

Old music: Sparklehorse – St Mary

A hymn to the NHS from the most unlikely of sources: a descendant of Virginia coal miners and maker of dreamy Americana

Given the never-ending furore over government plans for the NHS, it's time to highlight what is surely the most beautiful – and perhaps the least likely – musical tribute to the UK's hospitals and the staff who work in them.

Sparklehorse were, in effect, just Mark Linkous, the descendent of several generations of Virginian coal miners who made five gorgeous, dreamy albums over about a decade and a half from the mid-1990s. I write in the past tense as he killed himself in March 2010, aged 47.

In 1996, while playing in London to promote Sparklehorse's debut album, the tongue-mangling Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot, Linkous took an apparently accidental overdose of tranquilisers in his hotel room. With the added effects of alcohol and anti-depressants he collapsed with his legs trapped beneath him. When he was found by a maid, 14 hours later, he had irreparable damage to the limbs, causing his heart to stop briefly as medics moved him.

St Mary, from Linkous's follow-up album, Good Morning Spider, takes its name from the central London hospital where he spent several weeks in a painkiller-induced fug, unsure whether he would ever walk again (he spent six months using a wheelchair).

Even by Linkous's standards the song is gloriously beautiful in its sleepy simplicity, comprising little more than acoustic guitar, piano, and brief, lulling strings, with his trademark half-whispered vocals. The song intersperses Linkous's hospital confinement with delirious dreams of home: "Blanket me, sweet nurse/ And keep me from burning/ I must get back to the woods, dear girls / I must get back to the woods."

Later in the song he sings what I take to be a retrospective appeal to the doctors who had saved his life: "In the bloody elevator going to the bright theatre now/ Come on boys/ Please let me taste the the clean air in my lungs/ And moss on my back."

If that doesn't convince Andrew Lansley nothing will.