

Spin Control

July 23, 2006

SINGER-SONGWRITER

Various Artists, "The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson" (American Roots) *1/2**

Four decades ago, back when Kris Kristofferson was starting to make a name for himself as a songwriter, music executive Fred Foster wanted him to make a go of it as a recording artist. A hesitant Kristofferson said, "I sing like a frog," and Foster retorted, "Yeah, but a frog that can communicate."

That anecdote, which is recounted in Peter Cooper's excellent liner notes for "The Pilgrim," explains why Kristofferson is the perfect subject for a tribute album. Like his peer Leonard Cohen, Kristofferson is an effective but limited vocalist whose compositions bloom in the hands of more dynamic singers.

On this 73-minute disc, Brian McKnight completely transforms "Me and Bobby McGee" into a smooth R&B ballad, and Patty Griffin teams with Charanga Cakewalk for a folk-meets-electronica take on "Sandinista" that incorporates accordion, programmed loops and treated vocals.

Gretchen Wilson boot-scoots away from Music Row's typical production style for a spare, earthy, lived-in reading of "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down." Willie Nelson, who was Kristofferson's bandmate in the Highwaymen, sounds truly inspired on a stunning version of "The Legend."

The album closes with a revelatory demo from the man himself -- a 1970 acoustic spin on "Please Don't Tell Me How the Story Ends." Kristofferson doesn't sing like an amphibian. He sings like a poet.

Bobby Reed