

NO DEPRESSION

The Pilgrim: A Celebration of Kris Kristofferson

There are some first-rate songwriters of whom it's said that their songs show up can't-miss and singer-proof. There may be a handful of Kristofferson songs that turned out to be as simple and straightforward as that, but for the most part, the man's writings—lyrics *and* tunes—are as subtle and packed and potentially tricky as he is.

Singers get things out of his indelible songs to the degree that they actually get them in the first place; multi-performer tributes to Kris (and there have been a few) work out to the degree that interpreters are lined up who get them very well. This new “celebration” from Nashville's American Roots Publishing (the people behind the *Beautiful Dreamer* tribute to Stephen Foster) lines up performers and producers like that, and the result is one of the most consistently engaging and worthwhile Americana tribute albums of recent years.

Many of the performers are close to Kristofferson himself—Willie Nelson, Jessi Colter, Rosanne Cash, Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell. Some of these friendly turns, such as Rosanne's John Leventhal-produced gender-flipped “Lovin' Him Was Easier (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again),” can join the permanent record of Kristofferson interpretations.

A younger generation makes strong statements, too. Todd Snider finds the point where the irascible meets the tender in “Maybe You Heard,” Shawn Camp makes the intensely personal “Why Me” his own, and Gretchen Wilson is the first woman to really nail “Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down.” Anyone unaware of this important mainstream country singer's abilities with hard country ballads might pick up on it right here.

Lloyd Cole and Jill Sobule are an unpredictable duo to revisit “For The Good Times,” and the adventurousness should be applauded. It's good to see something new from Bruce Robison and Kelly Willis together, but it's somewhat disappointing that their duet on “Help Me Make It Through The Night” is really Bruce plus harmony—not a “he says/she says” give-and-take, which would have been a fresh notion.

Extensive commentary on Kristofferson by Peter Cooper, and notes on making the album happen from Tamara Saviano, round out this pleasurable package.

—Barry Mazor