

RED HOUSE PAINTERS

LONDON CHARING CROSS ROAD

BORDERLINE

ONE GIG played in Britain, one album released two months ago, and already people love this band to death, like a cult they've spent years nurturing and nuzzling up to in the safety of their own bedrooms. And, already, the Red House Painters demand to be written about to extremes, hyperbolically, demand a level of obsession almost unknown to bands at this level of development.

When Mark Kozelek shuffles back on, alone, for a final encore of his elegy to a lost friend, 'Michael' – the only familiar song he'll play all night – people are openly crying, for Christ's sake. Red House Painters' music – spellbindingly slow, delicate beyond definition, shockingly personal – may hardly fit the rigorous parameters too often defined for rock 'n' roll. But conventional, *loud* rock rarely inspires the emotions – excites, shocks, whatever – as much as these songs enrapture and blatantly *move* the audience. Make no mistake, this is *supremely* affecting music.

The sheer weight of painstaking, almost invariably painful confessions that Kozelek unloads in the space of nine songs is too much for a few, who find this steady, methodical dissection of his own psyche more unnerving than fascinating. Sure, it's a little embarrassing sometimes; the unadorned, brutally straightforward lyrics can be personally revealing to the point of gaucheness; during 'Mother', with absolutely no sense of self-parody, he groans "*Stick bobby-pins in my ears*". And there's a constant, disconcerting contrast between Kozelek's mumbling, stumbling, self-conscious bearing and the staggering un-self-consciousness of his lyrics, expressed in strong and soaring tones.

But the relentless intimacy, the unwavering analysis of a life of sadness, is melded to gentle, great songs. The 'Down Colorful Hill' album – remixed demos from a couple of years ago – is stoutly ignored until *that* encore, in favour of twisting, touching, frequently heart-stopping tracks from the double album they've just been finishing off back home in San Francisco. Although Kozelek maintains the songs are a little more "MTV-friendly" (very slight irony there), only the mid-paced sprightliness of 'New Jersey' breaks the flow of measured, bewitching melancholy.

'Dragonflies' and 'Evil' are the equal of anything on that first album, and the aforementioned 'Mother' – where he positively flaunts womb-yearning and a complete admission of his own inadequacy, before spiralling off into wordless, melodic whale-calls – is nothing less than astounding. The crowd are near-devotional, passionately involved, utterly, utterly entranced. Quite right, too – Red House Painters deserve every bit of praise that's being heaped upon them. Beautiful and sad beyond belief.

John Mulvey