

FOLKWAX

The Pilgrim Looks Back Down The Road, (04/12/06)

Kris Kristofferson turns seventy in a few weeks time, June 22 to be exact, and his eleven-song *This Old Road* finds this soon-to-be septuagenarian taking a backward look at his life and the changes he has witnessed in the world order. Employing a stripped-down sound, Kristofferson's voice, acoustic guitar, and harmonica, supported by long-time sideman **Steve Bruton** (guitar, mandolin, harmony vocals), album producer **Don Was** (acoustic bass, piano), and **Jim Keltner** (drums). Opening with the title cut, therein Kristofferson initially comments "*Look at that old photograph/Is it really you, Smiling like a baby full of dreams/Smiling ain't so easy now,*" and opens verse two with "*But I guess you count your blessings with the problems/That you're dealing with today.*" Having commented on a face now showing age, Kris poetically adds, "*Traces of a future lost/In between the lines.*" As for the hook, it's the repetition of the verse-after-verse closing lines "*Ain't you come a long way down [repeat], This old road.*"

Kristofferson's sophomore release, *The Silver Tongued Devil And I* [1971], featured "The Pilgrim - Chapter 33," which Kristofferson had written a few years earlier. Thirty-five years after the aforementioned song entered the public domain, he has penned "Pilgrim's Progress." As I said at the outset, this song collection finds Kristofferson reflecting upon his life, and in the chorus to "Pilgrim's Progress" he poses personal questions such as "*Am I strong enough to get down on my knees and pray,*" while verse two opens with "*I got lucky, I got everything I wanted/I got happy, there wasn't nothing else to do,*" but then he adds "*I'd be crazy not to wonder if I'm worthy, of the part I play in this dream that's coming true.*"

There are a couple of tracks here where it sounds as if Kristofferson is sitting right in front of you, namely, the love song "The Last Thing To Go" and "Chase The Feeling" - a treatise on addiction. The latter is one of the

few cuts on *This Old Road* to which Keltner contributes. At the outset of "Wild American," Kristofferson name checks Native American activist/poet/performer **John Trudell**, and as the track evolves he adds **Steve Earle**, **Merle Haggard**, and **Willie Nelson** to the list. The murder of Laci Peterson forms the initial focus to "In The News," while tampering with the planet's fragile ecological balance and the Iraq War are mentioned at the outset of the second verse, which closes with the vitriolic "*Anyone not marching to their tune they call it treason/Everyone says God is on his side.*" Clearly ill at ease with the Iraq War, Kristofferson goes on to pose the question "*How'd this happen, what went wrong*" then testily adds "*Don't blame God, I swear to God I heard him say.*" Barely halfway through the track, Kris goes on to call for an end to the Iraq War and equates the slaughter of non-combatants in war with the manner in which Peterson's life ended.

Lodged midway through the recording is "The Burden Of Freedom," which first appeared on Kris' 1972 album *Border Lord* [1972], while the content of "Holy Creation" is pretty much explained by the song title. "The Show Goes On" is a paean to one's youthful years - the era of "*The Rock and the Roll*" and surviving by one's wits. It's immediately followed by "Thank You For A Life," a bare-to-the-bone, no-holds-barred expression of gratitude by Kristofferson, partly to his maker and partly to his (current) wife. Conscious of the fragile thread that, when broken, spirits us from this life to eternity and conscious of his own advanced years and mortality, in the "Final Attraction" Kristofferson memorializes fellow musicians who have journeyed ahead. Kristofferson name-checks many who are worthy, while some of those he names slipped into eternity driven by their own delight in excess. In my opinion, Kris could have been a little more selective with his choice of heroes.

This is the first Kristofferson collection to feature new material in just over a decade and, the latter glitch apart, *This Old Road* is a highlight in a career already studded with grand achievements.