

# HONOLULU STAR

## Classic Kristofferson

**His new album showcases his songwriting talent**

By Burl Burlingame

Kris Kristofferson's voice still sounds like he's been working the pump handle too hard, the grainy notes fighting against the pipes and squeezed out with rusty reluctance. He's an original singer-songwriter, and the best that can be said about his singing is that it truly is original. He's 70 now, and he sounded 70 when he was 20, bless 'im.

"This Old Road"  
Kris Kristofferson  
(New West)

It's the songwriter half of his job description that earned Double-K permanent lodgings in various musical Halls of Fame, but, hey, on this record -- his first of new material in some years (oh yeah, he's also a movie actor) -- working with producer Don Was, Kristofferson has learned the Leonard Cohen trick of intimacy, taking a limited vocal range and turning it into characterization instead of vocalization. Was' spare production makes "This Old Road" sound as friendly as a living-room demo tape.

The effect, of course, is to focus attention on the melodies and lyrics, and here you rediscover why Kristofferson is so well thought-of by performers and other songwriters. (His limited vocal range, applied to his tunes, also makes them easy to sing by virtually anyone. Choruses are sometimes the same melody as the verse, just pushed up an octave.)

The songs are as melancholy, rueful, observant and pointed as ever, a broad canvas boiled clean as haiku. Often he's looking back,

meditating on chances taken and lives lost, small joys and lasting loves, and the simple legacies of fatherhood.

Kristofferson's liberal outlaw spirit is as ornery as ever, particularly in the brilliant "In the News," in which he loosens both barrels on the cold-hearted propaganda connections between the Iraq war and the Laci Peterson murder, or simply marveling at pal Willie Nelson's ability to mesmerize and carry on the troubadoring tradition, in "Final Attraction."

For something that sounds like a well-recorded demo tape, "This Old Road" is full of unexpected pleasures and a relaxing listen, and reaffirms Kristofferson's songwriting abilities.

Expect to hear many of these songs covered by others.