

The Free Soul of a Genius: Kris Kristofferson. “His songs keep echoing in my mind”

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*“He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity’s sun rise.”*

- William Blake, *Eternity*

*“But dreamin’ was as easy as believin’ it was never gonna end
And lovin’ her was easier than anything I’ll ever do again”*

- Kris Kristofferson, “Loving Her Was Easier (Than Anything I’ll Ever Do Again)”

Kris Kristofferson, a man of deep soul and poetic genius, is eighty-eight years-old, an elderly man who has come a long way down life’s road, now “Looking at a looking glass/ Running out of time/ On a face you used to know.”

His songs keep echoing in my mind, and I am sure in the minds of millions of others.

Great songwriter-singers, like great poets, are possessed by a passionate melancholic sensibility that gives them joy in the telling. They seem always to be homesick for a home they can’t define or find. At the heart of their songs is a presence of an absence that is unnamable. That is what draws listeners in.

While great songs usually take but a few minutes to travel from the singer’s mouth to the listener’s ears, they keep echoing for a long time, as if they had taken both singer and listener on a circular journey out and back, and then, in true Odyssean fashion, replay the cyclic song of the shared poetic mystery that is life and death, love and loss, the going up and coming down, the abiding nostalgia for a future home and a past that was a fleeting moment in time.

Time is the core theme of all great writers. Its mystery, its intimacy, how it holds us as we try to tell it, as if we could, knowing that we can’t as it mocks all our pretensions.

My 100 year-old mother, as she neared death, would often plead with me, “Don’t let me go, Eddy.” I would tell her I was trying, knowing my efforts were a temporary stay and that through our conversations we were building what D. H. Lawrence called her “ship of death”:

Build then the ship of death, for you must take
the longest journey, to oblivion.

And die the death, the long and painful death
that lies between the old self and the new.

We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do
is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship
of death to carry the soul on the longest journey.

And the little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing
on the pink flood,
and the frail soul steps out, into her house again
filling the heart with peace.

In those days she also used to ask me: “Now that you have lived more of your life in Massachusetts than in New York City, where do you say you are from and which do you consider your home?” I didn’t know what to say but would wonder where I would like to be buried, as if it mattered. I would be dead. Home. I don’t think so. Not underground, so why does it matter where.

Home isn’t a place for permanently sleeping. It’s the place from which we launch our ships out into the world. And the place that we discover when all our sailing is done and we enter the harbor of the ultimate unknown.

Where was the lightning before it flashed?

Kris Kristofferson is an astonishing songwriter and bard, a man of faith and conscience, and a humorously devilish performer with an on-stage persona of a spiritual satyr. Although he retired from performing a few years ago, he wrote and performed some of the finest songs in the American songbook. A man’s and a woman’s man, he wrote songs of exquisite passion and sensitivity and rough rollicking freedom that only an emotionless zombie would fail to be moved by. And in the last 15 or so years, he has fearlessly confronted his mortality, writing many brave tunes that bookend his earliest hits, such as [*Help Me Make It Through the Night*](#).

I have loved and listened to his music for a long time and wish to honor him.

This is my small tribute to a great artist, a poetic genius whose songs manifest the fact that he studied the Romantic poets.

Counterpose what is perhaps his most well-known song, [*Me and Bobby McGee*](#), first made famous by the rocking swirling twirling wild dervish Janis Joplin, a former lover so I’ve heard, confirming William Blake’s dictum that “Exuberance is Beauty” with his lilting poem that is little known but whose gorgeous melody confirms in turn the saying of that other Romantic poet, John Keats, that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”: [*Shadows of Her Mind*](#). Two meditations in very different song styles on love, loneliness, searching, loss, and the secrets of one’s soul – a magician at work. Whether partly truth or partly fiction doesn’t matter. Secrets are secrets, sung or spun like memories in the mind, webs of wonder.

Kristofferson broke barriers when he found success in Nashville’s country and western scene in the early 1970s. He made explicit the sexuality and the yearning for love that underlay traditional country music. The endless yearning that never ends. Its secret. Not just sex in the back room of a honky-tonk, but the “Achin’ with the feelin’ of the freedom of an eagle

when she flies,” as he sings in [Loving Her Was Easier](#). Something intangible. True passion for love and life.

He was an oddball. Here was a man whose inspiration for *Me and Bobby McGee* was a foreign film, *La Strada* (The Road), made by the extraordinary Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini. Not the stuff of movie theaters in small Texas towns. In the film Anthony Quinn is driving around on a motorcycle with a feeble-minded girl whose playing of a trombone gets on his nerves, so while she is sleeping, he abandons her by the side of the road. He later hears a woman singing the melody the girl was always playing and learns the girl has died. Kris explains:

To me, that was the feeling at the end of ‘Bobby McGee.’ The two-edged sword that freedom is. He was free when he left the girl, but it destroyed him. That’s where the line ‘Freedom’s just another name for nothing left to lose’ came from.

Not exactly country, yet a traditional storyteller, a Rhodes scholar and a former Army Captain, an Oxford “egghead” in love with romantic poetry, a sensitive athlete, a risk-taker who gave up a teaching position at West Point for a janitor’s job in Nashville to try his hand at songwriting, a patriot with a dissenter’s heart, he is an unusual man, to put it mildly. A gambler. A man who knows that heaven and hell are born together and that the body and soul cannot be divorced, that all art is incarnational and meant to be about ecstasy and misery, not the middle normal ground where people measure out their lives in coffee spoons. He always wanted to tell what he knew, come what may, as he sings in [To Beat the Devil](#):

I was born a lonely singer, and I’m bound to die the same,
But I’ve got to feed the hunger in my soul.
And if I never have a nickel, I won’t ever die ashamed.
‘Cos I don’t believe that no-one wants to know.

What do people want to know? A bit here and there, I guess, but not too much, not the secrets of our souls. Not the truth about their government’s killers, the lies that drive a [Billy Dee](#) to drugs and death, and the hypocritical fears of cops and people who wish to squelch the truths of the desperate ones for fear that they might reveal secrets best buried with the bodies. Secrets not about the dead but the living – or more appropriately put, the living dead. Kris has always had that wild man’s frenzy to never let the living dead eat him up, as D. H. Lawrence put it.

There are only a handful of songwriters with the artistic gift of soul-sympathy to write verses like the following, and Kris did it again and again over fifty years:

Billy Dee was seventeen when he turned twenty-one
Fooling with some foolish things he could’ve left alone
But he had to try to satisfy a thirst he couldn’t name
Driven toward the darkness by the devils in his veins

All around the honky-tonks, searching for a sign
Gettin’ by on gettin’ high on women, words and wine
Some folks called him crazy, Lord, and others called him free
But we just called us lucky for the love of Billy Dee

Like William Blake – “Can I see another’s woe/And not be in sorrow too?/Can I see another’s grief/And not seek for kind relief?” – Billy Dee captures in rollicking sound more truth about addiction than a thousand self-important editorials about drugs.

Kristofferson joins with Dylan Thomas, the Welsh bard, another wild man with an exquisite sense for the music of language and the married themes of youth and age, sex and death, love and loss, home and the search, always the search:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

Although most of his songs lack overt political content, such concerns are scattered throughout his massive oeuvre (nearly 400 songs) where his passion for the victims of America’s war machine and his respect for great spiritual heroes like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and John and Robert Kennedy ring out in very powerful songs that are not well known. Note his use of the word they in [They Killed Him](#), surely not a mistake for such a careful songwriter. Sounds like Dylan about the assassination of President Kennedy in [Murder Most Foul](#): “They killed him once and they killed him twice/Killed him like a human sacrifice.”

And in [The Circle](#), a song about Bill Clinton killing with a missile an Iraqi artist and her husband and the wounding of her children, his condemnation is powerful as he links it to the disappeared of Argentina in a circle of sorrow. Of course, no one is responsible.

“Not I” said the soldier
“I just follow orders and it was my duty to do my job well”
“Not I” said the leader who ordered the slaughter
“I’m saddened it happened, but then, war is hell”
“Not us” said the others who heard of the horror
Turned a cold shoulder on all that was done
In all the confusion a single conclusion
The circle of sorrow has only begun

As everyone knows, songs have a powerful hold on our memories, and sometimes we learn ironic truths about them only years later.

When I was young, my large family, consisting of my parents and seven sisters and me – Bronx kids – would go on vacation for a week in the late summer to a farm called Edgewater. We would pack our clothes in cartons weeks in advance and would load into the car like sardines layered in a can. On the trip north to the Catskill mountains, in our wild excitement, we would sing all sorts of happy songs, many from Broadway shows. As we approached the farm, we would go crazy with excitement and sing over and over the repetitive song we had learned somewhere: *We’re Here Because We’re Here Because We’re Here*. To us it was a song of joy; we had arrived at our Shangri-La, our ideal home, paradise regained. To this day, the name Edgewater is like Proust’s madeleine dipped in tea for many of us.

What we didn’t know was that the song we were singing was the sardonic song that WWI soldiers sang as they awaited absurd and senseless death in the mud and rat-filled trenches

of the war to end all wars. Sardonic words to them and joy to us. They were there because they were there and it was meaningless. We sang it out of joy. So Blakean:

Man was made for joy and woe
Then when this we rightly know
Through the world we safely go.
Joy and woe are woven fine
A clothing for the soul to bind.

To listen to Kris Kristofferson's vast oeuvre is a confirmation of that Blakean truth. It is to realize that all those songs he has written and sung have been his way of fulfilling the words of another Romantic poet who was Blake's contemporary, John Keats. Keats called life "a vale of soul-making," meaning that people are not souls until they make themselves by developing an individual identity by doing what they were meant to do, by listening to the voice within, not the cacophony without. Kris did exactly that to the consternation of his family. He answered the hero's spiritual call that asked him to follow his true self. The call that Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, says, when refused, results in sterility:

Often in actual life, and not infrequently in the myths and popular tales, we encounter the dull case of the call unanswered; for it is always possible to turn the ear to other interests. Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering life becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless. . . . Whatever house he builds, it will be a house of death: a labyrinth of cyclopean walls to hide him from his Minotaur. All he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration.

By answering the call, Kris blossomed into his sacred calling with all its unremitting deaths and births, unlike his character, Saul Darby, whose life's obsessive labor was to build [Darby's Castle](#) as a monument to his ego, even as he failed to hear his young wife weeping in the next room. Yet befitting the artist that he is who can grasp two tragic truths at once, perhaps Kris was singing of himself as well.

In Ken Burns' fascinating documentary series, [Country Music](#), Kris answers the question of why he took such a radical turn early on and gave up his military road to success for a lowly job as a janitor in Nashville where he hoped to write songs. He said:

I love William Blake.... William Blake said, 'If he who is organized by the divine for spiritual communion, refuse and bury his talent in the earth, even though he should want natural bread, shame and confusion of face will pursue him throughout life to eternity.'

When he answered this call of the spirit and took such a dramatic turn away from the conventional road to success, his mother wrote him a letter essentially disowning him ("disowning" – an interesting word!). When Johnny Cash read it, he sardonically said, "Isn't it nice to get a letter from home?"

Not devoid of humor, Kristofferson wrote [Jessie Younger](#), a catchy tune that no doubt concealed his pain while sharing it, an example of his extraordinary ability to use words in paradoxical ways:

Jesse Younger's parents wonder where it all went wrong
that Jesse's name has turned to ashes on their tongues
But he chose to starve and try to carve a future of his own
And he got his druthers because now his younger brother
Is his father's and his mother's only son

A close examination of so many of his lyrics leaves me aghast at his talent.

There are just a handful of songwriter/performers who can match the art of Kris Kristofferson. Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and Paul Simon particularly come to mind, for their work also contains that deep spiritual questing for "home," the enigmatic word we use to try to capture life's deepest yearnings.

Kris has an attribute that is very beautiful and emanates from a very deep place. Heart. Spirit. Soul. His songs are permeated with the quality Keats called "soul-making." Life as a vale of soul-making. One can hear it throughout [Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down](#), that plaintive cry from the bottom of a despairing bottle that gripped the great Johnny Cash as well. Like Dylan so often, the tintinnabulation of the bells conjures someone calling a lost soul to return home. "Then I headed back for home/And somewhere far away a lonely bell was ringin'/And it echoed through the canyons/Like the disappearing dreams of yesterday"

Whatever word we give it, this quality shines through in a beautifully poignant way, especially in [a concert he gave](#) in the Plaza de la Trinidad, an intimate venue, when he was seventy-four years old. Age has etched its marks on his rueful countenance but has added pathos to his performance. His song selection, while including many of his famous hits, also contains lesser-known songs that add an even greater humanness to his deeply moving performance. I am reminded of something the English writer John Berger said of Rembrandt: "The late Rembrandt self-portraits contain or embody a paradox: they are clearly about old age, yet they address the future. They assume something coming towards them apart from Death."

Kris Kristofferson may have been "out of sight and out of mind" in recent years, so I would like to bring him back to your attention and salute him as we remember him.

Thank you, Kris. You are an inspiration. Blessings as you fall into grace, as you reminded us with [Why Me Lord](#).

And here is his encore, "The Last Thing to Go":

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