

“Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose”

Multifaceted performer, social critic Kris Kristofferson dies at 88

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Kris Kristofferson, known both as a country music singer-songwriter and a film star, died on September 28 at his home in Maui, Hawaii. The cause of his death has not been disclosed. He was 88.

As a singer-songwriter, Kristofferson moved away at a certain point from the smooth Nashville sound, which featured elements such as string sections and polished vocal arrangements, and became a pioneer of what was dubbed “outlaw country.” This style was marked by a comparatively raw sound and greater lyrical candor. Kristofferson’s themes included loneliness, romantic desire and yearnings for freedom and redemption.

Kristofferson penned many songs that brought success to other artists. Among them are “Sunday Mornin’ Comin’ Down,” which was a number one hit for Johnny Cash, and “Me and Bobby McGee,” which became a posthumous number one hit for Janis Joplin (with whom Kristofferson had a brief romantic relationship). But, as the latter song indicates, Kristofferson’s influence extended beyond country music. The Grateful Dead, Michael Bublé, Al Green and Gladys Knight and the Pips are among the artists who have recorded his songs.

As a movie star, Kristofferson had rugged good looks and a commanding presence. Among his notable films are *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974) and *A Star Is Born* (1976), for which he won a Golden Globe. Several of his films, however, were better received by audiences than by critics.

Kristofferson had a markedly different background from many of his country music contemporaries. He was born in Brownsville, Texas, in 1936, in the midst of the Great Depression. His father, Lars Henry Kristofferson, was a major general in the US Air Force. His mother, Mary Ann (*née* Ashbrook), was a homemaker. The family later moved to San Mateo, California, where Kristofferson grew up.

In his youth, Kristofferson had difficulty choosing between his various talents and opportunities. His father encouraged him to join the military. As young as age 11, however, Kristofferson began writing country songs, at first influenced by Hank Williams.

While attending Pomona College in Claremont, California, Kristofferson pursued his love of literature. The Romantic poets William Blake and John Keats became enduring inspirations for

him. While at Pomona, he won two prizes in a national short story competition sponsored by the *Atlantic Monthly*, and also tried to write novels. Kristofferson not only graduated *summa cum laude* from college with a degree in literature, but also was awarded a Rhodes scholarship to study English at Oxford.

Kristofferson graduated from Merton College in 1960, having failed to establish himself as a musician in England. He accepted a commission as a second lieutenant in the US Army, married his high-school girlfriend Frances Beer and served as a helicopter pilot in Germany. Despite his increasingly rebellious behavior, he had become a captain by 1965 and was offered a job teaching English at West Point. Rejecting his military career, he turned down the position to try to become a songwriter in Nashville. Horrified at this decision, Kristofferson’s parents initially disowned him.

Kristofferson worked for various publishers as he honed his craft. In Nashville, he joined other gifted strivers like Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Roger Miller. These songwriters and musicians were as talented and productive as they were inclined to revelry.

Kristofferson’s early efforts were polished and literary, but, with encouragement, he moved toward a more plainspoken diction that complemented his sophistication and expressiveness. An early song, “Vietnam Blues,” recorded by Dave Dudley, reflected the artist’s initial right-wing sympathies, which began to change when he talked to friends who had served in Vietnam.

The ballad “For the Good Times,” which became a Top 40 hit for Ray Price in 1970, was Kristofferson’s break. Later that year, Johnny Cash topped the charts with Kristofferson’s “Sunday Mornin’ Comin’ Down.” The speaker in the latter song grapples with a hangover and feelings of isolation: “And there’s nothin’ short of dyin’ / Half as lonesome as the sound / On the sleepin’ city sidewalk, / Sunday mornin’ comin’ down.”

Kristofferson also released his first album, *Kristofferson*, in 1970. His guitar skills were basic, and his singing had a tenuous relationship with pitch. But his knack for the poignant detail and the honest, artistic expression of human feeling were evident. Still, his albums received mixed reviews.

The artist enjoyed further success when Joplin’s rendition of “Me and Bobby McGee” reached number one, with its bittersweet observation that “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” Sammi Smith’s interpretation of “Help Me Make It Through

the Night” topped the country chart and earned Kristofferson a Grammy for Country Song of the Year in 1972. The gospel-influenced “Why Me” became another number one country song for Kristofferson in 1973.

The artist soon began making albums and touring with his second wife, country singer Rita Coolidge. They won Grammys for their songs “From the Bottle to the Bottom” (1973) and “Lover Please” (1975).

Kristofferson made his film debut in Bill L. Norton’s *Cisco Pike* (1972). The following year he starred in 1973’s *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, directed by Sam Peckinpah. Kristofferson became a popular film star, and his movies began to overshadow his music. His screen success continued until his appearance in *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), Michael Cimino’s film that came under ferocious attack from the US media because of its generally left-wing effort “to represent America at the dawn of the modern age, the era of the emergence of giant corporate interests,” as the WSWS noted in 2016.

As a framework, Cimino used the Johnson County War, which was fought in Wyoming between large cattle companies and small settlers, and culminated in a pitched battle between the companies’ hired killers and a group of small farmers and ranchers in April 1892.

In a May 1, 1981 review (“The Lynching of ‘Heaven’s Gate’”), the *Bulletin*, a predecessor of the WSWS, correctly pointed out that the “heart of the criticism of *Heaven’s Gate* ... is the subject matter itself.”

They [the critics] are enraged that such a great amount of talent, time and resources should be expended in accurately recreating a bloody chapter in the struggle against American capitalism.

Though his star dimmed somewhat in the next period, partly as a result of his association with Cimino’s film, Kristofferson continued to appear in movies such as *Stagecoach* (1986), *Lone Star* (1996) and the *Blade* series (1998–2004).

Kristofferson’s musical career regained steam when he formed the outlaw country supergroup the Highwaymen with Nelson, Jennings and Cash. His last major hit, recorded with this group, was “The Highwayman,” which was a number one country song in 1985.

By the 1980s, Kristofferson’s politics had changed significantly from those he expressed in “Vietnam Blues.” Bucking President Ronald Reagan’s agenda of reaction (and the suffocating cultural atmosphere that it fostered), Kristofferson became an outspoken social critic. “What About Me,” from his album *Repossessed* (1986), showed sympathy for the victims of the US-backed death squads in El Salvador and for the Sandinistas, at the time a left-wing nationalist movement in Nicaragua that Reagan illegally sought to overthrow. Kristofferson also publicly opposed Reagan’s support for apartheid-era South Africa, President George H. W. Bush’s illegal invasion of Panama, the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War.

Kristofferson’s political comments could be caustic. During a 1991 television interview in New Zealand, he criticized America’s “flag-waving and choreographed patriotism,” which he likened to that of Nazi Germany. He also decried the country’s “one-party system, which is in control of all three branches of our government” and its “lap dog media that’s cranking out propaganda for the administration that’d make a Nazi blush.”

Kristofferson generally showed guts in the face of various pressures. In 1992, Irish singer-songwriter Sinéad O’Connor came under fire from official society after tearing up a photo of the pope on *Saturday Night Live* to protest sex abuse in the Catholic Church. As the WSWS explained in an obituary for O’Connor, the media was successful enough at whipping up hostility toward the singer that

Weeks later she was booed so heavily at a Bob Dylan tribute concert she could not even begin her scheduled song. Instead, she again performed “War” in an angry, defiant cappella. Kris Kristofferson was sent to escort her from the stage but defended her, saying to her “Don’t let the bastards grind you down.” She told him “I’m not down.”

Kristofferson said, “Her name has become synonymous with courage and integrity,” and wrote “Sister Sinéad” in tribute: “she’s never been partial to shackles or chains. She’s too old for breaking and too young to tame.”

Later in the 1990s, health problems began to afflict Kristofferson, though he remained active. He had bypass surgery in 1999 and began experiencing memory loss in the following decade. What was initially feared to be Alzheimer’s disease was diagnosed, after more than 10 years’ delay, as Lyme disease.

Among Kristofferson’s accolades are his election to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1977, his induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2004 and his lifetime achievement award at the 2014 Grammys.

Kristofferson was a man of many talents, and his life and work were marked by complexity and even contradiction. He stands out for his commitment to artistic truth and his sympathy for the marginalized. Kristofferson demonstrated a principled concern for democratic rights and an opposition to the predatory wars of US imperialism.



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