

Hammering THE AMPS

They pin you to the wall with vengeful, fuzzed-out glory; then they whisper a tune about cute little birdies. Mark Linkous of the ever-remarkable Sparklehorse tells of prehistoric instruments, of scavenging on the dump and of midgets with foot-long nails...

I always find myself spending, like, three hundred dollars on some guitar effect that sounds like it's got a dead battery or a loose connection,' Mark Linkous sighs, tinkering mournfully with his empty coffee-cup like a man contemplating immediate, inescapable ruin. But concentrate on the facial area just above the close-cropped goatee and just below his impeccably redneck chainsaw-company giveaway baseball cap and you might catch a tiny, fleeting, giveaway twinkle. Being Mark Linkous, perhaps, isn't always quite as bad as some people would like to believe.

Mark Linkous' Sparklehorse releases – eerie, fractured, dreamlike meditations interspersed by cathartic rushes of ragged guitar – have led many to dub this tall, shambling, self-effacing figure as being as near to a genius as anyone in alternative American music. Reassuringly, he's also a huge fan of what can only be described as Weird Stuff. His home in rural Virginia is littered with rusting tractors, a motley assortment of animals and a collection of Moto Guzzi bikes – an archaic, charismatic breed of Italian-made vee-twin which attracts a fanatical and occasionally peculiar following. Indoors, his Static King home studio is stuffed with fossilised electronica and warped guitars ('I've got two Gibsons, a 330 and a 335... they're both fucked'). His treasured keyboards – Optigans, Orchestrons, cheap miniature Casios – are, by any reckoning, irreparably obsolete, while his most favoured guitar effects just sound plain wrong. These unlikely ingredients are the source of the tremulous vintage sounds and otherworldly bleeps and warbles that form the sonic signature of Sparklehorse.

Born in 1963 in south-western Virginia to a mining family ('Have you ever seen

Coalminer's Daughter? Or that John Sayles movie, *Matewan?* That's what it looks like down there'), Linkous was weaned on bluegrass before he discovered classic '70s rock, especially Led Zeppelin. 'As a kid I was crazy on Jimmy Page,' he grins shyly. 'My grandmother once made me a suit with all these astrological signs on it, just like his...'

As a teenager he upped sticks to New York, just missing out NYC punk originals like The Heartbreakers and the New York Dolls but managing to catch US gigs by The Clash, The Buzzcocks and his favourites, The Damned. Linkous next moved to Los Angeles, his tastes shifting from punk rock pioneers to noise rock outcasts such as Throbbing Gristle, but the vibe wasn't good. 'That LA scene was so depressing, I almost gave up on music,' he admits. 'That was a bad decade.

'But then, completely by accident, I heard some homemade tapes by Daniel Johnston' – a unique Californian songwriter once



much fêted by Kurt Cobain and now resident in Austin, who documented his manic depression on self-produced underground releases like *Songs Of Pain*. 'I also came across Tom Waits for the first time – *The Island Years*, *Raindogs*, all that stuff. He did some incredible music for a radio play by Gavin Briers called *Jesus Blood*, just a loop of an old man digging clams on a beach with all this orchestration behind the story... that, like, really stuck and started something.'

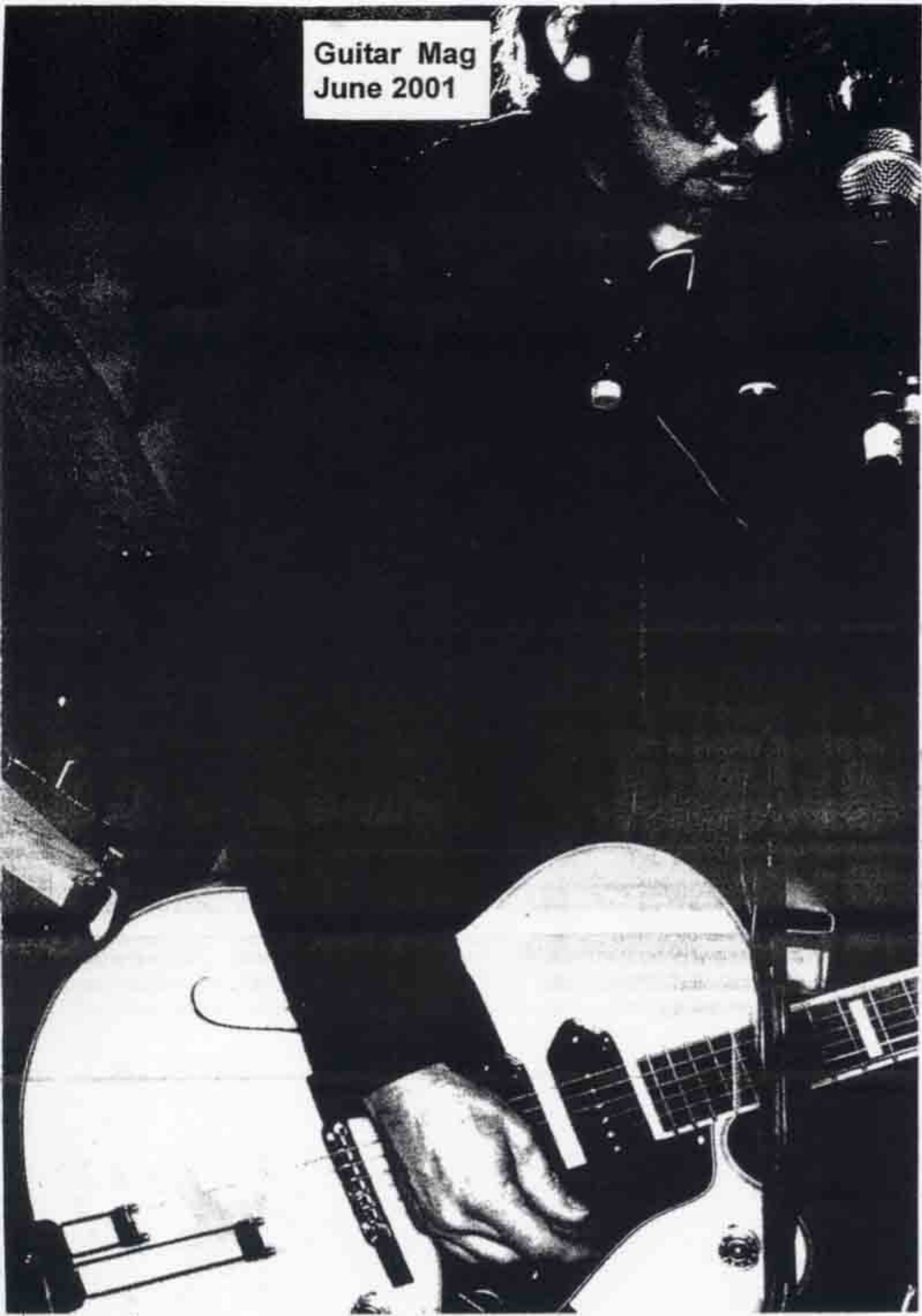
Suffering severe metropolitan burnout, Mark Linkous decided to return to his roots in rural Virginia and there began formulating songs for the first Sparklehorse album, 1995's meandering-through-Loserville classic *Vivadixiesubmarine transmissionplot* ('It's okay. I call it *Vivadixie*'). The key turning point was meeting up with musician and producer David Lowery, another ex-LA refugee who had given up his role in Camper Van Beethoven to move back to Virginia at the same time.

'We started hanging out,' explains Linkous. 'We first did some songs of mine on his 8-track cassette recorder. I passed them around to other musicians like Steve Wynn of Dream Syndicate and the House Of Freaks guys. Then David got a 16-track Studer machine and a Harrison board and since I was, like, his first client, we just used it as an experiment, playing around all night. I added some songs I'd recorded at home, and that was the record.'

Vivadixie, often hailed as a lo-fi alt.country classic, is really nothing of the kind. It's not very country, for one thing: some songs are more Neil Young filtered through a vintage wireless while others are simply unclassifiable, like the eerie *Spirit Ditch*, which contains an answerphone message from Linkous' mother in place of a guitar solo.

And the lo-fi tag? 'We were never intentionally trying to be lo-fi,' says Linkous. 'We were trying to make it sound as good as we knew how. That vocal style' – whispery, ultra-close miked and often double-tracked – 'came from using shitty microphones... and, I guess, me doing home demos for years and not wanting anyone to hear me sing. Technically, the record is obviously two guys trying to make it sound as convincing as possible. Looking back, though, I think *Vivadixie* is pretty good.'

The second Sparklehorse album, 1998's *Good Morning Spider*, was a nightmare. Whacked out on anti-depressants and Valium, Linkous passed out late one night in his London hotel room, trapping his legs beneath him for 14 hours and cutting off his circulation. Doctors at the capital's St Mary's Hospital saved him, but the rest of the tour was undertaken in a wheelchair. Remarkably, Linkous completed his new long-player, combining new material like the wracked *Painbirds* and the touching *Thousands Of Sparrows* with searing rockers like *Sick Of Goodbyes* and *Happy*



Man that had remained luckily unused from the *Vivadixie* sessions. 'I had a hard time assembling that record,' is all Linkous will say. 'That's why I had to resort to stuff that was left over.'

But huzzah: just a year after 2000's tempting taster EP *Distorted Ghost* comes the third full Sparklehorse album, *It's A Wonderful Life*, his most controlled and completely-realised offering yet: though there's nothing to match the raging abandon of songs like *Vivadixie's* *Hammering The Cramps* or *Good Morning Spider's* *Happy Man*, it retains all the drifting, dislocating Sparklehorse atmosphere.

The album was recorded in assorted comparatively posh studios with an assortment of producers at the helm including famed Mercury Rev overseer David Fridmann and PJ Harvey's main collaborator John Parish. The 'pro

producer' idea came from record company Capitol, who decided to gently ease Linkous out of the Fat Controller's chair: luckily, he doesn't seem to mind. 'Yeah... they weren't too keen on me making records out of my basement anymore,' he hums. 'I think they really wanted a "name" guy like, I dunno, Dave Grohl or someone, although they'd never have forced anyone on me. I kinda wanted Flood or (*Captain Beesheart* sideman) Eric Drew Feldman or Dave Fridmann, so it worked out okay. Anyway, this time I wanted to observe and learn a little bit and not play everything like I usually do.'

Recorded in Virginia, Brooklyn, upstate New York and Barcelona, *It's A Wonderful Life* benefits from great guest appearances: Polly Harvey on the driving *Piano Fire* and the exquisite *Eyepennies*, extra vocals from The Cardigans' Nina, twangular additions

from Portishead's Adrian Utley ('Adrian played bass on *Eyepennies* and guitar noise on *Dog Door* and a dictaphone on *Gold Day*, deadpans Linkous) and, most impressively of all, rare guest vocals and piano plunks from Mr Tom Waits.

'How did I feel meeting him? I was nervous as hell,' admits Linkous. 'We'd been talking for a while... apparently his kids had stolen his copy of *Vivadixie*, so I sent him another one. I decided to contact him again 'cos I had this song, *Dog Door*, which was weird - a

'I was crazy on Jimmy Page. My grandmother made me a suit with all these astrological signs on it just like his...'

regression, or a different style for me - and I couldn't finish it. So I sent him the track and he came up with the words and the melody and we recorded it near his home. He also played piano on *Morning Hollow*, which is a hidden track.

'What's he like? He's funny. Really, really funny. He likes messing with you, playing tricks. One time we were driving to Oakland and we were riding across some bridge and there's an island in the river and he was telling me there was a family of midgets who lived there and all their nails were, like, this long - and being

impressionable, I believed him...'

Now with a new five-piece lineup, Sparklehorse have decided to shun major-league venues in favour of smaller, more intimate clubs. 'I found myself playing 2000 seaters with security barriers and standing 30 feet from that audience and all this ridiculous bullshit, so I started asking that we be booked into smaller clubs for multiple nights,' Linkous explains.

So it was that just last month a few hundred people crammed into London's homely Borderline club for three nights of fab music. A new multi-skilled five-piece band - Al, swiped from David Lowery's Virginia studio, plays guitars, baritone guitar and pedal steel, while Margaret and Kendal swap violins, keyboards and bass guitars - ably backed Linkous, who alternated between an electro-acoustic, a classical and a super-cool Korean-made blonde Epiphone

SPARKLEHORSE

Zephyr with three P90s. His effects are, frankly, a laughable tangle: 'I use a couple of pretty dangerous stompboxes made by a couple of guys I know,' he reveals. 'One's by someone in Brooklyn called John Schuman, and the other is a Z.Vex, made by a guy in Minnesota. I have his Fuzz Probe' – a seriously mad unit with a 'sensor' plate built into the top – 'and it's ridiculous. The signal sounds like it's struggling to make it through the wire.'


Linkous, who attributes his soft/loud, precious/distorted schizoid guitar style as a product of 'listening to sweet, Sterling Morrison, Velvet Underground kind of guitar playing on the one hand and the Pistols and punk and the Pixies on the other', doesn't find it easy to pick any current favourite guitarists other than Jason Lytle from Californian combo Grandaddy: 'He's got a great style and sense of melody and construction,' he recommends.

But as you might have suspected, Linkous doesn't find inspiration from many guitar outfits other than his old favourite, Neil Young. True, the nine-strong Canadian whisper-to-nosebleed outfit Godspeed You Black Emperor is currently a huge favourite, as is Silver Mount Zion, a Godspeed offshoot containing guitar, drums and violin. He also much approves of Mogwai and Arab Strap, but mostly the isolated Linkous homestead echoes to the sounds of super-minimalist electronic outfits like Microstoria, a German duo comprising Oval's Markus Popp and Mouse On Mars' Jan St Werner (recommended albums: *Runtime Engine* and *Model 3, Step 3*). 'Laptop music,' he says. 'It sounds like satellites talking to each other.'

When not strumming onstage, Linkous prods at a little home-made stand containing a miniature Casio keyboard linked to a Boss SP-202 Dr Sample and doodles on a Kaos pad, generating an unlikely array of drones, swoops and warbles. Back in the studio these crackly, static-infused sonics are generated in a variety of ways, often by sampling Moog or ARP synths or otherwise by recording guitar feedback with the useful Dr Sample gadget: 'Then you just chop out 98 per cent of the signal until it just beeps and squawks and things.'

In fact, dangerously overdriven acoustics – often recalling Keith Richard's famous acoustic-through-tape-recorder *Street Fighting Man* sound – comprise much of *It's A Wonderful Life's* guitar vibes, either cranked through a console preamp or, even more bizarrely, through a Datman, a tape-based file system for PCs. 'If you run a guitar through there it makes the signal way too hot, like cheap consumer electronics,' he explains.

But it's the deranged keyboards that make up the bulk of this Sparklehorse offering. The vibrant, fluty tones would suggest a Mellotron – the huge '60s/'70s proto-sampler, where pressing a key triggers a length of actual recording tape –



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but Mark Linkous doesn't actually use one. 'They're too out of tune, too high maintenance,' he says. 'Mostly, it's a Chamberlin, which also plays tapes, or an Optigan, a sort of 1970's Mattel home entertainment fun machine that plays celluloid discs. It's really low-tech and wheezy and scratchy-sounding. The right hand plays keyboard sounds while the chord buttons on the left plays a disc of a real band playing an actual style of music – the discs are pre-recorded and really, really hard to find. I borrowed a bunch from a guy who plays for Tom Waits and made some copies, but the copies are bad. They've a lot of crosstalk and everything sounds like there's a shortwave radio under it. Actually, it's quite nice...'

'My other favourite studio tools? Distresser compressors made by Empirical Labs are the best for me when it comes to recording. They're real versatile – they can imitate Urei 1176s, or anything – and they

just slam the signal more than anything else I've ever heard.

'Right now one of my favourite things is a plastic 1950's Silvertone mike. It came with a reel-to-reel 1/4" recorder. I found it on the landfill near where I live. I used it to record Tom Waits' piano-playing 'cos I wanted it to sound like a recording that had been in a fire but just happened to be in the same key.

'I've also got an old wire recorder' – a rare, mostly military recording medium used just before magnetic tape – 'with a bunch of original wires dated from 1948 containing some guy reading strange numerical codes and a little girl talking. I ended up using the little girl on *Babies On The Sun*. It's amazing... they sound like they were recorded yesterday. I tried to use it to record Tom Waits as well, but the sound came out so good, I had to run it through a computer to make it sound old...'