

My family and other animals

Mark Linkous dedicated his last album to the spiders in his studio. This time, he seems more concerned with dogs and babies. Oh, and Tom Waits and PJ Harvey, he tells **Stephen Dowling**

Last time Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous was making an album, he dedicated it to the spiders residing in his rural home studio in Virginia, their webs vibrating in the corners as the room hummed with haunting music. He called it *Good Morning Spider*.

This time, it isn't so much *Good Morning Spider* as *Goodbye Sparklehorse*. Linkous's home studio at his new house a few miles down the road has picked up some welcome guests - brown recluse spiders, antisocial eight-legged beasts whose bites can lead to deep scarring and require plastic surgery. Not exactly the kind of place you want to be inviting guests to. The invited eight-legged guests were an unlikely catalyst for Mark Linkous's excellent adventure while recording his third Sparklehorse album, *It's a Wonderful Life*, another stalwart of the Virginia collective's covered ballads and scarred country.

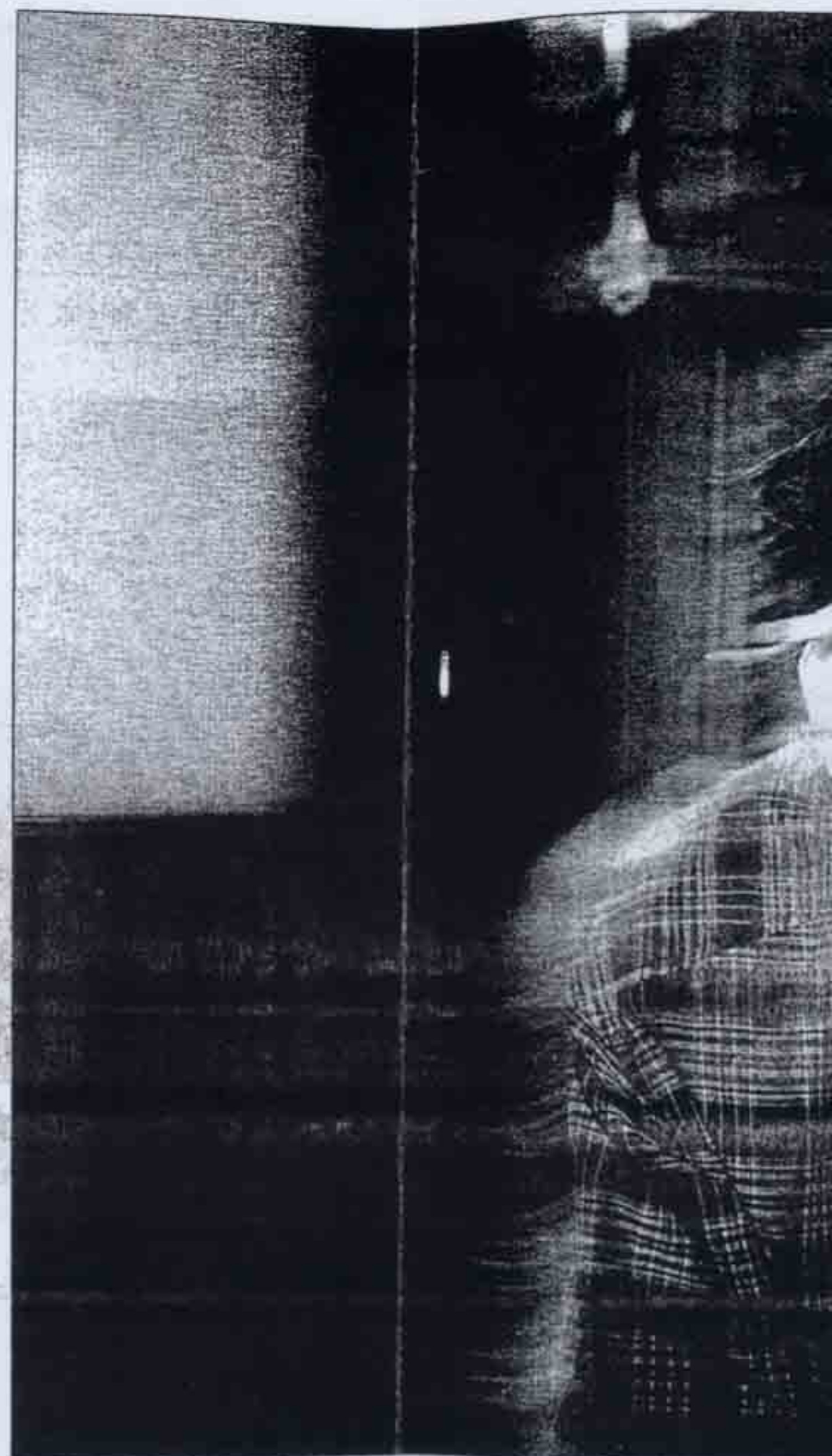
Third time in, Linkous has been defined by a roll-call of "characters and special guests" of formidable talent - Tom Waits, PJ Harvey, Mercury Rev's Jonathan Donahue and Nina Persson from the Cardigans. Sitting in the Hammer Horror surrounds of London hotel, the arm but shy Linkous looks deliciously out of place, basketball-tall and dressed in checked shirt and a cap advertising a chainsaw manufacturer. His eyes are soft and sad, and his voice a sometimes painfully hesitant Southern drawl more at home with the backdrop of crickets than the rumble of farm machinery or the hum of London traffic.

Linkous, you could argue, was

reborn in London. It was here that he died for a few minutes early in 1996 after a combination of Valium and antidepressants knocked him out for 14 hours in a hotel bathroom (badly damaging his legs); he then spent three months in St. Mary's Hospital, undergoing drastic surgery. He still finds walking painful and has braces in his lower leg, because all the muscles were cut out.

The rocky road to recovery has already delivered one fine album, and *It's a Wonderful Life* looks set to be one of the year's most intriguing bright moments. Linkous still can't credit the fact that some of his heroes have been harbouring desires to work with him ever since Sparklehorse quietly cantered into view with 1995's masterpiece, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* (an album whose title came from a peculiarly Linkous dream about a US Civil War submersible). Take Tom Waits, for instance, a man whose music put Linkous back together after a career in the lost-without-trace rock band the Dancing Hoods ended in heroin addiction and suicidal depression. "Dog Door" on *It's a Wonderful Life* is the sound of Linkous and Waits making the most menacing of sweet music.

"I had the track recorded, and it was finished, and I couldn't write a melody for it, a song form," Linkous explains slowly. "But I didn't want to lose it. I said to him, 'Here, take this: I can't do anything with it.' He wrote the words, and I flew out to his studio. I was going out there anyway to chill out and write songs with him." He happily admits that although he and Waits have been friends for a couple of years now, it's



Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse: 'I told "Rolling Stone" that it w

only recently that he has been able to talk to him on the phone without a couple of shots in his belly to steady his nerves.

It used to be a similar situation with the Cardigans' Nina Persson, who crops up on the plaintive "Gold Day" and the shuddering "King of Nails". "I'd heard she was a fan and might show up when we played a gig," Linkous says sheepishly. "I freaked out and walked back to the bus and had a few more shots of whiskey to work my nerve up. I had a big crush on her. I'd seen her on TV in little summer dresses. And then I went back in and met her, and it was great."

Linkous forgot about the meeting until, while he was recording in Brooklyn, his violinist casually mentioned she'd just bumped into Persson on the pavement. "So I called her. She was down in 45 minutes, and

within an hour she had the microphones set up and was singing. I love her voice." So much so that Linkous has co-produced the Cardigans star's forthcoming solo album.

Persson's icy voice adds a further sheen to the heart of *It's a Wonder-*

'It wouldn't have been right for Polly to come to my house and get dog-bit'

ful Life, an album full of creeping songs, Linkous's lyrics coming across like Gothic hallucinations from a Deep South literary circle, all elemental totems and warped visions. Whereas *Good Morning Spider* skirted round Linkous's crippling accident, this appears a much



asn't the PJ Harvey on the album; it was this banjo-player Phil Junior Harvey' *Mykel Nicolaou*

gentler, if still slightly surreal, affair.

There's a preoccupation with animals and babies that Linkous still can't put his finger on. "It wasn't intentional. It's just, there always seemed to be a baby running around where we were recording, or somebody chasing a baby. And the animal stuff, I never really realised until after the record that it was about animals. Maybe there's dogs and spiders because I realised I was more intrigued by the way animals and babies see the world."

It's a Wonderful Life's rich tapestries belie the writer's block Linkous struggled with after *Good Morning Spider's* worldwide tour, which took the aircraft-phobic Virginian as far afield as New Zealand. At the same time he had to kick the morphine that had been making life bearable after the accident. It wasn't easy. "I think a lot of it had to do with being on prescription painkillers

for so long. I panicked. I'd been able to lean on that for a long while. I'm not on morphine any more. I still take painkillers. It hurts if I walk too much, but it's not as bad as it used to be."

After recording two albums in splendid Southern isolation, Linkous decided he "wanted to travel around and work with other people and not do everything on this record myself. I wanted to work with John Parish [PJ Harvey's collaborator], and he said, 'Where do you want to record?' I didn't know, but somewhere in the background, his wife yelled out: 'Barcelona.' So that's where we went! Polly and Adrian [Utley, of Portishead] came a few days later. It was good that we went there. It wouldn't have been right for her to come to my house and get dog-bit or something." He snorts. "My dogs jumping all over PJ Harvey..."

The downhome Virginia lifestyle

– Linkous and his wife, Theresa, live on the edge of a pine forest with their four dogs, cats, horses and Linkous's tumbledown collection of Italian motorcycles – has been his bolthole ever since leaving Los Angeles in disgust a decade ago. He's adamant that this year's record, with its star turns, won't suck him into the pop-star lifestyle.

"I told *Rolling Stone* that it wasn't the famous PJ Harvey at all; it was this banjo-player Phil Junior Harvey. And it wasn't Tom Waits; it was his cousin Ron Waits, who works at the Piggly Wiggly Grocery Store. There's a big lawsuit, and it's polarised the entire family; everybody hates each other."

It's a Wonderful Life (Parlophone) is out on Monday. Sparklehorse play with Dave Gilmour as part of the Meltdown festival at the South Bank, London, on 22 June