

Mark Linkous

1962–2010

BY [RICHARD FOSTER](#)



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Richmond musicians, friends and family held a memorial at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden last weekend for departed rock star Mark Linkous, who on March 6 lost his lifelong battle with clinical depression in an alley outside a friend's home in Knoxville, Tenn. Distraught after receiving an upsetting text message, the former Richmonder left the house and shot himself in the heart.

Linkous, who was 47, recorded four influential, country-tinged alt-rock albums of haunted melodies under the name Sparklehorse, performing with artists such as PJ Harvey and Tom Waits, with whom he maintained a long-distance friendship. He toured with huge bands such as Radiohead and R.E.M., both of which raved about Linkous and counted Sparklehorse among their favorite musical acts.

It was while Linkous was opening for Radiohead on the European leg of its legendary "OK Computer" tour in 1997 that he had a near-fatal cardiac arrest from an overdose of prescription antidepressants and alcohol. He was clinically dead for three minutes and spent weeks in a coma. The attack left his legs atrophied, requiring him to use a wheelchair or leg braces, a source of constant frustration.

A somewhat reclusive musical genius, Linkous produced albums for Nina Persson of the Cardigans, Daniel Johnston and Richmond emo band Denali. More recently he collaborated with acclaimed musician and producer Danger Mouse (of Gnarls Barkley, Broken Bells) on the forthcoming album "Dark Night of the Soul." Scheduled for release this summer, the album of songs by Linkous and Danger Mouse includes an accompanying photo album by film director David Lynch and features performances by Lynch, Persson, Iggy Pop, Frank Black of the Pixies, the late Vic Chesnutt, Suzanne Vega and the Flaming Lips.

Despite his high-wattage connections, Linkous maintained close ties with friends and family in Richmond and Charlottesville, where he spent his formative musical years. When he wasn't touring, Linkous lived more like a farmer than a rock star, tending to his rural, isolated homestead outside Charlottesville.

Born in Arlington, one of four brothers, Linkous spent most of his childhood in the coal-mining country of Dickenson County in far Southwest Virginia. After his parents split up, he fell in with a rough crowd as a teenager and eventually was sent to live with his grandfather in Charlottesville. Discovering punk rock in high school, he began making regular road trips down Interstate 64 to Richmond to buy hard-to-find import albums from Plan 9 Music in Carytown.

In the early 1990s, Linkous lived on Patterson Avenue in the Museum District, working as the first dishwasher at Millie's Diner. He moved to Richmond around the same time as David Lowery of Cracker and Camper Van Beethoven fame and the two became friends for life.

A regular at Main Street Grill, Linkous initially formed a Gaelic-influenced folk band called the Flaming Cicadas with friends from Oregon Hill. Its repertoire included banjo arrangements of Sex Pistols songs. He later performed in local bands the Johnson Family and Salt Chunk Mary with his younger brother, Matt, a musician in his own right who led popular band Spike the Dog and performed on the 2006 Sparklehorse album, "Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain."

When Linkous formed Sparklehorse in 1995, Lowery produced his first album, "Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot." Linkous was the first client at Lowery's Sound of Music recording studio in Richmond, which has played host to big-name clients such as Hanson and Joan Osbourne.

Sound of Music co-owner Miguel Urbiztondo, who played drums on the 1998 Sparklehorse album "Good Morning Spider," says that everyone at Sound of Music considered Linkous a family member, and while they knew of his struggles with depression, they were shocked by his violent end. "It totally freaked me out — a gunshot to the heart," Urbiztondo says. "How do you do that?"

While national media reports have focused on the morbid, lurid details of Linkous' suicide and past drug abuse, Urbiztondo would rather remember the "intellectual artist" he was privileged to know. "How great it was to watch [Linkous] in the studio pick up a toy instrument and find the melody he needed for the song he was recording," Urbiztondo recalls. "We sat there in awe, and that was amazing, beautiful."

Linkous will live on in those he inspired, Urbiztondo says. "It's pretty clear that there are bands that were inspired by Sparklehorse," he says. "They sound like him. They have got a certain air to them." He cites Belgium's Mint as one example. "Young Europeans in bands, they talk about Sparklehorse all the time."