

# Remembering Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous

11:14 AM PST 12/30/2010 by Sofia M. Fernandez

SHARE

11

Like

27

Send

0

Comments (#comments)

**Mark Linkous**, the man behind the indie rock band **Sparklehorse**, took his own life on March 6. He was 47.

His last two published recordings as Sparklehorse -- *Dark Night of the Soul*, a multimedia collaboration with **David Lynch** and **Danger Mouse** that was tied up in legal wrangling with EMI for a year, and 2009's *In the Fishtank* with Austrian experimental musician **Christian Fennesz** -- capped off a career marked by critical acclaim and personal struggles with depression and drugs.

Linkous' music was fragile, earnest and experimental. He could also rock. He was a one-man band, oftentimes playing all of the instruments on a track; from guitar, bass and piano to all manners of keyboard -- pump organ, optigan, chamberlain, mellotron -- to various sound-manipulating combos derived from stripped microphones, drums, distortion pedals or tape looping. Linkous wasn't always into generating music this way, but once it took hold, Sparklehorse's sound was created.

**David Lowery**, frontman of **Cracker** and **Camper Van Beethoven**, spent a lot of time with Linkous in the 90s while they both lived in Richmond, Virginia. He tells *The Hollywood Reporter* that there was a marked progression in Linkous' style after that period, "It was funny because Mark ended up doing a lot of collaborations and things with people that had a lot of electronic elements. When I first met him I remember he was almost allergic to the sound of a drum machine and he ended up basing a lot of Sparklehorse sound around the fact that there would be drum machine a lot of times in area that was rock."

Linkous' career took off in earnest in 1996 when Sparklehorse opened for **Radiohead** on their *OK Computer* European tour. Sparklehorse's first album, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, had come out the year before and Linkous, who had tried to break into the music industry as part of the **Dancing Hoods**, was excited that his musical endeavors were finally paying off, "It was pretty cool for him when people like Radiohead and all these bands that he liked also immediately picked up on his music. He started going over to England and playing," says Lowery, who produced *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*.

"It was like a dream come true. He couldn't believe it. If you had to pick some way to become popular, it was like, well, I want the BBC and cool bands like Radiohead to take me on tour. I don't think he could've chosen a better outcome in his mind."

The tour ended for Sparklehorse when Linkous overdosed on a mix of sleeping pills, antidepressants and alcohol. His legs were permanently damaged because they had been pinned beneath him while he was unconscious, and he needed to use leg braces for the rest of his life.

Linkous continued songwriting during his recovery and beyond. He shared his homes and home studios with rescue dogs of varying levels of sanity. He recorded in Virginia; he recorded in North Carolina at his Static King studio. He and his wife **Teresa** were into motorcycles. Linkous had roots deep in Western Virginia and had extensive knowledge of obscure banjo, fiddle and piano music. He was nicknamed "Stinky Linky" because of his affinity for smoking unfiltered cigarettes.

Sparklehorse's next two albums were 1998's *Good Morning Spider* and 2001's *It's a Wonderful Life*. *It's a Wonderful Life* was the band's most successful album, selling 63,000 copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

**Nina Persson**, solo artist and lead singer of the Swedish pop group the **Cardigans**, collaborated on the album's tracks "Gold Day" and "Apple Bed." She tells *THR* that despite Linkous' reputation for melancholy musical musings, Linkous wasn't all about doom and gloom, "He's really into a lot of modern, classical composers and so forth but he really likes pop music, and that's where I could bond with him. We have very different kinds of backgrounds, he and I, so that's why the friendship was so giving and so fun because we could connect on a total pop ground. I think that's why he wanted to work with me too, because he liked the fun that I have."

Linkous produced Persson's first solo album, 2001's *A Camp*, and the singer says he needed a nudge every now and again from his unassuming ways, "He was not at all an authority. He was very mellow and always sort of a little apologetic. It was like that too when I hired him to produce my record because he was the least authoritative producer you could ever think of. I had to like, you know, finagle him out of that in the mornings."

She continues, "It was really pleasant to work and hang out with him. You just sort of sit and talk about quirky stories, listen to music. I'm very different than he is, so I would sometimes wish that I could get clear direction sometimes. But he just doesn't do that. But he's so kind, I don't know why he would never really understand that it was really and truly my pleasure to get work with him. You worked with him and hung out with him because you loved him."

In addition to songwriting and producing for artists like Persson and Daniel Johnston, Linkous was a regular on the road. His various concert dates included opening for R.E.M. in 2003 and touring with the **Flaming Lips**. Linkous first met up with Flaming Lips at a South By Southwest engagement in 1999 which singer **Wayne Coyne** remembers for its thematic coherence, "It's really ridiculous to think about the lineup now: It was us, **Mercury Rev**, **Granddaddy** and Sparklehorse all on the same bill. It's hard to believe, wow that's a little bit too much fuckin' slow sad rock if you ask me."

Coyne, who along with the Flaming Lips, collaborated with Linkous on *Dark Night of the Soul's* "Revenge" and "Go" for *The Late Great Daniel Johnston: Discovered Covered*, also remembers Linkous as a deliberately paced man, "When you're around Mark, when he was doing stuff, he would always move very slow, not just as an artist but in real life. Like me, I'm going to do ten things today. I'm not saying any of them are worth a shit but I'm going, going, going. And he wouldn't. We'd play a show with him, it wasn't many shows but there was a long time spent, 'I'm putting my boots on. I want to listen to some music and smoke a cigarette.' That was an activity for him. Not in a bad way, it's the way that he was. Music would just come kind of slowly. For him it was kind of like, 'Ah well, we might do some music today or tomorrow, I don't know.' "

Linkous also had an affinity for giving his collaborators the most basic of elements from which to create a song. Says Coyne, "With the 'Revenge' song, I don't know if there was even a hint of anything. It was a typical Mark Linkous track. He had like a chord progression that plays back and forth. You don't get any lyrics or song titles or anything. It's like too pieces of white bread. What do you want to put in between?"

Linkous' depression kept him down between the release of *It's a Wonderful Life* and Sparklehorse's fourth album, *Dreamt For Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain* -- he would reportedly write, then dismiss songs -- but he eventually completed *Dreamt For Light Years* with the help of Danger Mouse, whom Linkous recruited for the project after discovering, and digging, a copy of the *Grey Album* that had been sitting in a drawer for months. (Much of the material for *Dreamt For Light Years* had been recorded during the *It's a Wonderful Life* sessions with producer **Dave Fridmann**.)

Brian Burton, aka Danger Mouse, would not comment for this piece. Danger Mouse and Sparklehorse's *Dark Night of the Soul* co-host David Lynch said in a statement, "Mark lived music -- a southern gentleman musician with a very tender heart and soul. I guess this world was real rough on him. He will be missed very much."

Linkous collaborated with many other artists throughout his career, including **Thom Yorke**, **P.J. Harvey**, **Steven Drozd** of the *Flaming Lips*, **Vic Chesnut** and **Tom Waits**. He took on less publicized projects, such performing a live score to the silent film the *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* at the Los Angeles Film Festival in 2003. The Sparklehorse roster was constantly rotating too: Linkous' brother **Matt**, his sister-in-law **Melissa**, **Scott Minor**, **Johnny Hott**, **Sophie Michalitsianos**, **Paula Jean Brown**, **Chris Michael** and **Kendall Meade** were all band members at one point, among others.

The band's fans included **Brian Aubert**, singer and guitarist of L.A.'s **Silversun Pickups**, who tells *THR*, "I love Mark's music so much. I was almost thrown out of one of his rare L.A. shows for being too into it. *It's a Wonderful Life* is one of those records that defies labels. It demands you to crank it up, not to blow your ears out, but to swim in its mysterious whispers and minute subtleties. It represents the nature in the machine through endless animal imagery over synthetic strings and keys. The music is as mysterious as the man is to me."

Linkous was in the process of relocating from North Carolina to Tennessee when he killed himself. He had reportedly been working on a new Sparklehorse album. His label, Anti Records, would not comment for this story.

His work will be forever linked to his demise. Says Coyne, "I think for people who love music and love this dimension of that very fragile sadness that Mark sang about mostly, the fact that he killed himself will just forever seal that as this is authentic, this is true. These things that he sings about, that's never going to turn out to be fake. I think in that way, it was powerful, it is powerful, it probably always will be powerful to people who love that music and love that idea: this guy, barely able to sing about his own crushing existence."

A rediscovered thread of Linkous' past will, however, surface in February with the release of *Palace Guards*, the latest album by David Lowery. Lowery and Linkous had been friends and collaborators since 1989 (Linkous was Cracker's roadie in 1992) and Lowery incorporated a keyboard melody created by Linkous circa 2004 into the song "Big Life."

The song had been reworked several times over the years but wasn't right until Linkous' line became more prominent. Lowery says, "I went back and found a version that he had worked on and realized there was something that was more in touch with the essence of the song. It just happened to be this little keyboard thing that he was playing so I re-did the song based around that."

Linkous' was a wonderful musical life. Rest in peace.

Editor's picks:

["Sad and Beautiful World"](http://www.myspace.com/sparklehorse/music/songs/sad-and-beautiful-world-4477403) (<http://www.myspace.com/sparklehorse/music/songs/sad-and-beautiful-world-4477403>) - Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot

["Some Sweet Day"](http://new.music.yahoo.com/sparklehorse/tracks/some-sweet-day--39136275) (<http://new.music.yahoo.com/sparklehorse/tracks/some-sweet-day--39136275>) -- *Dreamt For Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*

["It's Not So Hard"](http://www.myspace.com/sparklehorse/music/songs/it-s-not-so-hard-33879989) (<http://www.myspace.com/sparklehorse/music/songs/it-s-not-so-hard-33879989>) -- *Dreamt For Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*

["King of Nails"](http://new.music.yahoo.com/sparklehorse/tracks/king-of-nails--7342577) (<http://new.music.yahoo.com/sparklehorse/tracks/king-of-nails--7342577>) -- *It's a Wonderful Life*

["Little Fat Baby"](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CR23qpdiiVE) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CR23qpdiiVE>) -- *It's a Wonderful Life*

["Sick of Goodbyes"](http://new.music.yahoo.com/sparklehorse/tracks/sick-of-goodbyes--1220322) (<http://new.music.yahoo.com/sparklehorse/tracks/sick-of-goodbyes--1220322>) -- *Good Morning Spider*

"Daddy's Gone" (with Nina Persson) -- *Dark Night of the Soul* (<http://dnots.com/html/>)

"Wish You Were Here" -- *The Lords of Dogtown* soundtrack

---