

new signings

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The melodies are twisted and nightmarish, the whispery vocals are re-EQ'd for a megaphone-like timbre, and the sonic backdrop is a cacophony of warped guitars, random circus side-show organs, melancholy banjos, answering machine messages, blown-out amplifiers, whirling engines and stray room sounds. Nope, Sparklehorse's recent debut release, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, is not your typical major-label fare. So how did they ever get signed to Capitol Records? The answer lies in the strong songwriting skills, home recording savvy and industry connections of the band's sole member, Mark Linkous. And when you consider that not long ago he was sweeping chimneys for a living, the story of Sparklehorse becomes all the more inspiring.

Linkous, a descendant of three generations of Southwestern Virginia coal

miners, used to play in a band called the Dancing Hoods. After four years of toiling in New York clubs, the Hoods headed to L.A.; two years and one release on Relativity Records later, they broke up. Within six months, Linkous was living in a van and had reached muck bottom. He moved back to Virginia and worked at menial jobs: chimney sweeping, dishwashing, house painting.

What happened next is the stuff of legend: Linkous came to the sudden realization that he didn't need a band. "I live in the middle of nowhere," Linkous says, "so I'm isolated from other musicians. I basically had to do everything

myself out of necessity." With the mother of invention on his side, he produced a brilliant tape on his home 4-track.

A big fan of Camper Van Beethoven, Linkous had befriended CVB's leader David Lowery (now of Cracker) and their producer David Herring in L.A. when the Dancing Hoods opened for Camper. Herring later called Linkous in Virginia with an offer to play guitar on former Bangle Susanna Hoffs' solo record. During the sessions, Herring introduced Linkous, and his tape, to Deanna Cohen at the mega-music publishing company Warner/Chappell. "I went into her office with my guitar," Linkous recalls, "and played all these songs for her. She started the ball rolling, and she turned me on to Dave Ayers, who at the time managed Ween and Helmet."

Ayers ended up managing Sparklehorse as well. "There was this strong

SPARKLEHORSE

DEBUT ALBUM:

VIVADIXIESUBMARINETRANSMISSIONPLOT

LABEL: CAPITOL RECORDS

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A pop instinct in Mark's writing," he says. "In his 4-track stuff it's buried under a bunch of sludge, but that's part of what I like about it." Ayers landed Linkous a publishing deal at Warner/Chappell. "That deal allowed us to make the record without a record company," he explains. "I wanted to have a publishing deal done so Mark could make a living and not feel pressured to make a record in haste."

The record took about a year and cost around \$15,000, a pittance by industry standards. David Lowery produced and played on two-thirds of the songs at his Sound of Music Studio in Richmond (he's listed as David Charles on the album). The other third Linkous recorded at home. Some songs were culled from his original 4-track tape. "I guess a lot of it was just static," Linkous says. "It's hard to articulate the feeling I wanted to get across with the music. It feels alien, yet it still generates a sense of place in a different way than sounds you're accustomed to." Notable players on the record include Bob Rupe from the Silos and Cracker, Johnny Hott of House of Freaks, and Armstead Wellford of Love Tractor and Gutterball. "Mark, David and I worked together for a year," recalls Ayers, "them in Virginia and me in New York. Sending tapes back and forth. Talking about it every day on and off for a long time. And then we started playing it for record companies."

The tape shopping had barely begun when Capitol A&R director Julie Panebianco inked a deal. "I heard four songs, and I really loved what I'd heard," Panebianco remembers. "I think it was 'Homecoming Queen,' 'Weird Sisters,' 'Tears on Fresh Fruit' and 'Heart of Darkness.' I went down with Dave Ayers to see them record. When I got down there I heard some more stuff I hadn't heard yet, like 'Someday' and 'Cow,' and I flipped." With Capitol in the midst of a major roster revamp initiated by president Gary Gersh, the way was clear for music like Linkous'. So without ever playing a single note live, or prostrating themselves at some contrived label show-

case, or suffering through demeaning form-letter rejections, Sparklehorse signed a major label deal in January 1995.

What's significant about Linkous' signing experience is that first, he did it alone with his 4-track. Second, he was able to use connections he had established during his previous time in a band. Third, he got a publishing deal before getting a label

deal, allowing him both time and autonomy to record without pressure from a label. Asked for words of wisdom for struggling bands, Linkous replies, "Buy a 4-track and find someone that's connected. There's so much luck involved. Just think of how many great songwriters and bands we'll never hear." Here's one we will.—*Andy Gensler*