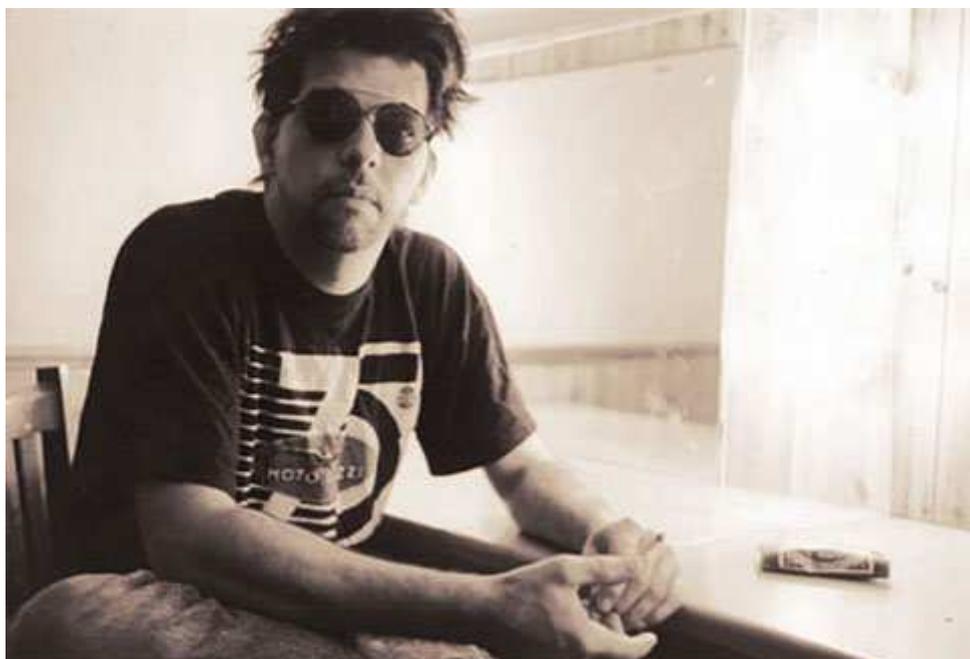


## Mark Linkous | Sparklehorse | Sheffield Leadmill 1998

Posted by [Pete Doherty](#) on 13 / 07 / 11 · [Leave a Comment](#)



Sparklehorse don't so much create music as uncreate it. Their recordings are sprinkled with the fallout of discarded and discordant sound. Things just get messed about with. But their tweaked-country-bred-walking-paced-music has recently been invigorated, perhaps reflecting a greater source of influences.

Blur and Radiohead are on that list somewhere, especially Blur's sixth album<sup>13</sup>, which is of course inspired by Pavement's low-fi sensibilities.

It's perhaps typical that Mark Linkous likes a British band's interpretation of low-fi American music, a sort of filtering of the original source material seems to be happening. Something that Sparklehorse are familiar with. Their approach involves distorting, filtering, adding and adjusting sound and music, introducing an element of dirty texture to the tracks. Somewhere between playing and playback the sound is happily sabotaged.

Sparklehorse are on a mini-tour of Britain riding high on a wave of critical acclaim for their recently released second album *Good Morning Spider*.

It's Saturday and it's 4pm and the venue is the Sheffield Leadmill, a cosy venue with just the right mix of low-fi artyness and sensible facilities, ie. food, computer games, coffee and beer none of which are available at this time.

The roadies and other staff move around efficiently and Bjork blasts out of the speakers, loud enough to make conversation difficult.

Linkous arrives, he's just travelled over from Oxford, and has been having a much needed a kip on the tour bus. Things went down really well last night and the band are in an optimistic mood for tonight's final gig.

We find a quiet room to chat, somewhere in the bowels of the venue. Linkous talks in quiet but considered tones, about the response to *Good Morning Spider* and of their different approach to it. "I think (I'm) relieved more than anything, I'm glad people like it as much really, more than the first one"

The main difference between *Good Morning Spider* and *vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* is that the former is self produced, the band have taken a different approach with *Good Morning Spider* which has allowed for a bit more experimentation. "There was a little pressure from record companies to hire a producer".

But Linkous managed to finish the album before the record company had any ideas about how things should be done. "I guess I was sneaky enough to finish it and get it out here and get a good response"

Linkous is quite aware of the pressure to use a producer and present a 'marketable' product. In fact he notes that "I would make more money for the record company if I sounded more like the Foo Fighters, if they found somebody like Butch Vig (to produce), they might try to fit me into that category...I think they still want me to remix some songs".

The 'some songs' no doubt includes *Chaos of the Galaxy/Happy Man* where the intro takes a full two minutes before the refrain moves from background 'radio' to foreground amped up rock.

"One of the things that the record company in the States wasn't happy with was *Happy Man* sounding like it's being broadcast from a shortwave radio" Says Linkous, however, he's not overly concerned, because the critics are at least on his side. "Every review that I've read, they always mention how cool they think that song is".

*Happy Man* is an obvious reference to Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* where the beginning of the song is 'tuned in on a radio' before moving over to the song proper. And it's a song Linkous has covered. "I've always loved the Floyd song *Wish You Were Here*, and the middle of the Raspberries song *Hit Record*, the bridge part or chorus part 'Play it again'". Linkous sings the catchy refrain and it's instantly remembered as the most distinctive part of *Hit Record*; the tinny-sounding chorus that sounded like it came right out of a cheap transistor radio.

The 'shortwave radio' effect is just one of many effects or sounds threading through *Good Morning Spider*, these effects, noises or distortions continue the process started on *viva...* that is the use of found sound over bought in effects and a preference for analogue over digital, not that any of the former are used exclusively it's just that they are used and are now a viable option.

Linkous gives an example of how a found sound can override an initial idea and become part of a studio recording, the source can be as mundane as a childhood gift. "My mom bought me this little Japanese reel to reel cassette recorder. I was going to record some guitar stuff on there and play it back backwards, but the tape that came on it had some child trying to learn Spanish. That's perfect and I've integrated it into my pedal box, you couldn't go in your own music store and get that."

Sparklehorse are making music which isn't dependent on big production techniques, expensive equipment or massive studios, and they're self produced. Linkous relies on quite rudimentary equipment for producing the finished result. "(In) my studio I have a sixteen track digital, it's fairly modest, I still don't have a lot of outboard effects, reverbs and things, and I still just use junk and found sounds". All in all, the above elements add up to an environment that offers the space to innovate in a relaxed, creative atmosphere without the worry of studio hire and expensive producers.

The location (currently Dillwyn) obviously plays it's part too, which is basically remote American countryside, the area is 'rich in pines and hard working farmers'. It seems the ideal location for taking a step back from city life and creating sparse, lucid music. The exact opposite of the typical rock 'n' roll circus. "When I left Los Angeles and came out to Virginia I started playing traditional Irish music, Hillbilly music and Medieval song with other people and that's when I just let go of the rock'n'roll star thing, and really became aware of the use of silence and open space."

Open space is not something that's hit the media in a big way yet, at least not in the States where every second is utilised. Sparklehorse's music seems to be a complete antidote to the sensory overload of advertising where one vital second hitting millions of people can generate considerable sales. Linkous has noticed a difference in British and American advertising. "It's worse in the States, even on the television commercials. In the UK there'll be a second or two of freeze frame on the last shot of the commercial, in the States every split second counts so it's as much sensory input as they can possibly beat you with."

In the land of extremes this is quite normal, and perhaps Sparklehorse are the normal apposite to such audio visual intensity. And when it comes to sport, it's not surprising to find out that Linkous prefers the more subtle English version of football to the American one, even though he admits he "wasn't born with the sports gene".

Linkous has also noticed a difference in British audiences compared to their US counterparts. "They're more polite here, the only audience in the United States for us is other musicians and film people".

Perhaps the Americans are not yet ready for Sparklehorse's brand of considered, deconstructed rock. "Basically I think the music over there is meant to sell (it's like) wallpaper advertisement." he adds.

Back to the studio and it seems Tom Waits almost made it onto the album. Linkous explains. "We were going to have him sing over the phonline on *Sunshine* but he missed mastering date by a day".

Linkous who describes his Waits records as "The most interesting records that I own", plans to have a word (when he gets back to the States), with Waits about a collaboration. Other possible collaborations are with Vic Chesnut and Will Oldham both of whom are highly regarded musicians with cult followings, which is another way of saying they operate on the periphery of mainstream music.

With *Good Morning Spider* achieving such positive reviews it seemed feasible to ask which track Linkous felt worked best and how he knows when he's recorded a good one? "*Sunshine*, that's my favourite song, before I (did) it I kind of imagine(d) how it should sound like in my head, and that came out pretty close".

Although *Sunshine* hits the spot in converting the imagined sound to record, there must be cases where what's imagined can't be recreated. "If I hear something in my head and I can't produce it, the logical way would be that I'd be forced to improvise, and a lot of times the alternative is so much cooler". explains Linkous.

The Sparklehorse sound could quite easily be adapted for film; it's unobtrusive, with barely audible vocals in parts, perfect for dropping into the occasional non verbal esoteric sequence. That's the seed of an idea for a future project as Linkous confirms. "I'd love to do sound, not so much songs, but just sound, just sort of wallpaper". He says this with reference to the father of popular minimalist music Brian Eno and his use of space. "I'd love to do that" he says, warming to the idea.

Away from music Linkous' other passion is motorbikes, this is probably an obvious fact given that motorbike visuals feature in the stage show, the video, on the album and single artwork and at this moment, on his T-shirt (Moto Guzzi). So it might not be surprising to find Linkous has twenty bikes, two of which need fixing, which is a number one priority once he gets home. In fact all of Sparklehorse are into bikes, Linkous has quite a few Moto Guzzis, and prefers the less sporty models that the rest of the band have. Instead his bikes "Just chug along" like tractors.

The interview ends as Linkous sparks up the staple of the arty and the cash strapped; the roll up

cigarette. Quite aptly lo-fi and none corporate.