Kristofferson rolls into town to support local theaters

Austin's Stephen Bruton will join musical mentor onstage

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SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN
Saturday, May 17, 2008

When last we encountered Kris Kristofferson, he was playing a private party in a tent outside a Red River Street club, neck-deep in the hoopla of SXSW 2006. The idea was to premiere songs from his first album of new studio material in a dog's age. He was fixing to turn 70 and seemingly unperturbed by the fact. The young women in the crowd who eyed him with frank speculation might have had something to do with that.

It's two years-and-change later and the album, "This Old Road," is in the rearview mirror, having garnered almost entirely laudatory reviews ("a stripped-down stunner offering plain-spoken meditations on mercy, forgiveness and freedom," said Esquire magazine) and renewed appreciation for Kristofferson's rough-hewn gifts as a songwriter and performer.

Today, he's staring down the barrel of 72 — unperturbed as ever — and fixing to head back to Austin to headline tonight's annual dual gala at the Paramount and State theaters (the theatres turn 93 and 73, respectively, and money raised at the event supports the preservation of both theaters). The two theaters operate under the umbrella of the Austin Theatre Alliance.

Before he climbs on a plane, though, Kristofferson is spending a day enjoying the patriarchal pleasures of presiding over a passel of kids and grandkids romping though his home in Hawaii. After a lifetime of hopscotching between concert stages and movie sets all over the world, the Texas native seems more than ready to ease up on the frequent flier miles.

"I'd say the only reason I travel any more is to go see family or play a gig," he says without any apparent regrets.

He will be visiting family, of a sort, in Austin. Kristofferson will be joined on the Paramount stage by his longtime partner-in-arms, Stephen Bruton. A local fixture around Austin for decades as a performer and producer, Bruton first saw the world with Kristofferson as the star's teenage guitarist ("He's never been kissed," Kris used to introduce him onstage).

"He was the baby of the group," Kristofferson recalls fondly. "Billy Swan decided to leave our band, and a guy named Jim Meeker brought Stephen to New York for me to hear him. So I asked if he wanted to join the band. I said, you can learn on the road because Billy was going to be with the band for the next few months.

"Well," he continues with a laugh, "Billy was there exactly one more week. The next gig, he was gone. And Stephen had to jump in with both feet. But he did a great job.

"He's always been my favorite guitar player. He's the musician of the two of us."

Though the guitarist Bruton might be more technically proficient musically than his mentor, there is no doubt that Kristofferson's songwriting casts a large and enduring shadow.

As has oft been recounted, songs like "Sunday Morning Coming Down," "Help Me Make It Through the Night," "For the Good Times," "Loving Her Was Easier (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again)" and other Kristofferson benchmarks ushered a new era of lyrical sophistication and sexual frankness into the stuffy cloisters of the Nashville country music establishment in the early 1970s.

Upon arriving in Music City in the mid-'60s after a hitch in the service and a series of odd jobs, the former Rhodes Scholar fell in with a wastrel group that included Roger Miller, Hank Cochran, Mickey Newbury and Willie Nelson.

Bohemian gypsies in a button-down town, they loved country music but somehow forgot to go all weak in the knees on the steps of the Grand Ole Opry or in the presence of the more hidebound Music Row tastemakers.

In Kristofferson's country music cosmos, Bob Dylan loomed as large as Hank Williams.

"Some of us would never have gotten to sing if Dylan hadn't opened the door (to singer-songwriters)," he says. "He revolutionized songwriting, I think, and made it an art form that was worth dedicating your life to. It wasn't just pop music anymore."

The last songwriters to grace the Paramount stage was the Gang of Four — Joe Ely, Lyle Lovett, John Hiatt and Guy Clark — who took over the joint for two nights a week or so ago. Kristofferson is asked about the influence his pioneering presence might have had on the quartet.

"Aw, I can't claim to be any sort of influence on them because they are so much their own artists," he says. "I got into it from a love for the soul of the music (and) I figure my enthusiasm is always going to be for people who were in it for the same reasons I was. They influenced me as much as I influenced them."

That refusal to play the standard bearer ("I'm not the leader! I'm just in front," his character wailed in the movie "Convoy") has always kept Kristofferson in the thick of things creatively, his undeniable influence notwithstanding. And it keeps him young at heart.

As he sings in "Pilgrim's Progress," from "This Old Road": "Am I young enough/To believe in revolution ... (And) perfect myself in my own peculiar way?"