

SPARKLEHORSE by Teresa Bolster

One of the least likely major-label releases ever is Sparklehorse's debut *Vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot* - the bizarre title more than matches its contents.

Mark Linkous - vocalist, multi-instrumentalist and chief visionary behind Sparklehorse - is basking in the rapturous reception of *Vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot*, his debut album under that moniker. Linkous is slightly miffed, however, by one magazine's description of him as a "Virginia redneck turned musician".

Calling from Detroit, where the five-man live incarnation of Sparklehorse are taking a night off on their extensive US tour with buddies Cracker, Linkous takes typically laid-back exception to the epithet. "That's a little unfair," he says in his soft and slow Southern drawl. "I've been a musician for a long, long time. I guess I've been a redneck for longer."

The

descendant of three generations of coalminers, Linkous lives on a farm in Breemo Bluff (nearest major town, Richmond) with his wife and an assortment of animals. "I grew up in south-western Virginia which is coalmining country, not much else going on but bluegrass music and country music, which, I guess, influenced me in a way."

Elements of bluegrass and country are evident in Linkous' songs, many of which defy description. The scope of *Vivadixie...* however, reaches way beyond these traditional genres. Linkous is a dab hand at knocking out a record company-placating 'up-tempo alternative rock contender' (see current single *Someday* for evidence) and the handful of 'straighter' songs he writes for Sparklehorse are not dissimilar to those of The Amps or Guided By Voices - melodic, rough as unshaved legs, and very, very low on production values.

Scattered throughout *Vivadixie...* however, are the Linkous specialties - prettily twisted, Southern-fried weird-outs, bizarre yet appealing and full of eccentrically original recording flourishes.

"In a way, I sort of like to imagine them as little pretty planets," says Linkous of his stranger creations. Linking the songs are soundbites, the aural equivalent of 'found objects' - tape loops, phone calls, a badly-tuned AM radio, anything to fill the silence between tracks and create an alluring aural landscape.

Vivadixie... began life as a loose project between Linkous and old friend David Lowery (of Cracker and formerly of Camper Van Beethoven), with the recording done on an 8-track at Linkous' farm. Inspired by the isolated environment, the results of those sessions are some of the starker moments on the album - most feature only Linkous' treated vocals and acoustic guitar to carry the tune.

When Lowery bought a studio in nearby Richmond, the recording continued with the help of ex-Silos bassist Bob Rupe, ex-Gutterball drummer Johnny Hott and Lowery himself. Even with the conventional band, the fuller tracks carry the

Sparklehorse stamp. "I guess, musically, you could describe it as fairly adventurous. I mean, it's certainly not your typical recording procedure, which I'm so not into - the whole idea of going into a recording studio and laying down the basic tracks with the drums and bass then doing the guitars and doing the singing. I want them to sound like they've been recorded at different times."

Some of Linkous' eerie songs sound like they've been recorded in different universes, such as *850 Double Pumper*. "That's my friend Bob Rupe who drag races," says Linkous of the voice he recorded down the phone line. "He's describing his engine on his Dodge Super B." The foundations of *Spirit Ditch*, a mournful ballad with treated vocals and guitar, are given an other-worldly quality by the addition of a genuine message from Linkous' answering machine. "We left a low spot there for a guitar or some kind of solo. But when I was out on the road, I called home to check my messages and Mom had left this great message about this dream she'd had. So, I made it play back and held the mic up to the telephone. Mom's heard it, she didn't mind. I don't think she really understands the music. I think it's a little too weird for her."

Vivadixie... may be too weird for Mrs Linkous, however, it proved palatable enough when Linkous was shopping around for a recording deal. His manager, David Ayers, went straight to the top. "He played it for Gary, the president of Capitol Records and he just loved it," explains Linkous, who still sounds surprised by the turn of events. "Even the weird stuff, David played him the weird stuff. He's probably a little bit more tasteful than most label presidents. He signed Teenage Fanclub and Nirvana and Smashing Pumpkins, so he's got pretty good ears, Gary does. He's had real good luck, he's got a very good track record, I would say. He loved it, you know. I didn't get any big multi-million dollar deal or anything but I think that we've had a good relationship so far."

While Linkous says he doubts that Capitol has "any outstanding expectations for Sparklehorse", the label has chosen *Vivadixie's* most commercial track

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- *Someday I Will Treat You Good* - as Sparklehorse's inaugural single, a move which concerns him to a degree. "I can imagine people hearing *Someday...*, which is a real rocker, on the radio then buying the album and freaking out. That's what I worry about. That's why I had resignations (sic) about putting out the rock and pop songs as singles, because I didn't want to give people the wrong impression. I would have chosen *Spirit Ditch*. *Someday...* is a little more accessible pop song."

Linkous admits that *Vivadixie...* hasn't set the world alight sales-wise, however, he's well pleased with the reaction from those who have heard it. "A lot of musicians are really into the record, including Radiohead," he boasts. "They heard it in a cab in Israel and they invited us to come over to England and open for them. We also played with Tindersticks. They're one of our favourite bands."

After Sparklehorse's second tour of the United States (they previously did the rounds with Son Volt), Linkous plans to complete *Vivadixie's* follow-up. "I was able to buy my own little 8-track digital studio with money I had left from my Capitol deal. So I have about four songs finished for my next record and a couple of new songs that I haven't recorded yet that I think I might go into a proper recording studio and record those with the band, 'cos I really like the way the band plays them. The B-side of the very first single is a non-LP song that I'm gonna re-record. I'm gonna do some conventional recording, just for those couple of songs, 'cos one's a pretty good rocker and the other one's just real pretty."

Meanwhile, enjoy *Vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot*, which is available now through White Records.

