

Kris Kristofferson

October 1, 2024

I wrote an article on September 25, 2011 about the joint performance of Merle Haggard and Kris Kristofferson in Spokane, Washington. It was a tribute to these two musicians, and especially to Kris Kristofferson for how he showed his kindness and generosity to the less-able, ailing Haggard. On September 28, 2024, Kris Kristofferson died at his Maui, Hawaii, home. He was 88.

Eulogies are praising Kristofferson and his extraordinary talent for composing verse and melody. His music was special, quite different from that of other artists. The word *singular* comes to mind when I think about Kristofferson's compositions. Here is another view expressed shortly after the man's death:

Steeped in a neo-romantic sensibility that owed as much to John Keats as to the beat generation and Bob Dylan, Kristofferson's work explored themes of freedom and commitment, alienation and desire, darkness and light.¹

In the 2011 article, I wrote similar praises to Kristofferson, as well as Haggard: "I witnessed a live performance of musical folklore poetry. ...their words and notes combined to create melodic wisdom."

The performance in Spokane was the second time I saw Kristofferson perform. The first time was 1974 at a small Maryland nightclub, a few miles outside Washington, DC. He was performing with his wife, Rita Coolidge. I recall their singing "Help me Make it Through the Night." It has remained one of my Kristofferson favorites, not only for the performance that evening but also because of another rendition of the song, sung shortly thereafter by a friend of the Black family.

I was staying at a ranch near Santa Fe, New Mexico at the time. It was a cold night, accompanied by a silent and windless, but heavy snowfall. I was in the company of an elderly couple, owners of the ranch, as well as my brother, Tom, and sister-in-law, Kaky. We were sitting in the owners' living room, warmed by flaming mesquite branches in an adobe brick fireplace. No sounds of music, just the soft sounds of our conversations. Lapses of talk sometimes yielded to silence, as we took pleasure in the flames protecting us from the frigid snowfall outside.

Without any introduction or fuss, the old rancher began singing one of Kris's songs. He sang it from start to finish, with no pauses. He knew it by heart. Like Kristofferson, he sang with a raspy voice "Help me Make it Through the Night."

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

¹ Bill Friskics-Warren, *The Spokesman Review* (primary source, *New York Times*), September 30, 2024, A5.

*Come and lay down by my side
'Til the early morning light
All I'm takin' is your time
Help me make it through the night*

*I don't care who's right or wrong
I don't try to understand
Let the devil take tomorrow
Lord, tonight, I need a friend*

*Yesterday is dead and gone
And tomorrow's out of sight
And it's sad to be alone
Help me make it through the night*

*Lord, it's sad to be alone
Help me make it through the night*

He finished. We remained silent. The fire crackled. The snow, silent as well, continued to fall. His unexpected song was so pleasing that no one wanted to break the spell.

Later, I asked Kaky if her stepdad, the soloist for that evening, sang very much. She said occasionally, but never like that night. And never had she heard him sing a complete song.

She joked that the evening's whiskey may have spurred him on. Whatever it may have been, his song has stayed with me for over 50 years. Thank you, old cowboy. Thank you, Kris.

Kristofferson expanded his professional life into making movies. He proved his talent there, too, being awarded several honors for his acting. However, he came under criticism during this part of his career. Some accused him of spending too much of his time and talent before the camera, and not enough before a mic.

One critic said this about one of my favorite Kristofferson's songs, "Who's to Bless and Who's to Blame": The critic said the song "continued his...decline."

The lyrics, accompanied by a beautiful plaintive tune, shows Kristofferson's talent for explaining the realities of life through metaphors and music.

*If a cheated man's a loser
And a cheater never wins
And if beggars can't be choosers
'Til they're weak and wealthy men*

*And the old keep gettin' older
And the young must do the same
And it's never gettin' better
Who's to bless, and who's to blame*

*All the cards are on the table
You done laid your money down
Don't complain about your chances
It's the only game in town*

*And the meaning doesn't matter
Nor the way you play the game
To the winner or the loser
Who's to bless, and who's to blame*

*Keep your hands above the table
And your back against the wall
Toss your chips in with your chances
Let 'em lay the way they fall*

*Cause the moral doesn't matter
Broken rules are all the same
To the broken or the breaker
Who's to bless, and who's to blame*

Does this song come across that it demonstrated Kristofferson was declining in his artistry? Not for me. It is a powerful and poignant description of many aspects of our existence.

Let's be happy and thankful that people like Kris Kristofferson come into our lives now and then. We are enriched by their presence.