

Band of Brothers

No one knew the late Mark Linkous better than his brother, Matt.

BY [RICHARD FOSTER](#)



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They were brothers and they were best friends.

When critically acclaimed rock star Mark Linkous, who recorded under the name Sparklehorse, shot himself in the heart March 6 in Knoxville, Tenn., surrendering to his lifelong battle with depression, his friends, family and fans were left reeling. Arguably none of them knew Mark better than his brother, Matt, who went from riding dirt bikes with his older brother as a child to making music with him as an adult.

Matt Linkous and his wife, Melissa, live in South Richmond with their young son, Spencer. Both musicians, Matt and Melissa toured with Linkous when Sparklehorse opened for R.E.M. in 2003. Melissa played violin on Sparklehorse's "Good Morning Spider" and "Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain." Matt, who led local band Spike the Dog, played guitar on Sparklehorse's 2006 release, "Dreamt for Light Years ..."



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Burdened by a lifetime of depression, the Sparklehorse frontman committed suicide at the age of 47.

In an exclusive interview with Style Weekly, Matt and Melissa Linkous speak about loving Mark Linkous and losing him.

"We were very, very close. I mean, you couldn't ask for a better brother," Matt says. "He was just a great fucking big brother. If you ever wanted someone to talk to, or if you were interested in something or you were doing something, he would give you his full attention. ... I was very fortunate."

The spare, melancholic beauty of Mark Linkous' work as Sparklehorse made him a critical darling, earning him accolades, a lifelong reputation as a musical innovator, and the respect and friendship of mega-famous peers such as Radiohead, R.E.M., Tom Waits, Patti Smith and P.J. Harvey. Mark also produced albums by troubled alt-rock legend Daniel Johnston, singer Nina Persson of the Cardigans and influential Richmond emo band Denali.

Mark was born in Alexandria in 1962. Matt was born four years later. Their father, Freddie, was a Snap-On Tools salesman. The family moved to Front Royal when the boys were very young, and then their father took a coal mining job in Dickenson County in far Southwest Virginia. Their grandfathers had both been coal miners and probably their great-grandfathers too. On the top of a bookshelf in his home music studio, Matt has one of his grandfathers' mining helmets, a lightweight leather cap with a carbide-burning lamp, not much different from a Zippo lighter. (It was like having "a bomb on your head" in the methane gas-heavy mines, Matt notes.)

By the mid-1970s when Mark was in middle school and Matt was still in elementary school, "both of us started really listening to music and riding our dirt bikes on fire roads and old, abandoned strip mines," Matt says. "We'd take our motocross bikes and just go nuts, man. We took riding motorcycles pretty seriously when we were kids. We had a really good time with it." Mark also began starting bands, mostly playing cover songs by Black Sabbath. "He was very young," Matt says, but he could pick up most any instrument and figure it out, a skill that stayed with him for life. "He would just pick up an instrument and go for it." As an adult, he says, Mark "was an amazing guitar player."

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Mark and his brother, Matt Linkous, shared a tight bond. "We were very, very close," Matt says. "I mean, you couldn't ask for a better brother."

In 1976, the boys' parents divorced. Their father stayed in Southwest Virginia, eventually remarrying and having two more sons with his new wife. Matt and Mark moved back to Front Royal with their mother, Gloria. "My dad was seven hours away and my mom was working shift work at a factory, and Mark and I were like, 'Cool!!'" Matt says, laughing. Left to their own devices, the young Linkous brothers fell into a tough crowd, hanging out with adult bikers while their mom was at work.

"One guy was named Chico. He had a steel plate in his head," Matt recalls. "He let Mark ride their chopper. Mark had never ridden a real motorcycle. All he had ever ridden was this dirt bike, and he wrecks the chopper and they just all laughed. They got a kick out of Mark and Mark got a kick out of them. ... [Mark] ended up in Charlottesville not long after that."

Barely 15, Mark was sent to live with his paternal grandparents. "He was kind of fucking up," Matt says, adding with rueful laughter: "There was a lot more to it." The brothers were separated for a few years, but saw each other during the summers and whenever else they could manage. "He would come to visit sometime and I would visit him and stay as long as I could," Matt says. "We would have a great time."

Their grandfather, John Linkous, was a former coal miner who'd moved to Charlottesville in later life and started a successful car dealership. Mark often told people that the elder Linkous was so tough that he once punched out a stubborn mule, killing it. John Linkous was able to rein in his grandson long enough for him to graduate from Albemarle High School, but Mark remained a rebellious, free spirit, playing in bands, drinking and partying.

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Matt Linkous today.

One day in summer 1979 when Matt was between sixth and seventh grades, Mark, then almost 17, showed up unexpectedly and picked up Matt. "I remember he came and got me and he was like, 'We're going to go see a great show,' and I was like, 'Yeah?'" Matt piled into the car with Mark and some of his friends from Charlottesville and they drove to Richmond, where they went to the Mosque (now the Landmark Theater) and saw Blondie on its "Parallel Lines" tour with opening act Rockpile featuring Nick Lowe and Dave Edmunds.

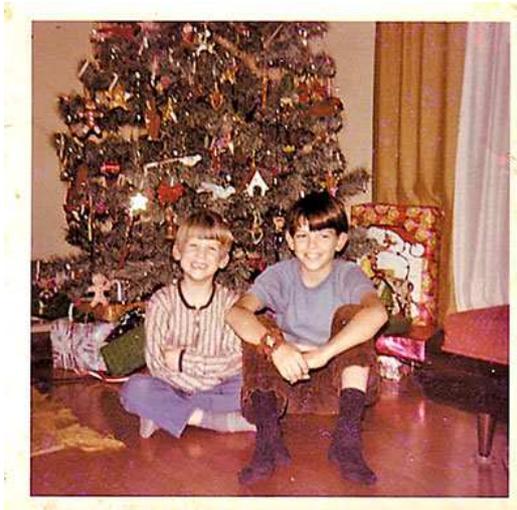
"It was really incredible. I was blown away," Matt says. "I went out and bought a guitar right after that. I hung out and started playing to a Jonathan Richman Modern Lovers record that I borrowed from Mark and I started writing all these little songs and sometimes Mark and I would get together and play."

After his high-school graduation, Mark moved into a house just outside New York City with a couple of roommates, and by 1981 Matt followed: "I had just finished ninth grade and I moved in with Mark," he says.

For the next two years, Matt lived in New York with his older brother, going to high school by day ("Mark insisted I graduate") and at night hanging out in legendary clubs such as CBGB's and the Peppermint Lounge, catching a slew of shows by influential punk and new wave acts. "I'd be hanging out all night long with Mark and come into school the next day," Matt says, laughing.

During their New York City nightclubbing days, they befriended punk-rock legends such as the Psychedelic Furs and the Damned. "Mark and Dave [Vainian, lead singer of the Damned] became friends like that," Matt says, snapping his fingers. "They became like instant friends. He's a great guy. The Damned were amazing. We saw them many times."

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Mark and Matt anticipating their Christmas gifts in 1971.

Two years passed and Matt went home to Virginia to finish his senior year of high school. While in New York, Mark had started a band called the Dancing Hoods, and they moved to Los Angeles in pursuit of a recording contract that never came. Mark came to L.A. depressed and addicted to heroin, and both conditions worsened in the City of Angels. "When he was in Los Angeles, he got pretty disillusioned with the L.A. music industry," Matt recalls.

By that point, Matt had moved to Richmond and Mark decided to move there too in order to get clean. While he was in L.A., Mark had met guitarist and singer Bryan Harvey, a Richmonder who formed the successful band House of Freaks with fellow Richmonder Johnny Hott. Harvey and Hott moved back to Richmond in 1988 and Mark Linkous moved in with Harvey until he got back on his feet. Meanwhile, Matt moved to Los Angeles, taking over Mark's apartment, but he too wound up coming back to Richmond after less than a year.

"Los Angeles was not a good place for the Linkous boys," says Matt's wife, Melissa. "Too much concrete."

Mark and Matt began playing music together, starting two short-lived bands called Salt Chunk Mary and the Johnson Family. "We really didn't play out that much," Matt says. "We only played out once or twice. We played out once with the Silos when they were still together, obviously, and we played out once at Main Street Grill. We were having fun." It was obvious to Matt, though, that Mark needed to make his own music.

The brothers Linkous had a practice space at the Mosque, where they'd seen Blondie play more than a decade before. While there, Mark and Matt met Camper Van Beethoven's David Lowery, who'd also recently moved to Richmond and was starting up both his new band, Cracker, and his Sound of Music recording studio.

Mark had a talent for befriending like-minded musical souls. Soon after meeting Lowery, Mark began writing the songs for what would become his first Sparklehorse album, "Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot," the first project that Lowery took on at the Sound of Music.

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Mark and Matt riding their bikes in Front Royal.

"I loved it. I thought it was fantastic," Matt says, remembering the first time he heard the album coming through Mark's speakers, now sitting in Matt and Melissa's home recording studio. "I could tell it was what he wanted to do and he needed to be in his own element. He needed his own space to do that."

Matt recalls visiting the isolated, rural Fluvanna County farmhouse that Mark lived in, watching Mark lay down tracks while the breeze blew through the windows of the old house in the deep woods. As a musician, Mark had a way of knowing exactly how each instrument should fit into an arrangement — and he could play them all, his brother maintains. Mark's music swiftly gathered fans and famous admirers. "He was so humble," Melissa says of her brother-in-law. "He always used to say it was a gift to work with those people he had always admired."

When they were younger, Matt and Mark were huge fans of Tom Waits, so when "[Mark] got to work with him, it was just fantastic," Matt says. "He called me immediately right after that and said, 'He's a totally normal, amazing guy.'" He remembers Mark, a "Twin Peaks" fan, also ringing him from David Lynch's home, marveling that he was drinking scotch with the film director.

In 1996, opening for Radiohead on its "OK Computer" tour in London, Mark overdosed on prescription sleeping pills, antidepressants and alcohol. He fell into a coma in his hotel room, his legs pinned beneath his crumpled body for almost 15 hours. When rescue workers found him, he went into cardiac arrest and was clinically dead for three minutes until he could be resuscitated.

Matt flew to London within a few days of the incident to be at his brother's side. "I was there and he was very medicated," he says. "He was in a lot of pain still. I actually helped change his bandages." Media reports alternately described it as either reckless drug abuse or a suicide attempt, but Matt says it was simply an accident. "He couldn't sleep. I don't think a lot of people realize that. He was having a miserable time sleeping." Mark was taking Valium to help him sleep — and combined with alcohol and prescription meds he was already taking for depression and high blood pressure, "it kind of anesthetized him," Melissa says.

"He wasn't taking it for kicks," Matt says. "He was going for days without sleeping and it was starting to mess with him because he had to do shows and interviews." Thinking Mark was asleep, the tour manager left him alone. After 15 hours, they checked on him and found him unresponsive.

In the hospital, despite his pain, Mark "still had the wherewithal to play around," Melissa says. Mark wasn't supposed to drink any fluids, but he craved Coca-Cola, so a nurse told him he could have a little sip as long as he promised to swish it around in his mouth and spit it out. He took the straw between his lips and did just that — and then he took a long, long sip and swallowed the whole thing down.

"You promised!" the nurse exclaimed. "I lied," Mark replied, like a mischievous schoolboy with a cat-ate-the-canary grin. "That's Mark right there," Melissa says, smiling.

The attack left Mark's legs atrophied. At first confined to a wheelchair, he had to relearn how to walk with metal braces on his legs.

"He got really good with it, but he was wobbly at the beginning," Matt says. "He called me up one day ... and he was like, 'I really want to go for a motorcycle ride,' and he'd just gotten out of the wheelchair, and I was like, 'Oh, shit.' ... I helped him get on his bike, his old Guzzi with the big nickel tank ... and he was kind of fumbling around for first gear because he couldn't feel it. I bent down and tapped first gear for him and he just took off. He came around the corner laughing his head off and said thanks. And right after that he started riding again. He figured out how to do it all himself. He was a great motorcycle rider. We used to ride together all the time."

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Mark Linkous with sister-in-law Melissa and nephew Spencer.

Mark was married, but Matt and his wife, Melissa, and their son, Spencer, age 6, were close to his heart. Mark called Melissa his sister. Spencer was Mark's godson and Mark called him "my boy." He joked around after Spencer was born, saying he wanted to be referred to as "godfather" thereafter. Matt and Melissa have warm, fuzzy memories of Mark and Spencer curled up on their sofa reading books about the planets together.

When R.E.M. wanted Sparklehorse to open in 2003, playing such venues as Madison Square Garden, Mark wouldn't go until Matt and Melissa agreed to play in his backup band. "He said, 'It kind of freaks me out because it's in all these big places,'" Matt says. "Mark had reservations about it," Melissa recalls. "For his live shows, he tended to want more intimacy."

Pregnant with Spencer, Melissa played bass on the two-week tour with R.E.M. and Matt played guitar. Longtime Sparklehorse collaborator Scott Minor played drums.

It was Minor who would later call Matt to let him know that Mark, visiting him in Tennessee, had committed suicide. "Scott's a good guy," Matt says. "Scott didn't want the cops or anyone else to call me. He called me that Saturday right after it happened." Matt had unknowingly sent a text message to Mark just minutes after his brother died. "It was fucking miserable," he says.

Mark had been going through a tough time personally before the suicide. "We were talking about a lot of the stuff he was going through and it was kind of rough," Matt says, "but he seemed like he was going to be hopefully OK." (While Matt doesn't comment on it directly, Mark's manager has said in media reports that Mark was going through a divorce from his wife, Teresa.)

Mark battled depression all his life. "He had a horrible time with it since he was a kid. It got harder when he was older, especially after that accident, it was bad," his brother says. "It affected him physically. His body was heavy. He'd get withdrawn. You could see it was hard on him. It was a hard, hard thing to see. He was very down on himself. He blamed himself for everything."

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Mark Linkous performs live with the Sparklehorse touring band. "His music was very important," says brother Matt.

Melissa says: "It was just a deep sadness, but at the same time, when he experienced joy, he could fully experience joy, but there was such a sadness. It was always there. ... What's funny is, as uncomfortable as he would sometimes feel, he made others feel comforted."

In recent years, Mark had been badly affected by the 2006 murders of his old friend, Bryan Harvey, and his wife, Kathryn, and their two young daughters in Richmond. "The Harveys' [murders] were so devastating to him in such a huge way," Melissa says. Mark's memorial service was held in the same place as theirs: Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden.

Mark also had been upset about the release of his forthcoming album, "Dark Night of the Soul," being held up because of a legal dispute with record label EMI. (See sidebar.) Shortly before he killed himself, Mark learned that it had been resolved and that the album would be coming out soon, "but it didn't help his situation," Matt says. "He fought as long as he could and he did the best he could. He tried several things. He tried putting himself off all the medication. He really battled hard. He was even on a no-caffeine kick for a while. I watched him fight that stuff and I watched him try hard. I guess he just couldn't fight it anymore."

Matt himself has much healing to do. "I wake up at three o'clock in the morning, and all I can say is, 'Man, this sucks.' It's awful. It's really hard." But he and Melissa and their son are getting through the trauma together. Talking about Mark, they laugh and smile much more than they cry. There's no anger over his suicide. But Mark is sorely missed. His absence is felt in their home.

"We're still here on this earth and we need to live and love and laugh," Melissa says. "All the people that have gone on before us, they want us to live full and joyful lives. We're going to get through it because we're still here. We had him as long as we had him, you know?"