

Mark Linkous obituary

Singer-songwriter who made haunting music under the name Sparklehorse

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Linkous was inspired by the music of Tom Waits and later collaborated with him. Photograph: Charles Langella/Corbis Outline

The American singer-songwriter Mark Linkous, who has killed himself aged 47, worked with the Flaming Lips, Daniel Johnston and [Danger Mouse](#), but is best known for the spectral country-folk music he recorded as [Sparklehorse](#). His songs were infused with a strong sense of intimacy and place, chronicling what Linkous called "the dangerous, spooky part of the south".

Linkous was born into a coalmining family in Arlington, Virginia. His musical epiphany came through hearing the Animals' *House of the Rising Sun*, a sensation he described as "louder than a dirt bike". In his youth, he began absorbing the regional country sounds of George Jones and the Stanley Brothers, before falling in love with punk acts such as the Sex Pistols and the Damned.

By the time he was 12, his parents had divorced. He attended Albemarle high school, in Charlottesville, and became, by his own admission, a "juvenile delinquent". In his late teens, Linkous and his band, the Dancing Hoods, lit out for New York and Los Angeles, but after two unsuccessful albums – *12 Jealous Roses* (1986) and *Hallelujah Anyway* (1988) – he returned, disillusioned, to Richmond, Virginia.

Hearing [Tom Waits](#)'s album *Swordfishtrombones* inspired him to start afresh. Linkous formed the Johnson Family, a local band that played only "300-year-old Irish songs" and began fashioning new tracks with the same purity of spirit as those old-time tunes. The band morphed into Salt Chunk Mary, although nothing was ever released on record. Sparklehorse was formed on the same guiding principles in early 1995, with Linkous supported by a mutating cast of musicians.

That year's *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* was a bewitching debut album. Recorded in the dead of night, Linkous's voice was often little more than a whisper, the music creaking with electric guitars, ambient noise and odd bursts of static. Songs such as *Homecoming Queen* and *Spirit Ditch*, the second of which sampled an answerphone message from his mother, were as unpredictable as they were fragile. At other times (*Rainmaker*, *Hammering the Cramps*), the band rocked out like antsy old punks. The album didn't sell, but its impact was felt by critics and musicians alike.

Radiohead promptly took Sparklehorse on tour. Then, one night in 1996, in a London hotel room, Linkous overdosed on Valium and antidepressants. Fourteen hours passed before he was found unconscious, his legs pinned beneath him so that he had lost circulation. When paramedics tried to straighten his limbs, he had a heart attack. Linkous spent six months in a wheelchair, undergoing seven operations to save his legs.

"For a while there," he told Rolling Stone magazine later, "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."

Linkous was troubled by depression for most of his life. The album *Good Morning Spider* (1998), which seemed moored between a dreaming and waking state, was generally seen as a commentary on his near-death experience, yet he claimed that most of it was written before the incident. There were fractured songs about sparrows, "painbirds" and junebugs; fabulous meditations on the beauty and impermanence of life. *Ghost of His Smile* was a typical example: "Dogs will wag their tails / And birds will sing / Hell, it's a hard world for little things." The third Sparklehorse album, *It's a Wonderful Life* (2001), was another haunted affair, this time featuring Waits and PJ Harvey.

Linkous produced *Fear Yourself*, the 2003 album by another anguished singer-songwriter, Daniel Johnston, and oversaw an album of Johnston covers the following year. One of these songs, *Like a Monkey in the Zoo*, was recorded by Linkous's good friend [Vic Chesnutt](#), who killed himself last year.

Sparklehorse's next album, *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain* (2006), with Waits on piano, was produced by Brian Burton, aka Danger Mouse. This led to a further collaboration between Linkous and Danger Mouse. *Dark Night of the Soul* was a project featuring Iggy Pop, Gruff Rhys, Chesnutt and others. The resulting CD and book, with photographs taken by the film director David Lynch, will be released this summer. Linkous described those sessions as a "happy time", adding: "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."

Linkous's manager, Shelby Meade, has confirmed that Linkous had been working on a new album. He is survived by his wife, Teresa (they married in 1991); his brothers Matt, Paul and Daniel; his mother, Gloria, and his father, Frederick.

- Frederick Mark Linkous, singer-songwriter, born 9 September 1962; died 6 March 2010