

THE BIG INTERVIEW

BY
BRIAN CAMPBELL

He made his name with the Red House Painters and now releases music under the name Sun Kil Moon. The multi-talented Mark Kozelek tells **Scene** about reworking the songs of Modest Mouse...

ON THE MARK AGAIN

TO COVER AC/DC isn't unheard of, but it was something of a shock when Red House Painters' singer Mark Kozelek decided to record his own versions of Bon Scott-era songs.

Kozelek, known for his delicate vocals and intricate guitar playing, further surprised everyone with what were brilliant reworkings of the material. He has also covered Neil Diamond and John Denver and has now gone one better by taking on a band that's barely been around for a decade – the excellent Modest Mouse.

That band is fronted by Isaac Brock, a man with a fierce and unique vocal delivery, but Kozelek has taken songs from a selection of their albums, slowed them down and transformed them into stunning strummed classics that could easily be mistaken for his own.

The album is called *Tiny Cities* – taken from the Modest Mouse song *Tiny Cities Made of Ashes* (from their *The Moon & Antarctica* album) – and the singer has released it under his Sun Kil Moon moniker.

The closing track is *Ocean Breathes Salty*, from the band's latest record – their breakthrough – *Good News For People Who Love Bad News*, and the Kozelek version is sublime.

Far from being a Modest Mouse fan from their earliest days, Kozelek insists he stumbled upon the band.

"I was just kind of indifferent to them. I had a girlfriend that liked them at one point but I just kind of dismissed them as one of these new trendy bands that come and go," he said.

"Then I kind of started to notice that everywhere I went these guys were doing three and four nights, so then I went to see The Shins one night a couple of years ago and they were opening for Modest Mouse.

"So it was an opportunity to see them and I stuck around and a few years later I did this album, so they definitely left an impression on me."

Have the Modest Mouse guys heard the album?

"That's like the question of the year for me. I know that they have it and I sort of vaguely heard that the drummer likes it or something but I've not definitely heard anything.

"For me this was just another project that I did and I've got to live with it now. It's a little embarrassing. It's one thing to do an all-AC/DC covers record – I was horrified enough when I did it but Bon Scott was gone and wasn't around to watch it.

"This is a little more horrifying because this guy's about 10 years younger than me and could probably kick my ass, you know?!"

"So you do something like this and it's a bit like getting a tattoo when you're drunk.

"It's like, 'Well I did it and I'm going to live with it' but I'm not going to go out and do a full-on Modest Mouse covers tour. That would be ridiculous."

Kozelek plays a one-off Irish date in Dublin on November 30 and it's one not to miss.

"I'm not really promoting *Tiny Cities* as such. I got asked to be part of the 25th anniversary shows in London for 4AD,



so if it wasn't for that I probably wouldn't be coming over but it's a long way for me to come to play one festival.

"So we've booked these shows in Greece and I'm over in Europe for a while and I have the new record out, so I might as well go and play some shows."

Kozelek said he didn't feel the need to cover *Float On*, the anthemic single from the latest Modest Mouse album, saying he felt more of a chemistry with albums such as *The Lonesome Crowded West*.

He said some of the engineers and musicians he worked with on *Tiny Cities* didn't even realise the songs were Modest Mouse covers.

As for the listening public and critics, he thinks the reaction will be mixed. "I think in a lot of cases, with stuff like this, people make their minds up about it before they even hear it.

"So I think if it wasn't spelled out for them a lot of people wouldn't recognise them as Modest Mouse covers."

Did he think it was important to completely rework a song and put his spin on it when doing a cover?

"For the most part that's what I want to do, to bring myself into it a little bit.

"The main thing is that I want to make good music, so I think if I were to emulate the original and sing the melody the same and play the guitar part the same, there's not much point. "And I'm obsessive and I get pretty passionate about artists like Bon Scott or Isaac Brock so I can't get enough out of just covering one song.

"I know the body of work is so vast and I know I can do a good job with it and really make something of it.

"It's just about having chemistry with lyrics and the stuff I've done works well with the music I play."

■ Mark Kozelek plays Whelan's in Dublin on Wednesday November 30. Tickets €20, available from Road Records, Soundcellar and via Ticketmaster. *Tiny Cities* is out now on Rough Trade.



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