



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Merle Haggard and Kris Kristofferson

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September 25, 2011 (with a November 18, 2014 update)

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. For this report, I had intended to let my companion Slim take the reins and tell you about the concert I attended earlier tonight. I set the stage yesterday by sending you “Slim’s Wisdoms (IV).” But I changed my horse in the middle of the ride. I could not let Slim make fun of what happened in an auditorium located in Spokane, Washington this evening. The performance that Reporterette and I saw and heard did not lend itself to parody. Slim has been placed aside for awhile. Here’s why.

By watching and listening to the singing and playing of Merle Haggard and Kris Kristofferson---as they reinforced each other’s gifts---I witnessed a live performance of musical folklore poetry. Maybe I am stretching hyperbole, but their words and notes combined to create melodic wisdom.

Wisdom from country and folk singers? Listen carefully to these mens’ songs. They personify what Charlie Rose said, “Knowing a lot...is a springboard to creativity.”¹ Certainly not all their lyrics convey insight into life’s highways. No writer can write pearls of perception with each phrase. Mark Twain himself wrote his share of throw-away verse. But some of their words, taken with the musical scores are musical poetry.

Also, I’ve a special story to share with you. I’ll recount the fine music I heard tonight. But there is another tale I want to relate; one that emerged on the stage as this performance evolved to become a paean to the past and a salute to the present.

Creativity

A musician once said about his music, “When I compose, I shut my eyes and play what I hear.”² We can only imagine what songwriters such as Merle and Kris think when they are composing the lyrics to their beautiful melodies.

What they do deals with creativity. All of us are creative. Some of us come to the fore with music; some with writing, inventing, sculpting, and other achievements. It’s part of our nature, waiting to be tapped. But for people such as Merle and Kris, their creativity is a springboard that catapults them far beyond what most of us can hope to accomplish. Let’s be happy that these folks populate our species. They enrich our lives.

I’ll cite one example of this creativity and the pleasure it brings us. It’s from Kris. I’ve chosen this song for sentimental reasons, which I will not belabor here. And just two verses; it’s likely you know the others. If you don’t, you’re missing something special:

¹ PBS, August 4, 1994.

² Paraphrased from the musician Ernst Hoffman, and sourced from Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary*, Random House, New York, 2001, 160.

*Take the ribbon from your hair.
Shake it loose and let it fall.
Laying soft upon my skin.
Like the shadows on the wall.*

*Come and lay down by my side,
'till the early morning rise.
All I'm taking is your time.
Help me make it through the night.*

I was impressed by this song the first time I heard it in the early 1970s. It was also the first tune I remember being sung by Kris Kristofferson. Because of my infatuation with the composition, I made a point to see him perform in a small nightclub outside of Washington, DC. He was co-starring with Rita Coolidge, at that time his mate.

On that night, he sang “Bobby McGee” and several of his other hits. His simple, symbolic verse and his melodious notes---especially within the context of his words---transfixed the audience.

I'm not well-versed in poetry. Blake, Cummings, and even Frost are beyond my limited understanding of rhyming metaphorical allusions. But I can relate to Kris' work (as well as that of Merle). For another example, here is a classic from Merle:

*I'm writing this down from the trench mom.
Don't scold if it isn't so neat.
The way that you did, when I was a kid,
and I'd come home with mud on my feet.*

The song goes on for a while. The mother then comes to learn that her son was killed in action: There was no signature at the end of the letter.

Corny? Yes. Poetry? I think so, but I come from a “corny” country and western upbringing. Regardless of our musical sensibilities and sophistication, in the context of the melody, Merle's prose is wonderfully clichéd. I'll take it over Cole Porter or at least on a par with Porter.

The “Opry”

This night's performance began with Kris walking onto the stage---which was crowded with unmanned musical instruments, mics, and chairs---to sing one of his newer songs. He also played his harmonica. The scene was vintage Kris Kristofferson, who is often a solitary performer.

It was a short song. He then introduced Merle Haggard, who came on stage with his band, the Strangers. Kris made this introduction for Merle's appearance as if Kris were an emcee, telling the audience Merle Haggard was the best there was to offer.

This adulation came from a man who your writer considers to be the best folk music composer of our times. Yet, there was Kris Kristofferson, being deferential---paying homage---to Merle Haggard.

Granted, if you are a country and western music fan, paying tribute to Merle Haggard is not a big chore. Examining his full body of C&W work, I place him easily on a plane with Hank Williams. Still, I was impressed with the courtesy shown by Kris to Merle.

And this gentle respect continued throughout the evening. Merle held the stage (doing the singing) for about 70 percent of the performance. I thought part of this imbalance might have come from Kris' seemingly weakened voice. But who cared? On several of Kris' singing solos, Merle played the lead guitar. Kris informed us he was very impressed with his "side-man."

A fine moment of the evening occurred toward the end of the show. Kris and Merle teamed-up to sing "Help Me":

*Lord, help me walk another mile, just one more mile.
I'm tired of walking all alone.*

*Lord, help me smile, another smile, just one more smile.
I know I just can't make it on my own.*

*I never thought I needed help before.
I thought that I could do things by myself.*

*Now I know I just can't take it anymore.
With a humble heart on bended knee, I'm begging you please, help me.*

*Come down from your golden throne to me, lonely me.
I need to feel the touch of your tender hand.*

*Move the chains of darkness, and let me see...Lord let me see
just where I fit into your master plan.*

*I never thought I needed help before.
I thought that I could do things by myself.*

*Now I know I just can't take it anymore.
With a humble heart on bended knee, I'm begging you please, help me.*

*Now I know I just can't take it anymore.
With a humble heart on bended knee, I'm begging you please, help.*

One does not have to be religious to be moved by this song. It tells us we are not isolated, independent beings. It tells us we all need help from others. It tells us we can be a bit humble as we go through life. At least, that is what the song says to me. But I'm no poet.

Finale

For your reporter, the most moving event of this evening was Merle singing one of Kris' more recent songs, followed by the two of them walking off the stage together. As they exited, Kris put his arm around Merle's shoulder, as if he were taking care of an older and more fragile person. It may have also seemed that way because Merle is small, and Kris is tall. Nonetheless, I learned later tonight that Kris is two years older than Merle.

The atmosphere of friendship and camaraderie between these two men was more than the moment of their leaving the stage. Several times during the performance, Kris moved over to a secondary mic to sing back-up to Merle along with the Strangers. Time-and-again, Kris had the spotlight taken away from himself.

I was somewhat puzzled by the lesser nature of Kris's performance in relation to Merle's. Again, Kris' voice is giving-out. Maybe that was the reason. But I think it was more than Kris' voice. I like to think that the great Kris Kristofferson, a musical poet of the highest rank, knows that Merle Haggard represents our last bridge to the country and western music of earlier times. Of Hank Williams and even Jimmie Rogers.³

Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe we should consult Slim on his opinion. Slim will surely let us know the truth.

Your on the Street Reporter

September 17, 2014 update

Kris Kristofferson is on tour this fall. Key-in his name and his website link (and others) will come up. I went to the website of Merle Haggard, but the button for tour dates was not active. Haggard recently performed at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee. He talks to the audience about his 2008 bout with cancer and mentioned to the Ryman audience, "Well, it's glorious but it's also tough because all the pressure is on you,. You've got all those people out there that call you a legend and an icon and all that stuff. You kinda gotta prove it."⁴

³ Merle sang one of Rogers' tunes, called the "TB Blues."

⁴ <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2014/09/11/working-man-at-77-country-singer-merle-haggard-still-feels-pressure-to-prove/>