

# Mark Kozelek's latest intricate wander, through Aquatic Park to 'Isaac Hayes'

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"Some people are gonna get it, but some won't." This observation about art comes from one of the countless conversations Mark Kozelek has with strangers, restaurant employees, hotel clerks, and fellow musicians throughout his new album *All The Best, Isaac Hayes*. Kozelek calls it the most accurate description of art he's heard from anyone, and it's certainly applicable to most of what the 53-year-old's put out in the last decade.

The Ohio-born musician, who's lived in San Francisco for 32 years, came to fame with the slow, atmospheric, fog-scented music he made in the '90s and early '00s with Red House Painters. He found a new generation of listeners with his solo project Sun Kil Moon, whose *Ghosts of the Great Highway* and *Benji* are slowly cementing themselves as indie classics. But since 2012's *Among the Leaves* he's been gradually veering into a stream-of-consciousness style where profound observations of life are likely to coexist with exhaustive descriptions of the hotels at which he stays, the restaurants in which he eats, the cities in which he plays

Some may find these songs mind-numbingly boring. Others may find peace in these slowly unfolding narratives or view them as a vicarious way to travel the world during these restricted times, sharing in Kozelek's joy as he traverses a remote Norwegian road or eats

oysters in New Orleans.

Your opinion of this music probably depends a lot on your opinion of Kozelek himself; he is not the most tactful man in the world, as his frequent and ugly conflicts with journalists, other bands, and talkative audiences make apparent. But it's hard to think of a musician who chronicles the world as dutifully and vividly as Kozelek, not least on *All The Best, Isaac Hayes*.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/x2zfspxX38Y>

*Isaac Hayes* is a spoken-word album. That means Kozelek's speaking 99 percent of the time versus, say, 40 percent. Its delicate piano backing makes it kin to ambient-narrative epics like John Foxx's *The Quiet Man* or Robert Ashley's *Private Parts*, where the languid flow of words is as much an instrument as anything. And though most of the songs are named after a place Kozelek played on his late-2019 North American tour, his mind always wanders back to San Francisco, which he fell in love with as a young man and never left. We caught up with Kozelek via e-mail to talk about *Isaac Hayes* and his beloved San Francisco.

**48 Hills** Let's start with a throwback. *What makes you smile?*

**Mark Kozelek** My girlfriend's cat. My dad's voice when he picks up the phone. John Fante books.

**48H** *I'm curious as to how the music and the words came together on All The Best, Isaac Hayes. Did you have specific piano parts in mind for specific parts of the narrative? Or do you record them separately and decide how they fit together later?*

**MK** I don't know how to play piano, at all. It was all improvised and heavily ProTooled by an engineer, with the exception of a piano piece played by Gia Margaret and two pieces played by pianist Chris Connolly. Several pieces were recorded randomly, mostly on a \$200 Yamaha keyboard. For the most part, the words were taken from a diary that started just before a tour that started in Vancouver until just after the tour, which ended in Pennsylvania. That's also me on the Fender Bass 6.

**48H** *You talk often on the album about being distracted by noises, be it the pipes in the hotels you stay in or the ticket scanners at the Ottawa Bluesfest. Have you always been easily distracted by sounds?*

**MK** My dad had a very bad case of this when I was young. When he was home, which was 50 percent of the time, he'd work in the basement, and any kinds of sounds distracted him. I didn't understand it at the time because I was a kid who smoked pot with very few responsibilities besides picking up sticks in the yard. But then life happened, and for the most part I travel for a living. The sound of street noise, refrigerators, a clock ticking next to a bed, are unpleasant sounds. I've been touring for 28 years, so for the most part, I know what hotels I like. Now and then I end up in a hotel I don't like and I try to make the best of it.

**48H** *What's the best compliment you could receive from someone about *All The Best, Isaac Hayes*?*

**MK** Someone heard it recently and told me my speaking voice soothed her. That my stories brought her peace.

**48H** *There are a few moments on *All The Best* where you start singing just for a few notes or a few bars. Were these moments planned, or did you simply feel like bursting into song?*

**MK** It's my natural habitat to sing, so yes, there are moments where melodies jumped out of me. I could have put all of the stories to melody, but I wanted to be a storyteller on this album. A friend of mine heard the record and said: "Anyone who didn't think you were singing on those last several albums will now know that you were."



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/RlJha3PuyYM>

**48H** *Tell me a little bit about your relationship with Aquatic Park.*

**MK** I walk several miles a day. Sometimes to Telegraph Hill. Sometimes to the Marina. Sometimes through Pacific Heights. For the most part, on the Marina walks, I stop at the Aquatic Park pier. I like to see what the fishermen are catching. I love how the atmosphere is slightly different from day to day. Sometimes it's a clear day, and sometimes you can't see the Golden Gate Bridge because the fog is so dense. I love the various barges that come in. They're so colorful, with mysterious acronyms like MSC. I find that area meditative and inspiring.

**48H** *Are you still able to record music at this time?*

**MK** Yes. I've been recording at a studio in the Sunset District. I've recorded before in that area. The Avenues are otherworldly, and I always feel inspired there. I love all of the succulent plants, the fog, the smell of the ocean, and the charming little stucco houses.

**48H** The current pandemic means two of your favorite subjects—touring and eating at nice restaurants—are off-limits. What are some of the things you plan on doing or places you plan on going once lockdown is over and it's safe/legal to do so?

**MK** Well, for starters, I'm not on "lockdown." That's prison terminology used by the media to instill fear in people. But I'd say it's safe to say I won't be touring this year, which I've made peace with. Other than that, my life is largely the same as it was a year ago. Banks always had glass between the tellers and customers, anyhow. I still walk in the same areas. Some

of my favorite restaurants, like Swan Oyster Depot, are still doing takeout. There's a lot of atmosphere to enjoy. Go down to Aquatic Park Pier and you'll see people picnicking and enjoying life.