

# Why Mark Linkous Was A Genius

By Luke Lewis

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"It's a sad and beautiful world," sang Mark Linkous on the penultimate track of the debut Sparklehorse album, 'Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot'.

In the light of his [suicide](#) at the weekend, we have to assume the sadness, for him, ultimately outweighed the beauty - but that phrase still stands as a fitting epitaph, even if it doesn't quite tell the whole story about this prodigiously gifted purveyor of cracked, desolate Americana.

The music he leaves behind is certainly not short of beauty - lyrically, Linkous had a Romantic poet's eye for the evanescent lushness of the natural world (horses, cows, sparrows, [tears on fresh fruit](#)).

But that beauty was always undercut with a mischievous instinct for the absurd and surreal that was part David Lynch ("*Circus people with hairy little hands*" - 'Piano Fire'), and part Captain Beefheart (in 'Spirit Ditch' he talks, bizarrely, of seeking refuge in a slide trombone).

Far from rejoicing in beauty, Linkous' unique gift as a songwriter was to deliberately *sabotage* the perfection of his own creations. On much of the first two Sparklehorse albums, his sweet, Neil Young-esque voice is deliberately swathed in scabrous distortion.

On 'Good Morning Spider', in particular, some of Linkous' prettiest melodies are beaten up and corroded by endless dissonant interruptions - radio static, voicemail messages, cacophonous feedback. Like a painter angrily slashing a pure canvas, Linkous' instinct was to destroy.

The most striking example of this? His most anthemic and potentially commercial song, 'Happy Man', was also his most nakedly emotional (refrain: "*All I want is to be a happy man*").

But instead of polishing it into a radio hit - which it easily could have been - for the album version, as if embarrassed by his own directness, Linkous roughed the song up until the first half was barely audible, before rising majestically into clarity on the second chorus - a phenomenally courageous feat of production.

It's easy to see why Thom Yorke was a fan (he invited Sparklehorse to support Radiohead on the 'OK Computer' tour, and the pair collaborated on a cover of Pink Floyd's '[Wish You Were Here](#)' in 1998). The two artists share the same sense of white-noise/interference as both a mental state and a sort of emblematic modern disease.

But if 'beauty' is an inadequate word to describe Linkous' lyrical universe, is 'sadness' any better? Not really. I'd argue that what Linkous articulated was something far uglier and knottier. He is one of music's greatest ever poets of severe, clinical depression - the vicious kind, the kind that leaves sufferers unable to think, or move, or speak.

Sadness, after all, can be picturesque, romantic, fuzzy round the edges. Linkous' lyrics, on the other hand, were consumed with lacerating rage (think of ['Pig'](#), with its bitterly sarcastic assertion, "*I wanna be a stupid and shallow motherfucker now*").

Neither was this mere self-obsession. Linkous felt other people's pain, too, as on ['Maria's Little Elbows'](#), where - paraphrasing The Velvet Underground's 'Candy Says' - he sympathises with a female friend who's "really come to hate [her] body, and all the things it requires in this world."

None of which we'd be hymning right now if it wasn't for the fact that Linkous also wrote some astonishing, viscerally powerful tunes - chief among them 1995's 'Someday I Will Treat You Good', the closest thing Linkous ever came to a hit.

And it wasn't particularly close, either: it peaked at Number 58 in the UK. But that was Linkous' career all over: perennially, heart-breakingly under-appreciated. Owing to a legal dispute, his most recent effort - 'Dark Night Of The Soul', a collaboration with Danger Mouse - never even got released.

It's a sad and beautiful world indeed - and without Linkous in it, just that bit sadder.