

Sparklehorse brightens

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Sparklehorse Press Photo Photo: Timothy Saccent

Fans of [Mark Linkous](#), or Sparklehorse -- the North Carolina singer-writer-producer and the enigmatically beautiful pop band being essentially one and the same -- might want to raise a glass to a 40-year-old album by a bunch of Englishmen. Were it not for [the Beatles'](#) "Revolver," Linkous might never have emerged from the lengthy post-9/11 depression that paralyzed his creativity, and Sparklehorse would not be playing its first full U.S. tour in five years. Talking by phone from his home in North Carolina, a 45-minute drive across the mountains from the barn where he stores his motorcycles and does his recording, Linkous says it was a "desperate and weird" half decade that separated Sparklehorse's third album, 2001's "It's a Wonderful Life," from its fourth, "Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain," released in September.

"After that last album was released, (shortly) before Sept. 11, 2001, I got really depressed," he says. "I couldn't work or do anything for three years. On top of all the s -- things happening in the world, in my own life people were dying all around me -- my first girlfriend, my granny who raised me and then some real close friends of mine I used to live with got murdered."

The band was put on hold, and not for the first time. Including its first album, 1996's "Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot," Sparklehorse has released only four full albums -- relatively few for a new young band that has earned so much praise from critics.

One big reason has been Linkous' struggle with depression, whose most dramatic manifestation was during the British tour to promote his premiere album. After an overdose of Valium and antidepressants, Linkous collapsed in his hotel room. Comatose for 14 hours before he was found, he sustained damage that led to a heart attack and almost resulted in having both legs amputated. (The song "Saint Mary" on the second album, "Good Morning Spider," was dedicated to the [London hospital](#) that saved his life and limbs.) What helped him break through the darkness this time around was "a combination of it getting a little hard to pay the rent and somebody reminding me, like, 'It's been four years since you put out an album,' " he says.

He started by working on somebody else's album -- [Daniel Johnston](#)'s -- and also curated an acclaimed tribute album to the outsider singer-songwriter. Then Linkous found himself "going back to what I really considered the best and listening to a lot of mid- to late-period Beatles. It was 'Revolver,' which was just the pinnacle of songwriting and production, that got my juices flowing again."

Linkous says that without that music and art, he would as likely as not "go crazy."

Though he's been on record as saying that he dislikes touring, he admits it has its benefits.

"When I have to be somewhere at a certain time, it doesn't leave much time for me to dwell on s -- in my own head," he says, "which really, really helps."

Because he's "never really been able to afford to have as big a band as I would like to have," the four-piece band on this tour is made up of multi-instrumentalists. Sparklehorse records are noted for their unusual sounds and rare instruments, but he won't be bringing one of his favorites, the Optigan.

"It's too old and precarious," he says, laughing. "That thing could catch on fire at any time."

He found his Optigan "in a thrift store after probably 10 years of looking for one," he says, noting that he uses it on nearly all of his records. He describes it as "looking at first glance like a weird home-entertainment chord organ that you would have in your basement, but it's really more like a primitive sampler, with this sort of secret flap you open up and insert these records in. When you hit a chord button, it plays a riff in that key. There are probably 30 discs of different musical styles like 'champagne music' and 'romantic string music.' The discs are really hard to find, but [Tom Waits](#)' keyboard player had a great collection, so I borrowed them from him."

Linkous is a Waits fan, and the feeling is mutual.

"We started communicating after my first album, 'Vivadixie,' " he says.

"Someone heard that he really liked it and that his kids stole it -- I still don't know if it was because they were sick of hearing it or because they liked it -- so I sent him a new copy and wrote him a little letter, and that's how we started talking." They've collaborated several times, with Waits making guest appearances on the past two Sparklehorse CDs. Asked if they plan to meet while Linkous is in California, he says, "I sure hope so. We meant to go see him when he was on tour here last year but, unfortunately, my wife almost got arrested. We both drive old diesel Mercedes [cars](#), and she got accused of stealing gas, which is impossible because our cars don't run on gas, but it took two hours to sort it out with the cops and we missed the concert."

Other Sparklehorse fans include [PJ Harvey](#), [Thom Yorke](#) of Radiohead and Danger Mouse, all of whom have worked with Linkous. He and Danger Mouse, in fact, have put a side band together dubbed Danger Horse.

"We've only done one session so far, out in California where he lives, but it's an ongoing thing, and I would like to do the next session in North Carolina if we could," he says. "I've got a great studio in a place that I rent just over the mountain range, with an old console, a mixer that I bought about six or seven years ago. They made a lot of gold records in the '70s on it that I bought as a kid -- all the [Ohio Players](#) records, I think, and a lot of the Styx records.

It's fantastic."

These days, though, the only music he really listens to is "instrumental music. Modern symphonic music or real sparse electronic music -- there's a specific genre they call glitch," he says. "My favorite is an Austrian guy named [Christian Fennesz](#) who does fantastic music on his laptop."

There are plans for Linkous and Fennesz to work on an album together this year.

"I can't wait," Linkous says. "We're just going to get together and see what comes out. Hopefully, it will be something that nobody has ever heard before."

Sparklehorse performs at 9 p.m. Sat. at the Fillmore, 1805 Geary Blvd., San Francisco. \$22.50. (415) 346-6000, www.livenation.com.