn’t release *Dreamt* at all. “I think the guy running Capitol and some people there are Sparklehorse fans and they thought it would do better on a smaller, more concentrated label like Astralwerks,” he said. “[Astralwerks] were really enthusiastic about Sparklehorse...that’s never happened before. [They] have bands that I like, records I like,” and, most importantly, they like him, ensuring more records in the future.

Charles Attal and Shelby Meade, who manage Sparklehorse from Austin and L.A. respectively, have made a short U.S. tour of smaller venues to promote *Dreamt*. Large venues can be impersonal for some of Sparklehorse’s songs and Linkous agrees, “I’d rather play a few nights at a smaller venue...something about the music [in large venues]... I become more and more disconnected from the audience. I felt more like an entertainer...and I never told anyone I was an entertainer. I felt like it corrupted and belittled everything I did...but after touring so much and talking to people I’m not so much that way anymore. I’ve enjoyed touring recently, I’ve got my best friend with me,” Linkous explains. This time, joining him in an ever-changing band line-up will be Austinite bassist Paula Jean Brown formerly of Giant Sand, guitarist Chris Michael who recently became a member of American Analog Set and drummer/right-hand-man Johnny Hott.

Watching Sparklehorse on stage at Antone’s, it seems unnatural that he was so dispirited of something he does so well and with such great intensity. Sparklehorse hypnotized the audience and Linkous, with all the vulnerability of a newly healing man, said, “this is the first date of our tour, and I’m wearing new shoes.”