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Live review: Kris Kristofferson at Disney Hall

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The singer-songwriter keeps it close to the bone in a no-frills acoustic solo show.

"Closer to the Bone," the title track from [Kris Kristofferson's latest album](#), made an ideal choice as the opening number at the esteemed singer and songwriter's solo show Sunday night at Walt Disney Concert Hall. It addresses the tendency as the years go by to hone in on those things that truly matter most and dispense with anything else that can sap precious time and attention.

Coming from the heartbeat

Nothing but the truth now

Everything is sweeter

Closer to the bone

The song also outlined Kristofferson's minimalist performance: just acoustic guitar with the occasional addition of harmonica mounted in the standard-issue folk singer's neck brace.

"Well, it ain't Dylan," he said after his rudimentary mouth harp solo in "Jesus Was a Capricorn," "but it's all we got here." In fact, it was very much on a par with Dylan's signature harmonica wheeze.

The evening was stripped down even by no-frills solo acoustic concert standards. Each of more than two dozen songs, offered up living room-style with simple finger-picked guitar accompaniment, was punctuated with a brisk "Thank you" before the near-capacity crowd could start to applaud.

Kristofferson also largely avoided chatting with the audience. What comments he had about his music were often slipped in during the song. On "Shipwrecked in the Eighties," he altered what originally had been a reference to Tonto to acknowledge the recent passing of his close friend and longtime musical associate Stephen Bruton:

So you turn to your trusty old partner

To share some old feelings

And you find to your shock that

Your faithful companion is gone ("So long, Stephen")

In the context of the night and the overall tone of his recent work, it was a quiet reminder to value loved ones while they are still with us.

As ruggedly handsome as ever and looking a couple of decades younger than his 73 years might suggest, Kristofferson included the touchstone songs with which he launched his career nearly four decades ago: "Me and Bobby McGee," "Help Me Make It Through the Night," "For the Good Times" and "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down."

He also folded in lesser-known pieces, including one he recorded in the early '80s on an album with Willie Nelson, [Dolly Parton](#) and Brenda Lee, "Here Comes That Rainbow Again," an endearing tale of random acts of kindness begetting more kindnesses.

When he got to "Sunday Mornin' " toward the end of the 85-minute set, it begged the question of whether there's ever been a more richly evocative opening line in a song than this one:

Well I woke up Sunday morning

With no way to hold my head that didn't hurt

And the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad

So I had one more for dessert

The poetry of his lyrics remains, but on "Closer to the Bone" and its 2006 companion piece "This Old Road," his writing more often manifests with haiku-like brevity. "Perfect strangers sitting down face to face/Like we've never met before," he sang at the outset of "Love Don't Live Here Anymore," which beautifully captures the emptiness of played-out romance.

Given the caliber of Kristofferson's remarkable body of work, you could hardly ask for more from a performance -- except perhaps to allow the songs to blossom fully with the kind of additional musical textures producer Don Was has supplied on the veteran's most recent efforts. A rhythmic bass line might have given "Me and Bobby McGee" a bit more momentum, and some aching steel guitar would have fleshed out "For the Good Times" beautifully.

It's obvious that fleshing things out isn't high on Kristofferson's agenda these days. But for anyone who values the musical half of the songwriting equation as much as the lyric portion, he might just throw us a bone.

randy.lewis@latimes.com