

Rolling Stone

Danger Mouse Looks Through A Label, Darkly

Behind his "Dark Night of the Soul" collaboration with Mark Linkous and David Lynch

by: Austin Scaggs

The final product isn't exactly what Danger Mouse envisioned, but the cutting-edge producer breathed a heavy sigh of relief with the release of *Dark Night of the Soul*, a multimedia package he created in tandem with songwriter Mark Linkous (the creative force behind Sparklehorse) consisting of a record and a large-form book of photos commissioned from filmmaker David Lynch. For the album, Danger Mouse and Linkous created moody backing tracks, then offered them to 10 vocalists who were charged to write lyrics and vocal melodies (contributors include Iggy Pop, the Strokes' Julian Casablancas, the Shins' James Mercer, Suzanne Vega and Pixies' Black Francis). "We had no intention of making a star-studded record," says Danger Mouse, born Brian Burton. "It's just when we started thinking about these people we just thought, 'Well, of course they'd sound good on a record together.'"

The catch, which Danger Mouse describes as "bittersweet," is that the CD mounted in *Dark Night of the Soul* package is completely blank. Buyers are slyly encouraged to use the recordable disc to capture the music from the Internet, where it is widely available as a free, though illegal, download. Danger Mouse's inability to package the music with the book stems from a long-standing contractual disagreement with EMI, who retain rights to some of his music. (Burton was signed to Lex Records, which entered into a relationship with EMI, though his Gnarls Barkley work is distributed by Atlantic Records.) With hopes of emancipating himself from his contract with EMI, Burton refuses to air his grievances in public. Those close to the situation say that while the court of public opinion would side with Danger Mouse in his dispute with EMI, the contract is nevertheless valid. An EMI representative issued a statement reading, "Danger Mouse is a brilliant, talented artist ... We continue to make every effort to resolve this situation and we are talking to Brian directly. Meanwhile, we need to reserve our rights."

When Linkous first heard the Danger Mouse's *Grey Album* — the groundbreaking 2005 digital mash-up of the Beatles and Jay-Z — he was suffering from a block in creativity, and thought Burton may help him out of his shell. Burton, it turns out, was a fan of Sparklehorse. "I really loved all three of their albums," says Burton. Linkous adds, "Next thing I know I was picking him up at the airport in North Carolina."

Danger Mouse would produce the 2006 Sparklehorse release *Dreamt For Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*. After those sessions, Linkous played Burton an instrumental titled "Revolution." "I just couldn't sing it," says Linkous, "and I thought that it should be an anti-war song, but I'm not that good at writing literal lyrics." Gruff Rhys, from the Welsh band Super Furry Animals, added lyrics and vocals and the song, retitled "Just War," kicks off the *Dark Night* album. "That was the egg for

the entire project," says Linkous.

Over the past three years, in between production gigs with the Black Keys, Beck and others, Burton has poured his time and money into *Dark Night of the Soul*. (EMI never expressed much interest in the project, nor did Burton use label money to fund it.) Linkous sporadically traveled to Burton's home studio in L.A. for writing and recording sessions. "Brian would get some wicked drum track going and I know how to write pop structures," says Linkous. They'd send those instrumentals to specific singers, including Wayne Coyne, Vic Chesnutt and Granddaddy's Jason Lytle. "It was a passion project for everybody," says Burton. "There weren't a bunch of checks being written to be on the record, everybody did it because they wanted to do it. They thought it was cool."

The project was never just about music, though. "It's a bad time for music videos," says Burton. "You just end up watching them on a 3x5 inch YouTube screen." When it came time to tackle the visual element for *Dark Night*, they petitioned a mutual hero, Lynch, who listened to the songs for inspiration. "Some of the images are calming, some are jarring, some are beautiful, some are sad," says Burton. "David was the only person I thought of who could put some imagination into this music."

And while the project has been a success — all 5,000 limited-edition books with CD-Rs have sold out at \$50 apiece, though posters and the blank disc are still available on their own — its producer is loyal to his artistic goals. "I'm glad people are hearing the album, because that was almost in jeopardy," says Burton, who paid for the whole project out of his pocket. "I'd rather have it be presented right than have the 'financials' get in the way."