

Dark Ages

By **Alli Marshall** on **09/07/2010 07:01 PM**

It was a year ago when local folk rock-noir artist Angela Faye Martin went to see Vic Chesnutt at what would be Chesnutt's last Grey Eagle show. After Chesnutt's set, Martin gave him an advanced copy of her just-completed *Pictures From Home*.

Martin had met the late Athens, Ga.-based singer/songwriter once before. "Back in summer 2008, my friend and mentor Mark Linkous and his wife, Teresa brought me to see Vic Chesnutt perform with Thee Silver Mountain Zion at the Grey Eagle," she says. "At that time, Mark and I had just begun to record a full-length LP of my songs.

"After the show, Mark presided over my conversing with Vic, his longtime friend and confidant, while we discussed favorite writers and growing up in Georgia. Mark told Vic we were making an album of my songs and Vic was kind enough to request a rough mix as soon as we were finished. I'd explained to Vic that I'd gotten a review from *Flagpole* in Athens that said I 'recalled' his early writings, which I felt I didn't deserve. He smiled and said he hoped I wasn't like him in other ways."

Within a few months of the second meeting, both Chesnutt and Linkous were gone — two critical (and self-inflicted) losses to the music world during an especially harsh winter. And Martin's album — gorgeously haunted with images of Appalachia and Linkous' shimmery-spooky touches, as luminous and fleeting as fireflies in a Mason jar — seemed to get lost in the shuffle. No labels called, though *Pictures*, lovingly crafted over two years in Linkous' Static King Studio in Hayesville, N.C., is among the last work Linkous created.

But Martin, who lost not just a producer but a kindred spirit, remains altruistic. "What has happened is some sweet correspondence with some people I admire," she says.

From the beginning of their all-too-short acquaintance, Linkous schooled Martin in the ways of the record industry. At the time, he was negotiating with Anti, trying to get *Dark Night of the Soul* released and was discouraged about the process. "He would say, 'You're going to have to get rid of your chickens and paint your nails with a Sharpie,'" Martin remembers.

But that's not her style. She lives in Macon County near the North Carolina/Georgia border, a rural landscape where she says she "listens to the ambient noises of the house." An old-timer in Clay County, who Martin's husband met through land-trust work, said, "You've got to meet this composer friend of mine."

"Gosh, I guess he doesn't realize I'm not really into classical music," Martin thought at the time. When she discovered the composer in question was Linkous, she "freaked out."

After Martin gave Linkous samples of her work, he offered to record a demo to send to labels. "After I submitted the demos to the companies he recommended and I wasn't getting any responses, he said, 'Well, screw everyone. We'll just make this

album. We don't have to get a bunch of musicians, you and I'll do all the instruments," she says. "His goal was to get me signed. He thought by doing this, if we made a good product, there was no reason I wouldn't be signed."

That didn't happen, though the album, from the opening notes of lead song "Strawberry Roan," drips with Southern lit, fuzzy bass and otherworldly weirdness: wind chimes, electric hum, Martin's little-girl voice, close, compelling and often eerily doubled, and pulse-quickenning lyrics like, "I will walk in the night to a light on the mountain so lonely / help me with with my coat so the woods get to know me."

Which is to say, what Martin and Linkous created goes beyond a tapestry of past-meets-present Appalachian imagery and folklore; it's both old-time and futuristic, both gritty and sweet. And, to an extent, it is (in retrospect) strangely prophetic, much like Linkous' own *Dark*, the down-tempo lounge/lullaby he created with Danger Mouse. "Widow's Lament" and "No one Can Wake You," songs from Martin's album, were written as character sketches before she even met Linkous, and yet they seem to speak of him.

"He did not have a good time of it," she says. "It was hard for him to adapt to the world around him. He was in bed a lot, depressed and in pain." Martin suspects that the loss of Chesnutt (wheelchair-bound since a 1983 car accident) came as a severe blow. Linkous also spent time in a wheelchair after an overdose in 1996, and he never fully recovered. Martin says, "It's wonderful to keep on keeping on, but I think they both did enough for us."

So Martin's upcoming Grey Eagle show is, in a way, in memory of her two fallen heroes. "They both loved that place," she says. When she learned that the September 10 date was open, she jumped at the chance to revisit that happier time of a year ago: The day after Linkous' birthday and just days before Chesnutt's tour when the music world was brimming with possibility. And — because listening to *Pictures* reveals the tools that Martin has gleaned and can carry forward — it still is.

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who: Angela Faye Martin & The Scarlet Oak Sway (Tim Lee III opens)

where: The Grey Eagle

when: Friday, Sept. 10 (9 p.m., \$8. thegreyeagle.com)