

Kris Kristofferson: Musical Rebel

For Kris Kristofferson, the route to Nashville involved a series of unlikely detours. He studied creative literature in college and earned a master's degree in literature from prestigious Oxford University in England. He enlisted in the U.S. Army, learned to fly a helicopter, and rose through the ranks to captain. He accepted a job teaching literature at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Then, against his family's wishes, he cast aside his teaching career, no longer able to resist his dream of becoming a songwriter.

"Writing songs, I feel, saved my life," he said. "If you want to be a songwriter, and you don't care if you ever make any money at it, and you can't do anything else—I mean, you just can't not write songs, then do it."

Following his passion, Kristofferson became one of country music's most influential songwriters, expanding the definition of a country song.

Born June 22, 1936, in Brownsville, Texas, Kristofferson grew up in a military family and excelled in academics and sports. He also followed the Grand Ole Opry, idolized Hank Williams, and worked at writing songs. Still, music was a sideline until 1965 when, two weeks before he was to report to his teaching job at West Point, he traveled to Nashville to explore the songwriting scene.

By chance, he met legendary singer-songwriter Johnny Cash backstage at the Opry. When they shook hands, Kristofferson recalls, "I'm sure that electricity went through me. That handshake changed my life, as that's what convinced me to get out of the army and go to Nashville."

His parents were crushed, but Kristofferson was determined. To make ends meet, he worked odd jobs as a janitor, bartender, and carpenter's assistant. By 1969, he was a leader among a new breed of songwriters who rebelled against traditional styles and content, explored frank topics with earthy honesty and drew on poetry for inspiration.



"Kristofferson got here by doing the opposite of what we've been told is the right way to do things," wrote music critic Peter Cooper. "He writes his heart and mind, crafted but not filtered."

In 1970, Kristofferson won Song of the Year honors from the Country Music Association for "Sunday Morning Coming Down" and from the Academy of Country Music for "For the Good Times." In 1971, his songs were three of the five Grammy nominees for Best Country Song; he won for "Help Me Make It Through the Night."

The acclaim encouraged Kristofferson to launch his own successful recording career, and his gravelly voice served his music well. "I feel very lucky that my voice has been accepted," he said, "but it wouldn't be if I was singing other people's songs. I think people have very graciously overlooked what I sound like." He was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2004.

Kristofferson has also built a respected acting career, in between writing, recording, and performing.

"I recommend following your heart," he said of the unconventional path he chose. "If the whole world thinks you shouldn't be doing something that you truly believe you're supposed to be doing, you gotta do that. And that can alienate some people, but you just have to do what you feel like you were set down here to do."

Sources: *American Songwriter*; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*;

Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville by Michael Streissguth; *The Washington Post*

LISTEN:

"For the Good Times"	"Me and Bobby McGee"
"Loving Her Was Easier (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again)"	"Why Me"

READ:

Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville by Michael Streissguth (It Books, 2013): The author traces the genesis of country music's changing style in the late 1960s and early 1970s through the careers of Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings, and Willie Nelson.