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NASHVILLE SKYLINE: A Conversation With Kris Kristofferson
Singer-Songwriter Looks Back at His Life and Career, Talks About Love and Things in Between

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(NASHVILLE SKYLINE is a column by CMT/CMT.com Editorial Director Chet Filippo.)

[Kris Kristofferson](#)'s life not only would make a damned good country song, it has already been a damned good country song. Many of them, in fact. Listen to any of his great songs and you hear a piece of his life in there. As few singers and songwriters have ever been able to do, he imbues songs with his very heart and soul. The songs early in his hungry career were the big hits, but I think that maturity has brought him new levels of perspective and understanding.

Kris Kristofferson at age 73 has lived a well-spent life. And he's still very much living it. As a young man, he went from being a Rhodes Scholar to serving as an Army officer and helicopter pilot. All the time, he nurtured dreams of going to Nashville and following in the footsteps of such singers and songwriters as [Hank Williams](#).

When he received an appointment to teach at West Point, he abruptly turned it down, resigned his Army commission and moved to Nashville in search of his future. To support himself, he worked as a janitor at Columbia Records' studio and flew helicopters to oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, ferrying workers and supplies. He also landed a helicopter on [Johnny Cash](#)'s lawn to personally hand him a demo tape of a song.

Eventually, after [Roger Miller](#) recorded his song "[Me and Bobby McGee](#)," other major artists discovered such gems as "[Sunday Morning Coming Down](#)," "[For the Good Times](#)" and "[Help Me Make It Through the Night](#)." Besides his career as recording artist, Kristofferson has acted in dozens of films, including *A Star Is Born*, *Lone Star*, *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. And he continues to be unafraid to speak his mind as a social activist.

I was privileged to spend some time with him recently, and here is part of an interview. Kristofferson talked about his new album, *Closer to the Bone*, songwriting, Johnny Cash and how he regards his life and career at this stage.

CMT: You originally called the new album *Starlight and Stone*. *Closer to the Bone* better identifies the songs' content.

Kristofferson: Yeah, I liked that title better. I don't know why I called it *Starlight and Stone*. "Starlight and stone" sounded like a good line, but *Closer to the Bone*, to me, is more the mood of the whole album. And it has several meanings -- the closer to the bone you are and the closer to the truth. I've always thought that was the sort of the thing that separated the good country music from the other music on the radio. There was less BS, less tap-dancing and more down to the meaning.

This album seems to be kind of continuing what you were doing with *This Old Road*. They're both very intimate.

I felt like that. I felt like it was sort of an extension of it. Don Was was the force behind both of them. I remember back when I did *This Old Road*, it was just like a demo -- just me and the guitar. But it worked, and it was received better than any for a long time. And this is more the same, but Stephen Bruton [Kristofferson's longtime guitarist who died after the sessions were completed] played on it and [drummer] Jimmy Keltner and Don. And Rami Jaffe did a couple of things that were just sweet on keyboard and accordion, too, but what he played on the piano on "From Here to Forever" just made me weep, it was so perfect. I can understand Stephen being in sync with me, but I'd never met Rami before.

On this record and in your live shows, you got away from playing with a full band. It was pretty much just you and a guitar. Did that make you feel vulnerable?

I did at first. It was very scary, but I didn't have time to get everybody. And I went ahead and did the shows. It was lucky I was in Ireland where the crowds are on your side pretty much. And it was scarier, but there was a more direct communication or something that was working, maybe because I could make a mistake without causing a train wreck and just keep going. I've been doing it about six years.

The song "Closer to the Bone" strikes me as being perhaps autobiographical where you say lines like "ain't you getting better, running out of time."

Everything that I write is sort of autobiographical, and I don't know that I'm getting better, but I'm certainly running out of time. (laughs). It feels like ... it stands for the whole album because all the songs are reflective of the view from this end of the road. And I'm hoping other people will like it, too. I just don't want to wait for the old folks like me to get down there!

In one sense you're celebrating what you've done, but you're also reassessing your life and really looking at it with a hard eye.

Well, yes, I think there are a lot of things in my life that I'm not proud of doing ... people's feelings that I've hurt. But from where I am now and the comfort that I have with my family, I feel real lucky to have gone through the separation that the road and the audience has put between us and our family. I know John [Johnny Cash] ended up real close to all his family, and I think it's just lucky that I didn't alienate them all by being gone all the time when they were growing up.

Was the song "From Here to Forever" written for your kids?

Glen Clark gave me that title when he and Stephen were writing some songs together. He said, "I don't care how you do it, but I'd like you to use that title." It's my favorite song on the album. The kids are all moved by it and most people seem to like it. It speaks for anybody.

Is the song "Holy Woman" written for all womankind or your wife, Lisa?

Both. To me, the best love songs work on two -- maybe three -- different levels where you're talking about the person who you're right opposite and all the people like that. I feel like sometimes when I'm singing a song like "[Moment of Forever](#)" that it goes both to your significant other and to the audience, and was it wonderful for you, you know? I think the best love songs I've written work on that level, like "Help Me Make It Through the Night." That's as much a plea to the audience as it is to whoever you were singing about in the first place.

The remarkable thing about your most effective songs is that you do something hard that a lot of people can't do. And that's to write about something personal but to make it universal.

It's not a conscious effort. When I wrote "Help Me Make It Through the Night," I was on an oil platform out in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico and was just thinking of myself. When I'm singing it now, I feel like I'm singing it to the audience, too. ... And I've noticed that the best ones that I've written, like "For the Good Times," work on all those levels. And on this album, "The Wonder" works on both. Of course, I guess when you get old and closer to the finish line, you start thinking of everybody, your loved ones, and that extends outward. There are still things that make me angry but not so angry that it takes over everything. But most of the things that are annoying are things that happened in the paper that you read about.

It's hard to write songs like that. Many people have tried, but there's no formula.

I think you have to make it work on a one-to-one level first, as if you're talking right to the person, but you just hope that you've written it well enough that people can identify with it and that it works on other levels. "Bobby McGee" doesn't work ... well, I guess it does because you get an abstract. I remember [songwriter] Vince Matthews said, "You've got such a good song going on, why do you have to put that philosophy in there? 'Freedom's just another word,' you know." And it turned out to be probably the most memorable line I ever wrote, so you've gotta take your friend's advice with a grain of salt.

I was thinking about that approach when you wrote "Good Morning John," which I guess you wrote about Cash when he was pilling.

Oh, yes. June was having a small dinner for John after he got out of his last rehab, and she had [Waylon \[Jennings\]](#) and [Jessie \[Colter\]](#) and some of their family. She asked me if I would write a song for it, which scared me to death, but that was what it was written for. And I sang it to him, and I think he was probably just as embarrassed as I was. Once we tried to cut it in the studio, I remember [Willie Nelson](#) and the band were singing the background and they would echo me. When I would say, "Good mornin' John," they'd go "Good mornin' John." And when I got to the line, "I love ya John," Willie goes, "He loves you John," and I was laughing so hard, I couldn't finish it. I guess he figured I was speaking for myself. It was such an immediate reaction, he didn't ask me if he could do it or anything! Willie remains one of the funniest people on the planet. He doesn't quit working. He hasn't changed. It's kind of like [Jerry Lee Lewis](#) outliving all the Sun [Records] people. Willie's never altered his lifestyle at all -- and there he is. Hopefully,

he'll be there forever.

"Good Morning John" is a bit of a brutal song. Did Johnny Cash ever give you a reaction to it at all?

He never complained about it. It was the truth, and he was fighting that battle all the way to the end. Once you've found an easy way to erase the things that are tearing you up inside, it's hard not to go back to that. I think, at the end, he was unable to do anything to release his grief after June died. It was just a matter of a month or so that he was able to keep going. They told me that he used to cry every night. He had a little room that was about as big as a closet, and he was just too sad to keep going. They were probably tighter longer than anybody that I knew, you know, in face of all the things that can split you up if you're working together on the road. They were just one of a kind. They were that way from the time I met them in '65 to the end, so it had to be right. I think they both felt guilty because they both had other marriages, but they were in love. I remember all the way down in Peru, when I was down there making that movie with Dennis Hopper. I was in Lima, and there were all these headlines about Johnny Cash and they had pictures of John and June and their little boy, [John Carter](#). John Carter has really measured up. He looked pretty wild there for a while when he was a kid out there on the road being a roadie. I remember Poodie [Willie Nelson's late road manager. Randall "Poodie" Locke] and some of those guys would sing, "Don't take your son to town, John. Leave your son at home." I guess it would be very hard to be John's son with John's genes and out there on the road. You know, the notion that he would straighten himself out as much as he's done is pretty hard to do.

One of the things that I really came away from the record with is, "Be who you are." When did you realize that you'd become who you are?

I think it was probably after [songwriter-publisher] Marijohn Wilkin showed me around Nashville back then. My platoon leader was a distant cousin of hers or something. That two weeks convinced me that this [Nashville] is where I belonged. Of course, the rest of my family and peers didn't share that enthusiasm, but it worked for me, and I hadn't connected that line with it until you just said it. I think that's probably why it was a successful move because it's who I was supposed to be, and I'll be it as long as I can.

Did your parents ever fully come to accept and realize what you became?

My mother was the one that was really against it, and my father just went along with it, but he told me one of the last times that I saw him, "I'll never understand what it is that you do, but I sure understand why you did it." He wanted to be a pilot, I guess, when nobody else wanted him to, and there was nothing going to stop him from it. He was a good one, and he ended up achieving things that he shouldn't have. He was a two-star general when he hadn't even finished college, you know, and he agreed with me. And my mother came to [agree] as well. I can remember her hugging Johnny Cash, who she had really disparaged in the beginning. She'd written a letter sort of disowning me when I was first here and it said some pretty harsh things about Johnny Cash. It said that nobody knew anything about him except that he was a dope addict. They were giving me an honorary degree out at Pomona College, where I did my undergraduate stuff, and she was up there on the stage hugging Johnny. And I thought, "Wow,

we've come a long way!"

The album ends with a hidden track, "I Hate Your Ugly Face," which you wrote when you were 11. What about that song?

[New West Records president Cameron Strang] had second thoughts after I'd put it on the tape. He thought maybe we shouldn't put that on there. And it's true, I wrote that or made it up -- I didn't write it down back when I was raking the horse manure down in Brownsville, Texas. And I was 11 years old. And I'm sure I didn't know what a beer was, but "cryin' in your beer" was an expression. I like [the song] to this day, but it was a long time after that before I made it as a songwriter.

It's a precocious song. You compare your ex-girlfriend to a heifer.

My favorite line was, "A lot of singers wish their sweethearts happiness/I just hope you're miserable, you sorry looking mess." (laughs) That may be one of the best that I've ever written.

Did you remember that song after all those years?

Yeah. I can't remember what I had for breakfast, but I can remember most of my songs. And the family will get me to sing it all the time anyway because they were the people I used to sing it to -- my cousins and nieces and nephews.