

May 15, 1990

Reissue helps settle doubts about Parsons

GRAM PARSONS died under mysterious circumstances in the California desert on Sept. 19, 1973. The official cause of death was heart attack, though there were reports of drugs, heavy drinking, and sexual elements. The controversy has faded over the years, replaced by a "good-die-young" reputation.

Parsons is now best remembered as being perhaps the most important among the Los Angeles-based musicians who created "country rock" — first as part of the groups the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers, then on the two solo albums he made before his death — "GP" and "Grievous Angel."

Now those two solo efforts have been released on compact disc for the first time, and both albums have been placed on one CD — a welcome bargain from the folks at Warner Bros./Reprise Records.

Parsons' contributions to the Byrds and the Burritos are mixed up with the work of the other highly talented musicians in those bands, but the solo albums represent the first collections that he largely controlled. He co-produced "GP" and fully produced "Grievous Angel."

Now anyone who's interested has an excellent opportunity to decide whether Parsons' reputation seems deserved, or whether he seems to be overrated.

Because most people who buy the CD are likely to play it from the start, they might get the idea right away that Parsons has been highly overrated. But once they make it through all 75 minutes and 11 seconds of the disc, a different verdict probably will result.

Here's the simple reason: "GP," whose 11 tracks lead off the compact disc, is far inferior to "Grievous Angel." The songs aren't as good, the singing is relatively weak, and the production is sloppy. Even Emmylou Harris, who sings duets with Parsons or backs him up on several songs on both albums, doesn't sound her usual, brilliant self on "GP."

A few of the songs stand out, especially the sensitive portrait of an unheralded singer, "She." But in general they're just ordinary country rock — or worse. Parsons' voice sounds like a wimpy cross between the Byrds' Roger McGuinn (a close friend) and the Grateful Dead's Bob Weir (on a bad day), and he attempts a variety of approaches (smooth on one tune, rough on another) without much conviction.



TERRY ATKINSON
ON CDS



Gram Parsons

"Grievous Angel" is a whole different story. Parsons' voice is full and confident, and the several duets with Harris are terrific. The songwriting and (especially) the production are far better. Among the delights are the haunting "In My Hour of Darkness" and the "Live from Northern Quebec" medley of "Cash on the Barrelhead" and "Hickory Wind." The medley is great, even if it is a little phony — the audience sounds were added and the recording was made in New York. But everything on "Angel" is first-class.

So what we have here is a very uneven but — for the "Angel" tracks — a highly recommended CD that, in the end, does demonstrate the tragedy of Parsons' early death. His reputation is earned — and not just from the heavy influence he had on fellow Los Angeles-area musicians. The disc comes with an excellent 22-page booklet containing liner notes by reissue directors John M. DeGatto and Marley Brant, all lyrics and credits, and — commendably — even where to write for other Parsons recordings and for books about him.

Atkinson is based in Los Angeles. Distributed by Los Angeles Times Syndicate.