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Various Artists

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

After *Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster* won a Grammy in 2005, the bar was set pretty high for the second release in the Great American Songwriter Series by American Roots Publishing. *The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson* easily clears it.

Kristofferson, of course, is now a familiar name for his appearances on the silver screen. But in the 1970s, he revolutionized the Nashville music scene with his songcraft. He took the pathos of country music and made the pain of the individual somehow more universal, imbuing his characters with a flawed humanity in search of redemption. His “small fictions” brought revelations of universal truths. He took outspoken stands on social issues, which was uncommon in the Nashville scene at that time. Along the way, Kristofferson amassed influential musical friends such as Johnny Cash, Janis Joplin, Roger Miller, Ray Stevens; all recognized something special in Kristofferson’s songwriting and brought his songs to a wide audience. By the time Kristofferson made his own debut recording in 1970 with *Kristofferson*, several of his songs had already topped the charts in the hands of other artists.

The 17 tracks that make up *The Pilgrim* CD are all outstanding. By calling on diverse artists to take a song and make it his or her own, the breadth of Kristofferson’s body of work is emphasized. It also illustrates that a good song with a well-told story and a solid melody transcends genre, much the way that Shakespeare’s plays can be

presented from any one of many cultural perspectives and still speak to the human condition.

It is difficult—nay, impossible—to pick a favorite. Honky-tonker Rodney Crowell certainly fills every prolonged vowel in the crooning lyrics of “Come Sundown” with wretched forlornness. Russell Crowe and the Ordinary Fear of God give the straightforward story of “Darby’s Castle” a treatment that allows a full Hollywood screenplay to run concurrently inside the listener’s imagination. And what to do with “Me and Bobby McGee”? What version can possibly compete with the listener’s memories of Janis Joplin? Brian McKnight is up to the task; his r&b version is spare and detached, with vocals that float upon the instrumentation, in complete contrast to Joplin’s over-the-top, full-immersion, take-no-prisoners rendition. The song serves both interpretations equally well. Marshall Chapman’s rollicking interpretation of “Jesus Was A Capricorn” makes it fun to skewer everyone: “Eggheads cussing rednecks cussing/Hippies for their hair/Others laugh at straights who laugh at/Freaks who laugh at squares” because “everybody’s gotta have somebody to look down on.” (Prompting any listener to think, ‘Gee, could I be part of that everybody?’)

Kristofferson’s songs expressing concerns about social justice are given great poignancy by Marta Gomez (“The Circle”) and Patty Griffin and Charanga Cakewalk, whose accordion sighs like an old abuela (“Sandinista”). And who could be a more fitting interpreter of “The Legend” than Willie Nelson, a legend himself? Other artists include Emmylou Harris and Friends, Shooter Jennings, Bruce Robison and Kelly Willis, Rosanne Cash, Randy Scruggs, and still others.

Kudos to Randy Scruggs, who produced the album, and Tamara Saviano and Tom Frouge at American Roots Publishing, whose vision conceptualized this project and brought it to fruition. And sharpen up your pencils for “best of 2006” short lists and Grammy nominations.

—Susan Hartman (Baltimore, MD)