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Sparklehorse spins more magical songs with 'Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain'

Still sparkling

Sparklehorse

When: Doors open tonight at 9

Where: 40 Watt Club, 285 W. Washington St.

Cost: \$10 advance
Call: (706) 549-7871

Tickets available at Schoolkids Records or charge by phone at (706) 353-1666



Timothy Saccenti Photography

By Julie Phillips

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It would be easy to romanticize Mark Linkous' life right now — nestled on a mountaintop in the Smokies in North Carolina, surrounded by nature, removed from the craze of current events, spending his days crafting the tunes that first made Sparklehorse an underground phenom in the mid-1990s.

But romantic notions are just what they are; instead Linkous' life is tinged with the tumult, bitterness and sometimes-angst that resonates so fully in his music. His first tale of rural-N.C. life involves rattlesnakes. Several have bitten his dog since he moved to the mountains about three years ago.

"It cost me something like \$1,200 in vet bills each time for the anti-venom," he says. "So it really just pissed me off. I wanted to go out and make a belt out of that snake."

Told in the quiet, gentle melancholy of Linkous' voice, though, it's clear before the story ends the outcome of this revenge tale isn't one of "man-defeats-nature."

"It made me feel worse," he says of his role in the demise of one of the snakes, "killing something."

The circumstances that took him to the remote locale are difficult as well. A relapse into addiction, coupled with depression — the same recipe that very nearly saw

the success of his somewhat infamous suicide attempt in London in 1995 — along with the murder of close friends in Richmond, drove him from his then-home in Virginia.

With the help of concerned friends, he found himself alone in the mountains. But his mental state was so grim for a while he couldn't really enjoy the scenery. "I became so much of a recluse, I stopped making music, lost interest in recording, cut myself off from everything," he says. Ultimately it was the horrifying murder of his friends that both devastated him and pushed him on, he says.

"That, if nothing else, inspired me to get my s*** together, and to do music, which was the only thing I could do well."

In the end, Linkous managed to come up with another set of songs, thanks in part to a horse and a mouse — albeit in moniker rather than animal form.

Danger Mouse, he of "The Grey Album" and Gnarl's Barkley fame and who once called Athens home, came to visit Linkous and produce Sparklehorse's new record, "Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain," set for release Sept. 26.

The result is as shimmering and rocking an album as Sparklehorse fans could hope for.

"I had been listening to later-period Beatles," Linkous recalls, when someone gave him "The Grey Album," which subsequently sat in a drawer, he says, for months

before he listened to it.

When he finally did, he liked it so much he decided to get in touch with the Mouse himself, Brian Burton. "And it ended up, he was a huge Sparklehorse fan, which I never would've guessed," Linkous says. "But aesthetically, with the pop sound, he really understood what I was going for."

"Dreamt," Linkous hopes, will appeal to fans of his early work on "Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot," released in 1995, which landed him a tour that year with Radiohead. "It's like my early recordings because I played everything on it and pretty much did everything on my own in my studio, so it has a homemade vibe to it," he says. At the same time, he thinks it's the most "pop" record he's done.

From its bright Beatles-esque opener, "Don't Take My Sunshine Away," "Dreamt" shines for Sparklehorse's enchanting (and convincing) ability to range from fragile, vulnerable whispers to loud, even angry rockers, with a polish most recently heard on 2001's "It's a Wonderful Life."

As for the future, Linkous says it looks pretty bright from the mountaintop today. In addition to other projects, he and Burton are planning on a true collaboration. The name still is being fleshed out.

"Danger Horse" is Linkous' preference, but Burton, he says, is partial to "Sparkle Mouse."