

MOJO Magazine

February 2001

Gram Parsons: *Another Side of This Life*

By Barney Hoskyns,

Unheard mid-'60s folk recordings taped in Florida by Gram's pal Jim Carlton.

BEFORE HE YOKED country to rock, Gram Parsons was just another wannabe minstrel on America's far-reaching folk circuit. In fact, before the trust-funded Florida kid was a wannabe folkie he was just another wannabe smalltown rock'n'roll singer. As with so many rock greats it took a few stabs at selected musical genres before Gram found his true metier.

The recordings on *Another Side of This Life* – stored for 35 years by Parsons pal Jim Carlton – show a great artist drifting towards his moment of musical clarity. Cut on a Sony reel-to-reel in the singer's hometown of Winter Haven between March 1965 and December 1966, they give us a Greenwich Village Gram who could have been a second-division David Crosby or Tim Buckley; a post-Harvard Parsons on the cusp of his adventures with the International Submarine Band. Not a whole lot that the Sierra album *The Early Years 1963-65* didn't already give us, but nice to have anyway.

There are creditable versions here of Tim Hardin's rockin' 'Reputation' and (presciently enough) Buffy Sainte-Marie's dopesick classic 'Codine'; of Hamilton Camp's folk staple 'Pride Of Man' and Tom Paxton's 'The Last Thing On My Mind'. Depends how well you think that rather earnest hootenanny style has dated. The title track is, of course, the famous Fred Neil song, sung in a bluesy drawl in December 1965. *Another Side of This Life* also features 'November Nights', the Gram song Peter Fonda covered on Chisa, and the very Crosby-esque 'Zah's Blues'. Not to mention an early version of 'Brass Buttons', the first hint of the longhair country to come.

What you won't hear on *Another Side of This Life* are the keening country-gospel strains Gram brought to *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*. There's little real bite to his singing on this grab-bag set-list of coffeehouse staples – none of the cracked, wavering pain we've come to worship. But so what: it's good to hear Gram when he was still a freshfaced young buck, before there was death in his larynx. It is, after all, another side of his life.

Jim Carlton talks to Barney Hoskyns

Gram obviously sounds very different on this album to the fragile country rocker of *Grievous Angel*. What was he like in 1965?

JC: He was just coming into his own as an artist, I think, and it blows me away to hear how mature he was at age 20. And at that time he was starting to hold his own in the Village, and he could see his effect on an audience. He was a very magnetic, charismatic fellow.

Did you ever feel like he was wrestling with the whole issue of coming from a privileged background?

JC: No. In my liner notes on the album, I quote from 'Zah's Blues' – "I wore my youth like a crown" – because he was very comfortable with that, but he never lorded it over anybody. Stanley Booth tells stories about Gram's walking into any given reception for the Rolling Stones, and Mick Jagger would be holding court and Gram would walk in, virtually unknown, and all of a sudden he was the cynosure of all eyes. And Jagger would just be irked by that. But Gram would not do it in an overt way.

'Brass Buttons' was an early song that Gram later recorded on *Grievous Angel*. How much country music was he listening to at this period?

JC: Not a lot. It was Jim ('Spiders and Snakes') Stafford who said, Hey, Gram, there's no longhairs doing country. Poor guy's kinda gotten pegged as this novelty artist, but Gram really, really idolised him, and Stafford cut his teeth on country music. So Gram said, Well, okay, this folk music thing is starting to die out anyway, why don't I give it a shot. But I think he found his soul there.

Were you still in touch with Gram when during the Byrds and Burritos era?

JC: Yes, indeed. I remember calling him and he was so proud of being a Byrd. And he came home and told me stories about Roger McGuinn having a Moog synthesizer half the size of a sofa!