

Singer-songwriter  
remembers the late Mark  
Linkous of Sparklehorse  
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Writing the songs that would make up her 2005 EP “One Dark Vine,” singer-songwriter Angela Faye Martin would glance out the window at the North Carolina mountains ringing her home and channel whatever spirits resided there.

She describes those sessions with some trepidation, as if such beliefs might cast her as a superstitious mountain woman who hears voices and talks to ghosts. There are worse things to be, however, and if anything, Martin found herself in good company — just on the other side of those mountains was the late musical genius Mark Linkous, the one-man band known as Sparklehorse, working on his final studio album.

“It was an all-acoustic, very stripped-down EP that I made here in the community I live in here in Macon County,” Martin told The Daily Times this week. “A studio came out and recorded it on location in the same room that the songs were written in. I didn’t mean for it to be an acoustic record; it was just done that way because I didn’t know any musicians at all.

“But the crazy thing about it, just over the ridge was Static King Studios, where Mark was making ‘Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain.’ I never even knew he lived there until 2008, but I have this superstition that my songs come from those ridges. Little did I know that just over them was Mark’s world.”

Fast-forward three years, when an 80-something-year-old neighbor (himself deserving of another story with his tales of living next door to jazz legend Dave Brubeck in New England and his wife’s friendship with painter Salvador Dali), upon hearing Martin’s songs, suggested she meet his “composer friend” Linkous. When Martin realized he was talking about Sparklehorse, her heart skipped a few beats. When the two finally hooked up at Static King Studios, Martin was starstruck.

“That big green door opened up into this dark cavern, and Mark was in there with this guy from Seattle who was working on his console,” she said. “Feb. 15, 2008 — that was the day my life literally changed, permanently. My husband and I were anxious just to befriend him and his wife because they were people around our ages in those mountains. We were excited about that, of course — almost as much as about what it could mean for my music to get his mentorship.

“I definitely courted him as a mentor, as an apprentice would approach a watchmaker. I definitely treated him with that level of respect. We had them over numerous times for supper and just did stuff with them. He took me to see Tom Waits in Knoxville. But the first time they came over for supper, I asked Mark if he would just help me put together a demo.”

A native of Georgia and a child of divorce, Martin had lived her later childhood on the road, attending 13 different public school systems by the time she graduated high school. Music was one of the few constants in her life; at 8, she discovered her brother’s vinyl collection, gravitated toward the Electric Light Orchestra and knew then that she wanted to go into rock ‘n’ roll.

It took a while for that dream to come to fruition, however; her 2005 EP was her first recorded effort. By the time she met Linkous, she had amassed another collection of songs and wanted to record a full-length CD. Linkous agreed and

took Martin under his wing.

"I did a demo, and Mark contacted several label people he knew," Martin said. "But when he realized what kind of shape the economy was in and how little interest his label friends had in someone living in the country and not in LA or Athens (Ga.) or wherever, he became pretty dismayed and less hopeful that a label was going to snatch me up and pay for everything, so to speak.

"It was a very sad process in those terms, but he acted like a mentor and a big brother would — he said, 'Screw it; I'm going to engineer and record your entire album for you, and I'll do it to fit your budget. We don't need anyone.'"

And so began the first of her regular pilgrimages over the ridges to Static King, where Linkous took the sparse, acoustic ballads that Martin had designed and helped her flesh them out. Dissonance, reverb, full-on electric rock flourishes — the songs on "Pictures From Home," released last year, are an eclectic batch of sounds that defy the stereotype of the lone singer-songwriter with an acoustic guitar. The technological manipulations are clearly evident, but they don't overpower her music; instead, they give the songs a forlorn quality that sounds distilled from the mists that ring those North Carolina mountains on a cold winter's morning.

"Mark and I both are extremely reverent Southerners, and he had a lot of naturalist inclinations," she said. "For all of his diesel smoke and motorcycles, for all of the machinery that is Sparklehorse, he had a deep naturalist leaning, and that's where I come from as well. It sounds pretentious, but I felt many times sitting there in that cave that was his studio that we had a stethoscope on the mountain.

"To travel to his studio, I had to drive through a lot of state forests and wilderness areas, and that would do something. It would put me in a place that was compatible to work with Mark and put me in a headspace to record those sounds with him."

After the recording process was over, other interests pulled Linkous away. He performed at the 2009 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville; traveled to Europe to play with avant garde artist Christian Fennesz; and ultimately decided to move to East Tennessee. Martin lost touch with him; the last conversation she had, she recalled, was shortly after the death of fellow singer-songwriter Vic Chesnutt, a close friend of Linkous.

"I talked to him three times in all after he lost Vic, and I can't begin to describe the pain he conveyed to me over Vic's death," she said. "I think he was literally unable to process it. I don't know how he was approaching the whole grief process, but I know it was detrimental to him."

On March 7, Martin and her husband went on an all-day hike; stopping off the visit her drummer on the way home, she got the devastating news — Linkous had taken his own life on the streets of North Knoxville. Martin and her husband were stunned; they did what they could for Linkous' widow, giving her a ride home from Knoxville to the North Carolina hills, and were at the Virginia memorial service for him, where Nina Persson of Swedish pop band The Cardigans sang "It's a Wonderful Life."

In the almost-two months since, Martin is still trying to come to grips with the death of a man who served as a mentor for both her album and the direction her sound has taken. She listens to "Pictures From Home" regularly — not out of ego, but because it reminds her of what she experienced and what she's lost. And when she performs on Saturday night at Barley's Taproom in Knoxville's Old City, no doubt she'll search the shadows for the ghost of her friend.

“It was such a strange thing, and I had never experienced anything like it before,” she said. “The songs on that record, they don't get old to me. I would like to be like my artist friends who can't stand their own work, but those songs keep Mark right there. I listen to the record all the time — as much as I do anything on my playlist — because it keeps him contained in my bubble.

“I can still smell the studio when I listen to it, and I don't ever want that scent to go away.”