

Mark Linkous wrote gorgeous songs but could never find the beauty in life

By Andrew Dansby | March 14, 2010



In his songs, Sparklehorse frontman Mark Linkous wrote lyrics that indicated he wanted to beat his depression. However, he took his own life on March 6. Photo: Timothy Saccenti Photography :, Astralwerks / HC

The first time I saw Mark Linkous, his band, Sparklehorse, was opening for either Son Volt or Wilco at a New York venue in 1995 or 1996, a show that resulted in my immediate purchase of *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, the first Sparklehorse record.

A few months later he nearly died from mixing liquids and chemicals that didn't react well together.

I got to talk to Linkous several times during the years. He was clearly troubled and hurting, but he often beat it back with humor.

Looking at the floor or toward a far corner of the room, he told stories about digging around garbage dumps for discarded electronics or buying a Harmony Rocket guitar from a guy in a parking lot of Fuddrucker's or being locked in his North Carolina studio because a bear wouldn't remove itself from the path between the studio's door and Linkous' truck. It turns out he shouldn't have left garbage in the bed of the truck.

Once I mentioned that I tracked down an album by the Dancing Hoods, Linkous' first band. "Please (expletive) destroy that," he said politely. He told me about the time, years before, when he had sat in his car thinking about walking into the ocean without any intention of stopping because his time in that band had been so unfulfilling.

Gavin Bryars' *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me*, a moving composition that includes a Tom Waits vocal in its final movement, made him reconsider. He left Los Angeles and returned to Virginia and then North Carolina, the area from which he came.

Thus Sparklehorse, one of my favorite bands, was born. Linkous' music effortlessly shifted from dreamy to twitchy, quiet to abrasive. It was at times very Southern, other times spacey. It was defiantly experimental at a time when "alternative" was commercial. I was drawn to his affinity for fusing old and new, making music that had some modern digital elements alongside parts played on vintage gear and found items.

The music also had a wonderful beautiful/ugly dynamic. He'd deface some of his most fragile melodies and add a gentle break to some of his louder songs. My favorite album was *It's a Wonderful Life* released in 2001. It's an

album of haunting beauty and wide-eyed vision, quiet keyboards punctuated with lightning-bolt guitar chords and Linkous' voice, a feathery warble that always seemed like it would be incapable of flight, though it creaked and flew anyway.

Linkous knew the value of contrasts. "It's a sad and beautiful world," he sang, a line so simple and perfect it still makes the hair on my arm rise.

He shared an affinity for one of my favorite wimpy songs, Bread's *Everything I Own*.

Another one of his songs referenced a desire to be "a happy man." He clearly wasn't. After *Wonderful Life*, he fell into a funk. "I got in a bad hole depressionwise," he told me at the time. "I couldn't get out for three years. I lost interest in recording. I still liked writing my little songs, singing them alone. But that was the end of it. I lost interest in recording them. I thought people didn't care."

There was a long silence. I very nearly told him that I, for one, did. But having traded e-mails and books with the guy for a few years, it seemed like saying so would have been an insignificant gesture. I said something spineless like "You don't mean that do you?"

Whether he meant it or not, he felt it.

Linkous put a rifle to his chest and pulled the trigger on March 6. He was 47.

His death came not even three months after Vic Chesnutt, another of my favored songwriters, ended his life. Both spent years battling depression.

Many music acts in the 1960s were looking to feel something more vividly, and they did so chemically, sometimes with fatal results. Next generation guys like Linkous, Chesnutt, Elliott Smith and Kurt Cobain seemed to feel too much. They used many of the same chemicals, though for different reasons. And even though three of those four lives ended violently, the end is ultimately the same.

Linkous seems representative of a shift away from the extroverted rock-star ethos toward something smaller in commercial scale (except for Nirvana) and more creatively internalized. He certainly poured that feeling into his songs, which were sad, yet relatable.

It's sobering to think there won't be comeback tours for Linkous. Or a new set of gorgeous and melancholy songs that suggest — at least for a short time — that he'd worked through it.

andrew.dansby@chron.com