

Torch Song

By Ben Widdicombe

Rock stars may like to talk about dying young and leaving a beautiful corpse, but few of them do anything about it. So you have to admire the personal style of the country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons, who died 30 years ago this month.

Parsons did for cowboy kitsch what Jackie Kennedy did for the Chanel suit. The onetime Byrd was also a pal of Mick Jagger's, an influence on the Rolling Stones and a mentor to Emmylou Harris. But while his famous friends lived to 401(k) another day, he checked out one night at the Joshua Tree Inn, near Palm Springs, Calif., a mere 26.

Even dead, however, Parsons still had an adventure left in him.

His road manager, Phil Kaufman, attained rock-music infamy by kidnapping and cremating Parsons' corpse within days of his death from a drug overdose. Kaufman says he was just making good on a pact the two made months before, at the funeral of a mutual friend. So he bundled Parsons' body into a borrowed hearse, drove back toward Joshua Tree until he was too drunk to continue, dumped the coffin by the highway and cremated his pal with a five-gallon can of high-test gasoline.

If this sounds like a Hope-Crosby road movie scripted by Hunter S. Thompson, the same idea occurred to the "Jackass" frontman, Johnny Knoxville. He plays Kaufman in "Grand Theft Parsons," a forthcoming film based on Kaufman's 1993 memoir, "Road Mangler Deluxe."

"Parsons is up there with David Bowie and Johnny Cash for me," Knoxville told The Times last year. "Coupled with his death and what happened with his body, that smacks of cult following."

While the number of members in that cult may be dwindling -- they're called "Grampires"- this photograph of the snake-hipped hipster preserves his mystique.

The guy on the right who looks like Roy Orbison dressed for a Dollywood trick-riding show is Parsons' clothier, Nudie Cohen. The consummate rodeo tailor, Nudie dressed Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, but his genius was to translate cowboy chic into a viable showbiz style for the likes of John Wayne and Ronald Reagan.

The customized Cadillac -- dolled up like Anna Nicole Smith on dollar tequila night -- is a "Nudie car," 1 of 18 the designer created with six-shooter stick shifts and a dashboard studded with silver dollars.

Parsons saved Nudie from becoming a fashion punch line by bringing the western look to 70's arena bands who sang about ganja and groupies, not campfires and cowgirls. (When Parsons took over the Flying Burrito Brothers in 1968, Nudie made certain the young man offended all of the right people by designing a suit emblazoned with a marijuana-leaf motif.)

A piece of Parsons' sartorial legacy can soon be yours, for a price. Kaufman lent Knoxville the jacket he was wearing on the day he stole Parsons' body to wear in the movie. "I've got it back now," Kaufman says. "After the film comes out, it's going to be on eBay."

These days, Kaufman's low-budget, drive-through approach to final arrangements would probably spawn a national chain of Krispy-Kremate funeral homes. Kaufman, however, remains as unsentimental about his former charge's ad hoc adios as his designer duds.

"Not only the good die young, plenty of times the dumb die young," Kaufman says. "Everybody thinks they have Keith Richards's metabolism. Gram thought that too, and he was dead wrong." And the rest, as they say, is a road movie.