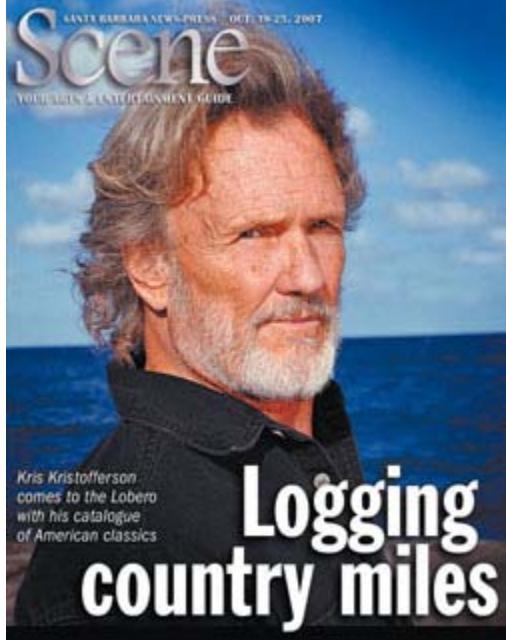


SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



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IN CONCERT : American artist - Kris Kristofferson has shown his talents onstage and on-screen, but his heart has always been in his writing

NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

When: 8 p.m. Thursday

Where: Lobero Theatre, 33 E. Canon Perdido St.

Tickets: \$38

Information: 963-0761, www.lobero.com

As is the case with most important artists, getting at the heart of what makes Kris Kristofferson a special part of the American music scene is complicated. It's not so much the multiple parts as it is the cumulative whole, his body of work from the 1960s onward. Kristofferson makes his first Santa Barbara appearance in many years Thursday at the Lobero.

Yes, as a revered songwriter, he has compiled a collection of well-known songs, such as Janis Joplin's "Me and Bobby McGee," Willie Nelson's "Help Me Make it Through the Night," "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down," and "For the Good Times."

On the big screen, Kristofferson's understated, man-of-few-words suavity has graced such memorable films as "The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea," the Western "Heaven's Gate" and John Sayles' "Lone Star." As a singer, Kristofferson is known for a distinctively warm but gruff vocal presentation, and has been an unsung hero on his own terms, as a solo artist and in such specialty groups as The Highwaymen, with Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings and Nelson.

Not bad for a failed military and literary man.

Kristofferson was an itinerant army brat, born in Brownsville, Texas, and grew up in San Mateo, Calif. He studied literature at Oxford before landing in Nashville, Tenn., and decided to devote himself to music. Now 71, Kristofferson is in a new phase of activity, having made the acclaimed and stripped-down album "This Old Road" in 2006, and reacquainted himself with life on the road.

Recently, Kristofferson spoke on the phone from his home in Hawaii, where he has lived with his family for 17 years.

Over the years, it seems like you've had a waxing and waning interest in touring.

The touring part of it was pretty much what I really wanted to do for a long time, although I was on a pretty self-destructive phase for a long time. It was like being on a roller coaster that was going pretty fast and there was no way really to stop and talk about it. It was just about survival.



COURTESY PHOTO

But I started going out by myself two or three years ago, when I got offered a job and didn't have time to mobilize all the troops. It worked so well that I kept doing it, even for really big audiences. They were bigger than the ones I was getting before, with thousands of people. It's working, because I think it puts a focus on the songs.

As much as other artists' covers of your songs have made your songwriting famous -- and lucrative -- you bring a unique touch to your own songs.

I appreciate that. But I also appreciate people who feel the other way. It really is a joy for a songwriter to hear somebody make a song even bigger than it is. That's a particular thrill that a songwriter has. I can't think of another art form where you can really see somebody make something out of your work.

Is Willie Nelson an obvious example of a singer who does your work justice, as was the case with "Help Me Make It Through the Night"?

I would say that one. I like Sammi Smith's version, too. And everyone's, really. Some of them were really powerful. Willie just did a song of mine called "A Moment of Forever," and he nailed it. And he did a thing on a tribute album that was just terrific, his version of "Living Legend." It was so much better than I could do it (laughs).

He's a great musician. He's also one of the finest (expletive) in the world. He looks at life with a good sense of humor, which is lucky (laughs), because he gets in trouble a lot.

He was one of my favorite songwriters before I ever came to Nashville. I heard him on the Armed Forces network. He wasn't a recording star yet, but there was a guy who liked his music so much, he used to play his versions of the big hits.

Can you describe your awakening as a songwriter? You studied literature and headed in another direction before delving into songs, didn't you?

I was always writing songs, from before I was a teenager. I never thought of music as a worthy profession. But it was something that I was doing. Even when I was in the Army, I had a band and was making up songs.

I went to Nashville after I left Germany and the Army. My next assignment was to go teach at the academy at West Point. Instead, I went to Nashville. I had a two weeks' leave. I got to hang out with Marijohn Wilkin, Cowboy Jack Clement, Tom T. Hall and Harland Howard -- all these people who I really respected. I just fell in love with the whole atmosphere of it, and stayed that way.

My friends and my family thought I'd lost my mind (laughs). It was about a good four or five years before I could make a living at it, so I had a lot of funky jobs. But they were good. I had a job as a janitor at a recording studio and I got to see all kinds of the artists I respected. I'd be the only songwriter in town who was allowed to be in there when Dylan was recording, because they

knew I wouldn't bother him. I also worked as a bartender at a place where all the songwriters hung out.

Your songwriting involves taking on the role of storyteller as well as painting imagery. Does that come from the part of you attracted to literature?

Well, yeah. I would think that anything I read, particularly when I was at Oxford and was getting into Shakespeare and William Blake, any exposure to good writing has to help rather than hurt you. I think it just put a little polish on it.

I'd been writing songs since I was down in Rio Grande Valley, growing up in Brownsville, Texas. Music was just something in my head all the time. Most of the time, it was Mexican music down there, and country music. So that's why I went to Nashville later.

Fast-forward to your latest album, the acoustic "This Old Road."

I'm really pleased with the response to it. When I did it, I wasn't sure if people wouldn't think it was just a demo. (Producer) Don Was had the courage to record it that way.

Well, you're no stranger to the era of rawness in recording.

Yeah, but I never had the courage to go in without a band. I remember T-Bone Burnett wanted to produce an album like that, around 1980. He wanted me to just go in and sit down with a guitar. I was writing songs with my band and was used to their sound. And I was cutting too many political songs, so I never got to do that back then.

Does it feel like you've ventured into a new phase in your musical life?

Well, yeah. It's definitely different. I hate to say anything about it, because I might jinx it. But what's really amazing about it is that there's so much respect out there. I can make a mistake and it doesn't bother anybody.

Also, I think they've been conditioned by their own personal experience of what's going on in the world that they're more open to what I'm saying. I've found the audiences now.

And that must, in turn, fuel your interest in doing this more and more.

It's just something that's working real well right now. There was a time when I wasn't comfortable onstage, and I'll never be totally comfortable. But there's a communication going on now that I think was the purpose of getting in this way of life, this way of making a living. As long as it's still working for both of us -- me and the audience (laughs) -- I'll probably keep doing it.

I can't let Dylan outlast me out there.