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Bronze plaques depicting members of the Country Music Hall of Fame sparkle like lucky pennies in the museum rotunda. Together, they are riches of the heart. Alone, they are loose change.

Kris Kristofferson thought deeply about such fortunes in August when it was announced he was going to be inducted into the Hall.

Kristofferson's image will stand alongside the heroes he met when he arrived in Nashville in 1965: Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Roger Miller. Ray Price. "The last time I was in Nashville I was doing a television show with Earl Scruggs," Kristofferson said earlier this week from a movie set north of New Orleans. "They took me to see all those bronze plaques. It was everybody I loved before I came to town and some of the people I got to know after that, like the Highwaymen Cash, Nelson, Waylon Jennings. I was moved."

Kristofferson, 68, will be inducted Nov. 9 during the 38th annual Country Music Association Awards telecast from Nashville. He is currently filming the race-horse themed "Dreamer," where he plays Kurt Russell's father.

The conscience of country music, Kristofferson was a compatriot of Cash, and a patriot before the word was politicized. He is the son of an Air Force general and he volunteered for Vietnam. (In 1966, Dave Dudley recorded Kristofferson's anthem "Vietnam Blues," a rare song for the period because it was written from a soldier's point of view.)

In December 1996, forgotten country singer Faron Young fatally shot himself in the head. I attended his visitation services held in a hilltop chapel outside Nashville. Only a handful of country artists showed up, old-timers like Skeeter Davis, Hank Snow and Boxcar Willie. They are all dead now, too.

A huge floral wreath sat at the altar. It was from Kristofferson and his family. The inscription read "Sleep With the Angels."

"I have always respected country music and have been trying to bring respect to it," Kristofferson said. "I'm not sure how much country music has respected me. But I was truly touched to be recognized. Faron was one of the first guys I met in Nashville. In fact, he hired me as a carpenter's helper for \$1.50 an hour building his studio."

For a country star, Kristofferson has an unusual pedigree. A Rhodes scholar, he studied at Oxford in England. He even cut four still unreleased songs under the name of Cris Carson with producer Tony Hatch -- who went on to write Petula Clark's "Downtown."

Kristofferson was planning to teach at West Point when he came to Nashville during an Army leave. Marijohn Wilkin, who wrote "Long Black Veil" and became a Nashville song publisher, was a cousin of his platoon leader in Germany, and she introduced Kristofferson to townies.

"I met Cowboy Jack Clement former Sun Records engineer the first day I was there," he said. "I was still in uniform. Johnny Darrell was playing us his new record of 'Green, Green Grass of Home.' As Cowboy, Marijohn and I were walking across the street, song publisher John Denny ran out of Cedarwood Publishing and told Johnny, 'Porter Wagoner is covering you right now.' We spent the rest of the night drinking away with Johnny.

"It was funny because from then on, it seemed every song Johnny Darrell who was then Nashville's hot song finder cut, someone else would cover: 'Ruby Don't Take Your Love to Town,' 'With Pen in Hand,' 'Son of Hickory Holler's Tramp' -- not to mention 'My Elusive Dreams.' It was like a funny novel; everyone had success but Johnny. After that long night of roaring with these songwriters, Cowboy took me over to see the train station in Nashville. Cowboy used to get on trains and ride down to New Orleans and back just to write songs."

In two weeks' time Kristofferson was hooked on Nashville.

There were songwriters all over the place. Ray Price was the part owner of Pamper Music, the renegade publishing company that set Nashville on its collective ear in the early 1960s. Pamper songwriters included Hank Cochran, who co-wrote the Patsy Cline hits "I Fall to Pieces" and "She's Got You"; Harlan Howard and Willie Nelson.

"I didn't hang out with Tom T. Hall, but I sure studied everything he wrote," Kristofferson said. "Songwriters like Willie, Roger Miller and Johnny Cash. Roger was the guy who made country cool to a new audience. I was lucky enough to be around his imagination that was going all the time.

"At night he'd be tickling himself -- privately -- and he'd come out with the most amazing things. We used to sit around and break down songs, and I still remember breaking down Miller's 'The Last Word in Lonesome Is Me.' I realized this is how Roger takes a new look at everything. Looking at 'lonesome' and seeing that the last word can be 'me.' Roger's wife told me they traced the family tree and that I was related to Roger. I can remember back when we both had short hair, people said I looked like him."

Wilkin also took Kristofferson backstage at the Grand Ole Opry, where he first shook hands with Cash. "I was electrified by the experience," Kristofferson said. "Then I met John when I was a janitor at Columbia Records. Cowboy Jack had showed John a letter I had gotten from home Brownsville, Texas. The letter disowned me because of my move into a business, where according to my mother, 'no one over the age of 14 ever listened to that stuff, and if they did it wouldn't be

anybody we'd want at the house.' And John's first words to me were, 'Well, it's awful nice to get a letter from home, isn't it, Kris?' That's what started our friendship."

The memories of Kristofferson's stint as a Columbia Records janitor will never be swept away. He was also cleaning up the joint when Bob Dylan was recording his watershed double album "Blonde on Blonde."

"It was so unusual in terms of a Nashville session," he recalled. "Back in those days, people tried to get three songs in three hours. If you didn't get that many, you were wasting money. Dylan went into big Studio A at Columbia, sat down at a piano and proceeded to write 'Rainy Day Women # 12 & 35,' 'Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again,' etc. All the musicians, Charlie McCoy, and those guys Joe South, Hargus "Pig" Robbins and others were off playing Ping-Pong and cards all night long. I couldn't believe it. I thought somebody was going to get fired.

"I was the only songwriter in Nashville who was able to be there. Police were around the building to keep people out. He sat at that piano all night long. In the early morning, he got the musicians together, and they went in and cut that amazing record. I would never have the nerve to go in and do that myself -- to try and create in front of people who are waiting on me. I have enough trouble just doing it.

"The things I saw in those days: George Jones walking in with a case of beer and cutting a whole album. Lefty Frizzell was a beautiful guy; he was so insecure. He'd look at me and say, 'Is that all right? Does that sound good?' And he's talking to the janitor, you know."

Kristofferson currently records for John Prine's Oh Boy label in Nashville, which creates a full circle. In 1971, Kristofferson helped Prine secure his first record deal after hearing Prine sing at the Earl of Old Town on the Near North Side. Kristofferson and Steve Goodman had been performing at the Quiet Knight, and Goodman told Kristofferson about Prine.

After the show, an entourage of Kristofferson, actress Samantha Eggars and Paul Anka headed over to the Earl, only to find Prine asleep. He was encouraged to wake up and play a few of his original tunes.

Kristofferson is planning to cover a medley of Billy Joe Shaver songs with Prine. Earlier this year, Oh Boy reissued Kristofferson's "Repossessed" and "Third World Warrior" on a single CD.

But when Kristofferson ranks all his country music memories, he puts the Highwaymen at the top.

The superstar collaboration fell under the radar during the early 1990s, but if the band was around in today's alt-country environment, it would be huge. In June 1995, the Highwaymen cancelled their appearance at the former New World Music Theatre, because the show had sold less than 1,000 tickets. Unfortunately, that was

to be their last ride through Chicago.

"I appreciate the Highwaymen experience more every day," Kristofferson said. "I can't believe I took it so for granted when I was doing it. It used to give me pause every time I would go on stage with those guys because they were all my heroes when I came to town. To be standing up there on Mount Rushmore, but if I had stopped and thought about it, I would have been so humble, I wouldn't have been able to participate.

"The last tour we did started in New Zealand in fall 1995 and went up through the Far East. It was hard. There was a lot of traveling and not much communication with people running the board. I remember a show in Singapore where my guitar was coming out of Willie's monitor. Willie didn't even want to hear himself, but the last thing he wanted to hear was my guitar. He ended up just pulling the wire out. I couldn't hear myself so I kept saying 'Turn it up.' Those were wonderful times. I think of John Cash every day. We will not be seeing his like again."

Nor will we be seeing the likes of Kris Kristofferson, whose silver-tongued integrity always has been anchored by a bronze heart.