



# WELANCHOLY WANN

# Sun Kil Moon's Mark Kozelek keeps it somber on *Among the Leaves*

BY Jeff Niesel



Sun Kil Moon singer-songwriter Mark Kozelek has the kind of quiet, lower-register voice that carries intensity despite its lack of volume. That has been apparent over the course of a decade of recorded output with both Sun Kil Moon and his previous outfit Red House Painters, which also recorded and toured for a solid decade. Kozelek is in fine form on *Among the Leaves*, the latest Sun Kil Moon endeavor. The somber opening track, "I Know It's Pathetic But That Was the Greatest Night of My Life," sets the tone for the melancholy, folk-inspired album filled with lyrics that touch upon the rigors of touring. The media-shy Kozelek recently participated in an email exchange to discuss the new album and his musical inspirations.

**What initially inspired you to want to start writing songs and singing?**

Seeing a girl play guitar on a lawn when I was a kid, then gathering up a lot of albums. Led Zeppelin, Cat Stevens, etc. I wanted to play guitar as early as I can remember, but didn't have an interest in songwriting until my later teens. I wanted to express myself and playing only the guitar, I felt limited.

**You have a particularly distinctive voice. Did singing come naturally to you or was it something you had to really work at?**

I had to work at it and still am. My voice is still developing and I'm still not as comfortable singing as I'd like to be.

**Red House Painters garnered tons of critical acclaim and put out several great albums. Looking back on the band, how satisfied are you with its creative output?**

Pretty satisfied. Our timing was a little early. By the time people wrapped their heads around what we were doing, we were breaking up. But I think we are remembered for being bigger than we actually were. We never had that much success, but creatively, looking back, we were a pretty interesting band.

**What caused the band to break up?**

The pain in the ass of putting it all together. Rehearsals, work permits, travel, going from label to label. It gets old.

**Why are you fascinated with boxing?**

I don't know. Everybody likes one sport or another. I don't like team sports and I identify with boxers. They're solo artists, in their own way. I also like the pace. I don't like the start/stop of basketball and the slow pace of baseball. I like the action in boxing, the art of it, the excitement, the knock-out.

**Does your interest in boxing inform your music in any way?**

There are a lot of references to boxing throughout my music, especially the Sun Kil Moon catalog.

**Talk generally about the making of the new album. When did you start writing the songs and is there any kind of thematic link to them?**

"Young Love" had been written for a while, but the rest of the songs came quickly. There isn't a thematic link so much, but I did feel a need to get into about some aspects of touring - hotels, boredom, etc.

**How does this album differ from previous releases?**

I'm a little looser and was even comfortable enough to include some bad songwriting. I don't write bad songs, but a few of these are pretty bad. I just wanted to show some vulnerability and not care.

**In "Sunshine in Chicago," you sing "now I just sign posters for guys in tennis shoes." I'm assuming the song is autobiographical. Talk a bit about your fan**

**base and the kind of connection you have to it.**

It's funny. There's always one big guy at every one of my shows. I wonder sometimes if it's the same guy who follows me around, but it's not. There's just this generic "big-guy" look and that's the person who wants an autograph after a show. I'm 45 now, so a lot has changed. I remember playing a solo show in Boston in '94 and tons of young women gathering around me after the show. The girl I liked most lingered around for a bit and then said, "I can't compete with this!" and ran off. Those days are long gone.

**"That Bird Has a Broken Wing" creates such a compelling mood. What inspired the tune?**

It's just a song about coming home from tour with an infection - an occupational hazard.

**You have a song for [guitar repairman] Richard Collopy. Talk about your interest in him.**

I barely knew the guy. He did some really nice work on one of my guitars. I remember he had allergies really bad, and that held him up a lot. He committed suicide, and I wrote a song for him. It just seemed like a nice gesture.

**I like how a quiet song like "Young Love" has an understated intensity to it. What's the key to accomplishing that?**

Just being me. I really don't know.

**We're living in a time when it's increasingly difficult to make a living as a musician. What keeps you going?**

It's the only thing I know how to do. I can't use a computer to save my life, and I still have a flip phone. ■