

Horsing Around in Your Home Studio

Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous shares some of his homegrown techniques for home recording.



By **Tim Gideon**

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Combining your old analog equipment with digital recording and editing not only [saves time](#) and money, it can also give your music a very cool signature sound.

Arguably the king of the low-tech/high-tech sound is Mark Linkous, the creative force behind Sparklehorse, a one-man carnival that has brought in such musical talents as PJ Harvey and Tom Waits to create an eerie, dreamlike sound.

Linkous records Sparklehorse albums in a [home](#) studio he calls Static King—an old ski chalet nestled in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. He records to analog tape for warmth, then dumps the tracks over to his digital recording station.

Linkous describes the forthcoming album, slated for August release and tentatively called Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain, as "edit-heavy," so mixing on a digital platform was essential. Many of the bizarre sounds he produces are the result of simple experimentation, and are easy enough for a novice to try. One technique he employs involves a portable digital recorder and an acoustic guitar. If you push the gain on the digital recorder past its intended limits, an acoustic guitar can sound like a distorted electric guitar while maintaining some of its acoustic characteristics. You can try the same thing by overdriving the inputs on your Digidesign Mbox or other digital input device.

Another [innovative](#) trick Linkous uses when recording calls for a mic and some duct tape. "Strip a cheap microphone down to its diaphragm, and literally tape it to the kick drum [the bass drum] or the kick shell," Linkous says. Then run those mics through inexpensive distortion pedals—Linkous recommends the Boss MT-2 Metal Zone—and run the output of those through noise gates. Noise gates are devices that let audio through only when triggered by a spike in sound. In this case, the spike would be the impact of the drum hit, and the gate is essential to keep the distortion pedal's hiss muted when the drum isn't being hit. The end result is a real drum kit that sounds trashy, a bit fake, and pretty damn cool.

Linkous also likes to mess with tape speed while he's recording. Most home studios aren't equipped with a nice analog tape machine like Static King's, but there are several lower-end four- and eight-track cassette recorders with pitch control knobs, so you can tweak the tape speed. After tracking, you can take the output of the tape machine and record it into the computer to mimic Linkous's process (though syncing an analog track with prerecorded digital tracks can get complicated). And by using plug-in effects in Digidesign's Pro Tools - music recording and editing suite, you can also change the pitch of a track or do what's called time compression: keeping the pitch the same but changing the track speed.

Part of the signature Sparklehorse sound is vintage-sounding mics. "My favorite [microphone] I actually found at a landfill in Virginia," Linkous says. "It used to be attached to a reel-to-reel recorder from the forties... you can usually pick those things up in thrift stores for a couple of dollars." If dumpster diving and thrift-store shopping aren't your forte, there are plug-ins out there—namely the Antares AMM-1 Microphone Modeler for Pro Tools—that mimic the sounds of several different old, [popular](#) (and expensive) microphones.

So to some extent, the tools do make the man, but who says those tools have to be expensive?

—Tim Gideon, freelance writer and musician.

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