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For the Good Times

Jan 12, 2006

Kris Kristofferson's Comin' Down, Despite Being "Too Old for This Shit"

BY NICK TANGBORN

At Austin's SXSW two years ago, I saw Kris Kristofferson perform a secret show at the Continental Club. We got there early and set up shop right in front of the stage, in a club that held, at most, 150 people. He played the richest, most amazing set I've ever seen from any artist—from brief, heartfelt introductions that rang with humor, grace, and humility, to emotionally hypnotic readings of his classic songs, which were delivered spare, guttural, open, and clear. After the show we were taken downstairs to meet the star and his wife; I asked why he wasn't doing much touring these days. Kristofferson leaned into me, put on his movie-star charisma, and said in that familiar growl, "I'm getting too old for this shit."

Kris Kristofferson is *the man*. Even when he's trolling out a cliché, making you feel like you're in an ABC Movie of the Week, he's still the guy you want to be: upstanding moral gravity combined with enough of a fuck-up to cover all your prurient interests, too.

And he's back. He's actually been back for a while; you just might not have noticed it yet. When you see Kristofferson

these days—which, thankfully, is more often now than it's been for a long time—it's usually as the gruff, avuncular mentor like Whistler in the surprisingly not-crap *Blade* trilogy. Or he's stoically demonic, like his characters in *Lone Star* or *Payback*. Between song and the screen, though, the one constant is that signature worn mug and gravelly, smoked-too-much, drank-too-much voice. That whiskied baritone returns to CD this March, when Kristofferson releases *This Old Road*—a full-length LP produced by Don Was and featuring old Kris crony Stephen Bruton on guitar.

The new record should restoke the fires of interest in the story of an intrepid entertainer that's been told often over the years. Kristofferson was the son of a career major general in the air force. He attended Oxford University as a Rhodes scholar, studying and writing about William Blake and performing unsuccessfully under the name Kris Carson. He was a Golden Gloves boxer. He was a helicopter pilot in the army.

And then he moved to Nashville, working as a janitor into his 30s, emptying ashtrays at a Columbia Records studio (where Bob Dylan was recording *Blonde on Blonde*, not incidentally) and handing out demo tapes to anyone who'd listen. Thanks to God and Johnny Cash, Kristofferson's songs started making the rounds on other people's records. Ray Price had a hit with the gently moving "For the Good Times," then Cash with the #1 "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down," and Janis Joplin with her classic take on "Me and Bobby McGee." (Joplin's version was released posthumously, and Kristofferson never even heard his friend sing it while she was alive.) By the '70s he was considered one of country's great songwriters. (It's been estimated that over 400 different artists have covered his songs over the years.)

But it was Kristofferson the actor who became a much bigger

star than Kristofferson the singer ever was or would be. The guy's rugged good looks and charming, shy stage demeanor made him instantly attractive to female audiences. By the late '70s, he was one of Hollywood's leading lights, with hits like *Semi-Tough* and *A Star Is Born*.

When Kristofferson hit a rough career patch in the mid- to late '80s and the '90s, it was working with Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, and Waylon Jennings as the Highwaymen that kept him successful. A new generation of fans of "alternative country" found a hero in his work, thanks to his mix of literate storytelling and honky-tonk ethos.

It was those themes, that charisma, the growl, the persona, that led me to put together *Don't Let the Bastards Get You Down*, a tribute record to Kris by newer indie artists with a great appreciation for his songs. It came out a couple of years ago, and was a big project in my life. At the time, there wasn't a lot going on around Kristofferson, and *Lone Star* had just come out. I like to hope that the record had some tiny part in his resurgence. But lord knows, it was inevitable. You can't keep a guy like Kris down. No matter if he's getting too old for the shit, the stories in his songs will always have a life of their own.