



MELANCHOLY MAN

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. ■