

Revisit: Sparklehorse: Good Morning Spider

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MAY 6, 2013

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We've just passed the three-year mark since Mark Linkous, the auteur of Sparklehorse, ended his life with a bullet through the heart. Enough time has elapsed for the grave dirt to settle and allow a reevaluation of his rather limited output under his shimmery, equine-inspired *nom de plume*. Across Sparklehorse's four LPs (five if you count the collaboration with Danger Mouse), Linkous exhibited a distinctive vision, which he manifested in an equally individualized and inimitable sound. "Rural industrial" might be the best way to describe the Sparklehorse model, a mix of newfangled production technology and archaic instruments, recorded together in what

sounds like an old wooden barn held together with duct tape. Amid the static bleeps and delicately plucked acoustic guitars, Linkous sang with a voice of a precocious six year-old boy, offering imagery just as absurd as one from that nascent age group might conceive, eager to explore the mysteries of the universe but often just as frightened and dismayed by them.

The hallmarks of the Sparklehorse sound coalesced and reached their zenith with sophomore record *Good Morning Spider*, released in 1998. It is a work creepy, endearing, angry, tragic, romantic and playful in equal measure, filtered through a dreamlike aesthetic. Second-hand instruments culled from thrift stores — wurlitzers, vibraphones, cellos, harmoniums, concertinas and a Speak & Spell — are cobbled together to create soundscapes with the brittle crust of experimentalism, but with gooey pop melodies at their core. Unlike 1995's debut *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, the record has decidedly more variety and experimentation, the quieter moments of folk-pop ("Sunshine," the Daniel Johnson cover "Hey, Joe," and "Come on In") balanced with a significant number of up-tempo, bedlam-laden tunes ("Ghost of His Smile" and "Cruel Sun" among them).

Yet despite *Good Morning Spider's* objective strengths, it's nearly impossible to give a serious analysis of the record without recapping the backstory that so largely informs it. Linkous, while on tour in support of *Vivadixie...*, collapsed in a London hotel after consuming a near-fatal mixture of alcohol and various other substances and lay unconscious for 14 hours, his legs pinned beneath him. He suffered a heart attack when responding paramedics straightened his legs and was technically dead for a few minutes. After being revived, he spent the next six months wheelchair-bound, the first three of which saw him confined to a London hospital. In later interviews, Linkous said his bouts with depression increased after the incident, as he feared he'd lost the ability to write songs. Perhaps most telling is that Linkous claimed he didn't even recall whether the overdose was a deliberate suicide attempt or simply an accident, as though, ultimately, it didn't matter.

Out of that turmoil arose *Good Morning Spider*, the title supposedly hailing from a folktale Linkous heard about the bad omen of seeing a spider in the morning. Bad things were certainly in store for Linkous, and the title reflects his sardonic attitude of self-deprecation, of a shoulder-shrugging pessimism. But any passive acceptance of a downward spiral that listeners might expect is immediately disavowed in opening track "Pig," wherein Linkous' frustration with his broken body detonates in a furious flurry. Drums clang like oil barrels thrown from a roof and the guitar shreds as though it's trying to peel paint. There is no room for subtlety here as he declares, "*I wanna new face right now/ And I want it bad/ I wanna new body that's strong/ I'm a butchered cow,*" and later expresses a surreal image of subversive machismo in "*I wanna be a pig/ I wanna fuck a car.*" Through it all, he maintains that thin voice of a child, albeit one having a tantrum and screeching through one of those plastic toy microphones.

Catharsis achieved, Linkous returns to the somber form on second cut "Painbirds." As Linkous was an outspoken fan of Tom Waits, with whom he would collaborate on follow-up *It's a Wonderful Life*, it's no reach to assume the song's title is a pun on Waits' own "Rainbirds." A wheezy saxophone, the metronomic and hollow drumming and acoustic strumming provide the bedrock of the piece, with a reflective Linkous' whispery vocals serving up incongruous yet vivid couplets: "*Spiral down those hateful dears/ Between our skins and burning spheres.*" The surreal poetry of Linkous' lyrics is crucial to the Sparklehorse makeup. To search for symbolism or metaphors in Linkous' words is akin to analyzing dreams; there might be meaning beneath the surface, and we'd like to believe there is, but it could just as well be randomly fired nonsense. With Linkous' fixation on the natural world and animals, horses paramount among them, his words have the feeling of impressionistic glimpses from a child's limited perspective.

Keeping with the theme of youth, few have merged childlike hope with a cynic's despair as convincingly as Linkous. He seems to be communicating that the worries of childhood do not fade away with age, but grow along with the body. "Sick of Goodbyes" and "Chaos of the Galaxy/Happy Man" in particular focus on this dilemma of being unable to reconcile youthful fears with adult melancholy. With the former, a foot-stomping rocker, Linkous sweetly expresses his unequalled understanding to a loved one before the angst gets the better of him, raging in the chorus with the repeated title. The latter finds Sparklehorse galloping to the fore after fighting through two minutes of fuzzy, AM radio tuning. The horse references are prominent, Linkous singing, "*I woke up in a horse's stomach one fogging morning/ His eyes were crazy and he smashed into the cemetery gates,*" buffering the singalong chorus of "*All I want is to be a happy man.*"

In the most direct song on the record, "Saint Mary," Linkous addresses his stay in the London hospital following his overdose, paying tribute to the nurses who tended to him. Sparse acoustic plucking, minor piano chords and a cello that sounds like the creaking of floorboards create the intimate atmosphere for Linkous' haunted meditations. His ordeal is referenced in such lines as "*Blanket me, sweet nurse/ An keep me from burnin,*" while the song ends with Linkous stating the temptation to cease the convalescing and embrace death: "*Please let me taste the clean dirt in my lungs/ And moss on my back.*" It's a harrowing sentiment, especially in light of Linkous' violent, self-inflicted end.

The record ends with some comparatively optimistic tunes, "Hundreds of Sparrows" and "Junebug," with the instrumental interlude "Box of Stars (Part Two)" sandwiched in between. Brief though they are, they find Linkous stating his desire for peace and contentment, hoping for a little luck around the bend and the solace afforded by a companion's embrace. In retrospect, the songs' sentiment is that much more effecting, knowing Linkous was apparently unable to find such comfort in life. Linkous' suicide casts an indisputable pall on his oeuvre, making any revisit to his records difficult at first, but all the more insightful in

the long run. While Sparklehorse's successive albums also chronicled his internal strife, it is *Good Morning Spider* that reigns as the supreme document of a man in his various moods, an artist inclined toward the dark but striving toward the light.