

THE BALTIMORE SUN

Kris Kristofferson

This Old Road [New West]

3 stars

The trend among older artists these days is to take the word "stripped" to heart without the sexy connotations. Veterans such as Johnny Cash, Neil Diamond and now Kris Kristofferson have all gone back to the basics of the human voice by releasing stark, acoustic, wrenchingly honest albums.

Musically, Kristofferson's moving *This Old Road*, his first new studio set in a decade, is closest to Cash's first American Recordings project: austere, not immediately accessible. Yet all of the projects are remarkable works by men in their 60s (Kristofferson is 69) who chased the mainstream in their younger days, to varying degrees, but chose to tap into something deeper later. Each reflects on colorful lives with the valleys and the peaks italicized.

"Thank you for a life that I'd call happy," Kristofferson sings in his unorthodox yet expressive voice. It feels almost an invasion of privacy as Kristofferson sings of mistakes made - both personal and via the government (the topical "In the News").

"Thank You for a Life" is sandwiched between a tune that looks forward ("The Show Goes On") and a closing cut that feels all too apocalyptic, seemingly suggesting the singer-songwriter feels somehow that this will be the last statement he will make before taking the next journey.

Despite composing one of the most enviable catalogs in contemporary music ("Me and Bobbie McGee," "Help Me Make It Through the Night," "Sunday Morning Coming Down" and "I've Got to Have You" are just some of his well-known tunes) Kristofferson has become better known as a film actor. *This Old Road* could remind everyone of his true calling.