

Back in the saddle

Rock musicians like to boast about living close to the edge. Mark Linkous has them all beaten. Linkous has wandered right up to the edge and fallen off it. Two years ago Linkous died. He was in London, promoting his band Sparklehorse's first album, the spellcheck-baffling *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*. Having mixed too much Valium with his regular antidepressants, he collapsed in a hotel bathroom and lay unconscious for 14 hours with his legs pinned under him. When he was found, and his legs were straightened out, he had a heart attack.

Technically dead for two minutes, Linkous was shocked back to life, and spent the next three months in St Mary's Hospital undergoing a series of operations to save his legs.

Unsurprisingly, his ordeal turns up as subject matter in a couple of the songs on Sparklehorse's new album, *Good Morning Spider*. They neatly illustrate the two extremes of Linkous's writing. *St Mary*, a grateful tribute to the nurses who looked after him, is a delicate, fragile, beautiful thing. *Pig* is a raucous squall of angry guitar and massively distorted vocals that mixes a poisonous cocktail of rage, frustration and self-hate with his desire to have a body that works again.

Linkous is one of the most talented songwriters around. *Vivadixie* was on almost every album of the year list, and despite, or because of, his near-death experience, *Good Morning Spider* is even better. While his debut led to comparisons with warped country acts such as Lambchop, *Spider* sees Linkous evolving a unique sound that fuses violas, guitars, steam engines and cheap early samplers.

Linkous wrote a third song that refers obliquely to his time in hospital. Called *I Shot a Dog*, it didn't make it onto the album. It recounts the time, shortly before his collapse, when Linkous was riding in his brother-in-law's pick-up truck and they hit a dog. "It was in a lot of pain. We thought we had to shoot it," Linkous remembers. "It was one of the most horrible experiences of my life. I couldn't look at it so I ended up having to shoot it four or five times to kill it."

Later, lying in hospital, Linkous began to believe that by killing the dog he'd stored up bad karma for himself. These days he's working hard to restore his supplies of good karma. "Now, I try to save as many turtles as I can," he says, calling from his home in Virginia. "After it rains round here there's turtles all over the back roads. So I clear them off the road and try and send them on their way."

As his turtle-rescuing duties suggest, Linkous is in a pretty life-affirming mood these days — lucky to be here and trying to cope with reality a little better. "I'm on a lot less medication," he says. Although he

A brush with death has lifted Mark Linkous to new heights of genius. MARK EDWARDS on the return of Sparklehorse

still needs "a medicine for my nerves because there was so much damage to them that my nerves don't really know where to go, so they misfire. It's nice to be more aware and more coherent".

Linkous was raised in Virginia. Seeing Johnny Cash on television he decided he wanted to play guitar and was in a series of high-school bands. "It was mainly people trying to teach me Led Zeppelin songs and me not doing too well," he recalls. "And

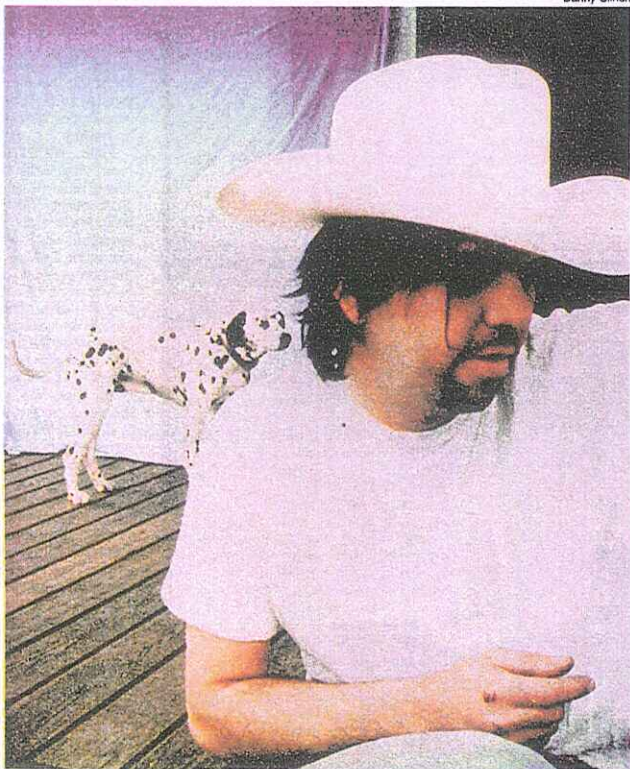
Since his "death", Linkous's life has been going better. Three years ago he said that his only real ambitions in life were to buy his own house and have a baby. He's halfway there. No babies yet, but he and his wife have just bought their own house with seven acres of land in the middle of a 400-acre tree farm just north of Richmond.

And, despite major label backing and better recording facilities, Linkous has managed to hold onto the home-made feel that is so crucial to the Sparklehorse sound.

"Working on eight-track, every instrument is in your face. It makes everything sound so intimate," he says. "I have 16 tracks in my studio now, but I try to remember those early lessons."

While Linkous is perfectly capable of writing great pop songs, he's only really happy when he's messed around with them. One

Danny Clinch



Mark Linkous: 'It's nice to be more aware and more coherent'

then I saw a newscast from London of punk rock, and I thought: man, I could do this."

His parents moved frequently, and not everywhere in Virginia was receptive to a long-haired proto-punk rocker. "One town where we lived, there was an exceptionally bad redneck vibe," Linkous remembers. "Carloads of rednecks would literally jump out and beat you up. So I went to a hardware store and bought two machetes, and I sewed deep pockets in my old coat. So when I had redneck trouble I would just whip out these machetes and act really insane."

Linkous's first stab at stardom took him to New York and LA, where he ended up a junkie, living in a van. He returned to Richmond to clean up, and as he reacquainted himself with country life, a new musical direction emerged — a low-key, lo-fi, sad-but-pretty sound that became Sparklehorse.

track on *Good Morning Spider* joins two songs — *Chaos of the Galaxy* and *Happy Man* — by seemingly playing them through a badly tuned-in radio.

"I'm a sucker for that kind of field recordings/short-wave radio static thing and then exploding into the full hi-fi at the end," explains Linkous. "And I was pretty sure the record company would want to make *Happy Man* the single and I was pretty bored with it by then, so I felt obliged to sabotage it. I'd much rather hear *Sunshine* playing on the radio."

Sunshine is prime Sparklehorse: a beautiful melody, a sparse arrangement underpinned by some indecipherable electronic noises to prevent it all getting too pretty, and a voice on an answering machine. The voice belongs to the songwriter Vic Chesnut. Confined to a wheelchair himself, Chesnut was a supportive friend through Linkous's post-hospital wheelchair period. But the voice might have belonged to Tom Waits, a great fan of Sparklehorse.

"Tom Waits was going to do something on *Sunshine*, but he missed the mastering date by a day," explains a still star-struck Linkous. "When he called to apologise, I spent all day getting up the nerve to call back, but we ended up talking for hours and he was asking me about my recording techniques."

Mention of Waits prompts Linkous to start talking about other sound pioneers. He wants to know how the *Tricky* album has gone down in the UK. I explain that having alienated much of his audience, *Tricky* now seems to have alienated many previously-supportive journalists as well, with stories that he has attacked at least one critic who gave him a bad review.

Linkous ponders this news for a second. "Maybe . . ." he muses, "maybe I should go find those machetes in case I get some bad reviews."

He won't be needing them. □