

Monday, 5 March 2012

Sick of Goodbyes: Remembering Mark Linkous

I first wrote a version of this piece almost two years ago, just a few days after the death of **Mark Linkous**, the singer/songwriter and mastermind behind **Sparklehorse**, at a time when feelings were surprisingly raw for me. Two years to the day since his passing, it feels appropriate to dust it off for display on this platform.



I still find myself quietly devastated at the loss of **Mark Linkous**. Planning on writing a probably trite and ham-fisted Facebook status update to this effect, I started compiling a mental list of my memories related to his music. Quickly finding that I couldn't stop and, becoming increasingly confounded as to what to use, I instead decided to write a fuller, hammier-fisted part-eulogy, such as it is. I didn't know Mark personally, so have been surprised at the keen sense of loss that's settled on my shoulders over the last couple of days as I've played **Sparklehorse** records non-stop. That there will be no more of these magical recordings seems unbearably and unavoidably sad. Those feelings therefore probably also need some exploration.

I still remember my first exposure to Mark's music on the 25th of May 1996. How can I be so precise? It wasn't to do with a revelatory first listen, as you might imagine and as a good clichéd story of fandom would have it. I actually bought *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* on something of a whim on the same day as the **Ben Folds 5** debut which I sought out having seen them on **Later**, smashing up Jools' piano the previous weekend. A review of *Vivadixie...* in the **NME** that I'd skimmed had caught my attention – remember this was pre-Internet, back when that publication retained some relevance – and that was enough.

Of my two new purchases made on that day, one record was slick, witty and preppy, with virtuoso piano playing front and centre. The other was fuzzy and elliptical, with songs that sounded like they were recorded on rusted, arcane, homemade machines that were fit to fall apart at any second. There was no real contest as to which got my attention. I played *Vivadixie...* to anyone and everyone that would listen. Remember, this was at a time when **Britpop** was at its height and British music felt important and relevant the world over. Knowing and swaggering, not yet the hopeless show pony hindsight largely and ruthlessly showed it to be, the movement was arresting and all-conquering. Added to that, the hooks from Radiohead's *The Bends* were still cast deep into me, so a record had to go some to garner anything more than my passing interest. That *Vivadixie...* caused outright obsession tells its own story.



Even though I was anally careful with my CDs I swear I wore it out and I had to buy another copy, *Vivadixie...* becoming one of only two records that holds that distinction (*The Bends* the other). I still recall listening to the song 'Saturday' on loop for an entire afternoon, thinking its simplicity just audacious, floored by its beauty to the point of paralysis "I'd like to tell you how I feel / but I'll probably keep it till Saturday". It seemed the most perfect thing ever written. It still does. I sort of couldn't believe it existed and I still feel that same way about it today. It made me pick up a guitar and became the first song I ever played to a live audience.



I remember follow up *Good Morning Spider* coming out in 1998 and, in an edgy froth of excitement, I took my CD walkman to town on the morning of release, bought a copy (yes, from those anachronisms called 'record shops') and retreated - well, fairly sprinted - to a nearby cafe to listen to the whole thing immediately. Twice. Really loud. They kicked me out for only buying a cup of tea and sitting there for 2 hours, eyes clasped shut for the most part. I wanted to drink it all in, to just collapse into that record. I often did over the following summer, one spent taking long, aimless walks in the Shropshire hills. Mark's vocal delivery on 'All Night Home' is still breathtaking - it's like he whispers into your ear and steals a piece of your soul.

The following may sound clichéd, but it's true: Mark's music did at times help me to reconcile my own problems - familial, health, philosophical / existential; all those that especially beset a gawky teenager. Somehow it was all wrapped up in those sad, glorious messes of records, which were as supremely sophisticated as they were naive. They seemed to exert their own gravitational pull, a sort of peculiar and delicious melancholia. This was in contrast as much as steadfast mining of a mood – dissonance meshing effortlessly with beauty, sometimes in the same song. I also loved them because my Dad hated them, thereby ticking another required box for rock and roll. I had and retain the inescapable sensation that, like all art worthy of note, Mark's music so clearly operated outside of an aesthetic and fashion. Things like image, reception, intention and, to an extent, form were secondary to exploration, necessity, understanding. These lessons – ones so fundamental they shouldn't need underscoring but are hopelessly lost in today's industry - stayed with me and still inform my creativity.

They say never meet your heroes, but I took the opportunity to meet Mark after a show in Leeds. I felt like I was a million miles away from home - it was the week after I had started University - and I chatted with him outside the venue whilst watching an enterprising local band

play in the street to the punters leaving the gig. He was accommodating in the face of being hounded by the idiot, earnest fanboy I was - he was genial, funny and seemed to be about 7 feet tall. This is oddly fitting, as the man was a musical colossus to me - he taught me that you don't need a great voice to be a great singer, that the oblique can be just as affecting as the direct, and he almost single-handedly re-calibrated my sense of the solace and beauty of sound.



RIP