

CULTURAL CONVERSATION  
DECEMBER 3, 2009

That '70s Guy at 73

By BARRY MAZOR

Nashville

Kris Kristofferson was back in town on Nov. 10—back where, in the mid-1960s, he'd worked as a janitor, and where he rose to the top of the Music City pack as a country-music songwriter with extraordinary, genre-changing gifts. There was an appearance on the prime-time Country Music Association Award show to make and another life-achievement award to receive: this time, the BMI Icon Award, bestowed on living country-songwriting legends.

At the BMI ceremony, Willie Nelson, his friend and partner in the "Highwaymen" supergroup of the '80s, which also included Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings, noted: "Everything he writes is a standard, and we've just got to live with that."

What the Texas-born Mr. Kristofferson has to live with himself is a public image largely formed in the 1970s, when, still in his 30s, he was at once filling arenas on rock tours, living a precarious rock 'n' roll life, starring in such varied Hollywood productions as "Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More," "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" and "A Star is Born," and continuing his outspoken political activism. He turned 73 this June, and almost everything in the life of the iconoclastic former Rhodes scholar, boxer and U.S. Army pilot is different today. The difference between his popular image and current reality was a subject that came up early when we sat down to talk before he headed to that BMI ceremony.

"I'm not sure what people think of me today," he said, "but I imagine that the fact that my family is the most important thing in my life right now—my wife, Lisa, my eight kids and seven grandkids—would be a surprise. It's not something that even I ever thought would go along with my life as a public person, and being an entertainer. When I had my first marriage [of three] and first couple of kids, I was fighting so hard to go my own way and speak my own words, to come to Nashville and hang out with other creative people, not at home, that I had to go back and build it over with them. With the later kids [the eight were born between 1962 and 1994], it was different. And they're all smarter than I am, and love each other, from the three different marriages."

Live appearances, recording sessions and film roles are scheduled with family life in Maui, Hawaii, as his first priority. Mr. Kristofferson first visited Hawaii while working construction as a teenager, and he fell not for the beach but for the Hawaiians: "There's a generosity of spirit there; they're not silver-tongued devils! Their actions speak louder than words. After a family reunion my mother had in Maui, a guy sold me some property, and five of my kids went to school right there and got exposed to that same unique spirit."

Life for Mr. Kristofferson since his '70s commercial peak has not all been so laid back; his outspoken political side had come to the fore in the '80s, and not without repercussions.

"I thought using my art to move people in the direction I wanted to move them was what I wanted to do, that if you can move the heart, you can get the head to follow—and it got me in some trouble. After I was down in Nicaragua or El Salvador and talking about that, it virtually made me unmarketable for a few years. But I didn't feel like, as a songwriter, I was striking out in a new direction by doing it. . . . Hank Williams, when he recorded as 'Luke the Drifter,' had some songs that were controversial at the time, that they might not have wanted to hear, talking about the good guys and the bad guys, songs like 'Be Careful of the Stones That You Throw.'"

Mr. Kristofferson eventually returned to more personal songwriting, with the encouragement of producer Don Was. His recent CD "Closer to the Bone" (New West Records) features sometimes stark, sometimes appealingly sweet contemplations of age and mortality, fatherly love songs to his children, and—in keeping with the always-lurking commercial potential of the author of such classics as "Sunday Morning, Coming Down," "For the Good Times" and "Help Me Make It Through the Night"—several ear-catchers ripe for singing by others. The new songs' lyrics exhibit that combination of frankness, sophistication and literary ambition that was so groundbreaking when Music Row first noticed what he could do.

"I wasn't trying to write differently from them; I was trying to write like them, to be as honest and powerful as the artists I admired, Hank Williams and George Jones, Roger Miller and Willie Nelson. What I think worked in my songs that were accepted was that people believed I was telling the truth. Was it sometimes telling the truth about things they weren't so used to hearing about? Well, yeah, maybe. I remember Chet Atkins saying, 'You know, he's talking about going to bed with her there!' But they didn't try to stop it."

The biggest surprise for Mr. Kristofferson, who hadn't originally been drawn to performing, was his quick emergence as a singer and actor in those image-setting '70s. The blockbuster roles essentially stopped coming his way after the 1980 "Heaven's Gate" box-office fiasco. His film performances from the time of his re-emergence in John Sayles's 1996 "Lone Star," right on through next year's just-completed, Tennessee-based "Provinces of Night" have been, for the most part, in independent films far removed from the extravaganzas that made him a '70s sex symbol, but not unlike his close-to-the-bone latter-day recordings. Over time, he came to value singing and acting both.

"With the acting, I feel I can bring the same thing as with a personal appearance on the stage—which is, really, having people feel that I'm telling them the truth. If you can't bust me for lying in a performance, then I've done my job."

It's palpable that music makers in today's Nashville feel proud and connected to what's best about the place when Mr. Kristofferson is around. And his own satisfaction in finding himself so accepted in country music again is just as evident.

"This embracing of me here now, warts and all, and no matter what I believe politically—I think about it all the time. I loved everything about Nashville music. The songwriters—Willie, Johnny Cash, Mel Tillis, Tom T. Hall, Shel Silverstein, Roger Miller, John Hartford, people who'd been my idols—became my friends. It was a little community of people who were serious about songwriting, who loved songwriting and songwriters. I learned from every one of them. Now people say that was a 'golden age.' And it was."