

Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous Finds His Muse in Woodsy Solitude

Comments (0) By [Darryl Smyers](#) Wednesday, Feb 14 2007



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"I ask myself every day if depression is necessary for creativity," says [Mark Linkous](#), sounding characteristically withdrawn, speaking from his home atop the [Smoky Mountains in North Carolina](#). The founder and driving force behind [Sparklehorse](#), Linkous is a well-known loner with a history of substance abuse who has managed to release only four albums in a decade-long career. Now clean and sober, Linkous talks calmly and freely about his reputation and past indiscretions.

"I am definitely a recluse, probably too much so," says Linkous. The multi-instrumentalist is preparing for a tour in support of *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*, the first release from Sparklehorse in five years. The new effort is decidedly more upbeat than 2001's melancholy opus, *It's a Wonderful Life*, yet Linkous finds it ironic that he produced his most polished effort amidst some of his most difficult times emotionally.

"I had these pop songs left over from my last record," says Linkous. "And now I put out a pop record at one of my worst times ever."

Using music as a sounding board for his depression, Linkous has quietly created a body of work as influential and challenging as that of anyone in alternative music. Starting with *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* in 1995, each successive release has deepened the emotional well, producing music of a rare and ghostly beauty. Related to both alt-country and atmospheric electronica, the songs of Mark Linkous reflect influences as diverse as [Tom Waits](#) and minimalist composer [Philip Glass](#). The former has had a profound impact on Linkous' work.

"Waits' songs, especially on albums like *Swordfishtrombones*, sounded like they were recorded in junkyards and mixed through car stereo speakers,"

says Linkous. "Listening to his music is like watching a cool documentary on TV."

The same could be said for all four Sparklehorse releases. Both *Good Morning Spider* and *It's a Wonderful Life* are full of cinematic themes, recorded and played on period machinery, recalling the sound of cracking vinyl looped with disembodied voices and topped with Linkous' distorted whisper of a voice. Songs like "Pig," "Sea of Teeth," and "Apple Bed" play like tributes to a past most would gladly forget, excursions into a dark, rural experience, a world of solitude that Linkous literally lives out at his North Carolina home.

"Sometimes, I just don't come off this mountain for ages," says Linkous.

But when he does, it's always in the service of quality material. Featuring melodies and quickened tempos that would have seemed out of place on previous releases, *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain* is packed with surprisingly hummable fare. "Don't Take My Sunshine Away" and "Some Sweet Day" are just two of the songs begging for release as singles. Unexpectedly, and despite critical kudos, Linkous does not have the highest opinion of his latest work.

"I'm not wholly satisfied with this record," says Linkous. "I had to compromise on a couple of songs, and I let them out not exactly like I heard them in my head."

It's not often that an artist shares such a subdued assessment for a new release, but Mark Linkous is not your usual anything. His soft-spoken demeanor is actually disconcerting, like the quiet neighbor who has a basement full of dark secrets. Linkous is still affected by a drug overdose that occurred nearly a decade ago. The story of Linkous collapsing in his hotel room while on alcohol, [Valium](#), and antidepressants and nearly losing both his legs has become part of the artist's lore. After many surgeries, he can walk without assistance, but the sad tale sticks to him as much as any esteem his music may have provided.

"It's a morbid sense of curiosity that everyone still asks about my past drug use," says Linkous. "I'm guilty of the same thing when it comes to [Daniel Johnston](#)."

Claiming his emotional state has improved, Linkous is eager to get out on the road with a new collection of sidemen and face an audience that once petrified him. Always strapped with a notorious case of stage fright, Linkous feels empowered by the fact that his music is gaining the same inroads in the States that it has long made in [Europe](#).

"After four records, people in [America](#) seem to be coming around to me," says Linkous. "Enough people here accept what I do and appreciate it, and I'm not as terrified to tour as I was in the past."

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