

BANDOPPLER

By: Michial Farmer

CBS, like everyone else on the planet, tried to cash in on Johnny Cash's legacy, in their case with a televised special tied to the *Walk the Line* biopic that featured acts like Kid Rock and Sheryl Crow vomiting all over classic country songs. Kris Kristofferson was one of only two performers who could really be considered Cash's contemporaries (a bloated Jerry Lee Lewis, leading the crowd in "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," was the other). CBS tried to tie Kristofferson down, chaining him to Norah Jones in one song and the Foo Fighters in the other. He grimaced his way through his two numbers (one of them, of course, was "Sunday Morning Coming Down"), never looking like he quite fit in but wanting to honor his friend's memory nevertheless.

I bring up Cash only because *This Old Road*, Kristofferson's eighteenth studio record, is inevitably going to be compared with the *American Recordings* series in every review you read, which would be a pretty lazy comparison. Cash and Kristofferson, despite their decades-long friendship (supposedly, in the 1970s, there was a Baptist Church in Nashville attended not only by these two but also by Roy Orbison—it's almost enough to make you go Baptist), have remarkably little in common artistically. Cash's major gift wasn't his songwriting, which was occasionally brilliant but often mediocre; it was his voice, that resonated like the voice of God no matter what he was saying. He owned essentially anything he ever sang, from "Girl from the North Country" to "Hurt."

Kristofferson, the cliché says, has a terrible voice—there are many that are much worse—and so his authority has to come from his songwriting. And it's true: some of the most distinctive and the best vocalists in pop music have covered his songs (Cash and Janis Joplin are only the most famous), but they never quite own them. Kristofferson's power is that he keeps a strange sort of hold on his songs and never really lets anyone else inhabit them

And so an *American Recordings*-type album would be a ridiculous endeavor for Kris Kristofferson to undertake. His cover of, say, "Rusty Cage," would lack both the novelty and the legitimate draw that Cash's had, because if Kristofferson isn't writing amazing songs, he doesn't really have anything (apart, of course, from his film career). The more apt comparison piece for *This Old Road*, then, is Neil Young's 2000 comeback attempt, *Silver and Gold*, in terms of both historical importance and overall sound—it's never less than pleasant but never more than minor, and of course that's really not a bad thing when you're dealing with people like Kristofferson and Young.

This Old Road is about as stripped-back as a record can be. Most of the tracks feature only Kristofferson, his acoustic guitar, and his longtime sideman Stephen Bruton on guitar, mandolin, and backing vocals. The whole affair, says New West's press release, "makes the listener feel as if they are sitting in Kristofferson's living room while he picks and sings just for them," which, noun/pronoun disagreement aside, is as apt a description as you're likely to hear.

"Chase the Feeling" is the album's anomaly—it features L.A. studio vet Jim Keltner (who, coincidentally enough, also played on *Silver and Gold*) on drums and producer Don Was on bass—and it's also the track that seems to have been getting the most attention. That makes sense, too, as it's probably the most immediate pleasure of the album. Over a mildly rollicking blues-rock backing, Kristofferson croaks his way through stories of Nashville excess, a subject, I am confident, Kristofferson knows as much about as anyone. "You were loaded again," he sings, "and ain't you handsome when you're high?" and even if it wrecks the addressee's marriage, he has to "chase the feeling 'til you die."

"The Show Goes On" is that song's companion piece, a series of reminiscences about the good old days that shares "Chase the Feeling's" blues sound but drops both its cautionary tone and its auxiliary instrumentation. You can probably guess the major thrusts of this song: Commercialism didn't exist in the old days; Kris and his buddies used to drink a lot, but, hey, that was okay; life has irrevocably changed, etc. I'm speaking somewhat glibly here, but frankly, it's fun to hear Kristofferson talk about the past. It's fun to hear him name-drop (as he quite literally does on at least two songs here), and, once you get past the idea that there might be a "Loving Her Was Easier Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again" hiding in the track listing here, it's fun to hear Kristofferson singing and playing pleasant if nonessential country music.

There seem to be two major themes to the record: the kind of days-gone-by reminiscing and reflections on old age to be found in "Chase the Feeling" and "The Show Goes On"; and the political screeds that rant against the war and Iraq and our country's current leadership. These latter songs are somewhat less satisfying, as Kristofferson has always dealt better with the personal than with the universal, but they offer, I suppose, their own type of charm.

"Wild American" is an ode to the national conceit of the rebel, dedicated at first to singer, actor and Native-American activist John Trudell but eventually expanded to include dedications to Steve Earle and, strangely enough, Merle Haggard, who is politically far to the right of Trudell and Earle (and of Kristofferson himself). And that sort of partisan confusion

seems to be the point, since the chorus says, "I don't care if that's left or right, it's wrong."

"In the News" is much clearer. It starts off with newspaper stories about murder, anti-environmentalism, and military bombings. "Everyone says God is on his side," Kristofferson says, before speaking for the Deity himself:

*Don't blame God
I swear to God, I heard Him say
"Not in My name, not on My ground
I want nothing but the ending of the war
No more killing, or it's over
And the mystery won't matter anymore."*

There's a certain hypocrisy, I suppose, in Kristofferson's raging against the Bush administration for claiming to speak for God and then himself unleashing a prophecy directly from the Almighty's lips, but the important thing is that you believe him when he says it.

Kristofferson plays to his talents and reverts to personal stories in "The Burden of Freedom," which makes it the most effective political song on *This Old Road*. He's praying instead of prophesying here, asking God to "help him to shoulder the burden of freedom," which seems to involve being the aforementioned wild American and forgiving his enemies when they condemn him for it. "Pilgrim's Progress" (set up as a sequel to the classic "The Pilgrim: Chapter 33") strikes a similar chord with its opening couplet: "Am I young enough to believe in revolution? / Am I strong enough to get down on my knees and pray?" The title track is a similar "progress report," a look back at the growth the singer has experienced over the last 30 years.

One of the strange pleasures of Kristofferson's catalogue is his tendency to provide spoken-word introductions to his songs even in their studio formats. "The Pilgrim: Chapter 33" is the most famous instance of this. It happens twice here, once on "The Last Thing to Go," where Kristofferson Bob Newharts his way through a Willie Pep quotation, and once on the last and best track, "Final Attraction."

"The words of this song occurred to me," he says, "while I was watching Willie Nelson close a show one time, waiting in the wings there," and suddenly it becomes evident why he likes to begin his songs with these little monologues: They, like his friend Willie closing that show, are a real connection with his audience, a way of bringing us not only into the songs but into his life. The song praises this connection and ends with the repeated phrase, "Go break a heart" (instead of a leg, I guess) and Kris naming off every dead rockstar he can think of:

Come on, son, get back up on that stage! You can do it one time just for Hank Williams! Ray Charles! Johnny Cash! June Carter! Waylon Jennings! Roger Miller! Janis Joplin! Jimi Hendrix! George Harrison! John Lennon! Mickey Newberry! Vince Matthews! Shel Silverstein! Lefty Frizzell! And Harland Howard. And maybe one time for me?

This is nothing if not charming—I can't imagine anyone hearing this coda without smiling—but there's a certain level of pathos once you get right down to it: Most of Kristofferson's friends are dead, and he turns 70 in June. His record looks back probably twice as much as it looks forward, and its closing line lump him in with the dead. "Go break a heart," indeed, Kris, and God bless you.

In the final analysis, I'm not sure that *This Old Road* can really be considered an attempt at a comeback. There's really no way mainstream country radio is going to pick up on these songs, and I'm certain Kristofferson knew that when he recorded it. Beyond that, it doesn't sound like he's much interested in a comeback, in being the type of star he was in the early 70s—he sounds content to be playing his guitar in his living room. Ain't you come a long way down this old road?