

'I think I kind of blew it'

Ten years after his own (brief) death, Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse is clean, sober and making records again, with a little help from Tom Waits. He tells Amy Raphael how he came back to life

Amy Raphael

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Between darkness and wonder ... Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

Mark Linkous once said the song that described him best was Neil Young's *Fuckin' Up*. Appropriate choice. On tour in Britain with his band Sparklehorse in 1996, he took a cocktail of alcohol, anti-depressants, Valium and heroin in a London hotel room and passed out with his legs trapped under him. He was stuck in that position for 14 hours, causing a build-up of potassium, which, when he was freed, entered his bloodstream and stopped his heart. Linkous was clinically dead. He came back to life but was hospitalised for weeks and nearly lost his legs.

Ten years on, Linkous, now 40, is back in a London hotel. He's in a dark corner of an empty restaurant, body awkwardly slumped, head lolling against the wall. He wakes with a jolt, runs a hand through haphazard hair (he arrived at 6am on a red-eye flight from New York). The darkest of shades stay clipped on to his thick-rimmed glasses. He talks so slowly and quietly in his Virginian drawl you wonder at times if he is still alive.

Linkous has been clean for three years and rarely even has a drink now. He moved from his native Virginia to a rented house in the mountains of North Carolina and went to rehab in Florida. "Only time I've ever been in Florida," he says, his voice almost a whisper. "I don't want to go back. Horrible state. But the rehab helped a little with my depression." He drifts off and it's hard to know if he's finished talking or has more to say. "I don't know what the depression is about." He smiles. "Stupidity, mostly."

For a long time after getting clean, Linkous struggled to record Sparklehorse's fourth album. He had always been high when he made music and feared his muse might leave him now he was straight. "I was so stoned all the time, I ended up doing drugs to feel normal. After rehab I spent three years writing songs but I lost interest in recording them. Oddly, there were a lot of pop songs. I don't know where they came from. Maybe it's cause I was listening to the Beatles a lot."

Finally, he ran out of money - he couldn't pay his rent - and managed to discipline himself enough to record *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*. It's a beautiful record, not so different from his first three. There's the same distorted falsetto Neil Young vocals, the ragged, raw, bluesy pop sound. It's a private and surreal world that Linkous creates, but not an exclusive one; these are universal tales of love and longing.

The songs are so drenched in melancholy that it would be easy to imagine Linkous living alone in his rented mountain house with just three dogs for company. In fact, he's been married for 15 years. So you're not too lonely? "Not unless I'm digging myself into a hole in my own head." Who do you write for? Sparklehorse songs are always so wonderfully

sad. "I don't know ... I think it's just trying to get stuff out of my head. To keep it from going crazy." He laughs. "To keep it from exploding."

A loner since boyhood, Linkous spends much of his time alone in the studio, playing most of the instruments. He has collaborated with Tom Waits, PJ Harvey and the Cardigans' Nina Persson (all of whom contributed guest vocals on 2001's *It's a Wonderful Life*); on *Dreamt for Light Years*, Tom Waits makes a reappearance.

The first time Linkous was given Tom Waits's phone number he had to knock back five shots of whisky and lock himself in a room before he felt brave enough to make the call. He finally went to California to meet Waits. "He told really great stories. He also scared me to death. We were driving down the highway in his big suburban SUV talking about animals we disliked. I mentioned carrion-eating turkey buzzards. He doesn't like them either. He proceeded to do an impression of a turkey buzzard sunning itself, his arms outstretched as we were flying down the highway at 80mph. He did a great imitation, it just went on for too long."

Perhaps the most important collaborator on *Dreamt for Light Years*, however, is the hip-hop producer Brian Burton, aka Danger Mouse, half of Gnarls Barkley. "I'd been listening to a lot of later Beatles stuff and then I found the Grey Album [on which Danger Mouse spliced the rhymes of Jay Z's *Black Album* to music from the Beatles' *White Album*], which had been sitting in my drawer for six months. I really loved it. I'd never have thought of Brian as a Sparklehorse fan. But there's a lot of slowed-down, sparse hip-hop stuff that I like." They got on so well they are planning to make a record together: Linkous wants the project to be Dangerhorse, while Burton prefers Sparklemouse.

Although Linkous can sound optimistic, he is prone to depression. He can't remember when it started nor why, though he talks for a while of his parents splitting up when he was 12 and the time he spent moving from one house to the other because neither parent seemed equipped to deal with the juvenile delinquent he says he became. He talks of music offering an escape from the Virginia coal mines in which both of his grandfathers and his father worked, and in which he, too, toiled for a short time.

"One of my grandfathers died from black lung, from breathing coal dust," he says. "My father still works in the mines. As soon as I saw Johnny Cash looking so cool in his black suit on television, I knew music offered a way out. My parents bought me a little plastic acoustic guitar but I don't remember writing songs. Later I worshipped Alice Cooper. Then Led Zeppelin. Punk rock. The first concert I ever saw was Blondie. Oh man, she was gorgeous ... But I never got to see the Pistols and I only saw Buzzcocks years later, when they reformed."

But music did not turn out to be such an easy way out. The London hotel room incident is evidence of that. Was he trying to kill himself? He hangs his head. "I don't think so. I was being stupid with drugs." Did it change his approach to life? "For a few hours. When I was scared I was going to die. I was in hospital here in London, praying - if only I could get back to my wife and dogs, I'd be the happiest person in the world. Unfortunately I let that feeling wear off. In some ways I think I kind of blew it by letting it slip away like that."

The dark days descended again in the aftermath of 9/11, when Linkous couldn't stop obsessing about the people who jumped from the Twin Towers or those who died in the planes. "It was pretty devastating, that whole thing. It really fucked my head up." He pauses, pulls a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and raises his voice. "I have to say I'm embarrassed and angry at being represented as an arrogant, dyslexic, asshole, cowboy redneck." He sucks hard on his cigarette before continuing his anti-Bush rant. "I get physically sick when I see his face on TV."

Are things any easier these days? Does he find life bitter or sweet? "It's never really been one or the other for me. It's both. I became a serious recluse in my mountain house. For a long time I thought everyone had forgotten about the band." A slow, awkward smile. "Touring sure is helping. It's been great to hear people singing along to old songs. I didn't expect people to care any more." So can he afford to pay the rent now? "No. But I'm hoping someday soon."

- Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain is out now on Parlophone.