

REST IN TEMPO: Requiem for a Happy Man



Another grey, shitty day in Los Angeles, and The Beast is mourning the just-reported death of composer/bandleader [Mark Linkous](#), who led the lo-fi surrealist rock band [Sparklehorse](#) from 1995 to, uh, Saturday, when he [took his own life](#) at age 47.

If anyone still refers to Downbeast as strictly a “jazz blog” then they haven’t been paying attention. Quoth the sage [Greg Burk](#): “There are no styles anymore, only music.” Linkous himself was a musical omnivore who joined a distinguished line of hermetic, depressive indie “outsiders” (Jeff Magnum, Jeff Lytle, Vic Chestnut) who retreated Big Pink-style to the woods of rural America – in Linkous’ case, a farmhouse in Bremono Bluff, Virginia – to make strange and decayed sounds with moss-dripped gothic lyrics. One can arguably draw a line of influence from Sparklehorse’s creep-in-the-kudzu debut *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* to Radiohead’s *Amnesiac* and Wilco’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*.



Lately, isolation has been rather hep. Think Bon Iver's **Justin Vernon** in his father's hunting lodge in the musical mecca of Northern Wisconsin, or Owl City's **Adam Young** in the basement of a 113-year-old farmhouse in Owatonna, Minnesota. Linkous' own music reflected this glorious (and somewhat claustrophobic) solitude, conjuring up images of a yard full of paint-chipped hobby-horses, weathered farm machinery and mice-filled refrigerators overgrown with crabgrass, electrical cables running across a chicken-feathered dirt floor to a jerryrigged recording studio amongst rusted tools, ancient spiderwebs and the scent of wood rot. Linkous' music sounded like blurry ham radio dispatches from such a place, especially on Sparklehorse's 1998 masterpiece [Good Morning Spider](#): "Pig" is a terrifying blast of Pixies-ish fury; "Painbirds" grows in intensity like a tumor (reflecting Linkous' quasi-accidental death in 1996); "Sick of Goodbyes" is pure fun; "Happy Man," especially the live version off the *Distorted Ghost* EP, is a jacked-up wonder of positivity ("all I want is to be your happy man!") that made me cry when I listened to it – even though it's an intense, upbeat rocker. And talk about that live EP: "Gasoline Horseys," a duet with Sofie Michalitsianos recorded in Bristol, England, is so quiet and delicate it risks being blown away by a stiff breeze.

Linkous sang (and spoke) in kind of a strangled, tremulous creak – like [Bobby Goldsboro](#) trapped under a combine. I recall an awkward [NPR interview](#) with Linkous that was more silence than speaking: far from being a petulant hipster who was too cool for the room, the man seemed physically unable to even speak of his own music or what it meant. No matter. *Good Morning Spider* got this Humble Blogger out of one of the darkest and doom-laden periods of my life, when I became a virtual self-medicated, bathrobed hermit in my own apartment, afraid to leave and afraid to write, the floor threatening to open up beneath my feet. Even Linkous' interesting fashion sense – he toured with the 'horse wearing a glittering Vegas suit, welding goggles, and a ten-gallon cowboy hat – helped me in some strange way. (It inspired me to write a story, dedicated to Linkous, entitled "Big Neon Cowboy," about a dustblown primitive awash in the digitized city.) I heard a testimonial at a funeral last summer where the speaker was recalling being depressed, and how having the deceased comfort her was both a blessing and a curse: "What do you do when the one who told you 'everything will be okay' is now gone?" Indeed.



What really sucks, of course, is the announcement on March 3 that Linkous' most famous project, [Dark Night of the Soul](#), the [troubled](#) group project with filmmaker **David Lynch** and pathological collaborator **DJ Danger Mouse**, was finally slated to be released sometime this summer. Bummer.

One of the best descriptions of Linkous' unique effect on the ears came from my friend [R.J. Smith](#), "His songs sound like a secret transmission from the 1930s that bounced around the heaven's for years before it was picked up by satellite. The songs sound remote, but they communicate as warmly and as richly as a natural-born artist sitting on his front porch, strumming and rocking."

Mr. Linkous, cross the river and rest under the shade of the trees. Hope to meet you there someday.

*Blood suckers hide beneath my bed
And black fumes of skin so gently bled
I slept with a cat on my breast
Slowing my heart stealing my breath
At sunrise the monkeys will fly
And leave me with pennies in my eyes.*

-Sparklehorse, "Eyepennies" (2001)