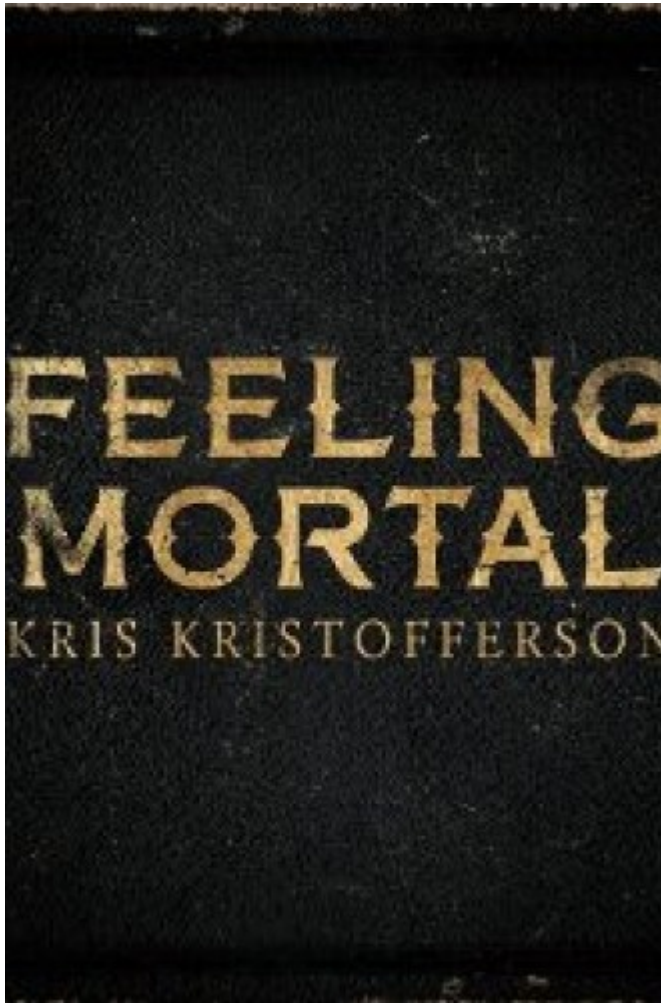


Feeling Mortal, by Kris Kristofferson

reviewed by [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Feeling Mortal

by Kris Kristofferson

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It's easy to write Kris Kristofferson off as another country songwriter trawling the shallows of whiskey, diesels and cornpone imagery. But that's a myopic read of the Rhodes scholar, William Blake devotee, Golden Gloves boxer and helicopter pilot—a

skill the struggling songwriter once used to land in Johnny Cash's yard for an impromptu demo tape drop. The stunt worked: Cash recorded "Sunday Morning Coming Down."

Yet Kristofferson's life has been far from charmed. His family objected to his songwriting aspirations and cut off ties; two of his marriages failed miserably. At his alcoholic nadir in the 1970s, Kristofferson guzzled three bottles of Jack Daniels every two days. If anyone deserves to title an album *Feeling Mortal*, it's this 76-year-old country legend.

And the opening title track hits the listener like a jagged fistful of discarded pennies. With no effect on his parched voice, Kristofferson drawls, "God Almighty here I am / Am I where I ought to be? / I've begun to soon descend / Like the sun into the sea." But if you're expecting a tears-in-the-beer surrender, guess again. Kristofferson unveils surrender of a different sort, a prayer of gratitude: "And I thank my lucky stars / From here to eternity / For the artist that you are / And the man you made of me."

Overall it's not a religious album, but it celebrates life and the forces that nurture it. Kristofferson can also paint an unflinching portrait of those who squander all for mammon. "Bread for the Body," with its accordion-fueled backbeat, tells a tale of a company man whose job means nothing to him. After the toys have been won and precious time lost, an awakening comes: "A man can get by without silver or gold / With bread for the body and song for the soul."

Kristofferson also digs deep into his existing songbook. He originally recorded "Stairway to the Bottom" in the 1970s, while "My Heart Was the Last One to Know"—a cowrite with Shel Silverstein—was recorded by Connie Smith in 1967. Both songs unfold stories of regret, offering two very different looks at heartbreak.

Feeling Mortal ends on a shambling high note: a song about a codger named Ramblin' Jack. Kristofferson's gravelly voice inhabits the song, convincing us that there's quite a bit of Jack in him: a man who "paid a little piece of his soul / For every seed he's been sowing." Regrets? In "My Way," Kristofferson answers like a sublime, country version of Sinatra: "He made his own mistakes, and love, and friends / Ain't that what matters in the end?"