

CD Review: Various Artists – *The Pilgrim: A Celebration Of Kris Kristofferson*

July 24, 2006

The Pilgrim: A Celebration Of Kris Kristofferson

Various Artists

When you think of Kris Kristofferson, many things come to mind: rebel, songwriter, actor, activist, outlaw. As all these titles do apply, Kris himself will be the first to tell you that the line between man and myth can become very blurred. Yet, there is still more solid truth behind the man, a truth that comes through in the songs he writes and sometimes sings. His life is a fascinating one, filled with willingly taken wrong directions. Although, if he hadn't taken these paths, we wouldn't have his music to listen to or a chance to hear from some of the people he has inspired on this well done tribute album.

Kristofferson was born into a well-to-do military family, complete with a Major General for a father. Kris himself would eventually sign up for military service, but not until after receiving the Rhodes scholarship and his Master's degree from Oxford University. While attending college, he was always writing, working on a novel or songs for his recording session as "Kris Carson". As a helicopter pilot in the military, he would make up songs to entertain his fellow soldiers, but his love and study of literary writers made him want more from his songs. Kris was turned down for voluntary duty in Vietnam because he was to be assigned to teach literature at West Point academy.

After ditching his military assignment, he headed to Nashville where he scored a job as janitor for the Columbia studios where he met many artists who would record his songs in the near future. He made a slight impression on Johnny Cash, but Cash still would not record any of his material. It wasn't until Kris landed a helicopter in John's backyard that he took any real notice. After that, others started to take notice as well and the rest is history, which includes becoming a terrific actor in major motion pictures and being an activist on the world scene. You can get a more detailed run down on Kris' life in the liner notes to this CD where you'll read about his time as a fireman in Alaska, a railroad man, a construction worker, and eventually a Nashville beer hall regular. The thick booklet is very informative in its telling of the story of how and why Kris came to

be an outlaw of country music. This CD is a good example of how he changed the way a country song could be written.

This killer tribute album opens with an intro by Kris to “The Pilgrim: Chapter 33” performed by Emmylou Harris. Her connection with Gram Parsons makes her the perfect choice for this powerful song, and is a great way to begin this disk because the song itself is somewhat autobiographical and contains wonderful lines about being a “problem when he’s stoned / he’s a walking contradiction / partly truth and partly fiction.”

“Maybe You Heard” by Todd Snider and “Sunday Mornin’ Comin’ Down” by Gretchen Wilson are two more powerful and reflective tunes composed with feeling and passion. Kris has lived these songs and it comes across in these lyrics. “Maybe You Heard” deals with understanding and sticking by the people you love and say you care about, while others look down upon them or turn their backs on them. “Sunday Mornin’ Comin’ Down” is my favorite tune by Kris and is done well here. He captures that lonely Sunday morning perfectly with an honesty and truth that anyone who was spent said dark morn’ alone coming down can definitely relate to and understand.

Kris’ songs are also represented well by others from the outlaw clan, such as longtime friend Willie Nelson and the family of Waylon Jennings, son Shooter and wife Jessi Colter. Shooter keeps the flame alive by delivering “The Silver Tongued Devil & I” in such a way that would definitely make his daddy proud, a voice sadly absent now. Shooter’s young whiskey-soaked baritone does a fine job here, in this number about drinking, thinking, and opportunities missed. Jessi’s working of “The Captive” is heartfelt and moving. She is a fine choice and excellent interpreter of Kristofferson’s ability and skill. Willie’s vocals can be heard on the last tribute track “The Legend” and his voice shines here as his delivery of the opening lyrics “was it better then / with our backs against the wall / were we better men / than we’d ever been before” are a compliment to Kris’ ability to convey reflective feelings of the lives they’ve led.

Latin vocalist Marta Gomez and R&B singer Brian McKnight represent Kris’ widespread influence. Marta’s bilingual “The Circle”, is moving and her accent comes though wonderfully, making this track one of the most enjoyable. While McKnight’s version of “Me And Bobby McGee” is passionate and growing on me the more I hear it, I can’t help but be reminded of other R&B covers of country and folk songs — the slow beat, mellow guitar, shaker sound, and yes, this one is complete with handclaps. I do like his voice; I just think he could have done more with the song.

The two standout tracks for me masterfully follow one another in track order

“Lovin’ Him Was Easier (Than Anything I’ll Ever Do Again)” and “Come Sundown”, performed by Rosanne Cash and her ex-husband Rodney Crowell. Her voice has knocked me out and stayed with me since I first heard her version of “Tennessee Flattop Box”. Crowell puts his signature sound and mellow vocals on “Come Sundown” to full effect; this song sounds like a tune right out of his own songbook. Hearing these numbers back-to-back sends me back to my youth, listening to these artists, as my Ma would show us how to dance a Texas two-step that still impresses the ladies. Thanks again, Ma.

Many others who have been inspired by our hero Kris round out the disk. People you might not really think of, such as actor Russell Crowe doing a fine version of “Darby’s Castle” or Marshall Chapman and the rocking “Jesus Was A Capricorn.” This tribute disk ends fittingly with a demo by Kris circa 1970 on “Please Don’t Tell Me How The Story Ends,” a perfect song because who knows where Kris’ long and accomplished career will head from here now that he’s 70 and has lost none of his fight or passion.

The Pilgrim is a true celebration of the music and songwriting skills of an American original that has endured throughout years of criticism and self-abuse. He’s a true storyteller of everyday life and love, of the lost and found. A poet documenting those who are given another chance to rise again and redeem themselves. Kris is an inspiration to us all if we know it or not, and we’ve all heard his voice in a song we sing.

Kris Kristofferson, passionate songwriter, rebel, and outlaw, we all owe you.

Written by Fantasma el Rey