



Lone Star

Kris Kristofferson, walking tall down 'This Old Road'

BY ANDY LANGER

Two years ago, on a South by Southwest Friday morning, Kris Kristofferson poked his head into the Four Seasons' lobby lounge. He was there to check out his old friend Willie Nelson's appearance on the KGSR Morning Show, but quickly wound up in front of an open mic. When KGSR's Kevin Conner asked him, "What would you like to do?" as in what would you like to play, Kristofferson replied, "I'd like to go back up to my room and get some sleep." Then somebody passed him a guitar. For the next few minutes, a few dozen or so of us were lucky enough to sit at Kristofferson's feet and hear him play "Me and Bobby McGee" – the voice craggy as ever, the passion just as unmistakable. What we witnessed wasn't just magic, it was magnificent.

The Pilgrim's return to SXSW this year is ostensibly in support of the March 7 release of *This Old Road* on New West (see review, next page), his first studio album of all new material in 11 years. Sparingly produced by Don Was, it's striking both for its stark gravity and its lyrical precision; "In the News," the set's undeniable centerpiece, may forever juxtapose in our minds the killings of Laci Peterson and Iraqi innocents. "They're connected by the cold-bloodedness," says its author. Add equally poignant meditations on family, mercy, and mortality, and you've got a serious contender for an armful of Grammys, if not also a belated E-ZPass into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Which brings us to his other piece of Austin business. Fresh off a role in Richard Linklater's forthcoming *Fast Food Nation*, Kristofferson is being inducted into the Texas Film Hall of Fame on March 10, in tribute to more than 100 film credits, from the 1976 remake of *A Star Is Born* with Barbra Streisand to John Sayles' superlative *Lone Star*. While the Brownsville, Texas-born actor's filmography speaks for itself, it's no stretch his induction also celebrates the Idea of Kris Kristofferson: Rhodes Scholar,

outspoken activist, country-music outlaw, family man. A man who writes simple songs about complex times.

In an interview a few years back, Kristofferson boiled his life goals into four lines: "Tell the truth. Sing with passion. Work with laughter. Love with heart." When asked about that directive now, his answer is classic Kristofferson – simple, direct, and plainspoken. "Yep. That's about right."

Austin Chronicle: This Old Road seems to hinge on a batch of big-picture concepts: freedom, tolerance, redemption.

KK: Freedom and redemption are at the core of just about every album I've ever done. I guess it's just the same things, only from an older perspective.

AC: This seems like a particularly tough time for those concepts.

KK: It's a tough time for human beings right now, but you keep putting one foot in front of the other.

AC: What's it take for change?

KK: You have to have committed people fighting for it. I don't really know. I think about Eisenhower's prophetic warning upon leaving office, a warning about the growing power of the military-industrial complex. That was his last big public speech. Here's a general and Republican president warning us about the world we're now living in. The military-industrial complex is getting rich off our kids getting shot and killed – and killing people around the world.

AC: Obviously a lot of people believe this war isn't working.

KK: If it was working it still wouldn't be defensible. To attack another country because you don't like their leader? My God, how many people would be attacking us, and probably will be, because they don't like our leader? We thought it was awful when the Japanese bombed us at Pearl Harbor. That was "A Day of Infamy." But hell, we went against the whole United Nations to bomb people. That's fairly easy to be against.

AC: It's getting increasingly more difficult to hope for the words that keep coming up on this album, "mercy" and "forgiveness."

KK: But it's got to happen, whether it's going to be forced on us or what. We can't develop as human beings and keep this up.

AC: Do mercy and forgiveness get more important as you get older?

KK: They've always been important, only at one point I was probably asking more for my own mercy and forgiveness. But when you get more involved in fighting for justice and human rights, mercy and forgiveness rank right up there at the top.

AC: There are songs on this album that seem deeply rooted in faith, but not perhaps the kind of faith the president talks about.

KK: Religion is a label that pushes buttons. The fact is that, historically, all our wars are holy wars – religious people fighting religious people. We have to find a different way of communicating. Hopefully our spirit will survive this.

AC: You've been not just a leftist, but an outright radical for decades. Do you believe your outspokenness has cost you record deals and opportunities?

KK: I know it has. I've been paying for so long that now that I'm just grateful I can still make a living. More than 20 years ago, one of the guys in USA Today was talking about right-wing country artists, which most of them are. At the bottom it said, "The left-leaning Kris Kristofferson has been dismissed as irrelevant." I thought that was perfect.

AC: Natalie Maines has admitted being surprised that the country music industry she once associated herself with is indeed so rabidly right-wing.

KK: I'm not surprised. I've been unmarketable on the radio for many years. I guess it was a surprise to see how little progress we've made.

AC: I'm going to assume that over the years you've said much more offensive things than she did.

KK: I'm sure I've pissed off more people than she did [laughs]. There were people who didn't like what I wrote from the beginning, whether it was "Law Is for Protection of the People" or "Best of All Possible Worlds."

AC: Do you regret any of that?

KK: I don't regret a word I've written. How could you regret something you wrote that you believed in? I've believed every word I've written.

AC: Some people would say the smart thing for folks like you and the Dixie Chicks is just to shut up and sing.

KK: I would say back, "Shut up and listen." The communication that I make through my songs is something I've been able to make for a while. And I'll probably just continue to do it. It's the way I express myself most effectively. If I'm just talking about how pissed off I am that we're attacking people unprovoked and bombing innocents that never committed a sin, nobody's going to listen. But if I can make somebody stop and feel something in a song I've written, they might be moved by it. You're halfway to change right there.

AC: There's a long-standing theory that art gets better during Republican administrations.

KK: Maybe it's just that people pay closer attention. It's not necessarily better because of the hard time, but all of a sudden a song that might've pissed 'em off, like "In the News," gets heard differently.

AC: This Old Road seems like a singer-songwriter's album by design. It's bare-bones, not unlike Rick Rubin's collaborations with Johnny Cash and Neil Diamond. What's with guys your age making acoustic albums?

In the Chronicle's third issue, Oct. 2, 1981, Kristofferson was interviewed by future political strategist Mark McKinnon.

KK: I never thought of doing it. I didn't think of performing that way either, but I got a call a few years back to play a gig overseas alone. After two years, I can say it works. It's such a different experience to stand up there by yourself in front of 3,000 people. They listen. It puts a focus on the songs that wasn't there when I played with a band. Don wanted to capture that. I thought to myself it would sound like an old demo I made in the living room, but it works, and the reaction has been good - probably because John[ny Cash] did it first.

AC: You've come to like being up onstage alone?

KK: There's a freedom in that. I can screw up and not cause a train wreck. I can communicate the songs better because everyone is listening. There's nothing else onstage for an audience to pay attention to.

AC: Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've spent most of your onstage career afraid of crowds.

KK: I didn't say I wasn't still scared now. I'm still terrified before the show. But it's like going out in a boxing ring: after the first couple of punches it's not scary anymore. I calm down after the first couple of blows to the face.

AC: People see you and they expect to hear "Me & Bobby McGee." In retrospect, how prophetic is the line, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose"?

KK: It definitely expressed the double-edged sword that freedom is. Unless you've lost everything – and I certainly haven't – you're not free. If you've got a family you're not as free as if you're alone. But nobody wants to be alone. I have no illusions I'm free. I'm chained to a lot. But I don't want to get free of my family, my home, and people I love. I like the responsibilities that keep me from being free.

AC: It's probably why you're here now.

KK: Definitely. There's no point in getting up otherwise.

AC: You like to say you're not much of a singer. Are you a better actor than singer?

KK: I think so. I've come to find the same thing that works onstage for me is what works performing in a film – being believable. If they think you're telling the truth, it's working.

AC: That's got to be harder than it looks.

KK: You have to get as honest as you can be. You have to strip away as much of the bullshit as you can. You have to just tell them the truth, and if you're perceived as telling the truth – whether you're an actor or singing some songs you wrote – it's a success.

AC: Is that what's fulfilling about acting?

KK: When it works well it's the same feeling you get creating something like a song. I've grown more respectful of acting as I've gotten older.

AC: You've gotten better at it?

KK: I got rid of a lot of things that were in my way. I used to have to get loaded to do anything in front of anybody. When I worked my way free of that it got easier to pay attention to what mattered.

AC: John Sayles has said you're his first choice for parts that call for a "son of a bitch."

KK: That's funny. The first time I met him after reading Lone Star I asked him, "Why did you think of me for this character?" That character is one of the biggest sons of bitches I'd ever played. And he said something about casting against type, blah, blah, blah. I think he could tell I knew he was full of shit.

AC: He almost single-handedly resurrected your film career.

KK: He did. He gave me great opportunities. It's around that time I said that if something was important enough to do, I might as well do it sober. And it worked. So I continued.

AC: Is a good director like a good bandleader?

KK: A good director is like a good record producer, like a Don Was. A good director brings out the best in everybody. He needs to be a communicator, somebody who takes the material and makes it even better. I remember Alan Rudolph striking me that way. When we did Songwriter, he'd run with ideas Willie and I came up with and dream up a great ending for them. He saw what works about Willie and I, and [he] encouraged it. He understood that relationship Willie and I had. That made it fun.

AC: What's at the core of that relationship?

KK: I was a fan of Willie's before I met him – and always will be. It was great to find out he's such a funny human being. He's one of the best people on the planet to be around for laughs. It's strange. It's like finding

out Shakespeare was as funny as Richard Pryor. Willie's truly funny. And that's important. If you don't have a sense of humor, you're done for.

AC: When you were a successful songwriter, but not yet a performer, Johnny Cash pulled you onstage at the 1969 Newport Folk Festival. What do you remember about that day?

KK: The people from the festival didn't want him to do it. They were arguing about it backstage. I was just standing there scared to death. The festival people said he didn't have time. Carl Smith was opening and was playing in Dylan's band. There were rockabilly fans there just to hear Carl. The time should have been his. But they passed it to me. And it was very generous of both of them. It was responsible for my whole performing career.

AC: So if Johnny Cash said he needed those five minutes we wouldn't know Kris Kristofferson?

KK: I believe that. It definitely wouldn't have happened while I was young enough to do anything about it. It was probably the most important moment of my career.

AC: You've been open about your decades of insobriety, yet for as long as you spent drinking your tale isn't as tragic as guys like Townes Van Zandt.

KK: We were all sort of half-wrapped-up in the glamour of being wasted people. Everybody would think about being Hank Williams. If you didn't examine it too closely, there was something very attractive about burning brightly and dying young. I feel very fortunate to have made it to the other side of that. But I was 10 years older than all my peers. I'd already done the army and Oxford. I was physically older, and I think it might have helped me in my battle to overcome the natural shyness and stage fright.

Joan Baez, Kristofferson, and Stephen Bruton (hand on shoulder) at Las Manitas, SXSW 04
photo by Todd V. Wolfson

AC: Guys that were your peers now have movies about them. That's got to be strange.

KK: I don't even like to think in that direction.

AC: Because your story isn't over or because it would just be too weird?

KK: I hope it's not finished. But I think it's rare those things are as good as the people they're about. That's why I was relieved by Walk the Line. They treated John with respect. And the performances were great.

AC: Have you seen the Townes movie, Be Here to Love Me?

KK: It was sad and depressing. But Townes' life was sad and depressing. Alan Rudolph let me introduce him from the stage when we were shooting Songwriter. Somebody told me he was out there as an extra, so I did an introduction calling him a songwriter's songwriter. He stood up and looked so proud. I thought, "Good God. This guy doesn't even know what people think of him. Or maybe they don't show it enough here in town." He had no clue how highly he was regarded.

AC: You've got eight kids. There's a line on this album, "When I see the wonder in the smiles of my children, it reminds of dreams worth coming true." What has parenting taught you?

KK: What it taught me was that there could be something you love absolutely and without condition, for which you would do anything. The better human beings are the people who work beyond that to have the same kind of unselfish love for everybody. I think it radiates itself out from there. Guys like Gandhi worked it out to where they felt that way about everybody.

AC: You've said that when you were you younger you had to leave home to do what you do, but now you live in a place that must be hard to leave: Hawaii.

KK: [Laughs.] That's part of it. We live in a real small town here. It reminds me of where I grew up in Texas. In Brownsville, we were at the bottom of the Rio Grande valley, with citrus fruit, but also tropical stuff like bananas. A lot of that stuff that grows here. It was real green where I grew up. And there were mostly brown people, like here. They tell me I spoke Spanish before I spoke English.

AC: Your friend Willie has a place in Hawaii too. Yet while you're content at home, he seems to live a very different life.

KK: Willie has to be walking distance from a golf course.

AC: Or a stage.

KK: He likes to play. For a while everything we did was the same – we were gigging together and acting together. I guess he'll probably never quit performing. But Willie is a real musician. You can listen to him like you could Django Reinhardt. We should be glad that he likes to work as much as he does.

AC: And you're not a real musician?

KK: I'm a real writer. I think that was one of the things that the singers in Nashville liked about me. There was no fancy footwork. Micky Newburry used to tell me, "You can communicate a song. You can sell a song." That's probably about right. That's my strength.

AC: We made a big deal a couple years back about Willie's 70th. How serious of a milestone does it feel like for you?

KK: They all just click by like road markers. I don't have time to think about it. I'm sure I thought when I whizzed past 60 that I was getting close to the finish line, but I don't feel any different, so I'll probably let them whiz by as long as I'm allowed.

AC: Can you think about legacy, what the name Kris Kristofferson will mean to people 30 years on down the line?

KK: Jesus, if it means anything at all I've done my job. end story