

# Kristofferson Wears Father Role

## Like A Smile

*Part 1 of 2*

**By Ray Elliott**

"See him wasted on the sidewalk in his jacket and his jeans, wearing yesterday's misfortunes like a smile," are the first words I remember hearing from Kris Kristofferson in a song called "The Pilgrim — Chapter 33" that he wrote more than 30 years ago.

Because of that image, playing the James Jones character in the movie version of his daughter Kaylie's novel, "A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries," wasn't a role I'd ever thought about Kristofferson getting. But when Nick Nolte decided to go to Australia to play Col. Tall in Terrence Malick's film adaption of Jones' World War II Guadalcanal novel, "The Thin Red Line," before taking the father role in Kaylie's novel, Kristofferson was offered the part instead.

"I'd never have had the chance, otherwise," Kristofferson said when he was in Champaign-Urbana for the screening of "A Soldier's Daughter" during the Roger Ebert Overlooked Film Festival.

Getting that chance, however, gave Kristofferson the opportunity to play one of the best roles of his career. It was a role he said he'd been preparing for all of his life.

"I could identify with (Jones) so much because of his military background and the fact that I wanted to be a writer more than anything else," said Kristofferson, who spent nearly five years in the Army before stopping off in Nashville on his way to an English teaching assignment at West Point after three years in Germany and deciding to stay and work as a janitor and write songs instead of pursuing a military career.

"I didn't know it was going to be songs," he said of his own writing success. "I hope that someday I will be writing fiction again."

James Jones' relationship to his work and to his family was how Kristofferson said he could most identify with the noted author of the World War II trilogy "From Here To Eternity," "The Thin Red Line" and "Whistle" who grew up in the southern Illinois town of Robinson.

And it was the family relationship that Kristofferson said was very appealing to him about the Jones he played and came to know through the role. The 65-year-old songwriter, singer and actor Kristofferson has eight children of his own, five at home in Hawaii.

"I imagine when (Jones) was younger," Kristofferson said, "he might have been the way I was more when I was younger. I think there's a point in your life, if you're a creative person, where you've got to be pretty selfish, and where your work is pretty much the most important thing in your life.

"But at least at the age when I was playing Jones, he had gotten to the point where what he really valued, I think, was family; his work as well. He was always dedicated to his writing, but not to the point of excluding the people he loved."

The younger Jones was who Kristofferson said he had in mind when he accepted the role of expatriate author Bill Willis in "A Soldier's Daughter."

"It's so funny," Kristofferson said, "because when I started to do this project, my memory, my impression of James Jones was all these pictures that they used to put out back when he was selling "Eternity." He'd be throwing a knife or doing something real manly and macho. I expected him to be more like Hemingway. I was glad to see that (Jones) grew into the person that he got to be."

Like Jones, the character in the movie had health problems and moved his family back to the United States after years of living in Paris to spend his last years at home, finish the final novel of his war trilogy and have his daughter and son grow up in America. The children had a difficult time adjusting to the culture and the fact that their father was dying.

"What was ironic for me was that life followed art," Kristofferson said. "Right after I did the movie (where the ambulance backs up to the house to take Willis off to the hospital), I had to have a triple bypass. And my kids, who had all been in North Carolina (on location for the filming of "A Soldier's Daughter") with me were there when the ambulance came to the house, just like when it came in the movie and rolled James Jones off to the hospital.

"At my house, you know. And Jody, one of my boys (who was 15) he went up to his mother and asked, 'It's not going to be like the movie, is it, Mom?'"

It was the wheezy-like breathing Kaylie perceived in Kristofferson's performance of the Jones character that really touched her.

"The breathing caused me to fall apart," she said. "My father had congestive heart failure, and he breathed in a way that everybody who knew him recognized it when they heard Kris in the movie. It was so effective."

Kristofferson said he wasn't aware of doing anything special.

"That's weird," he said, "because I didn't have a clue what it was really like. My father died of heart failure, but I think maybe I was close enough to needing the operation myself."

"And by the time I ran into Kaylie down there (in North Carolina) I felt like I was James Jones. But, of course, I had no idea that I'd look like it to his daughter, especially one that loved him so much."

Unlike Jones and the character in the movie, Kristofferson recovered and is able to work. But he said it is "hard to get me out of the house. I wouldn't have come here now, if it hadn't been for how much I loved the project."

But like Jones and the character in the movie, his own life as a father is what Kristofferson values now.

"When you're younger," he said, "you're still trying to find out who you are. And if you're in love with your work, it's probably going to take most of your attention. I know I wasn't the father for my first two kids as I am for the ones now."