

TORONTO SUN

By JANE STEVENSON

Kris Kristofferson is the epitome of a troubadour. His deep, husky voice and simple guitar playing may not rank amongst the finest in country-folk-rock, but his stories and songs surely do. Not to mention the man's obvious heart, character and charisma.

Last night at U of T's Convocation Hall, the 69-year-old singer-songwriter did not disappoint as he made a rare live appearance before a sold-out crowd in support of his first studio recording of original songs in 11 years, *This Old Road*.

Taking the stage alone with his acoustic guitar and mouth organ, Kristofferson seemed a bit tentative at first, as he often ended his songs with an abrupt "Thank-you!" or played abbreviated versions of tunes. But as he slowly became more comfortable, due in large part to the loud, rowdy crowd that shouted out song titles or their undying love, or just clapped along in a show of support, Kristofferson loosened up considerably. It probably helped too that his pal, Ronnie Hawkins, was in the audience, and Kristofferson made several references to his "buddy" throughout the night.

For the last decade or so, Kristofferson has been busy with his other day job -- actor -- but the strength of his latest album, produced by Don Was, shows that songwriting remains his first love.

New protest tunes In The News and Pilgrim's Progress, country outlaw odes The Show Goes On, Chase The Feeling and Final Attraction, and love songs The Last Thing To Go and Thank You For A Life, stood up right alongside the classics he played: Darby's Castle, Me And Bobby McGee, Best Of All Possible Worlds, Help Me Make It Through The Night, Nobody Wins, Loving Her Was Easier (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again), Jody And The Kid, Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down, Don't Let The Bastards Get You Down and Please Don't Tell Me How The Story Ends among them.

Kristofferson also has a humbleness that is rare in a Rhodes Scholar. "Well, it ain't Dylan, but it's all I've got," he said after performing the new song Chase The Feeling.

And when Kristofferson made mistakes, like during the false start to Me And Bobby McGee, or was disrupted by a small child who wouldn't stop crying towards the end of his two-hour-show, he was never flustered. "I know just how he feels," Kristofferson joked of the young boy wailing.

He even took a moment to get political but managed to make it funny and not preachy. "Oh Canada, do you ever wonder about your neighbours to the south?" he asked. "I don't hate George Bush. He's just the hood ornament on a machine run by a bunch of right-wing ideologues going over a cliff."

All in all, last night's concert was a far cry from Kristofferson's appearance two summers ago at the Molson Amphitheatre as the opening act for Blue Rodeo, which saw the audience talk through his entire set.

Last night, the crowd was chatty alright, but it was done with the utmost respect for the performer on stage.

"I can't tell you how much a night like tonight means to me in a place like this with people like y'all," said Kristofferson before his final song.