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Movement Seeks Gram Parsons Memorial At Joshua Tree

Country-rock pioneer was partially cremated in park, where unofficial marker now stands.

By Michael Gray

Fans and some park staffers would like to recognize country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons as part of the history of Joshua Tree National Park in the Southern California desert, the *Associated Press* reports.

Parsons died in 1973 of an alcohol and heroin overdose at a motel near the park, which he visited often.

His road manager, Phil Kaufman, and another friend stole Parsons' casket at Los Angeles International Airport, where it was awaiting shipment to his stepfather in Louisiana. They drove it to Joshua Tree and set fire to it, attempting to fulfill Parsons' wish to be cremated at the park, but fled when they saw headlights coming their direction. The two were later arrested, and the singer's partially burned remains were buried in a cemetery in New Orleans.

Later, fans illegally placed a marker in Parsons' honor at Joshua Tree. His shrine is a concrete slab on the geological formation Cap Rock, inscribed "Safe At Home," the name of one of Parsons' albums.

Now a movement seeking formal recognition of Parsons and his connection to the park is under way. The makeshift shrine does not appear on the official park map or in park brochures, and rangers are not required to tell the story in educational programs.

"It is one of the most deeply embedded pieces of Joshua Tree folklore," National Park Service employee Bob Van Belle said. "There is not a climber in the country who does not know the story." Joshua Tree employee Joe Zarki has e-mailed his parks colleagues around the country on the subject. "If Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton get recognition at New Orleans Jazz National Historic Site," wrote Zarki, "why not Gram Parsons at Joshua Tree?"