

[Gram Parsons](#)

A long-lost soul for a long, long time • Gram Parsons' country roots have grown deep into the nooks and crannies of rock's foundation

By [Holly George-Warren](#)

If Gram Parsons knew when he scribbled those words in a 1972 letter that 21 years later country music's biggest stars would record a best-selling tribute album to the Eagles, he probably would have been aghast. Though his oft-stated desire was to introduce pure, unadulterated country to rock audiences, Parsons inadvertently helped bring California rock to mainstream country.

Most likely, Parsons would have agreed with Elvis Costello's assessment in the notes to a 1982 Parsons compilation: "In the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers, Gram Parsons helped create a Frankenstein's Monster." Costello is among a remarkable collection of artists who have contributed to *Return Of The Grievous Angel: A Tribute To Gram Parsons*, due out July 13 on Almo Sounds. (It's the second Parsons tribute disc to be released this decade, following Rhino Records' Commemorative project of 1993.)

Overseen by Parsons' greatest protégé and acolyte, Emmylou Harris, *Return of the Grievous Angel* features renditions of his songs by '90s acts including Beck, Gillian Welch, Wilco and Whiskeytown, as well as artists from the generation right behind Parsons including Costello, Steve Earle and Lucinda Williams — all of whom, like Parsons, have tenaciously followed their artistic muses, damn the commercial consequences. These are the people for whom Parsons' message and music have been the most profound.

"Gram would be horrified by the state of country music today," says Harris, co-executive producer of the album along with Almo general manager Paul Kremen. "But he'd have a big ol' smile on his face to hear Lucinda Williams and Steve Earle and a lot of the great stuff out there that you won't hear on mainstream country radio."

In the last seven years of his way-too-short life, Gram Parsons (who died of a drug overdose at 26 on August 19, 1973) broke all the rules to make music his way. As a member of the International Submarine Band, the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers, and subsequently as a solo artist, he wasn't afraid to pull out the stops to put across a song — letting his voice break and sublimating his sorrows with drink and drugs, but unleashing his emotional highs and lows in his music.

Though classic country was decidedly uncool among rock audiences in the late '60s, Parsons became its biggest proselytizer. Into the twangy mix he added a soulful R&B feel and Dylan-influenced lyrics, creating what he called "Cosmic American music." As he also wrote in the

aforementioned 1972 letter, “My feeling is there is no boundary between ‘types of music’...I see two types of sounds — good ones & bad ones.”

When Parsons began forging his musical vision in the mid-’60s, country, R&B and rock audiences were about as stratified as you could get. Each looked suspiciously at the other; Merle Haggard, one of country’s great songwriters, had scored the topical crossover hit “Okie From Muskogee”. Most country and rock fans didn’t get the irony in the song but saw it as an anti-longhair ode. The 1970 film *Five Easy Pieces* also played up the hipster vs.hick angle, via Karen Black’s Tammy Wynette-loving dum-dum waitress.

Parsons, raised in Georgia and Florida, was weaned on C&W and R&B. A pivotal moment for him as a kid, then known as Gram Connor (before his world changed on Christmas Eve 1958 when his daddy Coon Dog Connor took his own life), was seeing Elvis Presley at the Waycross, Ga., City Auditorium in 1956. An impressionable nine-year-old, the boy soaked up the gospel/C&W/R&B brew that was nascent rock & roll and carried it through all his adolescent combos — the Ventures-esque Pacers, the rockabilly Legends and the Kingston-Trio-styled Shilos — and later as a Greenwich Village folkie.

Parsons didn’t start playing country music until 1965, in the Ivy-covered confines of Cambridge, Mass., where he was briefly enrolled at Harvard. By age 18, he’d already suffered just about as much tragedy as the protagonists of the most maudlin C&W weepers: After his father’s death, his mother married Robert Ellis Parsons, a fast-talking, sharp-dressing smoothie who adopted Gram and his sister Avis and changed their last name to Parsons — even replacing Connor Sr.’s name with his on their birth certificates. Gram’s mother drank herself to death over the next few years; she died the day Gram was graduated from high school. His freshman year at college, he got the news his sister had been shuttled off to boarding school after his stepdad married the babysitter who was hired to look after the daughter he had with Gram’s mother. (Soon after, sister Avis fled home when threatened with institutionalization in a mental hospital for getting herself pregnant.)

No wonder country — and the deep soul of Stax/Volt R&B — struck a chord with Parsons. Inspired by his beautiful late mother, he wrote the bittersweet 1965 ballad “Brass Buttons” (which, surprisingly, he didn’t record until several years later; it appeared on the posthumously released *Grievous Angel*). At Harvard, Parsons found an audience for his long-buried repertoire of old gospel songs and Hank Williams classics in a student advisor named Jet Thomas. Years later, Thomas told writer Ben Fong-Torres for his 1991 Parsons biography *Hickory Wind* that Gram “was a cultural outlaw doing country music and talking about it as a form of white spiritual music.”

Meeting like-minded musicians on the scene, Parsons credited Boston as being where “I passed my identity crisis and came back to country music...[The musicians there] had their ears open and they actually reintroduced me to country music after I had forgotten about it for ten years. And the country singers like George Jones, Ray Price and Merle Haggard — they’re great performers, but I had to learn to dig them. And that taught me a lot.”

His Boston band (The Like) relocated to New York and became the International Submarine Band. But only after the group moved to California did the music began to jell, beginning with

Safe At Home. Cut in 1967 and issued in 1968 by Lee Hazlewood's LHI Records, the album featured a very loose-knit band, but Gram's deep-down soul came across. He was already writing such straight-ahead country tunes as the Hank-inspired numbers "Do You Know How It Feels To Be Lonesome" (a la Williams) and "Luxury Liner" (a la Snow). Safe At Home also featured two Johnny Cash songs; the following year, Bob Dylan's Nashville Skyline included a collaboration with Cash.

The ISB didn't last long, and Parsons joined the Byrds in the wake of David Crosby's departure from that band. As fellow Byrd Chris Hillman recalls, "Roger [McGuinn] thought he was hiring a piano player but instead, as he's said, 'We got George Jones in a Nudie suit.'" Though his one album with the band, Sweetheart Of The Rodeo, is peppered with Parsons' compositions and song choices, it doesn't accurately reflect the sway he held in the group. That much becomes obvious upon listening to the 1997 reissue of the album, which includes alternate takes with Parsons on numerous lead vocals.

Hillman recalls being immediately knocked out by Parsons. "He had a great insight into country, real country music as well as R&B...the working man's songs, both of which, of course, came out of the church." Parsons and Hillman's collaborations in the Flying Burrito Brothers, which they formed in 1968 after they left the Byrds, resulted in a blueprint for today's roots-rockers, particularly on their 1969 debut, The Gilded Palace Of Sin.

"The best thing about the Burrito Brothers experience," Hillman says, "was that I plugged into Gram's insight into more R&B stuff, where he would take a song like 'Do Right Woman', which was really a woman's song, and perform it with a man's point of view. Gram gave that and 'Dark End Of The Street' — these beautiful rhythm & blues ballads — a country presentation, which really worked wonderfully. That's where he shined. He shined at that, and his knowledge and taste in music was impeccable. It certainly opened my eyes to blending country and R&B."

The Burritos began playing around the shitkicker clubs in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, where they jammed with Delaney & Bonnie and a group of Oklahoma-bred musicians including Leon Russell and Bobby Keys. "Gram discovered Bonnie & Delaney in a little club in the Valley," Hillman recalls, "and he literally dragged me there to see them. And there was J.J. Cale sitting down on the stage playing lead guitar and Bobby Keys who later played with the Stones. What a great-sounding act."

In the meantime, the Burritos, gussied up in Nudie suits, were struggling to find an audience. "We would play Hispanic dances in El Monte, California, and we played a prison with Bonnie & Delaney," Hillman remembers. "We couldn't get arrested when we were together — but we did get arrested once, literally. We were gonna do a high school assembly in the San Fernando Valley and we got arrested because we looked funny. They took us to jail! We were the Marilyn Manson of '69!"

Judging from live bootleg recordings, the Burritos crashed through Dixie-fried rave-ups and emoted ragged, raw country soul. They were a far cry from the Nashville country-politan sound of the time, and from what would become commercial country-rock. "We were caught inbetween,"

says Hillman. “It was too country to get on FM rock radio, which was emerging then, and Nashville hated us. It wasn’t slick, polished stuff; we weren’t good enough to be on the radio.”

On a recording of a show at San Francisco’s Avalon Ballroom, Gram’s Southern drawl urged the audience to knock down the walls that stood between them and country music. Many who saw the Burritos live still rhapsodize about the experience. today. James Austin, a Rhino executive responsible for such box sets as The Buck Owens Collection, The Sounds Of the West, and most recently The Roy Rogers Collection, recalls discovering the band in Los Angeles and being blown away: “I saw Gram and the Burritos at the Ash Grove, with Bukka White opening, and at the Troubadour, but the most memorable one was in 1969 at the Brass Ring in Sherman Oaks. It was a weeknight and there was nobody there; more people were onstage than in the audience. The band was great. Gram didn’t seem to care that nobody was there; he just played his heart out. During intermission he happened to walk over and sit down at the table right next to me. When I told him how much I loved his music and wondered about the next Burritos release, he looked me right in the eye and talked as if I was his only fan. He was very polite and sweet; it was like, ‘Oh this is a fan of mine and I want to give him my full undivided attention.’”

“When I first met this kid, he was the cleanest guy in the world,” says Hillman of Parsons. “He was hard-working — a great guy. It was a good collaboration at that point because we were leading fairly normal lifestyles and most of the songs were written in the daytime. One guy would get an idea and we’d work on it. For example, Gram got his draft notice, so we sat down and wrote ‘My Uncle’. I still look back at that as a very productive time working with him. The best vocal Gram ever did was ‘Hot Burrito #1’ and ‘[Hot Burrito] #2’. He put his heart into it. Cut the same night. I walked in, and he and Chris Ethridge had worked on those two and my mouth just fell open.

“And then things happened where we couldn’t quite work that well together. He just went nuts.”

By all accounts, Parsons was the ultimate fan when it came to the Rolling Stones — and as he and Keith Richards bonded over music and amusements, it spelled the end to his tenure in the Burritos, not long after the Burritos played Altamont at Richards’ behest. After missing gigs and showing up a mess one too many times, Parsons got his walking papers soon after the Burritos recorded their second album, 1970’s Burrito Deluxe, which featured the definitive version of the Stones’ “Wild Horses”. “He had the talent, he had the spark,” Hillman sighs. “He had no discipline.”

That character flaw may have come in handy over the next couple years playing Richards’ drug buddy and listening board during sessions for the Stones’ Exile On Main Street in the South of France. When Parsons came back to California and returned to the studio in 1972 with ingenue Emmylou Harris, all the veneer had been stripped away from his voice; the indulgences had taken their toll. Yet his soul-stirring duets with Harris probably gained in emotional power as a result: Her pure, crystalline soprano meshed perfectly with his world-weary honey-crackle.

Their first album together, 1973’s GP, documents the dissipated vet teaching the eager young student about real country music. “I was the audience he wanted to reach,” says Harris, who had performed primarily as a folkie until her collaboration with Parsons. “I hadn’t really heard

[country]. I couldn't get past the layers and country music being politically incorrect. I grew up with rock 'n' roll and folk and was a huge Bob Dylan fan. But Gram really did bring the whole rock sensibility — not just the attitude and lyrics, but the whole culture into this other culture. He really had one foot in each culture.

“Gram showed me that you can bring all those influences together if you have a focal point. And what he gave me was learning how to sing and how to phrase. I got this point of departure that I didn't have before. Gram's writing brought his own personal generation's poetry and vision into the very traditional format of country music and he came up with something completely different.”

This juxtaposition between musical cultures comes across vividly on tapes of live shows Parsons and Harris played with the Fallen Angels, some of which are documented on the Sierra Records album *Live 1973* and various performance bootlegs. Raucous medleys of Chuck Berry tunes found a home next to trucker songs and old gospel numbers, while torchy ballads such as Boudleaux Bryant's “Love Hurts” and “Sleepless Nights” became Parsons/Harris masterpieces.

Harris says her transcendent harmonies with Parsons came about through “osmosis”: “Just by singing with him,” she says, “I learned that you plow it under and let the melody and the words carry you. Rather than this emoting thing, it will happen on its own. As you experience life and know more, then it's gonna come out almost unconsciously as you sing. You have to have restraint in how you approach a song. On ‘That's All It Took’, I was still into it being very dramatic and that I must go up very high. And Gram said, ‘You know what? On this last tag, let's just voice it down.’ That's one of the few things I remember him telling me to do specifically. Basically, less is more — which is a cliché, but a cliché because it's true.”

Of the Fallen Angels' one brief tour, Harris says she learned other kinds of lessons. “It started out pretty grim, because we had a week of rehearsal before we went out, but Gram was not a very disciplined person. He loved to just sit and play, and we'd just play a lot of songs with no beginnings or ends or arrangements. I'd never gone on the road before, so I just thought this is the way it's done; I just thought some magical thing happens when you walk out onstage.

“We were fired from our first gig in Boulder because it was just a train wreck. So we got on the bus and went down to Austin early and we rehearsed. And that night we rocked the Armadillo World Headquarters — we got so many encores we had to go out and start the show over again since we didn't know any more songs. After that it was great.”

Off the road, Parsons and Harris returned to the studio in the summer of 1973 to record the masterful *Grievous Angel*. “The first album was not as planned out as the second one,” Harris recalls. “I was still learning a lot. We worked stuff out — while we were on the road, we worked up a couple of things, like ‘Love Hurts’, that ended up on *Grievous Angel*, which we recorded only a couple of months before his death.”

Parsons' last album sounds as powerful today as it was when released in 1974. Harris, of course, has been spreading the word ever since. “I tried to carry on as best I could as his student,” she says, “and follow some kind of inner barometer that he instilled in me. Gram really bequeathed

me an extraordinary life. He will always hold an extremely special place in my life and in my heart — and as an artist, certainly.”

Harris is the most obvious example of an artist who has taken Parsons’ heritage to the masses, but Hillman suggests Dwight Yoakam has played a similar role, if in a somewhat different manner. “Of all the people out there, I sort of look at Yoakam as being the Gram Parsons that worked — the operating model,” Hillman says. “He’s a very good artist and has that insight into what is very true and focused, as far as the music. He planned his career out and did quite well, and never sacrificed any integrity doing so.”

Clearly, though, Parsons’ legacy has resonated most strongly in the American underground. It’s unlikely alt.country as we know it today would exist without the influence of Gram Parsons. “Every once in a while you hear somebody do something that has as much to do with Gram Parsons’ take on country as it has to do with George Jones or Merle Haggard,” Elvis Costello points out. “Particularly when the rock ‘n’ roll people do it, like ‘Tear Stained Eye’ by Son Volt on their first record. That sounds like Gram. Or ‘Pray For Me Mama, I’m A Gypsy Cowboy Now’ by Jason & the Scorchers — it sounds exactly like Gram.”

Says Hillman, “On this [tribute] album, when I heard Wilco’s ‘One Hundred Years From Now’, I said, ‘Boy, they really captured that early Burritos sound — that live sound we used to have onstage. Nobody was doing that then; it was so out of left field. It was loose, but it was full of energy and life. Wilco really caught that for me.’”

Harris hopes the tribute album will lead more people to the original recordings, just as his work turned her on to the Louvin Brothers and Merle Haggard. “Gram really didn’t put out a massive body of work,” says Harris, “but it’s like what Spencer Tracy said in Pat And Mike: ‘There’s not much meat on her, but what there is is choice.’”

[Holly George-Warren traveled with Ben Fong-Torres throughout Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and California interviewing Gram Parsons’ friends, relatives and associates for Fong-Torres’ 1991 book Hickory Wind: The Life And Times Of Gram Parsons. Her writing has appeared in The Encyclopedia Of Country Music, The Rolling Stone Book Of Women In Rock, and publications including The New York Times, The Village Voice and the Oxford American.]