

Sparklehorse: a fitting tribute to a brittle talent

Neil McCormick remembers Mark Linkous, the cult genius behind Sparklehorse, who died before this week's album release.

By [Neil McCormick](#)

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I've been listening to a ghost. The voice crackles out of my digital recorder, a little nervous and tentative. "It's getting harder, this life, in music. Unless you have a lot of money in the bank, its very hard, especially being just one person. Record companies" There's a defeated sigh. "It seems to me like nobody knows what the ****'s going on ..."

Last June, I spoke to Mark Linkous, the cult genius better known as Sparklehorse. Nine months later, on March 6th this year, he committed suicide, shooting himself in the heart in an alley in Knoxville, aged 47. A brilliant, if famously troubled music maker, our brief conversation was amongst the last interviews he ever gave.

Linkous had just made a beautifully strange album, *Dark Night Of The Soul*, with another pair of mavericks, producer Brian Burton (aka Dangermouse) and film director David Lynch. It is a brooding blend of hip hop and indie rock, with sinister photographic imagery by Lynch and vocal contributions from an astonishing guest list of alternative icons including Iggy Pop, Suzanne Vega and members of The Strokes, Shins, Pixies, Cardigans and Super Furry Animals. Linkous was very proud of it.

"I've always loved a lot of the musical elements of hip hop," he told me. "Its so sparse, every sound is so dialled in, and I thought if you could integrate that with pop music in a smart way then you could really have something. I hear r'n'b stuff on the radio, with pseudo hip hop verses and poppy choruses, but I still haven't heard it done the way I hear it in my head yet. I wanted to do it with Brian, because I consider him the Jimmy Hendrix of the laptop."

But then, due to contractual complications between Burton and EMI, the album was withdrawn. To get round the problems, its creators released a limited edition high quality 100 page photographic book with a blank recordable CD inside, with the implication that you could (if you so desired) illegally download the album from the internet. It seemed a radical new way to release music, although Linkous was not entirely enthusiastic. "I would like it to come out in a way that's not so hard for people to attain," he admitted,

claiming this was a financially ruinous way to release a record forced on them by “legal bullshit”, and their desire for the album to be heard.

The elegant David Lynch book, though, was something of which he was proud. “I’m at the age where I still have a lot of vinyl and I miss that tactile thing. CDs always felt insubstantial, just plastic that I didn’t want to touch, really. Now everything is digital and who knows where you got the music? People think it just came out of the ether somewhere.”

The album finally received an officially sanctioned release this week, and has been collecting glowing reviews. Sadly, Linkous, who had a history of depression, was not around to read them.

“I guess I wasn’t really surprised when I heard about it,” admits friend and co-producer, Brian Burton. “Some people you live with knowing that’s always a possibility. The thing with Mark was, I guess, there was a lot of pain going on with him, it was something he daily dealt with. But he was really nice, almost overly concerned about other people. He was almost too fragile to be here. Things affected him very deeply. So obviously his moods would fluctuate a lot. Maybe he didn’t want to be here. But you never know what goes through somebody’s head when they do something like that.”

I met Linkous a couple of times over the years. He was a genuinely original talent. His 1995 Sparklehorse debut, ‘vivadixiesubmarinemachinegun’, was hugely influential in its crackling, lo-fi beauty. “I hadn’t heard anything that was melodic and beautiful in that way but also static-y and distorted and heavy,” recalls Burton. Linkous was clearly a delicate soul, with a slightly stumbling, apologetic way of talking. He notoriously almost died in 1996, after an accidental overdose of valium and anti-depressants whilst touring with Radiohead. Unconscious for 14 hours before he was discovered in his hotel room, he flatlined for two minutes before paramedics were able to shock his heart back into action.

“I did apparently die and that really bothers me,” Linkous told me in 1997. “Death and the whole idea of the inevitable has inspired so much art through the ages that you think if you die maybe something will have been revealed to you. But I don’t have any recollection whatsoever 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.”

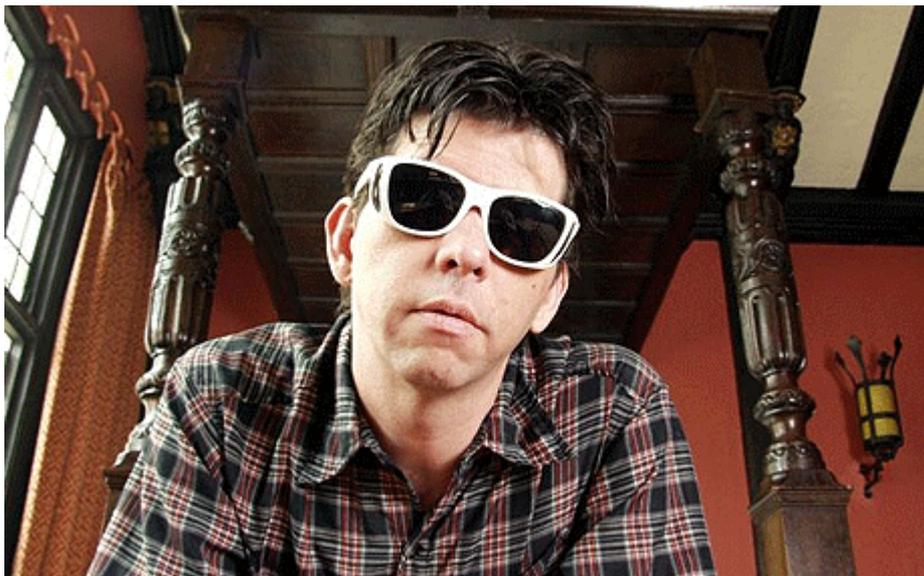
Linkous spent much of our last interview complaining about the music business. He had been dropped from his label Capitol, and declared himself saddened by not just how the music business treated him, but also people he had worked with for so many years. Another contributor to ‘Dark Night Of The Soul’, the brilliant quadriplegic, alcoholic singer-songwriter Vic Chestnutt, committed suicide in December 2009.



“Vic and Mark were very close,” notes Burton. “That was very, very difficult for Mark, I know. But he was excited about the album finally coming out, and he seemed to have been doing a little bit better around that time.”

With its ominous title and aura of death, ‘Dark Night Of The Soul’ might seem like a cursed album. But it would be a mistake to taint it with tragedy. It’s a little gem, full of sparkling psychedelic sounds and sinuous songs, weaving together the very different pop sensibilities of Sparklehorse and Dangermouse.

“Its strange having this album right now,” admits Burton, “having two people on it being dead. Its kind of a dark album, there’s a melancholy aspect, but I think it’s also pretty honest in a really positive way. This is an album that Mark and I put a lot into, it took years to do and we were really proud of it.”



The first time I interviewed Linkous, he told me “My goal would be to create something beautiful, little planets of music. There’s a surplus of ugliness in

this world already.” The last time I spoke to him, he said he was getting “close to the ideal that I hear in my head.” If ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ is the last we hear from him, it is a fitting tribute to a truly individual talent.

‘Sparklehorse and Dangermouse present Dark Night Of The Soul’ is out now on Parlophone records.