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Freedom's Not Just Another Word

Kris Kristofferson, the songwriter who forever changed what country songs could say and mean, reflects on his career before returning to Nashville to receive the Spirit of America Award from the Americana Music Association and the First Amendment Center

By Michael McCall

By 1969, Kris Kristofferson had nothing left to lose. Four years earlier, the son of a two-star general had built a life that personified the American dream. Kristofferson was an army captain and a veteran of the elite Airborne Rangers who had trained as a parachute jumper and helicopter pilot. He was a Rhodes scholar, a graduate of Oxford University and an authority on the English romantic poets, especially William Blake. He was a Golden Gloves boxer who had lettered in football and soccer in college. He'd married his beautiful high-school sweetheart. He had two healthy, bright kids. And, just after turning 29 years old, he'd been appointed the esteemed post of literature professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Then he threw all of it away. The week he was to assume his new job, he informed the military and his family that he had decided to move to Nashville to become a country songwriter. He might as well have said he was moving to Russia.

His mother wrote him to say no one over the age of 14 listened to the kind of music he wrote, "and, if they did, they weren't the kind of people we would want to know."

As the '60s wore on, Kristofferson's decision looked even more foolish to those he'd left behind. His only cut as a songwriter had been "Talkin' Vietnam Blues," a recitation by Ralph Emery that failed to break into the Top 100 of the *Billboard* country singles chart. It wasn't much of a calling card. His wife left him, and his family all but disowned him.

Moving through a succession of jobs, including working as a janitor at Columbia Studios and as a bartender on Music Row, Kristofferson made ends meet by spending one week a month flying a chopper that delivered oil workers to offshore rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. He got fired for falling asleep in the pilot's seat with the copter blades still whirling violently overhead. The next day, he abandoned his beat-up car at the airport in Lafayette, La., and flew back to Nashville. His brother traveled to Nashville to confront him, pleading, "When are you going to do something you can *do*?"

Meanwhile, Kristofferson took faith in a line from William Blake: "If a fool persists in his folly, he becomes wise." He took even greater faith in the fact that he, and the rowdy ring of Nashville writers he'd befriended, believed that his talent, always evident, was beginning to grow in startling leaps.

When Kristofferson began playing "Me and Bobby McGee" for his songwriting friends in 1969, he noticed people reacted differently. He could feel, rather viscerally at times, how the song connected with others.

As usual, his friends made suggestions. That's how songwriters worked in those days, playing new tunes for each other in bars and apartments until the beer ran out or the sun came up.

One of his friends, a well-established songwriter Kristofferson worshipped, listened over and over, then offered his advice. He told Kristofferson to cut the line, "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose." He thought it took away from the concise, colorful narrative of the verses.

"He told me, 'God, you've got all these concrete images and then all of a sudden you come out with this abstract philosophy,' " Kristofferson recalls. "But I decided to keep it. I thought it worked. And, looking back on it, that was the moment I really began to trust myself. In my mind, I had become good enough, and I decided I could go my own way."

His way, it turned out, would forever alter the possibilities of what country songs could say. In quick succession, the songs he wrote--Johnny Cash's "Sunday Morning Coming Down," Ray Price's "For the Good Times," Sammi Smith's "Help Me Make It Through the Night," Waylon Jennings' "The Taker"--had a bigger impact on the content of country songs than any single artist since the death of Hank Williams.

By 1970, Kristofferson started recording his own albums and further smashed all conventions. With songs like "Pilgrim No. 33," "To Beat the Devil," "Just the Other Side of Nowhere," "Why Me (Lord)," and "Loving Her Was Easier (Than Anything

I'll Ever Do Again)," he revolutionized country songwriting in the same way Bob Dylan had expanded and transformed rock 'n' roll.

"He started a completely different form of American music," says songwriter Marijohn Wilkin, Kristofferson's first champion in Nashville. "He took country music into the bedroom. It wasn't in the car anymore. It was not out under the moon anymore. It was very private, and it was raw, and it was full of pain and passion. It frightened people. It could be embarrassing to listen to, because I knew it was all true. I knew it was based on his own experiences. He'd come in and play me a song, and I'd say, 'My God, Kris, were you out again last night?' He'd ask me how I knew, and I'd say, 'You just told me in your song. You even told me her name.' "

Kristofferson, by then in his early 30s, may have been older and more experienced than most of the longhairs in Los Angeles and Austin who were finding new ways to merge country, rock, blues and other forms of music they loved. But he showed them how much emotion, honesty and sensitivity could be conveyed in a well-crafted song--if the rules were changed.

"I always felt like we were writing in the tradition of the old country music," Kristofferson says, speaking by telephone from a hotel in Santa Monica. "To me country music was about telling it like it was, about being honest about your life in your music. Pop music was pretty bland, but country music was about cheating, drinking, going to jail. It was the white man's blues music, and that's what I wanted to write."

But he wanted to convey it in a way that captured the world he lived in, and that world was evolving quickly and wildly. "I was listening to Dylan and the Stones and Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings," he says. "You wanted your songs to be that good, to have that kind of power. We were dead serious about music back then. I thought music could change the world. I still do."

Now 66 years old and probably better known for his acting and his activism than for his brilliant songwriting, Kristofferson returns to Nashville this week to look back on the city and his accomplishments here. On Sept. 19, he'll accept the Spirit of America Award from the Americana Music Association and the First Amendment Center, an honor that went to first-time recipient Johnny Cash last year. He'll play the Grand Ole Opry on Sept. 20. And he's got a new album, the politically outspoken *Broken Freedom Song*, on Nashville-based Oh Boy Records.

When he accepts his Americana award in Nashville on Friday night, Kristofferson will reflect back on what he gave up and what he gained when he decided to become a songwriter. He'll also be adding another chapter to one of Nashville's most remarkable and important stories.

Nothing in Kristofferson's early life seemed to point him toward Nashville or country music. He was born on June 22, 1937, in the border town of Brownsville, Texas, and his family moved regularly as his father climbed the ranks of the military. He graduated from high school in San Mateo, Calif., and enrolled in Pomona College, where he was a star athlete and a Phi Beta Kappa student in creative writing. He won the top prize in a writing contest sponsored by *Atlantic Monthly*, before accepting a Rhodes Scholarship to attend Oxford University in England.

After graduating, the fork in his road began to appear. In London, he hooked up with the entertainment impresario Tony Hatch, who had boosted the careers of The Searchers and Petula Clark and later would discover David Bowie. Kristofferson recorded some tracks under the name of Kris Carson with Hatch, but nothing came of them, and he followed his father into the military.

He became a top gun, a daredevil pilot trained for dangerous missions. Already a hard drinker, he and his buddies occasionally would take their planes out while drunk, pulling stunts like "dipping the skids" in Germany's Rhine River. "In the Army, I didn't really mind the idea of dying," Kristofferson once told writer Patrick Carr.

He also led a band that played Army bases in Germany. His superior officer, Maj. Don Kelsey, was a distant cousin of Marijohn Wilkin, who had written the country classics "Long Black Veil" and "Waterloo," as well as such rock staples as "Cut Across Shorty" and "Ramblin' Rose."

As Wilkin recalls it, the major's mother visited Germany and saw Kristofferson perform. "She was a musician herself, and she wrote to me to say that he had such charisma," Wilkin says. "Lord, I never heard such praise about anybody in my life. She said he was a sex symbol, [that] when he walks in the room women just swoon. But she said he had real talent too. She asked if he could contact me and send me some tapes."

Kristofferson sent Wilkin a tape, to which she responded politely. "It was the longest song I'd ever heard in my life," she says, laughing. "It was kind of a mix of Shelley and Keats set to the tune of Hank Williams. He wrote and asked if he could come visit me."

Kristofferson arrived for their meeting in full uniform. Wilkin had just started her own publishing company in Nashville, working with a small stable of daring writers like Johnny Darrell and Chris Gantry. The first person she introduced Kristofferson to was Jack Clement, the fabled songwriter and producer who had worked with two of Kristofferson's idols, Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee Lewis. Kristofferson also met Cash that week, when Wilkin took him backstage at the Ryman Auditorium during a broadcast of the Grand Ole Opry.

Wilkin remembers the moment when Kristofferson shared his dilemma with her. "He told me he had to make a choice between West Point and Nashville," she recalls. "Well, I just dropped my head on the steering wheel. I knew his mind was made up. I knew how hard it was for him, because I'd made the same decision when I moved here. I had left a job as a schoolteacher in Texas, and my family thought I was crazy or worse--half of them disowned me. So I'd been through the struggle and the pain he was feeling."

But Wilkin also knew there was no point in discouraging him. "Once this train is loaded, there ain't no getting off of it," she says. "I think some of us are called to this profession. I sure wouldn't have given up teaching if I wasn't being pulled by a force a lot bigger than me. Kris had it even worse. But there was a difference; he was the family provider. He was the captain and the father and the husband. But if he'd been sent to me, then I'd been tapped too. Our fates were already locked by then."

Kristofferson knew what decision he had to make too. "I knew there was something missing," he says. "I thought I might find it in writing novels and in teaching literature, because those were things I loved. But when I visited Nashville, something clicked inside, and everything changed. It was such a magical place to me. So I followed my heart."

He didn't make the move timidly. After he arrived, Wilkin signed him to her publishing company, Buckhorn Music, and recommended he take a job as a substitute teacher. "He looked at me like I was out of my mind," she recalls. Instead, Wilkin and Billy Swan helped him land a job as an assistant at Columbia Studios, running errands and emptying ashtrays during sessions, including those for Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*. "He took the job so he could meet people," Wilkin says. "These people were his idols, but he was Mr. Suave. He was very charming."

And fearless: Here was a guy who'd jumped out of combat planes and skidded across the Rhine River in fighter jets.

Nashville also was changing. Dylan was recording here. Roger Miller had won several Grammy Awards for "King of the Road."

"Roger had turned the whole town upside down," Kristofferson says. "He won so many awards that people outside of Nashville started paying attention. He made country cool."

But what hooked Kristofferson was the songwriting community that had nurtured Miller's eccentric genius. "You had these great guys like Harlan Howard who just encouraged all of us," he says. "You could hang out with Willie [Nelson], Bill Anderson, Hank Cochran. Tom T. Hall had started getting songs cut. And there were all these young hotshots arriving--Mickey Newbury, Tony Joe White, Billy Swan, Chris Gantry, John Hartford. Shel Silverstein was coming down from New York.

"In general, we all just tried to knock each other out. You tried to find a way to impress the other writers, to get some attention for what you were doing. We felt like we were fighting for respect--from each other, from Music Row, from the world at large."

Kristofferson wrote like a madman; they all did. They tried to out-write, out-hustle and out-party each other night after night. "They called it 'roaring' back then," Kristofferson laughed. "We'd go out roaring for days at a time. Just partying, playing music and singing songs to each other. I *loved* it. It just intoxicated me. My excuse was that if I didn't make it as a songwriter, I'd write a book about these people."

Wilkin worried that Kristofferson enjoyed the lifestyle too much, especially when the all-night bingeing occasionally erupted into violence. "He fought a lot," Wilkin says, her disapproval evident. "I told him, 'We already have two guys with that gig.' One was Tompall Glaser. The other was Faron Young, God bless his soul. That was what they did--insult people and get in fights. I told Kris that those guys were popular, so we had to put up with their behavior. But no one would put up with him doing it."

Wilkin nurtured Kristofferson's talent as well--when he stopped partying long enough to listen. "He always had his own style of writing lyrics, but he had been a poet and an English teacher, so his songs were too long and too perfect," she says. "I, in no way, was ever the writer Kris was, but I knew the problem he was having. His grammar was too perfect."

As a schoolteacher, Wilkin had to overcome the same problem when she began writing country songs. 'It hit me when I heard the line, 'But I don't want no one but you.' It was all wrong grammatically, but it was *perfect*. So I told Kris that. He had to learn to write the way people talk. He did, too."

He also had to learn to write melodies as progressive as his subject matter. "His first songs all sounded [like] Hank Williams musically," she says. "He had that real basic rhythm. I told him he had to develop his own style, one that better fit his words."

In 1966, Wilkin convinced producer Billy Sherrill to release a Kristofferson single on Epic Records. The song, "The Golden Idol," was about a young, redheaded country singer from Kentucky, and Kristofferson gleaned the title from the glow that shone around her flaming hair under the spotlights.

"Like all of Kris' songs, it had a line in it that just stopped me in my tracks," Wilkin says. "It said, 'Watch the face you're wearing disappearing down the drain.' Women all wore so much makeup back then, and it was just such a poetic line. We all knew what he meant. He always had a line or two in each song that was just so beautiful it would make me cry."

The single never drew any attention. "Billy Sherrill told me he'd put it out, but he told me he didn't know what the hell the song was saying," Wilkin recalls.

Kristofferson and Wilkin's relationship grew rocky as other Buckhorn artists had more success than he did. Marijohn's son Bucky Wilkin had already had a national pop hit in 1964 with "G.T.O," a Beach Boys-style hot rod song recorded under the band name Ronny & The Daytonas. Chris Gantry, another Buckhorn writer, got signed to RCA Records. Kristofferson, meanwhile, couldn't get a break.

"You know that stiff-legged walk he sometimes has in his movies?" Wilkin asks. "Well, it's not a put-on. He's always walked like that, and it's worse when he gets a little teed off. I remember this one day, I could hear his cowboy boots coming down this old wood floor hallway we had. I was not having a good day, and neither was he. He came right up to my desk. 'You're doing more for Chris Gantry than you are for me,' he said, and blah, blah, blah, whine, whine, whine--typical writer stuff. He said he wanted his contract back. And it just really hit me wrong."

Wilkin got out the contract and handed it to him. "Take this and shove it up your ass," she snarled. "And see if it fits."

Kristofferson stood there. He didn't say a word, but as Wilkin remembers it, the slightest hint of a smile broke his glare. He turned, his heels clicking back down the hall. Wilkin heard him stop in front of the door. Then she heard his heels click back toward her.

"He walked that rigid walk--I can still see it so clear--and marched right back to my desk," she recalls. "I looked up, and those blue eyes were just twinkling. He slammed the contract down in front of me and said, 'It didn't fit.' Then he smiled and walked out. We never spoke of it again."

But she remembers how the songs changed--they got deeper, more concise, more explicit and more distinctive. "I remember when he sang 'Darby's Castle' to me," Wilkin says. "There was a line in it that said, 'And the pale light of the moon through the window of the room split the shadows where two bodies lay entangled.' It was an amazing song, but I knew no one would touch it. I thought, 'Oh my God, now we've got to wait 10 more years for the world and the deejays to catch up with him.' "

Wilkin did start to land him some cuts by the middle of 1968. Roy Drusky recorded "Jody and the Kid," and producer Jerry Kennedy loved a suggestive song called "For the Good Times," cutting it with a female singer whose name Wilkin can't recall. "Jerry played it for a deejay," she says, "and he was told that no country radio station would ever play a song like that."

Wilkin knew Kristofferson planned to change publishers when his contract ended in 1968. She encouraged him to stay in Nashville rather than go to New York, which he'd considered. Instead, he signed with Fred Foster and Bob Beckham at Combine Music--a fateful move that led to Kristofferson recording for Foster's Monument Records.

He made the switch just as his talent began to crystallize. "I got better, damn right I did," Kristofferson says. "I *had* to get better. I was spending every second I could hanging out and writing and bouncing songs off the heads of other writers. They'd tell you when it worked and when it didn't. I remember Marijohn said they were all a bunch of losers, but they did like my style."

At Combine, Kristofferson met Mickey Newbury, another Texan with a poetic streak drawn to country music because of its honesty. "I learned more from Mickey than from any other single songwriter," he says. "He could make simple melodies and simple words work together in a way that said so much. It was exciting every time I got to hear him do a new song."

Newbury recognized a fellow traveler in Kristofferson and set out to help him. He told Roger Miller that Miller needed to hear "Me and Bobby McGee," which by that time had been cut by Bucky Wilkin for an upcoming solo album, *In Search of Food, Clothing, Shelter and Sex*. Newbury accompanied Kristofferson to the Ryman Auditorium for a taping of Johnny Cash's network television show one night, in search of Roger Miller.

"Everything in Nashville seemed to be changing so fast," Kristofferson says. Just as Miller's success brought new credibility and attention to Nashville, so did Cash's show, which combined country stars with hip, young singers and songwriters like Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Linda Ronstadt and Buffy St. Marie--as well as everyone from Mahalia Jackson to The Who.

Miller wanted to hear the song, but had to go to Los Angeles to tape a segment of the TV series *Daniel Boone*. So at the last minute, he offered to fly Newbury and Kristofferson to L.A., where he gave them walkie-talkies and told them to help keep him off pills. But Miller, crazed as ever, never stopped long enough to hear the song. Eventually, while flying back, Miller turned to Kristofferson and said, "What about that song?"

Kristofferson performed it on the spot. "Shit, that's good," crowed Miller, who proceeded to cut the song and released it

as a single in May of 1969. The record went to No. 12 on the *Billboard* country singles chart (No. 122 pop), and Kristofferson had his first bona fide, respectable hit.

Inspired by the success of Miller's version of "Me and Bobby McGee," Kristofferson set his sights on getting Cash, one of his heroes, to cut one of his songs. A couple years earlier, Kristofferson almost got fired from his job as a studio janitor when he interrupted a Cash recording session to give him some song demo tapes. Cash later said he accepted them, but never remembers listening to them.

Kristofferson, now picking up money as a member of the National Guard, decided he needed to make a stronger impression on the Man in Black. June Carter Cash always told the story best. She remembered hearing a horrendously loud sound at the couple's Hendersonville home on Old Hickory Lake. She looked out to see a helicopter lowering down to land on a lakefront bluff on the couple's property. She went to wake up her husband, who was taking a nap.

"John," she said. "The tourists have been coming by boat and by bus, but now they're coming by air.' "

Kristofferson clutched a tape that included the song "Sunday Morning Coming Down." Cash met the younger man as he walked across the large yard. Cash took the tape and angrily pitched it into the lake and ordered Kristofferson to get the hell off his property.

Ray Stevens cut the song first, but Cash eventually heard it. He decided to perform it on his TV show--only, the network censors objected. The song was about waking up alone and hung over on a bright Sunday morning full of happy families and inviting homes. The show's producers tied their objection to one line of the chorus, which went, "On a Sunday morning sidewalk, I'm wishing, Lord, that I was stoned."

Kristofferson attended the rehearsal where the producers and Cash debated the line, and the producers offered the singer alternate lines. Cash said he'd have to think about it--and the producers told him they couldn't air the song if he didn't change it.

Kristofferson sat in the Ryman balcony during the taping, and when Cash reached the line, he looked straight at Kristofferson and sang the line as it had been written. It was featured in the TV show, and, to everyone's surprise, the live version from the TV show became Kristofferson's first No. 1 hit.

As Marijohn Wilkin remembers, "Then it all changed--just completely changed. Kris had one hit after another. No one had ever seen anything like it."

It wasn't just the number of hits he compiled that impressed everyone. It was how wholly powerful and revolutionary each of those hits was.

"For the Good Times," the song a deejay once said no one would ever play, was a No. 1 hit for Ray Price.

"Help Me Make It Through the Night," another controversial song, initially drew protests and refusals from deejays because it had singer Sammi Smith talking about lying down with a man who wasn't her husband. The chorus found her gently pleading, "Let the devil take tomorrow, for tonight I need a friend." It, too, ended up as a No. 1 country song and a Top 10 pop hit. The song was recently listed as the No. 1 country single of all time by authors David Cantwell and Bill Friskics-Warren in their book, *Heartaches by the Number: Country Music's 500 Greatest Singles*.

While the artists started to seek him out, Nashville and the nation got their first glimpse of the new face of country music when "Sunday Morning Coming Down" was named the Country Music Association's Song of the Year in 1971, beating out Merle Haggard's "Okie From Muskogee" and Marty Robbins' "My Woman, My Woman, My Wife."

"It was probably the most incredible moment of my life--certainly the most shocking," Kristofferson remembers. "I mean, I was in heaven just being there. I was sitting right behind Merle, who I thought was going to win, and Marty was right behind me. I was so stunned when it happened, my head snapped back and I hit it so hard on those wooden pews in the Ryman that it nearly knocked me out. I remember Marty Robbins had to tell me, 'Get on up there!' I hadn't paid attention when they told us how to get onstage before the show, and in all the excitement, I stumbled on the way up there. And I got there and couldn't think of a thing to say. I think I finally said I was glad I wasn't up against 'Today I Started Loving You Again.' "

Kristofferson also hadn't dressed for the occasion, and his hair was in his eyes and nearly to his shoulders. Tennessee Ernie Ford, who presented the award, was visibly distressed by the man he saw coming at him. "Of course, everybody thought I was stoned," Kristofferson laughs. "I looked like hell. Some women writing in the paper the next day said that I should never be allowed back on TV."

Kris Kristofferson helped to usher in a new era, even as he now deflects the importance of the material he introduced to country music. "I don't know, a lot of people were doing exciting stuff at the time," he says. "Tom T. Hall, Mickey Newbury, Willie--we all were just trying to talk about real life. John Hartford wrote 'Gentle on My Mind,' and the words to

that song are some of the most revolutionary ever done in Nashville. There were a lot of us."

But Kristofferson, the former Army captain, undoubtedly led the charge. He was perfect for the role: A half-decade before the Outlaw movement officially began, he was a longhaired, disheveled guy in jeans and scruffy work shirts writing groundbreaking lyrics that related to old and young, to rich and poor, to diehard country conservatives and shaggy-headed rock 'n' roll liberals.

In earthy, simple phrases rife with poetic images, his songs spoke as candidly about religion, intimacy and loneliness as they did about sexuality, drinking and drug use. His songs would talk to God, and they would show people talking openly to each other. And, like the poets he once studied, he balanced tales about the travails of lovers and losers with philosophical insights. At a time when America was on fire, when generations and cultures clashed, Kristofferson presented bold yet sensitive lyrics about people on the move, about how men and women dealt with increasing personal freedoms and sexual permissiveness, and about their loneliness, insecurities, confusion and spiritual yearnings.

"We didn't write these things because we wanted to have hits," he says. "We wrote them because we were trying to write great songs."

As "Help Me Make It Through the Night" was on the top of the charts, Janis Joplin's famous version of "Me and Bobby McGee" was on Top 40 radio across America. Bob Neuwirth, a New York artist and musician known for his close friendship with Bob Dylan, had heard Roger Miller's version and sung the tune for Joplin in a Manhattan hotel room. Neither of them knew Kristofferson, though Joplin would briefly be his lover before her death. The version she recorded mangled some of Kristofferson's lyrics, but after she died, it became her biggest hit, and it's her version that most people know.

"Of course, now every time someone sings the song, they don't get the words right," Kristofferson says. "But God knows, that was a great record."

Meanwhile, Fred Foster coaxed Kristofferson into recording an album of his own. Originally released under the title *Kristofferson*, the company changed the name to *Me and Bobby McGee* after Joplin's hit.

A couple of events led to him stepping forward as an artist as well as a writer. Cash had persuaded him to take the stage at the Newport Folk Festival, where he received a hero's welcome, including a front-page rave from critic Robert Shelton in *The New York Times.* Then a California friend called to ask if he wanted to open a show for Linda Ronstadt at the Troubadour in Los Angeles. "Is that a trick question?" he responded.

Kristofferson's craggy voice pushed him to work outside of country music, he says. "George Jones, Lefty Frizzell, Marty Robbins, Waylon Jennings--those are great country singers," he says. "I never played the fairs and the rodeos and the country nightclubs because I didn't have a good enough voice to be a country singer. Once I started making records, I ended up working the rock clubs and the folk circuit, because that's where the singer-songwriters were."

One night after a club concert in California, actor Harry Dean Stanton and Kristofferson went out drinking, and Stanton suggested Kristofferson go with him to an audition the next day. It earned the singer his first movie role, as a pot dealer in *Cisco Pike*, which starred Gene Hackman and Karen Black. Sam Peckinpah then recruited Kristofferson to star with Bob Dylan in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and he began receiving bigger offers for acting roles.

Kristofferson eventually moved to California and married singer Rita Coolidge. (They had one child and divorced in 1981.) The movie roles proliferated, with Kristofferson developing into a leading man in such high-profile movies as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and *A Star Is Born.*

But as good as some of his movies may be--and in the last decade he's done some of his best work, in such films as *Lone Star* and *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries*--his songwriting will be his greatest legacy. On his passport, under "Occupation," it still says, "Writer."

Frances Preston, president of the royalty collection agency BMI, tells a story about the day Kristofferson realized just what his songs were worth. She flew to Chicago to meet with him, his manager, his music publisher and his agent. It was 1976, and his movie *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea* was in theaters. His contract with BMI was up, and Preston wanted to make sure he stayed with her firm rather than entertain offers from rivals ASCAP or SESAC.

As they sat down, Preston jumped the gun with a direct offer. "I told him we would give him $1 million to stay with BMI," she says. "He said, 'Oh my God, I've never heard of such money. Where do I sign?' The guys with him all turned their heads to the wall because they had no chance to negotiate. He probably could have gotten twice that much, that's how important of a songwriter he was and how successful his catalog is. But that's just the kind of guy Kris is. It was never about the money. Now he always comes alone when it's time to negotiate his contract."

Kristofferson has never stopped writing songs, either, and the last few years mark his only break from the road after more than 30 years of touring between movie roles. "I kind of slacked off after I had a bypass operation four years ago," he says, then adds with a laugh, "Almost dying will do that to you."

He's quick to admit he loves being at home. He lives on a 50-acre ranch in Hawaii with his third wife, attorney Lisa Meyer,

and their five children--he now has eight in all. "I got to where I didn't want to leave home," he says. "I finally figured out that there's nothing more valuable in life than being a good father."

But he plans to tour in 2004, hopefully with his old friend and new labelmate, John Prine (whose career got a crucial early boost from Kristofferson, who wrote the liner notes for Prine's debut). It would fulfill a dream, Kristofferson says, if he could return to Nashville and play the Ryman Auditorium, the site of so many early turning points in his life.

"I have such a warm place in my heart for Nashville because of the time I spent there and how important those years were to my life," he says. "It was hard sometimes, but I always felt like I was a part of something important. Those were magical days."

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