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Pilgrim's Progress

The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson **Various Artists** **(American Roots)**

—Sean Moores

Putting together a tribute album is a risky proposition. You want to, well, pay tribute to the artist without simply duplicating their songs. Taking chances carries its own risks, though; go too far into left field and you're just sullyng the work you meant to honor.

For American Roots Publishing, which brought us 2004's "Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster," the terrain was even more fraught with the potential for failure. It was riskier because the bar was set so high by their choices and by forces beyond their control. "Beautiful Dreamer," the first installment in American Roots' "New Great American Songbook Series," won a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album. As a subject for their follow-up, they chose Kris Kristofferson, who celebrated his 70th birthday last week.

Talk about a Herculean task. How do you suitably honor an artist who accurately sums himself up in "The Pilgrim: Chapter 33" as "a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction." Covering the truth part of that statement is daunting enough. Kristofferson's impact on Nashville songwriting was such that I'm not going to bother looking for an adjective to describe it. None will do it justice. As for his life, few have lived it more fully or worn so many hats: Rhodes Scholar, Army Ranger, chopper pilot, studio janitor, great American songwriter, movie star, activist and icon, to name more than a few.

But American Roots and the artists they enlisted prove to be up to the task on "The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson."

The excellence starts with the packaging. Critic Peter Cooper of The (Nashville) Tennessean contributes an engaging and informative essay in the liner notes. Co-executive producer Tamara Saviano (Tom Frouge was the other) does a thorough job of explaining how the disc came to be made. There's a great selection of classic photography.

Because of Kristofferson's longtime collaboration and brotherhood with Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings, Saviano says that one of the requirements of the project was lining up the involvement of "the family." They are all represented, even if by proxy, as Nelson, Cash's daughter Rosanne Cash and Jennings' wife Jessi Colter and son Shooter Jennings signed on. The producers then pursued "obvious choices," artists who were directly and noticeably influenced by Kristofferson. Finally, they selected "wild cards," to display the range of Kristofferson's influence.

Those most closely associated with Kristofferson seemed to play it the safest. Nelson, who teamed with Kristofferson, Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings in the Highwaymen, gives a wistful, Willie-like reading of "The Legend." Rosanne Cash changes the title and lyrics to "Lovin' Him Was Easier (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again)" for gender purposes, but the song loses none of its quality, tenderness or vulnerability in her capable hands. Colter exhibits the fine form she showed on this year's comeback album on Kristofferson's "The Captive." And Shooter Jennings shows that he's worthy of the material and of carrying on his daddy's outlaw legacy on one of Kristofferson's signature tunes - "The Silver Tongued Devil & I."

The disc gets a little more stylistically diverse with the musicians who were obviously influenced by Kristofferson. Emmylou Harris, with help from Sam Bush, Jon Randall Byron House and producer Randy Scruggs, opens the disc by lending her angelic voice to the opening cut, "The Pilgrim: Chapter 33." The tune also benefits from a little studio sleight-of-hand: A 1970 recording of Kristofferson's spoken intro segues smoothly in to the slightly newgrass remake. Todd Snider, whose writing certainly shows Kristofferson's influence, is pretty much a perfect choice to handle the defiance of "Maybe You Heard." Rodney Crowell gives a honky-tonk treatment to "Come

Sundown,” and Americana husband-and-wife team Bruce Robison and Kelly Willis sing harmony on “Help Me Make It Through the Night.” Shawn Camp, who is steadily earning notice as a songwriter in his own right, also shows he’s an able interpreter with his faithful version of “Why Me.”

The producers were apparently pretty serious about taking chances and about illustrating Kristofferson’s sphere of influence. Scruggs chooses to do an instrumental take on “Smile at Me Again.” Oscar-winning actor Russell Crowe & The Ordinary Fear of God sings “Darby’s Castle,” and acquits himself well with a performance that evokes Elvis Costello. Brian McKnight provides a different take on “Me and Bobby McGee” with a modern R&B-inflected cover that might end up being a hard sell to hardcore Kristofferson fans. Art-rockers Lloyd Cole and Jill Sobule are a subdued but pleasant pairing on “For the Good Times.” Patty Griffin and Charanga Cakewalk add electronic and Latin touches to “Sandinista,” and Colombian folk singer Marta Gomez pays further tribute to Kristofferson’s Central America-themed work with a beautiful version of “The Circle.” Marshall Chapman provides a bluesy version of “Jesus Was a Capricorn” that has attitude to spare.

Of all the wild-card choices, I was the most suspicious of Gretchen Wilson covering “Sunday Mornin’ Comin’ Down.” Wilson unquestionably has a great voice, but to me her presence reeked of marketing rather than making an appropriate choice to take on probably the greatest song from a great catalog. She pretty much nails it, though, which makes it even more disappointing that she’s frequently saddled with hokey material on her own discs.

Appropriately, “The Pilgrim” ends as it began, in Kristofferson’s own words and in his own voice. He closes the show with a 1970 demo version of “Please Don’t Tell Me How the Story Ends.”

Hopefully there are several chapters yet to be written for Kristofferson and for American Roots, which might just want to clear some shelf space next to that Grammy.