

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

Kristofferson finds freedom, serenity in LA gig

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By Tom Roland

LOS ANGELES (Hollywood Reporter) - "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose."

That line from "Me and Bobby McGee" ranks among the most celebrated in the career of singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson, appropriate because it addresses a consistent theme in his 40 years of songwriting: the search for freedom and its real meaning.

Performing Wednesday at the Troubadour in support of his new "This Old Road" album, Kristofferson underscored his obsession with that elusive concept, inserting some form of the word "free" into at least six of his 32 songs. (Playing two-thirds of his two-act show solo with only guitar and harmonica, the musician was joined after an intermission by the album's producer, bassist Don Was, and guitarist Stephen Bruton.)

Where many public figures invoke the word "freedom" for personal gain, Kristofferson seems to regard the ideal with both awe and skepticism. He's spent much of his life chasing it, and now as he approaches 70, he appears to finally be finding it.

During the 1960s and '70s, when he established himself as a writer of substance, that search resulted often in a simple escape from reality, symbolized by numerous references to alcohol and taverns in his early material. Many of those songs -- including "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down," "The Silver Tongued Devil and I" and "Best of All Possible Worlds" -- made Wednesday's set, punctuated by reminiscences about earlier times at the Troubadour, when he showed up late after a chemically themed Dennis Hopper party and director Sam Peckinpah was ushered out for fighting.

During the '80s, Kristofferson grappled with the patriotic version of freedom, railing against U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. Now, with his first album of new material in 11 years, it appears he is closer to his goal: He still tackles war and hypocrisy, but he seems to accept that his words will be dismissed by those who most need to hear them. In "The Last Thing to Go," "Pilgrim's Progress" and the title track -- all of which were performed Wednesday -- he finds serenity in having fought the battle regardless of the outcome.

Kristofferson showcased his material in a fitting manner. His voice is weathered and craggy, particularly in his lower register, and he's erratic and simplistic as a guitarist. But that only highlighted the introspection and vulnerability in his songs, which aspire to heroism while recognizing epic failure. Loneliness, spirituality and mature, bonded love provided subthemes in such titles as "Help Me Make It Through the Night," "The Heart" and "Thank You for a Life," as Kristofferson subtly tackled the pain and beauty of self-exploration and self-acceptance.

There's another significant line in "Me and Bobby McGee" in which the singer laments letting go of a lover who is "searching for that home I hope she'll find." One gets the feeling that Kristofferson's personal search continues, though he's discovered the key was in the journey all along. Despite all the harrowing conditions in his concert journey -- death, poverty and separation included -- the songs maintained a thread of optimism about humanity's resilience. His ability to explore the world's truths and still remain hopeful is a big reason why Kristofferson and his struggle for freedom still matter.