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Old Warrior strikes another blow

Kristofferson faces mortality while offering revolution

By Paul Curr

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"This Old Road"

Kris Kristofferson (New West)

If "Me and Bobbie McGee" is Kris Kristofferson's most recognizable song (it is), then his most famous lyric offers a definition of "freedom" (i.e. "just another word for nothing left to lose") that seems to offer a dark counterpoint to the standard American boast that this is the Land of the Free. We are certainly not a people with nothing left to lose.

Kristofferson's strange career has been dotted with songs of appreciation for blessings, but it could more generally be characterized by songs of gentle protest, dissent, advocacy for compassion and an expansion of our cultural conscience. It should be no surprise that the overarching emotions he presents are anger, disappointment and resignation.

For his 21st album, and his first studio effort in more than 10 years, Kristofferson has stripped away the quirky poetic artifice that has rendered him something of a novelty and created what may be the most concise artistic statement of his career.

While it was produced by Don Was, who has a reputation for polish and ambition, "This Old Road" comes off like an intimate demo, a personal performance for the listener. A band is credited, including Was on acoustic bass and piano, Jim Keltner on drums and Stephen Bruton on mandolin and second guitar, but their contributions are most often pushed into the background, offering little more than an occasional color wash to what is primarily a stark solo performance.

This arrangement works gloriously in spite of Kristofferson's notorious vocal shortcomings. The record offers a perfectly balanced portrait of modesty and ambition. Like the fabled drummer boy, Kristofferson is overwhelmed by his opportunity to play and is putting his best foot forward.

The album's 10 new tracks (arranged evenly around a new recording of an early nugget, "The Burden of Freedom"), find Kristofferson taking inventory of the years ("This Old Road"), assessing his own circumstances ("Pilgrim's Progress") and lamenting the condition of our world and a growing feeling of helplessness ("In the News"). "Wild American" is a tribute to troublemakers and revolutionary songwriters; here,

Kristofferson name-checks Steve Earle, Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson and others, encouraging their efforts.

In the closer, "Final Attraction," he admonishes his living colleagues to "pick up that guitar and go break a heart" for the memories of all of the great singers and songwriters who have offered inspiration and solace. Here he name-checks Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Janis Joplin, John Lennon, Roger Miller and others, before adding "and one time for me."

Similar in spirit to Neil Young's tragically overlooked "Silver and Gold," "This Old Road" presents an artist facing his mortality with an eye on both the eternal as well as the here-and-now. At one point, the 70-year-old Kristofferson asks, "Am I young enough to believe in revolution?"

The astonishing truth is that by merely asking the question he proves that he is, and by offering such a song, he invites us all to join.