

March 15, 2010 • 20:50Q

Mark Linkous



http://tommyudo.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/mark_linkous_sparklehorse_s.jpg

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I met Mark Linkous a few times in the mid 90s and again about five years ago. I wish I had some great insight to give you based upon these meetings which consisted of a couple of interviews, a conversation after a gig and a few chance meetings where only small talk and small gossip was exchanged. Perhaps I should tell you that he was a generous man, a kind man, a beacon of hope in a hopeless world. He may well have been, but I'm fucked if I noticed it. Maybe I should say that I saw right away that he was spiralling towards an unhappy end. That would just be bullshit.

For example: one of the occasions that I spoke to him was in London in 1996 just before he went back to his hotel, had an overdose and collapsed in such a way that he almost had to have both legs amputated. When I spoke to him he seemed fine. A bit laconic and tired, but no more so than any other jet lagged American junkie muso that struggled to answer my asinine questions in those days.

Hearing what happened that same week was shocking. But it was one of those classic overcoming adversity narratives that everybody loves and nobody wants to question too deeply. You know the story: he's a great artist, but he has problems with drugs. He nearly dies but he survives against the odds. Then he comes back and makes a stunning life affirming piece of art. And gets the girl. Freeze frame and roll credits to some high energy 80s power ballad.

But let me tell you something: surviving death and feeling overjoyed at being alive, you'd be surprised how fucking quickly that fades. You're left with the same problems that you had before with some new ones added for good measure. Linkous could never walk properly again and had to wear braces on both legs. He never complained but then you're not allowed to complain. You're supposed to feel blessed, or lucky to be alive, an optimistic good sport, not some self obsessed depressed and miserable old cunt with two gammy legs.

Linkous, we're told, struggled with depression all his life. Like many people who do, he self medicated with drugs, which may have compounded his problems but some of which may have numbed him physically and mentally enough to make it to the end of another day. Maybe we'll never know what the text message he received was, the one that supposedly upset him enough to go and get his rifle and shoot himself through the heart. That's not important. The cause can be any trivial, insignificant event. All thinking people consider suicide at one time or another. It takes a 'perfect storm', where all the necessary elements come together. Most suicides start days or weeks before triggers are pulled or high windows are opened.

What Linkous had in common with Elliott Smith, Jeff Buckley, Ian Curtis, Pete Hamm, Nick Drake, Vic Chesnutt, Kurt Cobain, Billy MacKenzie and Per Yngve 'Dead' Ohlin is not that they created introspective music that contemplated the shadowy side of life. No, what they had in common was being male.

Men are nearly three times more likely to kill themselves than women. Among men under the age of 35, suicide is the second most common cause of death. Suicide is more common than homicide. Among middle aged men – Linkous was 47 – the rate has soared over the past decade.

There are kneejerk explanations for this: men can't talk about their feelings the way that women supposedly do; men are a redundant sex; men are full of bad chemicals that makes them predisposed to depression and suicidal tendencies; men are just plain bad. Is it economic boom or bust? Too much responsibility or too little? The truth is that nobody knows why and all snap 'common sense' judgements are wrong. All of the artists mentioned who killed themselves were able to express themselves very articulately through their music. Linkous wasn't a great confessional songwriter; he conjured up skewed wonderlands, a musical and verbal equivalent of the films of Tim Burton or Jan Svankmajer. But it's unlikely that you'll find many clues to his death on any of the Sparklehorse albums other than that Linkous was no stranger to the 'dark side'.

Linkous had drug issues and was also upset by the suicide of his friend Vic Chesnutt earlier this year. Suicides sometimes have a nasty habit of spreading like a contagion.

It has been suggested that people who are depressed are actually seeing the world as it actually is, and it is everyone else who is deluded, clinging onto false hope, convincing themselves that life is worth living. People who kill themselves are just incapable of bullshitting themselves anymore.

But what could anyone have done? Maybe not allowing him to live as a virtual recluse. Maybe intervening in his drug use. Maybe forcing him to talk about what was going on in his mind. Nothing he'd have thanked you for or actually allowed anyone to do.

Linkous was a great talent. Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot is one of the best albums of the 1990s. He never topped it but always seemed to promise that he would. Maybe his Dark Night Of The Soul collaboration with Danger Mouse and David Lynch is the classic last word. Maybe something he had secreted in his beloved studio is the final masterpiece.

More likely there will just be a few tantalising odds and ends and a lot unresolvable questions.