

# FRACTURED AIR

The universe is making music all the time

## Posts Tagged 'Sparklehorse'

### The Last Waltz: Mark Linkous

[leave a comment »](#)

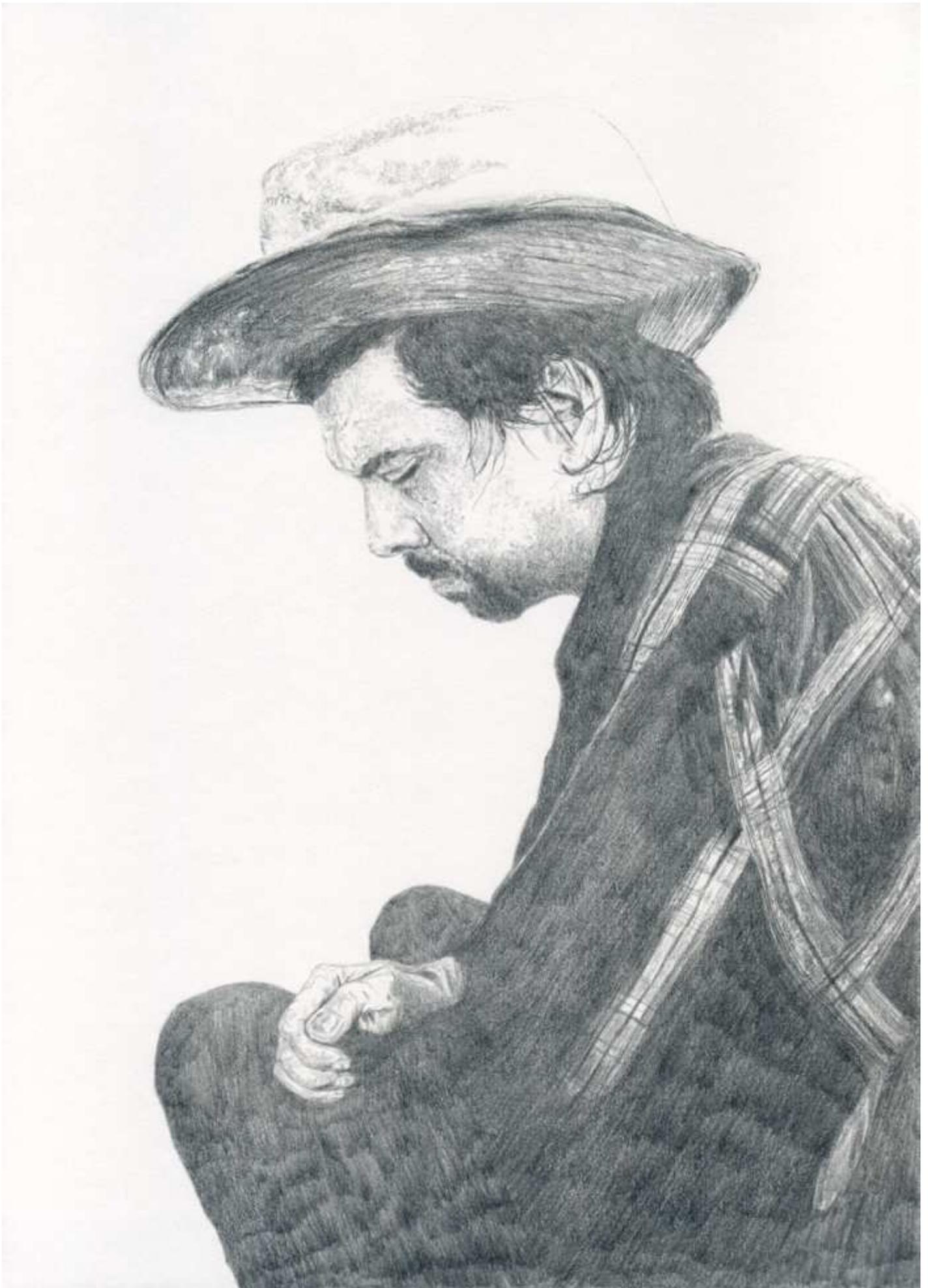
*"Songwriting's lonely  
songwriting hurts  
a relentless itching  
bed-bug curse  
songwriting costs  
it doesn't come free*

*ask Elliott Smith  
ask Richie Lee  
ask Mark Linkous  
ask Shannon Hoon*

*to get up on stage  
and sing you a tune  
this business is troubling"*

*—Mark Kozelek (Sun Kil Moon, 'Track Number 8')*

*Words & Illustration: Craig Carry*



Last year's latest Mark Kozelek release (Sun Kil Moon's 'Among The Leaves') contained a haunting and timely reminder of the many gifted songwriters whose lives were tragically cut short. Of course, the list of 'troubled songwriters' who left the world much too early down the years is, very sadly, much too long indeed.

As Kozelek writes, songwriting is lonely. The songwriter's (writing) life is essentially a solitary one. The process involves dedication and perseverance. And demands seclusion.

What struck me most of all, on listening to 'Among The Leaves' was Kozelek's inclusion of Mark Linkous in the song. While listening to 'Track Number 8' – for a split second at least – it seemed to me as though Linkous was still here. Why has he been included in Kozelek's song? But then, after collecting myself, I realized that, yes, he has indeed left us. This March will be the third anniversary of Linkous's death, who took his own life, aged 47.

Perhaps why I had been so slow to realize Linkous's passing is the simple fact that – like so many music fans – the music of Sparklehorse is always so close at hand. Those fragile songs; haunting melodies; deeply intimate words; are never far away. Linkous's albums, through his Sparklehorse pseudonym, not so much spoke to his listeners – but whispered, soothed, comforted. He wrote from a dark place, at times a deeply unsettling place. The kind of music that simply had to be written and recorded in the dead of the night. He went to the darkest places so we wouldn't have to venture there ourselves. Perhaps that darkness got too much to bear, like Bob Dylan's 'Not Dark Yet':

*"I've been down on the bottom of a world full of lies  
I ain't looking for nothing in anyone's eyes  
Sometimes my burden seems more than I can bear  
It's not dark yet, but it's getting there"*

(— 'Not Dark Yet', taken from Bob Dylan's 1997 album 'Time out Of Mind')

It is sad – as is the case for so many songwriters – that the music of Sparklehorse did not spread to a bigger audience during Linkous's life. Sure – he had the "critically acclaimed" tag forever associated to his name, but his audience would be best described as "of a cult following" variety. Yet these devoted fans worshipped their hero. They sought solace and wisdom (and still do) from his beautiful country-folk songs. And whose to say, Linkous would have necessarily liked – or wanted – a "bigger" audience anyway?

A scene from the recent documentary on Sixto Rodriguez ('Waiting For Sugar Man') comes to mind. Rodriguez, who had become (unknown to him) a phenomenon in apartheid South Africa, is asked "You weren't aware of something that could have changed your life completely, I mean, probably for the better..." To which Rodriguez shyly smiles and responds: "Well, I don't know whether it would have been for the better...but it's certainly an interesting thought."

— — — —

On hearing 'Swordfish Trombones' by Tom Waits, Linkous would be inspired to start on a new musical path. Previously, Linkous had put out two albums with his band The Dancing Hoods (in '86 and '88). Linkous – still in his twenties - moved from his Virginia homeplace to New York City and later to Los Angeles in the hope of securing a major label deal – but to no avail. Linkous would return home to Virginia and start afresh and, by 1995, he had formed a musical project entitled 'Sparklehorse.'

The beloved Sparklehorse debut album 'Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot' was put out in '95 and a European tour supporting Radiohead would happen the following year. However, Linkous's lifelong fight against depression would resurface while on tour with Radiohead. Linkous was wheelchair-bound for six months (and needing dialysis for acute kidney failure while also requiring seven operations to save his legs) after taking an overdose of Valium and antidepressant medication in a London hotel room. Later, after his recovery, in an interview with Rolling Stone, Linkous said: "For a while there I was really scared that when I technically died – which I guess I did for a few minutes – that the part of my brain that allowed me my ability to write songs would be damaged."

'Good Morning Spider' (1998) was the second Sparklehorse lp, seemed to draw inspiration directly from his near-death experience. Although subsequently Linkous said most of the album had been written prior to his attempted suicide. The album is a haunting and heartbreaking set of songs. On the track 'Ghost Of His Smile' Linkous's poetry of everyday life can be found in all its beauty:

*"Dogs will wag their tails  
And birds will sing  
Hell it's a hard world  
For little things"*

Most heartbreaking of all (and proves an all-so-difficult listening experience now) is the song's chorus:

*"And we thought that he was doing alright*

*I can't forget the ghost*

*I can't forget the ghost*

*I can't forget the ghost*

*Of his smile"*

2001 would see the release of 'It's A Wonderful Life', an album Linkous would collaborate with one of his own musical heroes – Tom Waits (Waits and Kathleen Brennan co-wrote 'Dog Door' with Linkous). Also guesting – on the sublime 'Piano Fire'- was Polly Jean Harvey on vocals. The album – twelve tracks in length – was produced by Dave Fridmann (Mercury Rev, Flaming Lips) whose collaboration would beautifully bring Linkous's eerie words to life.

Poignantly, Linkous would add "borrowed lines" from his dear friend Vic Chesnutt to the tenth track, 'Little Fat Baby.' The Vic Chesnutt song in question was 'Myrtle'. The following is 'Myrtle's' last verse:

*"I'm not an optimist, I'm not a realist  
I might be a subrealist but I can't substantiate  
It was bigger than me and I felt like a sick child  
Dragged by a donkey, through the myrtle"*  
(– 'Myrtle', taken from Vic Chesnutt's 1996 album 'About to Choke')

Linkous would incorporate 'Myrtle' (across each verse) into 'Little Fat Baby':

*“He got dragged by a donkey  
Through the dust and the myrtle  
But he was once a little fat baby”  
(— ‘Little Fat Baby’, taken from the Sparklehorse 2001 album ‘It’s A Wonderful Life’)*

Tragically, Chesnutt – Linkous’s close friend – (and another gifted songwriter) would – some years later – take his own life, by an overdose of muscle relaxers, and died on Christmas Day 2009. Only barely three months later, Linkous would himself take his own life, on 6 March 2010. On that day, the Linkous family made the following statement which will also be forever felt in the hearts of his many fans:

*“We are thankful for his time with us and will hold him forever in our hearts. May his journey be peaceful, happy and free. There’s a heaven and there’s a star for you.”*

— — — —

*For more information on the music of Sparklehorse please visit:  
<http://www.sparklehorse.com>*

Written by fracturedair

January 15, 2013 at 7:22 pm

Posted in [THE LAST WALTZ](#)

Tagged with [Capitol](#), [Mark Linkous](#), [Sparklehorse](#), [Vic Chesnutt](#)

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#) Theme: [Customized The Journalist v1.9](#) by [Lucian E. Marin](#).