

Interview: Angela-Faye Martin discusses the grief and redemption that inspired her latest effort, *Anniversary*

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NO COMMENTS



Photo courtesy of Angela-Faye Martin

It's been four years since [Angela-Faye Martin](#) released her debut, *Pictures from Home*. The interim was, to put it frankly, harrowing and grief-filled. Martin had been aided in the recording of *Pictures from Home* by her Southern Appalachian Mountains neighbor Mark Linkous, the beautiful-but-damaged mind behind the music of Sparklehorse.

But not long after her record appeared, Linkous took his own life after years of depression and addiction issues. His death followed, much too closely, the suicide of Vic Chesnutt, a kindred artistic spirit Martin met through Linkous. It was a one-two punch that initially made her follow-up seem impossibly difficult and too private to consider sharing with other musicians, let alone the public.

Eventually, though, the grief found its outlet. And, in a wonderful turn of events, it was among musicians,

friends and family close to Linkous that Martin channeled her grief into art. Recorded with Sparklehorse regular Alan Weatherhead, who also played many of the instruments, *Anniversary* is homage to lost friends and cherishing the time we have left.

Martin replied to e-mail queries from *Shuffle*'s John Schacht.

Shuffle: What was the genesis of this record? The one-sheet says it took two years and a good deal of searching for the right studio/producer...

Angela-Faye Martin: I only started writing again about a year or so after *Pictures from Home* came out. But as I came to have a batch of songs that seemed to work together, I thought I'd finally make some demos upstairs. The difficult thing was that dear friends were offering to help, and as badly as I needed to be with friends, these songs felt intensely private so recording didn't seem possible. A friend of mine got it into her head that I should call Matt, Mark Linkous' brother — not about recording but just to talk. I'd met Matt at Mark's memorial and had wondered how he was doing of course, and so, when I called we related well. I told Matt about the songs, and he said, 'Alan Weatherhead.' Pretty much just do not pass 'Go,' just, Al Weatherhead.

Shuffle: Why the title "Anniversary?"

A-FM: I am terrible at naming albums, I've decided. So, I settled on naming it "Anniversary" after the first song on the album. That was the only one that sounded okay as an album title. My thinking was that an anniversary keeps coming around, like an album goes round and round.

Shuffle: How was it working with Alan?

A-FM: Well, Alan knew Mark, and recorded and toured with him as well, and there was a comfort in that, to be sure. I called him at Matt's behest. Al immediately acted secretive, and that was something that these songs required: a secretive person that they could trust. There are so many things, but Al and I are the same age so we had the same musical era references. He immediately responded to the songs, and I really got everything he wanted for them. Hardly any speaking was required. Maybe he's a song whisperer. Put him in from of a Packers game, and all that changes. But, yes, he has many of Mark's aesthetic sensibilities as well.

Shuffle: You have contributions from Matt and Melissa Moore Linkous on the record, too...

A-FM: Matt is Mark's brother, and Melissa is married to Matt. Lot's of M's, right? Mark loved, loved, loved them both more than anyone except their son, Mark's nephew, I think. Matt and Melissa have a band called [The Rabbit](#). On the last night of recording, Al and I asked them over to Sound of Music Studios, in Richmond, Va., for Melissa to play violin on "Grace," and Matt brought Mark's modified Casio keyboard, which was a wonderful surprise. Once he started carrying on with it, Al captured it and kept it for the opening track. It still has Mark's scribbles on the keys; I have fond memories of Mark playing that thing on *Pictures from Home*.

Shuffle: You dedicated "Swifts & Swallows" to Mark – I imagine that wasn't too easy to write about. What did you learn from him in the time you knew him?

A-FM: That song jumped through my window and into my car the first time I went to Knoxville alone, after

Mark took his life there. For months I'd tried to write, then finally, I decided to walk through the grief and these vignettes, verse by verse, came forth while I was sitting in my car near where Mark died. So, in a way the hardest part of that song was just the drive to Knoxville.

What I learned from Mark could fill a book. He was a Virgo, so he was a great organizer. That's something that I loved about him. Meticulous, really. It will take the rest of my life to exercise the lessons I learned from Mark. But we talked a great deal about songwriting while we made that album. I'd ask him questions about the origins and images in his songs, and he was very thoughtful and sharing. I tried to learn engineering from him because that's my weakest limb, but he'd bristle and turn the conversation to poetry or movies, which was so fun and would push our sessions back late. His studio was something out of a Lynch movie. But I really did learn so much about what to exclude from a song. We'd sit and study a song, everything from ELO, the Stones' "Factory Girl" or Tammy Wynette singing "Til I Get It Right." He had the most amazing collection of vinyl I have ever beheld. As far as his influence on these songs, I'd say there are only three or four songs that don't have some direct reference to him.

Shuffle: In the one-sheet you mention "hymns of grief" — who are the hymns for, both Mark and Vic Chesnutt? Did you know Vic, or was it just that one-two punch of their deaths as well as the manner of their departures?

A-FM: The songs are not for anyone except everyone who is dealing with loss. And that is everyone I guess. We're all losing the natural processes of the planet we live on. It's just that these songs are more for those who are looking for a way to collect themselves and grieve than those who want to pretend it's not happening. Vic and Mark were endangered songwriters, let's say.

I wasn't a friend of Vic's, but I had a wonderful evening talking with him and Mark once, when Mark introduced us. Then I saw him again just a couple of months or so before he took his life. He'd remembered Mark and I were recording, and so we talked again. He is one of the songwriting giants of all time, to me. When I talked to Mark after Vic died, I knew that he'd been deeply changed by it. Mark had an alliance with Vic that was lovely. Both Southern, both struggled with similar demons and physical pain. So in some ways, these songs are notes about my feelings of aloneness in that I really was looking forward to having them as songwriting mentors for years to come, but also my understanding of their need to take leave.

Shuffle: You also mention songs that are "full-on rock spells against the enemies of Mother Nature." Who do you consider them to be? "Language of Stone" seems aimed in no uncertain way at them...

A-FM: Yes that one, "Landslide" and "Ravens at Night," too. Especially "Landslide," though. There is a problem with so much earth-moving in these mountains. The removal of the roots of trees comes back to haunt us, and the results can be catastrophic. Instead of learning this, we just keep cutting in more roads, building into the mountains, the poaching of coyotes, all of it. Thinking we 'have' to do these things, to have dominion or for the economy, when we are, in fact, ruining our very foundation.

Shuffle: You live pretty deep in the mountains if I recall – tell us what kind of inspiration you draw in your songwriting from living off the beaten path?

A-FM: There are so many great wild places in our country, but there's a particular quality to the Southern Appalachian Mountains that continues to mystify me, despite the familiarity. It's the most

fecund and biologically diverse place in the Western World because there was no glaciations. Maybe that means there's more songs here, too. We have more detail and that keeps my interest. But more than that, how do we save it and keep from fouling it up? How do we say, to someone that finds the disc, someone cared about this place, that this was here? Maybe my songs are just cave paintings.