

MUSIC; A Grievous Angel, A Busy Ghost

By NEIL STRAUSS

WAYCROSS, Ga.— THERE is a ghost that hangs heavy over the town of Waycross, a railroad hub in southeastern Georgia that has fallen on hard times. Though most folks move through the streets oblivious to it, some people say they can actually see it. And they see it everywhere.

"Before me, gentlemen, Gram once walked down these streets, as sure as I did," said Billy Ray Herrin, a local songwriter who held a tribute to Parsons here last week. He was sitting in the passenger seat of a crowded rental car. "Take a right here," he said. "I'm going to show you the exact monkey bars that he used to swing on."

Gram is Gram Parsons, the patron saint of country-rock and, beyond it, the catch-all modern folk genre known as Americana. Raised in Waycross, which he left at the age of 12 after his father committed suicide, Parsons lived fast, died young and left a good-looking corpse, a good-sounding body of work and a good-size cult audience that is about to see his memory taken to new heights.

For someone who sabotaged himself so much -- who often put the musicians he worked with second to his musical vision, who could be difficult to work with in the studio and who got so drunk and high that he exasperated those around him -- Parsons still managed to be the force behind five of the greatest albums of the late 60's and early 70's. They were "Exile on Main Street," by the Rolling Stones, a record he influenced but didn't play on; "Sweetheart of the Rodeo," by the Byrds, though more than half of Parsons' vocals were replaced in the final version; "The Gilded Palace of Sin" by his band the Flying Burrito Brothers, and his two solo albums (with a then-unknown Emmylou Harris), "GP" and "Grievous Angel." Even the Eagles, to some extent, spun out of the Flying Burrito Brothers.

All this is quite a résumé for someone who didn't even live as long as Kurt Cobain, Jimi Hendrix or Jim Morrison. Parsons died from taking too much morphine and drinking too much tequila in a motel near Joshua Tree State Park in California in 1973. He was 26. His death, and the bizarre adventure that ensued when his road manager stole the body and burned it in the desert (in keeping with a pact he had made with Parsons), is the subject of a movie currently in production, "Grand Theft Parsons," starring Johnny Knoxville of the television show and movie "Jackass." In the meantime, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones recently bought the movie rights to the definitive biography, "Hickory Wind: The Life and Times of Gram Parsons" by Ben Fong-Torres.

As the cult of Parsons has continued to grow, there has also been an increasing glut of tribute concerts and albums, some of them quite good and featuring admirers like Elvis Costello, Sheryl Crow and Beck. Parsons' own material -- released and unreleased, recorded and unrecorded -- has been so thoroughly mined that the latest CD, "Big Mouth Blues" (Sierra Records), features him just talking. And last May, two fans, Yvo and Margo Kwee, bought the Joshua Tree Inn, where Parsons died, and they intend to preserve it in part as a shrine.

Mr. Herrin, who runs a recording studio, a music store and a Parsons-inspired country-rock band in Waycross -- all three named after the Parsons song "Hickory Wind" -- was also the co-

producer of last weekend's tribute concert. Among the 300 or so people in attendance was Gary Griffin, the managing editor of The Waycross Journal Herald. Mr. Griffin had named his son Gram, and now Gram Griffin was on stage performing songs by his namesake. Also performing that night was Gary Griffin's brother, Dave, the show's other producer, who had originally planned to call his son Gram. Beaten to the punch by Gary, Dave decided to name his son Connor, after Parsons' birth name: Ingram Cecil Connor, heir to the Snively orange-grove fortune. (Yes, Parsons was a trust-fund kid.)

Legend has it that there are people even more Parsons-obsessed than these men. "I have a name for them," said Walter Egan, who first met Parsons in 1971 and who wrote a song, "Hearts on Fire," that Parsons covered. "I call them 'Grampires.' "

Mr. Egan and his band, the Brooklyn Cowboys, are among those who say they have seen Parsons' ghost in Waycross. On the back of the band's latest CD, "Dodging Bullets," is a picture of the members standing on the property where Parsons grew up. When the photograph was developed, they say, a strange anthropomorphic haze appeared to be floating in front of a band member. The group likes to think of this manifestation as a nod of approval from Parsons.

With most musical legends who die before their time, from Elvis to Tupac, fans love to believe that they are still alive. But to believe that Parsons is still alive would be to invalidate the tale of his body-snatching, which has become so integral to his myth. So instead, a lot of fans -- even some outside Waycross -- like to believe in his ghost.

"It's very strange," said Mr. Kwee, the new owner of the Joshua Tree Inn. "Gram Parsons' ghost really hangs out at the Inn. There's a journal in the room he died in, and people write in there about waking up at 4 a.m. and seeing Gram walk across the pool."

Last weekend in Waycross, at the Little Knights club, Parsons' ghost would have been pleased. Dozens of musicians, including the Brooklyn Cowboys, performed at the concert, the Fifth Annual Gram Parsons Guitar Pull and Tribute, one of many Parsons-related events that have taken place around the country this year. For eight hours, bands, most of them local, played music either by Parsons or inspired by him.

As Mr. Egan and the sweet-throated Nashville singer Lona Heins sang harmonies in an inspired rendition of "Sin City" -- Parsons' meditation on the evils of the music business -- Parsons' former drummer, Jon Corneal, looked around in awe. "It's a mystery to me," said Mr. Corneal, who played in Parsons' high school band, the Legends, and went on to perform with him in the International Submarine Band, the Flying Burrito Brothers and even the Byrds. "Where do all these people come from? I can't figure it out"

For those of a younger generation, like Johnny Knoxville, 31, of "Jackass," the cult of Parsons is less of a surprise. "It's not amazing to me because he's such a great musician," Mr. Knoxville said by phone. "He's up there with David Bowie and Johnny Cash for me. Coupled with his death and what happened with his body, that smacks of cult following to me. It's just a shame that he doesn't have a bigger following."

Parsons was a complex character, so winsome, charming and magnetic that singers in more popular bands often felt threatened by his presence, according to interviews with those who were there. At the

same time, he was so irresponsible and irritating when he was intoxicated that even his friends often turned against him.

A large part of his personal problems came from his family: his father, Cecil (Coon Dog) Connor, shot himself in the head when Gram was 12; a few years later his mother, Avis, married Robert Parsons, who Parsons biographers believe was after her wealth. She died of alcohol poisoning on the day he graduated from high school. (Her fatal drink was given to her in the hospital by Robert Parsons.) Years after Parsons' death, his sister and one of her daughters were killed in a boating accident.

Though he was born in the South (in Winter Haven, Fla., in 1946), Mr. Parsons did not develop his passion for country music there. In his early years he worshiped Elvis Presley, covering his songs in his first band, the Pacers, in eighth grade; in high school his taste turned to the folk of Peter, Paul and Mary and, later, the Kingston Trio. It wasn't until he went north, attending Harvard for four months before dropping out and moving to New York, that his passion for country was ignited, thanks in part to his new International Submarine Band.

"I THINK he got lonesome thinking about back home," said Mr. Corneal, a member of the band, which also included Brandon de Wilde (once a child star best known for his role in "Shane").

In 1968, the Byrds introduced Parsons' music to rock fans on the "Sweetheart of the Rodeo" album. Though he had auditioned to be the Byrds' pianist, the strong-willed Parsons ended up practically taking over the group, often trying his bandmates' patience in his determination to refashion them into a country-rock group. "All of a sudden this guy comes out of the blue and appears in the Byrds," Mr. Egan recalled. "I was like, 'This isn't the Byrds,' when I first heard the album. But then something about it touched me."

That summer, while on tour with the Byrds, Parsons left to spend time with Mr. Richards, one of whose finest songs with the Rolling Stones, "Wild Horses," was first recorded by the Flying Burrito Brothers two years later. Hanging out with the Rolling Stones had its perks, but it also had its downside.

"It's my observation that Gram Parsons thought that he had Keith Richards' metabolism," said Parsons' former road manager and body snatcher, Phil Kaufman. He was working with the Rolling Stones when he met Parsons. "The two of them hung out and said they had a common love for music and a common love for drugs. Keith can eat nails and sweat rust, and Gram thought he could too."

Mr. Kaufman recalled record shopping with the Rolling Stones and Parsons in Los Angeles, where they spent hundreds of dollars on music by Merle Haggard, George Jones and other country singers. "He'd play them each one," Mr. Kaufman said of Parsons. "And they'd sit there in awe because they'd been influenced by blues players. Country music was really hokey to them before that."

With Chris Hillman of the Byrds, Parsons formed the Flying Burrito Brothers in 1968. The band's first album, "The Gilded Palace of Sin," remains the turning point of the fusion, drenching traditional country music in the sweat of rock 'n' roll to create, as Parsons called it, "cosmic American music." Around then, the iconic hippie-country image of Parsons took shape: standing tall with shaggy sun-streaked brown hair

and a bare chest beneath a white suit made for him by the country-music fashion king Nudie the Rodeo Tailor, who embroidered marijuana leaves, pills and naked women onto the outfit. But, as usual, Parsons' unprofessional work habits and substance abuse, along with the record-label problems that plagued much of his career, wore the band down.

Every legend must have a lost album, and Parsons recorded his in 1970 with a strong back-up band that included Ry Cooder. The working tapes, last seen in his possession, have never been found. His two albums, "GP" and "Grievous Angel," were perhaps the music he wanted to make all his life, fusing his country taste with his early rock 'n' roll interest by hiring some of Presley's former sidemen. In addition, a 25-year-old Emmylou Harris provided what has become known as the sine qua non of back-up harmonies. Though Parsons' voice was never perfect, the emotional depth with which he delivered each song was, and one can hear the demons coming out to play in haunting songs like "Love Hurts," "In My Hour of Darkness" and "Return of the Grievous Angel."

By that time, Mr. Egan recalled, those who knew Mr. Parsons were already saying that he had a "Hank Williams death wish."

"He was my last role model," Mr. Egan recalled, "but to see how it went down at the end, that is when I realized: you've got to be your own role model."

Meanwhile, nearly 30 years later in Waycross, Mr. Herrin, who was six years Parsons' junior, moved through the streets in the footsteps of Parsons' ghost. "This is 'Hickory Wind,' " Mr. Herrin said as he stood on the banks of a creek where a young Parsons used to sneak cigarettes. The song is set in the pine trees of South Carolina, but Mr. Herrin maintains that it actually describes the Waycross of Parsons' youth. He sang a lyric from the song: "But when I'm lonesome, I always pretend/ That I'm getting the feel of Hickory Wind."

"This is it," he said excitedly, gesturing up at the tall pine trees casting their shadow over him. "Right here is your song."