

# RED HOUSE PAINTERS

## HILL SUITE BLUES

**WHEN PAINT ME THIS.** Cold adobe walls, a bare stone floor. An embroidered silk quilt hanging like a winding sheet from an old bed. Dead flowers on the pillow. It looks like a room waiting to receive the broken, bloody body of a martyr, or someone who's just died like one.

We are looking at the cover of "Down Colorful Hill", the debut album by San Francisco's Red House Painters. The sleeve doesn't give away much more than this—the album title and the name of the band. It doesn't tell you that the songs on the album were written by Mark Kozelek, who also plays guitar and sings. Neither does it mention drummer Anthony Koutsos, bassist Jerry Vessel or guitarist Gordon Mack.

Even by 4AD's standards, it's pretty f\*\*\*ing enigmatic on the information front.

What Vaughan Oliver's cover does suggest brilliantly, however, is the overwhelming solitariness of Mark Kozelek's songs. It uncannily matches the record's desolate atmosphere.

Full marks, as it were, for that.

"I LIKE the idea of picking up a record where the music speaks for itself. Like a Joy Division album. You just have this sleeve and, just by looking at it, you somehow know what the music's gonna be like. That's really cool."

It's a glorious early autumn afternoon in San Francisco, nothing but blue skies outside. In the cocktail bar of the Miyako hotel in Japantown, Mark Kozelek, sitting opposite me and looking like Paul Westerberg's scruffy younger brother, is chain-drinking coffee like a man heading for a caffeine crisis.

"The first idea for the cover that 4AD had, we really didn't like," he says. "It was a picture of a dead cow, hanging by its hooves. There are definitely songs about pain on the album. But it's not the kind of pain that makes me think of a cow hanging from a hook. That's the wrong kind of pain. This isn't an album full of blood and screaming. It's real lonely and melancholy, which, yeah, is the environment the songs come from."

"I'm definitely a loner, you know? I live alone. I don't go out a lot. I'm not a social person at all. I'm pretty content being by myself, being alone. As a child, I was the same way. I don't know why. Where I grew up, the winters were really bad, but the kids would always love to go out in the snow. Where I lived, there was a hill and the kids would all get up there on their sleighs and stuff. I always stayed home. I never participated in all the so-called fun neighbourhood things that the other kids got into. What I remember most about

growing up is sitting inside my house and looking out the window and seeing kids having fun. But it was never anything I wanted to be part of."

Were you unhappy?

"There was maybe a sort of unhappiness... But mostly there was a feeling of melancholy, which is a kind of comfortable unhappiness. It was like a shield against the world. And I always had my music. I was happy with that, up in my room with my headphones and records."

He sounds like he could have stayed there forever.

**YOU** grew up in a town called Massillon, in Ohio. You lived in a

nerve pills. Davron. Darvocet. Quaaludes. All kinds of stuff.

"I did drugs because I wanted to. It was something I was curious about. I lived in this suburban house in a suburban neighbourhood. I went to this suburban school where everybody was the same, and I thought it was cool that I'd started smoking pot, buying joints and doing drugs. It made me feel different, it made me feel cool."

I want to know what it was like in rehab, but you're pretty guarded.

"I don't know how much I should talk about this," you say, "because I don't want to come across like Sinead O'Connor, telling everybody I had this traumatic, abused childhood. But,

yeah, drug rehab was scary. I mean, I was only 14. But it helped me. I haven't done drugs or drunk for 11 or 12 years now, and I think I'm better off..."

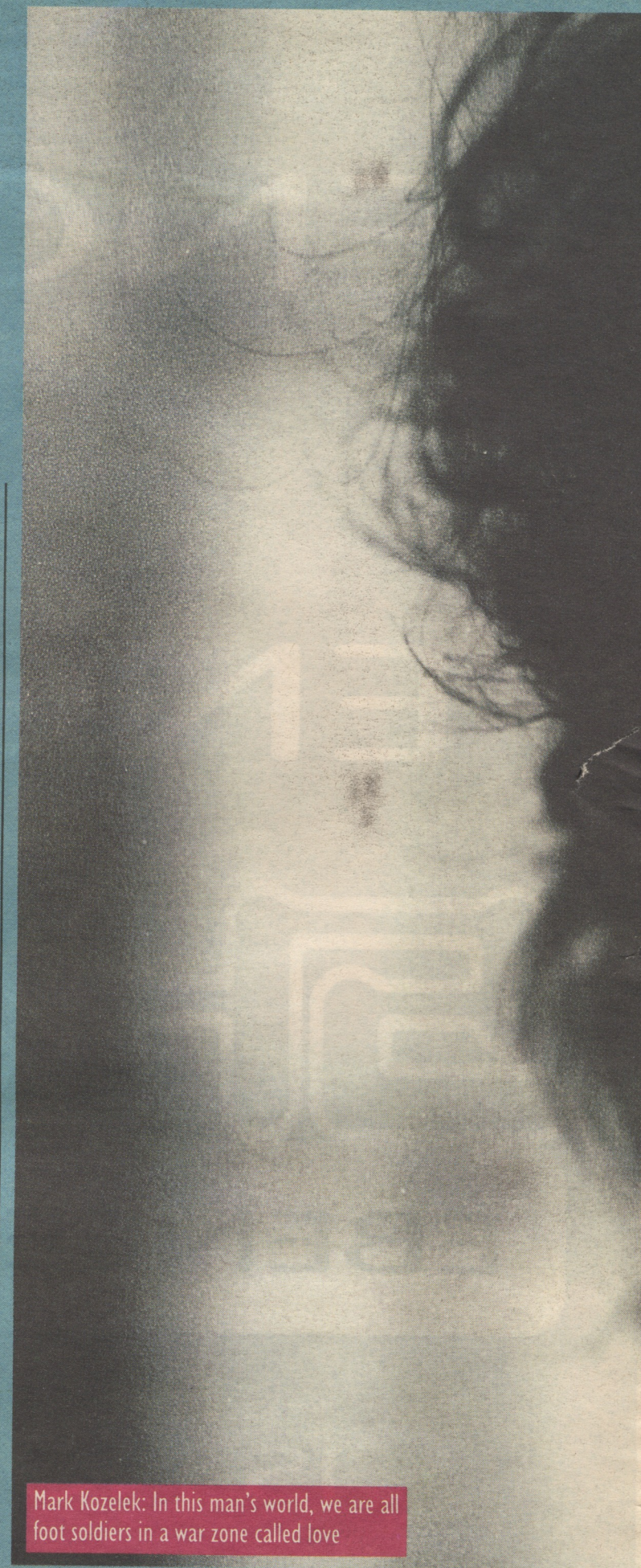
**YOU** started playing guitar around the same time you started doing drugs. You were good. But the more you got into drugs, the less you played. When you came out of drug rehab, you rediscovered music. It became a focus for your life, something for you to cling onto.

Music, you realised, was the way out you'd been looking for in drugs. When you were 18, you graduated from high school and formed a band called God Forbid. You were serious and heavy. The first song you wrote was called "The Starving". You were not overly endowed in the chuckle department.

You had intended to stay in Ohio, making a go of it there with your band. Then you found out something about your girlfriend and a friend of yours, and you freaked. You had 500 dollars in your pocket and lit out for Atlanta, taking the band with you. This was not a successful move. Your drummer got married and your bass player got into drugs. The band split. You'd met Anthony Koutsos by then, and formed a new band. Then you came out to San Francisco. Where you lived in Atlanta, you couldn't walk home two blocks from work without

getting mugged, beaten up, or worse. San Francisco seemed like heaven. You called Anthony and asked him to come out to the coast. He thought why-the-f\*\*\*-not? and joined you.

Red House Painters made their debut at the Blue Lamp. You were still a mainline rock band then. You were out front shouting, not singing. You weren't happy. Your songs were being drowned out by the noise. You were tired of riffs going off like pre-emptive airstrikes, and feedback ringing in your ears. One day, someone didn't turn up for rehearsal and you started playing acoustic guitar and singing. You didn't



Mark Kozelek: In this man's world, we are all foot soldiers in a war zone called love

have to shout anymore. You decided that the way forward was to turn everything down. The group were worried about all this sudden silence, but decided to give it a shot.

The results were disastrous.

"EVERBODY hated us," Mark Kozelek remembers. "We couldn't get people to stay at the shows. They'd just walk out. People threw ice at us and told us we sucked. A girl pretended to shoot me with a rifle. We were a Wednesday night band playing small clubs in front of 15 people, and everybody hated us."

"We sent a demo tape to Virgin, basically the same material that's on the album. This woman wrote back and said, 'I listened to your tape and didn't like it. I played it to the rest of my staff and they didn't like it, either.' She was kinda blunt. It made me feel bad, because I felt responsible for the band. Nobody liked us, and I think they were starting to wonder whether I knew what I was doing. I couldn't blame them. We were really struggling."

**AND** then something happened that turned everything round. Anthony was

out on the street, selling bracelets, trying to make a buck. Vudi, the guitarist with American Music Club, came by. Anthony told him that he should check out Red House Painters. Vudi turned up at the next show with Mark Eitzel.

"Mark just fell in love with the band," Kozelek recalls. "That night, we also got a great review from a writer called Lori Fleming. It was at that point that the band really started to believe in what we were doing. At last, someone else had given it the okay."

Eitzel played a further crucial role in this narrative. When he was in London earlier this year, he gave a demo tape of Red House Painters songs to the former MM writer, Martin Aston. He passed it on to 4AD's Ivo Watts-Russell. Ivo freaked, loved it, and got in touch with Mark Kozelek. He wanted to put out the demos immediately as a limited edition album, with a new record—it's going to be a double—to follow in the New Year.

"When I told the band," Kozelek recalls, "they went into shock. I couldn't sleep for weeks. I just couldn't believe it was happening. Here was a band that



**Signed to 4AD on the recommendation of American Music Club's Mark Eitzel, RED HOUSE PAINTERS have recently released the year's most beguiling debut album, 'Down Colorful Hill', an epic of brooding melancholy that's provoked comparisons with Tim Buckley, Neil Young, Van Morrison, AMC, Big Star and The Smiths. ALLAN JONES reports from San Francisco.**

**Pics: MATT BRIGHT**

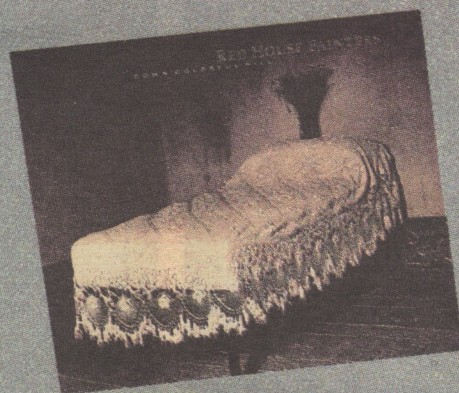
suburb where nothing ever happened. Your father was a salesman with a drink problem. Your mother was a housewife then. She's a leading drug counsellor now, an occupation which she took up when your father admitted his alcoholism and went into a recovery programme. You remember that clearly. It was two months before you went into drug rehab.

You were 14 years old.

"I started doing drugs when I was 10," you tell me, years later, clean at 25, in a cocktail bar in San Francisco. "I started smoking pot, and by the end I was taking a lot of valium, librium, a lot of



## WHAT THE PAPERS SAID



'Down Colorful Hill' revisited  
'... the year's most irresistible invitation to  
surrender to the rhythm of the blues...'

**MM**

'Solemn misery never goes amiss when  
it's accurate, and like early Smiths these  
Painters aren't scared to dig down in  
order to find daylight'

**Vox**

'... timid and verging on the tedious...'

**MB**

'... they evoke the cool meanderings of  
those West Coast pioneers of the late Sixties  
while keeping a very Nineties  
perspective...'

**Select**

'... crushingly sombre...'

**ECB**

'How much heartbreak can you take?'

**NME**

'Human perception can seldom have  
come as articulate as this, telling us  
everything we already know, but in a  
manner we've rarely heard before'

**Siren**

'... self-obsessed and vapid...'

**Q**

everybody said was never gonna go anywhere, was never gonna get signed. And suddenly someone wants to put out our album. It's like a dream."

"**DOWN** Colorful Hill" stands up to the times, and offers a reprieve from Seattle guitars and dancefloor bpm's. It's an album of solemn majesty, stately, frighteningly still, the saddest of musical seasons. Mark Kozelek's songs are pages from the diary of his life, disarmingly frank. They are songs about loss and heartbreak and bewilderment and grief. They are slow, mostly—and tender, full of hurt. They are about him, but they could be about any of us. In the emotional landscape that they describe, we are all foot soldiers in a war zone called love.

It's too much for some people, of course. The heretical take on "Down Colorful Hill" is that it's a wrist-slashing downer, terminally depressing.

Mark's heard it all before. "What's depressing? I listen to Paula Abdul, I get depressed," Kozelek says. "I watch Arsenio Hall, I get depressed. Other people think they're having fun. I don't. Somebody who thinks Nirvana

are the best thing that ever happened, they might listen to Red House Painters and think it's boring and depressing.

What can you say? I mean, I love American Music Club and look how much shit Eitzel gets for being Mr Depressing. But I listen to them and I don't feel depressed. I feel at home. Like somebody's singing about something I can relate to.

"It's like we get criticised for the songs being 'too personal' or 'too autobiographical'.

For some reason, people are uncomfortable with that. But what else am I going to write about? I write about what I'm thinking and feeling, and I can't

imagine trying to mask anything. And I don't care if that makes people feel uncomfortable. As selfish as it sounds,

as egotistical as it sounds, I'm just really preoccupied with myself. I don't read newspapers, I don't watch TV, I'm just not interested in writing about politics. I'll leave that to Bono or Tracy Chapman."

**YOUR** album is full of beautiful songs—"24", "Medicine Bottle", "Japanese To English"—and they walk through my life like ghosts. There's one I keep coming back to, drawn almost breathless to it. It's

called "Michael", and it's about someone you knew in Atlanta, who's since vanished into the great emptiness

**'I don't want to come across like Sinead O'Connor, telling everybody I had this traumatic, abused childhood. But, yeah, drug rehab was scary. I mean, I was only 14'**

— Mark Kozelek

of America.

"Mike was a real good friend of mine," you tell me. "When I moved to Atlanta, I was 18. He was 16, a high school drop-out. We bummed around together and got real close. Then he broke into a house, stole a bunch of stuff, got thrown into a detention home. First thing he did when he got out, he stole a car and got caught. They sent him to a youth prison. After that he was in and out of jail and drug rehabs.

"It became real hard to keep track of him. I could show you my address book. Mike's got all these different addresses all over Georgia and Alabama. Jails. Detention centres. Drug rehabs. People he's stayed with for a while and then moved on. You can't just pick up a phone and call Mike. You've got to call all these different people to find out where he is. That's what the song is about. It's a song about trying to get hold of someone who's real close to you, but you just can't reach them."

Out there in the gulping darkness of the American night, there must be lots of Michaels. Runaways, bummed out on dope and the bad dreams of the

nation. In the Sixties, people dropped out into the counter culture. Now they just drop out into oblivion. Was "Michael" a song for all of them?

"For me," you say, uncomfortable, "that puts the song into too big a picture. I've got a friend, and I feel something about him. It's that simple. It's all I ever intended it to be. I'm not Bob Dylan."

On the other hand, what if people heard things in your songs that described their own lives?

"Well, yeah," you say, laughing, nervous, bright. "If people listen to what I write and it somehow means something to them, that would mean so much to me. You know, I hate to sound precious, but I'm real serious about music and what I like and don't like. And if any record I do has the potential to move people as much as Neil Young or Lou Reed or Mark Eitzel has moved me, then, God, that would mean everything to me."

**'Down Colorful Hill' is out now on 4AD. Red House Painters make their UK debut at London's Borderline on November 3**