

ALBUM BY ALBUM

MARK KOZELEK

INTERVIEW *by* GRAEME THOMSON



Nearly 20 years into a career spanning Red House Painters, Sun Kil Moon and several solo records, singer, songwriter, producer and label boss Mark Kozelek has proved a master at painting melancholy in a thousand shades. A weighty beauty unites all his music, but a continuing desire to chase his muse down unexpected avenues lends it a compelling diversity. “You can’t direct creativity,” says Kozelek, gearing up for the release of the fourth Sun Kil Moon album. “You can’t set it in a direction and know where it will be a year from now. That’s the beauty of it.”

THE GET-TO-KNOW-YOU DEMOS

RED HOUSE PAINTERS DOWN COLORFUL HILL

4AD, 1992. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK



Six bewitching demos of bleached, glacial folk-rock, recorded in San Francisco by Kozelek, bassist Jerry Vessel and drummer Anthony Koutsos.

The astonishing debut makes an immediate impact, particularly in the UK.

KOZELEK: We were playing locally and had made several demos, but we didn’t really know where to send them. Back in 1991 you’d look at the back of a CD and try to find an address, but we didn’t have a manager or a lawyer. Our break came from Mark Eitzel of American Music Club, who really took to us. When he was in England he mentioned us to a journalist called Martin Aston, and when Eitzel came home I sent Martin a tape of about 20 songs. I just wrapped it up in a paper bag from the grocery store and put some stamps on it. Within a few months I was taking a bath and the answering machine picked up this British accent; it was Ivo [Watts-Russell] from 4AD, and that was it. Ivo picked the six songs he liked off those demos and released them as a kind of a get-to-know-you introduction to the band. We did the demos quickly and we never really thought anybody beyond our friends would hear them, but the press just ate it up. Looking back, it’s representative of that time and how I felt. A song like “24” is a whole different thing now I’m 43, but when I wrote it I was working at the front desk of a hotel and didn’t have a career in music and didn’t know if I ever would. It’s all relative.

TAKING THINGS DOUBLY SERIOUSLY...

RED HOUSE PAINTERS RED HOUSE PAINTERS I AND II

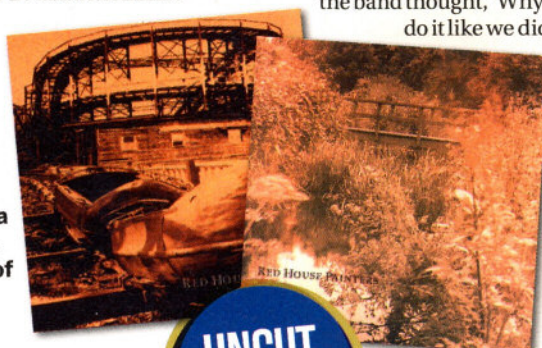
4AD, 1993. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK

Commonly called ‘Rollercoaster’ and ‘Bridge’ due to the cover art, the two albums are recorded simultaneously and released only a few months apart. Containing some of Kozelek’s most potent writing, the sprawling ‘Rollercoaster’ is a career stand-out.

KOZELEK: If records were movies I guess this one would be my *Apocalypse Now!* It was supposed to be one album covering this backlog of songs I had. It was the first time we’d had a budget and we knew we were going to have to be turning this stuff in to a record company and, because of the reaction *Down Colorful Hill* had been getting, it was going to go much further than the East Bay. We just threw ourselves in there, we didn’t really know what we were doing. We bounced back and forth between a couple of pretty expensive studios, had technical problems, different engineers, and we were learning a lot about the studio and what it meant to be on a record label.

That time was very intense. The records took about nine months and I was in the studio four days a week and then spending the weekends listening to rough mixes and basic tracks. I wasn’t sleeping well, I just immersed myself in

the world of recording. I became very analytical with everything: the tempos of the songs, the intonation of the guitars, my vocals. I wanted everything perfectly in pitch. I think the band thought, ‘Why don’t we just do it like we did it before?’



UNCUT CLASSICS

psychologically it was a whole different thing. You feel more like a proper band before anything happens, but then the press hones in on the singer and the songwriter and

the reviews would talk about me a lot. It did change things. I couldn’t put myself in the frame of my mind I was in before. I needed to take it more seriously. I felt the weight of the world on me.

In some ways it was a high point. It was such a catharsis of music and a very exciting time, because we were going to Europe and touring the US for the first time. Although I probably haven’t played “Strawberry Hill” for 15 years, there are a few songs on there – “Katy Song”, “Grace Cathedral Park”, “Mistress” – that really have some staying power and longevity. But honestly, it’s quite difficult to listen to, because it was difficult to make. Also, you look at something from 20 years ago and you like to think your music has matured. I feel like my singing is much stronger now than then. The sound of my voice from my early recordings is kind of cringey to me, the timbre is higher pitched. For a lot of reasons it’s a difficult record for me to go back to.



Red House Painters:
(l-r) Gordon Mack, Jerry
Vessel, Mark Kozelek
and Anthony Koutsos

THE STRIPPED-BACK THIRD

RED HOUSE PAINTERS OCEAN BEACH

4AD, 1995. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK



Junking much of the surface atmospheric evident on previous LPs, Kozelek strips the sound back to simpler, more organic acoustic textures, the songs haunted

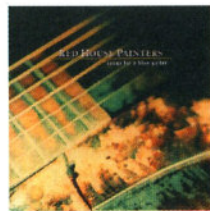
by memory and place.

KOZELEK: I was beginning to relax a little more in the studio. I'd learned a lot from the 'Rollercoaster' and 'Bridge' records and I was gaining more confidence as a producer, learning how to make a cohesive record that sounded right from beginning to end. It may have lacked the dynamics of 'Rollercoaster', but to me, *Ocean Beach* was the most cohesive album up to that point, warmer in tone and a little easier on the ears. It was the first album we recorded in one place. We settled on one engineer and worked in a studio mainly used for voice-over for commercials, it had a small tracking room and we really focused. At the same time my world was becoming more broad and my perspective was changing. 'Rollercoaster' and *Down Colorful Hill* are kind of isolated to one area in San Francisco, and I think *Ocean Beach* was about me learning how being out of town all the time could have an effect on your personal life and relationships. My whole scope was changing, and that's where songs like "Drop" or "Brockwell Park" come from. I also felt some nervousness, as it was my third record and that's a crucial point in an artist's career. Are you going to have a life in music or be a maths teacher or whatever? Getting past that feeling felt wonderful.

A SOLO ALBUM IN ALL BUT NAME

RED HOUSE PAINTERS SONGS FOR A BLUE GUITAR

SUPREME/ISLAND, 1996. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK



Their biggest seller in the US, this album of off-beat covers (including Wings' "Silly Love Songs") and ragged guitar pyrotechnics alienates 4AD,

who sever their ties with the band.

KOZELEK: I started this as a solo record. Jerry wanted to take a break so the timing seemed right. I like to change things up and you can really hear that on this record: three cover songs and taking liberties on the guitar, loosening up and stretching out. We cut the basic tracks in Mendocino in about four days and I sent them to Robin Hurley at 4AD. The next day I got a call in the control room. Robin said, "Ivo wondered how you'd feel about losing the cover songs and the guitar solos?" I thought, 'If we do that we'll have *Ocean Beach* again!' I called Robin the next day and said I didn't want to change anything, so could I take the record somewhere else. He called back and said, "Ivo says you're free to go if you repay the \$30,000 we've spent on the record." And that was it. I have to admit when I hung up the phone I was like, 'Oh fuck!' In the end we signed to movie director John Hughes' label Supreme, a subsidiary of Island, and got \$100,000. The album came out as Red House Painters because Jerry was back, and in the end I felt it was a vindication. In the US it's still our biggest seller and one song [a cover of *The Cars*' "All Mixed Up"] ended up in a Gap commercial.

A DELAYED SWANSONG

RED HOUSE PAINTERS OLD RAMON

SUB POP, 2001. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK



The band's career momentum is halted as the release of their final LP is delayed for over three years, bogged down by record-company changeovers.

KOZELEK: And this is the downside of being on a major label! We had that money behind us and, well, I was using it. I was getting pretty relaxed in the studio, bouncing between Mendocino, Austin, Texas and San Francisco, and the record started costing a fortune and going over-budget. All of a sudden there was a merger with the labels, Island was now becoming Universal, and a lot of bands were getting dropped. We were one of them and that was pretty hard. We'd spent about \$180,000 on the record, and we were in the same boat as we were with 4AD: "Sure, anybody can come along and take this record, but they owe us \$180,000." Things were changing in the music business and people weren't throwing that kind of money around. Sub Pop eventually contacted us and our lawyer made a negotiation with Universal. It was just like buying a foreclosure, they cut us a deal and we got the record back. It was recorded from fall 1997 into spring of 1998, but it didn't come out until 2001. There was a lot of build-up from it being shelved – these days it would be leaked on the internet, but that wasn't going on then – and I think the delay caused exaggerated expectations. But it was just an album, albeit a good album. In fact, it's my favourite Red House Painters record.

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Kozelek: "I'm compulsive. When I become obsessed, one bite isn't enough..."

A WHOLE LOTTA AC/DC COVERS

MARK KOZELEK WHAT'S NEXT TO THE MOON

JETSET, 2001. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK



Kozelek's first solo album features 10 Bon Scott-era AC/DC covers tenderly deconstructed for voice and acoustic guitar. Want to hear "Bad Boy Boogie" as

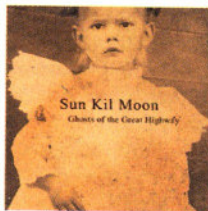
mournful country shuffle? Step this way.

KOZELEK: While I was on that whole hiatus between records I found odd things to do to stay busy. I had a part in *Almost Famous*, I put together a John Denver tribute record, and then I became obsessed with AC/DC covers. I'd been touring Spain and I was doing "What's Next To The Moon" and another AC/DC song, and they blended into the set fine. People kept saying, "Hey, I like the new songs!" Nobody knew they were AC/DC tracks, because I do tend to change the songs I'm covering. There was something about the way Bon Scott's lyrics fitted into that folkie acoustic context; once I'd seen how well one song worked I wanted to do the whole lot. The next thing you know, we had 10 tracks. It was the easiest record I ever made—fun, relaxed, a good way to decompress. I didn't even have to write lyrics. I'm quite compulsive. When I become obsessed, one bite isn't enough. I did the same thing later with *Tiny Cities* [*Sun Kil Moon's* album of *Modest Mouse* covers].

A NEW APPROACH

SUN KIL MOON GHOSTS OF THE GREAT HIGHWAY

JETSET, 2003. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK



Kozelek forms Sun Kil Moon in 2002 and their debut appears a year later, a mix of dusty ballads and Neil Young-esque rockers, all around a loose boxing theme.

KOZELEK: I see all my music as a continuum. I've produced every record, they're my songs, it's my voice, but the one thing I can do is to change the colour a little bit. Sun Kil Moon was an experiment to create a buzz and get some excitement back into my life. The band wasn't new—Anthony and Jerry from Red House Painters played on it—but I thought I'd give it a new title and see what kind of excitement it created. And I was right! All of a sudden these journalists in England who hadn't talked to me since 1993 were calling me. I'm a big boxing fan. "Salvador Sanchez" was recorded and I didn't have any lyrics. I just recall humming his name over the main guitar riff and it fitted so well. It was another one of those obsessions that became played out on that record. *Ghosts Of The Great Highway* was another turning point, because afterwards I set up my own label, Caldo Verde. I reckoned that people who buy my records didn't give a fuck what it said on the label. It was time to put that to the test.

A MASTERPIECE OF LOSS

SUN KIL MOON APRIL

CALDO VERDE, 2008. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK



Bruising, hauntingly beautiful songs of loss and redemption written "in honour" of Kozelek's ex-girlfriend and long term muse Katy, who died in 2003. It might

just end up being his masterpiece.

KOZELEK: The timing was right to make this record. Katy had passed away early in 2003, but it wasn't time, I needed to get some perspective. I wanted to pay tribute to her, honour her and make beautiful music about her. I didn't want it to be angsty, but I wasn't aware of how heavy it was until I saw people's reactions. To me, I was just singing songs the way I always had, but the people around me were having a hard time with it. During songs like "Tonight The Sky", the backing musicians would take a break and say, "Mark, this is really heavy." To this day Katy is the longest relationship I've had. She introduced me to lots of places and things. Every corner I walk around in San Francisco is filled with memories about her. She was a wealth of inspiration. The fact that she passed away under such extreme circumstances, dying of cancer at 35, is something I think about every single day and can't help but always go back to in my music. It will affect me for the rest of my life.

CLASSICAL-GUITAR MINIMALISM

SUN KIL MOON ADMIRAL FELL PROMISES

CALDO VERDE, 2010. PRODUCED BY MARK KOZELEK



Another left turn, a stunning new LP of minimal solo works hung on Kozelek's voice, often multi-tracked, and his clean, intricate classical guitar-playing.

KOZELEK: A few years ago I was on tour in New Zealand and I picked up a 5CD Segovia set, and then I got another one of his records that I just fell in love with. I've always liked classical guitar. I played it a bit when I was younger, and it features on some of my records, like "Summer Dress" and "Blue Orchids", but I've been listening to a lot more of it recently. There was something about listening to Segovia that made me feel like I wasn't doing as much as I might be. I felt like I wanted to make a record where I played guitar and sang as beautifully as I could. It made me want to raise the bar. I really bunkered down and started practising more on a nylon-string guitar and listening to more classical music, because I wanted something that made me feel the way those old classical guitar recordings made me feel. My engineer said that the vocal and nylon guitar really covered the whole range, and as we went along we realised that bass and drums would only clutter it up. 🎸