

Marlboro Country Music



KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

For several years after he hit it big, Kris Kristofferson lived like the devil and wrote like an angel. Now, his friends on Nashville's Music Row say he's living like an angel and writing like a devil.

Whatever the description, this Marlboro Country Music tour headliner is still one of the most unique characters to hit the music world. He has left an imprint on country music in more ways than one.

"I really didn't try to stir things up on purpose," he says. "I grew a beard and long hair when I was in the hospital with pneumonia and a girl friend said it looked nice on me. But at that time, it just so happened that country music people didn't go for that image."

They weren't prepared for some of the things he wrote about either. But this one-time Army captain and Rhodes scholar was just 33 years old when his "Sunday Morning Coming Down" won the Country Music Association award for the 1970 "Song of the Year." He had a tough time getting there. And if certain people didn't care for the way he dressed or lived his private life, he considered that their problem.

For a number of years after receiving that award, Kristofferson became adept at mixing his personal life with his prolific writing style until the two became so confused that he couldn't separate them. It was not until 1976 that he realized he didn't have to be miserable to write hits. Today he lives contentedly with his wife, Lisa (a law school graduate) and baby son in a Malibu, California home and pursues his singing/writing/acting career.

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"When I was starting out," he says seriously, "I felt that my music was more important than myself. I still feel that way, but that doesn't mean that any human isn't important at all. Anyhow, I'm not the same person I was then."

Kristofferson's first big hit came in mid-April 1969 with "Me and Bobby McGee." Roger Miller recorded the tune and later Janis Joplin turned it into a million seller.

At the time, Kristofferson was a staff writer at Combine Publishing Company, a considerable step up from his previous \$58-a-week job as janitor at Columbia Recording Studios. The owner of Combine had suggested the title to him but, as Kris put it: "I couldn't come up with anything to fit it for a long time until one night while driving in the rain, I felt the words and music taking shape. Which is often the way it is with songs."

By the end of 1970, Kristofferson was touring the country singing his own songs in clubs, on television and at concerts -- suddenly famous. One of his songs, "Help Me Make It Through The Night," was recorded first by Sammi Smith, going on to become a major country and pop hit in 1971. Subsequently, it became an international soul hit for Gladys Knight and the Pips in 1972, a reggae smash in Jamaica and England for John Holt, and a hit for Willie Nelson in 1974.

Nelson, who was Kristofferson's idol and is now a good friend, says he didn't help Kristofferson in his career "because by the time I met him, he had already gotten started." But the two are close now. This year, Kristofferson and Nelson joined Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash in cutting the CBS album HIGHWAYMAN.

Actually, it was Cash who first encouraged Kristofferson to embark on a country music career. At the time, he was an army pilot on his way to an assignment at West Point to teach English literature. He was eminently qualified.

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Born in Brownsville, Texas, the son of an Army two-star general, Kris was a Phi Beta Kappa student in creative writing at Pomona College in California (where he lettered in football and soccer) and won the top four out of 20 prizes in the Atlantic Monthly collegiate short story contest.

He studied at Oxford University on his Rhodes scholarship, joined the service, and went through ranger school, jump school and pilot training. En route to his West Point position, he stopped off in Nashville, ran into Cash (who listened to some of the songs he had written) and met with considerable encouragement.

His move to Nashville with his wife and two children, however, was not conducive to a happy home life and a divorce followed. Subsequently, Kristofferson married singer Rita Coolidge but that marriage broke up in 1981. They have one daughter.

Kristofferson has recorded 16 albums, most of them on the Monument label, and has had his songs cut by more than 450 artists including Cash, Nelson, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, and even Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops. In addition to the CMA "Song of the Year" award, he was named "Songwriter of the Year" three times by the Nashville Songwriters Association and is also a current member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Kristofferson has also appeared in 16 films, most notably in "A Star Is Born," which earned him a Golden Globe "Best Actor" award and catapulted him to Hollywood stardom. Some other film credits are "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore," "Semi-Tough" and "Rollover," which was filmed in Austin, Texas. His future will continue in films without doubt, but not at the expense of his first love - music.

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