

Good Evening Obscurity

Pain and death fuel Sparklehorse's inspired, rustic rock

Posted Feb 10, 1999 12:00 AM

The first thing Sparklehorse songwriter Mark Linkous wanted to do after he died was ride one of the four motorcycles he keeps at his farm in rural Andersonville, Virginia. Well, that's not exactly true. The *first* thing he wanted to do after he died was to learn how to live again, and (here's the really scary part) to see if he could still write a song. "For awhile there," Linkous says, "I was really scared that when I technically died -- which I guess I did for a few minutes -- that the part of my brain that allowed me my ability to write songs would be damaged."

In 1996, an overdose of Valium and anti-depressants in a London hotel room very nearly cut short Linkous' career before it had really even begun. Sparklehorse had been finishing up a European tour in support of its debut, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, when Linkous keeled over in his hotel room. It was fourteen hours before the singer was discovered unconscious, his legs pinned underneath him with their circulation cut off. When medics attempted to straighten his legs, the procedure triggered a heart attack. A three-month stay at St. Mary's hospital in London and no less than seven operations were required to save Linkous' legs, which doctors initially told him would have to be amputated. Even so, the singer says he was in a morphine-medicated state for two years after the accident.

"I don't even remember flying over there to London," says Linkous. "I just remember waking up in the hospital with tubes coming out of my nose." Though he's understandably reluctant to rehash the episode, Linkous knows he has little choice but to talk about it. For one thing, despite having to wear braces on his legs, he's getting ready for a two-month U.S. tour that begins in March with a band that includes cellist Sophie Michalitsianos, multi-instrumentalist Jonathan E. Segel, drummer Scott Minor and bassist Scott Fitzsimmons (the band just finished playing a series of dates in Australia and New Zealand). For another, much of the material on Sparklehorse's just-released second album, *Good Morning Spider* (Capitol), is in large part a product of the accident and its torturous aftermath.

Linkous' introspective, impressionistic songwriting style reaches new heights, or depths as the case may be, on *Spider*. Tracks like the cornet-laced "Painbirds," the gathering storm of "Chaos of the Galaxy/Happy Man," and the nursery rhyme prayer of "Saint Mary" all examine the fragile, fleeting quality of life, and the tangle of emotions -- frustration, resignation, wonder, and gratitude -- that wrestled for position within Linkous' helpless physical state. But even during his darkest days, Linkous held out a hand to hope. He didn't have to reach very far. "My walls were covered with cards and letters from people who said how much the first record meant to them, and that got me through it," he says. "It was amazing."

Jonathan E. Segel, who's been tapped by Linkous to play guitar, keyboards, violin and glockenspiel on the tour,

first met Linkous a decade ago when his employer's old group, the Dancing Hoods, was opening for Segel's band, Camper Van Beethoven. It would be years, however, before Segel heard about the strange outfit called Sparklehorse from his ex-Camper bandmate, David Lowery (now of Cracker), a frequent Linkous collaborator. In fact, one of Lowery's and Linkous' songs, "Sick of Goodbyes" (which first appeared on Cracker's 1993 album, *Kerosene Hat*), has been tapped by Capitol as *Spider's* first U.K. single.

"The thing that's so great about Mark's music is that it's got this timeless quality," Segel says a couple of days after the band's return from Australia. "There's definitely an old-time sound to it, but at the same time I think the sonic nature of what Mark's doing is very forward-thinking. The way Mark puts things is very poetic, and there's a universality to his songs."

Besides Linkous' way with words, *Spider* is rife with the clutter of peculiar, improbable sounds that, when placed next to each other, conspire to create a kind of restless dreamscape that flickers in and out of focus: pockets of shortwave radio static (Linkous hasn't called his home studio "Static King" for nothing) and whispered asides bump up against toy instruments and symphony hall strings. Sparklehorse's music is as old as it is new, as bare as it is busy. For every buzzing burst of mid-fi pop, there's an ancient Appalachian echo or a woozy detour into what might be described as a kind of rustic, art-damaged folk.

It's a strangely beautiful world that even Linkous couldn't have possibly imagined when, as a teenager, he left his home in Richmond, Virginia, and headed out to New York City and L.A. with dreams of punk-rock stardom dancing in his head. But it didn't take long, he says, before "I was as bored as shit with the idea of trying to make a rock record and getting signed. And then somebody played me a Tom Waits record."

That was all he needed to hear. Linkous moved back to Richmond, joined a band that played nothing but "300-year-old Irish songs," and basically discarded everything he thought he knew about music. "That period was about abandoning a lot of things and just starting from scratch and learning how to write again -- learning how to make art out of pain or clay." Linkous says he hears an honesty, an innocence and a purity of purpose in those old-fashioned sounds that's missing in much of so-called modern rock.

The same might be said for why he eventually left the hurtling highways of the cities for the winding dirt roads of the country. He and his wife recently bought a farmhouse at the outskirts of a town that he says boasts little more than a post office. Perhaps in a sense, Linkous himself had to first lose the qualities he talks most about -- honesty, purity of purpose -- before he could, ultimately, reclaim them. For all its haunted reflections, *Good Morning Spider* sounds not like the work of a man who's fallen down to die, but rather like a man who somehow, against all odds, has gotten to his feet to live.

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(February 10, 1999)