

Morning's Muffled Guns: A Tribute to Mark Linkous by Angela Faye Martin - March 10, 2011

On one of the waning days of winter, March 6th 2010, Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse took his own life with a rifle shot to the heart in the city of Knoxville, Tennessee. Things were going better for his career, he'd just been signed to Anti- Records, he was almost finished recording a new Sparklehorse album and was in the process of moving his Static King Studio to one of the south's best cities for music. Drastic change, no matter what, is incredibly daunting to one's well being. And Mark needed no additional challenges to his psyche, in my opinion. In recent years I came to know Mark through an aged mountain man who served as our conduit and mutual confidant and who made sure Mark and I met and recorded together before passing on himself.

It is March 20, of last year, 2009, and Mark Linkous and I are stepping out into the sun from his Static King Studios in Cherokee County, North Carolina. I tell him it's the last day of winter and I'm trying to draw his attention from finding a cigarette to a magnolia leaf that's gently clawing the front stoop. We've just finished recording a ten song LP of my songs adorned with all manner of Mark's signature Sparklehorse strangeness. Then I point to a far away tree and tell him that's the closest magnolia. And go on about how the wind carried it. He's squinting at me the way my uncle used to when I was trying to be clever and in the studio-induced faux British accent we employed to stay humorous, he cockneys, "and aren't you a rock and roll detective for the environment. . ."

He's probably wondering if I'm too scared to ride with him on his antique Norton motorcycle and thinking that this is not the day for it. He's anticipating the mix-down we've scheduled on his return from a trip to Richmond and then to Knoxville where he's already laying plans to curate a label and rebuild a studio. Between migraines, his broken cars, winter storms and trips to L.A. to finalize his album with Dangermouse and David Lynch, Mark Linkous is producing my album and this is cause to be very optimistic. And I could've been, were I only able to ignore how incredibly destructive this genius was to himself.

There were perfectly sunny days we worked in that dark studio, in the cradling arms of the Tusquittee and Snowbird mountain ranges in the company of the Valley river. The magical childhood stomping grounds of the writer, Charles Frazier. Mark and I would meet, usually at noon, decide what was to be finished from a previous session and solder wires, make coffee, and comb through rusty drawers of loot from which Mark beckoned me to select objects he'd curated from rummaging the dusty shops of Appalachia. On days when Mark felt good, we'd all get in the Subaru and my husband would take us to old abandoned homes where we'd find lucite barrettes for me and velvet chair cushions to match the furniture in Mark's studio. One such day was cut short by one of Mark's migraines so we put him to bed and he awakened that evening, saying he loved the kind of sleep he got in our home and that made us feel good. Southerners sometimes say things that are maybe true, or maybe not, and say them to make people feel good.

One time, while having me do take after take on a rhythm track for my song Pictures from Home, on what felt like piano-wire strings, he said loud enough for me to hear, "she's a pretty good guitar player" then mischievously, ". . .for a girl." It was one of my favorite moments with Mark because I think he was greatly entertained by my indignance, which made me put it on thick. Probably too thick because the following month, during one of our mixing sessions, one of the last ones, he asked me to sit in his big wine-colored velvet chair to tell me something "important". He wanted to tell me how good my playing was and how proud he was of the record. And with my chronic inability to assimilate a compliment, I shrugged off a moment I wish I'd known how to savor with the greatest mentor I will ever know.

One of the key factors in Mark's decision to cut his life short, I believe, was Vic Chesnutt's death

by suicide, on Christmas. Maybe having lost entirely too many friends to early death, Mark had amassed a gathering of sympathetic souls in the after-realm, so-to-speak. Perhaps his life became simply so unmanageable that the afterlife seemed hospitable in comparison and so he went. The manner in which he chose to do so was indelibly Mark's style. He loved guns, he had a relationship to his gun and was very intimate with the gun he ultimately used. Firearms are symbolic of a lot of things gone-wrong in our culture and the metaphor is not lost on some of us. Nor was Mark's ascetic allegiance to imperfection. Somewhere in him resounded the need to show us the power of dross against gold and decay vs. fecundity. His distillations of sounds between the dials, the speaking-valves, and fields of sonic halations were his homage to the mutant and at once adorable attributes of our universe.

During our sessions Mark had begun piecing the lyrics and music together for his next Sparklehorse album. The third song we recorded for my album, No One Can Wake You, I told Mark, I had written for him, to try and get him to record the whole album instead of just a couple for me to use to try and garner a contract as he'd first offered. His response was to play me a demo of a particularly Lennon-esque song he'd just written called, The Run, the few words I can recount went thus:

' . . .child, it will be hard sometimes -- here comes the run -- And morning's muffled guns."

I read a piece on Mark once that struck me odd, it surmised that Mark was first in his lineage to make a career outside the coal mines of Virginia. I had reckoned that the reporter never made it to the interior of Mark's musical chambers. And hadn't seen and heard how my friend and fellow southerner had done the very best he could but, in fact, hadn't escaped the mines at all and was bringing forth information and art never before cultured from these hills and it was just as dangerous and toxic, to him as the ash of coal to the creeks of Appalachia. And how the rendering of this ore for our ultimate enrichment took him away far too soon. That the rifle's final sonic report that is so deafening now will in time recede. And my, what wonders and what beauties he brought up for us all to behold.

Angela Faye Martin -- Stomp & Stammer -- April 2010