

Sparklehorse took the ugly and made it beautiful

The genius of Mark Linkous, who died tragically on Saturday, was to transform the twisted and cruel into the tender and transcendent



Sick of goodbyes ... Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse. Photograph: Charles Langella/Corbis

My introduction to [Sparklehorse](#) was an ugly and brutal experience. Detuned guitars hammering away relentlessly, as unforgiving as a smithy's forge, with a distorted vocal over the top. I might never have listened again had I not read an interview with Mark Linkous, in which he revealed the inspiration for the song: finding an injured bird and nursing it back to health. Never one for the literal, the lyrics to [Hammering the Cramps](#) run: "Hey little dog, can you fly? Hammering the cramps ..."

It was heartbreaking on Sunday morning to hear that Linkous had [taken his own life](#). Any sudden death comes as a shock, but as with Elliott Smith or Kurt Cobain, the news can't be totally unexpected for Sparklehorse fans. Linkous had already been declared technically dead once before in 1996, after an overdose of valium and anti-depressants while on tour with Radiohead.

Linkous channelled whatever optimism he could muster after his near-death experience into the second Sparklehorse album, 1998's *Good Morning Spider*. Animals and escaping into nature are recurring themes in Linkous's lyrics. "The owls have been talking to me," he sang on the shimmering *Spirit Ditch*. Elsewhere, Linkous transformed a biblical passage from Luke 12:6 over glockenspiel: "Every hair on your head is counted/You are worth hundreds of sparrows."

Whether using squealing grunge guitars ([Pig](#)) or sumptuous pedal steel ([Heart of Darkness](#)), Linkous, like Daniel Johnston, always came across as a naif. It confirmed a cruel irony: those who see the most beauty in this world are often the least equipped to handle it.

Listening again to *Hammering the Cramps*, I could no longer detect the punishing noises that once repelled me. Certainly it sounds damaged, but the melody is nothing but pretty and the pounding guitars sound like a determination to keep going, to keep something alive. This was the genius of Mark Linkous: he took the cruel, the twisted, the ugly and made them beautiful. Sadly, it was a beauty he wasn't always able to see for himself.