

Writers and fighters influential to Kris Kristofferson

Part 2 of 2

By Ray Elliott

"All my background is military," singer, songwriter and actor Kris Kristofferson said during a conversation about playing an aging soldier-turned-expatriate-writer, based on James Jones, in the movie "A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries." "My father, both my grandparents. One was in the Swedish Army; the other guy was in the Philippine Insurrection. Had his eye put out by a spear, and I have the spear, still.

"And my daddy was the first guy to 'fly the Hump' at night," he said, referring to the famous route over the Himalayas that American airmen used to get supplies to Chinese troops fighting on the side of the Allies against Japan in World War II. "That was his place of duty, assigned to Chennault's 'Flying Tigers.'"

After the war, Kristofferson's father flew as a commercial airline pilot, stayed in the Army Reserves, served in the Korea War, flew again as a civilian pilot and retired as a major general.

Following the family tradition, Kristofferson joined the Army in the early '60s, after graduating from Pomona College in California and spending a year at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar. In the Army, he went to jump school, Ranger school and flight school before serving a three-year tour in Germany. It was there that he first thought about leaving the Army and on the way back, he made the "detour down to Nashville to be a songwriter."

That was the end of his military life, and he started writing songs and pushing brooms. Out of that period came a number of his signature songs that everybody from Johnny Cash to Janis Joplin to Kristofferson himself has recorded. Every fan of his music has a favorite or two, including writer Kurt Vonnegut.

"He liked 'Sunday Morning Comin' Down,'" Kristofferson said.

So does Betty (Scott) Frye, a Robinson woman who watched after me when I was quite young. She even singled out a favorite line from the song.

"The line," she said, "I liked most was 'I stumbled to my closet to find my cleanest dirty shirt.' That was really a great, great line."

Appreciation of his work makes "his heart soar," Kristofferson said. His own appreciation of people and their work began to make significant impressions on him as a young boy.

"Hank Williams was probably my first big love," he said, "when I was getting attracted to writers. But I think my first (love) when I was about 8 was Rocky Graziano. I had a big picture on my wall of the second fight (with Tony Zale) when Graziano won when he came back after being knocked down every round and knocked (Zale) out. I can still see that with (Graziano's) right and his eye closed."

Sorting through stories about Kristofferson's life turns up times when he was almost down for the count but came up with his own hard right for a knockout in almost unbelievable ways. Like flying a helicopter into Johnny Cash's yard to pitch him a song.

"That is true," Kristofferson said, laughing slightly, not like he does when he finds something really funny and throws back his head and laughs down to his belly, but laughing anyway. "I did fly out there and pitch him a song. But I'd been pitching songs to John before because I was a janitor at the recording studio."

As the story goes, Kristofferson got drunk, flew into Cash's yard, sold him the song and launched a career.

"It wasn't quite like that," Kristofferson said. "It wasn't like he didn't know me. I'd pitched him every song I wrote for two years, but he hadn't cut any. So I had to make an impression with him on that. His memory of it is a little different than mine, but I'm willing to go with his because it did me some good when he recorded my song."

So, what really happened?

"John talked about me getting out of the helicopter with a beer in my hand," Kristofferson said. "In fact, he wasn't even there. I told my wife, if I had ever tried to fly a helicopter with a beer in my hand, I don't know where the hell I'd put it, because you've got to use both hands to fly."

"I have never flown a helicopter drunk. I've gotten drunk when I wasn't supposed to the night before, and my crew chief has had to wake me up, throw my visor back and say, 'Get up, sir.' But never drunk flying."

"I was reckless enough sober. I thank God I didn't hurt somebody or myself back when I was flying because I had no fear. I drank a lot of beer in those days. But not in a helicopter."

Today Kristofferson flies as a passenger in commercial jets and leaves Hawaii and his family there only when he finds something that interests him or that he likes the way he did playing the James Jones character "A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries." That no one was "over-awed by (Jones') job" as a well-known writer was something Kristofferson "was particularly impressed" with and something else he could identify with.

"God knows in my house, I'm just the old guy they laugh at every now and then," he said, pausing and chuckling before continuing. "I try to be more like (Jones). I love that scene (in the movie) where he's talking to his daughter about (sexual reality). I have to live with that every day because I've got all these teenagers going into that."

Besides the scenes in the movie and how the family was portrayed, Kristofferson said that "from all the stuff I read about (Jones), he was, for his time, progressive thinking. He was way ahead of where I was in those days."

"I remember thinking at one point that it's debatable whether Jones ever was as good of a novelist as Hemingway, but Jones was a good guy to live up to."

"It's kind of like when I got to play Abraham Lincoln once: the more you learn about the guy, the more you respect him. That was the case with James Jones."