

Kris Kristofferson: Musical Rebel

For Kris Kristofferson, the fastest route to Nashville was a series of detours. He excelled in college as a literature scholar. He joined the U.S. Army, learned to fly a helicopter, and rose to the rank of captain. He accepted a job teaching literature at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

And then, against his family's wishes, he let it go to pursue his dream of becoming a songwriter.

"To me, writing songs, I feel, saved my life," he said. "If you want to be a songwriter 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 respected songwriters, expanding what defines a country song.

Born June 22, 1936, in Brownsville, Texas, Kristofferson grew up in a military family and did well in academics and sports. He also followed the Grand Ole Opry, admired Hank Williams, and worked at writing songs. Still, music took a back seat until 1965 when, just before he was to start at West Point, he traveled to Nashville and couldn't resist the opportunities.

His parents were crushed, but Kristofferson was determined to have a music career. To make ends meet, he worked odd jobs—janitor, bartender, carpenter's assistant. By 1969, he was a leader among a new breed of songwriters who rebelled against traditional styles, explored new topics with frank honesty, and found inspiration in poetry.

"Kristofferson got here by doing the opposite of what we've been told is the right way to do things," music critic Peter Cooper wrote.



In 1970, Kristofferson won Song of the Year honors from both the Country Music Association and the Academy of Country Music—for two different songs. 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 recording career, and his gravelly voice has served his songs well. Inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2004, he also has stayed busy as a film and television actor in between writing, recording, and performing.

"I recommend following your heart," Kristofferson said of the path he chose. "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"

"Loving Her Was Easier
(Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again)"

"Me and Bobby McGee"

"Why Me"