

Bill Janovitz: Part Time Man of Rock



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Cover of the Week 73

I never had a chance to meet Mark Linkous, the musician behind the band Sparklehorse [who committed suicide late last week](#). But I have envied him. I envied his talent and vision in making a sort of music I dream about making. I envied him for having the sort of talent that attracts other heroes of mine like Tom Waits, into a collaboration.

While I used to wish I could seem more enigmatic and mysterious as an artist, as Mark seemed to me from the outside, I have never envied the sort of mental struggle that often accompanies the dark persona of the "true" artist. I know what depression is. I know it because I have had brushes with it. It runs in my family, as I am sure it does in many of yours. There is very little inspirational when one is in such moments.

I had a well-known singer/songwriter and the person's family at our house for dinner last night. This artist and I talked about Mark's death and it triggered the old conversation about the relationship between depression and art. We talked about friends and relatives dealing with similar issues. We fans have lost quite a few important artists

this year, like Vic Chesnutt (whose death prompted [this CoTW](#)). Too often, suicides like this are met perhaps with shock but maybe not surprise. In such cases, the particular artist's work probably displayed a heightened sense of urgency, as if the making of the art was necessary to the survival of the artist him/herself. It felt like the art was one of the few golden strands left binding the artist to the world. The art *needed* to be made.

For many fans, this sort of urgency adds a layer of authenticity that distinguishes the work of that artist over that of others. I don't feel that way. There are many seemingly well-balanced artists who are able to produce extremely moving and/or immediate works without any more apparent suffering than the average person. I have never felt that Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Tom Waits, or Lucinda Williams were about to off themselves. In fact, art that is all raw emotion is rarely artful, to me. I have seen plenty of unstable confessional singer/songwriters pouring out their guts on stage and repelled as often as not.

Troubled personalities are attracted to the arts because it is another means of expression. It is difficult to put emotional turmoil into words. Art is one way to do so. There are many depressed or otherwise mentally ill people who do not get the help they need. There are many who do not have the benefit of being able to express themselves artistically. We are not necessarily missing out on great works.

Yet there are many others out there who would not surprise us by making that choice. But a lack of surprise does not mean such an end is inevitable. And it does not mean the anguish is essential to creating. Indeed, it is often crippling, debilitating, and no good comes of it. Anguish may have been essential for particular art, though. For example, I can not imagine Skip Spence's *Oar* being made by a suburban 40-something real estate broker who was a one-time contender in the world of rock. Had that person not made the choice to pay the bills in a conventional way and instead maintained the track he/she was on against all common sense, then perhaps something akin to *Oar* could result. Personally, I am no longer ready to try.

Mark's death is truly a tragic loss. He created essential music. Vic was another tragic loss. The same choice by [the Mummies' Mark Horwood](#) is another extremely sad 2010 ending to a bright light, as is the loss of all our friends who have made this choice over the years.

Deaths start to pile up as we put on the years. Facebook seems to be as much a rolling obituary as anything else. Violent deaths -- murder, suicide, accidents -- rarely lose the power to shock. For a while, I was thinking of [the murder of my uncle in October](#) as something from which I could remove and box away the means of death in order to

be able to accept that, yes, a 63 year-old man died. So then I could accept the loss just on its own. And it did not have to be an overwhelming topic of conversation, for everyone deals with the loss of close relatives. Similarly, when friends chose to die, we could at least say that it was their choice. Now to move on and deal with the loss.

But then the conversations about my uncle continued. I am lucky enough to have life-time friends going back to elementary school, high school, and college. I have intensely deep newer friendships. They let me know through their questions and listening that this could never be simply a 63 year-old man passing away. Never mind that this was no ordinary 63 y.o., but one still extremely vital and young for his age. It is that in some senseless act, some numb kid stole our uncle/friend from us all. And now I realize that I might not ever get over that fact. I will eventually deal with loss. I am having more trouble with the means. I feel little or no vengeance. I just feel a deep and helpless sadness about how someone I loved was taken and how he spent his last breaths -- at the hand of someone not worthy of even standing at my uncle's stoop.

We should be shocked at violent deaths. We should be angry and sad and deeply troubled when someone is killed. And we should feel the same way even when it is at their own hands. I am sure Mark had the same impact on many close to him as my uncle did for me, my family, and all of his friends. His gifts were taken from us all.

This song, "Gold Day," the CoTW this week, means a lot in my life. It was one of the first songs my daughter loved and learned the words to. She thought it was by "Sparkly Horse." We played it every day when she was about 2-3 years old, as I drove her to and from preschool or on errands. But even without that connection, I would put this song up in my top five songs about being a parent. And granted, I am not even sure if that's what Mark intended. But that's what it means to me, and I put it up there with "Forever Young," which I identified with on a profound level well before I had kids of my own. When Buffalo Tom were starting out in Amherst, we often played on the same bill as Lobster Boy, which featured Sam Dylan, Bob Dylan's son. We became buddies. I never thought so much that, "wow, it's Bob Dylan's son. I wonder what that must be like." No, I really recall thinking, "what must it be like to be one of the people he wrote 'Forever Young' for." Though we did run into him at the airport in Copenhagen a few years later when we were playing the Roskilde Festival and Bob was playing another festival. Bob had a hoodie on and mirrored shades. The airport was abuzz. We were on the same flight to JFK. Same came over and chatted and it was about that time where I thought, "wow. That must be weird."

Parents and their kids, the continuum. So, why not have Lucy, now age 11, help me sing this one, "Gold Day," once her favorite song,

before she moved on to Top 40 and the ongoing discovery of her own music. Another one we used to sing was the Paul Simon song, "Father and Daughter," the refrain of which I still can not sing without choking up.

I'm a damn old softy.

*May God bless and keep you always,
May your wishes all come true,
May you always do for others
And let others do for you.
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung,
May you stay forever young.*

-- Dylan

May all your days be gold, my child.

-- Linkous, rest in peace.

[Gold Day mp3](#)

POSTED BY [BILL JANOVITZ](#) AT 12:07 PM
