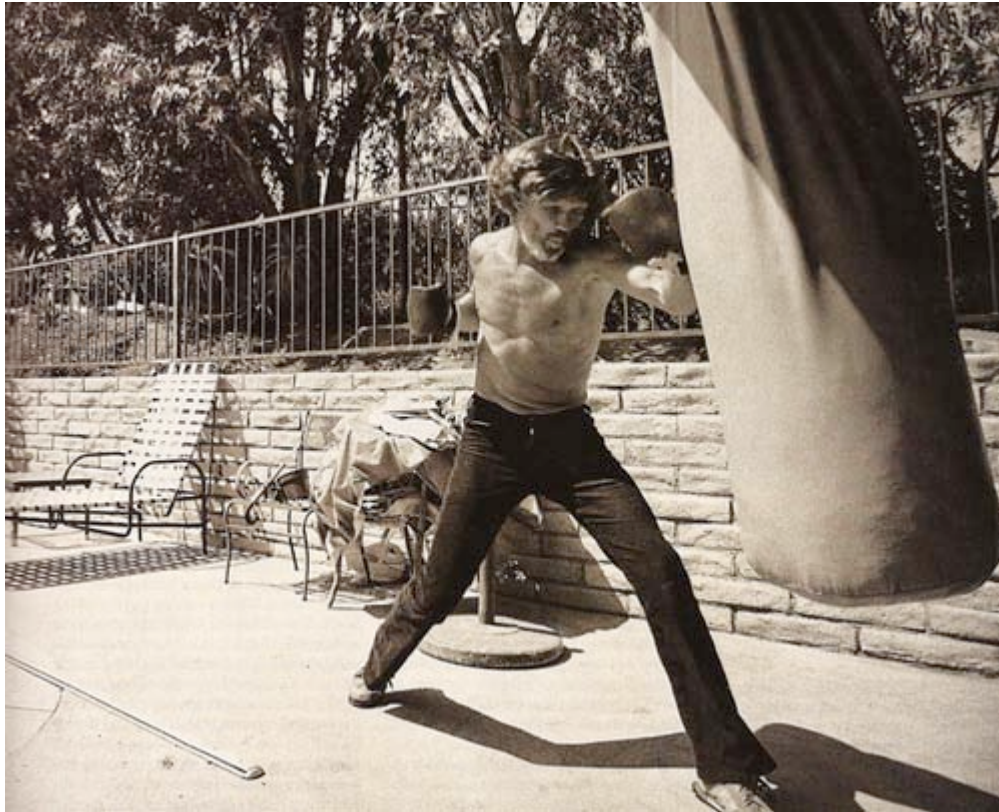


## [Kris Kristofferson :: The AD Interview](#)

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Last week AD cut a session with [Kris Kristofferson](#) at a studio here in Los Angeles — we also had the opportunity to interview the troubadour/actor/activist. Below Kristofferson speaks on his new LP, Nicaragua, old friends, and what exactly *did* happen with that National Guard helicopter on Johnny Cash’s lawn. Stay tuned for the AD session with Kristofferson in just a bit.

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**AD:** Why the album name [Closer to the Bone](#)? And why the change from *Starlight & Stone*?

**KK:** One felt righter than the other, at the time. “Closer to the Bone” seemed like it fit the mood for the whole album.

**AD:** What is “closer to the bone” for you?

**KK:** For me, it’s down to the bare essentials. If we’re talking about the songs, they’re stripped down to where I was just playing it with the guitar. Now, we’ve got Stephen Bruton playing. And this is Stephen’s last album [recording completed before his May 2009 death]. Stephen and Jimmy Keltner [drums], Don [Was, who also produced] playing bass, and Rami Jaffee [keyboards], he did some stuff that was so tasty, like on “*From Here to Forever*.”

**AD:** Why the more intimate setting now, both on this record and on [2006’s] [This Old Road](#)?

**KK:** Those were both Don's ideas, and it seemed logical to me because, for the last five or six years, I've been performing that way, you know, without a band. Just played the guitar and harmonica. And something about it is working. I was really surprised at the reaction to both albums. The first one, *This Old Road*, we did it in about an hour and a half. And he [Don Was] was trying out this new kind of recording where they have you surrounded by microphones. I don't know what they call it, but there was 360 degrees of reception. And I'm just standing there with a guitar and playing. And I figured it would just be a demo for a later session. But whatever's been workin' on the road now—on the stage, you know—seems to be workin' on the last two albums. I'm still kinda stunned by the reception; people just seem to like it, you know. And I'm more critical of myself, I guess. Maybe more than I ought to be.

**AD:** So you thought ...

**KK:** ... I thought maybe I would have to record them again, but it's workin'.

**AD:** You've obviously had a strong career—songwriting, film, across the gamut, and collaborations with [the Highwaymen](#) and [The Winning Hand](#)—but your solo recording career hasn't had as much commercial success after you first came on the scene in the late '60s, early '70s.

**KK:** Way back in the day, I was selling records up till, oh about '80, I guess. Then I started selling fewer. But I've always been amazed that anybody buys any of them. It's been a long ride. And if I ever thought that people would be treating me like an icon at the end of the road, I would think we were dreaming. I don't know, it seems like the reviews are better now and the audience reaction. I used to get people who'd get pretty mad at some of the things I would be saying, mad about "What the hell were you doing in Nicaragua?" and places like that.

**AD:** What were you doing in Nicaragua?

**KK:** Our government was trying to overthrow theirs. And it was really depressing because they [the [Sandinista National Liberation Front](#)] had finally overthrown the Somoza dictatorship that the United States had backed for years. And the people had a revolution and threw him out. And we [the U.S.] started training what they call the contras down in Fort Benning, and sending them off to blow up schools and hospitals and roads and health facilities. It didn't seem like a righteous thing for our country to be doing to another.

And those kind of things, back what I was doing in the '80s, a lot of people were mad about it because they didn't agree with me. And I've had audiences where 300 hundred of 'em wanted their money back [laughs]. And it doesn't happen that way anymore. I don't know why. Maybe it's because more people have been exposed to the same news that I was, and have changed their minds. Or maybe they're just more tolerant of the old guy up there. They aren't as rough on me as they used to be.

**AD:** Actually, that's something I wanted to ask you. Everyone is aware of the Kristofferson mythos—Rhodes scholar, Army Ranger, janitor, pilot—to the point where, now, it does almost dominate the conversation about you, even sometimes before the work at hand. How do you feel about that?

**KK:** The fact that anything is bringing any attention to any of my work is something I'm grateful for—that anybody gives a damn. And I'll probably piss people off again some time, but they've been more respectful or more tolerant as I get older.

**AD:** You have some credentials to back it up, too.

**KK:** [regarding activism] And I was right, of course [laughs]. I hope that they are gonna lighten up and appreciate Barack Obama, and let him work without being criticized from behind, from the other side, so badly.

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**AD:** It's tough these days to do anything without being criticized from behind.

**KK:** Yeah, well, it just seems stupid. I was pleased to see more votes for Obama than I thought he was going to have. And that meant he had a larger base of people who think like he does. And most of them are younger, so that's all encouraging to me.

**AD:** Back to the record for a bit, does *Closer to the Bone* relate at all to [To The Bone](#), from 1981?

**KK:** Basically, it means the same kind of thing: getting down to the truth. I was hoping it didn't sound too much like *To The Bone* because that was probably one of the lowest points of my life. I was recovering from a marriage that had fallen apart [with [Rita Coolidge](#)]. And I was a bachelor father with no experience at raising a kid by myself.

**AD:** Do you think that at the time, you thought that [experience] cut to the bone, but maybe reflection of a life lived cuts closer to the bone than the actual experience?

**KK:** That's sounds as good as any reason I can think of [laughs].

**AD:** You've said before that you would only write something if you had something to say. After an 11-year hiatus before *This Old Road*, now you've had two records relatively close together. Now, in 2009, a career four decades long, what is that you have to say?

**KK:** I've always used the songs to explain whatever I was experiencing or explain whatever the world was. But I hope that I've got something to say, till they throw dirt on me. I hope that I'll start writing a little more now. But I also have an autobiography that I'm supposed to start working on, and I better do it while I can still remember my name.

**AD:** So, this maybe ties into your autobiography—can you explain a little bit about “*Good Morning John*” [album track about Johnny Cash]?

**KK:** “*Good Morning John*” was one of the few songs I've ever written on request. June Carter had—John had just completed the last rehab he was ever in, and she had a little get-together for him, and she asked me if I'd write a song for him. And I don't know whether it embarrassed him more or embarrassed me more. But I had never written on command or by any kind of schedule. I pretty much wait till it hits me. But in this case, I felt obliged to do it because I thought so much

of both of them. I don't know if it stands up as a song on its own, but it's sincere. And it reminds me of John.

**AD:** Is that why it was important to include it?

**KK:** I don't know why it was. There are more and more of those faces up on Mt. Rushmore that are leaving us. John was such an important part of my life that I thought it was worth putting in there. I remember I was going to record it back when I wrote it. And some of the Highwaymen were there. Willie [Nelson] was, and he was singing as my backup guy. So, I would sing "*Good morning, John,*" and they'd sing [singing], "*Good morning, John*" ... you know, echo it. And I got to the line where it says, "I love you, John," and Willie goes [singing] "He loves you, John." I started laughing so hard, I couldn't finish the song. But he just couldn't quite bring himself to say, "I love you, John."

**AD:** How does that feel at this stage in your career? Obviously, it's been a few years since he passed, and Waylon, as well.

**KK:** The Highwaymen?

**AD:** Well, not just the Highwaymen, but close friends of yours and contemporaries and people who have shaped music culture, as you have ...

**KK:** One of the things that still amazes me is how, through my life, I've gotten to be friends, close friends, with a lot of my heroes. Guys like John and Waylon and Roger Miller and Willie Nelson and Muhammad Ali. People who I really respect, I've gotten close to. And that's really been one of the blessings of my life that it's turned out that way. You know, I know Bob Dylan.

Our heroes and our friends ... it's good.

**AD:** You wouldn't have met all of these people had you not left a life you'd already started forming for yourself. How difficult was that, being in a military family, being in the military yourself, having a young family, how difficult was that, embarking on a songwriting career?

**KK:** It wasn't as difficult as it sounds like it would've been because it was a totally different way of life. But I was so in love with the whole creative process, and the people like [Cowboy Jack Clement](#) and all of these guys who would spend days at a time hanging out and just exchanging songs, you know. It was such a creative experience for me; it never seemed as hard on me as it was, I'm sure, on my family and friends who thought I'd gone straight to the devil. Thought I'd lost my mind and gone to Nashville to be a country writer.

**KK:** But it was a point in my life, I made a decision to follow my own instincts and my heart, and it changed my life. And it made it what it is now. I feel very blessed to have been able to do what I love to do for a living, and to have such a close family, which is hard when you're working on the road and performing all the time. God, I got eight kids and as many grandkids, and they all love each other, so I feel very lucky.

**AD:** Do you think some personally tumultuous times in your early life and early career, how have they shaped your life from a career perspective, but also personally? You mentioned your family...

**KK:** My family now—I'm as close to my family as I ever was. To think, if I had thought that I was going to be as successful, I would have thought I was doing drugs ... or insane. Because I couldn't have ever dreamed all of the awards and all of the songs that people have identified with. It feels like it's been a successful journey.

**AD:** Looking back at that journey, what's your proudest moment?

**KK:** There have been so many. I remember the first time I heard John doing "*Sunday Morning Coming Down*," I was pretty proud. Just so many things. I feel like I was a very lucky person. And I would advise anybody who ever asked me, "If you had one rule": Follow your heart if it's at all possible. And even if it looks like you're failing—you've been a janitor for two years or something, you know—if you really love it, that's what you should be doing.

**AD:** Do you think the world is more or less receptive to that mentality these days? Do you think it's easier or harder to follow your heart?

**KK:** [Laughs] I don't know, it's been so long. That was 50 years ago. I hope that it's as easy as it was for me. I was really lucky, though. I had so many different lives going on, and opportunities like the Rhodes scholarship ... it all seems kind of magical now. Like it happened to somebody else.

**AD:** So, I have to ask: Did you really land a helicopter in John Cash's yard?

**KK:** [Laughs] Yes! I did! But the difference in the way it's usually perceived, I already knew John by then. I'd been his janitor at Columbia for a couple years. And I had given him every song I ever wrote. He hadn't ever recorded anything, but he was always encouraging about them. He [said later] he threw them all in the lake. That was one of the last things I ever heard him say—'cause he lived right on the lake there. But I had known him for a couple years before I landed that helicopter there. It was a National Guard helicopter—I had to fly four hours a month to get paid. I was in the National Guard just for a couple of months. I had flown thousands of hours in the military, when I was in the army. So, I didn't have any trouble flying. But I probably would've gotten in a lot of trouble if I had been caught landing on ... it was practically on his roof. Because the grass went out over the top of the house before he built the second story to it. But thing was, John wasn't even there. He had a very creative memory. He told how I got out of the helicopter with a beer in one hand and a tape in the other. And I said, "John, you've got to have both hands and both feet when you're flying a helicopter." And I swear to God, I've probably answered that question in every interview I've ever done.

**AD:** I'm not shocked, but this the first time I've ever interviewed you and it'll probably be the last, so I have to ask. It's sort of the requisite Kris Kristofferson question.

**KK:** That's the truth, and I did land it there. But it wasn't the song that he thought it was.

**AD:** Which song was it?

**KK:** It was a song nobody ever cut. It was called "*It No Longer Matters*."

**AD:** Think you'll put that on the next record?

**KK:** [Laughs] I don't think so. But maybe we'll do a bonus track. words/[j crosby](#)