

Caught by the Reaper – Mark Linkous, 1962 – 2010

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John Leahy remembers his friend, musician & songwriter, Mark Linkous, who passed away on March the 6th.



The sudden and shocking death of Mark Linkous is yet another premature and tragic end to the life of a gifted musician and songwriter. Mark will be remembered for his four magical records as Sparklehorse, and for last year's 'Dark Night of the Soul' collaboration with Danger Mouse and David Lynch. Tributes have already made much of both his musical legacy and the dark side of his personality as reflected in the lyrics and music from so many of those cherished songs. Many have pointed to the seeming inevitability of his suicide given the bouts of depression he would suffer, and yet the man I remember and loved could be so vibrant and full of passion it seems almost impossible for him to be gone.

Born to a coalmining family in Virginia (his father and grandfather were both miners), Mark was every bit a product of the American South. The debut Sparklehorse album 'Vivadixesubmarinetransmissionplot' (it came to him in a dream apparently), was full of metaphor and haunting imagery from his rural upbringing and life back in the South following apparently unhappy spells in both New York and Los Angeles. Horses, dogs, owls, all manner of animals and birds made it in to Mark's songs, and the pictures and videos we saw of his life at home were all wonderfully rural, a wilderness few of us ever experience. Mark was truly a friend of the river and his love for his home was accompanied by his delicate Southern manners and the grace of a man

who carried little anger or ill will to others. Just to hear him describe his home in the Smoky Mountains you felt as if you'd been there and I'll always regret not taking his offer to visit and experience it for myself.

We first met in 1996 when he and the band came to tour and I was working at the label that released his records in the UK. The terrible accident he suffered in London almost immediately after arriving is well documented elsewhere, technically he died for two minutes, but Mark's ability to recover from that showed his spirit. The messages of support he received from around the world were amazing and must have given him some of the tremendous strength he required to literally drag himself back to his feet following the many painful months of operations and rehabilitation on his damaged legs. Each time I visited him at St Mary's hospital in Paddington the walls around his hospital bed were covered in more and more faxes and messages of support from fans, fellow musicians, actors, all manner of artists from around the world who loved that record. Typically Mark, who seemed unable to meet people without leaving a lasting impression, went on to make strong friendships with so many of those who cared for him during his stay.

As he recovered his strength he was able to return to touring, first in a wheelchair and then on crutches. Spending more time working with and getting to know him, Mark captivated with good humour but most of all that genuine artistic spirit and personality that so few seem to possess in the music industry now. No wonder other artists were so keen to work with him, from touring with Radiohead to recording with fellow musicians like Tom Waits, PJ Harvey and Nina Persson.

Don't let the obituaries deceive you in to thinking this was a man for whom life held no thrill. Devoted to motorbikes, Mark always seemed to be able to arrange a touring schedule around a visit to Moto Guzzi in Italy or a bike shop in the UK. There were usually many drinks to be had after the latest show and he had a real love for spiced food, he tried to combine both as often as possible with fans and those he worked with. Playing at north London's the Garage I still remember visiting a Korean restaurant opposite the venue. The owner immediately fell for Mark's delicate charm, his request for a fork – "excuse me maam, I'm a redneck", delivered in a manner only he would have got away with. I'm sure it was a full twelve months before we managed to eat there again, but the restaurant owner welcomed Mark back as if he was one of her most loyal customers. Memorable and charming, Mark made so many friends in the UK it was no wonder he was able to play here regularly.

Subsequent records explored wider themes but always with that same magical approach to his environment. That celebrated debut was quickly followed by 1998's 'Good Morning Spider' with it's remembrance of St Mary's hospital and those who had cared for him, a thank you coupled with the haunting, whispered desire to flee London and taste the clean air of home. The third album, 'It's a Wonderful Life', was released in 2001 and furthered the dreamlike qualities of his music. Guest appearances from Tom Waits, PJ Harvey and Nina Persson amongst others drew more fans to Sparklehorse and allowed Mark to add to the palette of his work. His last album, 'Dreamt For Light Years In the Belly of a Mountain', was recorded over a longer period, it's gestation interrupted by a depression from which he seemed only able to emerge by virtue of the whole process of writing and recording the album. Introduced to Brian Burton, aka Danger Mouse, who shared production on 'Dreamt', in turn led to 'Dark Night of the Soul' with both the latter and celebrated film director David Lynch. That last record featured a list of vocal collaborators which once more read like a who's who of the alternative scene and once more confirmed Mark's ability to welcome others in to his world. Always keen to explore musically, Mark also remained fascinated by the sparse production of electronic music and collaborated with Christian Fennesz pushing his sound in new directions to the surprise of many of his original alt country fans.

The last time Mark and I spoke we traded emails soon after the death of his close friend Vic Chestnutt. Saddened by the loss of Vic, another to suicide, Mark was brighter on the subject of my eldest son's choice of new electric guitar. Born in 1997, Patrick's birth came at a better time for Mark; he used to joke that this newest member of the Sparklehorse fan club was his lucky charm coming at a time when he was invigorated by the progress he was making following the previous year's accident. Mark would follow Patrick's young life with interest and I have happy memories of my son sitting on Mark's lap as he strummed a guitar in the studio aged two. Pat's new guitar was a Telecaster and Mark was quick to remind me of previous famous players including his friend PJ Harvey as well as the Clash's Joe Strummer. "Here's to the young men with Tele's!" he said, and you could feel his excitement at the prospect of someone else to work with one day. We have lost a great musician, songwriter and true friend to so many, here's hoping his legacy will inspire those young men and women for whom music is a passion just as it was for Mark Linkous.

"Everyday you should pick up something, no matter how miniscule or microscopic it is, and when you go to bed you can say I was glad that I was alive to see that."