



## **DISAPPEARANCES – KRIS KRISTOFFERSON** **From Nashville’s Music Row to “Disappearances” on Screen**

*Jay Craven*

During the late winter and spring of 2005, we launched the filming for our Northeast Kingdom production of “Disappearances.” Crew members worked overtime to be ready for the first day and the actors arrived at our monastery set, fresh from the costume and make-up departments. The cast trailer lacked heat and that set off a flurry of tension but by the end of the day we were getting the hang of it.

As I reflect on all that has happened to make Howard Frank Mosher’s novel into a film, I think of the hundreds of people that have been crucial to the whole enterprise. In the forefront of the project’s champions is the film’s star, Kris Kristofferson.

I first met Kris over the phone. I’d pitched my “Disappearances” script to his agent in April 2000 but Kris’ call came nearly a year later. I’d given up hope that he’d ever read it, much less agree to play the film’s lead role of Vermont whiskey runner, Quebec Bill Bonhomme.

I was cooking dinner when Kris called from his home in Maui. “I’ve finally got my hands on your script,” he said in his rich, raspy voice. “And it looks like you sent it quite a while back. I’m sorry about that. Because it’s best script I’ve ever read.”

This kind of compliment is always suspect in the movie business. Hollywood people frequently “fluff” each other with false praise. The continual process of broken promises and outright rejection makes it hard to sort out what’s authentic.

“This is the Sam Peckinpah script that got away,” he said, “but with more humor.” I remembered that Kristofferson had worked with the legendary Peckinpah on three pictures, including “Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid,” the role that helped him break through.

“I love this character,” Kris said, immediately taking aim at a line spoken by Quebec Bill after he, his son, his hired man, and his brother-in-law have lost their hi-jacked whiskey into the lake—and nearly been killed by the relentless Canadian outlaw, Carcajou. “What do you say, boys, ain’t this the trip to end all trips?”

Kris laughed and moved onto another line, then another. I could tell that he “got” the hell-bent schemer and dreamer that he found in Quebec Bill. He said he’d do the part for actors’ minimum scale of \$1620 per week. Given that another “name” actor’s agent had just told me that his client wouldn’t even read our script without an offer of \$2 million, I was grateful.

Production of “Disappearances” did not develop quickly. In fact, Kris waited and remained committed for four years while we raised money. The fact is we’re still raising money but we finally committed to the film shoot last spring—or willed it to happen, some might say. Kristofferson’s support led other actors to sign on—among them “Deadwood” co-star, Bill Sanderson and Academy Award nominee Genevieve Bujold.



In the end, Kris turned out to be quite a trouper. He was always prepared, on time, and in good spirits. He gave the part everything he had, even during cold and rainy all-nighters, knee-deep in mud. He took repeated risks in his “Disappearances” performance, and he finds many subtle, instinctive, and original character beats. He enlarges and breathes distinctive life into Quebec Bill. Audiences and critics are responding.

Kristofferson worked for \$9,000 and he performed two benefit concerts that raised us \$60,000. He performed the second show a year after we wrapped production, knowing that we still needed money. He told me of a call he received, before the first concert, from his good friend, Willie Nelson, while holed up during the shoot at St. Johnsbury’s Comfort Inn. “I told Willie about the benefit concert and he asked me how much I was making on the film. I told him about one third of what the concert will generate. Willie just sighed. “So, it’s come to this?” he said. Kris laughed. But he understood and appreciated what it took to realize this film. I’ll always be grateful

During production, Kris plunged into 40 degree waters—twice— for the pivotal lake scenes. He ran his knee into a steel rod and hurt it pretty badly during the filming of the train hi-jacking, requiring hospital treatment and ongoing doctor’s care. Though he never admitted it, the knee never really healed. I asked him about it days later and, in the spirit of Quebec Bill, Kris simply joked that his knee had “never felt better. It would kill a normal man,” he said.

When young actor Charlie McDermottt accidentally shoved Kristofferson’s leg during rehearsal for the campfire scene, Kris yelled in pain then let out a thin smile, “Lucky it’s the same damn leg that gets shot. Nothing’s ever helped me so much.” It sounded like Quebec Bill, the irrepressible optimist even in the face of mounting calamity. Kris used the knee injury to the character’s advantage during the film’s closing scenes when Quebec Bill suffers from a gunshot wound.

Mid-shoot, Kris arrived on set for the ambitious tavern scenes and explained that his sister had died unexpectedly the night before. He was in a blue mood but he worked hard all day. Between camera set-ups, as actors and extras waited in the dark, cold, and cavernous Bay Street warehouse that we used for a set, Kris took out his guitar and sang for people—and for himself, working through a variety of feelings. He ended his improvised concert by letting loose with a handful of songs too risqué for any record company to release. Now he was ready to work.

Kris Kristofferson’s resume reads like a story from the great American novel—or maybe a post-modern Western that reworks the usual beats into a narrative of darkness and light. Maybe he’d be part champion rodeo rider, part outlaw. Some things came pretty easily to Kristofferson, women loved him, and he was very sharp—and daring, to the point of recklessness. Bill Friskics-Warren’s article in the March issue of the leading music journal, *No Depression*, tells how, when Kristofferson was stationed with the Army in Germany, he “got bombed with a few buddies and flew into the hollows of the Rhine River Valley, skidding along the surface of the water.”

Earlier in his career, Kris was rebellious, haunted, and self-destructive, especially with the tequila that helped him curb stage fright. Like his character in “A Star is Born,” he nearly plunged over the edge. But he pulled himself back thanks to the help of good friends, especially Johnny Cash. Kris also drew on a strong relationship with his wife, Lisa, solid creative work, and, ironically, the



experiences that nearly killed him. He asks in his song, “Pilgrim: Chapter 33” if, “the going up was worth the coming down.” In the end, he decided it was.

Kristofferson served as a Special Forces Captain and pilot in the Army. He’s been a Golden Gloves boxer and a successful singer/songwriter whose songs have been recorded by more than 100 artists, among them Cash, Willie Nelson, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Emmy Lou Harris, Janis Joplin, and Bob Dylan. During the 1970’s and 80’s Kristofferson was one of America’s most “bankable” movie stars, appearing in films ranging from “Convoy” to Martin Scorsese’s “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore.” He landed his co-starring role in “A Star Is Born” against two other pop idols: Mick Jagger and Elvis.

At Pomona College, Kristofferson earned Phi Beta Kappa then went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. After that, he landed a job teaching English at West Point but threw it away at the last minute for a move to Nashville where he rented a funky apartment and took jobs as bartender and janitor on Music Row.

It took time, but after repeatedly being turned down by the country music stars he wanted to record his songs, Kristofferson got hold of a helicopter and landed it on the bluff behind Johnny Cash’s home. He finally got the legendary singer’s attention and handed Cash a tape of songs he was sure could make it to the top, given the chance. He was right. Cash recorded Kristofferson’s “Sunday Morning Coming Down” and it won the Country Music Association Song of the Year award. After that, doors opened and Kristofferson launched a robust career in country music. He performed with the Nelson, Cash, and Waylon Jennings in the country super group, The Highwaymen—and his new album, “This Old Road” is being hailed as his strongest work in twenty years.

In the recent No Depression story, Bill Friskics-Warren writes that Kristofferson’s songs opened up new possibilities for what country music could say and mean. “Kristofferson writes the restlessly self-surpassing song of himself....taking every “wrong” direction and in the process finding himself on his lean, often lonely, ultimately transformative way back home.”

Warren refers to one of Kristofferson’s favorite quotes, a maxim of poet William Blake who wrote, “If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.”

This is how Kristofferson approaches his work, including his work in “Disappearances.” He works his own imperfections into a story of himself. Many of us see our flawed selves in his songs, which combine to weave a quintessentially American narrative. Think about his line from “Me and Bobby McGee.” By writing, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” Kristofferson mines his own low ebb for resonance. In doing so, he captures powerful meaning that remains a touchstone for an entire generation.