

## Mark Linkous sparkles: The life (and short death) of a legend

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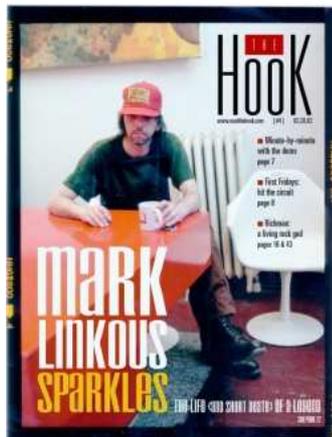


Photo by Jen Fariello

Mark Linkous is somewhere in the darkened recording booth, but the only thing I can see in the blackness is my own shadow, cast by the light streaming in the entrance.

"Could you shut the door?" Linkous pleads in a gravelly tone immediately recognizable from his albums. Acoustic foam must be hard to clean, as there's a distinct dusty smell— although our whispers are sonically perfect.

"I've been getting these awful migraines," he continues, not so much in apology as from desperation. "I hope it goes away."

"By the way, can you get me my Levi's jacket? It's hanging up in the studio."

Maybe it's the atmosphere. Maybe it's the knowledge that the man I'm talking to has been (but is, of course, no longer) legally dead. One way or the other, Mark Linkous is creeping me out.

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This is the story of a band called Sparklehorse and the remarkable man who fronts it, a tale as bipolar as the music it spawned.

Sparklehorse and Mark Linkous— who resides on a farm in Bremono Bluff, a Fluvanna village by the James River— are essentially synonymous, and if the band has multiple incarnations, the most important is the one in Linkous' head. Songwriter, performer, engineer, and producer, Linkous embodies the do-it-yourself indie rock auteur ethos. An enigma whose influence can't be measured in record sales, Mark Linkous and his music have met with critical, if not widely popular, acclaim.

Name-dropping comes easy when you're talking about Sparklehorse. Linkous opens for the likes of Radiohead and Cracker, collaborates with Tom Waits, housesits for P.J. Harvey's next-door neighbor in the south of England, and, as helper Eric from the Sound of Music recording studio was eager to share with me, knows Adrian "Portishead" Utley's private phone number by heart.

Linkous is something of a media darling, to boot.

"Songs that are as a bouquet of rotting roses, heavy American gothic masterpieces delivered so hushed you can hear a feather drop," writes the *New Musical Express*.

"Music of rare individuality," gushes Q magazine.

"Sparklehorse finds an odd beauty as things fall apart," says the *New York Times*.

Things were looking good for Linkous after Capitol Records released his 1995 debut album, *vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot*. Veering from Pixies-ish rawness to Joan of Arc-ish sonic barrages, from anthemic pop to delicate alt-country, his initial burst of songwriting and versatility made him something of a cult hit, particularly in Europe.

But often fame comes hand in hand with tragedy— London, 1996. As Linkous was getting ready to hit the road with Brit-rock icons Radiohead, he took a combination of anti-depressants and Valium (for the jet lag, of course) that proved to be temporarily fatal.

Linkous passed out with his legs folded awkwardly beneath him, cutting off their circulation. When doctors straightened them out, a medical quirk with an unpronounceable name caused Linkous to have a heart attack and die.

Fortunately, Linkous' death lasted only a matter of minutes. But the recovery took far longer. It was 12 weeks before Linkous left London's St. Mary's Hospital, although he made it out with legs intact, if not entirely functional— he used a wheelchair for months and will always need leg braces. But he had re-entered the "sad and beautiful world" he'd so dearly missed and loved, and to the delight of his fans, Sparklehorse lives on with him.

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My interview with Mark Linkous had already gotten off to a bad start when I showed up at noon to find him still sleeping.

"Umm... let me see if I can wake him up," says one of the several tinted-glasses-wearing hipsters buzzing around the Sound of Music this particular February morning. "But he was up until 6am..."

Linkous couldn't be roused.

### Essential Sparklehorse listening

*Vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot*

Released on Capitol Records, 26 September 1995.

This is the most erratic and least focused of Linkous' albums, but that's half the fun. There's a little something for every mood, although it can take a bit of seeking out. Drifting from the rock-out "Hammering the Cramps" into the ultra-mellow "Most Beautiful Widow in Town," or from the sonic assemblage of "Ballad Of A Lost Cold Marble" to the anthemic "Someday I Will Treat You Good," brace yourself for the ghosts and tangents that made Sparklehorse... Sparklehorse. With lyrics like "The parasites will love you when you're dead/ la la la/ la la," you know you're in for a twisted ride.

*Good Morning Spider*

Released on Capitol Records, 9 February 1999.

*Rolling Stone's* Rob Sheffield puts it well when he says that these are songs that belong "on your permanent rainy-day jukebox." This album retains Linkous' signature do-it-yourself Static King crackle and the earthy decay that mark *Viva...* while branching out to add a touch of hummability. Tunes like "Happy Man" might keep you waiting for the payoff, but when it comes along, it's worth it.

*It's a Wonderful Life*

Released on Capitol Records, 28 August 2001.

Instant melancholy in a box, this album most coherently defines the thickly Southern gothic sonic aura of Sparklehorse with the production assistance of David Fridmann. Even if none of the

I'm taken downstairs to the studio itself, where an engineer is busily working. The project is being produced by Linkous— he's supposed to be there right now, but as we've all found out, he's somewhat indisposed this morning—and the artist in question is Daniel Johnston, described by *Spin* magazine as an "indie schizoid." Linkous, convert turned producer, lists Johnston as one of his foremost influences, right alongside Tom Waits.

The room is littered with comfortable couches, thick black bundles of serpentine wiring, and a veritable timeline of recording technology. An antiquated Macintosh Performa perched on a speaker seems merely for decorative purposes, in contrast to the highly functional, third-full bottle of Maker's Mark next to it. I'm deposited on one of the couches and given every imaginable non-verbal instruction to remain as quiet as humanly possible.

If Bill Gates lost 30 pounds, grew 15 inches, and got a mod haircut, he'd look like Alan Weatherhead, the Sound of Music's recording engineer. Alan plays guitar with Sparklehorse from time to time, but he's too lost in his work for me to badger him about it. For over half an hour, he tediously tweaks drum parts. I can't figure out what he's doing, but he looks like a master at whatever it is. When the bass is layered on, I discover that you can whistle "Heart and Soul" over it, which refuses to leave my head for the next five days.

I'd predicted delays, fully expecting Linkous to be on R.S.T. (rock star time), but now it's past 1pm and there's still no sign of the man. To preserve my sanity, I relocate to the Sound of Music's airy kitchen-type meeting room. I'm reading an interview with David Lowery about Cracker in *Plan 9's 9X* magazine when who should walk into the room but David Lowery himself, making me feel like a bit of an ass. At least I salvage the visit by getting an interview with him.

Finally, at 2:30, I'm summoned downstairs for my two-minute audience with the man, the legend, the rock star... Mark Linkous. He promises that if I call him later in the evening, he'd love to talk.

On my way home from Richmond, a truck kicks up a rock that shatters my windshield. I start to feel that when Linkous sings, "I'm the dog that ate your birthday cake," he's really talking to me.

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Few of even the most fervent Sparklehorse devotees are aware that Linkous lives nearby or that he spent most of his formative teenage years living right here in Charlottesville. Most people find their way to our humble 'ville on their own, but Linkous didn't have much say about his arrival.

"I was sent there as a sort of disciplinary action," he says.

"After my parents divorced, my mom worked at a factory, and I was totally unsupervised in Front Royal, at just that time when I was 13 and hanging out with the motorcycle gang, The Pagans.

"I was rapidly becoming a juvenile delinquent," he continues, "and my parents just couldn't control me, so I got sent to live in Carrsbrook out on 29 with my grandparents."

Putting him in the house with John Linkous, the man who founded the well-known automobile dealership, must have seemed a logical way to straighten little Mark out.

"My grandfather once had a mule who wouldn't haul a coal cart, so he punched it in the nose, and it fell over dead," recalls Linkous, "but he was also a very generous man."

Where one grandparent left an impression with his fist, the other left one with a song.

"Mark's grandmother is really into people being musically inclined," says Charlottesville Tracey Linkous, Mark's cousin-in-law. "He calls her Nanny, and she's always been a huge supporter of Mark and his music. Not that it's the type of music she really listens to."

Linkous says he spent the bulk of his teenage years in Charlottesville, "mostly just going to [Albemarle] High School and drinking. I went to school to see my friends— that's the only reason I didn't drop out."

Linkous' memories of going to school are anything but academic. "We were smoking pot in this drainpipe— actually, we were smoking a lot of hash those days, but anyway— there was this drainpipe under the football field or something," he recalls. "We smoked so much hash and then went to class, and of course it was Sex Education. We had to go to the teacher's desk to pick up graded papers, and I was convinced my hand was attached to my face and wouldn't move." Right on, Mark.

And there were talent shows, of course, those age-old testing grounds for rock and roll up-and-comers. "My band would play, and they'd throw the breakers. Happened three times... some guy with an acoustic guitar always won."

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But Linkous wasn't the kind of kid who let defeat get him down. Not long after high school, he set out for Los Angeles to make his mark on the musical world, a goal he wouldn't quite achieve until he made it back where he started. Southern California proved too far removed from his birthplace in Dickenson County ("There's no reason to go down there unless you're in the coal business") for Linkous to feel at home.

"I needed an antidote to the glitz and glamour of Los Angeles," he says, and it turned out that the cure was to return to Virginia. "All I wanted to do as a teenager was escape, but later on, after I'd been in New York and L.A., one of the most special memories of mine was walking and spending time in the mountains alone— one of those things you don't appreciate until it's gone."

To this day, Linkous feels a certain animosity about his California days, and he "used to dread" playing on the West Coast. "Once, I actually got on the plane to fly over and made 'em stop and let me off. Fuck it."

Back in Richmond, Linkous started getting back in touch with his southern musical heritage. He joined an informal group that played 300-year-old Irish folk tunes in a house on Church Hill. "It was the antithesis of what Los Angeles was all about— we did it for the sake of enjoying it, not for 'making it.'"

tracks quite reach the thrash or weirdness potential of *Viva...*, Linkous makes up for it with a wealth of palatably ethereal ballads. Even includes collaborations with P.J. Harvey, Portishead's Adrian Utley, and Tom Waits. Make sure you hang on for the (barely) hidden track, elegant and movingly timid.

Then Linkous started hanging out with a Richmonder he'd met in L.A., David Lowery (then known for Camper Van Beethoven, now known as the frontman for Cracker). Before Linkous became a collaborator, he assisted Lowery in a more physical way.

"Mark was the roadie on the tour for our first album," Lowery remembers. "We'd play [Neil Young's] 'Why Do I Keep Fucking Up?' and Mark would come up and sing."

One night at Maxwell's in Hoboken, Lowery says, playing for an audience that was "really dull in a New York sort of way," Linkous began dumping coolers of ice on the crowd.

"Mark proceeded to trash the place—knocking over the PA stuff. The guy banned us from playing there even though Mark caused the damage," grouses Lowery. "Now he's playing there all the time—I guess they never made the connection."

One day, Lowery offered to bring some recording equipment out to Linkous' farm—a friendly enough proposition—and the result was an international phenomenon called Sparklehorse.

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"My take is that the whole sound evolved from a series of accidents," says Lowery, who gets listed as David Charles for his contributions to the Sparklehorse oeuvre. Perhaps Linkous' wife, Teresa, deserves a fair share of credit. Lowery explains a secret of his friend's success.

"Teresa would be asleep, so we'd try and record softly to avoid waking her up. We'd work at Sound of Music in off-hours, like midnight to 6am, and that's a slow and quiet time. In the end, he thought his voice sounded better quiet."

Linkous works during the witching hours, and from the sound of things, he's gotten a few visits from a spirit or three. Few musicians so strongly evoke a sense of place—the understated elegance of rural shabbiness ("Everything that's made/ is made to decay") is brought to life in Linkous' basement, as are the twisted internal workings of his own psyche ("The owls are talking to me/ but I'm sworn to secrecy").

Ghosts and Southern memory infuse Sparklehorse songs with an eerie atmosphere—he has a fondness for Cormac McCarthy's writings about what Linkous calls the "dangerous, spooky part of the South."

He also professes an avid appreciation of Breece D'J Pancake, a prolific creative writing student at UVA in the late seventies who left behind just one book of short stories. Pancake shot himself under a fruit tree in 1979. Even if Linkous' lyric "Give all your leaves/ to the ghosts in the trees/ to sink or to shine," doesn't make it obvious, Pancake's spirit inhabits this and many other songs.

The music is made to match the words, which is to say that there's nothing slick or contrived, or even traditional, about it. Filled with wandering guitars, ambient clanks, whooshes and buzzes, as well as Linkous' patently nicked whisper, his songs are as evocative as his chaotically woven lyrical web. How do these warped soundscapes arise?

"I try," he says, "not to think of music in an aural way—making noises that inspire images, that sort of thing."

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Linkous is understandably reluctant to talk about his 1996 overdose and subsequent health problems. "I got tired of telling the story—it had been documented so much already."

But he has resigned himself to the fact that it's a part of his history and that he's not going to make it through any interview without its popping up. He's prepared.

"It scared the hell out of me at the time," he says. "When you're in a really desperate situation and you really think you're going to die, it makes you realize how quick things can be over."

"If it taught anything relevant to me," he says, "it's to try to notice little things that would otherwise pass you by, no matter how microscopic they might be." There's a hint of boredom in his voice, possibly suggesting that this precise quotation has already appeared verbatim in many an article.

There's a depth to Linkous that journalists, and maybe even friends, can't quite perceive. Immensely talented and voluntarily haunted, he's found a release that gives the world a glimpse into his ever-churning mind.

The man and the music are complex and eccentric, as evidenced by his current trip to Europe. "I'm going to this sort of Shining-type hotel in Scotland," he says. "It gets shut down for the off season, but the owner is into writers and artists staying there before the tourists come. I've got part of the hotel for a month to record in."

Ironically or not, he concludes, "could be cool, could be a hotel filled with weirdos."