

# “I’m not interested in people’s bitching and whining...”



At the end of an uncommonly action-packed year, MARK KOZELEK reflects on fame, infamy, 22 years at the helm of Red House Painters and Sun Kil Moon, and the perverse sense of humour that provoked a war with The War On Drugs. “When I put words together, no-one can touch me. You tweet and play Bob Dylan covers? Good for you!”

**F**ROM MARK KOZELEK’S living-room window, he can see the Golden Gate Bridge, the San Francisco Marina and, he points out, the Tiburon neighbourhood where Robin Williams killed himself. “It’s hard for middle-aged people to see San Francisco taken over by young, Silicon Valley money,” he says of the city he’s lived in for most of his adult life. Kozelek’s favourite restaurant closed down a few weeks ago, and the grocery store down the street, and the Lumiere movie theatre. “That stuff bothers me,” he continues, “and makes me feel old. But I’ve got this gorgeous view and a pretty good set-up and I’m still inspired every day – so why fix what isn’t broke?”

Today, Kozelek is answering questions by email, having avoided old-fashioned interviews for the past few years – “So I don’t get quoted with words like ‘dunno,’” he claims. Last night, Sun Kil Moon played a show at the Fonda Theatre in LA, part of a 2014 campaign which has been, even by his industrious standards, intense. It began with the release of *Benji*, the most critically acclaimed LP of his 22-year career, and is ending, more or less, with a tender, dolorous collection entitled *Mark Kozelek Sings Christmas Carols*.


Over roughly 17 albums, mostly using the band names Red House Painters and Sun Kil Moon, Kozelek has forensically documented his life: a compelling patchwork of family anecdotes, love stories, tragedies, bereavements, tour grouches and small talk about cats and boxing. In the past two years, though, four remarkable albums (*Among The Leaves*, *Perils From The Sea*, *Mark Kozelek And Desertshore* and *Benji*) have seen Kozelek accelerate his creative process

with an evolved, off-the-cuff way of writing songs; a diaristic vigour that gives even greater intimacy to what he calls, archly, “middle-aged ramblings about dead relatives”.

Kozelek runs his own label (Caldo Verde), usually tours solo, and releases a steady stream of live albums to make a pragmatic living as a cult artist. But the rapturous reviews for *Benji*, especially, have given him a greater prominence than ever before, and exposed some other aspects of his personality to a wider – and slightly shocked – audience.

It has been an eventful autumn. On September 5, at the Hopscotch Festival in North Carolina, Kozelek’s characteristically grumpy stage persona found him lambasting a talkative crowd as “fucking hillbillies”. Online indignation duly followed, and by September 9 Kozelek was selling T-shirts with the slogan “All You Fuckin’ Hillbillies Shut The Fuck Up” on his website. Then, on September 14, Kozelek’s performance at the Ottawa Folk Festival was disrupted by The War On Drugs playing, at somewhat louder volume, on a neighbouring stage. “Who the fuck is that?” Kozelek asked the crowd. “I hate that beer commercial lead-guitar shit.” He then introduced his next song as “The War On Drugs Can Suck My Fucking Dick”.

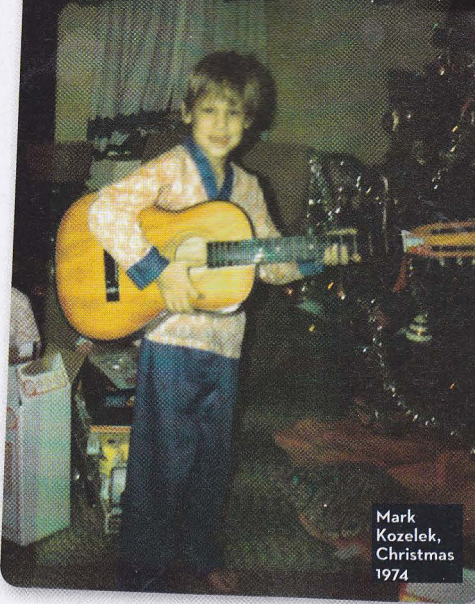
A bewildered War On Drugs later took to social media to try and find out what had been going on, which only served to amuse, or provoke, Kozelek further. By October 7, he had written, recorded and released “War On Drugs: Suck My Cock”, in which he also referred to a journalist who’d taken offence at his “hillbillies” jibe as a “spoiled bitch rich kid blogger brat”. After ranting in similar fashion for two decades, Kozelek’s cantankerous humour had suddenly been turned into rolling indie-rock news. The War On



“I’m here to  
make music  
and I don’t  
believe in  
wasting time”  
MARK KOZELEK

# MARK KOZELEK

● Drugs' Adam Granduciel eventually responded, exasperated. Kozelek, now pathological in his pursuit, released "Adam Granofsky Blues", in which he read out Granduciel's quotes punctuated by increasingly hysterical laughter. This last phase of the story happened after our interview, however; one in which he talks unrepentantly about his "banter", scathingly about social media and seriously, and in depth, about his art. Again and again, too, there's a sense of him asserting his credentials as a decent human being. "I have love in my heart," he says, "and I'm kind to people every single day of my life."



Mark Kozelek, Christmas 1974



Red House Painters in 1993

## RED HOUSE PAINTERS

**When we first met in 1992, how did you expect to spend the next 22 years? What were your expectations then?** I didn't think that far ahead. I remember Ivo [Watts-Russell, founder of 4AD] telling me he was 38 and I thought that sounded old, but here I am, at 47. The only thing I felt confident about, at that time, was that I'd make a living playing music for the rest of my life. I had a sense of it somehow.

**You must feel very proud about how you've stuck with your art for over two decades?** Yes, but it's not been the easiest road. There were several label switches, and the industry has changed so much. But I'm my own boss now: I work at my own pace.

**By most people's standards, you work at an incredibly fast pace. Every artist has different priorities. Some artists I know don't make as**

much music as they used to – social media has taken over their lives. I work at what I feel is a normal pace and things keep clicking. It's rewarding. Sun Kil Moon had a beautiful show in LA last night, and I felt so much love from the crowd.

**What needs to happen for you to pick up that love?** There are many elements that have to come together for a show to come off. Sometimes I'm playing indoors, sometimes I'm playing outdoor festivals at 6pm, trying to play "Carissa" with some other band's music bleeding into my set. Sometimes sound and crew know what they're doing, sometimes not as much. Sometimes a crowd is seated and respectful. Sometimes they've had too much to drink.

**Have you been surprised by the reaction to Benji?** I never worry about how records will be received, but I felt confident that *Benji* would be received poorly, that people would find it to be

middle-aged ramblings about dead relatives. But something about it resonated with people. I'm sure a lot of people love their mothers and fathers, or had a friend who died way too young.

**Has 2014 been your most successful year?** My most successful album happened back in the mid-'90s, pre-internet times, with *Songs For A Blue Guitar*. We were supported by Island, we toured a lot, songs were licensed to TV ads and movies. The second most successful was Sun Kil Moon's *Ghosts Of The Great Highway*. *Benji*, despite all of the hype, has sold about half of what *Tiny Cities* did. But considering the times we're in, selling 20,000 records in the USA, in a world where music is free, is pretty good.

**Do you feel staying in the public eye, with things like the War On Drugs business, will help?** I'm not doing anything intentionally to stay in the public eye. I'm staying true to my art, like I always have. The press, for whatever reason, decided to zone in on what is very common banter for me. It got worked out through song – the same way I work everything out.

**Do you think your songwriting style changed from *Among The Leaves* onwards?** I wrote "Sunshine In Chicago" just before I went onstage in Chicago and played it that night, and it worked. I followed that same flow throughout the rest of *Among The Leaves*: stream of consciousness. I'd just write, record, write, record. I was responding to whatever I was feeling and firing the songs off, one after another. I've got to a place where I don't work at writing. I get things out of my system quickly and move on.

**I had a look back at my interview from 1992, and a couple of your quotes stood out: "If my girlfriend fucks somebody else, or if I fuck somebody else, or we're not getting along, it's always my reaction to write about things. I'm not afraid to examine myself. I take my life very seriously, that's all. I don't wanna think too much about 'This is weird, Mark; you're solitary, you write about hating**

## PASSING FANCIES

"There isn't all the baggage that comes with, 'This is forever'."

**Jimmy LaValle, Desertshore, Justin Broadrick, Ben Gibbard? Kozelek on collaborations...**

**T**HEY DO THE music, I do the vocals. Jimmy [LaValle, with whom he made 2013's *Perils From The Sea*] and I recorded the entire album with only one phone conversation. It doesn't get easier than that. There was talk of us doing an EP, but he had a child since then, and you know how it is, he got busy with his things and I got busy with mine. But that guy made music that inspired me to sing at my very best. Maybe someday we'll do it again.

"With Desertshore [the San



Kozelek with (from top) Jimmy LaValle, Justin Broadrick, Ben Gibbard and Desertshore



Francisco instrumentalists who backed him on an eponymous 2013 set), I'd just show up, listen to what they'd recorded and write words and melodies on the spot. Easy stuff. When something is a side project, there isn't all the baggage that comes with, 'This is forever'. You're just working on one thing to see how it all turns out.

"Ben [Gibbard, *The Postal Service*/*Death Cab For Cutie* frontman] and I will make some music someday, I'm sure. I don't know how or when. Maybe him on drums, both of us singing and doing overdubs. He's a great drummer. Justin Broadrick [British avant-metal musician, best known for *Godflesh*] and I are working on something, as we can, here and there, as we're so fucking busy. It's going to be something, though, that album. It'll probably be out in 2016."

people, so why are you on the stage singing?" And "I just sing about shit that's directly involved with me." Those quotes suggest you've stayed remarkably constant throughout your career?

The quotes read awkwardly to me. But the sentence that basically remains true is that I'm still writing about what I'm passionate about.

**Does it surprise you to be still portrayed as a misanthropist and bad-tempered, when so many of your songs are so empathetic and humane?**

I don't know where all of that comes from, the misanthropy. I've played everywhere from Moscow to Jeju Island, Korea to Newtown, Connecticut, and I put my heart into every concert I play. I sign every autograph I'm asked to sign. People embed a piece of information into their brain and go with it, because it's easier. I'm playful with my audiences, I tease them from time to time. I make people laugh. But there is always going to be someone who pretends to be offended by it, because they're bored or alarmist or dramatic and have a phone in their hand. I show up to every concert making a mental note to remember every person in the staff's name. I'm respectful.

I have a friend who is sick and she doesn't have the strength to come see my shows, but I send her my live records as she said the best parts are my banter, they make her laugh. Anyone who thinks I'm 'bad tempered' is being lead by the nose. Sometimes you're only as good as the environment around you and, even in those not so great circumstances, I get through it with humour.

You had to be there in Ottawa that night. Playing *Benji* effectively wasn't an option, so I turned on the comedy. If people think I'm a prick because I don't have a Facebook page and I don't play Red House Painters songs any more, it's their issue, not mine.

"I THOUGHT MY LIFE WAS OVER WHEN TRUE DETECTIVE ENDED..."

**Mark Kozelek's life beyond music. Involves a lot of boxing...**

**"G**IRLFRIEND, long walks, bed, baths, HBO, food: that's my life outside of music. I thought my life was over when *True Detective* ended. I like Jim Lampley's *The Fight Game*, and there is a great short documentary I just saw on referee Kenny Bayless. The TV series right now are all reruns, but the boxing stays fairly current. The six-part documentary on [boxing trainer] Freddie Roach was hypnotic. I love when a documentary shows someone at work, rather than talking about their work. But yeah, mostly it's boxing. It's funny - my dad and I used to go to his friend Billy's house and all that guy watched was wrestling and boxing, period. I used to think, 'Man, what does this guy do besides watch boxing?' and here I am, just like Billy, watching boxing all the fucking time."

**What do you feel is so bad about Facebook and Twitter?**

It soaks up too much of people's time. I knew people, who were once great artists, who turned into internet junkies. So while they're posting photos of their new amps sitting in their garage, I'll actually be on tour. I'm moving forward, always.

**Do you ever worry that you reveal too much?** I'm in the songwriting business, not the wallpaper business.

**How do you feel about the War On Drugs episode now?**

The band tweeted they wanted confirmation of my stage banter, and they got it. They tweet, I write songs. That's how it works.

**Have you read any of the thinkpieces?** I've got a picture of someone who died at the age of 34 next to my bed. So I'm not interested in people's bitching and whining. Be grateful you can walk across the street. Someday it will end. Go outside and put a smile on someone's face. Tell a joke or give a \$20 bill to a homeless person. This Christmas, when I see someone lonely and hungry, I'm handing them a \$100 bill and giving them a hug, if they want it. You know why? I want to make people's faces light up with happiness on Christmas Day. I've had a great year, gotten lots of hugs and applause and big paychecks. I've made a living doing what I dreamed of doing since I was a

kid. So I'm gonna pass around some money and love to those who've been less fortunate than me.

**Do you regret any of the language you used?**

Language? Who are you, Tipper Gore? I've got a great sense of humour and anyone who doesn't share it is entitled to go cry about nothing.

**I was surprised at how much you knew about The War On Drugs' sound. Do you keep up with new music?** Their music drowned out my

entire set in Ottawa. I got familiar with their music whether I wanted to or not. I listen to classical guitar music and I check new music out when I'm at festivals, but when you're a full-time musician, you're busy with your own music.

**Does the press stereotype of you as a grumpy middle-aged man annoy you? There are times when it looks like you're using it to your advantage.**

I was a grumpy twenty-something, I used to pick on Evan Dando, for shits and giggles, between songs. I'm funny. I don't know what's going on out there in the press - slow times, maybe. But yeah, War On Drugs asked for a song, I gave them one. Press girl in North Carolina loved my hillbilly remark so much, I made her a shirt. If people don't want my banter soaking up all the press, then MAKE A GOOD ALBUM OR PLAY A SHOW THAT'S WORTH TALKING ABOUT. My hillbilly comment stole the show at Hopscotch? Not my fault. My War On Drugs banter upstaged you in Ottawa? Not my fault. If my banter is more noteworthy to the press than your music - not my fault.

I play two-and-a-half-hour sets and fly all around the world. Do fans want me to sleep in their basement all weekend? I'd love to, but I've got another city to play the next day. What do people want from me? To join Facebook and tweet? 'Hey fans, here's what I'm eating today! Here's a picture of my new salt and pepper shakers!' I make albums and I sing my heart out and I'll sign everything in your backpack when it's over. I'm sorry if that's not enough for you. I've put as many hours into my music as any successful lawyer or doctor. I'm here to make music and I don't believe in wasting time.

**How would you like to be remembered?**

As a great artist who inspired other artists to make music.

**And do you think, right now, that you're a great artist?** Yes.

**Does songwriting work as therapy, as a purgative process, for you?** Yes. I spent all day in the studio today and it felt great. When I put words together, forget it. No-one can touch me. You tweet and play Bob Dylan covers? Good for you, congratulations.

**Are there any songs that are too emotionally difficult for you to play these days?** "Somehow The Wonder Of Life Prevails" [From *Perils From The Sea*] is really fucking hard for me. Ah man, ➔

With Steve Shelley at work on *Benji*: Hyde Street Studios, San Francisco, August 2013



Sun Kil Moon at Hardly Strictly Bluegrass 2014: (l-r) Kozelek, Will Oldham, Mike Stevens, Phil Carney, Kirby Hammel and Nick Zubeck

MIKE MELNYK; REX © HBO/EVERETT



Live at the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, October 5, 2014

in 2003]. I saw her the night she passed away. What she would have given to see her daughter turn one. Her death destroyed me – friends had to take care of me. I couldn't get out of bed for two weeks. I remember calling Ivo and just crying my guts out and he sent me the most beautiful card. I'll never forget all of the support I got from friends. But with time, you get a different perspective. Katy always wanted to have a child and she got to do that in her life. I think of her every day. Every single day.

**Do you get bored of your songs after a while?**

Yes, that's a necessary process in growing as an artist. Songs just sort of die out, for me, my passion for them. I can't hang around a project too long, tweaking this and that. It's just boring and I need to get to the next song. I see poetry around me every day and I have to capture it.

**What's your oldest song that you're not bored with?**

"Black Kite". Anything that precedes *Among The Leaves* is a strain to play. But I played "Mistress" this year at one show, in Maine, because there was a guy in a wheelchair and he kept yelling out for it and that he'd waited 22 years to come see me – and I believed him, as he was in a wheelchair and it was my first time playing Portland, Maine. After the show, he wheeled himself up to me and asked for a hug and I gave him one and he would not let go. I mean, he would not let go. It just killed me. His name was Mike. Mike, it's not my favourite song any more, but if I ever play "Mistress" again, it'll be for you, 'cos you're the definition of strength and bravery and that hug made my fucking year.

**How easy is it for you to write songs now?**

In my sleep, on walks, on 'planes. Lyrics are the easiest thing. Just find an understanding girlfriend and write what's on your mind.

**How does your girlfriend feel about you revealing so much in your lyrics?** She knows that I have to be true to my art. Our relationship is deep. All you need to know is that I want to live a very long time. I wish I could live 10 lifetimes so I could spend them all with her.

**You seem to reveal so much in your songs, and guard your privacy so assiduously outside of them?** When you're a professional, you develop a thing called boundaries. You don't just let anyone walk into your home. I'm not in this business to be everyone's best friend. I don't let any stranger walk into my backstage area. Having boundaries is part of being professional. If you want to get anywhere in this world as a professional, you have to have boundaries.

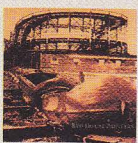
**In 2004, you told me, "I'm happy, but there's a lot of people who probably think I'm an asshole." Do you still believe that?** I'm making a new album as we speak, and trust me, it won't be wallpaper. Is that bad of me to do? Does that make me an asshole? My mom is coming into town tomorrow for 10 days and I'm going to play Scrabble with her all day long. Does that make me an asshole? I'll be in Europe for the fourth time this year and will be taking my music to Israel. Does that make me an asshole? A friend of mine is sick and I send her money. Does that make me an asshole? When Jason Molina died, I contributed the first track turned in, to help raise money for his family. Does that make me an asshole? When Tim Mooney died, who wrote a song for him? Every day of my life I have positive interactions with people. I go for walks and I make people smile at coffee shops, banks, restaurants. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't make someone smile. I see my girlfriend every night and when she looks at me, I smile and she smiles. That's all that matters. ☪

☪ it's hard for me to talk about without crying, but my friend committed suicide when he was 21. I was in Pacific Grove, California when I found out about it. He committed a crime when we were young and did some time in a detention centre. Anyhow, he was living with his parents and one night he left their house and drove into a tree. That's all I want to say on it. But every verse in that song kills me. There is the verse about my father and a bad scrap we got into when I was young, but I love him with all of my heart because he got me my first guitar from Sears when I was about seven.

The hardest verse of all is the one about Katy [an early girlfriend and key muse, who died of cancer

MARK KOZELEK: A BUYER'S GUIDE

"Sad reminders of what seems years ago..."



**RED HOUSE PAINTERS**  
**RED HOUSE PAINTERS** 4AD, 1993

The second RHP album (aka 'Rollercoaster'), after demos collection *Down Colorful Hill*. These two CDs of often pretty, often harrowing, confessionals established Kozelek's reputation as a sadcore magus. Another eponymous CD (aka 'Bridge') from the sessions was released later in 1993.



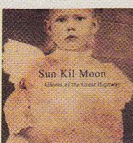
**RED HOUSE PAINTERS**  
**SONGS FOR A BLUE GUITAR** SUPREME/ISLAND, 1996

Dropped from 4AD because, allegedly, their guitar solos had got too long, RHP found a new home at the label run by filmmaker John Hughes. Kozelek once spent seven hours on the phone with Hughes as he needed a loan. "I just wanted to get \$15,000. Listening to him talk for seven hours was the price I had to pay."



**RED HOUSE PAINTERS**  
**OLD RAMON** SUB POP, 2001

Record label politics left the final RHP album on the shelf for three years. By the time this exceptional collection was finally released, the band had dissolved, and Kozelek had tentatively embarked on a solo career: his LP of acoustic AC/DC reconstructions, *What's Next To The Moon*, preceded *Old Ramon* by three months.



**SUN KIL MOON**  
**GHOSTS OF THE GREAT HIGHWAY** JETSET, 2003

Alongside RHP drummer Anthony Koutsos, Kozelek launched his second band with what is, arguably, his masterpiece. A rolling expansion of *Old Ramon's* Crazy Horse vibe, with meditations on memory, Judas Priest guitarists and sundry boxers that culminates with the 14-minute slow-burn of "Duk Koo Kim".



**SUN KIL MOON**  
**ADMIRAL FELL PROMISES** CALDO VERDE, 2010

Kozelek rates this and his 2013 collaboration with Jimmy LaValle, *Perils From The Sea*, as his best albums. A solo recording that privileges Kozelek's increasing mastery of the nylon-string guitar sound he loves on classical work by the likes of Segovia. The last SKM album before Kozelek moved towards his current spontaneous, *sprechgesang* style.



**SUN KIL MOON**  
**BENJI** CALDO VERDE, 2014

An unflinching and profoundly moving collection of stories, so unmediated they seem to unravel in real-time; Will Oldham and Steve Shelley figure in an expanded cast. "When you're middle-aged, you are who you are. I'm a full-time musician. I play decent-sized rooms, I make a good living. I've never, ever compromised."