

Mark Linkous: Troubled singer and songwriter who recorded as Sparklehorse

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Hiding behind the name Sparklehorse, the American singer-songwriter Mark Linkous made affecting, beautiful, bewitching, fragile music, and was championed by Radiohead, with whom he toured, as well as P.J. Harvey and Tom Waits, who both guested on his 2001 album *It's A Wonderful Life*. The handful of haunting albums and EPs and the dozen singles he released between 1995 and 2009 only nudged the lower reaches of the charts, yet they established him as a cult artist in the vein of Mark Everett – aka Eels – and two other tragic figures of the US alternative scene, Vic Chesnutt and Elliott Smith, though his rockier, more visceral material like "Hammering The Cramps", "Someday I'll Treat You Good" and "Rainmaker" was reminiscent of Hüsker Dü or The Replacements.

In songs like the poignant "Sad & Beautiful World", the prophetic "Sick Of Goodbyes" – co-written with his friend David Lowery of the group Cracker, and first recorded by them in 1993 – or the melancholy "Saturday", and in the hesitant interviews he gave, Linkous did more than allude to the depression that plagued him throughout his life. In January 1996, while in London and suffering from jet-lag, he mixed Valium, anti-depressants and alcohol, and collapsed in his hotel bathroom. He spent 14 hours unconscious, with his legs bent under him. When paramedics attempted to straighten his limbs, he suffered a heart attack and was clinically dead for two minutes. He underwent seven operations on his legs and spent six months in a wheelchair but recovered enough to walk with difficulty and with the help of braces, and was put on morphine and painkillers for two years.

In the early 2000s he fell into another deep depression, though making *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain*, the fourth Sparklehorse album, provided some succour. "It just got really bad for three years. It was this vortex I couldn't climb out of," he said in 2007. "I think probably a little confidence is what helped, and that confidence was music. Just getting a song down, one at a time, that I felt was decent."

However, despite joking that he had found "a shrink who is smarter than me," Linkous remained a tortured soul. "I would judge everything by its state of decay, just be overwhelmed by those thoughts. I would be sitting, staring at my wood stove, thinking that in 200 years' time it was going to be rust. I would have my dog on my lap, thinking he was going to die someday." Last Saturday, in a back alley in Knoxville, Tennessee, he fired a single bullet from a rifle into his heart.

One of four brothers, he was born in Arlington, Virginia in 1962. He came from a coal-mining family and often claimed music-making offered "a great way to stay out of the mines." His parents divorced when he was 13, and he became such a troublemaker that he was sent to live with his paternal grandparents while attending high school in Charlottesville. He started a lifelong obsession with motorbikes and also experimented with drugs. In the 1980s he played guitar and sang in several punk bands and moved to New York, where he formed the Dancing Hoods. They made two albums and scored a college radio hit with "Baby's Got Rockets", but broke up after relocating to Los Angeles in 1989.

By then, Linkous had become addicted to heroin and he returned to Richmond, Virginia, to try to kick his habit and deal with the failure of his group. He also discovered Tom Waits and began rethinking his whole approach to music. "I guess I tried to make records that sound as interesting as Swordfishtrombones and Rain Dogs," he later reflected. "That's what I've wanted to do from the

beginning, make pop-based records that are as interesting as his blues-based records. That period was about abandoning a lot of things and just starting from scratch and learning how to make art out of pain or clay."

Serendipity played a part in his reinvention. While he toured with Cracker, for whom Linkous had roadied, Lowery left his eight-track studio at Linkous's home. Linkous spent the next two years exploring the possibilities of do-it-yourself recording, often late into the night. To avoid disturbing his wife's sleep, he sang in a whisper, thus adding to the eerie atmosphere already created by lyrics heavy with Southern gothic imagery. Many of these recordings appeared on the first Sparklehorse album, the impossibly-titled *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* (1995), apparently inspired by a dream about a US Civil War submersible. The critical acclaim it received and the patronage of Radiohead brought Linkous to the UK, where his collapse made headlines in every music magazine.

"I felt like a victim for a while," he told *The Independent* in 1996. "But then the wall opposite my hospital bed became completely covered with cards and letters from fans, rock stars. It's overwhelming, the power of love. It kept me alive. I hadn't realised how much my album had touched people."

Partly informed by his near-death experience and including "Saint Mary", a tribute to the hospital staff who looked after him in London, *Good Morning Spider*, the second Sparklehorse album, again mostly recorded by Linkous on his own, made the UK Top 30 in 1998. For *It's A Wonderful Life*, he teamed up with the *Flaming Lips* producer David Fridmann and P.J. Harvey's right-hand man John Parish. He also drew Adrian Utley of *Portishead* and Joan Wasser – better known as *Joan As Policewoman* – into his orbit.

According to Linkous, the title track could be taken literally or ironically. "I got fed up with people in America thinking that my music is morose and depressing and all that," he said at the time. "That song is like a 'fuck you' to journalists, or people who are not smart enough to see what it is. But in the end, it was more about how everyday, you should pick up something, no matter how minuscule or microscopic it is, and when you go to bed, you can say I was glad that I was alive to see that. That's really what it's about."

Linkous loved animals and vintage instruments, wilfully used vinyl scratches and white noise on his recordings, and called the studio set-up he had at his home in Hayesville, North Carolina, *Static King*. He was a mercurial talent, held in high regard by fellow musicians, and was invited to participate in the 2001 *Meltdown* festival on London's South Bank curated by Robert Wyatt. The same year, he produced the debut release by *A Camp*, the side-project by the *Cardigans* singer Nina Persson, and in 2003 he oversaw the making of the *Fear Yourself* album by the outsider artist Daniel Johnston.

For the 2006 album *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain*, Fridmann returned, along with Brian Burton – aka *Danger Mouse*, of *Gnarls Barkley* fame. Linkous and *Danger Mouse* then embarked on a project entitled *Dark Night Of The Soul*, which featured contributions from *The Flaming Lips*, *Iggy Pop*, *Suzanne Vega*, *Chesnutt*, *Persson* and others. It resulted in the publication of a limited-edition coffee-table book of photos by the film-maker *David Lynch*; the music was leaked online, though it is now due for a worldwide release. Before taking his own life, Linkous had completed several tracks for a new *Sparklehorse* album.

Pierre Perrone

Mark Linkous, singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and producer: born Arlington, Virginia 9 September 1962; married; died Knoxville, Tennessee 6 March 2010.