

## SONGWRITING TRAILBLAZER

Among the major figures in the Outlaw movement, Kris Kristofferson took perhaps the most unlikely path. 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.

And then he walked away from it all, following his deepest longing and moving to Nashville to become a songwriter. Within a few short years, he had expanded the definition of a country song, becoming a trailblazer for a group of other young Outlaw songwriters.

"He was my milepost," said Guy Clark, another influential songwriter of the era. "He wrote in a way that no one had ever heard before. . . . Kris has a real respect for the language, a student of poetry and a poet himself."

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. A chance encounter with a renegade idol, Johnny Cash, and a persuasive conversation with maverick producer "Cowboy" Jack Clement convinced Kristofferson to change course.

"If you want to be a songwriter," Clement said, "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."

Kristofferson's parents were crushed, but he 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 Nashville songwriters who rebelled against Music Row conventions. Kristofferson explored frank topics with earthy honesty, and his lyrics echoed the artistry of both honky-tonk hero Hank Williams and William Blake, the English poet he studied at Oxford.

"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."



Kristofferson's fame rose as one Nashville star after another recorded his songs: Cash took "Sunday Morning Coming Down"; Sammi Smith, "Help Me Make It Through the Night"; Ray Price, "For the Good Times"; Roger Miller, "Me and Bobby McGee" (more famously recorded by Janis Joplin in 1971). By 1970, producer Fred Foster was encouraging Kristofferson to record his own music, despite his gravelly voice, and he became a sensation among the growing youth market.

"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."

His stature only grew among Nashville's renegade singers and songwriters. "Kris was Nashville's [Bob] Dylan," wrote music historian Michael Streissguth. "Youth culture was afoot in the Western world, and Kris symbolized Nashville's contribution to it."

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

## LISTEN

"Me and Bobby McGee"

"Why Me?"