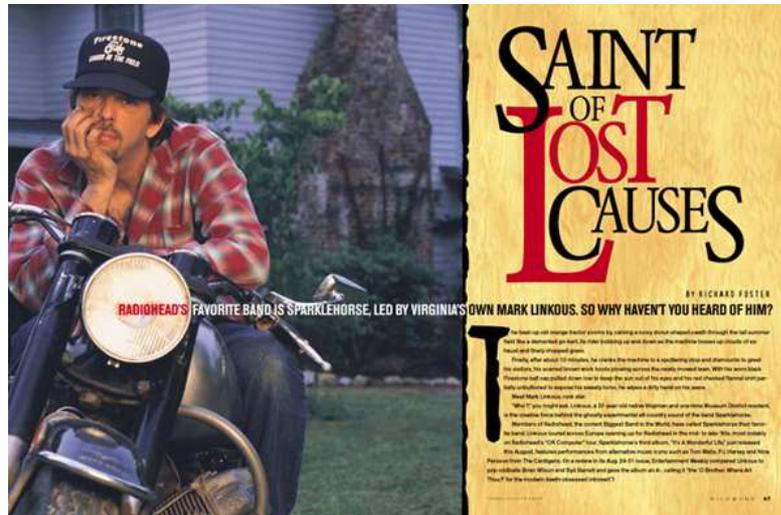


Saint of Lost Causes

Radiohead's favorite band is Sparklehorse, led by Virginia's own Mark Linkous. So why haven't you heard of him?

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The beat-up old orange tractor zooms by, carving a noisy donut-shaped swath through the tall summer field like a demented go-kart, its rider bobbing up and down as the machine tosses up clouds of exhaust and finely chopped grass.

Finally, after about 10 minutes, he cranks the machine to a sputtering stop and dismounts to greet his visitors, his scarred brown work boots plowing across the newly mowed lawn. With his worn black Firestone ball cap pulled down low to keep the sun out of his eyes and his red checked flannel shirt partially unbuttoned to expose his sweaty torso, he wipes a dirty hand on his jeans.

Meet Mark Linkous, rock star.

"Who?," you might ask. Linkous, a 37-year-old native Virginian and one-time Museum District resident, is the creative force behind the ghostly experimental alt-country sound of the band Sparklehorse.

Members of Radiohead, the current Biggest Band in the World, have called Sparklehorse their favorite band. Linkous toured across Europe opening up for Radiohead in the mid- to late-'90s, most notably on Radiohead's "OK Computer" tour. Sparklehorse's third album, "It's A Wonderful Life," just released this August, features performances from alternative music icons such as Tom Waits, P.J. Harvey and Nina Persson from The Cardigans. (In a review in its Aug. 24-31 issue, Entertainment Weekly compared Linkous to pop oddballs Brian Wilson and Syd Barrett and gave the album an A-, calling it "the 'O Brother, Where Art Thou?' for the modern death-obsessed introvert.")

Linkous' other notable fans include Counting Crows singer Adam Duritz, Ben Folds of Ben Folds Five and supermodel Helena Christensen.

So why don't you know who he is? Linkous, who now lives on a quaint 7-acre 19th-century farm deep in the woods of Buckingham County about 35 miles south of Charlottesville, is virtually unknown here in Virginia, not to mention the United States. Yet he travels to Europe several times a year, where he headlines crowded 2,000- to 3,000-seat concert halls and draws celebrity guest performers such as Radiohead's bassist and guitarist brothers, Colin and Jonny Greenwood.

"A lot of my favorite American bands like Grandaddy or Flaming Lips and Mercury Rev, we're all more popular in the UK and Europe," says Linkous. As he bends down to sit and talk in the grass, a medal of St. Jude, patron saint of lost causes, catches the sun as it dangles from a chain around his neck. He flicks a granddaddy longlegs off his jeans and pulls out a pack of tobacco and hand-rolls a cigarette.

"People unfortunately just aren't exposed to bands like Sparklehorse or Grandaddy or Mercury Rev," he says in his soft-spoken southwestern Virginia drawl, "just because of radio or the record companies or whoever the people are who run the music industry in America."

When Linkous goes to England, he says, he'll occasionally get recognized on the streets of London. "I'll go over there and do a week of press, sit over there in a hotel room for a week, just

one after the other.” Needless to say, it isn’t the same here, where Linkous can anonymously walk the streets of Richmond or hang out at his local Southern States and be treated like any other farmer.

“I don’t miss not being appreciated or recognized. I just wish things were different where bands like us don’t have to go so far to be appreciated because people are missing out on a lot. ... None of our music is that weird at all. It’s not that inaccessible. ... A lot of other people, especially in America, think it’s really weird or experimental. But it doesn’t seem weird to me at all. Blink 182 seems weird to me.”

Welcome to Linkous’ lost cause.

He doesn’t so much want to be rich and famous – though he wouldn’t mind that. He just thinks the American public is getting cheated out of hearing quality critically acclaimed bands like his in favor of “radio-friendly” pop-music Pablum.

But it’s a cause Linkous almost didn’t get to fight.

In 1996 as he traveled to London to open up for Radiohead on their European tour that year, Linkous had a much-publicized drug overdose in a London hotel room, mixing prescription antidepressants and alcohol. He collapsed into a coma for nearly 15 hours with his legs pinned beneath his crumpled body. When rescue workers straightened his legs out, a surge of potassium shot to his heart, causing him to go into cardiac arrest. He was clinically dead for three minutes until they resuscitated him.

He remained in a coma until weeks later. A series of nine painful operations on his atrophied legs followed. He did two subsequent tours with Radiohead and local alternative rockers Cracker singing from a wheelchair. He now walks – painfully but not visibly so – with the aid of leg braces, which he’ll have to wear for the rest of his life.

The only thing he recalls about the whole incident is waking up in the hospital to see his wife, Teresa, a Head Start administrator, standing over him. “I don’t even remember flying [to London].”

Linkous, who has struggled with clinical depression virtually his entire life, says he doesn’t know if the overdose was an accident or not.

“There was such a rush in quantity of cards and letters from people,” he recalls of his convalescence. “vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot,” Sparklehorse’s first album, released in 1995,” meant so much to people ... from rock stars to street people. Unfortunately for me and unfortunately for a lot of people, you don’t really know that until some people think you’re going to croak.”

That knowledge and the changed life outlook Linkous gained from the experience find intellectual purchase in the themes of his Frank Capra-titled album “It’s A Wonderful Life.”

“If the whole record is about anything,” he says, “it’s to remind yourself about that, that it was a good day to be alive today – not getting eaten by a bear, or seeing a deer drink out of a creek or something.”

Linkous’ own wonderful life began in Fairfax County, though he was raised in the coal-mining country of Dickinson County, where his grandfathers ran mining businesses. By the age of 13 or 14, his parents had split up, and Linkous became a self-described “juvenile delinquent” running with a crowd of bikers. He was sent to live with his grandfather, who had retired to Charlottesville.

“The one they sent me to live with, he hauled coal when they pulled [it] out with carts and mules. He killed a stubborn mule one time because he wouldn’t pull the cart by punching him between the eyes. He fell over dead, the mule.”

But Linkous says his teen years with his grandfather weren’t all discipline, though. “He was real nice, too. He bought me my first guitar, leather jacket, stuff like that.”

As a student at Albemarle High School, Linkous discovered punk rock, joining garage bands and making frequent pilgrimages to the then-fledgling Plan 9 Music in Carytown to buy hard-to-find records “when Plan 9 was a few cardboard boxes with some LPs in it.”

After high school, Linkous departed for New York to seek the rock ‘n’ roll life. He quickly started a Replacements-sounding pop band called The Dancing Hoods and the group soon moved to Los Angeles during the mid- to late-’80s in search of a record deal that never came.

Instead, he fell into drug addiction and homelessness, living in a van by the ocean. Addicted to heroin, he finally called his parents for help and checked into rehab clinics in Charlottesville and southwest Virginia.

But Linkous had made some valuable contacts in Los Angeles, noticeably future Cracker bandleader David Lowery, who later moved to Richmond to start his Sound of Music studio. Linkous, who by the early '90s was living on Patterson Avenue west of the Boulevard and was working as the first dishwasher at Millie's, was one of the only friends Lowery had in town.

The two would frequently get together to make music and Lowery would record Linkous on his eight-track recorder.

Linkous also hung out at Main Street Grill and started a band with some Oregon Hill musicians called The Flaming Cicadas that specialized in Gaelic folk tunes. "We sort of unexpectedly developed a big hippie following. And then we reacted by playing like The Stranglers' songs and Sex Pistols songs on banjos and completely alienated our audience and broke up."

Linkous later started another band with his younger brother Matt (formerly of the now-defunct popular local band Spike The Dog) called alternately The Johnson Family and Salt Chunk Mary.

By the mid-'90s, he had moved to Fluvanna County (the Fan reminded him too much of Hollywood, he says) and taken jobs sweeping chimneys and house-painting. Meanwhile, he became Lowery's first client at Sound of Music. Lowery produced the first Sparklehorse album under the pseudonym David Charles.

Critically acclaimed, "vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot" sold only well enough to pay back Lowery, who had produced the album for Linkous on spec. It turned out to be a good enough investment, however.

As the story goes, the members of Radiohead were touring somewhere in Istanbul, or maybe it was Egypt, when they heard a limo driver playing the Sparklehorse debut on his car stereo.

"Someone from the record company just called and said 'Radiohead wants you to open for them.' And I said, 'Great, that's a band I don't hate. I'll do it,'" Linkous recalls.

"Suddenly, I was playing stadiums in Germany in front of 40,000 people and my guitar player had never played in front of an audience at all and had the guitar notes written on the neck of the guitar. We were pretty pathetic. ... They're a huge majestic rock band. We would just get up and sort of be squeaky and pathetic and on the edge all the time."

It brought Sparklehorse and Linkous to a new level of recognition, however. In the years since, Linkous has produced Cardigans lead singer Nina Persson's solo album, and collaborated with Bangles lead singer Susanna Hoffs, co-writing songs and performing on her critically well-received 1996 solo album.

And then there's Tom Waits. Linkous learned that Waits and his kids were fans of Sparklehorse and he began corresponding with him. "We've been talking for a couple years ... pretty much by phone. I send him letters, books, bones, pieces of artwork. We've been exchanging things through the mail."

Which led to their collaboration on the new Sparklehorse album, a departure from Linkous' past recordings in that it was recorded at studios around the world, rather than at his farmhouse like his other two albums, "vivadixie" and "Good Morning Spider."

"I didn't want them to come here and get my dogs jumping all over P.J. Harvey and Nina [Persson] get snake-bit," he explains.

Now he's hoping to use his influence to help some other Richmond bands, notably the popular moody ensemble Denali and Linkous' brother Matt, who has been recording new songs since Spike the Dog broke up. Though Linkous was unsuccessful in landing Denali a major-label record deal ("I'm just not cut out to play the shenanigans it entails," he says), he's producing their debut album.

You could say it's all part of his lost cause. That's not to say that Linkous himself hasn't tried to be mainstream, however. He once paid a big-name "hot modern-rock remixer" \$10,000 out of his own pocket to remix a Sparklehorse song into a hit radio single. It failed miserably. He now wishes he had taken the money and bought another Italian Moto Guzzi motorcycle like he originally planned.

"I would love to be that popular," he says of the platinum-selling success of his friends Radiohead. "But not really just for myself. I would love for Granddaddy and Mercury Rev and my brother's band to be that popular. One reason, I think, [is] America in particular really needs it. I mean there's an awful lot of really shallow music out there."