

# Linkous And Chesnutt Sing Of Life's Little Details

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In a bead of water on a blade of swamp grass you might glimpse the reflection of a water bug darting out of sight. If the wind shifts a bit, you might hear Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse whispering a song about it, or Vic Chesnutt interpreting an allegory to the lesser foibles of humankind. Such is these artists' appreciation for the merest details of life that they can draw listeners through a microscope from their overstuffed routines into a world where all that matters is what's otherwise unnoticed.

Such gifts may be hard won. The pair are friends, and referring to accidents that nearly killed them both, leaving Chesnutt a paraplegic, Linkous says, "I think hitting rock bottom and being close to death makes you appreciate little things." Linkous emphasizes the differences, though. "Vic is so eloquent speaking about relationships and events. I write more about what animals think."

One illustration on Friday at Schubas Tavern was Chesnutt's rendering of "Soft Picasso" from his 1990 album, *Little*. The song traces the comeuppance of a "modern man" whose "modern woman" adopts his tricks and leaves him muttering "an epigram/ Live by the scam/ Die by the scam." Alternately pensive, funny and revealing, Chesnutt's lyrics are as beguiling as they are literate. He played to an audience that knew his songs well. Requests comprised much of his set, and the room exploded with them each time he asked for a suggestion from a particular album.

Chesnutt's most recent CD, "The Salesman and Bernadette," features nearly a dozen members of Nashville's avant-plains-pop-symphonic Lambchop, but Friday the songs shone elegantly through the spare accompaniment of Chesnutt's solo electric guitar and even sparer, but incisive, piano playing. The audience gamely supplied Lambchop's "sha la la" chorus on "Replenished," in which Chesnutt ponders implications of "the last days of sun in this part of the house."

The startling intimacy of Mark Linkous' recorded voice gives the listener a sense of eavesdropping on an intellect meandering a primordial swamp. Similarly, his music as Sparklehorse roves instrumentation and technology with no guidelines save his apparent powerlessness to avoid melodic hooks. His primarily studio projects transformed to live performance Friday at Double Door with accompaniment by a trio including Camper Van Beethoven multi-instrumentalist Jonathan Segal, an assortment of boxed sonic electronic magic, projected stills of odd vehicles clipped from '60s auto magazines, and a rabbit mask.

Segal's plaintive violin gave the music a country character only rarely suggested on the recorded versions. The subtle inflections of Linkous' voice were lost, but barely missed, in the revved up rock of the live show.

If Sparklehorse fails to deliver the thoughts of animals, it's not for lack of references to them. Critters on the 1996 "Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot" range from parasites to horses. One of the latter appears in "Homecoming Queen," which Linkous highlighted Friday with delicate, pretty guitar harmonics.

Highlights were the crowd-detonating full-on rocker, "Happy Man," and "Heart of Darkness," a singularly scary Linkous foray into Chesnutt's relationship territory, beginning in a parking lot and ending in a nightmare.