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## On The Line With... Kris Kristofferson

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I did this interview just prior to the release of Kris's new album, *Closer To The Bone* (New West), for a lengthy career retrospective in the October issue of *Exclaim!* Click [here](#) to read it. This is the full transcript of the interview also posted at my blog, [Heartbreak Trail](#).

***The new album feels like a continuation of your previous release, *This Old Road*, or would you say they're two pieces of a larger picture?***

They feel like that to me. Don Was was really the guy that put it all together.

***There's another song you wrote in tribute to Johnny Cash ("*Good Morning John*"). Did his last recordings partly inspire you to start making your own records again?***

Well, I was glad to see him make those last few records, and glad that Rick Rubin was so behind it. But Don Was was the guy who really suggested that I be recording like this.

***Did his encouragement get you writing again, or have you been writing all along?***

Both. Also, there were a lot of songs like "Good Morning John" that I hadn't recorded that really meant something to me. I wanted to get as many of them as I could on this record. I wrote "Good Morning John" at June's request after John had just gotten out of a rehab – I think it was the last one he was in. After that he straightened up for the rest of his life.

***Speaking of songs you hadn't recorded, I think most people will be surprised by the hidden track, considering you say it was the first song you ever wrote when you were 11. What prompted you to put that on?***

I don't know why I put it on there. Somebody suggested it. I'd made that up when I was only 11 years old, still living down in Brownsville, Texas. I think I made it up while I was raking manure. It was just an attempt to write the opposite of a love song, I think.

***From what I've heard you say in the past, you always had greater ambitions to write prose rather than songs, true?***

I never saw songwriting as having the potential to be a lifetime thing, or something that you would do for your life's work. It didn't seem to measure up to that. I didn't think it was something worthy of devoting your life to until I went to Nashville after I'd been in the army. It was so exciting and creatively stimulating to me being around all of the serious

songwriters there. Everybody was hanging out every night listening to each other's stuff. It was like a rebirth for me after five years in the army.

***I'm still fascinated by that period of your life. You accomplished so much even before you went to Nashville, and decided to leave that all behind. How do you view that now?***

I'm glad that I had the nerve to do that. I think it was probably an act of desperation. I think I would have probably drunk myself to death if I hadn't got into something creative. I always felt like it saved my life. It seemed at the time to my parents and my peers that I'd lost my mind. It was a long way from Oxford. But it was so exciting to me even though it was hard on my wife and kids and my family. It really did save my life.

***Were you conscious of having songs that nobody else in Nashville was writing?***

You know, I didn't. I didn't think I had great songs at the time. But for some reason I was immediately taken in as a serious songwriter by these guys who hung out all night at the jam sessions, and I never looked back once that happened. It took about four years before I actually started to get songs cut.

***Would you say that the social climate had something to do with you being accepted so quickly?***

Well, I can't speak for anybody else. For me, it was an opportunity to be creative and excited by what I was doing. After five years in the army, the freedom of it, the excitement of it was exactly what I'd been looking for. I was lucky enough to run into a bunch of people who were in love with songwriting as much as I was – even as I knew at the same time that my ex-peers and my family thought I was insane.

***Once people did start cutting your songs and having hits, were you tempted to start writing for other artists, or did you always write for yourself first?***

I started performing around the same time as the songs started getting cut. Johnny Cash put me on his show at the Newport Folk Festival, that was the first thing I did, and I got offers to play at some other folk festivals after that and I never looked back. I remember, after about a year and a half, Ray Price and some others tried to convince me to stop going out on the road and just go back to writing songs. They said, 'You were writing a lot more when you were working down in the Gulf of Mexico.' I guess I was doing better than they thought I was. I never did have to work for a living after that.

***That seemed like the time when Nashville was going through a big transition with so-called outsiders like Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell being accepted as well. You obviously have a lot in common with them in that your reputation was largely built upon people covering your songs at first too.***

Guys like Gordon Lightfoot and Leonard Cohen were already heroes to us. I had a feeling at the time I started performing that Canada was the best audience I had. I think it was probably because of how much I looked up to Gordon and Leonard Cohen. Did Joni Mitchell come from there too?

***Yeah, she was from Saskatoon.***

Well, there you go. There was a whole bunch of great singer/songwriters.

***To me, your first four records really exemplify that period when the singer/songwriter was king. And of course guys like John Prine came along during that time as well...***

It was really cool for me to be a part of his success story. Steve Goodman had introduced us, and I remember Paul Anka was in town to see my show. Steve took us to a club to see Prine, and Paul offered to fly them both to New York where I was going to be playing at The Bitter End. He got the owner to let them play however long they wanted to. Jerry Wexler from Atlantic Records came to see one of the shows and signed Prine on the spot. We made some demos with Steve there and he got a record deal too.

***Do you look back on that time now as a golden era?***

Absolutely. It was pretty amazing because maybe five years before that I couldn't even sing my own demos. They weren't used to hearing a voice like mine. I think Bob Dylan helped a lot of us in that way. They couldn't understand Dylan, but he was doing great, so I guess that gave us a chance to try to make a living at it.

***You made the transition to acting fairly early in your recording career.***

They both started at about the same time. My first gig in L.A. was at the Troubadour, and I started getting offers to do

films just from that. Robert Hilburn wrote a rave review, and it was the club that everybody went to anyway. I got offered a starring role in Cisco Pike right off the top with some good actors, and I didn't have any experience, or any real desire to get into that.

***It must have been a big shock.***

Well, I was surprised that I wasn't more surprised. Everything was happening so fast that I'm surprised that it didn't completely knock me off. I think I was lucky that I was so old when I made it. I mean, I wasn't old, but I was ten years older than my peers in Nashville. And I think that time in the army and my education saved me from some of the pitfalls that such sudden fame could have posed for me. Suddenly all of these people that I'd idolized from afar, like Janis, were now mates.

***I guess naturally a lot your early roles were outlaws, which coincided with the outlaw country movement. Did the line between reality and art start getting a little blurry around that time?***

That's why I say I'm glad I was older and I'd had the experience I'd had, because I'd had none in the spotlight like that. It did get a little blurry – you can't drink as much as I drank and not have things get blurry. Fortunately, I think I had enough survival skills by that time to not fall under the train.

***By the late '70s though, your acting career seemed to be peaking just as your music career seemed to be fading.***

Yeah, it wasn't getting as much attention because the record company I was with was sort of sinking in the west. I made several albums that nobody heard.

***Was it tough to balance music and acting?***

Yeah, it was, but so much was happening that I wasn't too worried. Then life crashed in at the end. Rita and I got divorced, and at the same time Heaven's Gate was the greatest bomb of all time.

***Unjustified, I think.***

Unjustified. I'm sure to this day that it was political assassination. The Attorney General at the time [William French Smith], who was an ex-Navy guy, had a meeting in Hollywood where he said there would be no more pictures that gave a negative portrayal of American history, which is what Heaven's Gate is about. That just did it in. There wasn't one favourable review, and I used to read them all. I'd never heard of any film that was treated like that.

***I think at least in Canada it's always been given a fair shake, maybe because Ronnie Hawkins is in it.***

Ronnie nearly got blown off a horse and killed! But having the film get such a negative reception was a shock because it put me out of work for a while. Poor Cimino hasn't done anything since then. The year before he won all those Oscars for *The Deer Hunter*.

***You made a nice return with *The Highwaymen* though a few years later.***

Listen, I feel very fortunate with how my life has turned out in this field. I can make an occasional film and go out on the road any time I want.

***Still, you went through a period during the '80s and '90s when you were making a lot of politically charged music that seemed to fall on deaf ears.***

That's true, but that was time when that information wasn't generally known everywhere. We were undermining these countries in Central America, blowing up schools, and training the Contras to mine roads and overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and kill people in El Salvador. It used to piss people off when I would sing those songs, and it doesn't anymore because they've been exposed to the same information. They get more tolerant of you as you get older.

***I would think too that people are getting tired of how secretive the government has been over the past decade.***

I hope to God they are. And I hope that Obama gets a shot at dealing with people diplomatically rather than militarily.