

Too good to be famous

Mark Linkous may never become a household name but he is a musical meteorite says Neil McCormick

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Last Thursday Mark Linkous and his band, Sparklehorse, played at LA2 in Charing Cross Road, in central London. It is a small venue for a big talent.

Chances are most of you have not heard of Linkous. He is not particularly famous and it is hard to imagine he ever will be. Sad-eyed and slack-jawed, leaning heavily on a walking stick, scruffy hair poking out from beneath a black cowboy hat, he does not look as if he belongs in the world of popular music. Hailing from a south-western Virginian coal-mining community, he looks like he could have walked out of the windswept pages of a Cormac McCarthy novel, the product of hundreds of years of inbreeding.

He talks in a soft, slow drawl, musing about the house he and his wife rent on a 1,200-acre ranch. "I have to live in the country," he says. "I just really need that privacy and the open space and being able to pee off my front porch. And burn firewood for heat. We have a couple of horses, three dogs, a cat, two lizards, a couple of frogs and a turtle."

He pauses, as if counting his blessings. "I never expected to be on a major record label. My ultimate goal is to be able to buy my own farmhouse and have a baby. And if I'm able to do that then I'll have everything I've ever wanted, and more people will have been exposed to my music than I ever thought possible."

Linkous may not be a big star, but he is a shining one: a jagged little musical meteorite who could cut your heart to pieces. The debut Sparklehorse album, **Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot** ("it was inspired by a dream I had about General Lee having a crude submarine back in the Civil War, and I could hear an old-time band playing inside, all distorted by the water"), has been slowly but inexorably picking up critical plaudits since its release by Parlophone in May.

A strikingly original, eerily moving synthesis of decaying country-rock and distorted power-pop, this bewitching slice of Gothic Americana would not be to everyone's tastes. The 16 tracks switch from the abrasive to the seductive with startling indifference, finding a similar mournful beauty in the punk thrash of **Hammering the Cramps** and in the spaced-out waltz of **Homecoming Queen**.

Everything sounds peculiarly off-kilter, as if it has been assembled wrong. Voices are either too quiet or too distorted, instruments separated by acres of space or meshed together in a frenzy, and telephone calls and snatches of CB radio wander disconcertingly in and out of the mix. "Partly it was because I didn't know what I was doing," Linkous admits. "A lot of nice accidents happened."

With lyrics from sources as diverse as Shakespeare, Conrad, Whitman and the Velvet Underground, and a voice as old as yellowed newspaper, Linkous has created a fragile paean to what he describes in one song (quoting Whitman) as his "**Sad and Beautiful World**".

"I don't suppose my existence is any more painful than anyone else's," says Linkous, with the hard-earned wisdom of a man who has been through the wars. "I definitely grew up fast, did everything there is to do at a young age." His parents split up when he was 10, and Mark quickly went off the rails, running with a motorcycle gang called the Pagans, discovering punk rock and heading to New York. There he joined a band and picked up a drug habit, living in a van and shooting up five or six times a day.

In his late twenties Linkous saved himself by summoning the strength to stumble back to Virginia, where he rediscovered the joys of simple rural life. "I remember noticing a grasshopper, and I'd forgotten about grasshoppers," he recalls. "I just had this whole new perception of things I had been oblivious to. So I started writing - a lot."

With the help of a new neighbour, David Lower from the rock group Cracker, Linkous began recording his songs on a basic eight-track machine. Imagine Tricky as a hillbilly, or Faulkner with a Rickenbacker guitar, and you might be halfway to imagining the unique sound he has evolved.

Vivadixie . . . is, as you may have gathered, an extraordinary album, so far removed from everything that is happening in the pop world that one might think the artist could not hope to be appreciated until after his death. Except Linkous has already died once.

On January 23 Linkous was in a London hotel room when a combination of prescription antidepressants and Valium caused him to pass out, trapping his legs beneath him. He was unconscious for 14 hours before he was discovered by a maid, who called an ambulance. He had cut off the circulation to his legs, and when the medics straightened his limbs out he suffered a cardiac arrest. He flatlined for almost two minutes before they were able to shock him back to life.

"I did apparently die, and that really bothers me," says Linkous. "Death and the whole idea of the inevitable have inspired so much art that you think if you die maybe something will have been revealed to you. But I don't have any recollection of what happened. Maybe because there's no big redemption. Maybe it's just a big nothing, the big nowhere. I'll have to wait to die again to find out."

The accident, however, has inspired the former heroin addict and clinical depressive to pick up the pieces of his life. He spent three months in hospital and had nine operations on his legs, which have suffered permanent damage. He was sustained by a flood of letters. "So many people had written how my music had touched them. Some of the letters were from rock stars - I was amazed. And it did help me get well and not give up. I felt like I still had a job to do, that there was a reason that I'm here. My goal would be to create something beautiful, little planets of music."

And he smiles with near-heartbreaking sadness. "There's a surplus of ugliness in this world already," he says. "I'd rather do something beautiful."