

# R.I.P Mark Linkous

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## Music editor Tim Noakes recalls an interview with the late singer of Sparklehorse, who died on Saturday

- Text by [Tim Noakes](#)

Ten months ago I did a story for Dazed on *Dark Night of the Soul*, the noir audiovisual album created by Danger Mouse, David Lynch and Sparklehorse. Out of the trio, Mark Linkous, the man behind [Sparklehorse](#), was the least known to me. I had heard the stories of his near fatal overdose on the 1996 Radiohead European tour, and of course was familiar with songs like “Someday I Will Treat You Good”, “Heart of Darkness” and “Don’t Take My Sunshine Away” but in comparison to Lynch and DM, he was very much an enigma. After all, this was a man who shunned the spotlight, rarely gave interviews, wore a horse’s head on stage and recorded surreal alternative rock music out in the Virginian countryside, on his own.

On the day of our interview he cancelled on me. Or rather overslept because it was his day off. When I did get him on the phone the following day I found a sweet, laid back, Southern gent on the other end of the line, who was quick to apologise for missing the first interview – not typical rock star behaviour. For an hour Mark talked about *Dark Night of the Soul*, how working with Danger Mouse had brought him out of a creative rut, his love of Twin Peaks and hip hop, and also what a pleasure it had been to record with heroes like Lynch and Iggy Pop. He called the sessions “a happy time” in his life, and appeared to have used the project’s dark subject matter as a cathartic counter balance for his own personal demons. He had a voice and easy manner I immediately warmed to, trusted and wanted to get to know better.

Sadly, that conversation was destined to be our first and last, as on Saturday March 6th 2010, Mark committed suicide, just days after *Dark Night of the Soul* was finally given the go ahead for a physical CD release. A few hours after hearing the news, I listened to our interview again and thought that it would be a fitting tribute to publish a longer edit than the version that made it into print.

So here it is – Mark Linkous talking straight from the Horse’s mouth about *Dark Night of the Soul*, one last time. Our thoughts, prayers and love go out to all of his family and friends. Rest in peace, Mark.

**Dazed Digital:** What drew you both to create this multi layered conceptual project?

**Mark Linkous:** Brian (Burton, Danger Mouse) and me knew that we had more in us that we wanted to do more work together. I like everything Brian does, but the first thing I heard was *The Grey Album*, and I was in a slump for long time, not being able to write much, which was why *Dreams For Light Years* took so long. I started listening to new CDs to inspire me. I saw the name Danger Mouse and liked the name and thought it was some band from North Carolina or something. So I finally played it without knowing what it was and was so excited about what I heard because I’m a

huge Beatles fan and I love Jay Z as well. I love the music in hip-hop songs, it's the most cutting edge, and cool sounds you'll ever hear if you really break it down.

**DD:** This project has surreal twists – did you want to continue to confound people's expectations?

**Mark Linkous:** Lyrically? I guess I don't really consider it as surreal. I just consider it all as imagery, whether it's aurally or ocular, it's all... what am I trying to say... it's not meant to be surreal or confounding in any way, it's just meant to be working on all these different levels, something that's never been done before. One of the things I really wanted to do with Brian was meld... I'm sure he's going to hate me talking about the Grey Album so much... but I really wanted to meld pop with hip-hop in some way.

**DD:** What was it like working with someone like Iggy?

**Mark Linkous:** I couldn't believe it when I heard his voice on the track. It's still hard to believe some of this stuff actually happened. After having such a hard time for quite a while writing and doing music, it's done a lot for me to work with Brian and friends. Working with David Lynch, another total hero of mine, I still can't believe that actually happened.

**DD:** What is it about Lynch that inspires you?

**Mark Linkous:** The stream of consciousness thing – how to perceive music in so many different ways. There's this theory about music, that the quiet parts are just as important as the musical parts, I really applied that to my music and that came from the influence of David Lynch's films – some of the quiet parts would be foreboding but in another context they could be beautiful. The music would compliment that dark part, you know?

**DD:** Is Dark Night of the Soul all about a nightmare?

**Mark Linkous:** Personally it's been a good dream, because working with your heroes makes you feel great. It's no different really to what David does when he goes to different countries to teach transcendental meditation to kids in schools who can't speak English in an attempt to reduce the crime rate. In his life, he's not a guy who lives in a surreal world with flashing red lights, velvet curtains and midgets talking backwards, he seems like a pretty active guy who enjoys life. It was a good thing for all of us. I don't know if we all look to the darkness to stop our heads from exploding or what...

**DD:** You've obviously had some real dark moments in your life; did you see this as a way of addressing some things that had happened in your past?

**Mark Linkous:** Well I don't think it's going to change my life in a drastic way, I'm just glad I've been involved in this thing while I'm still here on earth.

**DD:** Did it transform you as a musician?

**Mark Linkous:** Things that aren't very interesting to read I assume, but I liked the way people would phrase a line or something, to see how far we could push the music to be interesting. I've been working alone for a long time. I'm my own engineer. It's really hard to make records that really have elements that I want in them just because of the constraints I have. I don't have any interns or engineers so if I wanted the glockenspiel to sound like there's ants following it across the track panning then I'm

the one who has to do that. It's not that easy, and it doesn't happen quickly as I use quite antiquated equipment. I learn something new all the time.

**DD:** How did the lyrics come about – did you all trade bleak nightmares?

**Mark Linkous:** No one was given any direction whatsoever for the songs or the lyrical content. It was never discussed that it would be character or narrative driven, or that it would be about darkness and pain. That was never discussed or intended really. I don't know why it came out like that (laughs).

**DD:** Was this a cathartic way of clearing your ego?

**Mark Linkous:** I really enjoyed just playing guitar and writing songs, chord structures and stuff and not having to sing. I was so relieved when I told Brian I didn't want to sing.

**DD:** How did he take that news?

**Mark Linkous:** He was into it, he said he'd like me to sing one and I did, and that's about it. I've forgotten what the question was.... it was just a relief not to be in the forefront trying to sing because I can't really sing in the first place (laughs). It freaked me out at times. Doing a lot of it in California where Brian is lucky enough, well he's earned it, to have engineers and people to help so it wasn't just him and me in a room. Even the mixing process wasn't so laborious because one of the fellows who engineered it knew the music so well would get it mixed up for us and we would just tweak it for a day. I usually spend four or five days mixing a song of mine.

**DD:** How did working with other people in the studio affect you?

**Mark Linkous:** It was more spontaneous, he would put an organ part down and then if I had a guitar part in mind he would just say "Put it down" and it went on like that, it wasn't any hassle. I didn't have to drag the synth out of the corner and see if it still worked like I would if it was at my place. It was great to be relaxed about the whole thing, and not being under my console that was made in 1969 with red hot solder dripping on my face, I could just listen and play music and concentrate on nothing else. There was nothing to technically distract me at all.

**DD:** If it was so easy and you were recording in sunny LA surely it should have been a fun record? (laughs)

**Mark Linkous:** I didn't know how that happened! I was enjoying myself, it was something that I wasn't used, a different world. It was very pleasant. All I could think about was music. It just seemed like a happy time in my life. I didn't get into my brain too much because I didn't have time to like I usually do when I make music in solitary situations.

**DD:** Is it important to get away from your own head to make music like this?

**Mark Linkous:** Yeah. If I had done it in my studio or even in the South it would have been a lot different. Not that I have a love affair with Los Angeles, I lived there for a couple of years but moved back to the South. I don't know what else to say really.

**DD:** In a traditional sense the Dark Night of the Soul is a metaphor for loneliness and desolation. How have you experienced that since becoming a performer?

**Mark Linkous:** I don't produce much material because I do have problems with the darkness in my head that can debilitate me, that's why I'm much more productive

around other people I would say. Everybody has their little devils. Maybe we all felt it was a chance to bring out some of the darker aspects of our lives and express them.

**DD:** Are you and David Lynch kindred spirits?

**Mark Linkous:** I don't think I could be so pretentious to compare myself to him. I don't understand every scene in his movies but I love everything he does, so I guess we're kindred spirits in that way.

**DD:** Will this album be a downer for anyone?

**Mark Linkous:** The mood changed throughout the songs. Some of it is very hopeful. A song like "Jaykub" is about the people who don't get to stand on stage in front of 300 people or 10,000 people and they never will. They'll be dishwashers, the guys who drive trucks back and forth. That song is a dichotomy. You recognise that those people are out there and you love em for it. You don't love that they have to wash dishes for a living, you hope that things could be better for them, and maybe inside their heads they dream that they're on a stage in front of many people.

**DD:** Being one of those people that actually get to be on the stage, would you want to trade places with someone like Jaykub?

**Mark Linkous:** I don't know. On my last album I was having such a hard time making it that a lot of the songs came out to be hopeful songs, like "Mountains". My music isn't all depressing, most of it is about hope. That's what I wanted to do with my last record, I wanted to write hopeful songs because I didn't know if I was going to make another record again, so I thought I'd at least try and cheer some people up.

**DD:** So personally, do you see this as all therapeutic?

**Mark Linkous:** Oh yeah. It's something that will be out there forever and no one can take it away. I've collaborated with two great people that I have such admiration for and am friends with, and I hope it will always be that way. It will always be a gift; the whole thing was a beautiful gift for me.

**DD:** Some people think it's going to be called either Sparklemouse or Dangerhorse. Obviously it's not, but which do you prefer?

**Mark Linkous:** Dangerhorse. I hated Sparklemouse. Brian liked it but I didn't. I think he was just trying me nice. It sounds like a brightly lit British children's television show.

**DD:** Why is he attracted to working with people who name themselves after animals?

**Mark Linkous:** I don't know. Maybe it's the same anonymity thing that I have. I got away with refusing to show my actual face in any of the ads for this, I just wore my horse head.

**DD:** I've got one more question Mark. Would you advise people to listen to this album before they go to sleep or will it give them nightmares?

**Mark Linkous:** *(laughs)* Oh.... I think both really. I think some of em I really like to listen to in the daytime, but I guess on the whole it's probably best absorbed late in the evening hours. Not that I wish to give people nightmares, but sometimes they can be good. Sometimes you wake up and you realise it was just a nightmare.