

TheFader

Interview: Kris Kristofferson



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Kris Kristofferson's new album *Closer To The Bone* is so good and refreshing that we decided to put him in the Gen F section of our latest issue. For that story, we spoke to Kristofferson over the phone while he sat at home in Maui. Yes, we were jealous. But it's hard to hold it against him when the conversation goes from his songwriting to his Texas childhood to World War II, Oxford, Obama, Johnny Cash and ultimate fighting. The whole thing kind of made us want to retire and be his personal groundskeeper/buddy. After the jump, read the interview and see the video for the album's eponymous single. And when you're done, make sure to check out Kristofferson's excellent new Daytrotter session.

You recently said you're now making music for the time in everyone's life when they cherish every moment.

Yeah.

Do you think that there's enough new music addressing that angle of just appreciating life?

Well you know, I don't know. I don't really hear that much music.

Really?

For better or worse, when I started going on the road, I really wasn't listening to music that much after that. And I think I should have. But I don't know if it was laziness or just trying to focus on what I'm doing.

Are you mostly inspired to write songs by the people that you meet on the road then?

Yeah. And different environments. I don't write as fast as I used to, or as much, but I just wrote one

that they're going to use in a film that I just did called *Provinces of Night*, and they liked it a lot. So I can still do it. I don't know how much longer I'll be writing, but probably until they throw dirt on me, you know? In some form.

Where do you live nowadays?

Right now we're in Maui. I've been out here—we built a house out here back in the '70s, and we've been living out here full time for almost 20 years, starting in 1990, and then went back briefly to LA for my son's first year in high school. He wanted to come back out here, so we're back here now.

How old is he?

Fifteen.

Does he surf?

Yeah. We live in a real small town, and I think he missed the closeness of the friends. It's mostly local population out here, it's not many of us haoles. It's definitely a different atmosphere.

When I was growing up, my grandparents lived in Texas, and we listened to a lot of your music. You and a lot of Willie Nelson, and it just felt very West Texan to me. I think nowadays there's less of that old, vast, romantic West Texas. Does Hawaii still have a little bit of that wilderness?

I think so. Where I grew up was not West Texas, it was down at the bottom in Brownsville, and the feeling that I have here is the closest thing to the Rio Grande Valley that I've felt. It's different from California. We moved out there when I was in high school, when it was a different pace of life, and, I don't know, people treat each other differently. But there's an honesty about the friendships and the behavior. I'd noticed it first when I was about 17, when I went to work for Hawaiian Dredging in the summer out on Wake Island. And the people—there's a whole different sort of generosity and honesty about the people. I remember the first day I got there, they were driving us to the dinner—everybody in the same place, because Wake Island is very small, a little atoll—and the guy driving, he was drinking a beer, and he asked me if I wanted one. And I said, "Sure," and he just gave it to me. And I realized after that that you can't say that you want something or that you admire something they've got or else they'll just give it to you. A guy did it to me with a spear gun out there. There's a real generosity that was almost an innocence, that I think my son, Blake, probably missed.

Do you ever make it back to the Brownsville?

I went back because there was a woman who kind of raised me there, a Mexican woman who we're still close to, and I went down to see her. The town doesn't look the same to me as I remembered it—it's actually more Mexican than Texan, I guess. They said I spoke Spanish before I spoke English. Where were you from in Texas?

San Antonio. That's where my grandparents lived.

Well that's real Mexican, too.

Yeah. That's what I was going to say—once you get to San Antonio, everything south of there is over 50 or 60 percent Mexican. The population shifts in south Texas going back 200 years are always fascinating to me.

Where do you live now?

I actually live in New York.

In New York. Yeah, it's quite a big difference from that.

Absolutely. I asked if you ever went down there because I find that sometimes it's nice just to go down there and get that taste of life back a little bit, even though it's obviously even faster than it was in Texas when I grew up.

Well, Brownsville seems pretty stuck back in the past. But I think anywhere in Texas is going to be different from New York City. But that's got its excitement, too.

Were you living in Brownsville when you wrote the song at the end of the new album, the bonus track? It says you wrote it when you were a kid.

No, I'd just left. Maybe I'd started it. I used to sing to myself while I was raking the horse manure out

of the corral. But let's see—I think I was 11 when I moved to California. My old man was a pilot for Pan American, so we had to move around a lot.

During the early days of Pan American?

Yeah. I lived before I can remember down in Panama for a little while because he was flying down there.

Did he fly in World War II?

Yeah. He was in the Army Air Corps, which turned into the Air Force. In fact, I just read that he was the first guy to fly over what they called "The Hump," the Himalayas. They were supplying the Flying Tigers, and he was the first one to fly it at night. They didn't have the instruments they've got today. But he ended up in the Reserves. He was a Major General by the time he retired.

Same thing with my grandfather basically.

Yeah well, my dad ended up going back in during Korea. I think he was in charge of the Tokyo airlift. He was over there, flying the wounded out. I think he'd probably be depressed to see the world's situation today.

Really? How so?

Well, that there's so much militaristic threatening and danger, especially in Korea right now. It's the nuclear weapons that are making it a very scary situation over there.

You seem at peace with things, though. Except there's still that questioning of things in the world in your songs.

Well that will probably go on, you know, like I said, until I'm not kicking any more. Because we're still facing a lot of the same problems. But when you get to be my age, you look at things a little differently than you did when you were scrambling and young. To be looking at it from this end of the road, it's kind of evaluating everything.

What's the biggest change in how you think from "Sunday Morning, Coming Down" to now?

In my life, or in the world?

In your life.

My life now, god, when I was writing "Sunday Morning, Coming Down," I was living by myself in a little slum tenement. I've got eight kids now, and a bunch of grandkids, and they're really the best part of my life. At that time, I would have never thought that I would ever be a family man because I had pretty much moved away from my family—or they had moved away from me. But that was quite a long time ago. I feel really lucky to have persisted in that because at the time, when I went to Nashville, I was a captain in the Army and I'd been to Oxford, and I'd raised a lot of expectations, in my parents and some other people, and those expectations didn't include being a songwriter or a janitor in Nashville. I feel really lucky that I stuck with it, because it's what I love to do. So now I have to tell all my kids—I have one son who's debuting in wrestling in about a week, and another one is in ultimate fighting, and I can't really tell them not to.

That's pretty intense.

Yeah, but I was boxing when I wasn't supposed to. I had some concussions, and I've never regretted doing anything that my heart was into. So I have to feel the same way with my kids.

Did you ever have a moment with your parents when they were able to see that your persistence paid off?

Yes. Both of them—first my father. I used to periodically go out there to see them and my kids, who were living in California. And my father, I can remember the last time I was sitting down with him and we had a beer, which we'd never done before, and he said that he was really sorry. He had actually just gone along with my mother, who was really against it, but he said that he realized now. He said he didn't really understand what I loved about it, but he knew nobody could have talked him out of being a pilot, and he felt that following your heart was a good move. I try to pass that on to my kids. But my mother changed, too. I can see her hugging Johnny Cash when I went out to—Pomona College gave me some kind of honorary degree, a doctorate or something, and Johnny Cash went with me. I remember my mother hugging Johnny Cash like he was the president or something.

And everything was alright all of the sudden?

Yeah.

That's amazing. Pomona is where you got your undergrad, right?

Yeah.

David Foster Wallace was teaching there, the guy who wrote *Infinite Jest*. He actually passed away last year.

They had a great—maybe one of the best professors I've ever had happened to be the head of Creative Writing there, and that was my major—a guy named Edward Wisemiller. I really feel grateful because he encouraged me from the beginning.

Did he know you were writing songs?

No. I was just making up songs. I never thought of it as an honorable way to make a living myself. I was writing short stories, and I remember that the biggest thing you could do in school then was they had an *Atlantic Monthly* short story contest, and I won it. I got first and third and a lot of honorable mentions. He told me that somebody told him from the judges that they were going to give me the top four, but they didn't want to make it look like I was the only one in the contest. But it was really great for me because before that I was the only one who thought I ought to be a writer. I hope someday—and it'd better be fast—that I'll start writing longer fiction.

Have you published your fiction in the past?

No. Not other than those things for the *Atlantic Monthly*. The last thing I was writing was a novel when I was at Oxford, but when I went into the Army, I stopped writing and I haven't gotten back to it. I started to write some stuff that I just came across the other day when I was in Nashville, after I'd been there for three or four years, and it was a kind of humorous look at the guys who were struggling to make it.

What do you think you would write about if you decided to write something now?

You know, I really don't know. The things that concern me the most are the current events, the things that kill people. And that's why I was so encouraged about Obama winning. I remember back when I first heard him speak, I guess it was at the Democratic Convention, I thought, "Wow, there's a guy that I never thought would get so far so fast." But it looked like the way the Kennedys made you feel. I can remember Kennedy saying that even though our former government is a lot different from Russia's and Russia's government isn't something that we could embrace as a lifestyle, but that there are so many things about the Russians, their history and their military history, that we can admire. And in art. And it was a different way of talking, a different way of dealing with the Russians. Unfortunately, they interrupted his attempts. I guess he and Khrushchev were working in secret to try and get over things like the Cuban Missile Crisis. Neither one of them had the support of the other politicians around them, so they had to do it secretly.

Do you get the same sense with Obama?

Yes. I thought it was so creative of him to talk about dialogue with [Ahmedinejad] instead of just sitting back and condemning him. The thing that was really encouraging to me was how many people voted for him, how many people just didn't believe all of the right-wing trashing in the media.

Well I hope he's able to follow through on a lot of this stuff.

I hope so, too. And so far, I think his behavior has been great. And the most hopeful thing is what you mentioned, with Iran. But God knows how that will end up.

Yeah, you never know. But you hope for the best, make good songs.

Well, I'd just as soon not have any subjects about mortality and humanity and the man.

It was a true pleasure speaking with you. I love your music, I do hope you get to write your novel, I hope you take some time away from music to write that. I'd love to read it.

Well, I appreciate that.

Alright. Say hello to Hawaii for me.

Yeah, I will. Thanks a lot, man.

Thank you.