

CLASSIC • PREVIEW

# The Devil Kris Kristofferson Knows

**THERE IS NO BETTER WORD THAN HONEST TO DESCRIBE THE TALES AND SONGS OF KRIS KRISTOFFERSON**

KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

River Cree Resort and Casino

Saturday, Oct. 30, 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$49.50 and \$59.50 at Ticketmaster

BY KYLE MULLIN

Long after the song is over, something more can be heard in the fading hum of the strummed guitar strings, felt only by fingertips toughened from years of plucking those lonely notes. It's a beautiful revelry in what remains, and Kris Kristofferson has spent a lifetime finding that special sort of salvation from the fringe edges he's forced himself towards – be it the Sunday morning hangovers he's become so famous for singing about, or a memory dulled by the much more potent brew of old age.

The latter is a prime example of the 74-year-old entertainer's biggest current struggle – right now he's sitting, racking his brain to remember the name of the John Steinbeck novel he used as a reference for one of his most renowned songs.

"It was inspired by, whatcha callit," he says of "Here Comes That Rain-

bow' again – a tune that was based almost verbatim on dialogue between characters that scrape together a few sweet morsels of kindness at a diner during the Great Depression in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and went on to become a favourite anthem of Kristofferson's friend and mentor, Johnny Cash.

"I think I might've changed a word here or there, ya know, just to make it rhyme. The scene always moved me," says Kristofferson. "I loved (Steinbeck's) style, and at the time (that I wrote the song) I wanted to be a novelist myself, so I could identify with what he was doing. I'd love to think that I could write a book like that someday, but I wonder sometimes if I have the brain just to do my shows. As long as I keep playing gigs it'd be harder to finish something longer (than my songs), but I would like to write a novel before I totally lose my memory."

Novelist is one of the few vocations he has yet to try – from raw outlaw country singer, to songwriter for the likes of Johnny Cash and his old flame Janis Joplin, to actor, to Rhodes Scholar, to Army Ranger helicopter pilot, to janitor at the Nashville studio he hoped to one day record his own ditties in.

Each of those odd jobs have soured and shined for him again and again – his lauded performance as a racist sheriff in 1996's *Lonestar* helped salvage his reputation as an actor decades after *Heaven's Gate*, one of the biggest financial flops in movie history. His latest disc, 2008's *Closer to the Bone*, was hailed by critics as a masterpiece years after his concept album *Third World Warrior* was panned and left him branded as a has-been. Kristofferson nearly crashed one of the helicopters he still flew as a hobby in the early '80s because he was still sweating out much of the whiskey he'd downed the night before. And his career as an outlaw troubadour nearly died before it began, because most record execs in the late 1960s dismissed the narrow range of his husky voice.

"I tell ya, it probably kept me from being a performer for awhile, at least five years or so," he says of his infamous limitations as a singer. "But after that it didn't seem to matter because I was speaking my own songs ... if I weren't a songwriter I would have no reason to be a performer, but I'm able to move audiences in the direction I want to go, and just the communication of the songs so far has kept me going. Willie Nelson

and I are good friends, and I know that even he doesn't think I should be singing."

It's a searing sort of perseverance, and Kristofferson has been able to draw enough strength from every moment that has scathed him to write songs such as "The Pilgrim, Chapter 33" where he sings with confidence "The goin' up was worth the comin' down."

That song was also inspired, in part, by the struggles that nearly strangled his recently deceased friend Dennis Hopper for years – his career had stalled after the success of the motorcycle odyssey *Easy Rider*, and soon his life began to imitate his stoner art.

"For Dennis, it was like that for a lot of us at that time," Kristofferson said of the indulgences that turned deadly for many in showbiz during the '60s and '70s. "I think Dennis would agree with everything (in 'The Pilgrim, Chapter 33'). After *Easy Rider* life got very difficult for him. So many people have (faced the same thing), I probably hadn't yet at the time."

But eventually he did – by 1980, Rita Coolidge, Kristofferson's second wife and frequent performing partner, divorced him because of his al-

coholism. His daily bottle and a half of Jack Daniels habit cost him his pilot's licence, after he was caught passed out behind the controls of his helicopter.

After sobering up, outlasting all that turmoil didn't immediately pen a new redemptive anthem – it became clear that Kristofferson had already written a more fitting tribute to Hopper, Joplin, Cash, and all his loved ones that had wrestled with addiction and crippling heartache.

Kristofferson had titled it "To Beat the Devil" on his very first self-titled album. Part song and part spoken word narrative, the track didn't detail obvious or deliberate evil deeds. Instead it touched on far darker and subtler sins – the kind that make the broken-hearted lose all hope.

"It's about the evil in apathy, giving up, or any kind of selfishness," Kristofferson says of what is now considered one of his most underrated gems.

"Sometimes just earning a living and keeping your mouth fed can hollow you. There are many things that'll pick and push you away from the creative person you want to be. The trick to beating the devil is in not getting turned away."



THE WAY WE GREEN

PRESERVE AND SUSTAIN EDMONTON'S ENVIRONMENT

Are you concerned about Edmonton's Environment?

**The Way We Green Public Forum**

Learn. Discuss. Contribute.

Wednesday, November 3, 4 p.m.—8:30 p.m.  
Thursday, November 4, 7:30 a.m.—6 p.m.

The City Room, Edmonton City Hall

For more information  
[www.edmonton.ca/TheWayWeGreen](http://www.edmonton.ca/TheWayWeGreen)




## Blame Harmeet...



**For your addiction to Naan Bread and Butter Chicken!**

Head to [www.seemagazine.com](http://www.seemagazine.com) for your chance to win dinner for two at any New Asian Village location and movie passes to the Garneau Theatre