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BOOK REVIEW

Return of the grievous angel: New bio of Gram Parsons offers tragic insights

By Stayton Bonner
SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

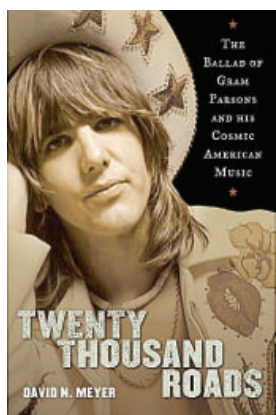
Sunday, November 04, 2007

"Most of Gram's contemporaries were high most of the time, and they never wrote anything down," David N. Meyer states in his biography "Twenty Thousand Roads: The Ballad of Gram Parsons and His Cosmic American Music."

So much legend surrounds country-rock innovator Parsons' life, from the Tennessee Williams tragedy of his youth to his stolen corpse's illegal immolation in the Joshua Tree desert, that attempting to excavate the real person from the mythology seems a quixotic task.



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Twenty Thousand Roads: The Ballad of Gram Parsons and His Cosmic American Music

David N. Meyer
Random House, \$29.95

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For readers not acquainted with or indifferent to Parsons' music, "Roads" is compelling for the Dickensian drama of his life alone. He was born Ingram Cecil Connor III on Nov. 5, 1946, in Winter Haven, Fla.

Meyers devotes the first third of his book to Parsons' troubled upbringing, giving detailed histories of all the families. Because of the extreme wealth and dysfunction of Parsons' family, the biography is often wilder than fiction.

Turning away from his family problems, Parsons found solace in music. "Winter Haven and nearby towns in Polk County proved to be cultural anomalies of their time," Meyer writes.

The day Parsons graduated from high school, June 5, 1965, his mother died from alcoholism at age 41. At the time, Bob Parsons had been having an affair with their teenage babysitter, Bonnie Muma.

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Although far from perfect, Bob Parsons was also unfairly vilified. The Snively family claimed that Bob, a New Orleans native, had taken siblings Gram and Avis to be adopted in Louisiana, where supposedly he would have greater control of their estate.

"The trouble is," Meyer writes, "there's no evidence that Bob ever took Gram and his sister to New Orleans, or that Louisiana law would have given him any special privileges if he had. The persistence of these stories reveal more about the Snivelys than Bob Parsons." As throughout the book, Meyer presents both sides of a historically contentious story, gives an opinion and then leaves readers to draw their own conclusions.

Meyer's in-depth focus on Parsons' troubled youth offers the reader context to understand the musician's propensity for self-destruction. After brief stints at Harvard and in New York, Parsons moved to Los Angeles in 1966 with his group the International Submarine Band, their moniker taken from the "Little Rascals" TV show. Parsons had moved away from his folk roots into playing straight country like George Jones, Buck Owens and Merle Haggard. Ray Charles' "Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music" inspired Parsons to see how blending different musical styles together could work. After abandoning the International Submarine Band for the Byrds, Parsons persuaded the latter to cut a country record in Nashville.

"In a sign of respect and sacrifice that may be difficult to properly appreciate 40 years later," Meyer writes, "the Byrds cut off their hair. ... The haircuts were a powerful act of solidarity with the country scene. ... It meant masquerading as part of a political and social culture the band despised, or at

least had built an identity reacting against." The resulting album, "Sweetheart of the Rodeo," now considered a landmark for being the first recording to blend country and rock music, was a failure at the time, alienating both country and rock audiences.

Parsons' stints with bands like the Byrds, Flying Burrito Brothers and the Rolling Stones were marked with a rotating roster of stars, incessant drug abuse and sex, all of which make for luridly compelling reading. "We liked drugs and we liked the finest quality," Keith Richards states about his relationship with Parsons. "He could get better coke than the Mafia." Parsons dated, impregnated and then abandoned Nancy Ross, a 19-year-old Santa Barbara, Calif., socialite who had previously dated Steve McQueen and David Crosby. Their brief time together resulted in his only child, Polly. The ugly side of the late '60s hippie movement, with its melting pot of narcissism and abuse, ultimately took its toll on Parsons.

"He kept his inner core to himself," Dr. Sam Hutt, a London acquaintance, says of Parsons, "and it was covered over by an awful lot of drugs. He was into the smack and booze and any sort of uppers that you could keep yourself awake to. ... He had a smack voice like Billie Holiday, Ray Charles ... Joe Cocker, and Lucinda Williams, I'd say, with all that kind of ravaged quality, quite raw."

Despite his increasing drug problems, Parsons was able to write music that has formed the foundation for all country-rock music afterward, from the watered-down sound of the Eagles to the Americana roots of Uncle Tupelo. The tragedy is that Parsons never considered himself a success. While alive, he only received one royalty check for his writing, from a Joan Baez performance of "Drug Store Truck Driving Man" on the "Woodstock" soundtrack. Like Townes Van Zandt, Parsons was a haunted writer who never received the widespread recognition he longed for.

At about 500 pages, "Twenty Thousand Roads" definitively covers Parsons and could also be used as a college textbook on the late '60s southern California rock and country scene. Although occasional quotes from authors such as Dana Spiotta and filmmakers such as Jean-Pierre Melville are sprinkled in to add literary weight, the book is a straight biography with long transcribed chunks from interviews with Parsons' contemporaries. Meyer obviously reveres Parsons' music, as anyone committed to undertaking this project would have to, but he is also honest in presenting his subject's shortcomings. For Parsons fans, big draws for the book include an account of his 1973 Texas tour, insight into his relationship with Emmylou Harris and an interview with Margaret Fisher, who was with Parsons when he died and describes that night's events in detail.

After his death, Parsons' body was stolen by his road manager, Philip Kaufman, and burned in the Joshua Tree National Park, the fulfillment of an alleged pact between the two men.

"He was a good Southern boy, loved to rock and roll, sad all the time," former bandmate Chris Ethridge said. "He wanted to go out like Hank Williams, and he did. He rock and rolled out, and it was his fault."

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