

THE POP LIFE; Acting Out Contradictions

By Neil Strauss

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For a while, Mark Linkous, the soft-spoken leader of the one-man group Sparklehorse, thought his first album would be his last. Two years ago, he collapsed in his London hotel room after mixing barbiturates with his antidepressant medication. When the paramedics came 12 hours later, they found him unconscious with his legs bent under his body. When they straightened them, a surge of potassium and calcium shut down his kidneys and heart. Fortunately, they were able to revive him.

While recuperating, Mr. Linkous tried desperately to work on new songs but found himself blocked. "I couldn't write," he said in a telephone interview this week from his farm in Virginia. "I was really frightened that when I flatlined for a few minutes, the songwriting cells in my brain died from lack of oxygen. But I was on so much medication that I couldn't think straight."

After three months in the hospital, Mr. Linkous, who had to use a wheelchair for six months, found his muse. The first song he wrote was the slow, elegiac "St. Mary," named for the hospital. "Come on boys," he pleads in the song, "please let me taste the clean air in my lungs."

"St. Mary" appears on his beautifully off-kilter new album, "Good Morning Spider" (Capitol), along with another song about the experience, "Pig." Where "St. Mary" is hopeful and grateful, "Pig" is nihilistic and angry. "I want to try and die," Mr. Linkous screams in the raw, overdriven song. Between these two compositions is a clue to the cryptic personality of Mr. Linkous, someone who simultaneously appreciates the simplicity of life and is frustrated by the complex lot it has dealt him.

"The only things I really need is water, a gun and rabbits," he sings in "St. Mary."

"The way the world is, things are so complicated and move so fast," Mr. Linkous said, explaining the lyric. "I'm guilty of acquiring all these possessions that I really don't need, like five old motorcycles. And there's all this stuff that comes with having a house and health insurance. Sometimes I feel like all I want to do is go up and live in the mountains and eat rabbits."

Though Mr. Linkous, who plays guitar, bass, piano, sampler and an old toy electronic keyboard called the Optigan on the album, is often compared to Neil Young, he said that lately he had been listening to the low-fi rock of Guided by Voices, the experimental electronic music of Oval and the trip-hop of Tricky and Radiohead, with whom he has toured in Europe. He insisted, however, that Radiohead was not an influence on his equally intense album. "We could never compete with them," he said. "They're great at making those big, majestic pop songs. Our thing is being kind of small and pathetic."

Often, Mr. Linkous is his own worst enemy. "Good Morning Spider" is full of self-destruction, with songs skidding to a halt after half a minute and vocals sung through toilet-paper tubes and old wireless intercoms. The song "Happy Man," for example, is one of his catchiest, most uptempo rock moments. But throughout it is disfigured by warbling static that sometimes grows louder than the song itself. "I wrote that song before 'Vivadixie,'" Mr. Linkous said, referring to his first album. "But I put all this radio static in there. I was tired of the song. I wanted to, in a way, sabotage it."

But why? "I have pop instincts just in my brain from growing up to pop music," he explained. "They will always be there, but I want to construct fairly traditional pop songs in the way that Tom Waits constructs his records, where they're more interesting sounding. I would much rather sound like 'Bone Machine' " -- the Waits album -- "than Everclear."

But under pressure from his record label, Mr. Linkous caved in slightly and recorded a noise-free version of "Happy Man" for radio only. He explained, "There's this really expensive motorcycle that I want, so. . . ."