

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

An Old Dog Chases Old Ghosts

BRAD WHEELER COUNTRY

This Old Road
Kris Kristofferson
New West

Kristofferson? He's 69 years old, since you ask, and he sounds every bit of it. His tuckered vocals -- a minimalist singer, we'll say -- have the texture of a weathered barn, all worn and grey.

"Ain't you come a long way," Kristofferson sings to himself on the album-opening title track, and isn't that the truth. *With This Old Road*, a veteran actor-tunesmith charts his journey, making sense of a life extensively lived.

The record's stoic nature and themes compare to Neil Young's recent *Prairie Wind* or Johnny Cash's *The Man Comes Around* from 2002-- retrospection, introspection and sober emotions from mature artists.

As *This Old Road* is the first recording of new songs since 1995's *A Moment of Forever*, it's hard to say when the 11 songs were written. (*The Burden of Freedom*, a prayer-song that shares the melody of John Lennon's *Happy Xmas*, was apparently penned in the late 1960s.)

For the title track though, we could guess 2004, the year Kristofferson was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. "Look at that old photograph, is it really you," he sings. "Looking at a looking glass, running out of time." The song is sparse, with a subtly dramatic chorus where Kristofferson is joined by long-time cohort Stephen Bruton on harmony. For colour, Bruton and Kristofferson add mandolin and a slow harmonica, respectively, while album producer Don Was does a little piano.

Bruton doubles Kristofferson on the crawling *country of The Last Thing to Go* on songwriting, while other numbers have the man alone. He's not much of a guitarist, but it's no matter -- songs are the *focus*. *On In the News*, a former U.S. Army officer is against a war and its billion-dollar bombing of a nation already kneeling.

The half-speed *rockabilly of Chase the Feeling* is the beefiest song of the album. From Kristofferson: "And you get loaded again / Ain't you handsome when you're high / Nothing matters / Chase that feeling till you die." Of course, Kristofferson chased all sorts of things in his younger years -- intoxicants, dreams, songs, what have you.

Those days are looked back on with the acoustic *rocker The Show Goes On*, where

Kristofferson remembers the Nashville days when songwriters roared through epic sessions of booze, tunes and powders. "It was all so easy then / We could do no wrong / We'll never be the same again / But the show goes on."

The show does go on, even if some of the players do not. Dead heroes Janis Joplin, Waylon Jennings, Cash and others are name-checked on the *album-closing Final Attraction*, inspired by Willie Nelson -- "somewhere in your lifetime you dared into feeling / so many emotions that tear you apart."

Willie, sure, but just as easily this is all about the songwriter *himself*.