

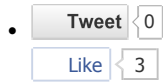
Mark Linkous Discusses the State of Sparklehorse

Working on new album, looking for a label, improvising with Fennesz, teaming with Danger Mouse, the Flaming Lips, and Gruff Rhys

By

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ML: Well, for [It's a Wonderful Life](#) and not so much for the last album, I knew exactly the way I wanted it to be and everything that wasn't played by me, that I couldn't play, like drums or violin or anything, I would sort of dictate. But I don't know, I like the way that record turned out. I think it's probably the best sounding record I'll ever do because I was really strict. I was kind of contradicting what I said I was going to do for my new album on *It's a Wonderful Life*. Every track was under a microscope, you know? And there was never really intentionally supposed to be famous people on it like there was, but there just was. [*PJ Harvey and Tom Waits were among the guests.*] But that record, I did really have specific ideas for how it should sound or how it should be mixed and the vibe that the whole record should have.

Pitchfork: It's interesting that you say so casually that it's probably the best sounding record that you'll ever do. Is that something that's not as important to you anymore?

ML: I don't know. I just don't know any producers I could... I think that's probably been why I never really made much money playing music. It's because I've never really worked with a producer who could make my music sound, I guess, like how the public wants it to sound. It's not because I've been trying to intentionally be lo-fi at all. I've tried to be as hi-fi and curious as I could for *It's a Wonderful Life*. But... I forgot what we were talking about [*laughs*].

Pitchfork: Speaking of producers, I want to ask about the [reports](#) that you and Danger Mouse are working on an album together under the name Dangerhorse. Is there any truth to that?

ML: So the last five years, the time between *It's a Wonderful Life* and the last record, I just basically spent it doing nothing. I wasn't feeling well, and I wasn't doing anything. People sent me stuff, and my manager kind of sent me stuff that would revive me or excite me, and this one I listened to, I set it in my drawer here for probably six months, and I finally listened to the Danger Mouse thing. I had no idea at all about the story behind it or anything, and I just loved it. I didn't know who the rapper was, I just thought this was-- first I thought Danger Mouse was an indie band from South Carolina or something-- and then I heard it and I was like "Fuck," because I love the Beatles.

Pitchfork: So it was [The Grey Album](#) that you heard?

ML: Yeah, *The Grey Album*. So I loved the Beatles samples, and I thought the rapper was just some guy. I wasn't that familiar with Jay-Z. Actually, the first time I talked to Brian [Burton, aka Danger Mouse], I was still clueless as to how he put it together and who the singer was. I thought it was that guy Jemini.

Pitchfork: Oh right, his old partner.

ML: Yeah, but I think he was in lock-up. So anyway, I called my manager, and I said, "I really like this Danger Mouse thing, guy, whatever it is, but what's up with him?" So we get on the phone, and I tell him what I want my record to sound like. And I didn't have a whole lot of material because I hadn't been creating much that last five years, but I said I wanted to make it really poppy, and I'm scared of pop. I almost called it *Fear of Pop*, but I didn't because somebody told me someone else called their album *Fear of Pop* recently. [*Ben Folds -- Ed.*]

I told him I wanted it to be really poppy and have a lot of cool-- I wanted it to sound like *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* in a way, because a lot of stuff I listen to is that sort of thing, like Boards of Canada. A lot of the stuff I listen to is glitchy electronic stuff and stuff with beats. So he was totally into that and convinced me over the telephone he could help me get to where I wanted to be and not to be surprised if he showed up next Wednesday, and next Wednesday he was here and we fucked around for like a week or so and that was it.

And then we just kind of mentioned, you know, in passing, like maybe we should do a record together that's not either, that's not Sparklehorse or anything. He wanted to call it Sparklemouse and I wanted to call it Dangerhorse. I guess I said Dangerhorse more in the press than he said Sparklemouse in the press, so I hope to God it's going to be Dangerhorse. Sparklemouse just reminds me of a British children's show.

Pitchfork: Well you could combine the first two and it could be Dangerspark or Mouseyhorse [*laughs*]. Are there plans going forward with it, or is it still in the "Wouldn't it be cool if..." stage?

ML: Well, we thought "It would be cool if..." but we kind of went in with no idea what the fuck we were doing, which is cool in a way. He had his own studio, and we'd just go in and I'd get some kind of glitchy rhythm going on my computer, which is the oldest Reactor program that exists. It's like Reactor 1 where it can only run on OS 9 Classic. But it still has really cool sounds. So I'd get something going, and he'd say "Oh that

sounds cool." And whenever anything like that worked he'd add some ACID beat on top of that, and we'd just kind of build things.

Then the hard part would be that we tried to build songs out of them, and that's rather difficult to do in a day, you know? Because it takes me forever to write songs most of the time. So we tried to do that every day, and a lot of times it worked. I had a couple songs written at home. I had one that worked really poppy that I was scared to sing but that I knew would be on this album, and we gave that to Gruff [Rhys] from Super Furry Animals and he sang that. I think we had like 17 tracks, and we made a list of our favorite singers. He's done a lot better at getting his singers to actually sing [*laughs*]. I mean, I got some of my buddies to sing and do their thing, like Vic Chesnutt and Jason [Lytle] from Grandaddy and people like that. So it's probably going to end up being a pretty cool thing.

Pitchfork: Do you sing on it at all?

ML: I sing on a track that I wrote at home called "Betty's Gone". I sing it with Nina [Persson] from the Cardigans.

Pitchfork: Otherwise, it's just you and Brian collaborating on the music behind it?

ML: Yeah, me and Brian mainly doing the music, and singers that we trust we tried to wrangle and hunt down. Even people that I've met like five years ago. Maybe Stephen Malkmus, I don't know him that well. It's taken a long time to get up my nerve to really talk to people and ask them to do this kind of stuff. But some of them have been great. I don't want to reveal too much, but the Flaming Lips track just came in and it's fucking awesome.

Pitchfork: So the record's still in the works? Do you have any idea when we'd see it?

ML: I don't know. Everything takes so long. I'm trying to get Chan Marshall to sing on them, the one that Wayne [Coyne] sang on, and Steven [Drozd] did some instrumentation and sang on two of them. We had a song that I had sent the Flaming Lips that, oddly enough, I played drums on it, and I'm not a drummer. In fact, a working title was called "Mark on Drums", and that's one that the Flaming Lips picked to work on, who have Steven Drozd, whom I consider one of the best drummers in the world. So they do this great job of finishing up the track, but the drums sound like this 90-year-old-man [*laughs*]. Like bad Ringo fills in slow motion.

It could be a pretty cool thing. I'm not sure when it's coming out, there's so much, the record industry's in flux now and nobody knows what's happening. And I don't know what's happening either.

Pitchfork: We recently [reported](#) that Sparklehorse is no longer on Astralwerks/Capitol.

ML: It was like a week or so after *It's a Wonderful Life* came out, 9/11 happened, and a week after my record came out on Astralwerks there was [this big merger](#), and everybody got fired. It almost seems like the last two records have sort of been cursed in a way, especially the last one. It really had not been out very long before all the bands got dropped from Capitol, unless you sold over half a million records when they closed the deal.

Pitchfork: Astralwerks told us that your contract expired with them. Is that not the case?

ML: No, that's not the case. My contract had expired with them, yeah. It was my last record. I was told-- and this may be wrong, too-- but what I heard was they went through a list and any band that had sold less than half a million records just got dropped. So, I don't know if that's good or bad for them or the industry or what.

Pitchfork: Have you talked to any other labels about a new Sparklehorse album or this Dangerhorse/Sparklemouse thing?

ML: The Dangerhorse thing is being dealt with by Brian. I figure he's got more push than I do when it comes to that, with Gnarl Barkley and all that. So yeah, it's kind of up to him who we're going to deal with on that. And I've been talking to some labels.

I went on a solo tour in England. I did like my first ever solo tour, which was like two gigs. One in Bristol, this place called the Cube that only holds 100 people, and it's seated. I think it also doubles as a theater, a little cinema. So I did a solo show there with my laptop, and then a few days later I changed the setup a little bit to do it again at [All Tomorrow's Parties](#). Portishead had invited me to play. And that was... First of all, I think I was

too excited about the new material. I had recorded all these backing tracks on the computer so I would just play guitar and sing, and I think maybe they were a little too dense and unfamiliar. I think the set was too many unfamiliar songs, and I think they would've rather just seen me play the guitar and sing a little more. So next time I'm going to get that together and get, like, cool film and everything going.

Pitchfork: And with the new stuff, are you still in the early phases of that?

ML: Yeah, still in the early phases. Some of the music's coming along really nicely. But after I did the All Tomorrow's Parties thing, I went to Amsterdam and recorded this thing called [In the Fishtank](#).

Pitchfork: Right, what's the label that does that?

ML: [Konkurrent](#). They're really cool and laidback, and the projects that they've [put out] as *Fishtank* are great. There're a lot of great bands that have turned out good stuff in this little idea/project thing that they've had going for a while. So Christian and I, Christian Fennesz--

Pitchfork: Oh, he was who you collaborated with on the *In the Fishtank* session?

ML: Yeah, oh yeah. I had known Christian for quite a long time. We've done work together on and off for probably three or four years now, but this is the first time we'd ever really properly went into a studio together, so it was really exciting. We went into this studio in the countryside of Amsterdam and we had two days in a nice, really professional studio where we just sort of improvised everything and it was really fun. I thinking it sounded great. I can't wait for it to come out.

Pitchfork: Do you have any idea when it will?

ML: Probably before anything else comes out. It was supposed to be mixed in January so I don't know when they're going to put it out, but I hope soon because I'm dying to hear it.

Pitchfork: Are you planning on going on tour again anytime soon?

ML: To Oregon?

Pitchfork: No, on tour again, sorry [*laughs*].

ML: Oh [*laughs*]. I didn't know if you said "Oregon" or "organ." But I did buy a church organ yesterday for \$100.

Pitchfork: That seems like a pretty good deal.

ML: Yeah, it's really cool.

Pitchfork: Where do you get a church organ?

ML: In thrift stores around here. You know in the back country you can get really cool shit sometimes in thrift stores and it just-- my wife called me and said, "There's this Farfisa here for sale," and I said, "Well, Farfisa, I've got samples of that." And she says, "No, it's a big church-organ-looking thing," and I was like, "What the hell?" So it's I guess a Farfisa. I didn't know, but they made like really big-- not just the typical 60s "deh deh deh deh"-- but this huge church organ with big heavy-sounding bass pedals and switches galore, just a million odds. And it's got this little almost synth thing built into it called The Partner.

Pitchfork: [*laughs*] It sounds so ominous.

ML: Yeah. It's called The Partner, and part of it is a drum machine so, actually one button actually says "Afro," so "Afro Partner" drummer. But it's really, I can't wait to get it. It's so big they have to bring it here on a truck.

Pitchfork: Where are you going to put it?

ML: I don't know. I got so much shit in my studio already I really don't know where I'm going to put it.

Pitchfork: Well good luck with that. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about?

ML: No, just if there's any cool label out there that wants to talk to me about putting out a record, let me know.