

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Kristofferson's new 'Old Road'

Songs, sentiments are stripped down.

By Nick Cristiano
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"It was so easy then, we could do no wrong," Kris Kristofferson reminisces in that characteristically gnarled, craggy voice of his on "The Show Goes On" from his terrific new album, *This Old Road*.

The song is about those times in the mid-'60s when the former Army captain and Rhodes scholar was scuffling to make it as a songwriter in Nashville.

"Those were beautiful days for me; it wasn't too beautiful for my family and friends, who weren't as in love with the business as I was," Kristofferson says over the phone from a tour stop in Boston, alluding to the personal cost of pursuing his dream. "It was just so exciting to me to be hanging out with musicians who were serious about their work, and who were just trying to knock each other out with their words. It was a real magical time."

Kristofferson, of course, went on to succeed, spectacularly. For a while there, it seemed he really could do no wrong. Songs such as "Help Me Make It Through the Night" (taken up the charts by Sammi Smith), "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down" (Johnny Cash), and "Me and Bobby McGee" (Janis Joplin) were not only hits, they helped introduce a fresh poetic lyricism to country music.

Since those heady days, Kristofferson has had an uneven career in music and in films. *This Old Road*, however, is a high point.

Producer Don Was frames the singer's acoustic guitar and harmonica with the barest accompaniment, putting that acquired-taste voice and conversational delivery in their best light. The arrangements also provide an appropriately intimate setting for songs that sound intensely personal, reflecting both the native Texan's bumpy journey to happily settled family man and his continued interest in social and political issues.

All of his albums are personal, but "this one is a little more reflective," Kristofferson concedes. "At this end of the road" - he'll turn 70 in June - "you tend to be that way. A lot of my friends and heroes have fallen along the way.

"I'm just pleased and surprised by the positive response to it, because it's pretty stripped-down and bare. I wasn't sure that people wouldn't think it was just a demo."

As for the age milestone: "I didn't think I'd get older than Hank Williams. I was amazed to make 30. I guess it beats the *alternative*."