

POP MATTERS

Various Artists

The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson

(American Roots Publishing)

by Steve Horowitz

Kris Kristofferson Turns 70 Years Old

Kris Kristofferson has written some magnificent music. His “Sunday Morning Comin’ Down” transcends any simple classification (i.e., best country composition, best hangover tune, etc.). It’s poetry of the highest order that belongs on the same shelf as the verse of William Carlos Williams, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and other modern masters. In addition, the Rhodes Scholar’s tale “Me and Bobby McGee” would be right at home with vignettes by other great American story tellers like Raymond Carver, Ernest Hemingway, and Jack Kerouac. These comparisons are not hyperbolic. The songs are that excellent, and Kristofferson’s written several other obvious classics, such as “For the Good Times”, “Help Me Make it Through the Night”, “Maybe You Heard”, “Lovin’ Her Was Easier (Than Anything I’ll Ever Do Again)”, and “Why Me”. Kristofferson’s oeuvre is quite impressive.

The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson, which celebrates Kristofferson’s 70th birthday and honors his songwriting talents, is not the first disc to contain an album’s worth of others singing the great man’s songs. The knock on Kristofferson has always been his voice. Some have compared it to a croaking frog and at times that has seemed generous. The obvious solution to this is to put out a record that features other artists performing his material. And Kristofferson’s songs have always been best known by other people’s recordings, including many classic renderings by legends like Johnny Cash, Janis Joplin, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Roger Miller, and Ray Price. There was even a double-disc tribute released several years ago that contained one disc of Kristofferson executing his material, the other one with various artists covering the same tunes.

The real question is whether the latest effort to honor the legendary songwriter is any good. The simple answer is yes. The producers stacked the deck by

selecting Kristofferson's best songs and choosing some sympathetic major players to interpret the material, including Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Rosanne Cash, and Rodney Crowell. Heck, these artists could sing the phone book and make it sound good, and having material as fine as Kristofferson's cherry-picked tunes only ensures the quality of the release. But these are only four of the 18 tracks, and while Nelson's spiritual take on "The Legend", Harris's sweet cover of "The Pilgrim: Chapter 33", Cash's soulful version of "Lovin' Him was Easier", and Crowell's jaunty rendition of "Come Sundown" are among the standout cuts, it's the lesser known artists who provide the best surprises.

Todd Snider offers a country gospel interpretation in his strong rebuke to those who find fault with friends in need of understanding and help in "Maybe You Heard". Marshall Chapman embraces the joy in "Jesus was a Capricorn" and sings it with a wry smile in her heart. Patty Griffin and Charanga Cakewalk make the political "Sandinista" into a touching, personal plea for freedom. Shawn Camp's "Why Me" could make even the coldest hearted atheist into a believer through his plaintive vocals.

Strange, but very good, are two songs by two of the hottest stars on the album. Party girl Gretchen Wilson, who often sings about getting drunk on a Saturday night, does a fine job of portraying life the day after on "Sunday Morning Comin' Down". Her voice cracks and aches at just the right moments. And actor Russell Crowe tells the story of a man preoccupied with his work and material goods who loses it all when he discovers his wife has been unfaithful on "Darby's Castle". Crowe lets the tension build by singing the lyrics clear and straight and letting the words do the work.

Two other songs of special note are R&B singer Brian McKnight's soul version of "Me and Bobby McGee" and married couple Bruce Robison and Kelly Willis's sultry "Help Me Make it Through the Night." McKnight slows down the pace and allows the bittersweet sadness of the piece to shine through. On the other cut, Robison takes the lead on the tale of seduction and lets Willis sexily harmonize to give the tune a classic country feel. Both songs are different enough from the well-known hit record versions to make them sound fresh and new.

Kristofferson himself opens *The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson* with an old intro to "The Pilgrim", which blends into the Emmylou Harris and friends' rendition. And he ends the disc with a demo, circa 1970, of "Please Don't Tell Me How the Story Ends". These songs thematically function well as a prologue and a conclusion and also serve as pleasant reminders of the man behind the music. They also prompt one to remember why it's best to have someone else sing these songs.