

SOME SWEET MUSIC Mark Linkous/Sparklehorse

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We say farewell to the North Carolina musician, who passed away this weekend.

BY JOHN SCHACHT

Ed. note: [With Mark Linkous' suicide](#) on March 6, the music world lost another amazingly gifted artist; as with [Vic Chesnutt's December passing](#), that loss seems a tragic waste. It's no secret, however, that Linkous had struggled with depression for much of his adult life, and his family released a statement that said, simply, "It is with great sadness that we share the news that our dear friend and family member, Mark Linkous, took his own life today. We are thankful for his time with us and will hold him forever in our hearts. May his journey be peaceful, happy and free. There's a heaven and there's a star for you."

At the time of his death, Linkous had reportedly almost finished a new album for the Anti- label, and [just this past week it was announced](#) that the Danger Mouse-Sparklehorse collaboration Dark Night of the Soul would finally see release following the resolution of a dispute with EMI. So let the following story stand as our tribute to Linkous - it was originally published a little over a year ago [by Carolina music magazine Shuffle](#), and Shuffle editor John Schacht (also a BLURT contributor) has graciously allowed us to reprint it, below.

Reflecting on his encounter with Linkous, Schacht observed, "I liked his [sense of] humor - nice guy, very damaged, though. When I hung up the

phone the last time, he was walking into a therapist's in Asheville, and [I sensed] I'd never speak to him again. You could feel the weight of his depression."

Years ago, when Sparklehorse was just a foal in Mark Linkous' imagination, he sometimes turned to folk art to help make ends meet. "I'd make whirligigs out of wood and old pieces of tin," he says almost sheepishly. Then he'd take a sawed-off shotgun to them and Sharpie the remains with random data -- "the date it was shot and the wind-speed and the temperature" -- before selling his doo-dads to "snooty people" who thought they were buying collectible folk art. "Instead, it was just some dumbass with a shotgun and a hammer."

This is the point on the page where you'd expect to see the analogy made that Linkous' music is similarly constructed from random bits of musical detritus that's been shot gunned and hammered into quixotic sonic shapes. But not here, and not this time, because there's not much left to chance in the carefully crafted art of Sparklehorse music.

Loyalists - including some rather prominent musicians - will swear by it: There's just something about the blend of fuzzy rockers and summer-haze twang, meandering guitars and tape-looped cicadas, wheezing pump organs and swirly synths, bruised vocals and haunted-farm vignettes, that makes Linkous' scattered releases treasured items.

The former Virginian, who's lived secluded the last five years in the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina, is the kind of musician who finds other musicians practically campaigning to be on his records. Previous Sparklehorse record guest-spots have included the likes of Tom Waits, PJ Harvey, Nina Persson and Vic Chesnutt, and Linkous has been invited to tour or record with Radiohead, the Flaming Lips, Portishead, Christian Fennesz, David Lowery, and, on 2006's *Dreamt for Light Years In the Belly of A Mountain*, with Brian Burton, a.k.a. Danger Mouse of Gnarls Barkley fame.

The appeal? Linkous forges his music in the crucible between sadness and wonder, destruction and renewal, and seems closer than most to the effects of the process. Those polarities mirror the author's own emotional tenor, but it's also culled from the natural world that Linkous, his wife Teresa, and their menagerie of pets and farm animals encounter in the woodlands surrounding their mountain home. Through Four Elements-metaphor and zoomorphic imagery, Linkous creates a fantastical tableau where decay and rebirth haunt the same space where the spirits of old horses roam and crows have "old souls," June bugs are "gods" and fireflies are "dying stars," and we're all "born to return back to clay."

Tuning in to those often stygian frequencies for inspiration can exact a steep emotional toll. But unlike the creativity-killing depression and addiction that resulted in five years of songwriting silence between 2001's *It's A Wonderful Life* and *Dreamt for Light Years...*, Linkous has kept busy since his last release. In addition to his own recent trio-tour in Europe he just wrapped a summer Euro-jaunt with Daniel Johnston, and was joined in Johnston's backing band by Scout Niblett, Yo La Tengo's James McNew, Norman Blake of Teenage Fanclub, and Jad Fair of Half-Japanese. (Linkous produced Johnson's 2003 disc, *Fear Yourself*, and curated a 2004 tribute to the lo-fi hero, *The Late Great Daniel Johnston: Discovered Covered.*)

Linkous is also writing and arranging material for the next Sparklehorse record. He calls the new songs "Buddy Holly-like" with "simpler chord progressions and lots of cool noises," and has compared them elsewhere to "suicide probes that send back as much information as they can before crashing into the sun." Unlike his last two releases, this time Linkous is trying to streamline rather than obsess over the dozens of snippet-filled micro-cassette tapes that he collects in the process of songwriting.

"I always thought that I was just a conduit, that something was coming through me and I was making music out of it," he says in his hushed Virginia drawl. "It seems like that got harder and harder to do, so I'm trying to do that again by simplifying things. The songs are not quite as clever, and I'm not laboring forever over every line, every lyric."

He's also producing twangy songwriter and Macon County neighbor Angela Martin to "keep my studio chops up," he says, adding Waits-like "*Bone Machine* twists" to the singer's clever narratives. And his much-anticipated collaboration with Danger Mouse - tentatively titled *Dangerhorse* - is finally getting mixed for a 2009 release. The track-list includes guest spots from the Flaming Lips, Super Furry Animals' Gruff Rhys, the Cardigans' Persson, and ex-Granddaddy guru Jason Lytle, among a host of others. Also in the can is a joint effort with laptop wizard Fennesz for the *In the Fishtank* series -- though Konkurrent, the Dutch label that's recorded and released the previous 14 imaginative pairings, hasn't released one in over two years after typically dropping two a year.

Linkous' music may inspire, but his release-luck hasn't: after his seminal 1995 debut, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, won him his cult following, 1998's *Good Morning Spider* chronicled a London hotel room overdose-and-collapse that briefly stopped his heart and left him in a wheelchair for six months (he still wears leg braces today). *It's a Wonderful Life* was released a week before Sept. 11, 2001, and essentially died on the vine despite all the heavyweight guests and critical accolades; one week after "*Dreamt for Light Years...*" came out, the EMI merger begat a Night of the Long Knives bloodletting, and any Capitol/Parlophone/Astralwerks artist that didn't sell at least 500,000 records, Linkous says he was told, was dropped "no questions asked."

"The last couple of albums," he sighs, "have been sort of cursed."

Still, sale numbers don't reflect his records' impact (Authors' note: In a decade of interviewing musicians, few peer-artists have invoked more geeky-fan-like reverence when their name comes up). Much of the credit for the Sparklehorse sound goes to Linkous' fascination with vintage gear and audio. But his isn't a collector's dilettantism; like any audio hound, it's all about sound. When he visited the Capitol Records building in Los Angeles, Linkous was disappointed his tour didn't include the fabled subterranean echo chambers Les Paul built beneath the parking lot, where early Beatles' recordings deemed sonically unsuited for the U.S. market went for equalization and sound-brightening.

Linkous seems mildly embarrassed by the geeky nature of gear-talk, and concedes he isn't mechanically inclined at all. Yet he has fallen victim to the siren-like satisfaction of trying to build shit yourself. While in Virginia, the self-confessed "carpentry retard" once tried to build garage doors for the 150-year-old farmhouse he lived in, but miscalculated the actual width and length of the wood, leaving a two-foot-wide gap when he shut the doors he'd slaved over. "Two-by-fours and one-by-sixes aren't two-by-four and one-by-six at all, and I didn't know that," he laughs. "I mean, where the fuck is the Bureau of Weights and Measures?"

Maybe it's his admiration for those who are craftsmen that draws him magnet-like to any rare or odd-ball instrument that might yield new and fantastic sounds. The stories behind how he acquired them, too, seem to infuse the instruments' personalities: haunting regional thrift stores and coming away with a \$100 church organ or a rare Japanese electric accordion; buying a classic old guitar in a Fuddruckers parking lot from some sketchy dude; calling in to rural AM-radio party lines seeking - and typically finding -- vintage fare for sale (see the sidebar for more details). His home studio, Static King, is practically a repository for the stuff, from the 60s' Fleckinger console through all manner of jerry-rigged components, banks of keyboards, and the requisite quiver of acoustic and electric stringed instruments.

Yet Linkous is just as likely to insist that "sometimes you don't need any of that shit" and can accomplish what you have to "with just a four-track." And that gets to the heart of Linkous' skill set anyway; more than this instrumental coterie, it's the care and thought that goes into his musical alchemy -- knowing when to let a melody breathe on its own, or when to shotgun the bejesus out of it with distortion, feedback or synth debris -- that defines Sparklehorse music. As long as that sonic aesthetic is intact and his instincts remain true, Linkous will likely never lack for admirers.