

Sun Kil Moon's *Benji*: Life and death (mostly death) in small-town Ohio

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Prolific singer, songwriter and guitarist Mark Kozelek (born 1967) has recorded something like 18 full-length studio albums and numerous live albums and collaborations since 1989, first as Red House Painters, then as Sun Kil Moon. *Benji*, his latest, was written and recorded over the course of the summer in 2013 and released in February of this year. The material is autobiographical and very current. Some of the songs take up events that happened *during* the recording of the album.

The premise is this: A moderately successful musician living in San Francisco (such as Kozelek himself) returns to his hometown in Ohio to attend the funeral of a distant cousin. Though he only met her briefly, 20 years earlier, he is deeply affected by the tragic, accidental death of this 35-year-old mother of two. Kozelek vows “to find some poetry, make some sense of it, find some meaning in the senseless tragedy.” The songs that follow are mostly concerned with the lives and deaths of certain of Kozelek’s family members and old friends who never left the area. What is the meaning of their lives?

Various sympathetic characters are sketched. Almost all of them have died or are approaching death. Two of Kozelek’s relatives, a nurse and a truck driver, die in separate explosions, each while burning trash in his or her yard. An old bandmate who suffered a mentally debilitating aneurism in his youth dies much later in life, leaving a wife and son behind.

Perhaps most movingly, an elderly friend of the singer’s father is under house arrest awaiting trial for the mercy killing of his terminally ill wife at a hospital. The distraught husband had attempted to kill himself at the same time, but the gun failed. Others survive, but experience their own trauma: Micheline, a mentally handicapped woman who “wanted love like anyone

else,” is victimized by a dishonest suitor only after her welfare money.

The strength of *Benji* is a genuine sensitivity to the suffering of these often downtrodden figures. Kozelek’s resonant voice, his intimate, conversational delivery and expressive fingerstyle guitar powerfully convey sadness. Lyrically—more often for better, sometimes for worse—he’s far more interested in clear, direct statements than with poetic construction. He is a prose writer, if anything. The words seem to flow together naturally, and the listener mostly feels they are honest.

However, even evoking powerful emotions, bringing out the sadness of an individual event, can have its limitations. There is at times a passivity in Kozelek’s work. This is felt throughout *Benji*, where life appears as a string of personal tragedies (“one damned thing after another”) with no discernable logic or root cause, about which almost no conclusions can be drawn, where the best one can do is sigh and try to hold on to such fleeting moments of happiness as there are.

Kozelek, who has been recording for a quarter-century and has traveled around the world and also acted in several Hollywood films (*Almost Famous*, *Shop Girl*), revealed something of his perspective in a recent interview. “Even though I’ve been away so long, I’m still very ‘Ohio’ ... There is simplicity to my life, a basicness with how I view things.” Too simple and too basic, one fears.

Criticizing in 1924 the “provincialism” of an author, Trotsky wrote that, “You can approach the [Russian] revolution through the small town, but you cannot have a small town line of vision on it.” In that author’s work, Trotsky wrote, “You do not feel the satisfaction which comes from solving contradictions, which is the greatest sign of a work of art. It is just as perplexing as

before, and even more so.” *Benji* is nothing if not perplexed.

Today, an artistic exploration of small-town American life, where so much is indeed unsatisfactory—even unbearable—is sorely needed. But the artists’ most important duty is to bring the audience closer to the underlying truth of his or her subject matter, and not simply to dwell somewhat woefully on its surface.

The album’s only real look out at the wider world is the song “Pray for Newtown,” which takes up real-life school shootings and other spree killings. Falling well short of helpful insight, however, the song suggests that “When your birthday comes and you’re feeling pretty good/Baking cakes and opening gifts and stuffing your mouth with food/Take a moment for the children who lost their lives.” Here Kozelek would appear to shift the blame for such social tragedies onto what he wrongly perceives as a privileged and indifferent population.

If there is one stand-out success on *Benji*, it is the funny and sweet “I Love My Dad.” Kozelek’s father, “an eighth grade dropout,” now 80 years old, apparently used to hit his son occasionally when the latter misbehaved. But Kozelek was also taught important life lessons by the man. This reviewer found particularly endearing the verse about his father using an Edgar Winter record to help the boy overcome his fear of an albino classmate in kindergarten.

When the soulful backup singers join Kozelek on the breezy chorus, which contains only the lyrics “I love my Dad,” it’s plain that all has been forgiven. Here Kozelek is stepping away from bitterness and moralizing. He does not condone the more brutal actions of his father, but he has attempted to view him more objectively and compassionately. He has attempted to understand him. It is a pity this approach could not have been sustained throughout the work.



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