



It's a Sad and Beautiful World: Remembering Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse

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By **Mehan Jayasuriya**

To be honest, Mark Linkous, the singer-songwriter better known as Sparklehorse, always seemed a bit too delicate for this world. And yet, when word spread of his death—an apparent suicide—around midnight on Sunday, fans were understandably shocked. In recent years, it seemed like the troubled, reclusive songwriter had finally turned a corner in his life. He had cleaned up, built his own studio and had entered a period of prolific collaboration. He had even embarked on a brief tour in 2007, something he tended to avoid during previous years. As with Elliott Smith, Linkous' death came unexpectedly and as such, will likely continue to puzzle critics and fans for years to come.

Linkous leaves behind a considerable, varied body of work, ranging from garage blues to wistful Americana to lo-fi indie-pop. His 1995 debut, the cumbersomely titled *Vivadiexsubmarinetransmissionplot*, still stands as perhaps the best point of entry into Linkous' world. An album of dusty folk ballads and fuzzed-out barnburners, it introduces the listener to the persistent themes that would come to define Linkous' career. Opening with a nod to *Richard III* ("A horse, a horse/My kingdom for a horse"), the album works its way through 16 tracks of surrealist imagery that evokes both the pastoral beauty and expansive loneliness of the American Southeast. Much like country icon Loretta Lynn, Linkous came from a long line of coal miners and seemed to understand that his sadness was both inherited from and inextricably bound to the land from which he came. The homecoming queens, widows and "gasoline horseys" that populate *Vivadiexsubmarinetransmissionplot* are inhabitants not just of rural Virginia, but of Linkous' internal landscape.

Today, *Vivadiexsubmarinetransmissionplot* stands as one of the greatest, most overlooked alternative country records of the 1990s. Upon its release, it was received warmly by both critics and college radio in the States. In the UK, the album received even more recognition, tapping into the British music industry's longstanding obsession with authentically rural American music. Linkous was able to parlay this success into a slot opening up for then rising stars Radiohead on their 1996 European tour.

This tour would likely have opened even more doors for Sparklehorse in Europe, had Linkous been able to follow through with it. While preparing for the tour, Linkous overdosed on a mix of valium, heroin, antidepressants and alcohol in a London hotel room. He lied unconscious on the bathroom floor with his legs pinned underneath his body for nearly 14 hours until he was found. When the attending paramedics lifted him up, the buildup of potassium in his body caused his heart to stop for several minutes until he was successfully resuscitated. Against all odds, Linkous recovered fully, though due to the series of painful surgeries that saved his legs, he was wheelchair bound for six months following the incident.

When Linkous emerged from the studio two years later, many were surprised to find that the album that he had written during his recovery, 1998's *Good Morning Spider*, was equal parts life affirming and sorrowful. The imagery here is far more fecund than in Linkous' previous work: pigs, trees, spiders, junebugs, sparrows, rabbits, stars, a lover's bosom, "warm, sweet bellies". Contemplating the big questions, Linkous is able to appreciate the beauty that surrounds him with a heightened awareness. Unsurprisingly, rebirth and renewal figure prominently here, as do meditations on God, the universe and the natural world. Of course, Linkous arrives at these themes through explorations of the everyday, a fact that is affectingly embodied in his cover of "Hey, Joe", written by friend and occasional collaborator Daniel Johnston. "There's a heaven and there's a star for you", Linkous sings reassuringly over gently strummed folk chords and the crackle of a dusty, old record.

At the turn of the century, Linkous embarked upon a series of collaborations that would continue to bear fruit for the remainder of his career. 2001's *It's a Wonderful Life* featured a number of prominent collaborators, including P.J. Harvey, Tom Waits, John Parish, the Cardigans' Nina Persson, Mercury Rev's Dave Fridmann and the late Vic Chesnutt. Here Linkous would continue to hone his songwriting chops, employing surrealist imagery of a near literary quality. Clocks drown, little, fat babies squirm, bodies sunburn, trees turn to soil and pianos erupt into flames. Musically, too, *It's a Wonderful Life* represents a massive step forward. While *Good Morning Spider* had introduced digital sounds to Sparklehorse's palette in a straightforward manner, *It's a Wonderful Life* incorporates these digital instruments seamlessly, while reasserting Linkous' analog roots. From the Beatles-esque Mellotron flutes that open "Gold Day" to the fuzzed-out guitars of "Piano Fire", *It's a Wonderful Life* is an album that's alive with lush, overdriven noise. And yet, its most notable sound might be a human voice—that of Polly Jean Harvey, whose rich, gossamer vocals serve as the perfect foil to Linkous' resigned, gravelly sigh on many of these tracks.

In the years following *It's a Wonderful Life's* release, Linkous lapsed back into depression. Unable to work, he retreated to his rural Virginia farm and did his best to shut out the world. Eventually, at the urging of friends and family, he moved away from the bad habits and bad company he had accumulated over the years, taking up residence in North Carolina's Smoky Mountains. There he built a home studio in a location that was even more remote than the coal mining town that he had grown up in. [As he told a WNYC interviewer in 2006](#), on at least one occasion, he was unable to leave his North Carolina home because a bear had taken up residence in the back of his pickup truck.

Despite the change of scenery, progress on a new album was slow going. It seems that Linkous' relentless perfectionism had finally caught up with him. As close friend and longtime collaborator Scott Minor [told Under the Radar in 2006](#), Linkous was producing a great deal of music but was unable to appreciate its worth. It took an external force, Brian Burton, better known as Danger Mouse and half of Gnarls Barkley, to provide an outside perspective, thereby motivating Linkous to complete the record.

Released, at last, in 2006, the appropriately titled *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain* stands as Sparklehorse's poppiest, most upbeat album. "Don't Take My Sunshine Away" employs sunny, Beach Boys-esque vocal harmonies, "Knives of Summertime" proceeds with a tumbling, jazzy gait and "Some Sweet Day" bubbles over with warm, inviting melodies. Despite the protestations of some critics, Burton's contributions here are largely unobtrusive, consisting of gurgling synths, programmed drum tracks and analog organs.

The last few years of Linkous' life found the songwriter working to fulfill his voracious appetite for collaboration. Though he had produced albums for other artists (most notably, Daniel Johnston and Nina Persson), had featured guest musicians on many of his albums and had engaged in a number of one-off collaborations (with Thom Yorke and the Flaming Lips, among others), he had yet to participate in an album-length collaboration. That all changed in 2009 with the release of two collaborative efforts: *Dark Night of the Soul*, a collaboration between Linkous, Burton, director David Lynch and ten other musicians and an *In the Fishtank* split with the influential electronic artist Fennesz. On both of these releases, Linkous demonstrated that his knack for songcraft hadn't diminished one bit during his years in the wilderness; the sonically adventurous split with Fennesz, in particular, stands as one of his strongest releases.

[According to Rolling Stone](#), Linkous had nearly completed a new album at the time of his death, though it remains to be seen whether or not the record will ever see release. One imagines that, if possible, Linkous' new label, ANTI-, will venture to release the record in some form, as it did with Elliott Smith's unfinished swan song, *From a Basement on the Hill*.

On a more personal note, I feel extremely privileged to have seen Sparklehorse twice during Linkous' 2007 tour—first in Baltimore and again at an Astralwerks showcase at South by Southwest (the previously unpublished photos that you see here were taken at the latter show). I had waited a long time to see Linkous perform live, having first fallen in love with his songcraft nearly a decade prior. Thankfully, the shows were worth the wait in every way imaginable. On both nights he was jovial, if laconic and seemed genuinely happy to be on the road again, playing his songs for an audience whose interest hadn't waned in the intervening years. Despite his reluctance to tour, live performance seemed to provide a form of therapy for Linkous, to say nothing of his audience.

Ultimately, those aspects of Linkous' personality that allowed him to write such poignant, sweet, emotionally resonant music may have proved to be his undoing. He seemed to be uniquely in touch with life's bountiful beauty and sadness, perhaps too much so for his own good. For those who lived with and loved his songs, he will be remembered as one of the most earnest, distinctive American songwriters of his generation. Truly, he will be missed.



A veteran of many a cold winter, Mehan was born in Montreal and reared in Southeastern Wisconsin. After four years spent earning a degree in Japanese literature at the University of Chicago, he spent a year living in Japan before finally landing in Washington D.C. A technology policy activist by day, Mehan spends his nights listening to, watching, photographing and writing about music. You can visit his personal website at <http://www.mehanjayasuriya.com>.

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