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This tribute deserves praise

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What's a fitting gift for a legendary singer/songwriter for his 70th birthday? How about a tribute album? Even better, how about a great tribute album?

Brownsville-born Kris Kristofferson, who turned 70 on June 22, is known for his songwriting (and acting), and throughout the years his songs have been recorded by many of the greats. This album continues that tradition with a diverse group of artists, from Willie Nelson to R&B star Brian McKnight.

Even casual country listeners will recognize many of the songs: *Help Me Make it Through the Night* (by Bruce Robison and Kelly Willis); *Why Me* (Shawn Camp); and, of course, *Me and Bobby McGee* (McKnight).

The CD leads off with Kristofferson talking about the people who inspired his song *The Pilgrim: Chapter 33*, including Dennis Hopper, Johnny Cash and Ramblin' Jack Elliott. Even though the song -- performed here by the venerable Emmylou Harris and Sam Bush, Jon Randall, Byron House and Randy Scruggs -- was inspired by others, it rings true for himself: "He's a poet, he's a picker. He's a prophet, he's a pusher."

Up-and-comers Shooter Jennings (*The Silver Tongued Devil & I*) and Gretchen Wilson (a surprisingly good *Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down*) hold their own against longtime performers Rosanne Cash (*Lovin' Him was Easier*) and Rodney Crowell (*Come Sundown*).

The one hiccup on the album is the very bizarre *For the Good Times*, performed by Lloyd Cole and Jill Sobule. Although Sobule's voice is good, the oversynthesized sound is distracting.

Even Russell Crowe (yes, that Russell Crowe) couldn't botch what is one of Kristofferson's most beautifully written songs, *Darby's Castle*. Crowe, who plays with his new band The Ordinary Fear of God, isn't the best singer ever, but what he lacks in quality, he more than makes up for in heart.

The CD was put together by American Roots Publishing, a little-known nonprofit arts organization with a Grammy under its belt. Its project *Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster* won a 2004 award for Best Traditional Folk Album.

With the strength and beauty of this CD, the folks at American Roots could find themselves back on the Grammy stage next year. And what a 71st birthday celebration for Kristofferson that would be.

Various Artists

The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson

American Roots Publishing

GRADE: A