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Kristofferson and Rosanne Cash: Mismatch that meshed

By Keith Harris

For The Inquirer

Kris Kristofferson would belong among the greatest all-time singer-songwriters but for one simple fact: He can't sing. For much of his career, this far-from-insignificant detail has been a bigger handicap than admirers admitted.

But judging from Kristofferson's Sunday night performance at the Keswick Theatre, his croak has at last settled warmly into its distinctive clogs. The loss of "Me and Bobby McGee," the acceptance of "For the Good Times," and the desperation of "Help Me Make It Through the Night" all sounded more acute in an old man's unsteady voice. Kristofferson will turn 70 in June, and age has treated him kindly.

Still, letting Rosanne Cash take the stage first was a bold move. With husband-producer John Leventhal on guitar, she focused on new material from *Black Cadillac*, a tribute of sorts to her father, Johnny; mother, Vivian; and stepmother, June, all of whom died within a two-year period. Here, as on oldies such as "Seven Year Ache" - as great a cheated-upon song as the '80s produced - a lingering pain burned beneath the lovely, stoical surface of her voice. To close her set, Cash invited Kristofferson on stage for his own "Loving You Was Easier," an awkward contrast of vocals hardly lost on the headliner.

"Have your ears had a chance to adjust from the sublime to the ridiculous yet?" he quipped early in his set. Cuts from *This Old Road* (New West), Kristofferson's first album of new material since 1995, held up alongside his classics, with "In the News" and its defiant "I want nothing but the ending of the war" a particular crowd-pleaser. Cash returned for Kristofferson's new "The Burden of Freedom," their harmonies blending better this time. By the time they closed with her father's rollicking "Big River," Kristofferson's weathered authority had come to nicely complement Cash's pure ache.