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## Review

by Jeff Tamarkin

The success of a tribute album is fully dependent on the contributors' ability to put their egos aside and kneel at the altar of the artist being feted. The crew honoring **Kris Kristofferson** here had no trouble doing that. Though some of the featured artists -- particularly **Rosanne Cash**, **Shooter Jennings**, **Jessi Colter**, and, of course, **Willie Nelson** -- were family and friends while others were admirers from afar, there's a palpable sense of love and respect permeating this cozy and homey 70th birthday party. **Kristofferson**, already in his thirties when Nashville took notice of him in the late '60s and early '70s, was a prime mover among the "outlaw" songwriters and singers who turned the country music business on its ear, bringing to it a rock & roll attitude marked by a stark new realism. His songs have been covered by many over the years, and the most successful interpretations have been those that drilled to the core and found the honesty and originality the writer gave them without slavishly aping the original. Only a few of the performers on this American Roots label collection, the follow-up to a similar set spotlighting **Stephen Foster**, stray far from **Kristofferson's** blueprints, but all understand who they're dealing with and what he's about. Those tracks that take the most liberty -- **Patty Griffin** and **Charanga Cakewalk's** sprinkling of Latin and electronica touches on "Sandinista"; **Brian McKnight's** spare, soulful "Me and Bobby McGee"; **Rodney Crowell's** honky tonkin' "Come Sundown" -- are among the most satisfying. **Marshall Chapman's** bluesy, boozy take on "Jesus Was a Capricorn" imbues one of **Kristofferson's** cornerstone compositions with the proper balance of humor and profundity, and the pairing of **Lloyd Cole** and **Jill Sobule** on "For the Good Times," with its soft harmonies and longing tenderness, is inspired. **Gretchen Wilson** doesn't make "Sunday Morning Coming Down" her own by any means, but she conveys the song's vulnerability. Lastly, **Kristofferson** himself tosses in a circa-1970 demo recording of "Please Don't Tell Me How the Story Ends" -- a nice touch, but somewhat superfluous. The album's major clunker? Not too surprisingly it's **Russell Crowe** -- yes, *that Russell Crowe* -- crooning his way through "Darby's Castle" competently if overdramatically. But even if the irascible actor is far from the best singer on the album, he too lets it be known that he's in awe of its subject.