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## **Gray Fox, Silver Tongue**

### **Kris Kristofferson Is Cultivating His Singer-Songwriter Roots, With His Boots On**

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When Kris Kristofferson was honored at the Texas Film Hall of Fame awards earlier this month, the director John Sayles offered a characteristically direct explanation for why he decided to cast the Brownsville native as a racist border town sheriff in his 1996 film "Lone Star." "He could dig for the simple truth of a character," Sayles said while Kristofferson watched from the wings. "He's smart, and you would sit up and take notice when he entered a room." But more important than such fancy notions as artistic honesty, integrity and intelligence, Sayles said simply, "Kris Kristofferson knows how to wear the boots."

Jump-cut to a few days later at Austin's Four Seasons Hotel, where music industry swells are arriving for the South by Southwest Music Conference. In a nearly empty conference room far away from the buzzing lobby, Kristofferson is wearing those boots, and Sayles was right. He knows how to wear them. Scuffed down to the bare leather, Kristofferson's boots are the sartorial reflection of the man: creased and cracked and comfortable, the real thing. At nearly 70 (his birthday is in June), Kristofferson looks his age -- his famous blue eyes glint like shards of polished steel from beneath a brow furrowed by time -- but is amazingly fit. In his all-black uniform of jeans, tee and button-down shirt, Kristofferson is wiry, his hair graying but still falling to his shoulders in waves, his smile regularly smoothing out the deep grooves in his tanned face.

Put simply, Kris Kristofferson is still a stone fox. But even more to the point, and as the audience will see tomorrow when he takes the stage at the Kennedy Center as part of its country music celebration, Kris Kristofferson -- not the movie star or the sex symbol or the American icon but, simply, the singer and songwriter whose words, music and persona changed country music forever -- is still here.

Indeed, Kristofferson has been downright ubiquitous at this year's South by Southwest, starting with the Hall of Fame induction, continuing through a film festival that featured a retrospective of his movies, and culminating in an opening-night performance with Jessi Colter, onetime wife of Waylon Jennings -- who with Kristofferson and Willie Nelson revolutionized Nashville in the 1970s as a group of mischief-makers known as the Outlaws. Colter's manager had a piano sent to Kristofferson's hotel room, and they spent an evening working out a few songs; the next morning he was clearly eager for the show to get started.

"This is a whole lot of backstage and very little gig," he says of South by Southwest, in a voice that is at once gravelly and soft. After harmonizing with Colter -- for the first time in nearly 30 years -- Kristofferson says he was put in mind of a time long ago, "when I was a little burned out on the road over in Europe. And I ran into, uh . . . who was Gram Parsons's girlfriend? Emmylou Harris. It was Emmylou and her band and Ricky Skaggs, and we were up in her room singing. . . . And I thought, God, what a wonderful way to go around the world."

That sense of cosmic thankfulness permeates "This Old Road," Kristofferson's new album. Sparsely produced, featuring little more than Kristofferson singing his own work and playing the guitar and harmonica, the record is at once a throwback to his roots as a picker and something startlingly new. While many of the songs are fond backward glances at a life well lived (if sometimes recklessly), just as many bristle with the social consciousness that has informed Kristofferson's work since his very first hit, "Viet Nam Blues."

If "This Old Road" had a subtitle, it might be "Songs of Gratitude and Rebellion." They range from the prayerful "Thank You" to "In the News," an outraged protest against the war in Iraq. The record has proved to be an unexpected hit, with Kristofferson experiencing his best first-week sales in decades, and receiving an outpouring of support from fans and critics alike.

"I'm just stunned by the positive reaction to it," he says. "I've been making records for so many years, and you always think you're doing the best you can, you know. But this one was so . . . naked . . . I probably wouldn't have had the courage to put out a record like that if it hadn't been for Don."

That would be Don Was, *the legendary* rock producer whose résumé includes making records for Willie Nelson, Marty Stuart and Waylon Jennings; in 1995 he produced "Moment of Forever" with Kristofferson. But it was three years ago at South by Southwest that Was saw Kristofferson perform live, without the band he had traveled with for most of his career. "It was the first time I'd seen him play solo, just him standing up there with an acoustic guitar and singing those songs," Was said by phone. "And he's amazing."

Last year, Was says, an audio company offered to outfit his Los Angeles recording studio with surround-sound recording equipment if he would make a record using the technology. "As it happened, Kris was coming to the studio just to visit that day," he recalled. "He just walked through the door and we recorded the whole album in about an hour and a half."

"This Old Road" was recorded with five microphones situated around Kristofferson. It possesses the intimate, spontaneous feel of something done on the fly, with Kristofferson at his most undefended; his voice cracks, he doesn't always hit the notes on his guitar. The lower register rumbling with gravitas as he sings about freedom, justice and Willie

Nelson, Kristofferson's voice combines the grit and softness of ancient stone, worn smooth by time and elements. Kristofferson's longtime keyboard player Donnie Fritts calls "This Old Road" the singer's finest record since the 1971 classic "The Silver-Tongued Devil and I."

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"It just reminds me so much of the day when we first got together," Fritts says. "I was a songwriter myself back then and when I heard Kris I said, 'Oh, so *this* is the way you're supposed to write a damn song.' "

Back then, Kristofferson recalls, "the guys I ran with didn't want to hear you dazzle them with footwork. Which was lucky, because I can't," he says with a laugh. "They just wanted to hear the song, what it was about . . . it was as stripped down as you could get. But I never had the nerve to do that once I started performing.

A few weeks later, at the Birchmere in Alexandria, Kristofferson stood alone with his guitar, fumbling with harmonicas and making self-deprecating jokes. "This'll be a good night if I don't mess it up," he quipped early on, then proceeded to hold the audience in a 100-minute spell with beloved hits including "Help Me Make it Through the Night," "Me and Bobby McGee" ("To Janis," he said softly afterward), "Lovin' Her Was Easier" and "Jesus Was a Capricorn," as well as several songs from the new album.

"It ain't Dylan, but it'll have to do tonight," he said with a laugh before launching into "Jody and the Kid."

The modesty is at once sincere and at odds with Kristofferson's undeniably commanding stage presence. This is a man, after all, who had to be literally kicked in the rear by June Carter before the performance that launched his career, at the Newport Folk Festival in 1969. Carter and her husband, Johnny Cash, were early supporters of Kristofferson, who after abandoning a promising career in the Army (his father and both grandfathers were military men) worked as a janitor at Columbia Records in Nashville while trying to break in as a songwriter. One of Music Row's most cherished pieces of lore is the story of Kristofferson -- who was working later as a pilot for an oil company -- landing a helicopter on Cash's lawn and handing him a demo tape; Cash later recorded "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down" and invited Kristofferson on his television show.

A Rhodes scholar whose short stories had been published in the Atlantic Monthly, Kristofferson approached songwriting with the discipline of an athlete and the heart of a poet. As music critic Peter Cooper wrote in the liner notes to "The Pilgrim," a tribute to Kristofferson that will be released in June, in his hands "Nashville-based country songs became literate, layered and respectable."

But it was that Newport gig that started it all. He proceeded directly to the Troubadour in Los Angeles, where he opened for an unknown named Linda Ronstadt. After that, as Kristofferson recalls, "I never had to work again for a living."

He still sounds awestruck at what he calls the "roller coaster" that started that year. "And it didn't stop." Not only were his songs becoming hits at the hands of such stars as Cash, Roger Miller, Ray Price and Sammi Smith, but he was coming into his own as a singer and, he adds, "I was getting film offers right from the top, because the Troubadour was in L.A., so there were a lot of movie people there. [Sam] Peckinpah was in the audience, Barbra Streisand. . . . I'm amazed now that I didn't just fall down and die."

Peckinpah gave Kristofferson his first big movie role, in "Cisco Pike"; they went on to make "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" together, as well as "Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia." Streisand, of course, would cast him in her remake of "A Star Is Born," solidifying his box office appeal as a soulful, sensitive heartthrob. His Hollywood career came to a halt as precipitously as it began with the release of Michael Cimino's disastrous "Heaven's Gate," but since "Lone Star," Kristofferson has been working steadily on-screen; indeed, there's an entire generation that thinks of him as the villain in "Blade."

Throughout "This Old Road," especially when he's invoking the names of such departed friends as Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, Kristofferson sounds amazed at having survived. And there were some years when it looked as though he might not, whether because of his own self-destructive behavior or the unforgiving vagaries of the music business. Famous for his partying and sexual conquests (the list of his former lovers, like the road, goes on forever), Kristofferson drank too much and smoked too much and probably loved too much. But he's been clean and sober for more than 20 years and, after two divorces (the second from Rita Coolidge), has been married to former attorney Lisa Meyers for 23 years. They live in Maui with their five kids (he has eight in all, plus four grandchildren) when they don't pile the younger children into a tour bus and take off.

Because through it all, Kristofferson has never stopped playing, whether in the 1980s as part of the Highwaymen with fellow Outlaws Cash, Nelson and Jennings, or with sidemen like Fritts and Stephen Bruton (who with drummer Jim Keltner plays on the new record).

Along with Nelson and Bob Dylan, Kristofferson has found he's happiest on a never-ending tour. With the exception of a pause for heart bypass surgery in 1999, "we never stopped," he says, "even when people didn't know we were out there."

And there were times, in the not too distant past, when not many people knew Kristofferson was out there. He has always had a core audience of devoted fans -- a disproportionate number of them women of a certain age -- but with "This Old Road," a new constituency is taking notice. (He was recently the subject of a cover story in the alt-country magazine No Depression.)

It's not lost on him that his career is being resuscitated by a rock producer, similar to the collaboration between Cash and Rick Rubin and, more recently, Loretta Lynn and Jack White. "I love it," Kristofferson says of how rock has revived his Outlaw roots. "I can see

doing this for a long time." So it's a good thing Kris Kristofferson knows how to wear those boots; they clearly still have a few miles left to go.