

Grievous Angel

By GREGORY COWLES

When the singer-songwriter Gram Parsons died of a drug overdose at the age of 26 in 1973, it wasn't clear he would ever receive the full Robert Johnson treatment: plucked from cult status, hailed as a neglected genius, honored with remasterings, tribute albums and a host of biographies. Parsons wrote some great songs, and he sang them in a sweet, warbly drawl, but he never had a hit record, and in his lifetime no one knew just how to classify him. He lived (and died) like a rock star, but his "cosmic American music" was too country for rock, too folk for country, too psychedelic for folk — he belonged everywhere, and in the end that meant he belonged nowhere.

Now we know he was alt-country all along. In the 1990s under that heading, bands like Whiskeytown and Uncle Tupelo embraced the American roots sound and championed Parsons as a forebear. Suddenly, his Zelig-like career attracted new attention. A strung-out sidekick of the Byrds and the [Rolling Stones](#), a founding member of the International Submarine Band and the Flying Burrito Brothers, the man who introduced Emmylou Harris to country music, Parsons even stole David Crosby's girlfriend at one point: the guy had to be good.

And so we're in the midst of a long Gram Parsons revival. David N. Meyer's biography is at least the fifth to appear in the last 20 years, and at 559 pages, it's the heftiest by far. Meyer, a [New School](#) film professor whose two previous books were movie guides, has interviewed friends, relatives, band members and hangers-on, and when he couldn't get major figures on the record, he turned to extensive secondary sources in his effort to sort through the Parsons legend.

The resulting book, "Twenty Thousand Roads," is like one of Parsons's live shows: frustratingly sloppy and self-indulgent, but studded with interesting tidbits. Among other things, we learn that Parsons's guitarist Sneaky Pete Kleinow was an animator for "Davey and Goliath" and "Gumby," and that the Burritos once had to wait an hour before playing the Whisky a Go Go because their opening act, a drunken Van Morrison, refused to yield the stage.

Parsons was born in 1946 into a rich but dysfunctional Southern family; his father committed suicide when Gram was 12, and his mother died of alcoholism the day Gram graduated from high school. Although he grew up in Georgia and Florida, Parsons wasn't turned on to country until he went north to Harvard (where, obsessed with music, he flunked out freshman year), but once he discovered Buck and Merle, he was smitten.

In Meyer's telling, Parsons was opportunistic, undisciplined and full of himself — a star. Voracity was more his style than virtuosity. Yet his charisma was irresistible. Meyer presents Parsons's brief sojourn in the Byrds as emblematic: invited to audition, Parsons ("with typical bravado, and in typical denial of how the real world functions") eagerly ditched his International Submarine Band on the eve of their first album's release. With the Byrds, he was supposed to be a quiet sideman, filling in on piano or rhythm guitar. But the sheer force of his personality took over, and he persuaded the group to make their next album in Nashville, and to make it country. That album is the seminal "Sweetheart of the Rodeo."

Parsons quit the Byrds after six months rather than tour South Africa with them. He claimed it was out of opposition to apartheid; but Meyer agrees with earlier biographers that it's more likely he wanted to keep hanging out with his new best friend Keith Richards. Either way, the move solidified his reputation for unreliability — and for partying.

“Keith sincerely feared Gram was doing an unhealthy amount of heroin,” Meyer writes. “If Keith Richards is running your intervention, you’re in trouble.”

“Twenty Thousand Roads” runs into some trouble of its own. The book repeats itself endlessly and has more begats than the Bible; Meyer feels compelled to trace the musical lineage of everybody who crossed Parsons’s path. He spends pages discussing the student rock group Parsons played with in eighth grade. (“The Pacers,” he gravely concludes, “are remembered as ‘not much of a band.’”) In a long digression, he hilariously but needlessly indulges his hatred of the Eagles: “soulless, overrehearsed, antiseptic, schematic, insincere, sentimental ... the most consistently contemptible stadium band in rock.” And he makes a few errors — saying, for instance, that Elvis Costello covered “Hot Burrito #2” on “Almost Blue” when it was actually “Hot Burrito #1.”

Elsewhere, Meyer gives Parsons more credit than he probably deserves, as when he asserts that “Exile on Main Street” was more or less an unofficial Parsons album. “Gram provided inspiration for much of what ended up on the record,” he claims. “He showed Keith the path down which ‘Exile’ travels. ... There’s no proof that Gram directly participated in any songs on ‘Exile,’ but the influence of his taste and philosophy is everywhere.”

Indeed, Meyer suggests Gram was the unacknowledged muse for everyone from the [Grateful Dead](#) to the New Riders of the Purple Sage. Parsons was influential, without a doubt, but Meyer leaves little room for the zeitgeist itself. In an era that featured Buffalo Springfield, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Dylan and the Band, artists hardly needed the example of Gram Parsons to dig into rock’s rural roots.

This overreaching is too bad, because Parsons’s story is fascinating enough on its own. What Parsons brought to the party was symbolized by the famous drug-patterned Nudie suit he wore (“a garment of legend,” Meyer writes): decadent glamour, a hard-won honky-tonk spirit and a stoned, emotional vulnerability that found its outlet in songs that will endure even though they never charted. “They’re always going to sound like great records,” Elvis Costello told Parsons’s daughter, Polly Parsons, when she and Jessica Hundley wrote their own biography of Gram two years ago. “They’re never going to go out of style ... because they were never ‘in style’ in a trivial way. They were always pure and they were always honest and in the end, that’s what truly lasts.”