

Kristofferson celebrates 70th with music

06/21/2006 5:12 PM, Associated Press

John Gerome

The voice on the other end is gruff, familiar, and, to be honest, a little intimidating. "I was about to pick up the phone and track you down," [Kris Kristofferson](#) grumbles, sounding like that mob boss he played in the [Mel Gibson](#) movie "Payback" several years ago.

Soon, though, the reporter's 10-minute tardiness is forgotten, and Kristofferson, who celebrates his 70th birthday Thursday, turns cordial and introspective.

He will appear in the film "Fast Food Nation" later this year and is the subject of a new tribute album, "The Pilgrim" that has artists as diverse as [Gretchen Wilson](#), Patty Griffin and [Brian McKnight](#) covering his songs. The album arrives July 11.

Despite leaving Nashville years ago, Kristofferson continues to be an important — almost mystical figure — in the city's musical history. He's the former Rhodes scholar who turned down an appointment to teach literature at West Point military academy so he could come to Nashville to write songs. He worked as a janitor at Columbia Studios while [Bob Dylan](#) was recording his 1966 landmark album "Blonde on Blonde," and once landed a National Guard helicopter on Johnny Cash's lawn to hand the star a tape of his songs.

He has lived hard and brought a gritty realism to country music with compositions like "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down" (Cash), "Help Me Make it Through the Night" (Sammi Smith), "For the Good Times" ([Ray Price](#)) and "Me and Bobby McGee" ([Roger Miller](#), [Janis Joplin](#)).

Kristofferson, who was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2004, spoke to the Associated Press recently by phone from his home in Hawaii:

AP: Do you ever wonder what things would have been like for you if you had taken that appointment at West Point?

Kristofferson: Things would have been radically different. I often think how grateful I am that I had the nerve or whatever it was to go in the other direction, because once I'd been to Nashville and hung out with the songwriters, I knew that was what I had to do.

AP: You were influenced by Bob Dylan and others rooted in folk and rock. What made you choose Nashville to pursue your craft rather than New York or California?

Kristofferson: I grew up in Brownsville, Texas, and had been a country-music fan since I was a little boy. I probably went to Nashville because my platoon leader had a relative there who was in the business and so we sent her a tape and she said come on down to Nashville. I spent a couple of weeks there and fell in love with it.

AP: You enlisted in the Army in the 1960s, yet that seems so counter to your political views today.

Kristofferson: I was in ROTC in college, and it was just taken for granted in my family that I'd do my service (his father was an Air Force general). From my background and the generation I came up in, honor and serving your country were just taken for granted. So, later, when you come to question some of the things being done in your name, it was particularly painful.

AP: How important was Johnny Cash to your career?

Kristofferson: I might not have had one without him. Shaking his hand when I was still in the Army backstage at the Grand Ole Opry was the moment I'd decided I'd come back. It was electric. He kind of took me under his wing before he cut any of my songs. He cut my first record that was record of the year ("Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down"). He put me on stage the first time.

AP: Your songs became more political in the 1980s. Did you worry that country radio might not play them or that they might not sell as well because of your views?

Kristofferson: From the very beginning, I always resisted being told what to do. I got into the business of writing songs because I thought I was writing the truth about what I was experiencing, and as long as I can do that and still make a living, I feel very blessed.

AP: How did you get into acting? Was that something you pursued?

Kristofferson: It just happened that my first professional gig was at the Troubadour in L.A. opening for Linda Rondstadt. Robert Hillburn (Los Angeles Times music critic) wrote a fantastic review and the concert was held over for a week. There were a bunch of movie people coming in there, and I started getting film offers with no experience. Of course, I had no experience performing either (laughs).

AP: What do you think about the tribute album? Some artists view them as bittersweet — a sign of respect but also that their best work might be behind them.

Kristofferson: I don't usually like tribute albums because I want to hear the person who originally did it, but I really like this one. So many of the people just nailed the soul of the song. Patty Griffin singing "Sandinista" just brings me to my knees.

AP: Did you think in your wilder days that you'd reach 70?

Kristofferson: I never dreamed of making it to 70. [Hank Williams](#) didn't get passed 29. I feel fortunate that I have such a good relationship with all my kids and my wife. Family is more important at this age than ever. I feel grateful every day that I'm respected, and, God, who could have dreamed that I'd be getting all this stuff when I first came into the business. It was very unlikely at the time that I'd even get a song recorded