

Kris Kristofferson: Leonard Cohen-esque

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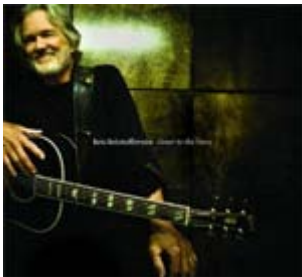
By **Bob Proehl**

No one judges Bob Dylan on his acting.

Thankfully for Mr. Dylan. His performance in the almost unintelligible (but far from unwatchable) *Masked & Anonymous* has gone mostly forgotten, while his performance as Alias in Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* was outshined by his soundtrack for the film. Likewise, the forays of Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson into film are viewed as just that: brief excursions into another media.

But for some reason, in the case of Kris Kristofferson, the public perception has long been that the man is an actor first, a songwriter second, and a musician at a distant third. There are many folks out there who've never heard Kristofferson's recordings, for whom he's just the pen behind "Me and Bobby McGee" or worse, the grizzled Whistler in the *Blade* films. Kristofferson's early film efforts, particularly in *A Star is Born* and *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*, were well received, but it hardly seems fair that a musician as talented as Kristofferson should go down in history as the man who starred in *Millenium*. Not the TV show, the Canadian science fiction movie. No one deserves that.

So it was at the beginning of this past summer that I decided that the man who wrote "Sunday Morning Coming Down" and "Me and Bobby McGee" must have something good going for him. With a little help from a rather daunting torrent file, I decided to educate myself on the subject of Kris Kristofferson: musician.



Closer to the Bone

(NEW WEST; US: 29 SEP 2009)

Like fellow Highwayman Willie Nelson, Kristofferson was born in Texas and made his way to Nashville to break into country music. Also like Nelson, Kristofferson met with early resistance as a recording artist in Nashville, due in part to a negative view of Texan accents that remained prevalent in the city's recording circles even into the mid-'60s. Kristofferson's first successes were as a songwriter providing material for other artists, including Roger Miller, Jerry Lee Lewis and Faron Young, while Kristofferson himself was working odd jobs around the city.

Unlike Nelson, however, Kristofferson was a Rhodes scholar, Army Ranger and helicopter pilot. It was this last talent that would land (pun intended) Kristofferson his first major hit, when he flew a helicopter onto Johnny Cash's front lawn to give Cash a set of demos that included "Sunday Morning Coming Down".

Throughout his career, Kristofferson's songs were more commercially successful in the hands of other performers than in his own, and certainly his discography has its share of misses. His mid-'70s recordings with wife Rita Coolidge fall flat, as Coolidge's thin, polished voice seems unable to match up to Kristofferson's rich baritone, and the soundtrack to *A Star Is Born* with Barbra Streisand is more of a vehicle for Streisand's talents than Kristofferson's. But the albums that grabbed me and held me were Kristofferson's first four efforts, all recorded in the early '70s before his acting career took off.

Alternating tracks brimming with raucous front porch energy and quiet, inviting balladry, 1970's *Kristofferson* is best summed up by Kristofferson's intro to "Me and Bobby McGee": "If it sounds country, man, that's what it is: it's a country song." With "Blame It on the Stones", *Kristofferson* leads with a satirical attack on cultural conservatism, a sentiment that would run through the first three albums and ultimately pervade the fourth, *Jesus Was a Capricorn*. The opening track employs a tent revival chorus to poke fun at folks who pointed fingers for all of society's ills at the Rolling Stones. The album goes on to criticize police persecution of hippies, poor folks and drunks in songs like "The Law is for Protection of the People" and "Best of All Possible Worlds".

As a counterpoint to the bitter humor of these more upbeat tracks, Kristofferson serves up the pathos of "For the Good Times", "Sunday Morning Coming Down" and "To Beat the Devil", stories of heartbreak, addiction and recovery. *The Silver-Tongued Devil & I* continues to strike the same balance, bringing out more new material than the debut album: songs that had yet to be tried out by other musicians first and offered Kristofferson a chance to put his unique stamp on them.

Kristofferson's voice on these albums is a hybrid of Buck Owens and Lee Hazelwood, combining the energy of the former with the low, smirking rasp of the latter. It's this particular vocal style that manages to give weight to Kristofferson's ballads while allowing a bit of bounce to his more satirical songs. Rather than the high lonesome sound of many Nashville balladeers, Kristofferson at times evokes Leonard Cohen, with a voice that pulls the listener into the depths of darkened barrooms, whether to share a sob story or a bit of tongue-in-cheek sagacity.

Border Lord, Kristofferson's third album, is perhaps the most traditionally country of the bunch, showing a little blues influence on the title track and "Little Girl Lost", but staying mostly within the comfortable confines of the Bakersfield shitkick sound, an energetic and plugged-in counter to the more lush Nashville production sound. The songs are concise, with Kristofferson's gift for narrative more focused than on earlier efforts like "Darby's Castle" or "Just the Other Side of Nowhere".

Kristofferson's voice also hits its full stride with this album, sounding clean and confident and shedding some of the rasp of his first two efforts. The backing band is tight and polished, complementing Kristofferson's delivery. Although it sold poorly, *Border Lord* is an exemplary country album, perfectly crafted and flawlessly performed.

Of course, saying an album is the best of the bunch doesn't always equate with it being one's favorite. On the follow-up to *Border Lord*, Kristofferson lets out the slack, turning in the sometimes slap-dash and often revelatory *Jesus Was a Capricorn*. Kristofferson weaves blithely from hippie punch-ups like "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" and the title track, the urban revenge story of "Sugar Man" with its musical and narrative roots in the classic "St. James

Infirmity Blues", the fatalistic balladry of "Nobody Wins" and the stunningly open religious pieces "Why Me?" and "Help Me".

Diverse and brilliant, *Jesus Was a Capricorn* rollicks with a sense of humor reminiscent of John Prine and was Kristofferson's last big solo hit, topping out the Country Billboard on the strength of the popular single, "Why Me?" Subsequent efforts met with diminishing commercial returns as Kristofferson moved his focus onto film, although he averaged an album a year throughout the '70s, due in part to contract requirements.

Many of these albums feel rushed and poorly focused, aiming to capitalize on Kristofferson's early film success while at the same time suffering for the amount of time his film career required. The initial spark of Kristofferson's talent occasionally flamed again in collaboration with other artists, most notably Willie Nelson, but the promise of the first four albums went largely unfulfilled.

At the end of this month, Kristofferson will release *Closer to the Bone*, the 20th studio album from the now 73-year-old performer. On his most recent album, *This Old Road*, Kristofferson sounds reinvigorated after 11 years without an album of new material. Backed by sparse arrangements and sometimes only his own guitar, his voice is weathered but still strong and the vigilant social conscious that informed his early albums seems to have returned to the fore.

The past few years have been kind to Kristofferson the musician: already recognized as a songwriter, he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame as a musician in 2004. While looking forward to hearing more of Kristofferson's musical ruminations on the latter end of his life, my summer has been soundtracked by his earliest works, by turns humorous and heart-wrenching, and all worth a listen.



Bob was born and raised in the Northeastern US. He graduated from SUNY Geneseo with degrees in English and Philosophy and completed his MA in English at Boston University. Since escaping graduate school, he's resided in Ithaca, operating No Radio Records, an independent record store and performance space, as well as DJing under the name AutoMatic Buffalo. His first book, *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, on the slight rise and quick fall of the Flying Burrito Brothers, is due out later this year from Continuum Press.