

## ROLLING STONE MAGAZINE

### GP / GRIEVOUS ANGEL ALBUM REVIEWS

By BUD SCOPPA

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Gram Parsons is an artist with a vision as unique and personal as those of Jagger-Richard, Ray Davies, or any of the other celebrated figures. Parsons may not have gone to the gate as often as the others, but when he has he's been strikingly consistent and good. I can't think of a performance on record any more moving than Gram's on his "Hot Burrito No. 1," and the first album of his old band, the Flying Burrito Bros.' *Gilded Palace of Sin*, is a milestone. The record brought a pure country style and a wrecked country sensibility to rock, setting a standard that no other country-rock effort has begun to challenge.

Parsons is a south-Georgia boy with a Harvard education, a big inheritance, and a tendency to melancholy. His central theme has always been that of the innocent Southern boy tossed between the staunch traditions and strict moral code he was born to and the complex, ambiguous modern world. He realizes that both are corrupt, but he survives by keeping a hold on each while believing neither. Lurking in the innards of all those tunes about how the city is full of temptations for a good old boy, and how his girl has left him, lured away by Satan, is Gram's ongoing preoccupation with loss and despair, much more personal and powerful than the banal sentiments that make the songs so enjoyable initially.

This use of stock country elements to enclose personal expression is as central to *GP*, Gram's first recording in two and a half years, as it was to his work with the Burritos. The album is just what Gram's devotees have been waiting for. But there are a few surprises here, like the hot, smoky, Jimmy Clanton-ish rock and roll ballad, "Cry One More Time," which turns out to be a J. Geils Band original, and the heavy use of Emmylou Harris, a singer from Alabama who's been traveling the folk circuit for the past several years. Together, Gram and Emmylou form a duo that's right up there with George-Tammy and Conway-Loretta in style, but with that added principle of moral uncertainty. A country chestnut, "We'll Sweep Out the Ashes in the Morning," is their most successful joint effort; it would make one half of a great twosided country single, with the formally written and arranged Parsons-Rick Grech original, "Kiss The Children," taking up the other half. Emmylou's singing is just about as sweet, hot-genteel, and forceful as Ronstadt's, and it sets off Gram's mournful voice nicely.

The rest of Parsons' backup is made up of L.A.-country stalwarts, including the always fine Byron Berline and Al Perkins on fiddle and steel respectively, and the backbone of Presley's touring band, including James Burton, is also on hand.

*GP* sounds anachronistic for the most part; the bulk of the tracks have a more classic C&W feel to them than anything that's come out of either Nashville or Bakersfield recently, with the notable exception of Merle Haggard's better efforts (and it's no surprise that Merle was interested in producing Gram after hearing him). The dimension of rustic authenticity is essential if Parsons' songs are to work dramatically. He's got the right people back there for that.

The other important dimension is the innuendo supplied by Gram's voice and delivery. He may not be old or tough enough to be a Haggard or a Cash, but he gets another kind of worldliness, a quieter kind of strength out of his singing. That amazing voice, with its warring qualities of sweetness and dissipation, makes for a stunning emotional experience on the key song of *GP*,

"The New Soft Shoe," and "A Song for You." These two, and the related "She," separate themselves from the classic country style of the other eight songs in much the same way the two "Hot Burrito" numbers stand apart from the other tunes on *Gilded Palace of Sin*. "The New Soft Shoe" tumbles together images of the old and new South (shoeshine boys and shopping malls, old-time hucksters on color TV) into an indecipherable but affecting heap. "A Song for You" is practically confessional in its honesty: "Some of my friends don't know who they belong to/And some can't get a single thing to work inside." When he says later in the song to the girl he's about to leave, "I hope you know a lot more than you're believin'," that clinches it. The song is absolutely hopeless, beyond despair. It's the saddest song I've ever heard.

I don't know what more he can possibly say after that. And yet, there he is just a few tunes later, ending the album with one of those Burrito-style chuggers, as if it were all a big hoedown. He gets away with it, of course. To borrow loosely from one of his lyrics, boy, but he sure can sing.

### **GRIEVOUS ANGEL**

Mick Jagger wrote "Wild Horses" for and about the late Gram Parsons and its chorus describes the paradox that fueled Parsons' life and vision. ". . . Wild horses couldn't drive me away/Wild horses, we'll ride them someday." Unable to choose between devils and angels, he broke the rules and welcomed both. It was, as Jesse Winchester once put it, dangerous fun. The musical results made Gram Parsons the most convincing singer of sad songs that I've ever heard.

After leaving the Byrds, Parsons made a series of albums; *Grievous Angel* completes the cycle. Beginning with the Flying Burrito Brothers' *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, the work progressed through *Burrito Deluxe* and Parsons' earlier solo effort, *GP*. The quartet comprises an autobiography both faithful to traditional musical forms and themes and original in its use of them.

As on Parsons' earlier *GP*, Emmylou Harris sets off Gram Parsons' quavery vocals with her cowgirl-angel voice. Their traditional country duets reach a zenith on two old love songs, "Hearts On Fire" and "Love Hurts." The first deals with passion and guilt, the second with the anguish of romantic love. I find both cuts staggeringly powerful.

Aside from a pair of party footstompers (Tom T. Hall's "I Can't Dance" and Parsons' and Rick Grech's "Las Vegas"), *Grievous Angel* is Parsons' most serious album. His firmer-than-usual (but no less plaintive) voice, Emmylou's buoyantly lovely singing, the sensitive playing of the Elvis Presley band members and others, all contribute to the music's sense of solemn purposefulness.

On the eerie "Medley Live From Northern Quebec," Parsons gives a make-believe live performance before an imaginary crowd of bottle-breaking country boys who recognize his tunes from the first note. Parsons seems to be saying that this is where he might have wound up if he had followed the traditional path. His treatment of the imaginary scenario might be interpreted as disdainful, but as he and Emmylou convincingly sing "an old song from a long time back" (his own "Hickory Wind"), there's a suggestion of regret as well.

Parsons employed country conventions in his songwriting as well as his singing, and it's often hard to separate his originals from the Harlan Howard and Boudleaux Bryant tunes he recorded. His best writing combined country elements with a personal style both openly emotional and filled with ambiguity. *Grievous Angel* includes four of his own songs.

"The Return of the Grievous Angel" describes the vision of home and love that haunts a wanderer through his travels across America: ". . . 20,000 roads I went down/And each one led

me straight back home to you." The immaculately simple "Brass Buttons" draws a picture of a lost love by cataloging the things that surrounded her: "Brass buttons, green silks, and silver shoes/Warm evenings, pale mornings, bottle blues. . . ."In "Thousand-Dollar Wedding" a bridegroom who is deserted on his wedding day laments: ". . . And why ain't there one lonely horn with one sad note to play/Supposed to be a funeral/ It's been a bad, bad day. . . ."

Parsons' final composition, and the album's last cut, reads almost like a prayer. "In My Hour of Darkness" evokes an agonizing struggle between faith and despair. It can serve as Gram Parsons' epitaph as well:

*In my hour of darkness,  
In my time of need,  
Oh, Lord, grant me vision,  
Oh, Lord, grant me speed.*