

# Back From the Brink : With 'Spider,' Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse returns from a life-threatening episode.

Pop Music

March 21, 1999|STEVE HOCHMAN | Steve Hochman writes regularly for Calendar

Mark Linkous would never write a song with a subject as trite as getting back on his own two feet. That particular struggle is all too real for him.

The release of "Good Morning Spider," the second album he's made under the band name Sparklehorse, and a tour that brings him to the Troubadour on Friday are just the latest steps in rebuilding his life and career after a nightmare.

Two years ago, the Virginia-based musician was basking in the acclaim for "vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot," the first Sparklehorse album. It was being hailed in particular in Britain, where the press fell for the haunting mix of low-fi rural rock, dream-time pop and inward-looking imagery. Among his fans: the band Radiohead, which offered him the opening slot on most of its European shows in 1996 and 1997.

In January 1997, though, everything came crashing down in a London hotel bathroom.

"I had a big bottle of Valium from Mexico and had been on antidepressants for a long time," says Linkous, 34, with flat detachment--as if he doesn't remember the incident but has heard others describe it.

"And I guess I'd been taking the Valium so much that I passed out. My legs were underneath me all night and half a day. When the paramedics came and straightened my legs out, it sent all the toxins to my heart and gave me a heart attack. Then my kidneys shut down and I had to be on dialysis, and then a few more things in a sort of chain reaction."

Now--12 weeks in a London hospital, seven surgeries, months of morphine and a pair of leg braces later--he can walk again, not to mention cruise the Virginia farmlands around his house on his prized Moto Guzzi cycle.

And the tough road of rebuilding his career is off to a very good start. The new album was released in the fall in England to a warm reception. The Sunday Times rated it the best of the year. Released in the U.S. last month, it's earned similar kudos.

Linkous bristles a little, though, at the many assessments that look to the album as a document of his trauma.

"I think if you lie in a hospital bed for three months in a foreign country with tubes running out of you, it can't help but affect you in a way," Linkous says, conceding that the experience is indirectly reflected in the album.

"But sometimes I feel a little self-conscious--since I'm making a living doing this--that people just like my music because of the [expletive]-up things that have happened to me. I think that's part of human nature, morbid curiosity.

"And I do think that [traumas] have inspired great art for so many years by many people, and if you can do that with something bad, you're so lucky. And I'm lucky anyway, making a living without having to paint houses and wash dishes."

The truth is, though, that most of the album was written and at least partly recorded before the incident. Only two songs came in the wake of the illness: "Pig" and "Saint Mary."

"In 'Pig,' I was mad that I can't have my old body back," Linkous says. "And 'Saint Mary' is just about the nurses who were so compassionate there, and kind of the feeling of actually looking forward to going into surgery--being in constant pain I looked forward to surgery 'cause they could knock me out."

The latter song is a particularly affecting mix of comfort and terror, with a somber, chamber-music arrangement backing such fearfully delivered lines as "Blanket me sweet nurse, and keep me from burning."

The real artistic fallout of the trauma will be much more evident, Linkous says, in his live shows, where he and his band (three alt-rock veterans whose credits include Ween and Camper Van Beethoven) will be introducing material for a planned third Sparklehorse album. But the nature of the creative changes may be surprising.

"I was on morphine for two years, just 'cause of the nerve damage and pain," he says. "Since I got off that I can think a little more clearly. For a while I was worried that my songwriting cells died when my heart stopped. I think they're OK, though, or I grew new ones. Really poppy ones. The songs I'm writing now are really pop songs."

"The fact that he got up and was able to do anything again, let alone get on stage and rock out, is amazing," says Bob Bortnick, Linkous' bandmate in the '80s group Dancing Hoods and now an artists and repertoire executive at Almo Sounds (where he signed Garbage).

"Musically, what he's doing is real. This is the kind of stuff he was doing in the bedroom next to mine when we were in Dancing Hoods. I saw him in New York a few months ago and walked backstage and there were some Radiohead guys, and PJ Harvey and Michael Stipe. Mark was so nervous, but I was, 'Wow! All these people are getting it.'"

Says Tom Waits, who is adding vocals to a track for the next Sparklehorse album, "I love his songs. . . . It's like opening your eyes underwater at the bottom of a stream. You go, 'Jesus, look what's down here.' I feel like I'm [hearing what is] between radio stations with him. And we seem to share a love of pawnshop hi-fi."

Linkous finds his moves toward pop--even if it's a decidedly left-field approach to pop--a bit ironic. It was to flee the pop wars that he went back to Virginia after time in New York and Los Angeles.

The Virginia of his childhood was the land of coal mining--his family's primary occupation for three generations. The advent of punk-rock in the late '70s provided him an aesthetic escape from that bleakness, and in the early '80s a literal escape as he headed to New York with his guitar.

Dancing Hoods relocated to L.A. in 1986 and quickly became a solid presence in local clubs. But after frustrating business deals scuttled several major-label offers, the band dissolved in 1988.

"I was getting really bored with the structured pop and disillusioned with the business and [expletive] up on drugs," Linkous says. "And then I heard [Tom Waits' albums] 'Swordfishtrombones' and 'Rain Dogs,' and [singer] Daniel Johnston's tapes, and I wanted to make pop music as interesting as Waits' blues. That's when I gave up on wanting to be a pop star and came back home to make just great music without caring about the rest of the stuff."

For a time Linkous did wash dishes and paint houses while working on home recordings. In 1995 some of them were sent to various industry folks, including Gary Gersh, at the time president of Capitol Records, who signed him and released the first album.

"Last time it took months to build any momentum with the press," says Capitol A&R vice president Dave Ayers, who managed Linkous before taking his current job. "With this one, there's a story, and people got the record and responded."

Sales of about 5,000 copies in the first month of U.S. release, Ayers says, though negligible by hit standards, represent a satisfactory foundation of good press and word of mouth.

"And now he's done a new version of the song 'Happy Man' that does give us a shot at radio," Ayers adds. "With the new songs he's writing, we have opportunities to build the artist, not be so worried about what this album is or isn't, but build Mark and Sparklehorse."

The accident means that Linkous now must try to regain the momentum he had built with his debut. As hard as that may be, he thinks he's got it pretty good.

"I've been able to buy a farmhouse. I was able to buy my old Moto Guzzi, and I still look down when I ride it and can't believe it's mine. I am lucky."