

Review: An evening with Mark Kozelek, melancholy's happy messiah

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Death and demise seemed to be the theme at “[An Evening with Mark Kozelek](#)” held at the [Great American Music Hall](#) on Sat, 1 March, as part of this year’s recent [Noise Pop Festival](#). But rather than coming off as down-right depressing, Kozelek’s touching ruminations and ramblings on lost and longing were life-affirming, entertaining even.

It is to his credit that you don’t put all this dreariness just to middle age malaise but are swept along by the humanity and pain of the quotidian where death seems to assert itself increasingly and sometimes absurdly. Playing his acoustic guitar perched on a stool, Kozelek illustrated how entertainment doesn’t have to be showy, shallow pop but can be nuanced, raw and hallowed.

The consequence, however, is that after more than 20 years as a musician, having fronted two bands the [Red House Painters](#) and [Sun Kil Moon](#), plus having toured the globe extensively from Asia to Europe, playing in a bustling metropolis like Melbourne to the tiny island of Giske in Norway, he is still not a household name.

So he may not be able to pull a sold-out arena tour but what does it matter when the [Great American Music Hall](#) is his favorite venue in the world, and the fact that he can “walk 20 blocks” from his home and be well-paid for this one-night sold out gig makes him positively gleeful?

He also placed an all-out ban on any photography and a zero-tolerance for mobile phones showing his verve. But for someone expected to pour his soul out with a stripped-down performance, accompanied by only a drummer – Eric Pollard, and keyboardist – Chris Connolly, it wasn’t too much to ask.

Well, once we all got over the knee-jerk reaction of feeling our entitlements were being trampled on, it made for a more poignant and engaging night. The evening’s repertoire was largely songs from his latest and sixth album, “[Benji](#)” yes after the name of the scruffy terrier with the heart-of-gold from the ‘70s movies.

He began with “Carissa” about the sudden freak death of his second cousin who he met as a child, then again when she was teenager with-child. Now he gets a call telling him “Carissa is 35, raises 2 kids, takes out the thrash and dies.” The baritone voice and simple guitar chords tug achingly at the heartstrings.

And if that didn't get you heavy-hearted, the next one "I Can't Live Without My Mother's Love" where he sings "I can live without a lover beside me at night/ I can live without what you might call a charmed life/But I can't live without my mother's love," is guaranteed to get even the hardest dude to crumple. It is far superior a rendition live, than on the studio album which is crowded with back-up vocals in the chorus.

The rest of his set continued with the same pace and more songs from "Benji". When he does engage with the audience, he again is himself, half taunting the guys in his front row for their plaid shirts, and calling one guy a retard for wearing head-phones. Whether Kozelek did it for effect as his next song touched on the subject of bullying, or otherwise – the night bore the inimitable frisson of a live show.

Kozelek recently performed at SXSW and has a tour scheduled for Europe in April, but if you have the opportunity to see him live I would urge you to take it. He doesn't disappoint. And though he often makes mention of the guys in tennis shoes that crowds his front row, tonight when he does have a couple of young girls there, they wind up getting escorted out for being overly-chatty and distracting.

After almost an hour and a half of "Benji" songs, he returns for an encore singing a number of songs from his previous album "Among The Leaves". He says, "This is a song written in a remote location in Singapore. They put me up there because there was a car race on." Being from Singapore, I wondered where exactly it was. "Black Kite" with its slow Flamenco-style and finger-plucking, starts to evoke ferns, bougainvillea and humidity made bearable by a gentle cool evening breeze. I hazard a guess somewhere on the island's eastern-most tip in Changi?

Whatever the locale, Kozelek and his fans know he is melancholy's messiah recounting here mid-life ennui and our universal mortality with nothing more than brutal honesty and nylon strings. And scarcely a soul in this joint is unhappy about that.