

BOSTON GLOBE

A poignant, poetic return to song

By Jonathan Perry, Globe Correspondent | March 27, 2006
Kris Kristofferson

At: Berklee Performance Center, Friday night

Closing in on 70 years of age, singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson has the rugged face and ragged voice of a man who has seen it all. But then, he always did -- even back when he was an ex-Rhodes-scholar-turned-janitor at Columbia Records, cleaning ashtrays while hustling his songs of humble people living hardscrabble lives to the likes of Johnny Cash (who had a hit in '69 with Kristofferson's "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down").

Kristofferson's been a bit of everything over the past 40 years, from outlaw country artist hanging with running buddies like Merle Haggard to mainstream movie star starring opposite Barbra Streisand. But what he's always been first and foremost -- and not merely due to his modest (at best) gifts as a singer -- is a songwriter whose poetic parables of hard-won wisdom amid faded romantic glories and the ruins of personal failure are among the most richly detailed and poignant in all of country music.

After more than a decade away, Kristofferson has picked up the pen again and is on a solo tour to showcase material from his new album, "This Old Road." During Friday night's benefit show for the Garden of Peace, a Massachusetts memorial dedicated to the victims of homicide (located at 100 Cambridge St. in Boston), Kristofferson received a country saint's welcome drenched in love and respect from a packed house that sighed loudly, cried softly, sang and clapped along out of tune and out of time, and hung on every one of those familiar scenes set in the barrooms, bedrooms, and truck stops of America.

For 90 minutes and 30 songs, Kristofferson responded in kind, a lanky picture of homespun humility who, with rattling voice and guitar, ruminated his way through torn and frayed anthems such as "Help Me Make it Through the Night," "Here Comes That Rainbow Again," and, of course, "Me and Bobby McGee," which he dedicated to his fallen friend Janis Joplin, who made it famous. "Loving Her Was Easier (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again)" was an unvarnished ballad, direct and uncluttered by overly perfumed verses or fancy fringe, and Kristofferson's tender, weathered sincerity made it all the more endearing. Like most of the others, the tune wound down like a clock and then just ended, without fanfare. On to another. He poked fun at his choppy guitar playing and rudimentary harp blowing. "Well, it ain't Dylan, is it?" he croaked with a chuckle at one point.

The handful of new songs fit snugly alongside the classics, although the subjects of home, hearth, and lengthening shadows were recurring subjects perhaps more on Kristofferson's mind than they used to be. Still, much of the new material found the Texas-born artist, as always, exploring big themes through small

stories: railing against the state of right-wing politics ("In the News"); contemplating weakness and redemption ("Chase the Feeling" and "Thank You for a Life," respectively); and finding comfort through faith and humor in the inevitable confrontation with mortality ("The Last Thing to Go").

He dedicated another new number, "Final Attraction," to a laundry list of peers and predecessors who had passed on: Cash and his wife, June Carter; Lefty Frizzell; John Lennon and George Harrison; Jimi Hendrix. It made one grateful that we still had Kristofferson there in front of us, still standing, still writing, still searching, still singing (sort of).

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