

Triumph over the odds: ex-junkie Mark Linkous burns up the road to recovery

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# EQUESTRIAN OF SORTS

Every night for a week last January, Mark Linkous' grandmother woke up crying. Every night she'd be terrified out of the dream state and wake traumatised, unsure of exactly what she found so troubling.

After a few days, it became clearer, so she called Mark's father: "Something's wrong with one of the boys," she told him, convinced. "It's OK," he said, and revealed that one of Mark's stepbrothers had broken his elbow playing football. Prescience confirmed, she relaxed for the first time in days. It was OK.

But that night it happened again. And the next night. Then, at the weekend, the bad news reached her home deep in Virginia mining country.

Grandson, former heroin addict and eccentric musical genius Mark had collapsed in a London hotel bathroom. Had lain unconscious for 14 hours with his legs trapped beneath him. Had been found by a maid, after his fellow Sparklehorse members had called round and been reassured when they heard his snoring. Had cut off the circulation in his legs and suffered a cardiac arrest when the medics tried moving him. Had, well, died for two minutes. Was now in St Mary's Hospital, London, the place where they first discovered penicillin. Might never walk again.

"My grandmother's real witchy," observes Mark four months later in San Francisco. From his wheelchair. He's going to be alright now.

ACROSS THE bay from San Francisco lies the substantially less glamorous city of Oakland, the scuzzy yang to its neighbour's utterly languid yin. Mean Marshall's is a big shed in a

particularly desolate corner of the city: the place where old motorbikes go to die and - if they're lucky - to be resurrected. There's a beguilingly spooky mortuary air to the place on this sweltering May day, as great clouds of dust rise off the countless Triumphs and Nortons in varying stages of wellbeing. One of the healthier specimens featured in the first episode of *Happy Days*, reveals Marshall, an amiable old greaser with a greying thicket of beard. One

the meantime, though, there are beautifully wrecked old bikes to dream about... "I've had motorcycles all my life," explains Mark in his tiny, sleepy southern voice. "My parents broke up and me and my kid brother lived with my mother for a while. She worked all the time in a factory and I started hanging out with motorcycle gangs like The Pagans. I thought I was, y'know, a bad boy. "My mom couldn't really handle me so she sent me to live

guitar, he was more serious. First he played Led Zeppelin songs, then he turned punk, then he dropped out of school (only class enjoyed: parapsychology), moved to New York and joined a garage-pop band, The Dancing Hoods. They did OK, moving to LA in search of a deal where they were "big for about two minutes", but never quite got signed. By some time in the late-'80s (Linkous is enormously vague about dates), the singer was working for a

straight, I started noticing all these things that I'd forgotten about. I remember I was outside the rehabilitation place and I noticed a grasshopper, and I'd forgotten about grasshoppers. I just stared at it for a long time thinking, "Man, this is amazing, it's like a little dinosaur or something." I just had this whole new perception of things I'd been oblivious to. So I started writing, writing a lot."

Cleaned up, Mark and his wife Theresa moved to an old house on a plantation one hour out of Richmond, Virginia. He wrote songs, hung out with David Lowery from Cracker (and once of Camper Van Beethoven), recorded them at Lowery's studio and, via a suitably tortuous route, was signed to Capitol. The rest is history, sort of.

THOSE SONGS form the basis of 'Vivadixiesubmarine-transmissionplot', Sparklehorse's remarkable debut album. The title comes from a dream Mark had about swimming towards a submarine built by Civil War hero General Lee, and hearing an "old-time band" playing inside it, distorted by the water.

Dream logic inspires him a lot. There's a surreal edge to many of the songs, as if the world's being described by dazed and wandering eyes. So he "wants to make literal things poetic. That grasshopper seemed so beautiful to me - not to sound hippy - but being near death you just really appreciate and have to keep a close eye out for things that are beautiful, y'know?"

And then there's the eerie, creaky atmosphere to songs like 'Spirit Ditch', that Mark ascribes to coming from the southwestern part of Virginia, where people live in dark hollows between the mountains. His cousins in the hills would tell of a witch who'd stop you from breathing when she walked by

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The glitter gang: (l-r) Paul Watsch, Scott Minor, Mark and Scott Fitzsimmons

day, Arnold Schwarzenegger turned up with \$20,000 to try to buy it for one of his Planet Hollywood hellholes. Marshall just laughed. "F---em," he said.

This is where Sparklehorse choose to spend a free afternoon on their American tour. Tonight they will play the grand ballroom of psychedelia, The Fillmore West in San Francisco. Bill Graham and Jerry Garcia's ghosts will not show up, but Mark Linkous will invoke the spirits of his Virginia homeland in his sad, funny, tender and wonderfully cranky little country pop songs. In

with my grandfather, for him to straighten me out, so I wasn't allowed to have my dirt bike. After a couple months I started going insane. When they did let me have my bike back I realised how therapeutic it is. I get really bad migraine headaches and if I have one I get on my bike and ride 'til I get rid of it. It feels like flying."

As a little kid, Mark was "a pyromaniac in training", pouring lighter fluid all over his toy guitar and torching it. By the time his strict but generous grandfather relented and bought him a proper

record company, the bassist was on some sordid and unspecified downward spiral that would see him end up in Ryker's Island jail, and the guitarist - Mark, of course - was living in a van, a heroin addict.

"I got really bad," he says ruefully. "I called my parents - they just thought I drank a lot - and I told them I'd been doing that shit for a long time and I needed help, so they flew me home and I went into hospital for a month, then went through rehab and all that shit."

"But when I started getting

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# SPARKLEHORSE

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and his grandfather reeled off ghost stories about dead miners asking for a light for their cigarettes.

"I was walking along this strip mine when I was a kid," Mark remembers.

"They leave these big man-made cliffs where they've excavated for coal. It was in the snow, and up on the cliff there was this black horse. And as far as I walked, it walked with me the whole time. I'll never forget that. It was really spooky..."

In the past couple of years, Mark's come to terms with being depressive. But last time he was in Britain, playing an *NME* Brats gig with the Tindersticks, he mixed a load of Valium – to combat nerves and jet lag – with his prescription anti-depressants. That was when he passed out in the hotel bathroom, legs pinned under his torso.

"I think when they straighten out your legs," he explains, "from all the circulation getting cut off, those limbs produce all this potassium or something, and when they straighten them out it goes to your heart and you have a heart attack. So I had a cardiac arrest when they took me to the hospital. I flatlined for a couple minutes, then they shocked me and got me back going. I was there for three months, on dialysis for a while, and they ended up doing nine operations on my legs."

Did you ever think you'd lose them?

"Yeah, I was f—ing terrified. I asked the doctor, and he said, 'I can't promise you you're not.' That was at the time when they went in again and got all the dead tissue out, so luckily they didn't need to amputate, but I lost the muscles that keep my feet straight, so these things come round like that..."

He grasps the straps round his shins and explains how he should be able to walk again by September, maybe even in time for Sparklehorse's show on the *NME* stage at Reading in late August. Then he explains, in his fractured, woozy, winning way ("I'm sorry, I lose my train of thought – I'm still on medication") exactly *why* this "thing", as he refers to it, happened:

"Taking too many Valium was like trying to be free of your body in a way, just overindulging. It had everything to do with the drug problem, the whole idea of getting high. I have to get over that. After you've been intoxicated, you have to try really hard to function in the world the way it really is. It's really hard to do that sometimes."

And you feel you have to do that more than ever?

"Yeah. Because, I mean, I never realised how many people love me."

Maybe there's a realisation you're lucky to be here now?

"Yeah, there is," he agrees, and he's very, very quiet now. "I'm glad to be here now. I'm *really* glad to be here, y'know?"