GRIEVOUS ANGEL: GRAM PARSONS AND THE COUNTRY ROCK MOVEMENT

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The country rock movement emerged in Southern California in the mid-1960s and was comprised of musicians who, through diverse musical practices and conceptual means, sought to fuse elements of country music with other popular genres. Developing amidst the social and political turmoil that defined the era, country rock provided a space for musicians and listeners to negotiate both musical and cultural boundaries. This dissertation provides a critical analysis of the life, legacy, and music of one of the movement’s central figures: Gram Parsons. Since his death in 1973 at the age of 26, interest in Parsons has steadily increased such that today he is hailed by many critics and fans as the “father of country rock” and the movement’s most influential artist. Much of this posthumous recognition is rooted in idealizations of Parsons’s Southernness, experiences of familial tragedy, fusions of country, rock, blues, and soul, or what he famously called, “cosmic American music,” and the bizarre details of his death. Intended to forge links between Parsons’s biography, music, and idiosyncratic personal style, these elements have been foregrounded by listeners in a way that has allowed Parsons to transcend the limited commercial success he received during his lifetime to attain a nearly mythical status.

Though provocative, the myths and originator narratives that surround Parsons paint an incomplete picture of his life and work, and ultimately, limit understanding of Parsons while failing to acknowledge the many musicians and complex social forces at work within country rock as a whole. In this light, the purpose of this study is twofold: first, to critically assess Parsons’s musical career and contribution to country rock, and second, to investigate how aspects of Parsons’s life, both real and fictionalized, have contributed to his posthumous acclaim and singular position within country rock’s historical narrative. By virtue of the oppositions that
are perceived to coalesce in Parsons’s life, persona, and music—country/city, region/nation, lower class/upper class, hippy/redneck, libertine/gentlemen, sacred/secular—he provides an excellent case study of the tensions that not only undergirded country rock in the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s, but that continue to inform conceptions of genre, authenticity, and musical meaning within discourses of popular music today. Through analyzing recordings, biographies, interviews, popular press articles, and a variety of media from an interdisciplinary perspective, this study demonstrates how an integrated musicological approach to understanding individual artistry and musical hybridity can both reflect and illuminate its objects of inquiry.
To my grandmother, Ruth Marie Gutknecht, for her guidance and grace
(1917-2014)
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I am especially grateful to my family for all of their influence, encouragement, and faith in me. Cousins Jamye and Jody, you probably don’t know it, but riding around Milwaukee with you guys as a teenager and listening to bands like Radiohead, Offspring, and Green Day (none which had made it to central Wisconsin radio yet) were some of the most formidable moments in my life and I am grateful to you both for letting me tag along and feel cool for a little while. Of course my parents, Frank and Bonnie Stanislawski, have since the beginning been my biggest influences, musical and otherwise. This project began many, many years ago with them and wouldn’t have become what it is without the time we spent listening to George Strait at Christmas or the Rolling Stones on the way to school, and certainly not without the pains they took to keep my fingers on the piano and my nose in the books. My sister, Callie, also deserves a huge thank you. I remain in awe of her courage and collection of Bob Dylan albums.

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INTRODUCTION

He’s a poet, he’s a picker,
He’s a prophet, he’s a pusher,
He’s a pilgrim and a preacher, and a problem when he’s stoned.
He’s a walkin’ contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction,
Takin’ ev’ry wrong direction on his lonely way back home.

- Kris Kristofferson, “The Pilgrim, Chapter 33”

I was introduced to Gram Parsons’s music in high school when my dad and I were trying to find new material for our acoustic folk-rock trio. Encouraging my then-burgeoning interest in country music, he suggested “A Satisfied Mind,” a Porter Wagoner song that Parsons covered while in The International Submarine Band in 1967. Though to my young ears the style sounded a lot like Merle Haggard and George Jones, there was something unique about the way Parsons’s shaky but powerful voice stretched out the first line—“How many ti-i-imes have you heard someone say…” Slightly off kilter and teetering on the edge of being in tune, Parsons sounded to me like a world-weary young man staking his claim in a musical idiom that sounded country, but was also tinged with rock and roll, soul and blues. Wrapped around this voice was the sound of a steel guitar, echoing with a resonant warmth that perfectly reflected the pathos of the song’s bittersweet lyrics. Although our group never ended up performing the song, it had made a strong impression on me. I was determined to find out more about Parsons, his voice, and his musical world.

Delving into Parsons’s life and music, I quickly learned that I was not alone in my interest in the musician, and that the sad confidence I heard in his voice was probably not unlike the one that rock critic Bud Scoppa recalled as he wrote that Parsons was “the most convincing

1 Kris Kristofferson, The Silver Tongued Devil and I (Monument Z 30679, 1971).
singer of sad songs” he’d ever heard. Due in large part to the emergence of alternative country in the early 1990s and the related interest in late 1960s country rock, numerous Parsons biographies, reissue and tribute albums, documentaries, annual festivals, and even a musical, have been released. Almost universally across these, Parsons is credited not only as “the father of country rock” (a label he despised), but also as the personification of the “live fast, die young” lifestyle often romanticized in popular music discourse. Indeed, emphasizing his Southernness, experiences of familial tragedy, and fusions of country, rock, blues, and soul, or what he famously called, “cosmic American music,” critics and fans have been quick to cast Parsons as the wellspring from which many recent roots-based styles have emerged. As such, Gram Parsons has grown from a relatively obscure figure into one of mythical proportions. Though provocative, the myths and “originator” narratives that surround Parsons not only paint an incomplete picture of his biography and work, but also fail to acknowledge the multitude of musicians and diverse range of styles that comprised country rock in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this light, the purpose of this study is twofold: first, to critically assess Parsons’s musical career and unique musical contribution to the country rock movement, and second, to investigate how aspects of Parsons’s life, both real and fictionalized, have contributed to Parsons’s posthumous fame and mythic status with country rock’s historical narrative. Ultimately, it is not my intention to reveal the “real” story of Gram Parsons, but to examine the originating contexts and processes through which Parsons and his music have gained meaning and significance.

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Throughout the course of this study, I examine six interrelated facets that help to account for Parsons’s singular position within discussions of country rock: his biography, music, involvement at key points of country rock’s development, ability to communicate his musical vision, lack of commercial success during his lifetime, and finally, his early death. By virtue of dualisms perceived to coalesce in Parsons’s life, persona, and music—country/city, region/nation, lower class/upper class, hippy/redneck, libertine/gentlemen, sacred/secular—Parsons comes to represent not only the tensions that undergird country rock, but also deep oppositions and anxieties that polarized American society in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that continue to inform American life today. Thus, despite the significant contributions of other country rock artists and Parsons’s own collaborators, he, through both his own ability to articulate his genre-crossing hybrid vision and the idealizations of critics and fans since his death, emerges as a beacon with which to navigate these tensions.

**Introducing Country Rock**

Between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s, the years roughly corresponding to Parsons’s musical career, the American popular music landscape was marked by a profusion of new sounds and styles. For many children of the post-World War II baby boom such as Parsons, this diverse musical landscape provided an important means for negotiating the increasingly contentious social and political worlds around them. Indeed, in the midst of the Cold War anxieties that gripped the nation in the late 1950s and the nationwide disquiet that attended to both domestic and foreign turmoil in the 1960s and early 1970s, many young people used popular music as a tool with which to question and reassess the validity not only of governmental
policies, but also the social and cultural boundaries inherent in the politics of social class, gender, and race.

In response to the discontent that defined the era, in the late 1960s, a counterculture emerged that was comprised of many young people born into postwar affluence, but struggling with the previous generation’s notions of a materialist American dream. Far from a coherent, organized movement, the counterculture was a loose confederation of young people with oftentimes competing ideologies regarding the era’s turbulent social climate. What did unite the counterculture however was popular music, and rock music in particular. Drawn from the sounds of earlier rock and roll, blues, rhythm and blues, and folk rock, and often imbued with a sense of social consciousness, the diverse musical strands running through countercultural rock served as means for collective expressions of alternative lifestyles and rejections of middle-class, establishment values.

Musically and socially during this time, the line between mainstream country music and countercultural rock music was a hard one. Despite its satiric tone, Merle Haggard’s famous “Okie from Muskogee” (1969) offered a conservative stance towards drugs and countercultural lifestyles that stood in stark contrast to the defiant anti-war and civil rights messages of rock groups such as Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Jimi Hendrix Experience. As the musical voice of what Richard Nixon called the “silent majority” of Americans who resented what they perceived as the counterculture’s disrespect for American institutions and establishment values, country music was far from politically neutral. Indeed, the perceived social and cultural differences between the worlds of conservative country and left-leaning rock positioned them as diametrically opposed.

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Paradoxically, it was against this contentious backdrop that country rock emerged. In the only existing comprehensive study of the subject, Olivia Carter Mather investigates country rock’s history, lyrical themes, vocal styles, instrumentation, repertoire, and relationship to country music. Ultimately, she argues that country rock was not a genre, but a movement comprised of a diverse range of musicians who mined country music for meaningful sounds, songs, and techniques and presented them within countercultural rock contexts. To that end, Mather highlights important locales within country rock’s history, exploring the movement’s relationship with the changing discourse of the American South, and the related cultural work done by specific musicians such as Parsons, Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and the Eagles. She concludes that by “highlighting more ‘universal’ and mythical tropes of nature, rambling, and romance,” country rock eased tensions regarding the South’s ascendancy in American life and showcased country music as non-political for rock audiences. In this way, country rock created a space for musicians and listeners to reassess the cultural politics of both genres.

While Mather’s study adds much to discussions concerning music and place, her consideration of the stylistic diversity within country rock also problematizes the label country rock itself. She shows, for example, that while Parsons often drew on instrumentation from honky tonk such as the steel guitar and fiddle in his work, other groups who experimented with country rock, such as the Grateful Dead and the New Riders of the Purple Sage, sometimes used elements of bluegrass, including mandolins and high-lonesome singing styles in theirs. In


6 Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 2.

7 The phrase “high lonesome sound” was coined in 1963 by New Lost City Ramblers co-founder John Cohen, who used it as a title for a short film he made about music in the Kentucky mountains. Quickly though, “high lonesome sound” became a catch-all phrase to describe bluegrass’s emotionally intense, soaring-to-the-point-of-strain vocal style. See Rachel Rubin, “Hearing History in Bluegrass’s High, Lonesome Sound,” *Tribeca Film Institute*
critically assessing artists such as these who often simultaneously employ multiple sonic markers from a range of popular genres, it becomes evident that conceptions of country rock as a homogenous style quickly lose traction.

Compounding the problem of the label *country rock* itself is reluctance on the part of the movement’s participants to even employ the term. Gram Parsons himself, convinced of the power of his music in bringing “longhairs and rednecks together without barroom brawls” recoiled at the designation, preferring his own formulation: “cosmic American music.” In a letter written to a friend in 1972, Parsons showed his disdain as he mused that he had become “some sort of ‘rep’ for starting what (I think) has turned out t’be pretty much of a ‘country-rock’ (ugh!) plastic dryfuck.”

Michael Nesmith, another country rock pioneer also mentioned his unease with the term: “I’m not comfortable with the category of country rock… I wasn’t trying to do country rock, I was just trying to make music.” Indeed, to reduce a vision such as Parsons’s “cosmic” one to a simple musical hybrid discounts the complex musical range with which Parsons and others formulated and manifested that vision.

Despite reluctance on the part of the music’s creators, *country rock* has since the late 1960s become a meaningful designation for musicians and fans, although one that needs to be qualified and understood as comprising a variety of musical approaches. Following Mather’s formulation, I will use *country rock* to refer to a musical movement that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s and whose participants, through a number of conceptual means and musical practices, sought to fuse elements of country music with other popular musical genres, including, but not

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limited to folk, rock, rhythm and blues, and soul. While my focus will concern Gram Parsons’s contributions to country rock in particular, understanding the field of country rock writ large will contextualize his contributions and self-positioning.

Additionally, John Einarson, in one of the few popular press accounts of the movement, identifies four unique musical streams running through country rock which help place musical elements amongst past and concurrent musical forms. The first of these he identifies are musicians who had rock-informed sensibilities, attitudes, and experiences, but adapted traditional country music forms by adding a bit more emphasis on rhythm. While the degree of “emphasis on rhythm” is hard to qualify, groups like Parsons’s International Submarine Band, the Flying Burrito Brothers, and Nashville West played country music in a way that, as Chris Hillman has discussed, put “more back beat” into what they were doing. As noted by pedal steel guitarist, Al Perkins, these musicians played country with “a different style, a little more rock. They looked rock & roll but played country.”

The second stream that Einarson identifies is comprised of musicians who approached country rock not from the country side, but from rock music. Essentially, artists within this stream such as the Byrds (prior to Parsons joining), Poco, Michael Nesmith and the First National Band, and later, the Eagles, used country music instrumentation to create rock music. As Richie Furay of Poco has observed, “Some people define country rock from a lyrical standpoint, but I define it from a musical aspect. It’s not so much sob-in-your-beer lyrics, it was the collection of musical instruments and the way that they were played… For us, it was introducing steel guitar and dobro into rock music, and later banjo and mandolin.”

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10 Einarson, Desperados, 12.

11 Ibid.
Einarson’s third stream consists of artists who drew much more on folk and bluegrass influences in their particular approach to country rock. Though a large percentage of musicians across country rock as a whole had roots in the folk revival and bluegrass, particular artists and groups such as Hearts and Flowers and the Dillards continued throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s to employ largely acoustic textures, sparse instrumentation, and emphasis on vocal harmonies while deemphasizing technological experimentation or eccentricity. An important contribution of this stream was the highly-influential *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* (1972), an album by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band that included collaborations with many older, but by-then famous bluegrass and traditional country artists such as Roy Acuff, Mother Maybelle Carter, Doc Watson, Earl Scruggs, and Vassar Clemens, among others. Introducing these older artists to youthful and largely middle class audiences, the Dirt Band was continuing the kind of work that important folk revivalists such as the New Lost City Ramblers and Pete Seeger had done years before, but through a country rock lens rather than a folk one.¹³

Lastly, Einarson’s fourth stream identifies established rock artists that delved heavily into country for only short periods of time. In addition to Bob Dylan, who forayed into country with *John Wesley Harding* (1968) and *Nashville Skyline* (1969), other artists in this stream include Buffalo Springfield, the Lovin’ Spoonful, and the Grateful Dead. Though their time in country rock was brief, groups within this stream, perhaps more than the others, were instrumental in introducing country elements to nationwide rock audiences by virtue of their previous popularity.

¹² Ibid., 13.

¹³ As the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s John McEuen has said, “We definitely brought people who didn’t listen to country and bluegrass to that music” (Ibid., 16).
As Einarson notes, “For a time, it seemed that everyone wanted a touch of country in their rock.”

Although the repertoire of many country rock artists, and Parsons in particular, can be seen to cut across multiple streams, recognizing and codifying the musical diversity within the country rock movement is important. As Mather and Einarson demonstrate, such recognition is not only useful for investigating actual sounds, but also ways that country’s musical markers were employed in innovative ways by musicians at particular times and in particular places. Indeed, not only can we better assess musical details, but begin to understand how musicians such as Parsons and his collaborators deployed sonic markers towards specific social and cultural ends.

Significantly, the contributions of Mather and Einarson add to a rather small pool of literature concerning country rock. Indeed, Mather’s dissertation and her accompanying articles on Parsons and more recently, the Eagles, are by and large the only musicological studies available on the subject. Likewise, Einarson’s popular press account of country rock accompanies several other chronicles of the movement, but these are few and offer little by way of critical musical analysis or commentary of the movement’s social and political contexts.

14 Ibid.


Given the relative lack of critical work done on country rock in general, it is not surprising that Parsons and the country rock movement have received little attention in country music historiography more broadly. Amongst other canonical monographs on country such as Bill Malone’s *Country Music U.S.A.*, only Jocelyn Neal’s *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (2013) devotes substantial attention on the movement’s history, stylistic elements, and principal artists. This seems somewhat curious in light of the acknowledgement of the intersections that have taken place between country and other popular forms since the genre’s existence. Indeed, while Curtis Ellison, Richard Peterson, and Don Cusic all devote entire chapters and sections to genre-crossing artists such as Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams, little to no mention is made of country rock and artists such as Parsons who worked toward similar goals. The contention that country rock artists were first and foremost rock musicians who only came to country music later may help to explain their absence, but the implicit message in this omission of country rock is that country music has historically resisted intersections with other genres of popular music and remained stylistically distinct from rock in

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17 Bill Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* 2nd ed., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002). Within the field of country music, Bill Malone’s book remains the canonic scholarly history of the genre. Given Malone’s meticulous research, it is of little surprise that Parsons is given a more nuanced biographical description and is positioned amongst other artists with similar leanings toward country rock. Situating Parsons with artists such as John McEuen of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and a variety of other artists who later came to be associated with Southern rock such as Charlie Daniels, Malone’s brief biography and contextualization of Parsons’s career within the shifting relationship between country music and the musical impact of the counterculture provides a more accurate representation of Parsons in country’s historical narrative. Parsons is also mentioned in Malone’s book *Southern Music, American Music.* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 143-144.


particular. In reality though, like the histories of rock, blues, and jazz, the history of country music is filled with instances of genre intersections, fusions, and crossovers. Ultimately, in failing to recognize country rock, many scholars have missed an opportunity to augment discussions concerning the diverse strains that have run through country music’s past and that so clearly influence it today.

Similarly, histories of rock seldom offer more than cursory details of Parsons’s career and the emergence of country rock. More often than not country rock appears either as a “natural” outgrowth of the folk-rock trends of the 1960s or as one of the few “back to the country” idioms that emerged in the 1970s such as the singer-songwriter genre or Southern rock. David Szatmary for example, cites Bob Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* (1968) as a move toward country by a rock artist, but neglects to mention other earlier catalysts for country rock’s emergence and its position within the counterculture during the late 1960s. In another example, Reebee Garofalo presents Dylan again as the “trend’s” originator: “The artist who kicked off this trend in 1968 used clean, unfettered production, accompaniment that was laid back and spare, and sang in an uncharacteristically throaty voice. On first hearing, it would have been difficult to tell that it was Bob Dylan.” Though Garafalo goes on to mention Parsons and his work with the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers, he, like Szatmary, ignores the cultural politics at work within these fusions of country and rock music and offers a relatively linear and evolutionary


conception of country rock instead of a more critical assessment of why country rock emerged at a specific time and went on to become so successful in the 1970s.24

In the end, inquiries into movements such as country rock help deconstruct notions of genres as uniform and static entities. Surely, studies of subgenres and unique fusions of disparate musics have been written, but in much of the historical work done on genres such as country and rock, it is too often the case that though acknowledged, the diverse roots and creative interchanges among them are set aside as anomalies. Thus, a secondary goal of this dissertation is to serve as a reminder that assumptions of generic purity or linear historical narratives often fail to illuminate the fluidity of popular musical forms and the constant negotiations and renegotiations that take place within any given musical field over time.

Introducing Gram Parsons

Gram Parsons was born Cecil Ingram Connor III on November 5, 1946 in Waycross, Georgia.25 He was the grandson of John Snively, owner of one of Florida’s citrus empires, and the son of Avis “Big Avis” Snively and Ingram “Coon Dog” Conner, an Air Force veteran who operated one of Snively Groves’s box-making factories in Waycross. Afforded nearly every luxury as a child by virtue of his family’s wealth, Parsons was drawn to music early on and began learning to play piano and guitar in his pre-teen years. Following the suicide of his father when he was twelve, Parsons and his mother and younger sister moved from Waycross to Winter Haven, Florida, to stay at the Snively mansion. Not long after, Parsons’s mother married Robert

24 Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman’s American Popular Music: The Rock Years (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) mentions Parsons and country rock only in framing their discussion of progressive country music and the outlaw movement in Austin during the 1970s.

Parsons, who adopted her children. Cecil Ingram Connor III became Gram Parsons.

Though Parsons later claimed country as his musical roots, like many young musicians of the era, he began his career in rock and roll before moving to folk. At fourteen, Parsons joined his first rock and roll band, the Pacers, which shortly after evolved into the Legends. During their time together, the Legends were a regional success, playing a mix of rock and roll and pop standards at country clubs, high school dances, and local radio and television shows around the state. Amidst the Legends’ rock and roll success though, Parsons was gravitating toward the sounds of the urban folk revival. To that end, in 1963, Parsons formed the Shilos, a commercial folk group modeled on the style of the Kingston Trio and the Journeymen. This group was short-lived, but like the Legends, also found success, even managing to impress Bob Dylan’s manager, Albert Grossman, during a trip to New York City in the summer of 1964.

On June 5, 1965, the day that Parsons graduated from the prestigious Bolles School in Jacksonville, Florida, his mother died of complications from alcoholism. Not long after, Parsons left Florida and went north to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he attended Harvard University. It was there that Parsons began to pursue country music and formed his first country-based band, The International Submarine Band. Parsons spent only one semester at Harvard and in the spring of 1966, moved with the ISB to New York City where they spent the next year rehearsing, performing, and writing new material.26 In 1967, the group moved to Los Angeles and recorded Safe At Home, an album largely indebted to early rock and roll and West Coast-based country acts like Buck Owens and Merle Haggard. Parsons left the International Submarine Band shortly after the release of Safe at Home to join the Byrds, folk rock pioneers and one of countercultural

26 The group cut a single for Ascot Records (“Sum Up Broke” b/w “One Day Week”), and for Columbia they recorded the theme song to the movie The Russians Are Coming!, released as a 45 with Buck Owens’s “Truck Drivin’ Man.” See Holly George-Warren, liner notes, Sacred Hearts & Fallen Angels: Anthology (Rhino R2 76780, 2001).
Los Angeles’s most popular groups. Alongside bassist Chris Hillman, Parsons urged the group to pursue country music. To that end, in 1968, the Byrds released *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, an album with country at its stylistic core, but comprised of a mix of folk material (“Pretty Boy Floyd”), Bob Dylan covers, Bakersfield-style honky tonk (“You’re Still on My Mind”), and original Parsons compositions (“Hickory Wind,” “One Hundred Years from Now”).

Later in 1968, both Parsons and bassist Chris Hillman left the Byrds to form the Flying Burrito Brothers. Featuring Parsons’s and Hillmans’ country vocal duet style, steel guitar as lead instrument, and R&B-style bass and drums, the Burritos dedicated themselves to pursuing Parsons’s vision of “cosmic American music,” a fusion of country, rock, gospel, and soul. In line with the late 1960s counterculture’s values and aesthetics, this pluralistic musical vision was intended to foster racial and social harmony between country and rock communities. The Flying Burrito Brothers released two albums with Parsons, *The Gilded Palace of Sin* (1969) and *Burrito Deluxe* (1970). Ultimately, both of these albums alongside the ISB’s *Safe at Home* and the Byrds’s *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* were opportunities for Parsons to both advocate for country music within a rock context and develop his own hybrid sartorial and musical style.

During his time with the Byrds and Flying Burritos Brothers, Parsons befriended the Rolling Stones and forged a close bond with guitarist Keith Richards. Though Parsons had experimented with drugs and alcohol before he met Richards, together, the pair dove deep into substance abuse, Richards supporting his habit with money earned from the success of the Stones


28 As evidenced by Parsons’s fashion sense at the time, he often mixed visual signifiers of country with those of rock (custom-designed Western rodeo suits with embroidered marijuana leaves). This sartorial mixing will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

and Parsons with his seemingly limitless trust fund. Distracted by his relationship with Richards and escalating drug habit, Parsons left the Flying Burrito Brothers. For roughly a year afterward, Parsons remained relatively inactive, spending time in Europe with the Richards and the Stones acting the part of rock star but without actually playing much music.

In 1972, Parsons returned to Los Angeles where he began writing material for a solo album. Drawing on his inherited wealth, Parsons enlisted members of Elvis Presley’s backing band, singer Emmylou Harris, and Merle Haggard’s studio engineer Hugh Davies, to help him record his first solo record, *GP* (1973). More straightforwardly country than other country rock releases at the time, *GP* set Parsons apart from his West Coast-based peers such as the Eagles, who balanced pop and country elements in order to appeal to mainstream tastes. Following the release of the album, Parsons embarked on a national tour with his backing band, The Fallen Angels. After the tour wrapped up, Parsons returned to the studio in 1973 with many of the same musicians that played on *GP* to record his second solo album, *Grievous Angel*.

*Grievous Angel* was completed in the late summer of 1973 and to celebrate its completion, Parsons took some friends to the Joshua Tree National Park outside of Los Angeles. There Parsons spent most of the time consuming drugs and alcohol, and on September 19, 1973, he overdosed on a mixture of tequila and barbiturates. He was taken to Yucca Valley Hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival. Learning of his death, Parsons’s stepfather planned to have Parsons’s body flown to New Orleans, where he would be buried. Before takeoff, however, Fallen Angels road manager Phil Kaufman, convinced airport staff to release Parsons’s corpse into his custody. Seeking to fulfill Parsons’s wish to be burned in the desert, Kaufman then

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30 See Mather, *Taking It Easy in the Sunbelt,* 38-44.

31 A live performance from this tour was captured and released as *Gram Parsons and the Fallen Angels Live 1973* (Sierra Records GP 1973, 1982).
drove back to Joshua Tree, where he cremated Parsons’s body. After campers discovered
Parsons’s charred remains the next morning, what was left of Parsons was flown to New Orleans
where he was finally interred. *Grievous Angel* was released in January of 1974, four months
after Parsons’s passing.

Considering the diversity and number of important musicians and groups within the
country rock movement, it is remarkable that today Gram Parsons is singled out as the “father”
of the movement. It is all the more remarkable if we consider that during his lifetime, Parsons
was relatively unknown and all of his records sold poorly, even those lauded as the first country
rock albums. In contrast to other enormously successful musical “father” figures such as Jimmie
Rodgers, “the Father of Country Music” and Elvis Presley, “the King of Rock and Roll,” Parsons
never achieved mainstream success while he was alive. Although Parsons did receive positive
critical attention, audiences were often confused by his projects. Chris Hillman’s recollections
about the Flying Burrito Brothers’s reception encapsulates Parsons’s problem and the problem
country rock faced generally in the late 1960s: “The rock & roll stations said we were too
country, and the country stations said we were too rock & roll.”

Even in the midst of country rock’s rise to national prominence in the early 1970s through the success of Linda Ronstadt and
the Eagles, Parsons remained a marginalized figure within the movement seemingly destined to
fade into obscurity.

Although after his death groups such as Poco and the Eagles recorded tribute songs to
Parsons, and his singing partner Emmylou Harris championed Parsons’s music as she rose to the
heights of success in the late 1970s and 1980s, it wasn’t until the 1990s that Parsons’s music and
influence would begin to be recognized. As mentioned above, this surge in attention owed

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32 Einarson, *Desperados*, 142.
much to the alternative country community, and in particular to the 1999 tribute album, *Return of the Grievous Angel: A Tribute to Gram Parsons*, which was co-produced by Harris. This album, which Mather calls the “most influential release of the Parsons revival” features performances of songs written, co-written or popularized by Parsons by alternative country, rock, and pop artists such as Wilco, Sheryl Crow, Lucinda Williams, and Parsons’s former bandmate, Chris Hillman. Ultimately, the tribute recognizes Parsons’s past and present influence on artists across the popular music spectrum.

Since the release of *Return of the Grievous Angel*, interest in Parsons has steadily increased. Indeed, in addition to album reissues, a full-length movie, a multitude of mentions in the press, and even an annual international festival held in Parsons’s honor, to date, six biographies have been written about him. In a review of the most recent of these published in 2012, one writer joked that at the rate things are going, Parsons “will soon have had more books written about him than he sold records in his lifetime.” Such attention implores one to ask: In light of all the crucial and in many cases, more successful participants in the country rock movement, why is Parsons so popular? Why is he, above all others, recognized as the

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33 Former bandmate Bernie Leadon composed “My Man” which was recorded by the Eagles for their 1974 release *On the Border* (Asylum Records 7E-1004, 1974). Poco composed “Crazy Eyes” in honor of Parsons. Their 1973 album of the same name was released just four days before Parsons’s death.


movement’s “father”? What is it about this guy that makes him so intriguing? And finally, what kind of cultural work does bestowing Parsons with such a title do?

For many, Parsons’s significance is tied to biographical details, particularly his Southern upbringing and tragic early death. For others such as Bud Scoppa, Parsons’s mystique lies in his music, and especially in the emotional vulnerability often heard in his singing voice.\textsuperscript{37} Often, in the midst of details of Parsons’s life becoming more widely known, these assessments are intertwined such that Parsons’s biography frames the way his music is heard and interpreted. As a result, a number of prominent myths about Parsons have arisen, namely that Parsons “invented” country rock and that his Southern background legitimated his embrace and avocation of country music within rock contexts.\textsuperscript{38} As Mather notes, at the heart of such mythmaking are notions of sincerity and authenticity that are built on perceived connections between Parsons’s biography and musical meaning.\textsuperscript{39}

While much of Parsons’s popularity is founded upon a stockpile of myths and legends attesting to his genius and which reinforce “great man” narratives in music historiography, I suggest an understanding of Parsons’s popularity that accounts for the real moments of exceptional creativity and innovation that underlie these myths. Certainly, judgments of genius and undisputed exceptionality run the risk of perpetuating essentialism and of discounting the social, historical and material conditions surrounding an artist’s work. But in thinking critically about the origins and lasting communicative value of what has been created, we can better understand the productive tension between the ordinary and the exceptional. Accordingly, this

\textsuperscript{37} See Mather, “Regressive Country,” for discussion of Parsons’s vocal “failures” (162-170).


\textsuperscript{39} Mather, “Regressive Country,” 162.
understanding allows us to assess Parsons’s contribution to the country rock movement as unique while tied to broader musical and social contexts. Following Keith Negus and Michael Pickering’s discussion of creative genius, I argue towards an understanding of Parsons that recognizes how his unique musical goals engendered instances of innovation that have since been “re-created, re-lived, re-embedded into different lives by others in other contrasting contexts across both space and time.” Ultimately, in grounding the legends, myths, and absolute conceptions of Parsons’s genius in the reality of his biography, musical output, and approach to creativity, a clearer, more nuanced picture of the musician emerges, one that accounts for his singular position within the discourses of country rock and alternative country today.

Foundations: Authorship and Authenticity

Within discussions of popular music, notions of individual creativity and exceptionality are intimately bound to conceptions of authorship and authenticity, especially in the case of those artists who are understood to be the creators of their own music. Indeed, performers such as John Lennon, Bob Dylan, and Joni Mitchell are just a few examples of artists who are recognized as originating authors whose work is authenticated as a form of direct expression. As will be seen throughout this study, fans and critics have likewise bestowed authenticity onto Gram Parsons by virtue of a perceived connection between songs he wrote (or in many cases, co-wrote) and performed and details of his life. While sociological critiques have rightfully challenged the idea of art as produced solely by unique individuals working alone, the valuing of authorship

remains fundamental to the understanding of texts and the stylistic practices through which texts have been produced.

Deconstructing the complex relationship between author and song, David Brackett argues that the notion of strict identity between lived experience and a song’s meaning eliminates the effect of the song as a musical performance. As he writes, where “the musical codes and the manner in which the song is performed may either contradict or reinforce the content in the lyrics, adding new layers of nuance by ‘acting out,’ inflecting, and contextualizing them,” there exists the possibility of a “multiplicity” of authorial voices in a musical text.41

Brackett’s understanding finds resonance with Roland Barthes’s famous assertion of the “death of the author,” which presented a challenge to the idea that meanings of a text could be fixed and understood in relation to a single authorial figure. Ultimately, Barthes argues for a shift in the process of interpretation, whereby the meanings of texts become the creation of the reader (listener) rather than that of the author:

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.42

Despite the democratizing possibilities inherent in the “rise of the reader” advocated by Barthes, Richard Middleton suggests such a “binary inversion” simply transfers authority rather than “upsetting the order within which it operates.”43 To that end, Michael Foucault does not render the author invisible, but deconstructs the author as a figure with particular discursive properties

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operating within a body of works and particular social conditions. As such, the role of the author as originator is denied and he or she as a subject is analyzed as a “variable and complex function of discourse.”

Related is Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the “field of cultural production,” which also challenges the idea of the unique individual: “the essential explanation lies outside of them in the objective relations which constitute the field.”

Stressing the competitiveness of the field, Bourdieu argues that artists struggle over position, power, and prestige within an arena also occupied by state and commercial institutions and other mediating factors. Ultimately, in Bourdieu’s terms, rather than the result of talent, or genius, or consensually recognized ability, the creative and cultural recognition of authors should be viewed as socially constituted within a contested field.

Like Middleton, Keith Negus recognizes that such sociological approaches may only reverse “the imbalanced account of the relationship between individual creativity and social context.” Accordingly, he argues convincingly that “no matter how much context and collaboration is added to the picture,” individual authorship will not go away and is central to any understanding of one’s music and its influence. Indeed, in the case of Gram Parsons, despite the fact that many of his songs were written with others and supported by a “multiplicity” of other musicians’ “voices,” both critics and fans give his authorial voice primacy. Take, for example, religion scholar Michael Grimshaw’s discussion of the relationship between Parsons


47 Ibid.
and Southern rural theology in songs co-written with others:

   It is in his own songs that the “gospel of Gram” is most obvious. There is the invoking of a latter-day Southern covenant based on landscape and memory as epiphany and the spiritual locus of grace, as in “Hickory Wind” which sings of a thwarted desire to return to the simplicities of life back in South Carolina...

Further, Grimshaw makes an explicit link between Parsons and one song in particular:

   The defining song of Parsons, in fact a song that would come to express his influence, his person and his “testament,” is a song of love and theology, of loss, searching and restoration: “Return of the Grievous Angel.”

Clearly, Grimshaw locates Parsons within these songs, thus illustrating Foucault’s understanding of the author as a complex discursive fiction and Will Straw’s observation that “the body of a performer’s work endows that performer’s personality with a unity, just as the presumption of that unity gives meaning and coherence to a body of work.”

Presumptions of an originating author continue to guide interpretations and the creation of musical meaning, whether bestowed upon an individual artist or members of a group understood as one unit. Complicating these presumptions though are star images or musical personas that may or may not relate to knowledge of the real author. As mentioned by Brackett above, there thus can exist multiple voices with sometimes competing identities. Negus observes, “The star image and performing persona adds further complications to the way personal identity and textual meaning are created, particularly when the author’s public identity


is transparently mannered and studied.”\textsuperscript{51} In the case of Parsons, whose outlandish visual style and penchant for stretching the truth were often on public display, such complications are reinforced not only by Parsons’s disavowal of a self-consciously “mannered persona,” but also by the collapsing of identities present within the music itself.

As a way to “retain a sense of both real author and performing persona without romantically reducing one to an expression of the other,” Negus draws on literary critic Wayne C. Booth’s distinction between the “real author” and the “implied author,” that is, “that sensibility (that combination of feeling, intelligence, knowledge, and opinion) that ‘accounts for’ the narrative.”\textsuperscript{52} Adding the categories of “narrator” and “character,” Negus argues that together these identities can be used to “question and to unbundle the presumed connections between author and song, and… to allow for a critical discussion of how values, beliefs, world views, and experiences are created, represented, conveyed, and mediated through songs without being reduced to the authentic experience or coherent beliefs of the songwriter or singer, or reduced to the surface appearance of a performance.”\textsuperscript{53} Accordingly, authors can be treated not as “transcendent touchstones,” nor ignored amidst discursive power struggles or cultural fields of production, but instead recognized as producers and the inhabitants of personas that are both musical and social.

Following Negus’s mediating approach, my study will seek to understand Parsons in a way that asks how and in what ways the various components that comprised his musical activities and identities were conceived, combined, and communicated. Thus, in acknowledging

\textsuperscript{51} Negus, “Authorship and the Popular Song,” 619.


\textsuperscript{53} Negus, “Authorship and the Popular Song,” 623.
Parsons as a real author with distinct intentions, beliefs, social and musical values formed in relation to specific social and historical contexts, but necessarily mediated by a multiplicity of personas, voices in his music, and the projections of his audience, we can better comprehend Parsons’s unique contribution to the country rock movement and the notions of authenticity that frame the discourse surrounding him.

The specter of authenticity looms large over discussions of popular music. Used in conjunction with a number of other ambiguous buzzwords including “sincere,” “real,” “honest,” “genuine,” authenticity is often used uncritically to denote styles and performances perceived as direct and uncorrupted by various factors including, but not limited to commerce, trendiness, derivativeness, and a lack of inspiration. Though some such as Born and Hesmondhalgh argue that the concept of authenticity has become less important, “consigned to the intellectual dust-heap,” the term is still widely used in discussions of popular music. As David Pattie writes, “The discourse and term of authenticity is internalized to the everyday vocabulary of musicians, audiences and academics.” Indeed, in describing Parsons’s voice, Gandulf Hennig, the director of the documentary, Gram Parsons: Fallen Angel remarked, “The singing was so soulful, it was so authentic, even if it was out of tune.” This remark points to an essence or particular character present in Parsons’s singing that, even though outside the bounds of what is considered aesthetically “good,” was recognized as authentically truthful. While judgments such as this abound in musical discourse, ultimately, the phenomenon of authenticity is a complex one that involves more than just personal preferences. As Keir Keightley observes, it also “involves a


56 Quoted in Mather, “Regressive Country,” 156.
sense of music’s external contexts, and a judgement of the ‘objective’ effect on music of such factors as record company marketing strategies, music-making technologies, or the ongoing history of music’s broader stylistic changes.\textsuperscript{57}

While authenticity is often perceived as audible in the music, authenticity is not inherent in musical sounds or any particular style, but rather is a value ascribed in the act of interpretation.\textsuperscript{58} As Allan Moore writes, “‘Authenticity’ is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicized position. It is ascribed, not inscribed.” \textsuperscript{59} Likewise, Richard Peterson uses the ironic phrase “fabricating authenticity” to argue that authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct “continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse commercial interests, fans, and the evolving image” of the music.\textsuperscript{60} Peterson continues:

Authenticity in a living art form can have a number of meanings, but as we have seen, in popular culture, where experts and authorities do not control the particulars of the word’s meaning, the definition centers on being believable relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being original, that is not being an imitation of the model.\textsuperscript{61}

Peterson’s position helps to broadly frame how Gram Parsons’s creativity within the country rock field and the country tradition itself is perceived to manifest authenticity. As will be illustrated throughout this study, Parsons often demonstrated recognition and understanding of


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 131.


\textsuperscript{60} Peterson, Fabricating Authenticity, 5-6.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 220.
established musical forms, but executed them in a way that bespoke originality and conscious deviation from those forms. Recalling the biographical sketch of Parsons above, the same might also be said of the way that his life in many ways fit stereotypical characterizations of the lives of country singers, but simultaneously contradicted them in a way that was original within both rock and country contexts. Indeed, like Kristofferson’s protagonist in the epigraph at the outset of this introduction, Parsons could be understood as a “walking contradiction,” at once an enormously wealthy Southerner from the Georgia swamps, a “Harvard-educated hillbilly,” a longhaired country boy lost in the big city lights of the Sunset Strip, an ill-fated wanderer who only wanted to be safe at home. Partly truth, but mostly fiction, these archetypal reductions used to describe Parsons tell us less about the “real” Parsons and more about how authenticity is ascribed onto an idealized version of a single figure. That Parsons’s music is understood to embody these biographical tensions as well only compounds such ascriptions.

As a way to approach authenticity as a matter of interpretation rather than quality inherent in music, Allan Moore proposes a tripartite model that is dependent on asking who, rather than what, is being authenticated. In Moore’s formulation, “first-person authenticity,” or the authenticity of expression, arises when an originator (composer, performer) successfully conveys the impression that his or her utterance is sincere and unmediated, representing an earnest attempt to communicate with the audience. This pole accounts for ideas about connection, intimacy, and how a performer’s acts and gestures are understood to connect to their own authentic life experiences. “Second-person authenticity,” or authenticity of experience, occurs when a performance succeeds in validating the listener’s experience of life, that the music

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63 Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication,” 211-220.
is “telling it like it is” for them. This pole coincides with Lawrence Grossberg’s understanding of authenticity in relation to rock: “‘authentic rock’ depends on its ability to articulate private but common desires, feelings and experiences into a shared public language.”64 Finally, “third-person authenticity,” authenticity of execution, arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance. This pole is tied to appropriation, whereby performers venerate original artists and points of musical origin in a way that betrays respect and faithful musical representation.65 Certainly, in practice, these three authenticities overlap and are often engaged simultaneously, yet as distinct authenticating modes they offer comprehensible means of approaching dialogues between listeners and artists. The utility in using Moore’s typology to investigate the authenticity bestowed onto Parsons both during his lifetime and since his death lies in these dialogues given the fact that Parsons’s voice, ability to articulate “cosmic” utopian musical and social visions, and devotion to country tradition are often cited by critics and fans as authenticating factors.

Though Moore’s conceptions of authenticity are far-reaching and useful for identifying whom authenticity is ascribed to, the “what” being deemed authentic is nonetheless important, especially in instances of creativity and the formation of new musical forms. Indeed, Gram Parsons’s authenticity as a country rock pioneer is predicated on the sounds and enterprise of country rock itself being understood as authentic within its original countercultural context. Middleton argues that this process has to do with how authenticity is produced in the interplay of

64 Lawrence Grossberg, We Gotta Get Outta This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture (London: Routledge, 1992), 207.

65 Brackett argues that “music (or other forms of cultural production) at the ‘margins’ is frequently the most available for appropriation and economic exploitation precisely because it carries the greatest charge of ‘authenticity’” (Brackett, Interpreting Popular Music, 89).
“selves and culture,” that is, of people and music. To this end, Keightley identifies two broad families of rock authenticity—Romantic authenticity and Modernist authenticity—that help orient us to how Parsons’s musical innovations throughout his career resonated within his own social and historical contexts and how they continue to resonate today:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic authenticity tends to be found more in:</th>
<th>Modernist authenticity tends to be found more in:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tradition and continuity with the past roots</td>
<td>experimentation and progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sense of community</td>
<td>avant-garde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>populism</td>
<td>status of artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belief in a core or essential rock sound</td>
<td>elitism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>folk, blues, country, rock’n’roll styles</td>
<td>openness regarding rock sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gradual stylistic change</td>
<td>classical, art music, soul, pop styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sincerity, directness</td>
<td>radical or sudden stylistic change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘liveness’</td>
<td>irony, sarcasm, obliqueness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘natural’ sounds</td>
<td>‘recorded-ness’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hiding musical technology</td>
<td>‘shocking’ sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>celebrating technology 67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Putting this table into practice, as an example, one might align a group such as Creedence Clearwater Revival with Romantic authenticity and a group like Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention with Modernist despite them both falling under the “rock band” umbrella. Keightley argues that these tendencies serve simultaneously to position rock against the pop mainstream and to create and organize internal differences within rock culture. Importantly, they also become criteria for authenticating artists who engage within them both in unique ways: “Rock culture tends to regard as most innovative those rock performers who deploy Romantic and Modernist authenticity more or less equally, in a productive tension… The different forms of authenticity, rubbing up against each other, produce work that is celebrated for its complexity,

66 Middleton, Voicing the Popular, 205-206.

67 Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 137.
energy, and artistic innovation.\textsuperscript{68} Significantly, the productive tension that Keightley identifies resonates with both Moore’s “first-person authenticity” and the dynamic between believability and originality that Peterson described above. While Keightley’s typology will bear most heavily in my discussion of “liveness” in Chapter Four, I introduce it here as a way to begin to understand Parsons’s individual creativity within a rock context and how the music he made and sounds he experimented with have come to manifest authenticity on multiple levels.

In the end, no absolute method exists to evaluate authorial primacy or authenticity, only ways of interpreting the debates that surround these concepts as listeners confer them onto artists and their music. Yet, as the discussion above indicated, there exists a discernable “productive tension” that grounds these debates, whether it be between contrasting authorial voices, the believable and original, the Romantic and Modern. Locating this tension in the expressive material created by unique individuals allows us to connect creation, content, and consumption in a mutually defining relationship, for as Joli Jensen writes, “music is made in relation to who is making it, how it has been done before, what else is out there, and who is imagined to be responding to it. Authors, canons, marketplaces, and readers intersect in the construction of musical texts.”\textsuperscript{69} Ultimately, the question guiding this study is not whether or not Parsons is actually the authentic “father of country rock,” but how this discourse has been created and shaped by his music and its reception.

\textbf{Methodology and Chapter Outline}

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 139.

\textsuperscript{69} Joli Jensen, \textit{Nashville Sound}, 157.
My methodology will align with other musicological work that engages with biographical details in the lives of important musical figures as a means of investigating broader issues.\textsuperscript{70} Jocelyn Neal’s work on Jimmie Rodgers provides one particularly useful model in the field of country music.\textsuperscript{71} Through focusing on three of Rodgers’s songs, she examines the processes by which country music has redefined and renewed itself over time through Rodgers’s music. Though I will not use the same song-based structural framework that Neal does, I will use a similar approach to biography and music to paint a portrait of how Gram Parsons and his music have come to signify innovation and authenticity within the discourse of country rock.

Details of Parsons’s biography are central to the narrative thrust of this study, and thus, I mine biographies, musician interviews, liner notes, webpages, and popular press articles that address his life story. I do so not only to piece together a factual account of his life and career, but also to trace how specific biographical elements have been foregrounded by those wishing to establish Parsons’s (posthumous) celebrity. In light of the work done on Patsy Cline by sociologist Joli Jensen, who argues that “celebrities are always transformations of biographical realities,” I treat the “Gram Parsons” presented in this literature as not just an artist or a person, but as a “polysemic subject position, someone whose life and work can be made to mean a variety of things to a variety of people.”\textsuperscript{72} While part and parcel of the conceptions of authorship


\textsuperscript{71} Neal, \textit{Jimmie Rodgers}, 2009.

and authenticity that undergird this study, this approach will bear most heavily in Chapter Five
where I discuss reception of Parsons’s life and music in the wake of his death.

Though my dissertation is not about country music itself, but about how many of
country’s musical markers were employed in innovative ways by Parsons and other musicians
with backgrounds in other genres, it will be necessary to identify country’s musical conventions
to better approach country rock’s selective uses of them. While much of the existing literature
on country music addresses the genre’s history, rural, working-class imagery, and lyrical content,
more recently musicologists such as Olivia Mather, Jocelyn Neal, and Travis Stimeling have
begun to explore country’s sonic aspects. Accordingly, my musical analyses will draw on such
work by paying particular attention to harmonic language, form, instrumentation, instrumental
and singing styles, and how alterations to these parameters by Parsons and his collaborators
created new meanings and practices within country rock, and popular music more broadly.
Ultimately, I intend to contribute to country music scholarship by critically engaging with how
sounds and styles can signify beyond perceived musical and social boundaries of the genre.

In addition to analyses of musical elements that are pitch-centered, I draw from the work
of Albin J. Zak III, Steve Waksman, Robert Walser, and David Brackett to account for sonic
features such as timbre and reverberation, and the impact of recording technology and studio
practices. At some points of my discussion, I have found it necessary to transcribe or outline

73 Olivia Carter Mather, “‘Cosmic American Music’: Place and the Country Rock Movement, 1965-1974” (PhD
Diss.: University of California—Los Angeles, 2006); Jocelyn Neal, “Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and
Stimeling, Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin’s Progressive Country Music
Scene (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Marcus Eli Desmond Harmon, “Harris/Cash: Identity Loss, and
Mourning at the Borders of Country Music” (PhD Diss.: University of California—Los Angeles, 2011).

74 Albin J. Zak III, The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records (Berkeley: University of California Press,
2001); Steve Waksman, Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Robert Walser, Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and
Madness in Heavy Metal Music (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993); David Brackett, Interpreting Popular
the musical features I describe. Necessarily, certain musical phenomena such as timbre do not easily translate onto the page, and thus, my musical examples will serve more as illustrative guides rather than comprehensive representations. It is my hope that my analyses will encourage readers to seek out recordings to more fully experience the rich depth of the music described.\textsuperscript{75}

The chapters in this dissertation are structured according to chronology, accounting for five musical phases within Gram Parsons’s musical career from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s. Chapter One builds on Bob Kealing’s recent biographical sketch of Parsons’s youthful excursions in rock and roll and commercial folk before his turn to country music.\textsuperscript{76} Drawing on Zak’s conception of the “rock and roll process” of absorption, revision, and fusion of disparate influences that defined the musical zeitgeist of late 1950s and early 1960s, I show that while Parsons claimed country roots, he, like many of his musical peers, negotiated the era’s “haphazard convergence of musical dialects” in a way that bespoke youth culture concerns.\textsuperscript{77} Though Parsons would later describe this early period as one of “identity crisis,” it will be shown that in modeling himself and his music goals after musicians such as Elvis Presley, the Kingston Trio, and the Journeymen, Parsons laid the groundwork for the hybrid musical mixing that would define his work in country rock soon after. Ultimately, this chapter contributes to the limited work done on Parsons’s early career not to question his presumed “countryness,” but to shed


\textsuperscript{75} Recordings will be integral sources for this study. Adding to releases by prominent country-rock artists by labels such as Reprise and A&M in the late 1960s and 1970s, the recent release of previously unreleased recordings and reissues of out-of-print albums by smaller companies such as Sierra Records and BGO Records have dramatically increased availability and access to country-rock recordings. Sierra Records, for example, has recently released recordings from Gram Parsons’s early folk years and also includes a recorded interview with Parsons from 1972. See \textit{Gram Parsons: The Early Years Box Set} (Sierra SBXGP 2100, 2011).


light on the foundational musical influences and social world on which such countryness was built.

Chapter Two examines Parsons’s turn to country music and his work first with International Submarine Band, and then with the Byrds. Significantly, it was during this time that country rock began to emerge in southern California as a distinct movement within the popular music landscape. Through an exploration of each groups’ influences and relationship with the country field in the mid-1960s, we begin to see how and why particular West Coast-based strands of country music appealed to Parsons and other budding country rockers in Los Angeles who had also begun their musical careers in 1950s rock and roll and commercial folk. Also significant is that the albums he contributed to during this time, the ISB’s *Safe at Home* and the Byrds’s *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, are often cited today as founding documents of the country rock movement. While we would be remiss to attribute the importance of these albums solely to Parsons, I argue that the authorial voice and innovative musical aesthetic he brought to these projects not only mediated the relationship between past and present country traditions, but also the perceived boundaries between country and rock sensibilities.

While Parsons’s commitment to country music with the International Submarine Band and the Byrds established his position within the emergent country rock movement, his subsequent work with the Flying Burrito Brothers situated him and his music more self-consciously within a broader countercultural frame. Accordingly, Chapter Three addresses Parsons’s conception of “cosmic American music” as it manifest in the Burritos’s first album, *The Gilded Palace of Sin* (1969). As the designation suggests, the Burritos sought to create a musical middle ground for countercultural audiences to reassess genre boundaries by tapping into idealized American-ness and the spirit of social harmony that the counterculture loosely
organized around. To this end, the group’s “cosmic” vision offers a singular avenue into understanding not only how country music fit into countercultural projects and concerns, but also how Parsons and the Burritos musically negotiated the social and political disquiet that bore on popular music at the end of the 1960s.

Chapter Four focuses on the last phase of Parsons’s career, and specifically how Southernness became manifest on his solo albums, *GP* (1973) and *Grievous Angel* (1974). In contrast to more successful country rock artists such as the Eagles who eschewed Southern themes in favor of Sunbelt regional imagery while infusing pop elements into their music, Parsons, in collaboration with members of Elvis Presley’s backing band and new singing partner, Emmylou Harris, returned to an earlier sense of country traditionalism predicated on idealizations of a rural, pre-modern South. Thus, I posit that in the context of regional shifts and country rock’s rise to mainstream popularity, Parsons employed musical and lyrical constructions of Southernness as a “regressive” strategy to authenticate himself as a Southerner performing country music and to critique the overt commercialism that he perceived in country rock at the time.

With Chapter Five, I examine the impact of Parsons’s death on posthumous reception of his life and last works. In the wake of the bizarre and tragic events that accompanied his passing, critics and fans were quick to explain Parsons’s death as an inevitable outcome of his “doomed Southern DNA” and desire to live out an excessive honky tonk lifestyle.78 Thus, the fact of his death became a frame for the ways that listeners would construct his biography, interpret Parsons compositions that explored the subject of mortality, and finally, impart cultural authority and authenticity onto Parsons after his life ended. In this light, I will draw on literary criticism to

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accomplish two goals: first, to investigate two of Parsons’s posthumously released recordings as “automortographic last acts,” or what Thomas H. Kane describes as “gestures by the self as it is receding… received after the fact of death” that invite survivors to “re-inhabit, reinvestigate the lost subjectivity of the person now deceased,” and second, to examine such “re-inhabitation and reinvestigation” of the parallels often drawn between Parsons’s background, music, and the Southern Gothic literary tradition. Ultimately, this final chapter will tie together the interwoven threads of authorship and authenticity by examining the creation of meaning shared between Parsons and his survivors.

79 Thomas H. Kane, “Last Acts: Automortography and the Cultural Performance of Death in the United States 1968-2001” (PhD Diss.: University of Virginia—Charlottesville, 2003). According to Kane, an “automortographic” last act is a gesture by the self as it is receding that gets read or received after the fact of death (156). See also Kane, “The Deaths of the Authors: Literary Celebrity and Automortography in Acker, Barthelme, Bukowski, and Carver's Last Acts,” Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory 15, No. 4 (2004): 409-443.
CHAPTER ONE

Parsons’s “Identity Crisis” and the Roots of Country Rock

Fans and biographers of Gram Parsons often idealize a connection between his biography and country music. Citing his Southern upbringing, the familial tragedies that accompanied his childhood, the subjects explored in his compositions, and the soulful fragility of his singing voice, some argue that Parsons was ideally suited to sing country music.¹ Michael Grimshaw, in one of the few scholarly articles on Parsons makes such a link, writing that,

Parsons did not possess a voice of great range or depth—nor can it be said of perfect pitch. But what it did have was a soft aching fragility, a tender sorrow and the nasal purity of a man singing because this was the only way to express the hurt, suffering and sorrow—and occasionally the joy he encountered in a short life. As such, he sang country music because it is music that speaks of need and salvation, of dislocation and grace, of the attempt to try and follow the will of God—and of the grudging reconciliation with failure.²

Parsons himself, always the self-mythologist, wrote of his “return” to country music while studying at Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts: “I passed my identity crisis and came back to country music… the guys in the ISB [Parsons’s band at Harvard] were important; they always had their ears open, and they 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” (original emphasis).³

If Parsons himself believed country music to be the first and ultimately, truest facet of his identity, what are we to make of the music Parsons made during his “identity crisis”? And perhaps more perplexing is what to make of the fact that Parsons’s self-described

¹ See, for example, Griffin, Gram Parsons, 15, 24-27.
² Grimshaw, “Redneck Religion,” 98.
“reintroduction” to country music, an idiom long associated with rural and southern working-class imagery and values, took place at an Ivy League institution in New England with the help of young musicians who, like Parsons, came largely from middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

Though Parsons’s words seem to discount his period of “identity crisis” as little more than a minor excursion on the path back to country music, an investigation of this period reveals that Parsons was, in fact, like so many of his generation and so many that would figure in the country rock movement later, a privileged youth working to forge an identity for himself through popular music. With disposable incomes, better education, and eagerness to distance themselves not only from their parents’ generation, but also from what was perceived as an increasingly bureaucratic, conformist, and commercialized American society in general, first rock and roll and then commercial folk music provided a way for white middle- and upper-class youth throughout the nation to imagine and cultivate alternative identities without fully discarding the ideals and values associated with their objective class positions.

Parsons period of “identity crisis” lasted roughly a decade from his first musical forays in the mid-fifties through 1965, the point at which Parsons began immersing himself in country music while at Harvard. Not so coincidentally, this period marks a robust point in popular music’s historical narrative, particularly with regard to the development of rock. Indeed, this period witnessed the explosion of rock and roll, the urban folk boom, and finally, the emergence of folk rock and the multitude of divergent musical streams that flowed in its wake. Thus, in tracing points along Parsons’s journey in relation to the musical landscape during this time, a clearer picture emerges of how postwar youth audiences and musicians carved out identity amidst swiftly changing musical and social worlds.
The first part of this chapter will explore Parsons’s early attraction to rock and roll and first public musical endeavors as a teenager in Winter Haven, Florida. It will be shown that like many of his peers, Parsons embraced the broad spectrum of available popular music as a way to hone his developing musical voice while appealing to the youth culture values of his upper-middle class milieu. The second part of the chapter will discuss Parsons’s turn toward folk music as he reached college age in the early 1960s. Examining his engagement with the more commercial strand of the urban folk boom will illustrate how many young rock and rollers like Parsons used folk music not for political purposes or as a means to cultivating actual folk lifeways, but as a way to resonate with an aging rock-and-roll generation that was becoming increasingly suspicious of the popular marketplace and the mainstream. The chapter will close with an appraisal of Parsons’s early musical career and how his emerging authorial voice not only reflected a number of musical dialects, but also the broad conceptual changes in rock ideology that, by the mid-1960s, had been adopted by many within the youth culture from which Parsons had emerged. Ultimately, this chapter will explore the early part of Parsons’s career not to discount myths surrounding Parsons’s “countriness” or his investment in the music, but to shed a nuanced light on the wide range of influences that would lead Parsons to embrace the idiom and engender his unique contribution to the country rock movement he helped initiate in the second half of the 1960s.

Parsons in Polk County, Florida

As the grandson of John Snively, owner of one of Polk County, Florida’s citrus empires, Gram Parsons grew up amidst great material privilege at the center of the area’s concentrated circle of wealth. Such affluence provided Parsons with almost unlimited resources and leisure
time with which to pursue his hobbies, with music often at the forefront. Having moved from Waycross, Georgia, to Winter Haven, a small town within Polk County, following the suicide of his father in December of 1958, Parsons arrived at a time not only when his grandfather’s citrus business was booming, but just as importantly, when rock and roll was inspiring many of the county’s young residents to form groups of their own. Although Parsons had long been entertaining his family and friends at his Georgia household with his musical interests, in the midst of the familial tragedies that surrounded him and the move to Winter Haven, music increasingly provided him with a means for emotional release, artistic expression, and forging connections with other young people in the area, often from very different life circumstances.

In the late 1950s, Polk County was a vibrant Southern melting pot filled with migrants that had come from southern Alabama, northern Florida, and southern Georgia for work in the area’s orange groves. As a result of better living and working conditions, small towns within the county such as Winter Haven, Bartow, Auburndale, and Polk City grew quickly and became suburban communities with residents often connected by shared occupations and working-class backgrounds. On the other end of the economic spectrum however, were the wealthy owners of the citrus groves such as the Snivelys who, along with a clique of roughly ten families, held considerable influence over the small towns throughout the county. As such, a concentrated circle of the super rich was surrounded by thinner circles of immigrant families who depended on the rich owners for their livelihoods. Amidst this hierarchy based on land ownership and wealth, the nuances of class position were not lost on the young people of Polk County. Karen Goodman Lacerte, a classmate of Parsons at Winter Haven High reflected on the public-school dynamic: “We had people with no shoes and people whose maids were pulling up and delivering

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them to school. It made for a complex environment.\textsuperscript{5}

As a way to navigate such a stratified distribution of wealth and diversity of backgrounds, many of Polk County’s youth, like Parsons, were drawn to popular music as a guiding beacon. Kent Lavoie, a member of a Winter Haven band recalls the climate of the area’s music scene and the mindset of its participants at the time: “There was no ranking. There was: Can you do anything? If you can, come on.”\textsuperscript{6} As such, by 1960, Polk County had become a hotbed for music, and Parsons soon immersed himself in the scene by joining his first band, the Pacers. Consisting of Parsons on piano, guitar, and vocals, Martin Clevenger on bass, Skip Roser on drums, and Jimmy Allen on guitar, the Pacers played area country clubs and teen centers, and as Clevenger recalls, performed a variety of tunes by Ray Charles, the Ventures, Chuck Berry, and by Parsons’s demand, a lot of Elvis Presley.\textsuperscript{7} Though the Pacers time together was short lived, Parsons’s experience with the group gave him important visibility within the Winter Haven music scene and would help secure his next position with one of the area’s other up and coming groups, the Legends. His time in this group gives insight into how rock and roll figured in Parsons’s early musical career and how it would influence his later musical orientation and aesthetics. First however, it will be useful to situate Parsons within the 1950s youth culture of which he was part and the unique historical moment of rock and roll’s emergence.

\textbf{Rock and Roll and Elvis Presley}

\textsuperscript{5} Meyer, \textit{Twenty Thousand Roads}, 71.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 72. Of Parsons’s musical style at the time, Clevenger also recalled that in addition to pounding out three-chord rock and roll songs, Parsons’s piano-playing tended toward smoother styles such as that of pianists like Floyd Cramer, one of Nashville’s busiest session pianists and accompanist to seminal artists such as Presley, Patsy Cline, and Jim Reeves (Ibid.).
As it did for Parsons and the Pacers, rock and roll, a music rooted in rhythm and blues and country music and performed by both black and white performers in the mid-1950s, gave youth throughout the nation a means to demarcate lines between themselves and their parents while working against what were perceived as the confining elements of suburban affluence. Indeed, through identification with rock-and-roll performers, many of whom had come from working-class backgrounds, white middle-to upper-class teenagers could “try on” less-privileged identities from their positions of relative security and comfort. Such constructed identities, often adapted from the manners and visual styles of marginalized groups (including clothing, hairstyle, etc.), challenged the values of their parent generation while addressing what historian Todd Gitlin describes as the “extreme and wrenching tension between the assumption of affluence and its opposite, a terror of loss, destruction, and failure” the pervaded the Cold War years. Accordingly, this culture of youth in the late 1950s and early 1960s forged an identity with a sociopolitical edge. As Keir Keightley observes, “Youth could see themselves as outsiders, an ‘anti-mass’ social subgroup with almost subcultural connotation—This sense of difference, of ‘otherness,’ allowed youth to imagine affinities with the cultures of disempowered minorities. Thus, million of white, middle class rock fans could appropriate a range of forms of difference, whether these be racial, sexual, class-based or other.”

As with previous generations, ethnicity, locality, and class differentiated consumption of popular culture among the diverse population of young people born roughly between 1945 and 1964. Thus, it is important that we resist the tendency to generalize too broadly about the

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By the end of the 1950s, \textit{Life} magazine estimated that teenagers possessed nearly $10 billion dollars of discretionary income with nearly 16 percent going toward entertainment.\footnote{Cited in Ronald D. Cohen, “The Delinquents: Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent U.S. History,” \textit{History of Education Quarterly} 37, No. 3 (Autumn 1997): 261.} Armed with such potential spending power, young people represented a consumer market that in the early 1950s was only beginning to be tapped. By the end of the decade, however, the music industry alongside the publishing, radio, motion picture, and television industries presented
products and programs that had been designed to meet and, in some cases, create the concerns of young people. Radio deejays began tailoring their shows specifically to youthful white radio listeners and potential record buyers, while film and television producers catered to a variety of adolescent topics, ranging from romance to rebellion. Although young people had played a role in the popular sphere’s marketplace prior to the 1950s, this preponderance of media catering to youth taste engendered its official institutionalization as a distinct segment of the mainstream, creating a sharper split between youth and adult-oriented markets.

Above all, the sounds and imagery of rock and roll crystallized 1950s youth culture. Although music that sounded like uptempo rock and roll could be found in the 1940s in the music of artists like Louis Jordan and T-Bone Walker, by the mid-fifties, hits on Billboard’s popular or “Top 100” sales chart revealed the domination of a new sonic orientation. Bill Haley’s “Rock Around the Clock,” which was featured in Blackboard Jungle, quickly became the music’s first “ubiquitous symbol” in 1955, followed not long after by Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene” (1955) and “Heartbreak Hotel” (1956) by Elvis Presley. Delivering bombastic youthful rebellion through driving backbeat rhythms, twelve-bar blues forms, amplified instruments, lyrics often about love and sex, and a blend of elements from country, jump blues, and novelty, the rock and roll of these songs became a concrete musical type linked to and

13 Ibid.
14 Undercutting rock’s exceptionalism narrative that begins with rock and roll, Keightley observes that the early stirrings of this split took place earlier during the big band era, when “critics and the industry began to distinguish, not only between taste publics, but between age groups as well.” See Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 112-113.
15 Zak, I Don’t Sound Like Nobody, 179. Chart crossover also indicated the success of rock and roll. “Rock Around the Clock” was the top single on the popular chart and also appeared on the rhythm and blues chart. “Maybellene” topped the rhythm and blues chart, and went on to appear on the popular chart in the fall of 1955 where it stayed for fourteen weeks. Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel” topped both the popular and country-western charts in 1956, while also rising to the No. 5 on the rhythm and blues chart (Crawford, America’s Musical Life, 734).
defined by its young audience. Simon Frith writes, “What mattered about rock and roll in the 1950s was its youth; its expression of a community of interest between performer and audience; and its account of a generation bound by age and taste in a gesture of self-celebration, in defiance against the nagging, adult routines of home and work and school.”

With rock and roll as their rallying cry of sorts, many young people throughout the nation were connected by a sense of shared angst, alienation, and ultimately, the pursuit of fun-filled expression through a musical idiom that explicitly catered to such feelings through both sound and sentiment.

Perhaps more than any other early performer, Elvis Presley embodied the zeitgeist of 1950s youth culture. Simultaneously invoking youthfulness, Southernness, and blackness, or what Gitlin calls, “three national symbols of the uncontrollable, unfathomed id-stuff surging beneath the suburban surface,” Presley epitomized the emotions, aspirations, thoughts, feelings, tastes, and contradictions embedded in the minds of his young audiences members.

Importantly, the figure of Presley meant different things to different people. Rock writer Stanley Booth, four years younger than Parsons and also a Waycross, Georgia, native, described Presley and his rock-and-roll cohort in terms of rebellion and working-class street tough imagery.

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18 For a discussion of the relationship between 1950s youth culture and the experience of listening to popular music see Christopher Rasmussen, “Lonely Sounds: Popular Recorded Music and American Society, 1949-1979” (PhD Diss.: University of Nebraska—Lincoln, 2008); Zak, *I Don’t Sound Like Nobody*.; Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Outta This Place*.


20 In contrast to the dominant portrayals of Presley drawn by rock music writers such as Booth for whom Presley is a symbol of youth and counterculture, Julia Aparin explores Presley as a symbol of age, traditional values, and hero of the American Dream through an ethnographic study of his working-class fans. See Julia Aparin, “He Never Got Above His Raising: An Ethnographic Study of a Working Class Response to Elvis Presley” (PhD Diss.: University of Pennsylvania—Philadelphia, 1988).
rather than star power:

They were not named Tab or Rock, not even Jim, Bill, Bob. They all had names like Leroy, Floyd, Elvis. All outcasts, with their contemporary costumes of duck ass haircuts, greasy Levis, motorcycle boots, T-shirts for day and black leather jackets for evening wear. Even their unfashionably long sideburns (Elvis’s were furry) expressed contempt for the American dream they were too poor to be part of.21

Booth’s characterization resonates with ways that some middle-class youth idealized working-class peer groups at the time. As Gitlin observes, “the adolescent society depended on affluence—on time and money of its own to spend—but it also flirted with the harmless part of the culture of delinquency; the spirit of fun and adventure, the disdain for studies, the drinking, smoking, making out, swearing, staying out late.”22 Echoing Gitlin, Frith writes, “The street culture that fascinates the suburban young is a romanticized version of the culture of working-class peer groups.”23 In light of the flirtation and fascination Gitlin and Frith describe, the contempt for the “American dream” that Booth imparts onto the “outcasts” is telling, for it indicates that Booth, from his position of relative affluence, projected onto Presley and other rock and rollers an ostensible opposition to or at the very least, suspicion of upward mobility. This projection is ironic if we take into account that Presley, as cultural historian Michael Bertrand notes, defied the invisibility and relative isolation of his Southern poverty with his immense success, and actually represented one of the region’s first generations to realize a star-studded version of the postwar American dream.24


22 Gitlin, The Sixties, 29.


24 Michael Bertrand, Race, Rock and Elvis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
For Parsons, Presley was also a foundational figure. In 1972, he told an interviewer that, “I just wanted to play guitar because Elvis played one.” Indeed, from 1956, when Parsons saw Presley perform in Waycross, Georgia, to 1973 when he recruited members of Presley’s backing band to play on his second solo album, *Grievous Angel*, Presley’s presence loomed large in his work. Parsons family friend, Louise Cone recalls that at an early age, “Gram was a sweet child as long as you let him be Elvis Presley. He loved Elvis Presley, imitating him and playing the piano… Gram came up with Elvis in his heart.” Childhood friend Henry Clarke also remembers, “For Gram it was Elvis, Elvis, Elvis. He loved Elvis.” Of seeing Elvis for the first time in Waycross in 1956, Parsons himself recalled, “He came on, and the whole place went bonkers. It all penetrated my mind.” Apparently, after the show, Parsons even got the chance to meet his idol backstage, who, in short time would be catapulted to the top of the charts with “Heartbreak Hotel.” Parsons claimed to have marched through a dressing room where he introduced himself with, “Hello there, you’re Elvis Presley and I’m the little kid who buys your records and I think you’re alright.” Years later, Parsons recalled, “Elvis influenced me tremendously. If it wasn’t for him, I would have probably strayed into country music. I always paid attention to anything that had a steel guitar in it… but then all of a sudden, somebody turned me on to Elvis.” This recollection is significant in that it highlights the generic distinction that Parsons would work so steadfastly to transcend later in his career, and most importantly, one that

25 Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 55.


27 Ibid., 33.


29 Ibid.
defined his “identity crisis.” Indeed, though in 1973 Parsons would conclude that “pure country includes rock and roll,” it seems that the hard line he drew between the idioms in his early career was one that he had not yet begun trying to erase.\(^{30}\)

While the figure of Elvis Presley in the mid-1950s was attached to multitude of symbolic meanings, his music, and in particular, the music he recorded at Sun Studios and RCA Records prior to his induction into the army in 1958, was forged through what Albin Zak calls the “rock and roll process.” He writes, “Before rock and roll was an idiom, it was a process of absorption, revision, and fusion of disparate influences. Presley, like his peers, became a rock-and-roll star by immersing himself in the rock and roll process, that is, by embodying the era’s haphazard convergence of musical dialects.”\(^{31}\) The result, as Zak concludes, symbolized the spirit of the times, one in which the imaginative refashioning of music from across the pop spectrum challenged borders between musical categories while appealing to youth culture concerns.\(^{32}\)

Indeed, remembering the first time he encountered Presley’s voice on record, Bob Dylan told Doug Brinkley in *Rolling Stone* magazine that it was like “bursting out of jail,” and that in his youth, Presley was a powerful and almost mystical figure “that was bursting with life. That’s the Elvis that inspired us to all the possibilities of life.”\(^{33}\)

Ultimately, Presley’s musical refashioning through “rock and roll processes” mirrored the processes of identity creation that many white middle- to upper-class youth such as Parsons (and Dylan) were engaging in during the 1950s and that would guide their worldviews through the


\(^{31}\) Zak, *I Don’t Sound Like Nobody*, 6.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 105.

turbulent 1960s. In short, the rock and roll process was just as much social as it was musical, and through drawing on the expansive range of sounds and visual imagery offered through the emergent media industries of the period, young people ventured beyond the perceived limits of their material environment out into the realm of imaginative possibility. As will become evident in the following sections, Parsons’s own “rock and roll process” would lead down multiple musical paths that, in the end, all pointed toward country music.

The Legends

In his short time with the Pacers, Parsons had gotten a small taste of local stardom and soon was ready to branch out on his own. He soon joined the Legends, one of central Florida’s most active young rock and roll bands. Consisting of Parsons on lead vocals and rhythm guitar, Jim Stafford on lead guitar, Gerald “Jesse” Chambers on bass, and Jon Corneal on drums, the group, by 1962, had become one of the area’s most popular high school groups. Like the Pacers, the group covered songs that most working dance bands of the era did such as tunes by the Ventures, Ray Charles, and Elvis Presley, along with a number of slower, softer ballads and novelty songs. Jim Carlton, another musician involved with the Legends, recalls, “It was just a meat-and-potatoes rock and roll band. We played ‘Johnny B. Goode’ and a lot of Ventures stuff… Not a bad rock and roll band, authentic for its time.”

Gigs for the Legends consisted of proms at public and private schools, country club dances, and teen centers throughout the state. Luckily for the Legends, Parsons’s wealth would provide them not only with matching suits and

34 The Legends in the short time they were together had a constantly changing lineup. Among those who drifted in and out of the group, Parsons, Stafford, Carlton, Corneal, and later, Kent LaVoie, whose other band, the Rumors, rivaled the Legends at one time, went on to later musical success as Lobo.

a portable sound system, but also a means of transportation—Bob Parsons, Gram’s stepfather, bought the group a Volkswagen bus with the group’s moniker emblazoned on its side.

Although throughout the central Florida music scene a number of musicians had, like Parsons, come from the upper reaches of the social ladder, many had grown up in working-class households. The contrast between Parsons and Jim Stafford, for example, reveals how such disparate backgrounds could influence musical ambition. While Parsons’s family name and class standing afforded him all the newest instruments, clothes, and a never-ending stream of business connections and encouragement, Stafford’s hard-earned status as the area’s top guitarist was part and parcel of a work ethic engendered by the example of his father, a laborer at the International Fruit Corporation. As such, in grooming himself for stardom, it was evident to his bandmates that Parsons relied just as much if not more on visual appeal and marketing as he did on practice. As Stafford recalls, “he’d try anything in a performance. He’d try sunglasses, any old thing if he thought it’d get him noticed. If he thought it would make him look neat… Gram was the only dreamer then out of all the guys. Gram was into making it. I was into my guitar, the drummer was into girls, Gram wanted to be a star.” Jesse Chambers also recalls Parsons getting after him about his greaser hairstyle, the very look that Stanley Booth above used to describe authentic rock and rollers: “You need to wash that stuff out of your hair and comb it this way,” Parsons insisted.

Despite such differences in backgrounds, work ethics, and sartorial preferences, it seems that their collective ambitions were paying off, for in short time, the Legends reached beyond

36 Kealing, Calling Me Home, 40.
37 Quoted in Griffin, Gram Parsons, 33.
38 Quoted in Kealing, Calling Me Home, 69.
their local popularity out into regional success through an appearance on *Hi-Time*, a televised Saturday-afternoon teen dance show from Tampa that was the area’s local imitation of Dick Clark’s *American Bandstand*. Though footage of the show is no longer available, existing photographs from 1961 show the group to be as Parsons insisted, well-groomed and well-dressed in matching suits and ties.\(^\text{39}\) Again, such polished visual presentation stands as a point of contrast to the idealized working-class street tough costume often ascribed to early rock and rollers and 1950s youth culture rebels, and in doing so, highlights a visual manifestation of Parsons’s high class position. Certainly, Parsons could have afforded to dress the Legends in a way that suggested rock-and-roll rebellion, but instead he chose to adhere to standards of dress that fit with the norms of his upbringing and appeals to professionalism.

In one of the few surviving recordings from a Legends performance on the *Hi-Time* show in 1962, one can hear a young Parsons singing Everly Brothers-style harmony with Chambers on a medley of popular hits.\(^\text{40}\) These include Presley’s “Rip It Up” (1956), the Everly Brothers’s “Let It Be Me” (1960) and Ray Charles’s “What’d I Say” (1959). Collectively, this group of songs in the Legends’s medley forms a cross-section of the kinds of popular material that Parsons and his contemporaries performed. Today, Carl Chambers, brother of Jesse Chambers, Parsons’s singing partner, is webmaster for Dizzy Rambler Online, a repository of audio clips and photographs of the many Polk county musicians that Parsons crossed paths with during his time with the Legends.\(^\text{41}\) In surveying the rich history of the central Florida garage band scene


gathered by Chambers, it is evident that like the Legends, groups such as the Blazers and the Dynamics included not only rock and roll a la Presley, but also slower ballads, Tin Pan Alley tunes, novelty songs, and rhythm and blues. In the surviving recordings of the Dynamics in particular, one can hear George and Ira Gershwin’s “Summertime” (1935) alongside Jimmy Reed’s “Baby, What You Want Me To Do?” (1959) and Henry Mancini’s “The Baby Elephant Walk” (1961). Such eclecticism reflected the “haphazard convergence of musical dialects” that existed on record and radio throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.\(^{42}\) Indeed, as Zak observes of the period, “the electronic media exposed young performers to an astonishing range of music from which they formed a musical worldview with little regard for traditional borders.”\(^{43}\) Bobby Braddock, one of the Dynamics, attests to Zak’s observation of such a worldview: “I think I loved music so much that one kind of music just wasn’t enough for me.”\(^{44}\)

If such a diverse range of repertoire reflected varied musical tastes on the part of performers, it also reflected the ongoing rock and roll process in the early 1960s. This point in popular music’s historical narrative, which rock writer Peter Guralnick describes as a “treacle period,” is often seen as the first of rock’s “dark ages.”\(^{45}\) Subsequent rock criticism lamented the fact that rock and roll’s original founders such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Jerry Lee Lewis had all but disappeared from the charts and that the music had moved closer to the sound and spirit of mainstream pop. These charges were in fact predicated on a construct of rock and

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\(^{42}\) Zak, *I Don’t Sound Like Nobody*, 6.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 105.

\(^{44}\) Bobby Braddock, *Down in Orburndale: A Songwriter’s Youth in Old Florida* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 85-86.

roll authenticity that was informed by mid-1960s countercultural values. Thus, when critics such as Greil Marcus bemoaned in 1969 the fact that “the burst of creation that exploded in the fifties was drying up” and was being replaced by “the clean, sugary rock ‘n’ roll of Bobbie Vinton,” he was ignoring the fact that what called rock and roll had always been fluid and in a constant state of stylistic flux. Of this period in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Zak astutely observes,

True, the traces of blues and country that early critics saw as rock and roll’s crucial connections to authentic roots were nearly indiscernible in much early sixties pop. The music was, in a sense, further assimilated in the commercial pop universe, further removed from an identifiable home and an attendant set of style features. But that, too, was evidence of the rock and roll process and ethos at work, embedding influence deeply in contrived creations and showing off a spectacular ability to absorb and transform almost anything musical.

Indeed, through seamlessly linking early rock and roll, sentimental balladry, and rhythm and blues, the Legends, in their Hi-Time medley, highlighted not only the stylistic diversity of music falling under the rock and roll umbrella in the early 1960s, but also showcased the blurring of musical and social boundaries within Parsons’s music.

In light of the dramatic changes occurring throughout the South, the regional successes of groups like the Legends are significant. In the midst of turmoil surrounding desegregation and increasing civil rights activism in the region at the time, popular music, and specifically, rhythm and blues-infused rock and roll, provided new opportunities for white youth to engage with black musical forms in a region marked by particularly hostile attitudes regarding such interactions. Detailing the role that rock and roll played within shifting attitudes about race in the South at the time, historian Michael Bertrand observes that the music helped facilitate interchanges between white and black youth audiences not only in concert halls and on dance floors, but through


recordings, jukeboxes, and radio—media not usually understood as sponsors for social change.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, contradicting widely held assumptions about the monolithic nature of racism in the South during the late 1950s and early 1960s, rock and roll, in the hands and ears of Southern youth such as Parsons and the Legends, “mounted serious assaults upon the vulnerable yet still heavily fortified attitudes associated with Jim Crow segregation.”\textsuperscript{49}

Despite the changing attitudes of some of its young people however, Polk County’s “heavily fortified attitudes” regarding segregation still held significant sway within the area’s more adult performance venues. Bobby Braddock, a Polk County native at the time, recalls that in 1959, at Club 92, a talented black harmonica player named Texas Ray from Tampa, Florida, was forced to stay in the kitchen until he was ready to take the stage for the last half of his band’s set. Even though he was the star of his all-black band, he was not allowed out front until it was time for him to perform.\textsuperscript{50} As was commonplace in the era of rigid segregation though, venues geared toward black audiences such as the Elk Club in Florence Villa, allowed whites to see black acts perform. Wayne Renardson, another Polk County native and peer of Parsons, recalls he and some other classmates from Winter Haven High seeing Fats Domino at the club, though they were the only whites in the audience for his set.\textsuperscript{51}

Although segregation was enforced at certain music venues in Polk County, radio and recordings had, since the mid-1950s, provided Polk County youth with an important medium for

\textsuperscript{48} Bertrand, \textit{Race, Rock, and Elvis}, 39.; See also Alice Echols, \textit{Shaky Ground: The ’60s and Its Aftershocks} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 58.: “white youth—irrespective of class—were violating America’s racial line by going to rock ‘n’ roll shows” (58).

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.


more covert subversion of racial dividing lines. Two radio stations in particular, WSIR-AM, which broadcast out of Winter Haven, and WLAC, which was transmitted from Nashville after ten o’clock, exposed many to classic black blues artists like Lightnin’ Hopkins, B.B. King, and Howlin’ Wolf. John R., the Nashville disc jockey of WLAC, in particular, is remembered as playing what young people like Parsons wanted to hear, not what their parents wanted them to hear.\textsuperscript{52} Recordings of such black artists, in contrast, were a bit harder to come by. Very often, music by black artists had to be mail-ordered as very few local record stores sold them. For Parsons though, a young man with almost limitless resources, attaining black rhythm and blues records proved far easier. Ultimately, “serious assaults” on racial intolerance were perhaps less pronounced in the youth teen centers in central Florida that young white rock and roll groups such as the Legends played, but they were deeply manifest in the interracial musical well from which they drew for material and performance style. As Dizzy Rambler Online’s archives indicate, songs by Ray Charles and Chuck Berry were often performed alongside tunes by Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley in performance styles that suggested Little Richard just as much as they suggested Jerry Lee Lewis.

The limited audio and visual evidence of the Legends’s short time together bears witness to Parsons’s earliest musical endeavors and talent. Indeed, as the \textit{Hi-Time} medley indicates, Parsons’s early preferences for close harmony singing and musical eclecticism provides a frame for the kinds of rich vocal blends and variety of repertoire that would pervade his future work. Perhaps more important though is how Parsons’s time in rock and roll manifested not a

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., For a discussion of WLAC and mail-order record retailers, see Charles L. Hughes, “‘Country-Soul’: Race and the Recording Industry in the U.S. South, 1960-1980” (PhD Diss.: University of Wisconsin—Madison, 2012), 44-49.; See also Christopher Rasmussen, “Lonely Sounds: Popular Recorded Music and American Society, 1949-1979” (PhD Diss.: University of Nebraska—Lincoln, 2008), 50-79, for a discussion of the Top 40 radio format and the importance of recordings in postwar youth culture.
transgressive rejection of his affluence or direct assault on the confining aspects of his upper
class position, but instead, a reflection of how his position could be used to benefit himself and
his bandmates. Thus, contradicting associations that critics like Booth made between rock and
rollers and overt scorn for the “American dream,” Parsons, the Legends, and their fellow Polk
County bands illustrate that like their hero Elvis Presley, they too were earnestly striving for
success through a refashioning of the many musical dialects that existed at the time.

Parsons’s early attraction to Elvis Presley and rock and roll connected him to a large
community of young people also negotiating dramatic social changes and identity through the
rock and roll process of absorption, revision, and fusion. Importantly, the meritocratic class-
obscurring sensibility and interracial expression fostered by Parsons’s rock and roll experiences
would provide an avenue into folk music, the next point of his musical journey.

**Rockin’ and Rollin’ Into the Urban Folk Revival**

While continuing to play gigs around the region with the Legends, Parsons began
cultivating an interest in folk music, particularly that of the commercial folk groups finding
success within the thriving urban folk boom. Significantly, Winter Haven, an enclave for young
rock and roll musicians, was also one of the few towns in central Florida to have radio stations
that played folk music in the early 1960s. WSIR-AM in Winter Haven and WGTO-AM,
broadcast from Cypress Gardens, provided exposure to groups such as Peter, Paul, and Mary, the
Chad Mitchell Trio, the Kingston Trio, the Limeliters, and the Journeymen, all groups whose
music was based not in preservation-minded recreations of older folk material or in topical
protest music related to current events, but in traditional material that could be adapted for more
pop-oriented listening audiences. Ultimately, it was the sound and aesthetic of these commercial
groups that would serve as the connective link for many rock and rollers moving toward folk as they reached college age.

With the help of Buddy Freeman, a family friend turned manager and booking agent, Parsons began playing solo shows between Legends sets, showcasing his growing repertoire which included everything from acoustic versions of Bobby Vinton’s “Blue Velvet” (1963) and the Kingston Trio’s “It Was a Very Good Year” (1961) to Peter, Paul, and Mary’s “If I Had a Hammer” (1962) and “Puff the Magic Dragon” (1963).\(^{53}\) Freeman recalls that as a solo performer, Parsons worked to please his audiences by focusing on current hits.\(^{54}\) Thus, like his work with the Pacers and Legends, Parsons tailored material and performances for young audiences with popular tastes. As a side project to the Legends, in 1962, Parsons and Winter Haven High classmate, Dickie McNeer formed the Village Vanguards with Patti Johnson, who played the “Mary” to Parsons’s and McNeer’s “Peter” and “Paul.” Wearing matching outfits in the tradition of many commercial folk groups, the Vanguards played during breaks at dances in high school gyms, at house parties, talent shows, and during intermissions at Legends shows. This integration of rock and roll with folk music not only hints at the fusions of rock and folk that would emerge later in the mid-1960s, but also speaks to a musical marketplace in the early 1960s that still denoted what Zak calls “aesthetic randomness,” much more than stylistic consistency.\(^{55}\) Though the Village Vanguards time together was short, the group would serve as Gram’s first, but not last, excursion into the heart of the more self-consciously commercial strand of the folk boom.

\(^{53}\) In an effort to establish his credibility as a country singer and establish his country roots, later in his career Parsons called this “sick music.” See Griffin, Gram Parsons, 55: “I really hated what I heard on the radio at this time… Bobby Vee, Bobby Vinton and that whole bit. It was a negative inspiration.”

\(^{54}\) Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 88.

\(^{55}\) Zak, I Don’t Sound Like Nobody, 211.
While rock and roll provided Parsons a means of connecting with musicians from other class positions and for tangentially engaging with discourses concerning youth identity and race in the South, his work in commercial folk would serve different, but related purposes. As he had done with rock and roll, Parsons approached folk material not with the intent of cultivating an actual working-class identity through it, but as a way to continue his affiliations with a rock-and-roll youth culture that was becoming more intellectually aware and socially conscious as it reached college age. In seeking a sense of authentic experience through music, many youth such as Parsons turned to folk in the belief that through its association with rural locales, the working-class, and other marginalized groups, folk music was oppositional to the popular mainstream. Thus, though the working-class associations and source material for young new folkies was drawn from a musical reservoir shared with early rock and roll, it was reconceptualized as the antithesis to rock and roll’s overt commercialism. The broader context for this antagonistic relationship between rock and roll and folk was an increased awareness and suspicion of the commercial marketplace on the part of folk enthusiasts. Paradoxically though, the musical products crafted through such suspicions would contribute in large part to folk’s boom in the early 1960s and to its own commercial success.

Parsons’s self-positioning within the urban folk revival provides evidence of this paradox. Indeed, as Parsons moved from rock and roll to folk music, he turned toward the most consciously commercial strand of the urban folk revival while implicitly identifying with its anti-mainstream values. Before exploring Parsons’s commercial folk excursions though, it will be useful to discuss this strand of the revival, its relationship with the other revival strands, and finally, its musical aesthetics and values. It becomes clear that in retaining many of the social and musical values of rock and roll, commercial folk, more than other folk strands, provided
young musicians with a means to continue their explorations of musical and social boundaries while striving for mainstream commercial success. Ultimately, as the next step in Parsons’s own “rock and roll process,” commercial folk would not only appeal to the inculcated attitudes and tastes of his upper class position, but also provide a new way to develop his musicianship and growing depth of musical knowledge.

Commercial Folk

While much has been written about the urban folk revival in general, most recent scholarly inquiries concerning the movement have tended to focus either on preservation and education-minded participants such as The New Lost City Ramblers or topical songwriters such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. The lack of critical work on performers such as the Kingston Trio and other commercially successful groups might suggest that an echo of the commercial folk-vs.-folk purist split, or the commerce-vs.-art divide, that existed within the revival may still be bouncing around the walls of the Academy today despite our best efforts to transcend value hierarchies based in conceptions of high and low art. It is not my intention here to offer a comprehensive survey of commercial folk, but to highlight its importance and influence on middle- and upper-class youth such as Parsons who had begun their musical paths in rock and roll.

In one of the few critical discussions of commercial folk Robert Cantwell has made connections between it and early rock and roll, specifically the kinds of rock and roll artists that

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56 See, for example, Ray Allen, Gone To the Country: The New Lost City Ramblers & the Folk Music Revival (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

57 There is one Master’s thesis that directly addresses commercial folk: Christy Jean Miller, “Peter, Paul and Mary and the Cultivation of Commercial Folk Music in the American Folk Revival” (Masters Thesis: University of Kansas—Lawrence, 2009).
many Polk County groups such as the Legends emulated.\textsuperscript{58} He observes that in the midst of rock and roll’s “massive commercialization, marketing and sex scandals, and, most of all, the strange disappearance of the founding performers” (Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis), a “vacuum in popular music had opened” that was filled with pop performers such as Frankie Avalon and Fabian.\textsuperscript{59} As a result, a broad sector of middle-class youth turned to folk music as a way to transport their imaginations away from the “high school corridors and sock hops” to “folk” worlds where the social and cultural affinities of early rock and roll could still be found. Highlighting the Kingston Trio in particular as representative of the kinds of folk groups that young people gravitated towards, Cantwell continues,

In the music of this group, underneath the gleam of sporty arrangements and expensive harmonies, there was something solemnly beckoning, a horizon of possibilities; though unapologetically commercial and almost cunningly Ivy League they performed the principal office of music, what some of the great rock-and-roll tunes from Memphis such as Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel” or Carl Perkins’s “Blue Suede Shoes” had done, which is to carry the spirit beyond itself into regions where the human story tells itself unabridged and unencumbered.\textsuperscript{60}

In words tinged with wistful romanticism, Cantwell points to the resonance of folk music for many 1950s youth culture members whose postwar affluence was beginning to merge with idealism, intellectual growth, and increasing social awareness. His words like Dylan’s mentioned above, also highlight a “horizon of possibilities” that, as Parsons’s time with rock and roll demonstrated, allowed for the blurring of prescribed social boundaries.


\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 316, 317.; See Zak, \textit{I Don’t Sound Like Nobody}, 211 for a discussion of rise of girl groups and emergence of Motown during “treacle period” previously described.

Musical boundaries also blurred. Like early rock and roll combos, commercial folk groups were essentially small acoustic string bands comprised of young white men who sang in “natural” voices that sounded untrained despite careful attention to phrasing, vowel sounds, and proper accenting. Also like rock and roll, commercial folk repertoire often featured relatively simple melodic lines and harmonic progressions that lent themselves well to vocal and instrumental arranging by amateur musicians with varying skill levels. In sum, the repertoire and musical presentation of these groups had an air of amateurism and folksy traditionalism that proved accessible to non-professional musicians and those like Parsons who were looking for new opportunities to develop and showcase their musical professionalism.

Attempting to account for the folk boom and the music’s success with college-age youth throughout the nation, periodicals of the time echoed earlier discussions of rock and roll’s youthful appeal, linking interest in folk music by urban youth with its rural origins and associations with marginalized groups. The Saturday Evening Post understood the folk phenomenon as “strange,” and consisting “of a rediscovery by city youth of what is essentially a country idiom, an urban folk revival that feeds upon songs of love, hate, birth, death and work that were born in the fields and on the prairies.” Gene Bluestein in a 1961 article entitled “Songs of the Silent Generation” wrote that the folk movement was “composed of students who are filled with the stubborn idealism that permeates the songs of Negro slaves, miners, hoboes, and blues singers.” Billboard magazine reported in August of 1963,  

Cantwell, When We Were Good, 316.
Gene Bluestein, “Songs of the Silent Generation,” New Republic, March 13, 1961, 21-22.: “This generation of college students has begun to react against being treated like adolescents…if they have not been ideological, they have been willing to associate themselves with non-conformist movements, despite warnings by parents and teachers that such activities will endanger their personal as well as their job security.”
“Hootenannies are the thing this year… There hasn’t been anything like it since rock and roll exploded on the music scene a decade ago, for the interest it has stirred up on the radio, TV, concert, one-nighter and festival level.” These accounts can be read as a kind of update to the fervor present in responses to rock and roll’s emergence and its connection to young people. In short, in the discourse of the early 1960s, a now college age rock and roll generation was no longer looking to the “cultures of the dying industrial city” for “connection to the past, for emotional expression, and a set of values that explained and justified rebellion,” but to those found within the pure, uncorrupted, rural country.

With antecedents in late nineteenth-century nationalist projects and Depression-era labor movements, the mid-twentieth century “folk revival” was fostered in urban enclaves throughout the United States, and as the articles cited above highlighted, did indeed appeal to many high-school and college-age listeners, some who identified with the music’s left-of-center politics and anti-modernism, some who found the music an inspiration for their own music-making, and many who found the music a more authentic alternative to the popular music mainstream. As Zak deftly describes, pop artists such as Brenda Lee and Paul Anka in this early 1960s mainstream reflected “a broad nexus of entertainment and commerce, each reinforcing the other in an unending process of large-scale cultural production, dissemination, acquisition, and use.”

Thus, as “mainstream” artists reflected nationwide market dominance through the distribution power of radio networks, Hollywood film companies, and the largest record labels, the relatively marginal market presence of folk artists heightened its image of authenticity and connectedness.

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64 “Hoots the Name of the Game This Year,” *Billboard*, Aug. 17, 1963, 1.


66 Zak, *I Don’t Sound Like Nobody*, 45.
to a mythical past and enduring tradition. Ultimately, with its concern for youth hipness, social awareness (of varying degrees), and the maintenance of an authenticity rooted in social values distanced from the pop mainstream, commercial folk commingled traditionalism and professionalism in a way that not only subverted its conscious interest in commercial success while achieving it, but also appealed to a rock and roll generation that was maturing.

Many histories of the folk revival cite the Kingston Trio’s 1958 recording of “Tom Dooley” as the official beginning of the urban folk craze though artists like the Weavers and Harry Belafonte had had mainstream success several years earlier. The Weavers in particular, among whose members included Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and Woody Guthrie topped the charts in 1950 with their rendition of Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter’s “Goodnight Irene” and according to Seeger himself, helped introduce folk music to the masses: “those months of early 1950 were an interesting experience. And at that time millions of teenagers first heard the words ‘folk song.’” In the years that followed, artists as diverse as Frank Sinatra, Dennis Day, Jo Stafford, Red Foley, and Ernest Tubb, all recorded versions of “Goodnight Irene” with considerable success. By 1958, the ground had been laid for folk’s widespread popularity and thus, when

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67 Ibid., 45, 63.

68 Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 121. Keightley defines folk authenticity as “musical experiences that are valued as unalienated and uncorrupted, “anti-mass” pleasures which were perceived to be musically pure, genuine and organically connected to the community that produced them.”

69 Cantwell, When We Were Good.; Ronald D. Cohen, Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970 (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Zak, I Don’t Sound Like Nobody, 65.

70 Quoted in Cohen, Rainbow Quest, 71. Revival historian Ronald Cohen charges that in the pursuit of popular recognition, “the Weavers seemingly compromised both their artistic and political integrity,” and in doing so, “temporarily occupied an awkward musical niche, bringing a sweetened, compromised folk music to a national audience” (Cohen, Rainbow Quest, 69-70). Cohen’s ostensibly negative characterization of the Weavers’s success is predicated on what seems to be an intrinsic connection between “folk music” and political consciousness.
the Kingston Trio’s “Tom Dooley” reached the top of the charts, almost immediately, folk music was catapulted into the national consciousness and into a position to fulfill the needs of a rock and roll generation looking for new sources of “authentic” musical expression. As such, in their idealized musical and lyrical constructions of rural, working-class “folk” worlds and their enormous commercial success, the Kingston Trio and the many groups that followed them paradoxically represented both a refusal and an embrace of the mainstream that for some rock and rollers like Parsons, proved an inspiration and new musical outlet.

Far removed from imagined origins and locales of the “folk,” the Kingston Trio was formed in the late 1950s in San Francisco, California, initially as a nightclub act. With the success of “Tom Dooley” in 1958 the group, comprised of Dave Guard, Bob Shane, and Nick Reynolds, began touring incessantly, becoming pioneers of the college concert circuit and setting the performance standard for many of the commercial folk groups that would form in the next few years. Emphasizing live appearances and visual appeal, the Trio wore striped button-down shirts, energetically ran out onto stages, and often infused comedy into their sets. In a description of “Tom Dooley” and the Kingston Trio’s status as “the hottest group in U.S. popular music” in Time magazine in 1960, the writer highlights the group’s popularity and polish:

Hoisted to these heights by the noose that hung Tom Dooley—the ballad was sleeping in an album they cut early in 1958—the Kingston Trio have added to the burgeoning U.S. folk music boom a slick combination of near-perfect close harmony and light blue humor. To help their predominantly collegiate and post-

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71 Ibid., 72. Sinatra’s version in particular, released only a month after the Weavers’s, remained on Billboard’s Best Seller chart for nine weeks, peaking at number five. See James Kaplan, Frank: The Voice (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 440.

72 The Kingston Trio’s “Tom Dooley” reached number one on the Billboard charts on November 17th, 1958, where it remained for one week. See Fred Bronson, The Billboard Book of Number One Hits (New York: American Photographic Book Pub., 1985), 45.

73 Cohen, Rainbow Quest, 134. The Kingston Trio’s reach was broader, thanks to pop radio programs, proliferating 45-rpm records, and college venues; The group was managed by Frank Weber and signed to Capitol Records.
collegiate audiences identify with them, the three do their best to festoon themselves in Ivy, wear button-down shirts, even chose the name Kingston because it had a ring of Princeton about it as well as a suggestion of calypso.\textsuperscript{74}

In another article in \textit{Downbeat} magazine written a year earlier in 1959, writer Richard Hadlock describes them as artists who happened to have “pressed the right commercial and artistic buttons at once,” initiating a success that was not accidental; “it grew from shrewd investments of time and talent coupled with systematic work.”\textsuperscript{75} These descriptions speak not only to the conscious commercial aspirations of the group and their management, but also hint at what writer and former Journeymen member Dick Weissman describes as an emerging sort of oppositional culture that developed between the “pop-folk stars” such as the Kingstons and the “urban revivalists” such as the New Lost City Ramblers who concerned themselves more with faithful presentations of traditional folk material for preservationist purposes than with commercial appeal.\textsuperscript{76}

In 1958, Roger Lass, a writer for folk music magazine \textit{Caravan} also discerned diversity within the movement, identifying several categories of folk musicians that existed at the time. Lass differentiated popular and classically trained “arty” adaptors of folk tunes such as the Kingston Trio and Richard Dyer-Bennett, “ethnic-professionals” such as Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly, and “self-conscious ethnic” artists such as the New Lost City Ramblers who “devote themselves, in their own playing, to the imitation of existing ethnic styles.”\textsuperscript{77} Lass concluded


that the last category, the “self-conscious ethnic” singers, would need a play preservationist role and pay close attention to the social and musical elements of the culture from which they were drawing material in order to “present” folk material rather than “interpret” it for their audiences. In a provocative piece written nearly a decade later, folklorist Ellen Stekert also identified similar categories: traditional singers, “imitators,” “utilizers,” and “urban utilizers” of the “new aesthetic.” Despite acknowledging that she was writing “in a humpty-dumpty age of ambivalent and misapplied words,” her categorizations, like Lass’s, were also formed along the lines of artist intention, faithfulness to original sources, and degrees of creative license used in adapting folk material toward commercial aims.

Commentary on such divisions was not limited to writers. Folk performers themselves were also conscious of differing musical and social values existing within the folk revival. The words of John Cohen and Tom Paley of the New Lost City Ramblers and Shane Guard and Nick Reynolds of the Kingston Trio offer insight into such consciousness and the kinds of critiques that each side leveled at one another. Cohen and Paley, in liner notes for the Ramblers’s first album (1958), contrasted themselves with other artists who “watered down” existing folk material: “This intrusion of Art (capital A) is done with the intent of making the music more palatable, so that the folk songs can fit in with the décor of the living room or what have you. But this becomes the death of these songs.” In notes for the group’s album, Old Timey Songs for Children (1959), Paley continued to articulate the Ramblers’s mission through chastising the popularization of commercial folk and commercial media outlets: “You will not find slick, commercial arrangements on this record—you can hear that kind of pap on the juke box and the


pot-luck juke box called radio any day—we prefer to leave the songs with their original vigor and feeling.”

80 In the course of their early career, in liner notes and performances, the Ramblers would continually express these types of critical appraisals of “pop-folk’s” stylistic and cultural inauthenticity.

In contrast, members of the Kingston Trio offered a different understanding of their position and goals within the folk community and marketplace. In an interview from the Downbeat article mentioned above, Guard represented the group as much more concerned with audience interaction than with the education-oriented purism that “self-conscious ethnic” singers such as the Ramblers advocated. Guard stated, “We are not students of folk music; the basic thing for us is honest and worthwhile songs, that people can pick up and become involved in.”

81 Echoing the group’s emphasis on pleasing audiences through accessibility, fellow Trio member, Nick Reynolds, summed up the group’s outlook on material in a way that again, contrasts with the Ramblers: “We don’t collect old songs in the sense that the academic cats do. We get new tunes to look over every day. Each one of us has his ears open constantly to new material or old stuff that’s good.” For the group, “good” material was that best suited for live performance. Guard continued, “When the performance is over… the piece is not significant anymore.”

82 Guard’s last point here is crucial to understanding a key difference between many of the “pop-folk” groups and the “urban revivalists.” While Cohen and Paley of the Ramblers advocated for the presentation and preservation of folk material gleaned either directly from forgotten ethnic and regional performers or recordings for educational purposes, Guard and Reynolds’ goals for


82 Ibid.
the music were understood more in terms of immediate audience engagement and entertainment.83

Musically, differences between groups like the Kingstons and groups like the Ramblers were manifest not only in chosen repertoire but also in instrumental and vocal styles. Concerned with clarity and polish, commercial groups stressed pure tonality, sticking very often to pitches of the diatonic scale and employing consonant harmonies built around major and minor triads in harmony singing. Largely homophonic textures built around vocals were augmented by accompanimental instruments often limited to strummed banjos and acoustic guitars with occasional string and brass orchestrations added for depth. In contrast, “urban revivalist” groups seeking to faithfully recreate traditional sounds and styles, imitated the bends, slurs, blues tonalities, and nasal timbres found in southern mountain singing while employing a diverse array of instruments. These ranged from the traditional string band lineup of guitar, banjo, and fiddle to other instruments such as mountain dulcimers, mandolins, slide guitars, and autoharps. Often the texture was a polyphonic or heterophonic mix with fiddles and banjos ornamenting the main melodic line and guitars adding harmonic stability through strummed chords.

A brief comparison of the Kingston Trio’s “Tom Dooley” (1958) and the New Lost City Ramblers’s version, from their second album, The New Lost City Ramblers Vol. II (1960), illustrates these musical and aesthetic differences.84 Using the first recording of “Tom Dooley” done in 1929 by Gilliam Grayson and Henry Whitter as their source, the Ramblers’s version

83 This contrast resonates with what Richard Crawford identifies as the dichotomy between accessibility and authenticity that emerged in America in the nineteenth century. He writes, “Until after the Civil War, the ethos of accessibility dominated the public performance of virtually all music in the United States. Indeed, perhaps no development in musical performance was more important than the appearance of a new attitude in opposition to accessibility, which may be called authenticity. In contrast to accessibility, authenticity centered on composers’ music, privileging works over occasions” (Crawford, America’s Musical Life, 228).

84 New Lost City Ramblers, Vol. II (Folkways Records FW02397, 1960).
features a single vocalist, fiddle, and acoustic guitar.\textsuperscript{85} Alternating with the choruses and verses, fiddle breaks mimic the vocal line while the acoustic guitar provides chords and rudimentary bass runs. The Ramblers’s version is a very close recreation of the early Grayson and Whitter recording with very few added musical or lyrical elements. Their devotion to the earliest recorded instance of the song is also indicative of the “purist” search for sources considered the most archaic, and in turn, most authentically folk—that is, perceived to be musically pure, genuine and organically connected to the community that produced it.\textsuperscript{86}

Released a year earlier, The Kingston Trio’s version, in contrast, drew from a 1952 recording done by folk singer and song collector Frank Warner.\textsuperscript{87} Like Warner, the Kingstons added a slight lilt to the beat and syncopation to the song’s chorus. Throughout the tune, the group sings in close harmony with clear diction while softly strummed acoustic guitars and a banjo provides accompaniment. Behind lead vocals in the verses, background “ooohs” and “ahhs” fill out the texture, and in the choruses, lead and background vocals enter into a call-and-response dialogue that suggests sing-along performer-audience interaction. Thus, in contrast to the Ramblers’s version where the sparser texture made the song’s tragic narrative the sole focus, the Kingston’s version, with its scripted vocal arrangement, lush instrumental backdrop, and rhythmic variation, draws more attention to the music. Regarding this approach, Guard remarked, “Kids simply aren’t ready to really listen to music… ‘Tom Dooley’ was one of those odd things, but in general the younger ones want something more physical, that doesn’t require much thought.”\textsuperscript{88} Thus, stressing the physicality of the music and visceral response over

\textsuperscript{85} Grayson and Whitter, “Tom Dooley” (Victor 40235, 1929).

\textsuperscript{86} Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 121.

\textsuperscript{87} Frank Warner, Frank Warner Sings American Folk Songs and Ballads (Elektra EKLP-3, 1952).
intellectual possibility, the Kingston’s *interpretation* of “Tom Dooley” utilized elements of pop production in a conscious way. Although deemed inauthentic by the Ramblers and others within their “purist” cohort, it was this “pop-folk” approach that would receive the lion’s share of the commercial spotlight and inspire a multitude of young people such as Parsons to turn to folk music.\(^8^9\)

What both groups did have in common though were repertoires that consisted of tunes that by and large, did not address contemporary issues, namely those taken up by the then-burgeoning civil rights and student peace movements. As these movements began to flourish in urban cultural centers and on college campuses across the nation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, “pop-folk” groups and “urban revivalists” parted ways with the emerging strand of folkies such as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan who, in picking up the political awareness and activism that had been present in the work of predecessors like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, began writing topical songs concerned with social issues of the time. In contrast to such social cause-minded folkies, the Ramblers continued to record versions of previously recorded material that could have been construed as only tangentially political, if at all.\(^9^0\) The Kingston Trio also avoided engaging with material that directly confronted issues facing the nation at the time, either drawing on material written by their contemporaries or arranging traditional songs without overt political messages.\(^9^1\)

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\(^8^9\) Bill Malone writes that “urban folk music was essentially a facet of pop music… and many people, such as Janis Joplin and Gram Parsons, moved easily from rock-and-roll to folk and then to hard rock or other forms of music” (Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 279).

\(^9^0\) Upon first glance, the group’s 1959 album, *Songs from the Depression*, might have suggested political content, but John Cohen recalled that “it was just a topic” not intended to “provide anyone with a cause to pursue.” See Ray Allen, *Gone to the Country*, 70-75.
Even as the urban folk boom reached its peak in the early years of the 1960s, various factions within the movement continued to struggle in defining what constituted genuine, or authentic, folk expression in the midst of the music’s commercial success and potential as a voice for social awareness and change.\textsuperscript{92} As Ray Allen writes, “the folk revival was multidimensional and not easily reducible to a single category of music, a particular political ideology, a common set of values, or even a shared cultural perspective.”\textsuperscript{93} Ultimately, it was the sound, professionalism, stylized rusticity, and entertainment value of commercial folk more than the music’s former or current political associations that appealed to Parsons and others within his specific folk-enthusiast cohort.

The Shilos

In 1963, after Parsons failed eleventh grade at Winter Haven High, Parsons’s mother and stepfather sent him to the Bolles School, a small private school in Jacksonville, Florida. Once a strict Southern military academy, Bolles, at the time, was softening its hard edges and beginning to shed its military past. Discipline was manifest less in formal military structure and more in grooming students for class-appropriate behavior. Such transition from military rigidity was difficult at Bolles in the early 1960s when, in light of the ominous conflict looming in Vietnam, parents were less than enthusiastic about military training. The older generation of teachers still expected the disciplined respect of students while younger instructors, who had not been

\textsuperscript{91} In 1964, The Kingston Trio did make an attempt to cover more topical material on \textit{Time to Think} (Capitol T2011, 1964). The album included songs related to the plight of coal miners, the poor, social justice, and the deceased John F. Kennedy.

\textsuperscript{92} See Cohen, Chapter 7: “The Revival’s Peak, 1963-1964” in \textit{Rainbow Quest}, 194-228, for a discussion of the intersection of authenticity, commerce, and politics at the height of the folk revival’s peak.

groomed by the military, didn’t. Quinn Barton, a teacher at Bolles recalls, “People like Gram loosened us up.”94 One teacher in particular, Robert Hubbard, was especially influential to Parsons, introducing him to Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.95

It was at Bolles that Parsons began writing his own folk songs and immersing himself completely in music. Retaining Buddy Freeman as his manager, Parsons continued booking solo performances around the South. A particularly important gig was at the Coca-Cola Hootenanny, a talent show held in Greenville, South Carolina. At this contest, Parsons served as MC, performer, and judge, and also met members of the Shilos, a three-piece folk trio from Greenville consisting of banjoist Paul Surratt, bassist Joe Kelly, and guitarist George Wrigley. In an impromptu meeting backstage, Parsons, Surratt, and Kelly found common interest in the music of the New Christy Minstrels and the Journeymen, both successors of the Kingston Trio who emulated the Trio’s polish and focus on intricate arrangements and rich harmony singing.96 Though the Shilos lived states away, Parsons quickly became a full-time member of the group and its driving force.

Under the musical direction of Parsons and business direction of Buddy Freeman, the Shilos played hospitals, department store openings, high schools, charity functions for organization like the South Carolina Teachers’ Association, television shows such as Shindig, and coffeehouses throughout the South.97 In addition to growing tighter as a band through a

94 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 103.

95 See Kealing, Calling Me Home, 86.; Walker, God’s Own Singer, 29.

96 Surratt recalls, “We met Gram backstage and started talking about folk music and the Journeymen and we all started singing… And we had this incredible blend, the three of us, and we just stopped and looked at each other, this magical thing that happened immediately” (Quoted in Walker, God’s Own Singer, 32). See also Surratt interview in Griffin, Gram Parsons, 35-45.
month-long gig in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, the Shilos’s summer of 1964 was punctuated by a trip to Greenwich Village, the northeast Mecca of the folk boom. Having met John Phillips of the Journeymen months earlier at a show during their “Hoot Tour,” the musicians found themselves at Phillips’s apartment on 116th Street where they also met Dick Weissman, then the banjoist in the Journeymen. As well as playing gigs at some of the Village’s most important venues, through Phillips and Weissman, the group even obtained an audition for a management group with connections to Albert Grossman, Bob Dylan’s manager. The Shilos played well enough to impress Grossman and were offered contracts on the spot, but when Grossman and the management team discovered that the Shilos were still in high school and too young to sign a contract, the deal was cancelled. The reality of having to head back south for senior year weighed on the Shilos, but ultimately, their New York trip had introduced them to their folk heroes and new audiences, and gave Parsons a connection to a robust world of musical freedom and bohemian hipness to which he would return not long after.

In early 1965, the Shilos, then in their senior years and back from New York, recorded a demo at Bob Jones University in Greenville. The demo contains some of Parsons’s first

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97 Though cities throughout the Northeast and West Coast are generally described as the nation’s folk centers during the folk boom of the 1950s and 1960s, the South also had a significant number of venues that supported folk music and musicians. South Florida, in particular, boasted a wealth of coffeehouses such as the Other Room in Lakeland’s Dixieland District, the Carrera Room in Orlando, and the 18th String and Beaux Arts in Tampa Bay. Also in South Florida: the Flick, Gaslight South, the Coffee House, the Catacombs, Pegasus, and in Jacksonville, Café Espresso, where some classic pictures of Parsons were taken (See Kealing, Calling Me Home, 75).

98 For a discussion of the Hoot Tour and its contentious trip through the South see Cohen, Rainbow Quest, 205.

99 Kealing, Calling Me Home, 96.: Venues included the Café Wha?, the Town and Country Club, the Bitter End, and Café Rafio.

100 Intended as a way for the group to get its feet in the door at a number of television variety shows and record companies, the demo was never officially released until 1979 when Sierra Records released it as an LP under the title Gram Parsons: The Early Years, 1963-1965 (Sierra Records SRS-8702, 1979). Recorded on a single microphone, the members, like earlier bluegrass and old-time groups, had to adjust volumes and vocal blend themselves as they leaned toward or away from the microphone. As Kelly recalls, “It was like singing into a big electric razor…It was a one-hour session and we took an hour. We just ran through it. There weren’t any second takes” (Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 120).
original compositions, traditional folk selections, and a number of other then-current commercial songs. A brief sampling of a few of the demo’s representative tracks illustrate the group’s positioning within the world of the folk revival, its musical and aesthetic preferences, and a glimpse into Parsons’s early compositional style.

The first track, “I May Be Right” was originally written by Dick Weissman and included on the Journeymen’s influential *New Directions in Folk Music* (1963). Though they adhere relatively close to the form and arrangement of the Journeymen’s original recording, the Shilos make alterations to the song, particularly a change to the verse’s melodic line and harmonic underpinning and an emphasis on Surratt’s banjo playing, which figures prominently in the song’s opening and break before the second verse. In a style more like the Kingston Trio than the New Lost City Ramblers, Parsons sings the song’s lead vocal with a tightly-controlled vibrato and full chest voice, clearly enunciating lyrics that concern a traveler’s journey over mountains and lonesome roads to find “a gal,” while the group’s other members supply background “oohs” and staggered chorus entrances. This opening cut introduces the sound and stylistic orientation that pervades the rest of the demo.

As a paean to the expanse of the country and the freedom to travel it, “Big Country,” the second track, was written by Jay Irwin and echoes the traveling trope of “I May Be Right.” Though without references to specifics landmarks within the country, the song emphasizes rural locales, allowing Parsons to assert that he has plenty to see and that the city is no place for him:

So, give me the road and a strong heart to travel with, a mind that’s always free. I don’t even know if I’ll be back again, I gotta lot of things to see (to see). It’s a mighty big country.

Again, Parsons sings the lead vocal part against a strummed acoustic guitar accompaniment and supporting background vocals. Like “I May Be Right,” Parsons vocal mannerisms include
vibrato and a full, rounded timbre that eschews the nasal quality found in much earlier traditional southern mountain singing and vocal deliveries of the “self-conscious ethnic singers” within the revival. This kind of polished vocal performance continues onto the next track, “Zah’s Blues,” the first Parsons original and early example of his maturing authorial voice.

“Zah’s Blues” explores themes of nostalgia and aging. Though Parsons claimed to have written about an actress whom he had met while in New York the previous summer, his lyrics perhaps speak more profoundly to his personal struggles with wealth and the tragedy that it was mixed with during his childhood:

A baby doesn’t know how loneliness can feel.  
She has her own small world and nothing in it’s real.  
Just spread joy all around and watch the sun coming down.

When I was young the world was rich with spices and parfaits.  
My heart was filled with pride; my head was filled with praise.  
I wore my youth like a crown and watched the sun coming down.

Love only lasts for a moment; life holds a brief smile for all.  
The sunshine can’t last forever and soon the night must fall.

Memories can fade in dreams that you can’t find.  
You’ll finally reach the end and never look behind.  
No use in turning around, it’s just the sun coming down.

To make a connection between these words and Parsons’s biography can only be speculative, but nonetheless it is useful to do so if only to highlight a turn toward more introspective songwriting that had begun taking hold within the folk movement months earlier. Indeed, in late 1964, Bob Dylan, the folk movement’s most visible and arguably influential figure, moved away from the overtly political writing that had secured his status as a folk protest singer up to that point and began writing more abstract, metaphorical, and introspective songs.\(^{101}\) Though is does not

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\(^{101}\) Another Side of Bob Life (1964) signaled a turn away from the overt politicism that marked Dylan’s previous work. Illustrative is “My Back Pages,” which offered a rejection of his earlier protest-inspired idealism: “I was so much older then/ I’m younger than that now.” It becomes evident in Parsons’s letters and interviews that he held
possess the mysticism or symbolic weight of Dylan’s personal manifesto in his “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” “Zah’s Blues” does illustrate Parsons’s understanding and ownership of youthfulness and loss.\textsuperscript{102} Indeed, Parsons acknowledges the encouragement and self-assuredness that a family’s wealth can provide, but also the fleeting moments with which love is actually shared in the midst of such wealth. The imagery and metaphor of a sun setting and dark night coming on also signal the sense of final closure often associated with death. This was a subject that Parsons had intimate knowledge of given his father’s earlier suicide and the rapidly deteriorating condition of his mother who was struggling with alcohol addiction at the time.

Musically, “Zah’s Blues” is also somewhat of a departure in the context of other material on the Shilos’s recording. Parsons alone croons the song’s lyrics, employing wide vibrato, open vowels, resonance through both his head and chest cavities, and very clear diction. At times singing with a lullaby-like softness, this delivery highlights not only how his vocal mannerisms had developed since his earlier rock and roll performances, but also the kind of emotional investment and conviction evident in Parsons’s early folk performances.\textsuperscript{103}


\textsuperscript{103} In regard to the lullaby quality of “Zah’s Blues,” it is possible to offer one further interpretation of both the song’s lyrics and mood. In the midst of Parsons’s mother’s alcoholic decline and the increasingly tense relationship between Big Avis and Bob Parsons, Parsons showed much concern for his younger sister, Little Avis, who was often present for domestic disputes. Written months after “Zah’s Blues” was recorded, a letter to Little Avis from her brother showed his recognition of the hardships that wealth and death had brought to his family. Parsons wrote, “I wish there was one thing I could tell, some clear advice to whisk away all the things that are bothering you right now…The best thing we can do is learn from the past and live our lives the right way…not sick and haunted by what life has done to us” (Reprinted in Meyer, \textit{Twenty Thousand Roads}, 163). In light of Parsons’s brotherly concern, the first verse of “Zah’s Blues” in which he sings, “A baby doesn't know/ How loneliness can feel/ She has
accompaniment is his acoustic guitar, which vamps a jazz-based progression filled with minor 7th chords, 13th chords, and major 7ths. Although these chords push beyond the standard major and minor harmonic language that pervades the rest of the demo, they nonetheless also connect to commercial folk repertoire, for the song’s changes bear a similarity to “Scotch and Soda,” a 1940s swing tune recorded by The Kingston Trio in 1958.  

Following “Zah’s Blues,” the recording includes a harmonized rendition of Pete Seeger’s “The Bells of Rhymney,” a song that Parsons had begun arranging months earlier at Bolles, “They Still Go Down,” a miner’s lament written by Dick Weissman, and “Mary Don’t You Weep,” a narrative song about the Alamo in which Parsons shares lead vocal duties with the rest of the group. The inclusion of these songs serves as an example of the attention given to historical narratives by commercial folk groups as a way of identifying with working-class moral values and idealism. Whatever political content could be extracted from these types of songs was universal, not cause-specific, and thus, like “Tom Dooley,” provided a safe entry into a world no less idealized, but with perhaps more substantial moral weight and an air of intellectualism. Also included are two arranged spirituals, “On My Journey Home” and “Oh, Didn’t They Crucify My Lord,” and finally, one more Parsons original entitled “Surfinanny,” her own small world/ And nothing in it’s real,” speaks to the fragility and innocence of youth naiveté in which knowledge of the “real world” hasn’t yet been gained. Thus the crooning, lullaby quality of Parsons’s vocal delivery is all the more meaningful if we understand it as being directed toward his sister.


105 According to Surratt: “We never knew anything about politics back then. All the four of us know was we were doing great songs about fun things. George was political but as kids…you just make moneymaking records and live happily ever after. I was only sixteen…the big folk boom was on. Folk was everywhere back then and as it is the South’s cultural heritage it went over real well” (Griffin, Gram Parsons, 37).
which borrows from Gus Cannon’s “Raise a Ruckus Tonight” (1963)\(^{106}\) and was intended as a promotional piece for Cypress Gardens, a theme park in Winter Haven.

Using the demo as a promotional piece to send to television and record companies, Surratt, Wrigley, and Parsons wrote a letter to accompany their recording: “We would greatly appreciate your giving the enclosed tapes your most careful consideration. We believe we have the newest and freshest style to come along in the folk field for many years… We feel that we could be of significant value to your company.”\(^{107}\) Unfortunately for the Shilos, they were advertising a repertoire and sound that was quickly becoming old-fashioned and out-of-touch with what was happening in the folk world, and in the popular music world at large. Indeed, by the summer of 1965, Bob Dylan had abandoned the acoustic folk sound aesthetic and the topical social commentary of his earlier work by “going electric” at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, while the Byrd’s reached to the top of the charts with their electrified version of Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Ultimately, as a new strand within the popular music landscape, Dylan’s and the Byrd’s “folk rock” had ignited a reconceptualization of what had become accepted tenets of folk authenticity and effectively ushered in a new wave of commercially successful folk-inspired rock music. Although Parsons was beginning to compose more and more original material, he and the Shilos, meanwhile, had continued to pursue the sound and style of the Kingston Trio and the Journeymen, groups whose particular folk wave had crested months earlier. The “times were a-changin’” quickly, but it seems that the Shilos weren’t.

Perhaps sensing the Shilos absence in the changing tide, Parsons wrote to Paul Surratt in the spring of 1965 to express some trepidation about the future direction of the Shilos: “We’re going to have to do some serious rearranging. The people want a different sound, and ours isn’t


\(^{107}\) Letter reprinted in Kealing, *Calling Me Home*, 107.
different enough yet.”\textsuperscript{108} Parsons wanted to pursue more original music and urged the group to devote serious time to his new compositions, which as “Zah’s Blues” indicated, were beginning to focus more on introspective reflection and personal testimony. In Parsons’s typical hyperbolic fashion, he assured Surratt that his music was “going to be as big as Dylan’s” and that he still wanted “to make it with the Shilos.”\textsuperscript{109} Despite his words, it seems that Parsons had other plans for his future. He had been accepted to Harvard University and, in the summer of 1965, drove north to spend the summer back in Greenwich Village before heading to Cambridge for college in the fall.\textsuperscript{110} Parsons’s time with the Shilos was over. Ultimately though, the lessons he had learned playing rock and roll with the Legends and commercial folk with the Shilos had helped prepare him for the ideological and musical experiments that he would begin making in the Northeast.

**Overcoming the “Identity Crisis”**

Following graduation from the Bolles School, Parsons spent the summer in Greenwich Village writing, performing, and making connections with other musicians. Renting a small studio apartment off Bleecker Street, Parsons lived across the street from future Buffalo Springfield members Richie Furay and Stephen Stills, both young folkies who were, like Parsons, in a period of musical transition.\textsuperscript{111} In addition to musicians, Parsons also befriended

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} The Shilos last extended gasp happened over Parsons’s winter break in late 1964. Bob Parsons leased an old warehouse in Winter Haven for Parsons and the Shilos to perform at. The warehouse was soon turned into a coffeehouse called the Derry Down and though it didn’t serve alcohol, provided a social space for those too old for the teen centers, but too young for bars. Parsons and the Shilos were the featured performers and after the boys went back to school for the spring term, the Derry Down continued to book local bands and groups from out of town.
former child actor and star Brandon De Wilde, who at the time was attempting to turn from acting to music. At the end of the summer, in the midst of writing and performing, Parsons and De Wilde attended a Beatles concert at Shea Stadium. Like his earlier experience seeing Elvis Presley in Waycross, Georgia, Parsons was moved by the Beatles’s effect on the thousands in attendance. In the midst of the folk boom’s dwindling and changes within the Village’s music scene, the folk music landscape was certainly changing and Parsons was looking for direction. It was at Harvard in Cambridge in the fall of 1965 that he would find the musicians that would help give him some.

In an interview in 1972, Parsons said of his brief time at Harvard, “I think I was there for about four hours and fifteen minutes.” As his freshman advisor Jet Thomas attests, Parsons “never went to classes” and that it was “clear from the moment he got here [Harvard] that he was interested in music.” Indeed, not long after arriving in Cambridge, Parsons began recruiting musicians from the area to join him in a new group. Christened Gram Parsons and the Like, Parsons’s new band was comprised of singer, guitarist, and saxophonist Ian Dunlop, guitarist John Nuese, and drummer Mickey Gauvin. The group rehearsed at Dunlop’s apartment in Cambridge, focusing almost exclusively on Parsons’s growing repertoire of original material. Dunlop recalls of Parsons’s songwriting, “There was individuality and creativity in his writing. It was highly romantic and lyrical, and not based in grooves or riffs as in rhythm and blues.”

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111 At the time they were part of the Au-Go-Go Singers. Soon after, Furay and Stills would travel to Los Angeles and form the Buffalo Springfield with another young folkie, Neil Young.

112 De Wilde become most famous for his role as young Joey Starrett in the 1953 western, Shane, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor.

113 Griffin, Gram Parsons, 56.

114 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 153.

115 Ibid., 159.
In line with the sound and style of folk rock emerging on the West Coast via the Byrds and permeating the Beatles’s then-current release, *Rubber Soul* (1965), recordings of Parsons’s own “I Just Can’t Take it Anymore” and “November Nights” by the Like feature droning and chiming electric guitars, danceable rhythms, melodic hooks in the choruses, and lyrics that address personal reflections on life and relationships. Recorded in late 1965 at RCA Studios in New York City, these songs, which emerged for the first time on Sierra Records’s *Early Years* box set in 2011, reflect Parsons’s brief foray into folk-inspired rock. Though in short time the Like would rechristen themselves the International Submarine Band and plunge deep into country music, for a short period in 1965, they were like so many other young musicians trying to keep up with the swift changes taking place in popular music.

The Like’s recordings help to provide context for a more substantial batch of recordings that Parsons made with former Legend bandmate Jim Carlton on two occasions in 1965. Setting up two microphones in a bedroom at his father’s house, Carlton recorded Parsons alone with an acoustic guitar first in March and then just after Christmas Day in 1965. Ultimately, eighteen tracks were recorded that wouldn’t surface until 2000 when Sundazed Records released them as *Another Side of this Life: The Lost Recordings of Gram Parsons, 1965-1966*. Recorded prior to his departure for Greenwich Village, Parsons’s first set of recordings from March adhere very closely to the sound, style, and repertoire of his Shilos material. In contrast, Parsons’s recordings from December draw on a more diverse repertoire. Ranging from Brill Building pop

\[\text{116} \text{Ibid., 136.: Carlton recalls, “Neither Gram nor I had any agenda but to get the tunes... We did four sessions in all—it happened whenever he would drop by.”}\]

\[\text{117 Gram Parsons, *Another Side of This Life* (Sundazed SC 11092, 2000).}\]

\[\text{118 In addition to his own “Zah’s Blues,” Parsons performed “They Still Go Down” by Dick Weissman, “Pride of Man” by folkie Hamilton Camp, “The Last Thing on My Mind” by Tom Paxton, and “Hey Nellie Nellie,” an historical epic by David and Jonathon Fromer and Elbert Robinson.}\]
such as Lieber and Stoller’s “Searchin’” to blues such as Reverend Gary Davis’s “Candy Man,”
the eclectic batch of cover songs on the December recordings reflect Parsons’s continuing “rock
and roll process” of mixing idioms without recourse to musical and social boundaries or aesthetic
traditions. Perhaps just as significant are the growing number of original Parsons’s compositions
that exhibit an introspective turn and expanding musical language. Together, the March and
December recordings serve as bookends to Parsons’s forays in commercial folk and offer an
intimate glimpse at an artist in transition at the close of the folk boom and the beginning of rock
and roll’s return to the mainstream via the British Invasion and folk rock.

Of the original compositions Parsons recorded in the later December sessions,
“November Nights” and “Brass Buttons” most clearly reflect Parsons’s developing songwriting
and musical style.119 Although the Like recorded “November Nights” earlier, Parsons’s spoken
introduction to the candid acoustic version reveals this development in his own words. Indeed,
as the track opens, Parsons explains that the tune is “sort of Bach-ian” and that one has to “listen
to the phrasing, because it’s very wild.” Probably what Parsons was referring to as “Bach-ian”
and “very wild” are the subtle changes that occur in the song’s rhythmic profile and guitar’s
strumming pattern as the song moves from verse to chorus, and also the use of the minor
subdominant chord in the chorus. This subtle harmonic nuance created by the movement from I
to iv and back to I is perhaps more “Beatles-ian” than “Bach-ian,” as a number of early Beatles
tunes employ this convention.120

Significantly, Parsons’s reference to Bach was not altogether unusual. Bob Dylan
described the Byrds as having a “danceable Bach sound” and Roger McGuinn described his

119 The other Parsons original recorded in December was “I Just Can’t Take It Anymore,” an upbeat tune with clear
rock and roll influence.

120 See, for instance, “What Goes On” on Rubber Soul (Capitol Records ST 2442, 1965).
introduction to their cover of Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man” as “Bachlike.” These allusions
to the Baroque composer may have been intended to impart a sense of intellectualism and
musical knowledge onto their work, but also may have been the product of not knowing how to
describe progressions not based in blues harmonies without referring to the Beatles. Though
there is little evidence to suggest that Parsons, Dylan, or McGuinn consciously sought to deny
the awareness or influence of the Beatles, sidestepping their mention in favor of Bach raises two
important questions. First, given the enormous success and international impact of the Beatles,
might it be possible that the group had become perceived as too overtly commercial? And
second, as such, might the references to Bach have been intended to position Dylan, McGuinn,
and Parsons on the art side of the art vs. commercial divide that had emerged within the folk
revival and developing discourse of rock? These questions are not intended to suggest that the
Beatles were, in fact, too commercial or that Parsons and his peers actually perceived them as
such, but to recognize how the Beatles’s position at the nexus of the powerful shifts taking place
within popular music was acknowledged by both professional musicians such as Dylan and
McGuinn and those striving for success like Parsons. Ultimately, in downplaying the Beatles’s
musical influence, but realizing the impact of their star power on audiences and the media, it
seems that Parsons had a conflicted relationship with the group. As much as the Beatles’s
popularity provided inspiration as his experience seeing the group at Shea Stadium indicated, the

121 Paul J. Robbins interview with Bob Dylan” Los Angeles Free Press, September 17 and 25, 1965.; Randy Alberts,
“Roger McGuinn: 8 Drives High,” O’Reilly Media
3, 2014.

122 In this light, it is somewhat ironic that the Beatles too exhibited consciousness of this developing divide, for at
the request of John Lennon, producer George Martin added a “Baroque-sounding” keyboard solo to Rubber Soul’s
“In My Life” (1965).
desire to not be seen as musically derivative may have compelled him to negate their effect on his own work.

Aside from his introduction and harmonic language, Parsons’s vocal delivery of the song is also significant, for it highlights a shift from the rich open resonance and wide vibrato of his previous recordings to a more nasal and focused sound. This change is even more pronounced in the electric Like recording of “November Nights,” where Parsons struggles with pitch, breath support (vocal fry “always” in last chorus), and timing (rushes ends of phrases in pre-choruses). Although Mather, in her discussion of Parsons’s voice, highlights his performance of “November Nights” as firmly in the folk style of the Shilos, it could be also argued that it provides one of the clearest examples of a move away from the polish of commercial folk back to the rock-and-roll styled singing that he had done years earlier. Importantly, the vocal “problems,” i.e. pitch, timing, present in “November Nights” would also become a defining source of authentication for Parsons’s work in country music not long after.123

The lyrics of “November Nights” reveal indebtedness to Dylan’s Another Side of Bob Dylan (1964), and particularly songs such as “I Don’t Believe You” and “It Ain’t Me, Babe” which concern love and longing. Unconnected to either current or historical events or an imagined rural working-class world, the nostalgic lyrics reflect on remembrances of “candlelit skies” and love on “November Nights”:

Verse One:
You say that you’re restless, you say that you know me too well.
You’ve seen all my best and you’ve heard all the stories I tell.
You think you’ve been taken for granted, you’re probably right.

Chorus:
Still I remember a November night,
When the dawn on your doorway shone white with frost.

123 See Mather, “Regressive Country.”
And the soft love that always began with the touch of your hand,  
And recall the mornings that tossed your hair in the wind.

Ultimately, in expanding beyond the traditional sonic and lyrical palette of commercial folk with  
“November Nights” in both its acoustic and electric forms, Parsons showed himself to be  
catching up with current popular music trends. Indeed, employing lyrical imagery indebted to  
Dylan and a musical language that suggested folk rock, Parsons was finding the “different  
sound” the Shilos had lacked.

Like “November Nights,” “Brass Buttons” also shows Parsons stretching his musical  
boundaries and reaching even further into his own life experiences for subject matter. Though it  
was recorded in December of 1965, “Brass Buttons” began as a poem entitled  
“Prereminescence.” Written months earlier while Parsons was a senior at Bolles, the poem first  
appeared in the Bolles School Literary Magazine in the spring of 1965. Revealing the  
influence of the Beat writers he had been introduced to earlier, the poem stands as an emotional  
reflection, specifically on the past and alcoholism, and more broadly to how they both had  
become wound together in Parsons’s present. Frequent references to “brass buttons” and fine  
clothing are juxtaposed with images of old drunks on barstools longing for the reappearance of  
those fine clothes and times when “warm evenings” had “delight”:

**Prereminescence**
Brass Buttons  
Green Silk, and Silver Shoes  
Warm Evening’s  
Delight,  
Cocoa Hues  
Brightly buckled thoughts  
Held fearfully fast  
Against the clumsy  
Crashing truth of the  
Present.

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“Gimme the old days,”
Squats the
Puffy-eyed old thing
On the last stool,
“Yes, Giv’ em back.”
The drunken mirror in
Front of him mutters
(slyly through a crack.)

...

The young also remember.
Clean sharp memories.
Not rusted or
Worn from over-use.

Yes, my Familiars
Wink back at me
Sometimes from brass buttons
Leaving hints
Of the future’s endless
Supply of stools
And mirrors.

... 125

The poem’s world-weary sentiments belie Parsons’s eighteen-year-old sensibility. By 1965, Parsons had experienced much more than many of his peers, having endured the suicide of his father years earlier, an adoption, and his mother’s increasing dependence on alcohol. Of a piece with “Zah’s Blues,” this theme of youthful awareness grounded in personal experience is one that Parsons would return to often in later compositions.

In song form, “Prereminescence” became “Brass Buttons.” 126 Despite the modified text and poetic structure, themes present in “Brass Buttons” echo those of the poem closely. The

125 Reprinted in Walker, God’s Own Singer, 29.

126 Parsons would record the song in two versions: one in the Carlton collection discussed here and later on Grievous Angel, his last album recorded before his death in 1973.
protagonist understands that the past or “dream” is too real in the present to be idealized as anything other than what it was: a finely dressed tragedy soaked in a “bottle of blues”:

Chorus:
Brass buttons, green silks and silver shoes,
Warm evenings, pale mornings, bottle of blues,
And the tiny golden pins that she wore up in her hair,
Brass buttons, green silks and silver shoes.

Verse One:
My mind was young until she grew,
My secret thoughts known only by a few.
It was a dream much too real
To be leaned against too long,
All the time I think she knew.

Verse Two:
Her words still dance inside my head.
Her comb still lies beside my bed,
And the sun comes up without her
It just doesn’t know she’s gone.
Ooh, but I remember everything she said.

Chorus:
Brass buttons, green silks and silver shoes,
Warm evenings, pale mornings, bottle of blues,
And the tiny golden pins that she wore up in her hair,
Brass buttons, green silks and silver shoes.

If “Prereminescence” only hinted at his inner grief while his mother was still alive, “Brass Buttons” more clearly provokes a sense of loss that is reinforced by the protagonist’s memory. It seems that in the midst of Parsons’s mother’s decline and death, Parsons’s transformation of “Brass Buttons,” from poem to song, provided him a musical way to articulate his feelings about loss, and particularly, the loss of his mother in an emotionally charged, introspective and personal way.

The intertextual relationship between “Prereminescence” and “Brass Buttons,” autobiographical resonance in each, and mature tone of both works also illustrate the interplay of
multiple authorial voices. Given that Parsons composed the poem and song he can be attributed as the “real author,” yet, in song form, “Brass Buttons” takes on a performative dimension that intertwines Parsons’s actual voice with words and music that may or may not be heard as directly related to his life. Indeed, the song might just as easily be interpreted as a song of lost love. In short, if connections between Parsons’s biography and the song are made, it is because we, as listeners, cull from knowledge of Parsons’s personal life and supply the connective tissue, so to speak. Thus, existing as a “sensibility” comprised of feelings, intelligence, knowledge, and opinions that listeners ascribe to him, Parsons also becomes an “implied author” of the texts while retaining a sense of authorial primacy. As mentioned in the Introduction, recognition of such “implied authorship” and the multiplicity of “voices” at play within a work allows for a more critical assessment of the presumed connections between author and song, song and performance.

Like “November Nights,” the Carlton recording of “Brass Buttons” also suggests a subtle shift in Parsons’s musical direction, again, in regard to vocal delivery. He employs his deep vibrato only once on the word “her” in the second verse, and often shortens phrase endings where he might have earlier extended them. Despite the relative restraint in his performance, however, this early version of “Brass Buttons” exudes a soft-spoken tenderness that while less overtly expressive than earlier compositions such “Zah’s Blues” or “Big Country,” captures the subtlety of Parsons’s meditations on memory, love, loss, and a number of very personal themes.

Ultimately, Parsons’s Carlton recordings from March and December of 1965 serve as bookends to a period of change and experimentation within Parsons’s social and musical worlds. They also remind us that Parsons, often imagined and understood as the ground-breaking country

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rock pioneer with country music in his Southern roots, was like many of his peers, once a young middle-class folkie thoroughly committed to the music, but coming to terms with the renegotiations of what popular music constituted at the end of the folk boom’s peak and rock and roll’s re-emergence in a new guise.

**Conclusion**

In addition to nurturing Parsons’s musical ambitions, Harvard’s intellectual setting also became Parsons’s platform for self-aggrandizement. Feeling at ease amongst the school’s student body, which was largely comprised of white, middle- and upper-class youth, Parsons brought himself some publicity through some outrageous claims. In an article in the *Harvard Crimson* entitled, “Yardling to Rock, Signs RCA Contract,” Parsons claimed that the Like had signed “the second highest promotional contract in RCA-Victor’s history—exceeded only by Elvis Presley.”128 The paper also reported that a dozen other companies were vying to sign the group. *Boston Globe* writer William Fripp allowed Parsons to embellish even further, reporting that Ed Sullivan had contacted Parsons’s manager, and that Parsons had spent time clubbing with the Beatles in New York City, both of which were self-serving fabrications.129 Not surprisingly, Bob Dylan also got some of Parsons’s attention. In Fripp’s article, Parsons acknowledged Dylan’s influence, but retained some critical distance: “Bobby asks questions and hints at emotion. I want to answer some of the questions teen-agers ask about love, to describe the gamut of feelings and how to deal with them.”130 Congruent with his self-awareness and desire


130 Ibid.
for celebrity, these claims both asserted his artistic autonomy and situated him amongst the most well-known names in popular music. Again, just as his eschewing of the Beatles’s musical influence demonstrated above, such self-fashioning relied less on establishing a musical lineage with these artists than on elevating himself to their level of popularity.

Surprisingly enough, Parsons self-promotion and frequent appearances in and around Cambridge caught the attention of *Life* magazine photographer Ted Polumbaum. Commissioned by the magazine to photograph and highlight one of Harvard’s most promising incoming freshmen in the fall of 1965, Polumbaum chose Parsons.\(^\text{131}\) Apparently unaware that Parsons was less than a model student, Polumbaum followed the young musician walking to and from class, hanging out with friends and bandmates, and writing songs. In the end, *Life* decided not to run the story and the photographs were all but forgotten until recently when Parsons biographer Bob Kealing, uncovered them in 2009 at the Newseum in Washington, D.C.\(^\text{132}\) The photographs provide an intimate glimpse of Parsons as both a slightly unsure student and a confident artist immersing himself in music.\(^\text{133}\) In classmate David Johnson’s reminiscences in the *Harvard Journal*, it was Parsons’s confidence that was most apparent:

> In the fall of 1965 I stood near the entrance of memorial Church, facing Widener Library. On the library steps a group of young musicians posed for a photographer from *Life* magazine. The center of attention was the group’s leader, Gram Parsons, then a 19-year-old freshman from Winter Haven, Florida. Another Harvard freshman, Lawrence Piro, held one of Gram’s guitars. I envied him. Up close, Parsons appeared remarkable self-possessed and confident. He was lean and good-looking, with longish dark hair. I felt awed that a contemporary could

\(^{131}\) That incoming freshman class included Michael Roosevelt, grandson of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the late Steven Ashley, the future business affairs and attorney for Curb Records, Rhino Records and Sierra Records from 1977 to 2008; Tommy Lee Jones, future famed actor and Academy Award winner and Al Gore, the future Vice President of the United States.

\(^{132}\) Kealing, *Calling Me Home*, 118.

\(^{133}\) See pictures in Kealing, *Calling Me Home*, 118-126.
be so far along the road to the American Dream we grew up on: being Elvis.\textsuperscript{134} Johnson’s words indicate that Elvis Presley had remained a standard by which to measure self-worth and achievement. Even though by 1965 Presley himself had become more devoted to movies than music, the “possibilities of life” that he and the other early rock and rollers and folk artists had represented and opened to a youth generation struggling to define themselves remained relevant and sought after. That Johnson made links between the Elvis and Parsons is significant, for it speaks not only to a sense that Parsons’s star was rising, but that in the perception of those around him, he had succeeded in forging an identity that, like Presley’s, embodied the mythic America in which his generation had come of age.

Popular music in the years preceding Parsons’s turn to country music in the mid-1960s both reflected and contributed to drastic changes in the nation’s social and cultural life in the postwar years. For many young people who had been born into the relative comfort that the postwar economy afforded, it provided a means for exercising aesthetic and commercial authority, and in turn, a way of transgressing social boundaries. Rock and roll and then folk music, two of the period’s most popular genres with connections, both real and imagined, to working-class people and places, offered an avenue of “possibility” that went beyond the perceived limitations and desperation inherent in middle- and upper-class life. Lawrence Grossberg has written, “Rock and roll transforms the despair of its context into an embracing of its possibilities as pleasure. But it cannot dismiss the despair. For what rock is inescapably drawn to is the attempt to find meaning and value in the historical moment and in its own existence.”\textsuperscript{135}


In looking to musicians such as Presley, the Kingston Trio, and the Journeymen, whose music and charismatic personas had transformed youthfulness and working-class life into a source of transgressive pleasure and power, young people throughout the nation were carried into a realm of possibility where alternative identities could be forged and explored. As the next chapter will discuss, despite Parsons’s dismissal of the musical work he had done before turning to country music, the rock and roll process and commercial folk aesthetic that he had engaged with were more than just musical growing pains or the soundtrack for an “identity crisis.” They were, in fact, foundational for his transition to the music that his mythical “countryness” would be constructed upon in the future.
CHAPTER TWO
A “Country Beatle”

While Gram Parsons was struggling to find footing amidst the receding wave of urban folk, new musical currents were flowing not only through the folk community, but the world of popular music in general. Indeed, folk rock emerged on the West Coast and in the summer of 1965, the Byrds had a number one hit with their chiming, electrified version of Bob Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Dylan himself, the folk movement’s darling and perhaps most prominent icon after Pete Seeger, had also “gone electric” that year, swapping his acoustic guitar for an electric one, his one-man band for a raucous blues-based backup band, and his topical protest-inspired lyrics for introverted and highly metaphorical meditations. 1965 was also a year after the Beatles’s arrival in America spurred the British Invasion, inspiring young people throughout the nation to plug in their guitars and rock.

As the last section of the previous chapter discussed, Parsons too had attempted folk rock and begun looking increasingly inward for musical inspiration with his band, The Like. While he had expanded his musical language with tunes such as “Brass Buttons” and “November Nights,” he remained unsatisfied with his seeming lack of direction and “identity crisis.” On a trip home to Winter Haven shortly before heading to college, Parsons expressed these sentiments to Jim Stafford, his former Legend bandmate. According to Stafford:

He came back into town once and was talking real discouraged. He said he’d tried rock ‘n’ roll and he’d tried folk and he really didn’t know what else to try to play. We had a talk and I said to him, “You’ve got country roots. Folk’s a craze anyway, why don’t you sing some C&W as a longhaired young guy?” Gram seemed to really like that idea.1

With Parsons biographer, Bob Kealing, Stafford was a bit more specific:

1 Quoted in Griffin, Gram Parsons, 29.
I just blurted it out without thinking about it all. I just said, “Why don’t you just let your hair grow long and do country music? And you could be”—I remember saying the words—“a country Beatle. You could be a country Beatle.” I think I was thinking more of a gimmick for him. It never occurred to me that you could change music. You could do rock plus country. There wasn’t an ounce of that. There wasn’t anything about what he ended up accomplishing. But I did say let your hair grow and you’d be the first long-haired country guy.2

While Stafford’s “country Beatle” suggestion may have seemed “gimmicky” or inconsequential at the time, it was not without some precedent. In 1964, the Beatles had covered Carl Perkins’s “Honey Don’t” and “Everybody’s Trying to Be My Baby,” and continued to draw on country material through the next year. Indeed, in 1965, the group recorded Buck Owens’s “Act Naturally”3 and gestured toward a prototypical country rock sound with McCartney’s “I’ve Just Seen a Face,” both of which were released on Help!

Later in 1965, the Beatles also released Rubber Soul, the enormously influential album that signaled the group’s shift from teen pop toward more introspective, adult subject matter. Influenced as much by Dylan’s lyrical acumen as it was by the Byrds’s confident, chiming guitars, avant-garde techniques from the classical sphere, and Indian musical traditions, Rubber Soul broadened the Beatles’s musical scope and put them in more direct dialogue with groups such as the Kinks, The Who, and the Rolling Stones, all of which had given the British Invasion a harder, more critical edge. As such, the Beatles’s already widespread popularity was suffused

2 Quoted in Kealing, Calling Me Home, 117.

3 While “Act Naturally” might be dismissed as merely filler material and an opportunity for drummer Ringo Starr to appease his fans, the group’s decision to record the song reveals, at the very least, an awareness of Buck Owens and country music coming from Southern California. Starr recalls, “I sang ‘Act Naturally’ in Help! I found it on a Buck Owens record and I said, ‘This is the one I am going to be doing,’ and they said ‘OK.’ We were listening to all kinds of things.” See Brian Roylance, ed., The Beatles Anthology (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 173. Certainly, the song’s playful tone and references to “the movies” and the singer becoming “a big star” also factored into the decision to include the song on Help’s! accompanying soundtrack album. While there is little evidence to suggest that the Beatles’ version of “Act Naturally” was taken seriously as an embrace of country music on the part of the group, its mention in chronicles of the country rock movement reveal the song as having some degree of influence. As Einarson notes, “when the British Invasion his North American shores like a hurricane in early 1964, several of its leading proponents brought with them an appreciation for rockabilly and country material, notably the Beatles…these musicians were bringing country influences to a whole new generation turned off by Nashville’s slick country pop” (Einarson, Desperados, 7).
with an artistic dimension that reflected a reciprocal relationship with rock artists from both sides of the Atlantic and more solidly established the group as one committed to experimentation and creativity. In the context of this shift, Stafford’s “country Beatle” designation takes on more substantial meaning than he seems to have intended, for it not only implies commercial success, but also a creative aesthetic that could embrace country music, an idiom that the Beatles had only scratched the surface of. In the end, for Parsons, Stafford’s suggestion would indeed become much more than a ploy for popularity; it would legitimize an artistic vision that Parsons was only beginning to become conscious of.

When Parsons entered Harvard in the same year, folk continued to dominate the Cambridge campus. Though Harvard Square was no Greenwich Village, folkies had Harvard Library and its Library of Congress anthologies of folk and blues music at their immediate disposal. No doubt the academic vigor of those students immersed in the folk world compelled many of them to search out not only the most obscure recordings, but also what they perceived as the most authentic of these. In such an environment, Parsons certainly could have flourished given his folk credentials and intellectual curiosity, but soon after forming the Like, Parsons began to take Stafford’s words to heart and to that end, began pursuing country music with his own kind of “purist” fervor. In short time, the Like would be rechristened the International Submarine Band and devote themselves entirely to the idiom, but with a rock and folk revivalist edge.

In the concern for authenticity that marked the urban folk revival, then-current commercial country music had been all but ignored. The imagery of matching sequined suits, carefully constructed hairdos, and scripted stage humor flew in the face of the unrefined “common man” simplicity that revivalists preferred and deemed authentic. Although the two
had been interwoven from the start through shared musical roots and working-class themes, country and folk, by the late 1950s and early 1960s had became completely distinct.\(^4\) Country music continued to voice working-class concerns and carried a relatively conservative social and political identity that spoke to its older audience, while folk carried an implicit critique of the political establishment and the adult mainstream status quo that resonated with its largely young and educated middle- and upper-class audiences. Though Parsons himself had not employed folk as an overtly political tool, it had situated him within a youth culture audience that was markedly different from that of country music. Thus, Parsons’s decision to pursue country music within a milieu that had been inculcated with folk revivalist conceptions of authenticity allows us an opportunity to explore how those conceptions guided his turn to country, an idiom that by all accounts he had had very little experience with during his “identity crisis.” Further, in looking at Parsons’s own move to country music, we can begin to understand how and why particular kinds of country music appealed to other budding “country Beatles” and future country-rock leaders, who, like Parsons, had begun their musical careers in 1950s rock and roll and commercial folk.

As they had in the previous decade, divergent musical streams flowed in a multitude of directions within the musical landscape of the mid-1960s. A crucial difference was that the renewed interest in rock brought on by the British Invasion drew largely on conceptions of authenticity and commercialism that had been forged within the preceding folk boom.\(^5\) As such, while young musicians such as Parsons continued to have a wide variety of musical material available to them, many navigated that material in a way that bespoke rock’s folk-informed ideology. Clarence White, former folkie and future Byrd guitarist, recalled his own transition


from folk to rock in the midst of such a musical climate: “It wasn’t so much that I was getting bored with acoustic bluegrass, I could just feel so many new things in the air. I wanted to get in the stream of a new kind of music that combined what you could call a ‘folk integrity’ with electric rock.” White’s words reflect an underlying sense of musical possibility and how folk’s ideals had become ingrained in the minds of its participants. Likewise, despite Mather’s claim that “Parsons’s participation in the folk scene during the early sixties had little to do with his later country music,” one can observe how both rock and roll and commercial folk bore on his early approach to country and more specifically on how he would, in his own words, “try to do hard rock or rhythm and blues and country music at the same time.”

This chapter will address Parsons’s early forays into country music first with the International Submarine Band, and then with the Byrds. It is through the music he helped produce during this period that we can begin to see how Parsons’s previous musical experiences and evolving “countryness” manifest in his stylistic preferences, repertoire choices, and creative self-fashioning. The first part of the chapter will discuss Parsons’s transition to country in light of the state of the country field in the mid-1960s, paying close attention to two particularly influential recordings: Ray Charles’s *Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues* (1965) and Buck Owens’s *Roll Out the Red Carpet* (1966). The chapter’s second section will analyze the International Submarine Band’s debut album *Safe at Home* in the context of the band’s move to California and Parsons’s developing musical aesthetic. The third part of the chapter will explore Parsons’s brief involvement with the Byrds in an effort to highlight how the rock-and-roll and

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7 Mather, “Cosmic America Music,” 113.

8 Quoted in Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 138.
folk-revivalist roots of the band’s members, like Parsons’s own, informed their particular orientation toward country music on their landmark album, *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* (1968). This album, recorded in both Nashville and Los Angeles, is often heralded as one of the founding documents of country rock, and thus, it will be useful to situate it within the budding country-rock field as it existed at the time.\(^9\) Let us now turn to the foundations on which Parsons’s particular country was built. As this chapter will bear out, it is within them that the roots of Parsons’s approach to the line between believability and originality, and tradition and innovation, reside.

**A Harvard Hillbilly**

Although Parsons claimed that growing up he had “always paid attention to anything that had a steel guitar in it,” many musicians close to him in his early career recall that in addition to rock and roll, Parsons’s first record collections included comedy albums and jazz, not country.\(^10\)

Indeed, according to Jim Carlton:

> Gram was *not* into country music at all back then. He did not consider it hip and had no interest in country at all. Jim [Stafford] was, and Gram criticized him for it because he knew it was part of Jim’s heritage, but it really wasn’t for Gram. Once, I learned a few bars of “Steel Guitar Rag” and played it for him and was immediately chastised as he went to the piano and played a mock version of some Floyd Cramer songs. It was funny and he asked what the hell I was doing playing “that stuff?” (original emphasis)\(^11\)

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\(^10\) According to Jim Stafford: “At the time I met him, strangely enough, Gram was nuts over Peter Nero. Because Gram was still playing piano then. He owned *Music for the Nero Minded*, some Ray Stevens album he was crazy over, a Smothers Brothers record, he loved Jonathon Winters, loved Brother Ray Gardner” (Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 32).
Dickie McNeer, the son of another wealthy citrus family in Winter Haven recounted also, “Country was not an accepted form of music here in Polk County… even though it was roots music for us. Nobody listened to country except the lower-class people that we didn’t know, who were at the honky-tonks after picking fruit all day.” Though Parsons would have never admitted it later, country music was not held in much esteem by his class echelon, and despite being a primary ingredient in the Elvis Presley and other rock and roll records he was drawn to, was largely ignored by he and his upper class peer group. Parsons had engaged with the kinds of rural and working-class themes found in then-current country music through commercial folk, but again, the idiom had had no significant bearing on his performance style or repertoire selections.

As we recall from the outset of Chapter One, Parsons did credit “the guys in the ISB” for “reintroducing” him to country music and for helping him pass his “identity crisis.” In particular, John Nuese, the group’s guitarist, lays large claim over Parsons’s turn to country. As he told Parsons biographer David Meyer:

When the band got together I was the only one with experience playing and listening to a lot of country. I take credit for turning Gram on to this music. Because he didn’t know anybody who listened to it at the time. Everybody wanted to play black music, R&B—they wanted to be black. Or they wanted to play folk music. Nobody was listening to what they’d call redneck country-western shit. Mickey Gauvin was a black, soul kind of drummer. Ian [Dunlop] was familiar with some country, but was mostly a rock and roller, and Gram, who had been exposed to country in his formative years, was doing commercial folk music. Gram did not know what was going on in country music. He knew no Buck Owens or Merle Haggard. Nor did the other members of the band. When I turned them on to these singers they all liked it and were caught up, totally hooked by the music.

11 Quoted in Walker, God’s Own Singer, 27.

12 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 67.

13 Ibid., 160.
While Nuese’s words certainly indicate some of his own mythologizing, they also speak to the different musical backgrounds of the group members while hinting at the underpinnings for the group’s attraction to Owens and Haggard, two of Bakersfield, California’s biggest country stars. This preference for country coming from California as opposed to industry’s epicenter of Nashville, Tennessee, was a product not only of the shared musical features between California country and early rock and roll, but also of its symbolic meaning within the country field in the mid-1960s.

Nuese’s stress on race in the quote above is also revealing, for it highlights the kinds of racial essentialism that existed within country rock’s emerging discourse and rock more generally. Submarine Band bassist Ian Dunlop expressed similar sentiments: “We were saying, ‘look, we’re just four white guys, and if our roots are anywhere, maybe they’re down where they always were—with Elvis and country musicians and stuff like that. That’s our roots, man.’”

Jet Thomas, Parsons’s freshman advisor at Harvard, recalls that Parsons too linked country and whiteness and talked about it as a form of “white spiritual music.” Echoing both Dunlop and Nuese, Chris Hillman, Parsons’s future bandmate and another of country rock’s primary founding figures, put country in very black and white terms in an interview with Sid Griffin in 1985:

**Hillman:** Does’t matter where you’re from cause it’s the workingman’s song. It’s the workingman’s music. It’s white man’s music, as opposed to the black man’s music.

**Griffin:** White man’s music?

**Hillman:** White man’s blues is right… you’re darn right it is. That’s the way we express it. I mean we are saying the same thing as the black man. “My old lady

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14 Quoted in Fong-Torres, *Hickory Wind*, 70.

15 Ibid., 65.
left me” or this happened or that happened because we have our way of expressing things and they have theirs.16

As much as these kinds of musical categorizations based on racial essentialism seem to reinforce musical and racial difference, when acknowledged, they could also engender the sort of musical integration that had been a hallmark of rock and roll’s social power since the mid-1950s. In their eclectic listening preferences, the International Submarine Band negotiated racial boundaries toward liberating ends and thus provided a basis for Parsons’s career-long embrace of rhythm and blues and country, genres coded as black and white respectively.

Parsons withdrew from Harvard in February of 1966. Soon after, he and his bandmates relocated to New York and rented a house in the Bronx where they delved into listening, rehearsing, and performing the new music they were discovering. Nuese remembers, “We were connected to the sound we felt was happening in country music, this strong, powerful sound. The set we played mixed R&B and country tunes. The R&B the audience knew and the country stuff they had never heard before. Ever.”17 Early demo tapes of the band reveal versions of Buck Owens’s “Together Again” (1964) and “Just As Long as You Love Me” (1964) alongside Little Richard’s “Rip It Up” (1956) and Wilson Picket’s “In the Midnight Hour” (1965).18 According to ISB band members, two albums that were particularly inspirational for the group were Ray Charles’s 1965 release Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues and Buck Owens’s Roll Out the Carpet for Buck Owens and his Buckaroos (1966).19 Together, these albums exemplify the kinds of interchange between seemingly disparate idioms that would prove

16 Interview in Griffin, Gram Parsons, 85.
17 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 174.
18 Fong Torres, Hickory Wind, 68.
19 Walker, God’s Own Singer, 55.
foundational not only for Parsons’s musical development, but also for country rock in general.

The Modern Sounds of Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues

The third of Charles’s country-themed albums, Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues was the follow-up to the enormously successful Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music (1962), and its sequel, Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music, Vol. 2. (1962). ISB member Ian Dunlop opines, “I think that record is the key… That was the thing that broke all the barriers between all of us, getting us into this amalgam of a truer country music, but with a rock or a slight rhythm-and-blues treatment.”\(^\text{20}\) Including soulful big-band arrangements of country songs such as Buck Owens’s “I’ve Got a Tiger by the Tail” (1965) and Bill Monroe’s “Blue Moon of Kentucky” (1946) alongside previously written ballads and uptempo blues tunes, the album, like its antecedents, continued Charles’s defying of musical categories, and as country scholar J. Feder Lester observes, their inherent social boundaries as well. Lester, in a discussion of race, country music, and the South asserts, “Charles staked his claim to country music largely on the grounds that his sincere expression as a musician demanded that he disregard musical boundaries. In doing so, he forged a powerful critique of musical segregation, but one that is remembered primarily as a monument to Charles’s versatility and integrationist vision, not as the beginning of the end of country’s whiteness.”\(^\text{21}\) Indeed, Charles’s country albums did receive some attention within the largely white country community in the early to mid-1960s, but the majority of his success with white audiences was found in the adult-oriented mainstream pop world as evidenced by Modern Sounds’s fourteen-week long position at number one on

\(^{20}\) Quoted in Fong-Torres, Hickory Wind, 68.

\(^{21}\) J. Feder Lester, “‘Song of the South’: Country Music, Race, Region, and the Politics of Culture, 1920-1974” (PhD Diss.: University of California—Los Angeles, 2006), 175.
Billboard’s Pop Album chart. As country historian George Lewis writes, “the major impact of Modern Sounds was not in the country market itself, but rather in the attention it garnered for country music across the pop and R&B spectrums.”

While Elvis Presley and his early rock and roll cohort had provided examples of country music’s influence in their rockabilly and rock and roll hybrids, Charles’s albums focused specifically on country music. The implications of a black artist known for his musical “genius” in what were perceived as black musical forms—soul, rhythm and blues, and jazz—recording songs in an idiom that had been played almost exclusively by white musicians was not lost on musicians negotiating the increasingly contested social landscape of the early 1960s. As Dunlop’s words above suggest, Charles projected a sense of authenticity that stemmed not only from his soulful voice and musical vision, but also from his status as a black artist who was willing to break racialized barriers of genre. Diane Pecknold observes that Charles “understood popular music as a process of natural cross-racial exchange” and “saw himself as being able to transcend racialized genre boundaries not only because of his talent and varied influences but because the boundaries themselves were vast borderlands of shared traditions rather than clearly demarcated lines.”

Certainly, such a vision of musical and racial transcendence resonated with the “rock and roll processes” that had earlier defined the early musical experiences of Parsons and his cohort throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the calls for integration that


defined the Civil Rights Movement at the time.\textsuperscript{25}

At the time of *Modern Sounds*, Vol. 1’s release in 1962, the “Nashville Sound” was country music’s predominant style. Comprised of a network of record companies, prominent producers, studio musicians, and artists, the Nashville Sound worked towards appealing to country fans still rooted by rural values, but now living in cities and looking to distance themselves from country music’s “hayseed” image and sounds.\textsuperscript{26} As such, fiddles, steel guitars, and nasal, rural-sounding vocal timbres previously found in honky tonk were replaced by elements typically found in mainstream pop music: string arrangements, background choruses, and smooth, crooning vocal styles. Much of the material on Charles’s first two country-themed albums features a confluence of mainstream pop and Nashville Sound elements. *Modern Sounds*, Vol. 1’s hit song, “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” for example, features a very lush string arrangement, background vocals, and very little of the rhythm-and-blues style of Charles’s earlier work. Lester situates these early albums more broadly within the record industry movement known as “Good Music.” “Good Music,” as exemplified by artists such as Frank Sinatra, traded on “the patina of classical music that clung to string arrangements” and relied of “standards” composed on Tin Pan Alley or for the Broadway Stage.\textsuperscript{27} Paralleling the rise of the

\textsuperscript{25} Citing his 1960 album, *The Genius Hits the Road* as setting the stage for strategies used in *Modern Sounds*, Lester posits that Charles employed genre-crossing as a means to critique segregation: Charles used genre “to construct a spatial assault on segregation that paralleled the Civil Rights Movement most basic tactic: trespassing… Charles seems to have given a musical form to integrationist trespassing in taking down the barriers that remained in adult-oriented music. He performed the musical equivalent of a sit-in.” See Lester, “‘Song of the South’,” 180-181.

\textsuperscript{26} While the Nashville Sound is often cited as the product of the country industry’s reaction to rock and roll’s commercial boom in the 1950s, scholars such as Joli Jensen and Diane Pecknold understand it as arising in the context of technological and institutional changes within the country industry and social changes within country’s increasingly suburban audience. Pecknold argues that through the consumption of music by artists within the Nashville Sound, new urban dwellers retained their sense of belonging to the country and their working-class roots while taking advantage of their assimilation into suburban middle-class life. See Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound*, 1998.
Nashville Sound, proponents of “Good Music” attempted to appeal to the generational cohort that had come of age during the Swing era while battling rock and roll’s onslaught in the 1950s. In light of the “standard” country material he was recording, and in particular songs by then-current Nashville Sound artists such as Don Gibson and Eddy Arnold, on Modern Sounds Vols. 1 and 2, Charles highlighted the fluidity between the Nashville Sound and “Good Music,” and more broadly, the common tastes that had developed between each idiom’s audiences.\(^{28}\)

In contrast to Modern Sounds Vols. 1 and 2 however, Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues drew much more on the rhythm-and-blues elements that characterized Charles’s earlier Atlantic recordings and less on Nashville Sound elements. To that end, the album was less successful than its predecessors, peaking only at number 116 on the Billboard 200 chart.\(^{29}\) Combined with Charles’s melismatic gospel and blues influenced vocals, nearly three quarters of the album’s songs feature guitars, improvisatory vocal and piano interjections, and rhythm and blues-based horn charts. The album also covered country songs by artists situated apart from the Nashville Sound industry at the time, namely Buck Owens and Bill Monroe. Owens’s “Don’t Let Her Know,” originally a lilting ballad in 2/4 bemoaning the loss of love, is modified in Charles’s version to be a slow waltz complete with Charles’s idiosyncratic vocal style, blues piano embellishments, and accompanimental acoustic guitar strumming. Although the tune’s lush background vocals nod toward Charles’s previous country albums and the Nashville Sound, his voice captures the emotional pathos of the tune through note-bending

\(^{27}\) Lester, “‘Song of the South’,” 178.


and slides that serve to mimic the whine of the steel guitar, the most prominent instrument in Owens’s version.

While country material accounts for only half of the songs on *Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues*, its ease amongst the album’s more overtly rhythm-and-blues material reinforced Charles’s continuing embrace of both idioms while highlighting the commonality between them. As Charles said, “Country music is a lot like blues… It’s simple, honest. I love that real country sound in itself, the pureness of it.” Though Lester argues that the selections that comprise Charles’s country-themed records as a whole are neither country nor rhythm and blues given Charles’s refusal to engage with accepted boundaries of either genres, we would be remiss to underestimate the albums’ impact on listeners such as Parsons who recognized genre boundaries, but were willing to conceive of them in new and more inclusive ways.

Ultimately, Charles’s significance for the International Submarine Band and country rock in general went far beyond his mixture of musical idioms. Certainly, his soulful rhythm-and-blues treatment of country material provided a model for the ISB’s early work, but more important was Charles’s implicit denial of the social boundaries perceived to be inherent in the idioms he engaged with. Although he did not actively promote *Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues* as a model for “cross-racial exchange” or advocate on behalf of country music overtly, the album found meaningful resonance for young country rockers like Parsons who were becoming interested in doing just that. In short, the meeting of Country and Western and Rhythm and Blues that Charles facilitated helped pave an inroad to the “cosmic America” that Parsons was moving toward. Important also is that in refashioning his own orientation toward

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country music vis-à-vis Buck Owens on *Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues* instead of Nashville Sound artists, Charles aligned himself with the country scene flourishing on the West Coast. It was to that scene, centered around Bakersfield and Los Angeles, California, that Parsons and the International Submarine Band looked toward for another significant line of influence.

**Buck Owens and the Bakersfield Sound**

Bakersfield is an oil town located about one hundred miles north of Los Angeles. Throughout the early twentieth century, Bakersfield and surrounding towns like Oildale became home to many migrant workers from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas who had escaped the Dust Bowl looking for better opportunities. Displaced from home and family, people in these working-class communities bonded within the dance halls and honky-tonks that littered the area. Libations and live country music flowed, allowing patrons to connect with their roots while forging new community ties.31 For musicians, the practicalities of playing in these often loud and raucous venues necessitated the use of drums and amplifiers that would carry music over the sound of noisy crowds and shuffling feet. To that end, by the late 1950s, a country-music style emerged within Bakersfield that, as country scholar Jocelyn Neal notes, had two main components: a chugging shuffle rhythm, and instrumentation that prominently featured the electric guitar and bass.32 In addition to these features, Neal also adds nasal twang in vocal styles, lyrics outlining working-class characteristics and concerns, little distinction between live

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32 Neal, *Country Music*, 220.: Neal describes a shuffle as a variant of swing rhythm commonly used by ‘50s era R&B musicians.
and recorded versions of songs, and simple verse-chorus forms. Ultimately, this sound and structure, which had its roots in western swing and the mid-1950s honky tonk of artists such as Lefty Frizzell and Ray Price, would come to be called the Bakersfield Sound and be treated by both fans and journalists as oppositional to the concurrent Nashville Sound.

Bakersfield’s proximity to Los Angeles was instrumental in introducing this sound to the rest of the nation. Los Angeles, like other centers of country music in the early twentieth century, was home to a number of barn dances and radio shows, but with the emergent entertainment industry in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, also used film and television to disseminate country music and imagery. In particular, “Western” and cowboy themes, promulgated through radio, television, and film, were melded with Southern-based country styles. As one can see in the costuming of country stars throughout the nation and in the designation “Country and Western” itself, which came to be in the early 1950s, this meeting of West and South did much to alter country music’s imagery and style in general.

With a musical infrastructure for country in place in Los Angeles, record companies like Capitol Records went on to produce some of the most popular country artists of the 1950s and 1960s. Capitol, which was formed in 1942, drew on the established tradition of cowboy singers in Los Angeles, signing important West Coast artists such as Tex Williams, Merle Travis, and Tennessee Ernie Ford, who would become known for crossover hits like “Sixteen Tons” and his status as the label’s biggest country seller of the fifties. Most significant to this discussion

33 Ibid., 221.
though is that Capitol was also home to Bakersfield artists, Buck Owens and Merle Haggard, two artists that also challenged Nashville’s industry dominance in the sixties.36

As Ray Charles’s and the Beatles’s covers of Buck Owens’s tunes suggest, the Bakersfield-based singer, songwriter, and entrepreneur was a central figure in chipping away the barriers between country music and other popular genres in the mid-1960s. In the midst of the Nashville Sound’s move to meet the demands of an increasingly urban and middle-class audience through pop conventions, Owens pursued a sound and style that not only harkened back to honky tonk and 1950s rock and roll, but also demonstrated the “stylistic flexibility” that defined the rock aesthetic of the mid-to-late sixties.37 Catering not only to his Bakersfield audience base, but also the taste of young listeners, Owens often included covers such as Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode” (1958) and Ben E. King’s “Save the Last Dance for Me” (1960) in addition to performing his own material.38 California country historian Gerald Haslam posits that “Owens had risen to challenge Nashville’s power.”39 Indeed, between 1963 and 1967, Owens released fifteen consecutive number-one recordings that established him as a country artist who rose to stardom without relying on the help of the Nashville country industry.40

36 Buck Owens was signed to Capitol in 1957, Haggard in 1965.

37 Today, discussions of popular music often blur the distinction between rock and roll and rock. However, Theodore Gracyk observes that the distinction between them emerged in the mid-sixties and was firmly established among rock fans, musicians, and critics by 1967: “Rock is generally understood as popular music closest to, but superseding, rock and roll… Jon Landau reflects common wisdom when he says that ‘The Beatles, the Stones and Dylan were the first inductees to rock’s (as opposed to rock and roll’s) pantheon’” (Gracyk, Rhythm and Noise, 8-9). Ultimately, Gracyk concludes that genealogy is decisive in differentiating rock and roll and rock, arguing that the stylistic flexibility achieved by artists such as Dylan and the Beatles around 1965, rendered rock and roll only one kind of rock style “no longer identical with the general aesthetic movement in popular music then under way” (Ibid., 12). See also Crawford, America’s Musical Life, 809.; Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 126-129.

38 California country historian, Gerald Haslam observes that “California’s unwillingness to accept southern domination of this national music [country] was augured by Buck Owens, who perfected an exciting style and who refused to abandon his Bakersfield base” (Haslam, Workin’ Man Blues, 207).

39 Haslam, Workin’ Man Blues, 207.
Containing many of hallmarks of the Bakersfield Sound, Owens’s recorded sound was defined by a sense of “liveness.” In using his touring band as his studio band, a practice largely unheard of in Nashville at the time, Owens had fuller control of his sound, one that recreated the raucous atmosphere of the honky-tonks and dance halls that he had grown up playing. Steel guitar, fiddle, piano, and drums formed the instrumental core of Owens’s early material, with the electric guitar and bass added later. Among members of Owens’s band, the Buckaroos, fiddler and guitarist Don Rich was a constant throughout Owens’s peak in the 1960s. Until his death in 1974, Rich was responsible not only for the Buckaroos’s characteristic guitar twang through his idiomatic blues-influenced Fender Telecaster guitar style, but also for the searing two-part vocal harmonies that pervaded many of Owens’s compositions. Like the bright biting timbre of the electric guitar, fiddle, and steel guitar, the two-part vocal sound between Rich and Owens easily cut through the band’s instrumental mix.

Within the peak years of his popularity in the mid-1960s, Owens’s recordings remained remarkably consistent in sound and style. This had much to do with Owens’s studio production processes and the relatively stable line-up of his band throughout the period. Such repetition, as Mark Fenster notes, was a key element in the construction of an identifiable “Buck Owens sound,” one that was defined not only by its distinct musical elements, but also by its contrast to the Nashville Sound.41 In infusing the sounds of late 1940s and 1950s honky tonk and rock and roll into his country, Owens constructed himself as an artist who was both “different” and more “authentic” in relation to Nashville. As a testament to Owens’s sense of difference and self-authentication, in 1965, he even wrote a one-page “Pledge to Country Music” that appeared in

40 In Country Music U.S.A., Bill Malone writes, “for several years during the sixties the music of Buck Owens and the Buckaroos blew like a breath of sparkling fresh air over the country music landscape” (292).

his fan club’s newsletter and *Music City News*, Nashville’s premier trade publication. In the pledge, Owens vowed to sing only country songs and record only country records.\(^{42}\) Certainly, Nashville artists sang country songs and made country records too, but implicit in Owens’s pledge was that in an era of pop crossover, some had discarded the purity of the genre in order to appeal to mainstream taste and thus, were no longer authentically country. As Fenster argues, though the figure of “Buck Owens” was built upon the same system of private ownership, cultural production and distribution of commercial products as Nashville, the musical and cultural meanings attached to him allowed the sense of his music as a commodity and product of generic conventions to be elided.\(^{43}\) As such, Owens could be viewed as distinct from the mainstream commercial market while thriving within it.

Ironically, although its was released at the height of Owens’s success and in the same style of his earlier hit albums, *Roll Out the Red Carpet* (1966) was the Buckaroos’s first album to not charting single. Nonetheless, it was this Owens album that the International Submarine Band cited as foundational for turning them onto the “strong, powerful sound” of country music. Prominent throughout *Roll Out the Red Carpet* are trademarks of the Bakersfield-rooted “Buck Owens sound,” particularly Owens and Rich’s two-part harmonies, the bending and sliding of Rich’s twangy guitar style, and the hard shuffle beat of the drums.\(^{44}\) The impact of rock and roll by way of the British Invasion can be heard throughout the album and especially in the album’s

\(^{42}\) Reprinted in Fenster, “Buck Owens,” 283.: “I shall sing no song that is not a country song. I shall make no record that is not a country record. I refuse to be known as anything other than a country singer. I am proud to be associated with country music. Country music and country music fans have made me what I am today. And I shall not forget it.”

\(^{43}\) Fenster, “Buck Owens,” 276, 279.

\(^{44}\) Also of note on this album are two instrumentals, “Cajun Fiddle” and “Tom Cattin’” that both feature Rich’s fiddle playing and the steel guitar of Tom Brumley. In both these songs, Rich and Brumley trade off hoedown style solos that recall barndance atmospheres.
title track, “Gonna Roll Out the Red Carpet.” In addition to the simple verse-chorus form and harmonic language, the song features stop-time hits leading to choruses, rockabilly-style guitar playing, and Owens’s and Rich’s bright two-part harmonies. This song and others like “I’m Laying It on the Line” bear strong similarity to then-current Beatles’s hits such as Rubber Soul’s “What Goes On” (1965) and Yesterday... And Today’s “And Your Bird Can Sing” (1966).

While Owens’s allusions to rock repertoire and identification with 1960s youth might have been seen to fly in the face of standard definitions of country or as contradicting his pledge, the image he had carved for himself positioned him against Nashville Sound artists whose music was deemed to be part of the mass of pop music, and thus authenticated his own as the “true country music.” As Fenster writes, “within the historical moment in which some artists whose recordings were marketed as country included string sections, brass instruments and vocal choruses singing behind smooth crooning, the Pledge’s dogmatic insistence upon a particular notion of ‘country’ and that notion’s historical connotations marked an oppositional stance to what was becoming a dominant style.” Ultimately, albums like Roll out the Red Carpet situated Owens apart from his Nashville-based contemporaries, and like Charles’s Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues, redefined the boundaries of country for young listeners like Parsons and the his bandmates.

If Owens used his sound as a counterpoint to Nashville, fellow Capitol artist Merle Haggard drew on his roots in the Californian working-class experience to distinguish himself within the country field in the mid-1960s. Born in 1937 to parents who had left Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl migration, Haggard grew up poor in Bakersfield. After a period of juvenile delinquency in his youth that culminated with a brief stint in San Quentin prison for attempted robbery, Haggard turned to music and began writing personal songs about the Okie

experience and working-class life in general. In 1965, Haggard was signed to Capitol Records and went on to release several number one hits, among them “Mama Tried” (1968), “Sing Me Back Home,” (1968), and “Workin’ Man Blues” (1969). Like Owens’s, Haggard’s recordings through this period relied on Bakersfield Sound elements that in conjunction with his semi-autobiographical lyrics made him a leading proponent of a uniquely West Coast country aesthetic. In the next chapter, I will discuss Haggard’s late sixties recordings and in particular his political anthem, “Okie from Muskogee” (1969), the song that nearly overshadowed his earlier output and became a sounding board for the antagonistic relationship between the counterculture and country music.

In the end, although they did not dismiss the Nashville sound or its artists wholesale, when young budding “country Beatles” like Parsons and the International Submarine Band turned to country, many claimed the Bakersfield Sound as their stylistic roots alongside rock and roll. Indeed, Nuese said of Parsons during this early formative period, “He learned lots of Haggard and Buck Owens. Those were the two biggest influences on him.”46 Country rock and bluegrass musician Herb Pedersen also recalls, “we looked at it as having a real bite to it. Nashville had a smooth kind of production, it was almost more pop-oriented. Then Buck came along with Don Rich. It was country music, but it had a rawness that we liked about bluegrass. Buck was extremely influential… this was the hippest stuff I’ve ever heard. Real raw, but really good.”47

The popularity of the Bakersfield Sound amongst youth was not lost on the artists themselves either. Echoing Pederson, Tom Brumley, Owens’s steel guitarist throughout the period remembers how the perceived naturalness of the Bakersfield sound appealed to young

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46 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 161.
47 Quoted in Einarson, Desperados, 22.
country rockers:

Nashville put so many restrictions on the music. They’ve got writers writing songs, and cookie-cutter sessions, all to a formula. It’s got to be natural, let musicians play from the heart. That’s what country rock was. The sense of adventure was coming from outside of Nashville… Buck contributed so much to country, and to rock too. I remember when we started having hippies coming to our shows. I couldn’t believe it. I would read write-ups about those guys liking our music, even the Beatles. We did the Fillmore in San Francisco in 1967, and that was an experience. That wasn’t a chair or a seat in the building. Everybody was on the floor smoking pot having a good time. We filled that place two nights in a row, and they loved it (original emphasis).  

Owens himself said of the Fillmore gig, “These kids, they know what they like. They wanted stone country. That’s why they wanted me.”

Like Ray Charles, Bakersfield Sound artists like Owen and Haggard thrived outside the bounds of the Nashville country industry, and thus, as “cultural outsiders” gained more of what Fenster calls “discursive control” over the ways that their particular country was created and presented to audiences. Though Owens was perhaps more attuned to youth audiences and rock and roll than Charles, both he and Charles assembled seemingly disparate sounds, styles, repertoire, and imagery into authentically individual fusions that reached beyond country’s traditional borders. Richard Middleton speaks to this process: “musical units are assemblages of elements from a variety of sources, each with a variety of histories and connotation-clusters, and these assemblages can… be pried open, the elements re-articulated in different contexts.” As the words of future country rock leaders Nuese, Dunlop, Pedersen, and Hillman above reveal, for

\[48\] Ibid., 24.

\[49\] Ibid.

\[50\] Fenster, “Buck Owens,” 282.

young musicians coming to country music from outside the tradition and in the context of complex social landscape of the sixties, Owens’s and Charles’s “assemblages” were foundational. As the rest of this chapter will bear out, Parsons’s preferences for musicians and music that were outsiders, or as Mather writes, “slightly dislocated with respect to the central country tradition” would not only connect him other young musicians within the emergent country rock scene on Los Angeles, but also become a prevailing aesthetic of his first country recordings.52

Honky Tonkin’

If during his “identity crisis” Parsons had stayed closely attuned to popular hits of the day, during this “reintroduction to country” phase, he began exploring the more obscure outer reaches of the country-music spectrum. Just as artists like the Kingston Trio and Journeymen had led many young revivalists to seek out commercial folk’s archaic roots, Buck Owens and Ray Charles inspired Parsons and the International Submarine Band to reach back into what Ian Dunlop describes as the “world of pure country.” According to Dunlop, the group delved into older “country ballads and songs that were so weird they were funny—ultra-obscure Americana… This strange Americana was about the heart of America, and that’s where a lot of country music came from. The passion and the cheating and the drinking. We were discovering the depths of how impassioned that music is. It’s magnetic and terrifically poetic. It’s the human condition exposed.”53 Dunlop’s words convey that the band was discovering country music with a kind of zeal that distinguished between which was “pure” and “impassioned” from what was not. Thus, in a kind of “purist” concern with musical material outside of the then-

52 Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 76.

53 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 168.
current Nashville country mainstream, Parsons and his bandmates brought a reviverist impulse to their artistic pursuits and predilections.\textsuperscript{54}

With such an impulse and Charles and Owens as their foundations, Parsons and the ISB reached back into the country canon, with a focus specifically on 1950s honky tonk and country gospel. Through artists such as Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, George Jones, and the Louvin Brothers, Parsons schooled himself in both up-tempo drinking songs and whiskey-soaked laments that wallowed in the depths of loneliness and self-pity. Neal writes that “the philosophy of honky-tonk music was based on seeking empathy for the hard knocks of working-class life and an evangelical Christian perspective on redemption.”\textsuperscript{55} Teetering between rowdy Saturday nights and sorry Sunday mornings, honky tonk was built on the sincere and felt expressions of personal struggle, with poverty and substance abuse often at the core. Importantly, the manifestation of such struggle, often captured in the lyrics and voices of white honky-tonk singers, led many young country rockers to identify honky tonk as “white blues.”\textsuperscript{56}

Honky tonk’s expressive lyrics coupled with a distinctive vocal style. Carrying none of the markers of trained singing styles, honky-tonk vocals often sound “naturalized,” that is, almost as an extension of expressive speech.\textsuperscript{57} Honky tonkers also often used bright, nasal tones and allowed the quality of their voices to vary between high and low notes. Much of the

\textsuperscript{54} Dunlop’s words resonate with Greil Marcus’s exploration of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes in his book, \textit{The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes} (New York: Picador, 2011, updated edition) where he likens the collection of songs Dylan recorded with the Band in 1967 to Harry Smith’s influential \textit{Anthology of American Folk Music} (Folkways FP 251, 252, 253, 1952). Smith’s collection, which gathered together eighty-four of his favorite hillbilly, gospel, blues, and Cajun performances from the early decades of sound recording, played an enormously influential role in the urban folk revival. See Cantwell, “Smith’s Memory Theater,” in \textit{When We Were Good}, 189-240.

\textsuperscript{55} Neal, \textit{Country Music}, 105.

\textsuperscript{56} See Hillman’s words above, and ISB guitarist, John Nuese’s discussion of “white blues” in Griffin, \textit{Gram Parsons}, 52.

\textsuperscript{57} Neal, \textit{Country Music}, 104.
popularity of honky-tonk singers such as Hank Williams and George Jones rested upon their ability to convince their listeners that they personally felt the sentiments of the songs they were singing. As such, vocal cracks, pops, cries, quivers, and breaks abound in honky-tonk vocal performances that both increase emotional impact and solidify connections between singers and songs.

We might recall from the previous chapter that Parsons’s poem “Prereminesence” and its song version, “Brass Buttons,” reflected tragic elements of Parsons’s biography, namely his family’s struggles with alcohol, loneliness, and death. Though Parsons himself may not have recognized it at the time, in the context of honky tonk’s underlying worldview, “Brass Buttons” hints toward honky tonk in both the imagery of its lyrics and Parsons’s subtly expressive vocal style. This is not to suggest that Parsons was unwittingly writing or performing country prior to the International Submarine Band, but to highlight resonance between Parsons’s early lyric writing and the honky-tonk themes he would embrace not long after. As such, it is possible to understand Parsons’s interest in country, and honky tonk specifically, as a reflection of both his self-awareness and sometimes self-destructive tendencies. Indeed, Parsons recalled his predilection toward the struggles inherent in honky tonk to rock journalist Chuck Casell: “I like the bright lights. That’s part of country music, that kind of tragic guy, country kid in the big city, don’t know where to go. And I hate the city man, I hate it, but I always got to come back to it to hustle something or make some kind of deal, I know.”58 Ultimately, this self-awareness and embrace of the “tragic guy” figure of honky tonk would not only inform Parsons’s growing number of original compositions, but also the kinds of repertoire that the International Submarine Band would soon record from their new West Coast base.

58 Quoted in Griffin, Gram Parsons, 137.
Los Angeles and Safe At Home

Despite some success in New York, including a show in the summer of 1966 opening for the Young Rascals in Central Park, Parsons decided to move the band to Los Angeles.59 According to Ian Dunlop: “We’d made a certain amount of progress. New York at that time was seen as slightly second-rate compared to the West Coast. One or two people that we knew had decided to make the jump. Gram took a trip out there in late 1966, flew out there and stayed with Brandon De Wilde. He came back pretty soon, saying: ‘This is the place. Come on, let’s go’.”60 De Wilde, as we recall from the previous chapter, was a former child actor turned musician whom Parsons had befriended in New York. It was he who would help Parsons form connections in Los Angeles and foster his initiation into the Sunset Strip’s star-studded lifestyle.

The ISB left New York in March of 1967 and relocated to a large house in Laurel Canyon which in short time became a temporary home for a number of other East Coast émigrés including Barry Tashian, a former member of The Remains. Although young longhaired musicians like the ISB might have been unique in New York, in Los Angeles, they joined a growing contingent of young “country Beatles” also beginning to incorporate country textures into rock or experiment with country music within a rock frame. Indeed, the Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, Hearts & Flowers, and the newly electrified Dillards were all working within the same circuit and working to introduce elements of country to their young rock audiences.

While the ISB’s main focus in New York had been music, the band’s new surroundings in Los Angeles created a number of distractions. Parsons, in particular, had become romantically involved with David Crosby’s former girlfriend, Nancy Ross, and they began exploring shared


60 Quoted in Walker, God’s Own Singer, 54.
spiritual interests. It was in Los Angeles that Parsons would also be experimenting with harder drugs. While he had used marijuana and LSD in New York, barbiturates and heroin were quickly becoming part of Parsons’s narcotic regimen. Though his drug use during this period was relatively controlled, its impact on his work ethic was detrimental to the ISB’s drive. Dunlop recalls, “After the initial activity and getting gigs, things tailed off… We weren’t doing much writing. Record people would occasionally come to gigs, but they didn’t want to take a chance on us. We stagnated. Not getting an opportunity definitely wore on us. I wanted to do more than sit around and wait.” Parsons’s relative affluence allowed him a freedom that the group’s other members weren’t afforded. While his annually dispersed trust fund permitted him to take in all that Los Angeles had to offer, the rest of the ISB was starving and looking for alternatives.

With the band in disarray, Dunlop and drummer Mickey Gauvin split from the group, soon forming a rhythm-and-blues band under the name, The Flying Burrito Brothers, or depending on who was sitting in with the band on a particular night, The Remains of the International Main Street Flying Burrito Brothers Blues Band. In the midst of the group’s split, Parsons and guitarist John Nuese held on to the International Submarine Band name and continued to pursue straightforwardly country material. To that end, Parsons and Nuese began frequenting the network of country clubs that had emerged in and around Los Angeles, seeking out the honky-tonk atmospheres that informed the music they loved and players with which to pursue their vision. Clubs like the Corral and the Palomino in North Hollywood, and the Aces Club in the City of Industry, initiated Parsons and Nuese into the sometimes rough-edged culture

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61 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 192.

of the California country music scene and with it, a world far removed from the rock clubs that their contemporaries were working within. Significantly, it was also within these venues that Parsons’s utopian vision for redneck and hippie reconciliation through “cosmic American music” would begin fermenting. As Parsons said later, “When I say that the long hairs, short hairs, people with overalls and people with their velvet gear can all be at the same place at the same times for the same reason, that turns me on.”

In the spring of 1967, Parsons was introduced to Lee Hazelwood, a producer, arranger, songwriter, and owner of the record label, LHI, or Lee Hazelwood Industries. Hazelwood’s girlfriend, Suzi Jane Hokom, had an affinity for country music and through word of mouth, had heard of the International Submarine Band. Soon, the band, which at the time consisted of only Parsons and Nuese, was signed to Hazelwood’s label and talks of recording began.

On a brief trip back to Winter Haven, Parsons convinced former Legend drummer Jon Corneal to join the group in Los Angeles as they looked for other musicians to round out their recording lineup. Back in Los Angeles, the new ISB recruited session bassist Joe Osborn, and two of the area’s best country players—steel guitarist Jay Dee Maness and pianist Earl P. Ball. Both seasoned session players and performers, Maness and Ball, represented the more conservative old-school approach to country music in both appearance and outlook. Maness, who Nuese described as having a “DA haircut,” “pointed shoes, and a “skinny tie,” was initially leery of “hippie types” such as he and Parsons, but soon came to respect Parsons’s interest in the music. Maness later told John Einarson, “All Gram wanted to do was be a country singer… Gram wasn’t a great singer, but the way he interpreted country music made him special”

63 Quoted in Griffin, Gram Parsons, 146.
The sessions that would produce the International Submarine Band’s only album, *Safe At Home*, began in July of 1967 at Western Studios in Los Angeles, and yielded two cuts, “Luxury Liner” and “Blue Eyes,” both Parsons originals that were released as a double-A-sided single. Sessions resumed in November with some lineup changes—Osborn was replaced by bassist Chris Ethridge, Parsons’s friend, Bob Buchanan joined on harmony vocal and rhythm guitar, and rising star Glen Campbell was brought in to add guitar and tenor vocals. Recording was completed in December and the album, which consisted of four Parsons originals and six covers, was scheduled for release in the early spring of the following year.

In an interview in 1972, Parsons reminisced about *Safe at Home*: “I was thinking about it the other night. It’s probably the best country album I’ve done because it had a lot of really quick shuffle, brilliant sounding country.” Indeed, throughout the album, the ISB capture many of the elements of the Bakersfield Sound and its underlying spirit of 1950s honky tonk. Much of this had to do with Parsons’s attention to detail and understanding of the idiom in which he was working. By most accounts of the sessions that produced *Safe At Home*, Parsons was largely in charge of song choices, arrangements, and judging whether or not the group had achieved the spontaneous “sense of adventure” that Tom Brumley mentioned. According to Bob Buchanan, Parsons often had the final say: “If he didn’t like it, he would tell you and it wouldn’t

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64 Einarson, *Desperados*, 79, 89.

65 By many accounts, the recording process for *Safe at Home* was a difficult one. Maness and Ball were not used to the lack of structure in the studio, and Nuese and producer Suzi Jane Hokum disagreed on whether to record the album live or build it piecemeal through extensive overdubbing. See Meyer, *Twenty Thousand Roads*, 206-209.; Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 50, for Nuese’s description of the recording process.

66 Quoted in Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 130.
happen. There was no equality in the band. Gram was the show.”

Parsons’s authority in the Safe at Home sessions reveals several points that underscore the unique position that his affluence and class background afforded him. First, in not having to worry about paying for studio time, Parsons was free to use recording and production as an extension of his creative vision more than a practical means with which to capture fully-formed ideas. Second, although commercial success was certainly a goal for Parsons, his independent wealth allowed him the relative freedom to experiment with a vision and material not guaranteed to sell. In other words, if the album failed in terms of sales, little was lost in terms of money spent. Certainly, his record label, LHI, wanted a marketable and lucrative product, but such a concern was not necessarily a top priority for Parsons. As Jon Corneal recalls, “Not everybody was in the same situation Gram was in. Money was not really a problem to him, he had plenty of it. But I had to work for a living.” Finally, Parsons’s dominating leadership at the sessions recalls his prominent role not only in the Legends and Shilos, but also his demand to “be Elvis” as a child, that is, to be the central fixture around which all else revolves. Ultimately, the process of completing Safe at Home solidified patterns that would hold true in Parsons’s future recording sessions: very little structuring of material prior to recording, preferences for live recording vs. overdubbing, hiring more experienced musicians for specific parts, and a level of control that minimized the producer role. Thus, as much as Parsons relied on other musicians, they primarily served his vision, one that was as much a product of his musical development as it was the economic freedom he had exercised to pursue it.

Safe at Home opens with “Blue Eyes.” Replete with folksy ruralisms, the song’s lyrics

67 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 208.
68 Quoted in Einarson, Desperados, 69.
speak for a man who, despite being poor and treated badly, has the comfort of his “pretty girl” at home:

I got chores to keep me busy, a clock to keep my time,
A pretty girl to love me, with the same last name as mine,
And when the flowers wilt, a big ol’ quilt to keep us warm.
I got the sun to see your blue eyes, but tonight you’re in my arms.

In contrast to Parsons’s earlier compositions which contained more abstract imagery and poetically expressive style, “Blue Eyes” signaled a move toward the more straightforward narratives found in country music. Augmenting the buoyancy of the song’s lyrics, the song’s musical elements capture the Bakersfield Sound. Indeed, against a relatively sparse backdrop and shuffle beat of the drums, Manness’s steel guitar flourishes around Parsons’s tuneful lead vocal line. Lacking the vibrato and chest voice resonance of his earlier work, Parsons’s vocal is nasal and focused with a small hint of a Southern accent, and though Parsons is joined by more than one background vocalist in the song’s choruses, the harmony parts are very much of a piece with the Owens/Rich collaborations.

“Blue Eyes” sets the musical tone for the rest of Safe At Home. A cover of Merle Haggard’s “I Must Be Somebody Else You’ve Known” (1966) is the album’s second track. More cheerful than Haggard’s original, Parsons sings with a youthful exuberance nearly at odds with the bewilderment contained in the song’s lyrics, which outline the confusion of a playboy struggling with the loss of what he thought was just another “darlin’.” Like “Blue Eyes,” the song features core Bakersfield Sound elements, but also adds more layers of instrumentation. Following an instrumental break for the steel guitar and acoustic guitar, Ball’s piano joins the mix, comping a syncopated slip-note figure much in the style of Nashville session pianist, Floyd
The third song on *Safe at Home*, “A Satisfied Mind,” was originally recorded by country star Porter Wagoner in 1955 and a decade later by the Byrds on *Turn! Turn! Turn!* (1965). Wagoner’s version, recorded prior to his transition to the Nashville sound, is firmly in the honky-tonk gospel mold. The mournful whine of the pedal steel guitar combined with Wagoner’s deliberate phrasing and the hymn-like interaction between himself and his background vocals match the sober moral message of the lyrics: it’s better to be poor with a satisfied mind than rich without one. The Byrds’s version, in contrast, contains the trademark features of folk rock, namely, rhythmic vitality, harmonized vocal lines throughout and chiming twelve-string electric guitars. As such, their version recasts the song as more of a folkie’s warning about money than a lesson to be learned about being mentally fulfilled.

The ISB’s version is somewhere in the middle. While it leans toward Wagoner’s in terms of honky-tonk sentiment, it has the rhythmic vitality of the Byrds’s version where the uptempo waltz feel is augmented by Corneal’s snare-drum embellishments, the bass’s upbeats, and Maness’s idiosyncratic steel playing. Reflecting the influence of Don Rich and Roy Nichols, Merle Haggard’s guitar player, in the instrumental break, Maness employs sharp, staccato attacks in conjunction with single-string slides that mimic electric guitar string bends. Specifically, at the 1:08 mark, Maness plays a descending figure that emphasizes muted “ghost” notes and bent

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69 Slip note style is achieved when the key below the melody’s note is struck quickly before the actual melody note is played. The result sounds like the pianist is missing the melody’s note and then correcting it (on purpose). Similar to a grace note, the effect mimics the way a steel guitar or fiddle player can start on a lower pitch and then scoop up or slide into the melody’s note. See Neal, *Country Music*, 212.

70 Cornel here is playing a kind of shuffle waltz in which he precedes each accented downbeat on the bass drum with a softer swung eighth note. He often embellishes the snare hits on beats two and three with drags or ruffs (same thing, different terms).

71 Though definitions change depending on musical context, in country guitar styles, “ghost” notes are those that are fretted (or barred on a steel), but muted either by the fingers on the fretboard or by the palm of the picking hand.
blue notes that, at first listen, make it difficult to know whether it is actually a pedal steel or an electric guitar. Coupled with this instrumental ambiguity is a two-bar hemiola created by the figure’s opening duple note values over the underlying simple triple time (3/4).

Example 1: “Satisfied Mind” steel guitar solo (1:08)

Though brief, this figure displays elements of Wagoner-inspired honky tonk and Byrds-influenced rock, and on a broader level, can be understood as representative of the musical middle ground occupied not only by the ISB’s version of “A Satisfied Mind,” but also by the album as a whole.

In contrast to “A Satisfied Mind,” the album’s next track, a medley of Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues” (1955) and Arthur Crudup’s (and Elvis Presley’s (1954)) “That’s All Right Mama” (1946) illustrates the group’s unabashed allegiance to rock and roll roots. Seamlessly fused by Corneal’s relentless drumbeat and Ethridge’s bass part (which bears striking resemblance to Presley’s “I Don’t Care if the Sun Don’t Shine” [1954]), these two songs retain honky-tonk instrumentation, but it is employed in a way that captures the spontaneity and energy found in Cash’s and Presley’s original Sun Records recordings. In tandem with Parsons’s vocals and the funky rhythm section, Maness and pianist Ball both play syncopated embellishment figures that resemble the whistling train sounds alluded to in the lyrics. Campbell’s acoustic

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while being plucked. In other words, individual notes are “sounded,” but do not ring. “Ghost” notes are used often used as pickup notes by country players when using a hybrid picking technique called “chicken pickin’.” This technique will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four.
guitar also joins the mix in the second half of the song, playing bent-note lead lines behind Parsons. As Parsons’s vocal exclamation in the instrumental break indicates, the band’s energetic performance recalls the raucous, seemingly off-the-cuff style that Parsons and Corneal had performed nearly a decade before in Winter Haven.

Perhaps in a nod to his boyhood home, Parsons chose to record “Cowboy” Jack Clement’s “Miller’s Cave.” A story song in the tradition of Jimmy Dean’s “Big Bad John” and Curly Putnam’s “Green, Green Grass of Home,” “Miller’s Cave” tells of a young man from Waycross, Georgia, who, after killing his unfaithful beloved and her new friend, “Big Dave,” is forced to hide out in Miller’s Cave. Although the song was made popular by Hank Snow, Parsons probably was most aware of Bobby Bare’s version, which rose to the top of the country charts in 1964. While Bare’s version of the song features Nashville Sound elements such as strings and background “oohs,” Parsons’s version draws on the Bakersfield sound with his voice heavily foregrounded. In this way, the song’s narrative becomes its sole focus.

Following a spirited honky-tonk version of Johnny Cash’s “I Still Miss Someone,” the album finishes with three Parsons originals. In the context of the rest of the album, these three best capture Parsons’s developing country aesthetic and hint at the future of his songwriting. The first of these, “Luxury Liner,” exemplifies how Parsons updated his “purist” country sentiments with unique harmonic and formal arrangements and ambiguous lyrics. Written in New York, the song is one of Parsons’s first that is firmly within the country mold and draws both musically and lyrically on vehicle imagery to explore themes of loneliness and escape. The “luxury liner,” which could refer to either a locomotive or a passenger ship, ostensibly carries the protagonist away from a relationship soured by infidelity:

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72 Bare, a country performer who often drew from outside the genre for material, found success within both country and the folk boom through his recordings of other story songs such as “Detroit City” (1963) and Ian and Sylvia’s “Four Strong Winds” (1965).
A Section:
D7
Well, a luxury liner, forty tons of steel.

If I don’t find my baby now, then I guess I never will.

A G D
I’ve been a long lost soul, for a long, long time.

G
I’ve been around.

A
Everybody ought to know what’s on my mind.

Bridge:
D C G D C A
You think I’m lonesome? So do I. So do I.

B Section:
A D A
Well, I’m the kind of guy that likes to make a livin’ runnin’ ‘round,
A D A
And I don’t need a stranger to tell me that my baby’s let me down.

Bridge:
D C G D C A
You think I’m lonesome? So do I. So do I.

Entire form repeats and song fades out in A7

While lighthearted on the surface, Parsons’s lyrics are heartbreaking, for they highlight a painful self-awareness of abject solitude that comes from the outside looking in. Indeed, the protagonist confirms his misery through those around him—they know as well as he does that his baby let him down and that he’s lonesome. As the song unfolds amidst the relentless chugging of the drumbeat and the percussive slap of the bassline, it becomes unclear as to whether or not the

73 Minor change in A section lyrics in second repeat:

Well, a luxury liner, forty tons of steel.
No one in this whole wide world could change the way I feel.
speaker will, like the “luxury liner,” simply ride away, keep “runnin’ ‘round,” or crash.

Parsons’s penchant for thematic ambiguity and wordplay as displayed in “Luxury Liner,” would remain a constant throughout his future songwriting.

If “Luxury Liner’s” lyrics invoke movement and uncertainty, so too does the song’s harmonic underpinning and form. The song begins in D7 as the instruments fade in over Corneal’s accelerating drumbeat, prolonging arrival at a tonal center, and thus, creating a sense of anticipation. The temporary tonal center of D major finally arrives at the end of the third line, but quickly moves to A major (V) to set up the song’s transitionary bridge. While this section could be considered the song’s chorus, in light of its recurrence and song’s structure, it is better understood as a modulatory section leading toward the song’s shorter B section and second harmonic area of A major. Thus, sections A and B are blurred together, despite their different harmonic areas and lengths. Finally, the bridge returns again, leading the song back around to the beginning and the entire arrangement is repeated. The second time around though, the song fades out inconclusively in A7 instead of returning to D major.
Example 2: “Luxury Liner” lead vocal melody line

Through alternating between different, yet related, tonal centers and eschewing clear verse-chorus form, Parsons reinforces the ambiguity of the song’s lyrics while capturing the “luxury liner’s” sense of constant movement. In this sense, the song’s narrator becomes the “luxury liner” itself, alone and trying to “make a livin’ runnin’ ‘round.” As will be discussed in Chapter Four, this musical and lyrical identification with an anthropomorphized vehicle would surface
again at the close of Parsons’s career with “Return of the Grievous Angel.”

If “Luxury Liner” conveyed abject loneliness and weakness, Parsons’s next original, “Strong Boy,” showcased bravado and strength. The speaker tells off a would-be opponent who is vying for his girl’s affections. Though this opponent is “strong” in the physical sense, he is no match for the strength of the speaker’s heart. As such, the “strong boy” can only watch his love “roll by.” Despite the gusto with which Parsons voice captures the song’s enthusiastic machismo, it would be one of the few times that one of Parsons’s protagonists identified with strength rather than weakness.

The album concludes with “Do You Know How It Feels to Be Lonesome?” a song Parsons co-wrote with Barry Goldberg, a blues keyboardist who he had befriended through Ian Dunlop and Mickey Gauvin. Though much slower and more straightforward in musical terms, the song is of a piece with “Luxury Liner” in that it questions the outside world in an attempt to understand the loneliness and depression within:

Do you know how it feels to be lonesome
When there’s just no one left who really cares?
Did you ever try to smile at some people
And all they ever seem to do is stare?

While the song’s maudlin sentiments show Parsons’s grasp of honky-tonk pathos, “Do You Know” contains moments of parody. Not only does Parsons preface the song with an absurd statement: “Polka Varieties Farmer John Sausages presents Jon Corneal asking the musical question: Do you know how it feels to be lonesome? Take 21,” but he also includes a Nashville Sound-style background vocal arrangement in the song’s verse that awkwardly emphasizes the isolation of the singer. Perhaps in displaying some distance from his self-pityingly sentimental lyrics through over-the-top production elements, Parsons hoped to critique what he and his peers considered the overtly commercial motivations of the Nashville country industry. In this way,
Parsons registered both his knowledge of country field at large while reinforcing his alignment with those that were “slightly dislocated with respect to the central country tradition” in and around Nashville at the time.⁷⁴

Completed in December of 1967, *Safe at Home* was officially released in March of 1968. In the intervening months, the International Submarine Band had essentially dissolved. Parsons had joined the Byrds and announced to Lee Hazelwood that he would be recording no more for LHI. In doing so, he relinquished all royalties from *Safe at Home* and the rights to the International Submarine Band name. Without a band to back it, LHI cancelled promotion for the album and as such, *Safe at Home* failed to make any impression on the marketplace when it was released.⁷⁵ Significantly though, a number of rock critics gave the album favorable reviews. *Los Angeles Times* critic Pete Johnson wrote that the album’s songs were “done up purty authentic” and that Parsons’s “voice and pen seem meant for the medium, neither sounding artificial in the homey feel of good country music”⁷⁶ while *Hit Parader* magazine noted, “The band is honestly dealing with country-western music… Although the Buckaroos are much more exciting, the Submarine Band is at least exploring an area that most groups wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole.”⁷⁷ A year later in 1969, Robert Christgau was a bit more ambivalent. Writing for *The Village Voice*, he reflected, “Parsons, with his deep respect for country music, played it too straight. He needed the canted approach of the Byrds, who combine respect with critical

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⁷⁴ Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 76.

⁷⁵ In a desperate attempt to create some enthusiasm for the album, Lee Hazelwood enlisted Duane Eddy and Don Everly to write liner notes for the album. Eddy wrote that he heard “George Jones, Buck Owens ‘soul’,” while Everly asked, “whatever happened to white soul? Whatever happened to music that is incredible and easy to believe? Some youth could get into it and really shake things up. Nashville needs to get some fresh air” (original emphasis). Duane Eddy and Don Everly, liner notes. *International Submarine Band: Safe at Home* (LHIS 12001, 1968). See Fong-Torres, *Hickory Wind*, 81.


distance.”

Though none of the above assessments cite Safe at Home as particularly groundbreaking or as the first country rock album as many later would, they highlight the group’s efforts to achieve an authentic country presentation and willingness to engage with the idiom as young musicians. Implicit within these appraisals is rhetoric regarding the tension between country and rock with an understanding that the idioms occupied opposite ends of a musical and cultural spectrum. Christgau, in particular, reinforced this point when he wrote that Safe at Home was “an assertion of continuity from Arthur Crudup to Gram Parsons, with country music and all its simple virtues square in the center” (emphasis added).

While country, in the hands of rock musicians like the Byrds and Buffalo Springfield embraced the “critical distance” ostensibly needed to bridge the gap between the idioms, in the hands of the Parsons and the ISB, it remained wedded to the safety of country’s “homey feel” and thus was, as Christgau suggests, “too straight.” For Christgau and many critics like him, only the complexity of rock could elevate country or expand its boundaries to resonate with young rock audiences.

Ultimately, like his departure from the Shilos earlier, Parsons’s decision to jump ship from the International Submarine Band reflected both a desire for change and a bigger outlet for his musical aspirations. Indeed, in joining the Byrds, a rock group that had achieved international success and had access to many of the resources that the International Submarine Band lacked, Parsons was catapulted onto a much larger stage, one that would in time, secure his


position within the emerging country rock pantheon and add significantly to his legacy.

Although Parsons’s time with the Byrds was brief, the combination of his “deep respect for country” and the shared musical pedigrees of the rest of the group’s members would help create one of country rock’s most enduring albums: *The Sweetheart of the Rodeo*. Like *Safe at Home*, the album failed to attract much interest at the time of its release, yet *Sweetheart* was crucial for introducing country music and Gram Parsons to the rock world.81

**Flying with The Byrds**

At the time that Parsons joined the Byrds in 1968, the group consisted of only two of its original members: bassist Chris Hillman and lead singer and guitarist Roger McGuinn. Chief songwriter and vocalist Gene Clark had left amidst personality conflicts with singer David Crosby. Crosby had been pushed out of the band also because of personality conflicts and his penchant for on-stage political rants, and drummer Michael Clarke left the band upon completion of *The Notorious Byrd Brothers* in early 1968. Though *Notorious Byrd Brothers* was being touted as one of the group’s best albums due in large part to its experimental sound, with only two members left after its release, the Byrds were forced to explore new options. According to Hillman, “We needed to reinvent ourselves.”82

81 It could be argued that Bob Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding*, released earlier in 1967, was just as crucial for introducing country to rock audiences, but in listening one finds that Dylan’s sound relies less on country’s style markers, such as pedal steel licks and use of the fiddle, than on sparse acoustic instrumentation. Certainly, in the context of loud, electrified rock music, Dylan’s album gestured toward “country” through acousticity, but the Byrds, through their instrumentation, repertoire, and overall style on *Sweetheart* captured traditional country style much more clearly. It wasn’t until 1969 that Dylan would make an unmistakably country album with *Nashville Skyline*. See Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 136-145.

82 Quoted in Einarson, *Hot Burritos*, 58.
To that end, Hillman and McGuinn conceived of a new project that would encompass a selective history of twentieth-century popular music.\footnote{The absence of blues, rhythm and blues, and jazz in McGuinn’s plans for the album may be seen to reflect the absence of these genres in folk rock more broadly. In his work on folk rock, David Brackett asserts that in fulfilling “the need for a genre that was distinctively white,” folk rockers differentiated themselves from white blues rockers or acid rockers through eschewing “ties to historical and contemporaneous genres that were strongly associated with African Americans.” As such, Brackett posits that “folk-rock seemed to satisfy the desire for the newly expanded mass of white, middle-class, post-secondary school producers and consumers for a music that did not reek of an earnest duplicate, however skilfully delivered.” See David Brackett, “Elvis Costello, the Empire of the E Chord, and a Magic Moment or Two,” \textit{Popular Music} 24, No. 3 (Oct., 2005): 362-363.} As McGuinn told Ed Ward in an interview for \textit{Rolling Stone} in 1970, “My original idea for \textit{Sweetheart of the Rodeo} was to do a double album, a chronological album starting out with old-timey music… nasal Appalachian stuff, then get into like the 1930s advanced version of it, move it up to modern country, the Forties and Fifties with steel guitar and pedal steel guitar… then cut it there and bring it up into electronic music and a kind of space music.”\footnote{Ed Ward, “The Rolling Stone Interview: Roger McGuinn,” \textit{Rolling Stone}, October 29, 1970, 28-33.} In need of new musicians to help complete such an ambitious undertaking, Hillman and McGuinn enlisted Parsons, who had been introduced to the band through a mutual business manager: Larry Spector. McGuinn had agreed to hire Parsons based on his keyboard playing, thinking that Parsons could help him play the country material and futuristic jazz that would close the album. McGuinn recalled to \textit{Fusion} magazine later, “We just hired a piano player and he turned out to be Parsons, a monster in sheep’s clothing. And he exploded out of his sheep’s clothing. God! It’s George Jones! In a sequin suit!”\footnote{“Roger McGuinn: Questions and Answers.” \textit{Fusion Magazine} 7, March 26, 1969.}

Indeed, not long after joining, Parsons began steering the group head on toward country music.\footnote{Significantly, country music was not completely foreign to the Byrds as their earlier...}
recording of “A Satisfied Mind” indicated. For Hillman, Parsons’s knowledge of country repertoire and feeling resonated with his own background in folk music and bluegrass. As Hillman recalls, “I knew this music. I was playing in hardcore country bars south of L.A. with a fake ID when I was nineteen. But Gram understood the music, too, and he knew how to sing it.” Soon, Hillman and Parsons became creative allies and McGuinn’s chronological concept album idea was pushed aside in favor of a full-fledged country album.

While Hillman’s and Parsons’s love for country music would bear on Sweetheart, the album’s repertoire, stylistic diversity, and execution was just as indebted to the group’s shared rock-and-roll and folk backgrounds. Like Parsons, both McGuinn and Hillman had come begun their musical careers in rock and roll via Elvis Presley before turning to music falling under the loose umbrella of folk. Thus, familiar with the debates concerning commercialism and authenticity that pervaded popular music in the postwar years, each member brought with him different, but related ideas about what country music on Sweetheart should sound like, and what sorts of artists, styles, and sounds captured it best. As such, the material presented on Sweetheart is unlike the relatively homogenous Bakersfield honky tonk on Safe at Home, instead offering a broader definition of country that included not only honky tonk, but also elements of bluegrass, gospel, folk, and soul—all idioms that had been explored by the Byrds to varying degrees prior to Sweetheart’s creation.

86 Downplaying the Byrds’s previous work, Parsons told Chuck Casell in 1972, “I suppose I convinced the Byrds that they should be doing country music instead of trying to write their own Bob Dylan material” (Quoted in Griffin, Gram Parsons, 126).

87 “Girl With No Name” and “Time Between,” both penned by Hillman and included on the Byrds’s Younger Than Yesterday (Columbia CL 2642, 1967), also exhibit country style.

88 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 220.
An understanding of McGuinn’s and Hillman’s musical backgrounds may serve as a point of comparison to Parsons’s and provide a frame for the kinds of musical choices they would make in their construction of country music on *Sweetheart*.

Roger McGuinn was born in Chicago in 1942, and in his teenage years, took up rock and roll in the style of artists like Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Carl Perkins, and the Everly Brothers. Soon after, folk icon and twelve-string guitar player Bob Gibson piqued his interest in folk music and inspired McGuinn to enroll in Chicago’s Old Town School of Music where he took guitar and banjo lessons from former Weaver, Frank Hamilton. After gaining performing experience in local coffee houses throughout Chicago, McGuinn was recruited by the Limeliters, and then by the Chad Mitchell Trio, both groups who enjoyed great success within the commercial folk strand of the revival. McGuinn’s next offer came from the New Christy Minstrels, but he had to decline when pop singer Bobby Darin recruited him as a songwriter for his publishing company. Soon McGuinn was working in the cubicles of the Brill Building alongside Neil Sedaka, Carole King and other pop songwriters. Outside of the Brill Building however, McGuinn continued to pursue his solo career, playing Greenwich Village hootenannies where he had begun incorporating Beatles tunes into his folk set. After leaving Darin, McGuinn set course for Los Angeles. There, not only did he secure a gig at the Troubadour, the major center for folk music in California in the 1960s, but he also was introduced to fellow musicians, David Crosby and Gene Clark, both folkies who had also begun incorporating rock into their repertoire. With the help of producer Jim Dickson these three alongside drummer Michael Clarke and Chris Hillman would go on to become the Byrds.

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89 Doug Weston’s Troubadour began as a mainstream folk club in the late 1950s, but by the mid-1960s had become the home of other burgeoning singer-songwriters such as Linda Ronstadt and Jackson Browne and a center of Los Angeles rock. For a discussion of the venue, see Chapter 4 in Barney Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun: Strange Days, Weird Scenes, and the Sound of Los Angeles* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996; paperback reprint, 1999).
Hillman was born in San Diego in 1944 and, like McGuinn, took up the guitar in the midst of rock and roll’s popularity in the mid-1950s. Quickly though, as rock and roll began to recede in the early 1960s, Hillman turned toward folk music, and bluegrass specifically. Before long, he was playing mandolin professionally with the Scottsville Squirrel Barkers, a San Diego-based bluegrass group. In 1962, however, Hillman was invited to join the Golden State Boys, a professional bluegrass band that often performed on Cal’s Corral, a local country television show hosted by gregarious car dealership owner Cal Worthington. Hillman recalls, “That’s when I got it: when I was an 18-year-old kid watching Buck Owens & the Buckaroos or Wynn Stewart onstage… That was the real stuff, the real country music. For a middle-class Californian kid I was right in the center of it all from an early age and I learned from those guys.”

The Golden State Boys soon drew the attention of future Byrds producer Jim Dickson, who took the group under his wing and rechristened them the Hillmen, after its young mandolin player. Though Dickson worked hard to attract label interest for the group, he was ultimately unsuccessful. He did, however, recognize Hillman’s musicianship and offered him a bass player position in a new group he was developing: The Byrds.

While the early musical trajectories of both McGuinn and Hillman are similar to that of Parsons, it is important to not underestimate the importance of how their time together during the Byrds’s highly successful early period contrasted with his. Indeed, prior to the group’s disintegration in 1968, the Byrds’s unique blend of chiming electric guitars, folk-styled vocal harmonies and danceable rock rhythms had translated into four top 50 albums and seven top 40

90 Quoted in Einarson, *Hot Burritos*, 92.

91 Biographical information on McGuinn and Hillman taken from Johnny Rogan, *Timeless Flight: The Definitive Biography of the Byrds*, 3rd ed. (Essex: Square One Books Ltd, 1991). According to Hillman, “I was a mandolin player and didn’t know how to play bass, but they didn’t know how to play their instruments either, so I didn’t feel too bad about it. None of us were rock ‘n’ rollers; we were folk musicians and, although it was tremendously exciting, it was such an alienating thing to be getting into” (Ibid., 23).
singles. As one of the few American bands that was able to compete amidst the onslaught of the British Invasion in the mid-1960s, the Byrds, and other folk rock bands that emerged in their wake, injected, in Clarence White’s words mentioned at the outset of this chapter, a “folk integrity” into the new rock frame, thereby legitimating rock as an art form for an emerging youth counterculture. Ultimately, at the forefront of rock’s emergence in the United States, by the late 1960s, the Byrds had garnered a level of social and cultural power unlike Parsons had ever experienced.

With such power, the Byrds’s modus operandi became musical experimentation. While never abandoning the roots of their folk-rock sound, the Byrds forayed into a number of musical areas often with great success. As McGuinn recalls, “part of the fun of the Byrds was changing the musical direction all the time. We started with folk rock and raga and put in the Moog synthesizer. Some people called its psychedelic but I thought of it as Coltrane and Shankar.” While in this context the group’s experimentation with country might have been understood simply as a new “musical direction,” the perceived divide between country and late sixties rock rendered the turn to country more complex.

The degree to which the Byrds were consciously attempting to expand the bounds of country for their rock listenership is difficult to assess. According to Hillman, the group realized that with Sweetheart that they were doing something different, but didn’t think it was necessarily


94 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 221.
groundbreaking.\textsuperscript{95} Parsons, on the other hand, viewed the project a bit differently. McGuinn recalls that Parsons’s idea was “to do something really revolutionary. Gram thought we could win over the country audience. He figured once they dig you, they never let go.”\textsuperscript{96} In this light, it would seem that with little desire to appease the Byrds’s rock audience, Parsons concerned himself more with solidifying a place within the country tradition. Though not fully achieved, this goal would undergird the Byrd’s approach to country on \textit{Sweetheart of the Rodeo}, and its singular status within the history of country rock.\textsuperscript{97}

\textbf{\textit{Sweetheart of the Rodeo}}

In March of 1968, just weeks after Parsons joined the group, the Byrds flew to Nashville to begin work on their new album. By 1968, Nashville Sound elements had begun to blend with those from the West Coast and though Nashville still held its place as the symbolic home of country music and center of the industry, the relationship between these country music centers had become less oppositional.\textsuperscript{98} While Mather argues that artists such as The Byrds, Bob Dylan and Country Joe McDonald came to Nashville primarily to record with “efficient, reputable, and technically competent” Nashville session musicians, in the case of the Byrds, it is just as conceivable that the group’s trip to country’s symbolic home was a means to infuse country

\textsuperscript{95} Einarson, \textit{Hot Burritos}, 77.

\textsuperscript{96} Quoted in Walker, \textit{God’s Own Singer}, 72.

\textsuperscript{97} Mather writes, \textit{Sweetheart of the Rodeo} became “perhaps the first album-length project by a well-known band that attempted to place itself squarely within the country style and to cover country classics” (Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 154).

\textsuperscript{98} Jocelyn Neal observes that at this point the musical sound thought of today as “classic country” a la artists such as Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn had begun stirring. See Neal, \textit{Country Music}, 249.
authenticity into *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* and to introduce themselves to country audiences.\(^99\)

Indeed, while the Byrds did hire several Nashville session musicians over the course of the week they spent recording there, only half of the album was completed, and by most accounts, the Byrds flouted most Nashville studio conventions.\(^100\) They did however, appear on the Grand Ole Opry and, in a grand now-famous gesture, departed from the show’s strict format to introduce one of their new songs, Parsons’s “Hickory Wind.” The importance of this performance will be more fully discussed in Chapter Four, but it is mentioned here to highlight how the group used Nashville’s country resources less as a way to make their music sound a certain way, and more as a way to establish themselves within the country tradition, one that Byrds drummer Kevin Kelley described at the time as “probably the biggest and most honest we have.”\(^101\)

Sessions for *Sweetheart* officially began in Nashville at Columbia Studio A on March 9. Over the course of the next week, the group was joined by Nashville-based pedal steel guitarist Lloyd Green, fiddle and banjo player John Hartford, and double bassist Roy Husky, and recorded a total of eight tracks. Alongside two Bob Dylan covers, recorded also were four folk covers and two Parsons originals. Although this discussion will concern only the five that were included on the finished album, the eight songs recorded in Nashville reflect the commercial folk and bluegrass roots of the band.\(^102\) Perhaps more so than the tracks recorded later in Los Angeles, these demonstrate an unwitting effort to reconcile folk and country writ large.

\(^99\) Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 126.


\(^102\) Traditional ballad, “Pretty Polly,” Tim Hardin’s “Reputation,” and Parsons’s own “Lazy Days,” were also recorded in Nashville, but were not included on the first release of the album in 1968. They were however released alongside several rehearsal outtakes on Columbia’s Legacy Edition of *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* in 2003 (Columbia/Legacy 87189).
Continuing the trend that had begun earlier in 1965 with “Mr. Tambourine Man,” the Byrds’s inclusion of Dylan songs not only reinforced the group’s rock orientation, but also established the sense of “critical distance” that Christgau cited earlier in his assessment of *Safe at Home.* Indeed, the themes of stasis and negation present in “You Ain’t Going Nowhere” and “Nothing Was Delivered” respectively, are ironic in light of the group’s drastic change in stylistic direction, and despite a number of folksy colloquialisms, the lyrics of these songs are relatively abstract in comparison to most country material. As such, both songs give *Sweetheart* an air of intellectualism not often found in country at the time.

While the songs’ lyrics owe more to Dylan’s imaginative post-folk rock style than to country, the music stands solidly within country’s stylistic parameters. The pedal steel guitar playing of Lloyd Green figures prominently on both tracks, and drummer Kevin Kelley’s parts also signify country. In “Nothing Was Delivered” for example, Kelley converts Dylan’s triplet feel to a honky-tonk shuffle in the verses that contrasts the straight four-on-the-floor rock beat present in the chorus. Against this country backing, McGuinn’s lead vocals and the group’s accompanying harmonies reflect country vocal arrangements more than their previous folk rock arrangements. Ultimately, by aligning themselves yet again with Dylan, the Byrds continued their adherence to an established pattern and rock leanings, yet also introduced country music as a new means by which to present it.

Though the choice to record “I Am a Pilgrim” and “Pretty Boy Floyd” might have had to do with the group’s lack of original material, they both showcase the group’s grasp of traditional

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103 Significant also is the fact that these two songs were previously unreleased and had been written in 1967 by Dylan and The Band in Woodstock, New York while Dylan was recuperating from a motorcycle accident. Later released in 1975 as part of *The Basement Tapes,* these songs and the others recorded in Woodstock in 1967 departed from the psychedelic guitar-driven experiments that pervaded the rock world at the time and signaled the direction that Dylan would soon take with *John Wesley Harding,* the sparse acoustic album he would record in Nashville later in the year.
material and folk roots. “I Am a Pilgrim,” which is sung by Chris Hillman, was a song popularized by Merle Travis in the late 1940s and recorded later by a number of folk and bluegrass musicians including Doc Watson and Bill Monroe. Firmly in the country gospel tradition, the song’s lyrics reflect a yearning to be delivered from the “wearisome land” of the living. Like previous versions, the Byrds’s musical treatment of the song relies only on acoustic instrumentation with Hillman’s lead vocal being joined by an acoustic guitar, fiddle, banjo, and bass. While Hillman’s performance is a bit tentative, his plaintive vocal tone captures the tune’s world-weary sentiments, and amidst the song’s sparse acoustic texture, is not unlike the sound of old-time material that flourished a decade earlier within the folk boom. McGuinn’s version of Woody Guthrie’s outlaw narrative “Pretty Boy Floyd” follows a similar musical formula. John Hartford provides both Scruggs-style banjo accompaniment and fiddle breaks while Hillman improvises mandolin flourishes. Augmenting McGuinn’s lone vocal line, these elements create the sound of an old-time string band that lends itself well to the song’s archaic storyline.

Like their Dylan covers, the group’s recording of “Pretty Boy Floyd” also highlights the group’s embrace of material outside of the mainstream country fold. Although Guthrie had had experience with “hillbilly” music as a radio host and performer in Los Angeles in the thirties, in the following decades he had become better known for his connections to the politicized leftist strata of the folk revival. As such, within the country establishment’s growing political conservatism in the late 1960s, Guthrie’s status as a political and cultural outsider left him

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104 Nashville session musician Roy Husky (double bass) joined the Byrds in the studio, so Hillman could focus on mandolin.

largely unrecognized by the commercial country world. Thus, by including Guthrie’s composition within their country project, the Byrds offered a broader conception of country while signaling to listeners that they maintained their ties to the politicized folk world. Further, the song’s allusion to Oklahoma and Robin Hood narrative reinforced the group’s West Coast ties and solidarity with the figure of the cultural outsider just as Buck Owens and Merle Haggard had done earlier with respect to the Nashville industry.

The last song to be recorded in Nashville and included on *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* was “Hickory Wind,” a song co-written by Parsons and ex-ISB bandmate Bob Buchanan. Perhaps the most traditionally country of the material recorded in Nashville, the song contains nearly all of the idiom’s hallmarks in both its lyrics and musical setting. As an expression of nostalgic yearning for the past, home, and ruralness in the face of city life, “Hickory Wind” reestablishes the importance of the South through an autobiographical lens:

Verse One:
In South Carolina there are many tall pines.  
I remember the oak tree that we used to climb,  
But now when I’m lonesome, I always pretend  
That I’m getting the feel of hickory wind.

Verse Two:  
I started out younger at most everything.  
All the riches and pleasures, what else could life bring?  
But it makes me feel better each time it begins  
Callin’ me home, hickory wind.

Verse Three:  
It’s hard to find out that trouble is real  
In a far away city, with a far away feel,  
But it makes me feel better each time it begins  
Callin’ me home, hickory wind.

106 Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 150.
In slow waltz time against a wash of Green’s steel guitar, Hartford’s fiddle, and Parsons’s own Floyd Cramer-style piano playing, the lyrics demonstrate Parsons’s own world-weary sentiments and his swift musical growth. Parsons’s voice, in particular, displays this growth, for it contains markers of honky-tonk singing often used to demonstrate authentic self expression: timbral variation, melismatic phrase endings, and a sense of fragility ostensibly informed by his own feelings. This kind of assimilation of country convention and emotional investment is quite remarkable considering that Parsons had only come to the idiom roughly two years earlier. In the context of the Byrds’s trip to Nashville and their own status as country outsiders, “Hickory Wind” might be understood as Parsons’s and the Byrds’s most brazen musical attempt to establish authenticity within the central country tradition. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, it was through this song that Parsons introduced himself at the group’s historic Grand Ole Opry appearance and one that he would return to later in his solo career as a means of re-asserting his position within country rock in the early 1970s.

Following the group’s Nashville sessions and a tour of East Coast colleges, the remainder of Sweetheart of the Rodeo was recorded in Hollywood, California, over the course of two months. The album was finally completed in May of 1968 with the addition of six more songs. Like those recorded in Nashville, the songs recorded in Hollywood reflected the group’s understanding of country as a diverse range of sounds, songs, and styles, but unlike them, drew more on Parsons’s prior experience with honky tonk and R&B than on McGuinn and Hillman’s prior experience in bluegrass and folk.

Hinting at the fusions of country and soul that Parsons would in short time term “cosmic American music” and explore with the Flying Burrito Brothers (the subject of the next chapter), the first song the Byrds recorded in Los Angeles was a cover of soul singer William Bell’s “You
Don’t Miss Your Water” (1961). To convert the song from a horn and organ-driven soul ballad, at Parsons’s suggestion, the Byrds called on Safe at Home contributors Jay Dee Maness and Earl Ball to give the track a honky-tonk instrumental backing. As a result, the song became a lively waltz filled with pedal steel and piano embellishments. In contrast to the blues-inflected vocals of Bell’s original, McGuinn’s vocal delivery in the Byrds’s version is of a piece with the characteristically smooth, folk-influenced style he had used on previous Byrds recordings. Perhaps to bolster this straightforward vocal rendering, McGuinn’s vocals are double-tracked in the verses and augmented by Byrds folk-rock style harmonies in the choruses.

The group’s covers of George Jones’s “You’re Still On My Mind” (1962) and Merle Haggard’s “Life in Prison” (1967) are both sung by Parsons and manifest Bakersfield Sound elements again with the help of Maness and Ball. Along with “Hickory Wind,” these tracks, more than the others on Sweetheart, showcase Parsons in a leading role and continue the sound and feeling found earlier on Safe at Home.

Like “I Am a Pilgrim,” the group’s cover of “The Christian Life” reveals gospel as a source of influence, but as a result of McGuinn’s contrived vocal performance lapses into near parody. The song was originally written by Ira and Charlie Loudermilk of the Louvin Brothers, one of country music’s most influential brother duet teams, and included on their 1959 release, Satan is Real. The album, as journalist Don Yates writes, mirrored the Louvins’ “fire-and-

107 Parsons was the original lead vocalist on “You Don’t Miss Your Water.” McGuinn’s vocals were overdubbed in post-production as a result of threats from Lee Hazlewood, who claimed that Parsons was still under contract with LHI Records. Along with “You Don’t Miss Your Water,” both “The Christian Life” and “One Hundred Years From Now” were subject to the same treatment. Some maintain that McGuinn used the situation to decrease Parsons’s presence on the album. According to producer Gary Usher, “McGuinn was a little bit edgy that Parsons was getting a little bit too much out of this whole thing...He didn’t want the album to turn into a Gram Parsons album” (See Christopher Hjort, So You Want To Be a Rock ‘N’ Roll Star: The Byrds Day-By-Day 1965-1973 (London: Jawbone Press, 2008), 162-176). See also Griffin, Gram Parsons, 140 for Parsons’s understanding of the overdubbing: “There’s another Sweetheart of the Rodeo, and uh, I dig it.” In 2003, a 2-CD Legacy edition of Sweetheart was released that included outtakes, rehearsal versions, and master takes of songs with Parsons’s lead vocals still intact (Sweetheart of the Rodeo [Legacy Edition] Columbia/Legacy 87189, 2003).
brimstone Christianity” and Southern Baptist conception of Old Testament punishment.\textsuperscript{108}

Though the Louvins became as well known for their secular recordings, the messages of God-fearing hard-won redemption found in their country gospel albums such as Satan is Real would prove a powerful influence throughout Parsons’s career as would the Louvins’ vocal duet style. In the voice of McGuinn however, the song comes off a joke that pokes fun at the conservative religiosity of traditional country. The song’s lyrics speak from the perspective of one who has converted to “the Christian life” while his buddies are off doing things he despises:

My buddies shun me since I turned to Jesus.
They say I’m missing a whole world of fun.
I live without them and walk in the light.
I like the Christian life.

While the Byrds’s instrumental backing to the song captures the honky-tonk feel of the Louvins’ original, McGuinn’s contrived Southern accent and tentative delivery contains little of their sincere conviction. In the context of the late 1960s and the group’s countercultural audience, this seemingly tongue-in-cheek kind of rendering underscored the “critical distance” that Christgau found favorable in the Byrds’s country work.

Reflecting Hillman’s early love of Hollywood westerns, the group recorded “Blue Canadian Rockies,” a song originally recorded by Gene Autry for his 1952 film of the same name. Most notable in the Byrds’s version (which Hillman sings) is the idiosyncratic electric guitar playing of Clarence White. White, like the rest of the Byrds, had sought to fuse “folk integrity” with rock and to that end, had begun translating his virtuosic flat-picking acoustic guitar style onto an electric guitar.\textsuperscript{109} White’s instrument of choice, a Fender Telecaster, had

\textsuperscript{108} Don Yates, “Review: Louvin Brothers: Tragic Songs of Life/A Tribute to the Delmore Brothers/Satan is Real,” No Depression 5 (September–October 1996).

\textsuperscript{109} Clarence White (1944-1973) began his musical career in bluegrass as vocalist and lead guitarist of the Kentucky Colonels, a West Coast-based bluegrass band. After switching from acoustic to electric guitar around 1965, White
been equipped with a pull-string mechanism that was capable of raising the guitar’s B-string a whole step. Connected to the guitar’s strap button, the mechanism allowed White to mimic steel guitar licks without having to physically bend individual strings. As demonstrated on “Blue Canadian Rockies,” White utilizes a variety of playing techniques, namely finger-picked rolled chord figures, double-stops, and “B-bender” licks that take the place of Maness’s pedal steel. Following the departure of Parsons and Hillman, White would become a full-time member of the Byrds, contributing his guitar playing to the group’s future country excursions.

The final track recorded for Sweetheart of the Rodeo was Parsons’s own “One Hundred Years from Now.” Somewhat ironically, this song is not only reminiscent of the Byrds’s earlier folk rock, but by far also the most rock-edged track on the album. Indeed, the song is driven by Parsons and McGuinn’s harmonies, Kelley’s steady rock backbeat, Parsons’s block piano chords, White’s constant electric guitar noodling, and Lloyd Green’s recurring pedal steel hook. The song’s lyrics also reveal a side of Parsons’s songwriting more indebted to Bob Dylan than Buck Owens. Filled with rhetorical questions and a sense of existential dread, Parsons’s words speak to the fatalistic themes that were beginning to surface within the counterculture at the time:

Nobody knows what kind of trouble we’re in.
Nobody seems to think it all might happen again.

It would be these sentiments recast within a more perceptible country frame that would soon pervade Parsons’s work with Hillman in the Flying Burrito Brothers.

Ultimately, in its broad range of repertoire and stylistic diversity, Sweetheart of the Rodeo offered an expansive definition of country that not only mediated the relationship between West Coast country and Nashville, but also the perceived boundaries between past and present country traditions and modern rock sensibilities. In short, Sweetheart might be called a

worked as a session musician and guitarist of Nashville West, another pioneering, but short-lived country rock group of the late 1960s prior to joining the Byrds.
revisionist country album dressed in rock clothing. Significantly, for Parsons, his status as a Byrd and prominent voice on the album would boost his credibility within the quickly emerging country rock scene on the West Coast and afford him the opportunity to continue his increasingly ambitious pursuits after leaving the group just weeks prior to the album’s release.

In the context of the Byrds’s prior success, *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* was a commercial failure. Released in late August of 1968, the album reached only number seventy-seven on the album charts and was the band’s lowest selling release at that point. Despite this, the album, like *Safe at Home*, received a number of favorable reviews by the rock press.\(^{110}\) *New York Times* critic William Kloman wrote, *Sweetheart “is an excellently produced, urbanized version of old country and western motifs… People who grew up listening to Hank Williams will miss the rough edge of down-home grit in the vocals, which are more Southern Maryland roadhouse than true bluegrass, but the simplicity and honestly of the music make it the best country and western album of the recent avalanche.”*\(^{111}\) *Los Angeles Free Press* writer David Mark Dashew also praised the album as “one of the most honest, unpretentious, and musical” that he had heard in a long time: “There is a simplicity about this album… This is a great album, in spite of the fact that you may enjoy it.”\(^{112}\) Robert Hilburn of the *Los Angeles Times* said that the album was “some of the best country music ever achieved by a pop act”\(^{113}\) while *Rolling Stone*’s Jon Landau offered his opinion in a page-long essay on “Country & Rock”: “The Byrds, in doing country as country, show just how powerful and relevant unadorned country music is to the music of today. And

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\(^{110}\) There were also a number of negative reviews of the album. See, for example, Robert Shelton’s review of the album in the *New York Times* where he writes, “The latest Byrds album [adheres] to most of the ‘rules of the game’ about country sound, and yet, sad to say, to this old fan of the Byrds, the album is a distinguished bore.” Robert Shelton, “When Flatt and Scruggs Sing Dylan, What’s Up?” *The New York Times*, November 24, 1968, H7.


they leave just enough rock in the drums to let you know that they can still play rock’n’roll. That’s what I call bringing it all back home.”

As the reception of *Sweetheart* demonstrates, those within the rock world included country within its bounds if it met rock’s folk-derived criteria for authenticity. Indeed, key words like “simplicity,” “honesty,” and “unadorned” in assessments such as those above reflect the rock community’s claim to musical values rooted in the folk boom. Barry Gifford’s contrasting between “Blue Canadian Rockies” and “Life in Prison” from his *Rolling Stone* review of the album offers a more specific example of such qualified acceptance:

“Blue Canadian Rockies” is a particularly nostalgic track for all old Gene Autry fans. To hear that “the golden poppies are bloomin’/ ‘round the banks of Lake Louise” brings back visions of Ol’ Gene and his horse Champion loping along the prairie. “Rockies” sounds much more honest than their rendering of Merle Haggard’s “Life In Prison,” a much more citified contemporary song. The Haggard tune sounds too professional, too well laid out and unsympathetic with the plight of the unfortunate guy who murdered his girl-friend. It would be better to listen to Haggard himself do this—it’s not that much better but at least it’s honest.115

The positive attention that *Sweetheart* received in the press also reflected the recognition of country rock as a developing field. Just two months prior to the album’s release, Richard Goldstein penned an article for the *Village Voice* entitled, “Country Rock: Can Y’all Dig It?” in which he reported on groups such as Moby Grape, The Stone Poneys, the International Submarine Band, and the Byrds,116 and in September, as mentioned above, Landau published his article, “Country & Rock” in *Rolling Stone*, citing the Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, and The Band


116 Richard Goldstein, “Country Rock: Can Y’all Dig It?” *Village Voice*, June 6, 1968. Goldstein opined, “the country rock of 1968 will be sophisticated, but not dishonest. I’ll wager we don’t get God and country and a whole lot more Jesus from The Byrds, except in a context of nostalgic irony.”
as exemplars of the music. Significantly though, as the above analysis of *Sweetheart* reveals, the rock in the country rock produced by the Byrds came less from the music itself and more from their previous rock success, status as outsiders to country tradition, and occasional critical distance from certain kinds of country material. Ultimately, in being less concerned with blending musical elements of country and rock than with presenting country as a long tradition of diverse sounds, songs, and styles, through *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, the Byrds distinguished themselves within the emerging country rock field.

**Conclusion**

In appraising Parsons’s contributions to both *Safe At Home* and *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, it is evident that as much as Parsons’s vision of himself as a country musician was built on what he had learned from Ray Charles and Bakersfield artists like Owens and Haggard, it was also indebted to his prior experience in rock and roll and commercial folk. This is reflected not only in the material he chose to record and the way he interpreted that material, but also in how many of his original compositions manifested both a concern with stylistic fidelity and a desire to expand stylistic boundaries. Thus, just as Charles and Owens had assembled musical fusions that were both “different” and “authentic” within the country field in the mid-1960s, within the burgeoning country rock scene in and around Los Angeles in 1968, Parsons’s “deep respect for country music” established him as an artist set somewhat apart from his peers. As Mather observes, “he was not a rock musician who dabbled in country or bluegrass techniques, but a musician committed to country instrumental style, vocal delivery, and lyrical themes.”

Certainly, we would be remiss to attribute the importance of these albums solely to Parsons, but his full-on dedication to country music within such a youthful countercultural climate in and

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117 Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 84.
around Los Angeles and ability to articulate his understanding of country music’s history and emotional power were key contributing factors for their significance and establishing country rock as a distinct musical form in the late sixties.

Amidst the “avalanche” of country rock records that fell upon the rock landscape at the time, *Safe at Home* and *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* can be classified as country first, with rock only a distant second. Both albums represented country in a more expansive and inclusive way than what was often found in most mainstream commercial country, and thus, provided their rock audiences with a more accessible avenue into an idiom long held to be at musical and cultural odds with what was hip. Despite the commercial failure of the albums at the time of their release in 1968, they signaled a divergent direction within the rock world that manifested both a continued to adherence to folk-derived conceptions of authenticity and reaction against what was perceived as the inauthenticity and excess of the West Coast countercultural rock scene. As Chris Hillman complained in an interview for *Hit Parader* upon returning from Nashville in March of 1968, “I’m terribly disillusioned. You walk down the street and on every corner you see a rock group. But they’re not really serious musicians. They think just because they have long hair and wear an Indian morning coat that they’re saying something, that they’re making the scene.”

As the following chapter will discuss, the disillusionment that Hillman felt would soon translate into another landmark album, again with Parsons as a primary contributor. In the same interview that Hillman addressed his disillusion, Parsons added, “to be really honest about wearing an Indian morning coat you must be an Indian in the morning… These people don’t wear honest clothes and they don’t produce honest music. They have absolutely no soul or

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118 Quoted in Grein, “The Byrds in Nashville.”
As his words indicate, though he had come to country music only two years earlier, he understood his artistry as an “honest” reflection of himself. Clearly, his “identity crisis” was behind him.

As quickly as Parsons had joined the Byrds, just as quickly he was gone. At the end of the group’s European tour preceding Sweetheart’s release, Parsons decided to forgo the next South African leg of the tour, citing opposition to apartheid as his main reason. Apparently, Parsons had learned of the situation in South Africa through Keith Richards and Mick Jagger, whom the Byrds had befriended while in London, and at their suggestion, decided against performing in a segregationist country. While some have argued that Parsons’s motivation to leave the band had just as much to do with fear of flying as with his racial politics, Parsons’s abandonment of the group reflected, again, his willfully individualistic ambition and lack of concern with repercussions, financial and otherwise.

Parsons had only been with the Byrds for six months and left somewhat unceremoniously, but his contribution to the group was significant. As McGuinn said in the wake of Parsons’s departure and Sweetheart’s release: “While he was with us, he led us into this direction headlong which we would never have done.” Though perhaps seeking to disclaim responsibility for the Sweetheart’s lack of commercial success, McGuinn’s words point to Parsons’s influence and the country “direction” that the Byrds would continue to pursue on their

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119 Ibid.
120 Parsons told the Seattle Helix, “Something people don’t know about me is that I was brought up with a Negro for a brother. Like all Southern families, we had maids and servants, a whole family that took care of us. Sammy Dixon was a little older than me, and he lived and grew up with me, so I learned at a real close level that segregation was just not it.” Reprinted in Richard Cusick, “The Story of the Grievous Angel Part One,” Goldmine, September 1982.
121 Doggett, Are You Ready for the Country?, 59.
next few albums. For Parsons, leaving the Byrds allowed him the opportunity to continue pursuing country on his own terms. To that end, following a period of hanging out with Keith Richards and introducing him to “mechanics of country music” back in Los Angeles, Parsons set out to form a new group that he described as a “Southern soul group playing country- and gospel-oriented music with steel guitar.” This group, the Flying Burrito Brothers, would more directly address the concerns of their countercultural rock audiences than either the ISB or the Byrds had, and more consciously blend country and other popular music elements in musical mixture that Parsons would famously call “cosmic American music.”

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CHAPTER THREE
Lions and Lambs in Cosmic America

With an advance from their new record company, A&M Records, in late 1968, Gram Parsons and his new group, the Flying Burrito Brothers walked into Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors on Lankershim Boulevard in Los Angeles to order the now-famous custom suits that they wore on the cover of their debut album, *The Gilded Palace of Sin*.¹ Since the early 1950s, store owner and clothier Nudie Cohn had been creating suits for country stars such as Spade Cooley, Roy Rogers and Hank Williams, with his most famous creation probably being a $10,000 gold lamé suit that Elvis Presley wore in 1957. Known for their sequins, spangles and over-the-top garishness, Nudie’s custom suits reflected the professional glitz and dazzle of the stars themselves. Los Angeles-based piano player David Barry recalled the difference between hippies in Southern California in the late 1960s and the “real guys” of country music in terms of such costuming:

They all wore rodeo outfits and satin. They looked like a Las Vegas joke. But that was what the real guys wore, and if you wanted to be authentic, that’s what you wore. People like me wore jeans and boots, which is exactly what real country stars didn’t want to wear because it suggested they came from country’s poor white roots. They wanted to deny that and have a guitar-shaped swimming pool in Nashville.²

As Barry’s words indicate, the sparkle of Nudie’s suits offered material evidence of success and star power. For Parsons, a young musician whose star was rising through his former association with the Byrds and his promotion of country music, an idiom seemingly far removed from the countercultural scenes that existed on the West Coast at the time, the suits were a way to both

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¹ Burrito co-founder Chris Hillman recalls that the idea to get the suits was indeed Parsons’s. See Einarson, *Hot Burritos*, 134-135.
visually connect to “real country stars” and to consciously promote an identity that poked at the boundaries between the absurd and the sincere, the contrived and the real.

The Burritos’s bedazzled garb displayed on The Gilded Palace of Sin’s cover and in subsequent press photos reveals much about the group’s aesthetic. While referencing the sequined wagon wheels and cacti that punctuated the suits of “real” country stars such as Porter Wagoner and Hank Thompson, the Burritos augmented their suits with countercultural imagery. Bassist Chris Ethridge’s white Edwardian-cut suit is covered in ornate red and yellow roses. Steel guitarist “Sneaky Pete” Kleinow wears a bulky black velvet pullover shirt with a gold pterodactyl in flight and two Tyrannosaurus Rexes on the back. Chris Hillman’s blue business-cut suit is festooned with sparkling peacocks of gold and green and a large golden sunburst on the back. Parsons’s white suit, now housed in the Country Music Hall of Fame, perhaps best encapsulates the converging and sometimes contradictory streams that ran through the Burritos’s music and imagery. His belled pants hang low with flames licking up the sides toward poppies that covered the front pockets. Naked women adorn the lapels of his short-cut jacket while green marijuana leaves, pills, and sugar cubes of LSD embellish the remainder of the front of his jacket. Contrasting the hedonistic vices implied on the front is a large flaming red cross that radiated with bolts of blue and white light on the back.

At once ridiculous and outrageous, earnest and traditional, the Burritos’s suits manifested Parsons’s desire to create visual and sonic imagery that challenged simplistic understandings of social and musical boundaries while underscoring the group’s “cosmic” musical aesthetics. Responding to reactions of the press toward the group’s outfits, Parsons told an interviewer in 1969: “We think sequins are in good taste. Rolling Stone, the Free Press—they think we’re a bunch of show-offs and we’re trying to put everything down… They’re so uptight about our
sequined suits. Just because we wear sequined suits doesn’t mean we think we’re great, it means we think sequins are great.”

Putting such misunderstanding of the group’s visual cues in line with their musical goals, Parsons went further:

We’re merely reflecting everything because real music is supposed to reflect reality. You can’t build a reality in music, you have to reflect it. Like ‘original’ music was made to get people to get together. Like religious music, to form a bond between you and your ancestors, let’s say. In church you would have music that would make you nostalgic and think of the olden times and what the reality was that lead you up to right now. That’s where music is at. You can’t build your own reality—that’s why psychedelic music is so jive. It’s everybody’s own bag. No, I’m sorry, you know, we’re all in it together. Like it or not.

Though somewhat obtuse, Parsons’s distinction between “real music” and psychedelic music provides context for exploring how Parsons and the Burrito’s attempted to reach their audiences through what Parsons called more specifically “cosmic American music.” Eschewing the vague country rock designation that the press had begun using to describe some of the country-flavored music of groups such as the Buffalo Springfield and the Byrds, Parsons sought a more inclusive and pluralistic melding of a variety of popular genres. According to Parsons: “We were still trying to do my deluxe number, a dream of soul-country-cosmic, what I called in my earlier college days ‘Cosmic American Music’.” As this designation suggests, in appeals to both countercultural values and an idealized American-ness, the Burritos sought to mediate the conservatism of mainstream country and the outspoken liberalism of rock’s counterculture through a musical middle ground that allowed listeners to reassess the boundaries and cultural politics of both genres. This chapter will explore that fertile musical middle ground. The first part of the chapter will investigate the formation of the Flying Burrito Brothers and the musical

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4 Ibid., 5.

5 Griffin, Gram Parsons, 131.
means by which the group would create *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, their debut album and their audience’s introduction to “cosmic American music.” The middle portion of this chapter will discuss “cosmic American music” in the context of both the counterculture and its relationship to country music at the end of the 1960s. And finally, the chapter will conclude with an exploration of prominent currents that manifest in the sounds, lyrical themes, and chosen repertoire that comprises *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, namely escapism, gender relations, and racial politics.

These currents, by no means mutually exclusive, are often discussed at length within the socio-political contexts of late 1960s rock, but have yet to be discussed fully in regard to country rock specifically. Mather explores the cultural work done by musicians such as Parsons and the Burritos, but focuses more closely on how the country rock movement as a whole negotiated tensions within the rock community regarding the American South. She writes, “by sidestepping hot-button topics like race, poverty, and politics in general, and highlighting more ‘universal’ and mythical tropes of nature, rambling, and romance, the style eased tensions regarding the South’s ascendancy in American cultural life and showcased country music as non-political.”

Certainly, such a claim could also be made for the performance of Southern “folk” material by revivalists within the previous decade’s “folk boom.” As we recall from Chapter One, much like the Kingston Trio, Parsons and the Shilos eschewed cause-specific messages in favor of the kinds of universal “folk” themes that Mather highlights. While Mather’s statement does ring true for a number of important country rock albums that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, closer inspection reveals that the Flying Burrito Brothers, in particular, *did* directly confront such “hot-button topics” through engaging an alternative musical and political aesthetic that resonated within a countercultural frame.

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6 Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 2.
The Flying Burrito Brothers and *The Gilded Palace of the Sin*

By the time that the Byrds’s *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* was released in August of 1968, Gram Parsons had quit the group and Chris Hillman was on the verge of leaving. By October, Hillman had completely severed ties with the Byrds’s remaining two members and reconnected with Parsons to begin work on a new project. Though Parsons often receives the lion’s share of attention for the Flying Burrito Brothers’s repertoire and legacy, the early musical products of Parsons and Hillman alongside pedal steel guitarist “Sneaky Pete” Kleinow and bassist Chris Ethridge would prove foundational for the world of country rock and popular music in the following years.

Soon after reconnecting, Hillman and Parsons rented a house north of Hollywood in Resada, California on De Soto Avenue and began following a regimented schedule for writing new material. It was this period in late 1968 that Hillman describes as the most fruitful time in his and Parsons’s musical careers: “We were writing songs because we had a purpose. That was the most prolific time in my life and Gram’s too, that month or two we were living on De Soto writing the songs for the first Burritos album.”⁷ Indeed, within weeks, Parsons and Hillman had written most of the original songs that would appear on *The Gilded Palace of Sin*. With this batch of new songs, Hillman and Parsons quickly began searching for a recording contract. Through their connections to the Byrds, Parsons’s charm and word-of-mouth popularity, the two Burritos signed with A&M Records for a $20,000 advance. An independent label founded by Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss in 1962, A&M was a good fit for the group given both the revenue made by its non-rock artists and the label’s desire to crossover into the rock market.⁸ Given the

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⁸ Some of A&M’s first acts were Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, the Baja Marimba Band, and Waylon Jennings.
label’s inexperience with rock, let alone country music being played by artists from established rock backgrounds, A&M’s relatively lax control of the group gave Hillman and Parsons the freedom they needed to pursue their musical goals.9

With record label support, Parsons and Hillman soon began looking for musicians to complete their lineup. To that end, they recruited bassist Chris Ethridge and steel guitarist Pete Kleinow, both players whose styles leaned toward the unconventional. Ethridge, who had previously played on the International Submarine Band’s Safe At Home was, like Parsons, a native of the South. Born in Meridian, Mississippi, he played rock and roll and rhythm and blues in clubs around the Gulf Coast until 1965 when he was recruited by pop singer Johnny Rivers to join his band and move to California. In addition to backing Johnny Rivers, Ethridge soon began working as a session musician in Los Angeles, contributing to a number of albums including Judy Collins’s 1968 album, Who Knows Where the Time Goes.10 Not a traditional country bassist, Ethridge’s style was more melodic and fluid, owing much to the rhythm-and-blues music he had grown up playing. Indeed, according to future Burrito member Bernie Leadon, Ethridge “was not a bomp, bomp, bomp, on-the-downbeat bass player… it’s almost like he’s playing a

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9 A&M was not the only record label to begin embracing West Coast based country rock in the late 1960s. Also in 1968, Elektra Records signed the Dillards who would soon release the seminal progressive bluegrass album Wheatstraw Suite, and Capitol Records, no stranger to country music, signed Hearts & Flowers, the group that would launch the career of future-Burrito and Eagle member Bernie Leadon. Despite Sweetheart of the Rodeo’s lack of commercial success, the Byrds continued to record country-tinged albums for Columbia Records, alongside Decca Records, Amos Records and Warner Brothers who also supported artists by then loosely defined by the country rock designation. Significantly, it wouldn’t be until The Eagles released their debut album on David Geffen’s Asylum Records in 1972 that country rock would attain mainstream commercial success and significantly boost major label interest in the music. Thus, record label support of the Burritos and country-rock in general in the late 1960s represented semi-calculated risk-taking based on artist reputation much more than a need to cash in on an established popular genre. Regarding the Burritos at A&M, rock writer Jim Bickhart notes that “It wasn’t a bandwagon at that point… But here you had all these well-known musicians wanting to play this music, so the record companies took notice. There wasn’t a bandwagon. There was an organic attempt to create one, not by the record labels but by the musicians themselves. By embracing the Burrito Brothers and Gene Clark and Doug Dillard—and attempting to sign Poco—A&M seemed keen to be there in case it became a bandwagon” (Quoted in Einarson, Hot Burritos, 108).

cello counterpoint part, not the basic fundamental notes.”

In addition to his idiosyncratic bass playing, Ethridge also brought the seeds of two songs that would help anchor the group’s first album—“Hot Burrito #1” and “Hot Burrito #2”.

While Hillman, Parsons, and Ethridge each offered unique contributions to the Burritos, one of the most crucial components of the group’s sound was the steel guitar playing of “Sneaky Pete” Kleinow. As the group’s main soloist, Kleinow often pushed the instrument into the forefront as an independent voice in dialogue with Hillman’s and Parsons’s vocals. Much like Jimi Hendrix’s use of his electric guitar in songs such as “All Along the Watchtower,” Kleinow’s steel’s presence and interplay with the vocals often went beyond mere accompaniment to serve a narrative function.

Kleinow, who had come to California from South Bend, Indiana, in the 1950s, was roughly fifteen years older than the rest of the group and had become a veteran of the West Coast music scene by the time Hillman and Parsons approached him. A stop-motion animator by day and musician by night, Kleinow had done a few shows with the Byrds, but was known more for his work for local western-swing performer Smokey Rodgers and his band, the Western Caravan.

In addition to playing with Rodgers, Kleinow had long been playing clubs such as the Lazy X and Palomino in North Hollywood, many of the same venues that Parsons and Hillman had been frequenting around the time that the idea for the Flying Burrito Brothers was conceived. As Kleinow mentioned to Parsons biographer Jason Walker, “Gram Parsons and Chris Hillman were looking for a steel player that was a little bit different, not the Nashville

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13 Einarson, *Hot Burritos*, 112.: Kleinow worked on the Davey and Goliath show and the Gumby series, which he wrote the title song for.
model.” According to Hillman himself, Kleinow was a different kind of player: “Sometimes he would be brilliant and other times he’d just be weird playing weird stuff… But in the scope of things if one was to design this to be what it originally was then he was the perfect guy.”

To this end, through using the pedal steel in a non-traditional way that explored sounds and melodic gestures found much more often in rock, Kleinow opened up new possibilities not only for the instrument itself, but also for the musical and social context in which it was used. This achievement resonates within musicologist Jacques Attali’s efforts to theorize the role of music as a social force and means of structuring difference. Attali argues that “noise,” as opposed to “order,” is a mode of sound that interrupts existing musical codes, and in doing so proposes new ways of musical understanding that could also lead to new ways of structuring power and difference. In this light then, as an “innovator and herald of worlds in the making,” Kleinow interrupted the existing codes through which the pedal steel was understood by countercultural audiences, and in turn, restructured the parameters of both rock and country music signification for those listeners.

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14 Quoted in Walker, God’s Own Singer, 95.

15 Einarson, Desperados, 113. In terms of the unique technical aspects of Kleinow’s playing, Leadon explains further that Kleinow’s style owed much to the tuning system he used: “In steel guitar there is this sixth tuning which is actually a C chord but with a sixth in it. Pete had an eight-string Fender cable pull steel. By the time the Burritos began this E9 tuning had started and there were a lot of country guys, especially in Bakersfield, playing that tuning. In the key of E the dominant is B, so instead of tuning the sixth tuning to C6, Pete tuned down to B6, which allowed him to play easily in the key of E with everyone else. So he played E stylings out of a B6 tuning with weird cable pulls that nobody else did. It was all ass backward” (Ibid., 115). As such, according to Leadon, the outcome was “absolutely unique-to-Pete steel licks” (Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 268). Kleinow’s choice of instrument also had much to do with his unique style. While many steel guitarists used instruments with multiple necks that employed different tunings (a C6 tuning on one and E9 tuning on the other, for example) and that also had a number of pedals and levers underneath the body that raised and lowered string pitches, Kleinow’s eight-string single neck instrument had relatively few pedals, thus encouraging Kleinow to approach the instrument in unconventional ways in order to play conventional country licks and also to create his “unique-to-Pete” licks.


17 Waksman, Instruments of Desire, 11.
Though they lacked a committed drummer, the group began rehearsing together and preparing to record. Sessions began in November at A&M’s new studio. By all accounts, there was little preparation actually done for the sessions and many song arrangements were learned on the spot with little input from A&M’s studio staff. According to Hillman, “Everything was recorded live, singing and playing at the same time mostly. A couple of tracks were overdubbed, but that’s all.” Tracks for what became *The Gilded Palace of Sin* were completed in January of 1969 with a total of four drummers being utilized for various songs. The album hit the shelves later in the spring. It reached only #164 on the US Billboard charts and sold roughly 40,000 copies.

Despite minimal rehearsal time, scattered haphazard sessions, and a lack of polished production, the album managed to attract some noteworthy attention from critics. *Rolling Stone*’s Stanley Booth lauded the album almost exclusively in terms of Parsons, writing that the album was “the best, the most personal Parsons had done” and “the statement of a young man who must feel at home nowhere, not in the city or in Waycross, Georgia.” Booth, who we will recall was also a Waycross native, opined that “Parsons, coming from the country, feels more deeply than most the strangeness and hostility of the modern world, but he speaks to and for all

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20 Drummers include: Jon Corneal (tracks 1, 3, 4, 5, 7), Popeye Phillips (tracks 8, 9, 11), Eddie Hoh (tracks 2, 10), Sam Goldstein (track 6)

21 The album was released in the midst of what eventually became a disastrous promotional train tour across the United States. See Einarson, *Hot Burritos*, 154-194.


of us. Gram Parsons is a good old boy.” In 1974, John Firminger echoed Booth in the *Country Music Review*: “This album quite clearly stands as a complete definition of the term *country rock*, using a heavy instrumental approach combining strong country roots. The lyrical content showed a departure from the more traditional subjects and involved topicalities like drugs, draft dodging, and sex, matters that the younger generation could readily identify with as part of their lifestyles.” In the context of Parsons’s desire to create “cosmic American music” amidst the backdrop of the youth counterculture, such assessments highlight at once an understanding of the group’s musical goals (albeit through Parsons in Booth’s case), and also a recognition that the then-contemporary concerns they addressed such as drugs, draft-dodging, and sex, were modern ones that mattered deeply to the community built within and around rock. The “modern world” that Booth understood Parsons as trying to come to terms with as a “country boy” ostensibly from the “good old” South, was one replete with the kinds of contradictions that Parsons and the Burritos sought to explore and problematize—urban/rural, region/nation, upper class/lower class, black/white, sacred/secular, conservative/liberal, hippy/straight—through “cosmic American music,” itself a vaguely defined stylistic amalgam of genres understood by many as incongruent.

The range of material recorded by the Flying Burrito Brothers for *The Gilded Palace of Sin* situated the album uneasily amidst other artists and groups working within country rock broadly at the end of the 1960s. As the group’s eschewing of the *country rock* label and the Parsons’s “cosmic American music” designation suggests, the goals of the Burrito Brothers were aimed toward appealing to the ideals of the counterculture while at the same time exposing them to a wider and more inclusive conception of “American” music with country music at the fore.

24 Ibid.

In other words, as groups such as Poco did more or less rock versions of country music, the Flying Burrito Brothers, reflecting the pluralism and inclusiveness inherent in the counterculture itself, went beyond the generic bounds of country and rock music out into the wider expanse of the popular music landscape to reflect a richer “cosmic America.” While a number of songs do more straightforwardly couple rock’s rhythmic drive with country textures, musical elements derived from other popular genres, and in particular gospel and soul, surface throughout album, highlighting the fluidity of generic boundaries. More specifically though, through the adaptation of diverse musical sounds, styles, and lyrical themes into an overriding country music frame, Parsons and the Burrito Brothers created a conceptual space for their audiences to reassess the cultural politics of the genre and its place within understandings of American music. Ultimately, the group’s “cosmic” vision offers a singular avenue into understanding not only how country music fit into countercultural projects and concerns, but also how musicians such as Parsons negotiated the kinds of shifting social and musical boundaries that bore on popular music at the end of the 1960s.

“Cosmic American Music” and the Counterculture

Today Chris Hillman dismisses Parsons’s designation as silly, but in 1968 and 1969, Parsons’s dream of a utopian “cosmic American music” or “soul-country-cosmic” had cultural resonance that was anything but. In the midst of turbulent and violent upheavals within the

26 Einarson’s formulation of the four streams of country rock is useful here, for as we will recall from the introduction, Poco represented the second stream in their use of country instrumentation toward rock ends.

27 Einarson, Hot Burritos, 33. Speaking to Einarson about “cosmic American music,” Hillman said, “What does that mean? It’s the stupidest term I ever heard.” Hillman’s remark reveals something of his bitterness toward the credit Parsons has received for his role in the Flying Burrito Brothers. Such bitterness is not unfounded though since Parsons continues to be cast as the central figure within the group. See, for example, the title of a recent release of a bootleg Burritos show from 1969: Gram Parsons with The Flying Burrito Brothers: Live at the Avalon Ballroom 1969 (Amoeba Records AM 0002, 2007) (my emphasis).
social fabric of American life at the close of the decade, significant polarization existed between many Americans. In particular, student radicals and hippies very often butted heads with law enforcement and members of what Richard Nixon labeled America’s “silent majority,” that is, Americans who either supported governmental intervention at home and abroad or simply detested the attention being given to war protesters and the counterculture itself.28

From the perspective of many countercultural rock audience members, country music, as typified by songs such as Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee” (1969) and “The Fightin’ Side of Me” (1969) two of the period’s top country hits, represented the music of the “silent majority.” In an interview with Chuck Casell in 1972, Parsons spoke to such perceptions:

It’s a beautiful, beautiful idiom that’s been overlooked so much and so many people have the wrong idea about it. God, I just can’t believe it. When you say country music to people, what some people think, you know, how little they know, what they haven’t listened to, what they missed… People, when they think of these guys they can’t think of anything but bad stuff. They think of Hank Snow, or Tennessee Ernie Ford and when they think of country music they think of WASP white cab drivers saying “Look at that nigger over there dablam you,” and listening to three chord music and I don’t know.29

Pamela Des Barres, famed 1960s groupie and member of Frank Zappa’s GTOs, illustrated Parsons’s concerns in liner notes to a Flying Burrito Brothers bootleg album: “I had always thought of country music as lame and corny, played by backwoods guys with crewcuts.”30

“Misunderstandings” such as these help to frame how the Burritos’s “cosmic” project was conceived and received by their countercultural audiences. In confronting country’s racist and

28 Richard Nixon used the term “silent majority” in a speech given on November 3, 1969 to refer to the vast number of Americans who were not vocal, but assumed to support the war in Vietnam. His administration, a day after the speech, defined these people as “large and normally undemonstrative cross section of the country that until last night refrained from articulating its opinions on the war” (Quoted in New York Times, November 5, 1969); See David Farber, “The Silent Majority and Talk About the Revolution,” In The Sixties: From Memory to History, 291-316.

29 Griffin, Gram Parsons, 133.

redneck connotations and perceived simplicity, the Burritos sought to redress misunderstandings of country music through lyrics, sonic markers, and visual signifiers that resonated with their countercultural audiences. Ultimately, through “cosmic American music” the Burritos sought not only to (re)introduce and expand the language of country music to their listeners, but to do so through tapping into the spirit of pluralistic inclusiveness and idealized social harmony that the counterculture loosely organized around.

Today, counterculture is often unmoored from its contextual and historical position and converted into a category used interchangeably with terms like New Left or hippies. Indeed, the term often conjures a wide variety of images of everything from bongs to political protests to long hair. Peter Braunstein and Michael Doyle charge that by the mid-1990s, “there were as many definitions of the term ‘counterculture’ as there were utopian fantasies during the actual counterculture.” Originally coined by J. Milton Yinger in 1960 as a category distinguished from the sociological category of “subculture,” counterculture was meant to represent “a full-fledged oppositional movement with a distinctively separate set of norms and values that are produced dialectically out of a sharply delineated conflict with the dominant society.”

This formulation would have had utility for analyzing earlier and subsequent manifestations of such movements, but by the end of the 1960s, when Theodore Roszak employed the term for his best-

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31 In tracing the etymology and evolving meaning of the term redneck, Patrick Huber observes, “for approximately the last one hundred years, the pejorative term redneck has chiefly slurred a rural, poor white man of the American South and particularly one who holds conservative, racist, or reactionary views.” Further, Huber examines the redefinition of the term, showing how in the late 1960s and early 1970s, southern white workers began employing the term positively to “emphasize their industriousness and their white racial identity.” Additionally, regarding country music, Huber finds that “more often than not, country songs presented romanticized images of southern rednecks and frequently used the term as an affirmation of identity.” See Patrick Huber, “A Short History of Redneck: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity,” Southern Cultures 1, No. 2 (Winter 1995): 145-166.


33 Ibid., 7.
selling *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, it quickly entered public discourse as associated exclusively with 1960s cultural radicalism and dissent amongst the decade’s youth.\(^{34}\) Roszak’s far-reaching book sought to explore the common ground between 1960s student radicals and hippie dropouts through their mutual rejection of the “technocracy” that he perceived as dominating industrial society at the time.\(^{35}\) Thus, addressing a large spectrum of 1960s youth under the “counterculture” designation, Roszak effectively linked youthful discontent of all kinds with the tumultuous historical moment, making the late 1960s “counterculture” the counterculture.

Grown in the wake of America’s post-World War II economic abundance and triumphalism, this 1960s counterculture, which reached its height roughly from 1964 to 1970,\(^{36}\) had roots both in 1950s youth culture and bohemianism that flourished in cities across America. Criticism and denunciation of increasing militarism, anti-communist witch hunts, bigotry, and rampant post-war consumerism were themes of 1950s bohemian Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs that were incorporated into countercultural ideology throughout the following decade.

With the addition of increasingly contentious civil rights issues, escalating involvement in Vietnam, and domestic disputes concerning gender and sexual inequality to this already complex mixture, 1960s America was replete with tension. As a manifestation of this national disquiet, the counterculture itself was far from the monolithic, unified, goal-oriented, and wholly


\(^{35}\) Emphasizing the United States, Roszak defines a “technocracy” as a “society in which those who govern justify themselves by appeal to technical experts, who in turn justify themselves by appeals to scientific forms of knowledge. And beyond the authority of science there is no appeal” (*The Making of a Counterculture*, 8).

\(^{36}\) Braunstein and Doyle, “Introduction,” 11-12.
optimistic movement that it is often understood as today. Braunstein and Doyle speak eloquently to this point:

[The counterculture] was an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, “lifestyles,” ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations. These roles were played by people who defined themselves first by what they were not, and then, only after having cleared that essential ground of identity, began to conceive anew what they were. What they were was what they might become—more a process than a product, and thus more a direction or a motion than a movement.37

Other cultural historians of the 1960s echo this formulation. George Lipsitz observes that the counterculture “reflected a full range of aesthetic and social stances, careening between idealism and cynicism, collectivity and individualism, hedonism and selflessness.”38 Conflating “hippies” with “counterculture,” Alice Echols adds that “both individualistic (‘Do your own thing’) and tribal (‘Everybody get together’), the hippie scene was philosophically thin: a little Eastern mysticism, eco-consciousness, and the conviction that all things ‘natural’—with the important exceptions of rock ‘n’ roll and synthetic drugs like LSD—were better.”39 Though offering a more simplistic characterization, Echols nonetheless, like Lipsitz, Braunstein, and Doyle, highlights the multitude of ideological streams that ran through the counterculture—a heterogeneous collection of people tied together loosely by their shared historical positions and a refusal to engage with certain elements of mainstream America, particularly the “technocracy” that Roszak bemoaned in 1969.

Certainly, the youth counterculture plays a significant part in the history of the 1960s, but it is important to recognize that media and scholarly coverage of this era privileges certain views

37 Ibid., 10.
of American culture, particularly those that are mostly white, middle- and upper-class, and college educated. Indeed, not all youth in the 1960s were part of the counterculture, and many young people served in Vietnam willingly, continued to uphold conservative social values, and listened to mainstream music. As Nadya Zimmerman concludes in her discussion of the counterculture in late 1960s San Francisco, “Sixties historiography issues mainly from people who lived through the era: but more specifically, from those who actively participated in socio-political movements or actively opposed those movements… the result is a scholarly focus that shapes images of the counterculture with the same oppositional terms that once shaped the socio-political movement on the ground; and the counterculture becomes part of the decade’s progressive narrative.”

Zimmerman’s points underscore the importance of approaching the counterculture in a way that acknowledges both its instability and the many voices that may not have been able to rise above its din.

With such an approach, Zimmerman identifies a unifying thread that helps make sense of the counterculture’s multi-dimensionality. Citing Leonard Meyer’s 1967 book, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, Zimmerman posits that pluralism, or the coexistence of a multiplicity of styles in a balanced, yet competitive cultural environment, allowed the counterculture to construct a self-image that appeared “non-mainstream, color-blind, natural, open-minded, sexually free, and unmediated by commercialism.” As such, the artistic products created by artists working within this environment reflected not only the “plurality of experiences” that they themselves brought to bear on their work, but also more broadly, the creative refashioning of materials

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42 Zimmerman, “Sixties Synergy,” 42.
perceived to be in line with predominant countercultural values.\textsuperscript{43} As evidence of such experiential diversity, we might look to the many different musical strands and orientations toward country music that existed within the country rock field in particular. For example, we can compare the Burritos’s “cosmic American music” which drew heavily from country and soul music to the Grateful Dead’s country-inflected “American roots music” on \textit{American Beauty} (1970) which drew more from rock and roll and bluegrass.\textsuperscript{44} As Mather contends, “Any given country rock band was not interested in every kind of country music; in other words, musicians chose the aspects or sub-styles of country music they found most relevant for their purposes,” and as I suggested in the previous chapter, reflected their prior social and musical experiences.\textsuperscript{45}

When considering the stylistic diversity within the counterculture, pluralism also becomes a useful way to situate idioms such as country rock amidst the wide spectrum of music and imagery associated with the counterculture as a whole. Indeed, reflecting the “unstable collection” of people and ideas that defined the counterculture itself, the range of music created by artists understood to be countercultural stands an amorphous mixture lacking a single unifying musical thread. While one could highlight the preponderance of blues elements, the emphasis on electronic distortion, or lyrical meditations on alienation or drug use that permeate the work of many countercultural musical heroes such as Jimi Hendrix or Janis Joplin, it becomes clear that attempts to define \textit{the} countercultural music are soon thwarted. From the free-form blues-based explorations of the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane to the garage rock of Detroit’s MC5 or psychedelic pop of the Beatles, the variety of popular music that

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 26; See also Lipsitz, “Who’ll Stop the Rain?,” 208.

\textsuperscript{44} Liner notes, Grateful Dead, \textit{American Beauty} (Warner Bros. Record WS 1893, 1970).

\textsuperscript{45} Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 12.
appealed to countercultural audiences consisted of a multitude of different sounds and styles. The range of performers invited to perform at 1967’s Monterey International Pop Music Festival during the “Summer of Love” is indicative of such diversity. Over the course of three days, some 60,000 people witnessed the first large-scale American appearances by Jimi Hendrix, the Who, Ravi Shankar, and Otis Redding in addition to performances by artists as diverse as Lou Rawls, South African jazz artist Hugh Masekela, and New York songwriter Laura Nyro.\(^46\)

Despite such stylistic eclecticism, connections obtain between artists that conveyed rage and frustration while projecting fantasies of cooperation or in many cases, escape. As George Lipsitz observes, many within the counterculture expressed feelings of existential dread with impulses “neither to defend nor to attack the American empire, but to get out of the way of the confrontation… Escapist tendencies led ‘hippies’ to fashion a better picture of what they were running from than of what they were running to.”\(^47\) Accordingly, countercultural audiences held musicians that expressed these feelings in high esteem, lauding figures such as Bob Dylan (“Like a Rolling Stone”) Jim Morrison (“The End”) as spokespeople of the counterculture itself. Important to this discussion is that the Flying Burrito Brothers too expressed escapist fantasies. Indeed, in a song such as “Wheels,” for example, Parsons and Hillman beg for motorcycles to take them away (“come on wheels take me home today”) and speak of having “telephones to say what they can’t say.” This plea for escape and refusal to confront, face-to-face, those who necessitate such a plea, reveals the sense of resigned resistance that pervades a number of songs on *Gilded Palace*. In contrast to artists such as Dylan and The Doors however, the Burritos

\(^{46}\) Though artist diversity in itself was a significant factor at these large festival gatherings, the “ritualized sharing of public space” amongst countercultural attendees was the core of the festival experience, for it affirmed community and cultural unity among counterculturalists of all different stripes. Lipsitz contends that “presumptions of a common community with a mutuality of values pervaded festival rock concerts no less than they did political mass demonstrations” (Lipsitz, “Who’ll Stop the Rain?,” 215).

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 223, 221.
expressed this resistance through country music. Ultimately, this presentation exposed common ground between countercultural themes and country, thus challenging the perceived distance between them.

**Country Music in the Countercultural Mind**

Although today rock icons such as Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin loom large in the collective memory of popular music in the sixties, it is important to acknowledge the popularity of music and musicians beyond the countercultural purview amongst the mainstream listening public. Indeed, as George Lipsitz observes, while Hendrix’s Woodstock version of the “Star Spangled Banner” (1969) and Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth” (1967) are often remembered as two of the quintessential sixties anthems, it was Percy Faith’s mushy instrumental ballad, “Theme from *A Summer Place*” (1960) that became the best-selling song of the decade. And although antiwar messages in songs such Country Joe and the Fish’s “Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” (1967) are today taken as definitive sixties statements, there also existed, across a number of genres, pro-war messages that spoke to many Americans of all ages and backgrounds who disapproved of what they considered the main noisemakers in the United States: college demonstrators, hippie visionaries, and black militants—all groups affiliated with the counterculture.49

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48 Ibid., 209.

49 It is telling that in 1966 Sergeant Barry Sadler’s pro-military “The Ballad of the Green Berets” remained at number one on the charts for five consecutive weeks while competing with the Mamas and the Papa’s “California Dreaming.” Following closely behind, Pat Boone’s “Wish You Were Here Buddy” (1966) and Victor Lundberg’s “An Open Letter to My Teenage Son” (1967), both songs with pro-war anti-hippie messages, also reached high positions on the pop charts. Farber notes that by the fall of 1969, 84% of white Americans assented to the claim that college demonstrators were treated too leniently, and went up to 85% when the statement read, “black militants are treated too leniently” (reprinted from “The Troubled America: A Special Report on the White Majority,” *Newsweek*, October 6, 1969, 31): David Farber, “The Silent Majority and Talk About Revolution,” in *The Sixties: From History to Memory*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 231.
Some of the most visible and popular pro-war or anti-hippie messages came from country music. After 1965, a number of country songs rose to prominence that defended American involvement in Vietnam. Dave Dudley’s “Vietnam Blues” (1966) and “Mama, Tell Them What We’re Fighting For” (1966) and Johnnie Wright’s “Hello Vietnam” (1965), though less explicit in defense of American policy, defended soldiers and sought to humanize the struggle for those fighting overseas. More overt attacks and belittling of antiwar protestors continued in 1966 with Stonewall Jackson’s “The Minute Men Are Turning in the Graves” and Bill Anderson’s “Where Have All the Heroes Gone,” which criticized the idolization of long hair protestors and anti-government folksingers. Through songs such as these, country music, made even more visible by the media through connections to the segregationist Alabama Governor, George Wallace, became increasingly characterized as either jingoistic or unthinkingly patriotic.\

The culmination of such sentiments was of course Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee.” Recorded in 1969, the song quickly became Billboard’s number one song on the country charts for four straight weeks and led to Haggard’s selection as the Country Music Association’s Entertainer of the Year in 1970. The song constructs a portrait of a hard-working patriotic Middle American by using the prototypical counterculture member as his foil. The “Okie from Muskogee” does not smoke marijuana, wear beads and sandals, have long hair, burn draft cards, or question authority. In a 1972 article titled “Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority,” Paul DiMaggio, Richard A. Peterson, and Jack Esco Jr. cite “Okie from Muskogee”

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50 Jens Lund writes that “country music’s distinctive ‘sound’ reflects its conservative and discriminatory make-up, even when a given song has no overt political or religious message.” See Jens Lund, “Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music,” In The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture, eds. R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 79-91, 91. More recently, Travis Stimeling observes that perceptions such as Lund’s denied country artists a satirical voice, ultimately reinforcing stereotypes of country artists as conservative, racist, rural dwellers. See Stimeling, Cosmic Cowboy and New Hicks, 64.
as highlighting a “contrast [between] Godless, unclean, foul-mouthed, dope-taking, unconventional, educated, complex, urban youths… [and] their virtuous small town counterparts.” 51 Further, they argue that despite the existence of more socially progressive songs in the country canon, the song led “popular commentators to see all country music as right-wing know-nothingness.”52 The success of “Okie” provided the platform for Haggard’s patriotic follow-up, “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” which like its predecessor criticized the “squirrelly guys” who were “runnin’ down” the country. Encouraging them to “love it or leave it,” Haggard’s condemnation of hippies, peaceniks, and radicals reinforced the already contentious relationship between country music and the counterculture.53

Significant though is that not all counterculture members condemned country music wholesale in the wake of the genre’s rash of anti-counterculture songs.54 Through an exploration of countercultural underground press publications, Zachary Lechner argues that while some understood country as backward, racist, and conservative, others viewed the genre as a repository of noble long-forgotten values that could be used as a way to critique the impersonal American “technocracy” at large.55 Lechner also observes that in the countercultural imagination, country was intimately tied to the American South, despite its presence in and around Southern


52 Ibid., 44.


54 See La Chapelle, Proud to Be an Okie, 197-207, for a discussion of how “Okie from Muskogee” was reshaped by countercultural musicians to counter the dominant usages of the song.

California.\textsuperscript{56} As such, he notes that some counterculturalists idealized a pre-modern rural South that celebrated “community, family connections, closeness to the land, and… authenticity in a rural setting” while avoiding the region’s associations with racism and bigotry.\textsuperscript{57} In this light, we might recall Stanley Booth’s review of \textit{The Gilded Palace of Sin} in 1969, which focused almost exclusively on Parsons’s Southern roots and “good old boy” understanding of the impersonal modern world. Lechner concludes, “In their endeavor to employ an imagined South’s family-oriented, rural, simple, and authentic values as tools in their resistance to the supposed stagnancy and phoniness of modern American society,” counterculturalists distilled an essence of Southernness that challenged the mainstream status quo.\textsuperscript{58} For country rock, the importance of this challenge was that it led to the qualified acceptance of country music by some, and thus opened the possibility for examining the broader ideological reasons for its earlier dismissal.\textsuperscript{59}

While Lechner argues for the South’s primacy in the counterculture’s positive relationship with country music, Michael Allen in an article titled “‘I Just Want to Be A Cosmic Cowboy’: Hippies, Cowboy Code, and the Culture of a Counterculture,” investigates how and why some musicians identified with the counterculture incorporated cowboy mythology into

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 53-54.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{59} Despite the creative refashioning of idealized Southernness by some countercultural artists, “Vicious South” imagery remained in the work of some others. The most famous example would be Neil Young’s “Southern Man” (1970) which Jim Cullen describes as “one of the most passionate denunciations of the white South that has ever been recorded.” See Jim Cullen, “Reconstructing Dixie: Confederate Mythology in Rock ‘n’ Roll,” In Jim Cullen, \textit{The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past} (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1995), 125.
their music.\textsuperscript{60} To this end, Allen shifts his regional focus to the West, arguing that the Cowboy Code, which encompasses qualities of “wanderlust, love of nature, strength, courage, adaptability, stoicism, loyalty, individualism, egalitarianism, and independence,” spoke to the counterculture’s “vision of an agrarian republic” and spirit of freedom.\textsuperscript{61} Although this mythology of the West would factor much more heavily in the later work of country rock artists such as the Eagles and Mason Proffit in the early 1970s, its use by artists such as the New Riders of the Purple Sage and the Great Speckled Bird in the late sixties motioned toward another kind of reconciliation between country and the counterculture.\textsuperscript{62}

In light of both Lechner’s and Allen’s conclusions, it is evident that much of the countercultural interest in country music stemmed from desire to escape the “technocratic” confines and social mores of modern America. To that end, the imagined America that was sought was one not bound by time or regional dividing lines, but open to the multitude of people and ideas that comprised the counterculture as a whole. As the next section will discuss, a prominent current that runs through \textit{The Gilded Palace of Sin} are lyrical and musical constructions of movement, and more specifically escape not only from the limits of the modern world, but also from narrow countercultural conceptions of country music’s aesthetics and politics. In light of Braunstein and Doyle’s words above concerning the counterculture’s identity construction—“What they were was what they might become—more a process than a product,

\textsuperscript{60} Michael Allen, “‘I Just Want To Be a Cosmic Cowboy’: Hippies, Cowboy Code and the Culture of a Counterculture,” \textit{The Western Historical Quarterly} 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 2005): 275-299.


\textsuperscript{62} Not to mention the Byrds’s \textit{Sweetheart of the Rodeo}, whose cover featured a cowgirl outfitted in Western wear.
and thus more a direction or a motion than a movement”—I argue that two songs, “Sin City” and “My Uncle,” not only construct the musical and social landscape of “cosmic America” as a place of refuge, but also use that landscape as a middle ground from which they and their audiences could critique the reality of the world around them.

**Escape to “Cosmic America”**

Apparently written about a former manager who had done them wrong, “Sin City” portrays an apocalyptic vision of a city teeming with greed and insanity. As a counterpoint to the idyllic vision of the rural South Parsons had earlier painted in “Hickory Wind” with the Byrds, the song captures not only the sense of existential dread that had crept into the counterculture by 1968, but also the Burritos’s own interpretation of what was happening in late-sixties America. Chris Hillman remarks, “each verse touches on things that were happening at that particular time… It touches on earthquakes in California, because everyone was reading [popular American psychic and spiritualist] Edgar Cayce at the time, and it talks about Bobby Kennedy’s death, and a bit about Vietnam… we were taking ideas from the old Baptist lyrical imagery and using them in these songs.”63 The song’s lyrics commingle the topical with a kind of Christian fundamentalism found in the country-gospel tradition of the Louvin Brothers, whose 1959 album, *Satan is Real*, had been foundational for Parsons and Hillman years earlier:

Verse One:
This old town’s filled with sin.
It’ll swallow you in
If you’ve got some money to burn.
Take it home right away.
You’ve got three years to pay,
And Satan is waiting his turn.

Verse Two:

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63 Quoted in Einarson, *Hot Burritos*, 102.
The scientists say it’ll all wash away
But we don’t believe anymore.
‘Cause we’ve got our recruits
In their green mohair suits,
So please show your I.D. at the door.

Chorus:
This old earthquake’s gonna leave me in the poorhouse.
It seems like this whole town’s insane.
On the thirty-first floor a gold-plated door
Won’t keep out the Lord’s burning rain.

Verse Three:
A fool came around tried to clean up this town;
His ideas made some people mad.
But he trusted in his crowd,
So he spoke right out loud
And they lost the best friend they ever had.

In contrast to the Pollyannaish utopianism of the countercultural “Get Together” love ethic, an “even more powerful apocalyptic strain” had emerged in many areas of countercultural popular music that confronted the dark reality of the end of the decade. Indeed, from Barry Maguire’s “Eve of Destruction” (1965) to the Doors’s “The End” (1967) to the Band’s “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” (1969), resignation and fatalism served as counterpoints to the idealistic “Flower Power” in-the-moment happiness that had proliferated earlier. More specifically, “Sin City’s” dystopian vision addresses the troubled states of Los Angeles and San Francisco, both cities that had long been countercultural strongholds. At one time the cities were distinguished by disparate levels of political engagement, fashion, and musical infrastructures, and as such, each supported countercultural communities that seemed to rarely overlap. In fact, an antagonistic relationship developed in which San Franciscans routinely dismissed Los

64 Lipsitz, “Who’ll Stop the Rain?,” 221., See also Echols, Shaky Ground, 32.

65 The Band’s song articulates the Confederacy’s demise through the narration of Virgil, a poor Southern soldier who describes the fall of Richmond, his brother’s death, and an image of Robert E. Lee. Lechner describes it as “a deeply political song that investigates the collision of war, working-class values, and a mythical southern past” (Lechner, “The South of the Mind,” 77).
Angeles as a star-studded land of garish imagery and impersonal freeways, while Los Angelinos, such as Frank Zappa derided San Francisco’s lack of style and “more-rustic-than-thou” attitude. But, in the aftermath of the Monterey Pop Festival of 1967, which attempted to present a cross-section of both Los Angeles and San Francisco groups and the popular musical field as a whole, tension between the cities eased. The festival’s success not only fueled the record industry’s desire to sign Los Angeles and San Francisco bands, but also added to the already large influx of young people who had relocated to the cities. Looking for peace and love, many arrived to find increasing numbers of drug dealers, conmen, and biker gangs taking advantage of already strung-out countercultural youth. The onslaught of booming commercial interest in and co-optation of psychedelia, and the miasmatic sourness of chronic drug use and crime emanating from both cities joined them in a kind of shared disillusion. Just months after The Gilded Palace of Sin’s release, such disillusion was exacerbated in late 1969 by the Manson murders in August in Los Angeles and the Altamont Festival in December in northern California which culminated in drug overdoses, injuries, and one death. The symbolism of these events within two of the counterculture’s most prominent centers, forced young people throughout the nation to confront the sources of the counterculture’s disintegration, or at least get out of the way of its crumbling.

As the titles “Sin City” and The Gilded Palace of Sin reveal, the Burritos confronted this

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66 Quoted in Barney Hoskyns, Waiting for the Sun: Strange Days, Weird Scenes, and the Sound of Los Angeles (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996; paperback reprint, 1999), 140.; West Coast chronicler, John Platt, speaks to such conceptions and misconceptions: “It was significant that LA never had a Fillmore or an Avalon or a poster artist like Rick Griffin—although the clichés about LA studio bands and San Francisco live bands obscure the truth that there were great live bands from LA. There was also an equivalent to the San Francisco hippie in LA, but it’s hard to pin down what he or she was because LA had no Haight-Ashbury. And there was always that affluent aspect to LA, with boutiques on the Strip selling $500 hippie outfits. To San Franciscans, LA was still a place full of on-the-make directors and starlets” (Quoted in Hoskyns, Waiting for the Sun, 142).

67 As Braunstein and Doyle observe, the counterculture “was expressly anti-linear, anti-teleological, rooted in the present, disdainful of thought processes that were circumscribed by causation and consequence” (Braunstein and Doyle, “Introduction” in Imagine Nation, 10, 13).
disintegration through allusions to biblical prophecy. Indeed, Michael Grimshaw writes that “Sin City” was an urban gospel tune that cast a critical eye on its location and serves as an instance of overt religious imagery being taken deep into the heart of the counterculture. While many counterculturalists would, as Echols notes, move toward Eastern-derived spirituality, a number were also drawn (in some cases, back) to Christianity. Indicative is the formation of the Jesus People Movement in San Francisco in 1967, and an increasing number of religious communes and college campus clubs throughout the nation. When expressed in music with countercultural appeal, such religiosity was often couched in terms of God’s benevolent warmth or Jesus’s love. Indeed, songs such as the Byrds’s “Jesus is Just Alright” (1969) or Linda Ronstadt’s “We Need a Lot More of Jesus (And a Lot Less Rock & Roll)” (1971) advocated for Jesus’s saving graces in the midst of increasing crime and perceived spiritual hollowness. In contrast, the religiosity inherent in “Sin City” and across Gilded Palace as a whole is often expressed in terms related to the rapture and God’s wrath. Perhaps, in the midst of the counterculture’s refusal to confront the American Establishment (or its own internal flaws), the Burritos desired to appoint an unforgiving God to do so, and in this way, instead of simply suffusing “flower power” idealism with Jesus’ love, challenged American and countercultural decay with divine penalty. Implicit in this message is a desire to escape “Sin City” for its opposite: a “cosmic America” free from sin and the threat of the “Lord’s burning rain.”

As much as “Sin City’s” lyrics portrayed the Burritos’s personal response to the increasingly dystopic spirit of the times, they were likely also modeled on the kind of “fire-and-

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brimstone Christianity” found in the Louvin Brothers’s *Satan is Real*. The album, whose cover features the brothers standing in front of a plywood representation of the Devil while fire burns at their feet, is filled with songs lamenting the power of temptation and the consequence of sin. The album’s title track, for example, uses a spoken-word narration to tell of an old man in a country church urging the preacher to make Satan’s presence known:

Preacher, tell them that Satan is real too.
You can hear him in songs that give praise to idols and sinful things of this world.
You can see him in the destruction of homes torn apart.

Nearly all of the songs on the album reinforce these sentiments, and while some are less grim that others—“The River of Jordan” and “There’s a Higher Power”—*Satan is Real* exudes the sense of sincere conviction in the duality of good and evil, and sin and redemption, that is found in “Sin City.”

“Sin City’s” connection to the Louvins is not limited to lyrics however. Over a mid-tempo waltz, Hillman and Parsons harmonize throughout the entire song, blending their voices to achieve the “high-lonesome” vocal sound that was characteristic of the Louvins and other brother duet teams. Malone writes that the close harmony singing of brother duets evokes a sense of nostalgia and familial bonding: “[Brother duets] of the 1930s and 1940s… somehow conveyed to their audiences a sense of family intimacy that seemed to translate into musical harmony.”

Also like the Louvins’s duets, Hillman and Parsons present “Sin City’s” narrative from a single viewpoint despite being dual-voiced. In other words, whereas male-female duet teams such as George Jones and Tammy Wynette performed from two different perspectives that often united in shared understanding in the end, brother duets like the Louvins and male singing partners like Parsons and Hillman intertwine themselves into a single unified perspective. Ultimately, in terms of sound, style, and sentiment, “Sin City” is one of the clearest examples of

70 Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’,* 70.
the Burritos’s adherence to traditional country on *The Gilded Palace of Sin*. Casting a critical light over the Burritos’s “cosmic American landscape,” the song shines toward country’s redemptive rural environs through constructing its opposite.

If “Sin City” implicitly called for movement toward a “cosmic America,” “My Uncle,” one of the most politically-conscious songs on *Gilded Palace*, advocates for movement not only beyond the geographic bounds of America, but also toward an alternative country politics. In dialogue with country music’s pro-war hits of the period, “My Uncle” champions a draft dodger’s flight to Vancouver, Canada, or any “foreign border” where one could escape the “law and order” that rendered people invisible (“underground”), or perhaps, dead (“under ground”). Calling into question the cost of the American government’s (“Uncle Sam’s”) demands, Hillman and Parsons together sing: “Now I don’t know how much I owe my uncle/ But I suspect it’s more than I can pay/ He’s asking me to sign a three year contract/ I think I’ll take the first bus out today.” As a critique of the draft, the Vietnam War, and the American government, “My Uncle” served not only as a means to establish the Burritos’s political credibility with their countercultural audiences, but more importantly, to show that country music, despite its perceived conservative politics, could be used effectively in doing so. In this way, the Burritos muddied the waters around country music’s politics for their countercultural audiences.

Musically, the song is clearly influenced by the Bakersfield Sound of Buck Owens and Merle Haggard as opposed to the Nashville Sound. Indeed, the pedal steel guitar is prominent as are Parsons’s and Hillman’s harmonized vocals. This distinction is significant in that almost concurrently with *Gilded Palace’s* release, Haggard released “Okie from Muskogee,” the song that would catapult him to stardom and contribute to solidifying country’s lamentable status within much of the counterculture’s mind. Thus, in employing many of the same musical
characteristics that Haggard’s music was associated with, “My Uncle” further complicated the assumptions attached not only to “Okie From Muskogee,” but country’s musical markers writ large.\footnote{The inclusion of the mandolin in “My Uncle” augments the song’s themes of movement and escape. Here, Chris Hillman draws on bluegrass mandolin style elements such as the use of open and closed chords, offbeat chops, and scalar soloing as a way to produce a sense of forward momentum. Hillman’s mandolin part adds a bluegrass feel to “My Uncle” without overpowering its traditional country elements. Thus, together with Kleinow’s buoyant steel guitar embellishments, the mandolin signifies not only an expansion of the song’s country parameters, but also the sonic parameters of the Burritos’s “cosmic American music.” For a discussion of bluegrass mandolin playing in country rock, see Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 184-194.}

In an interview with Jan Donkers in 1972, Parsons himself offered a perspective on the counterculture’s interpretation of Haggard’s “Okie” that sheds light on “My Uncle”:

**Parsons:** I don’t mind it, I like it, I like to sing it a lot, but Merle, he sees it differently. People are always laying it on him, how serious are you about that? He’s not, he’s no more serious about that than he is about whether he catches fish that day or not. He’s more serious about singing songs to people… He just saw Muskogee and painted that picture… It’s nothing about hair or all the connotations that people would think there are in “Okie from Muskogee,” beads and sandals and dope, and LSD and shaggy long hair, and…

**Donkers:** Burning draft cards.

**Parsons:** Right, burning draft cards at the courthouse, you know. Fuck man, maybe what he was really thinking about was burning down the courthouse, along with Old Glory and everything else.\footnote{Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 148.}

Though Haggard didn’t go as far as Parsons in disputing his allegiance to the conservative ethos of “Okie,” his refusal to definitively subscribe to any one political ideology since its release has given fellow musicians and journalists much to debate.\footnote{See La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 201-202 for a discussion of Haggard’s contradictory explanations of the song’s origins and meaning. In 1974, Haggard told a Michigan reporter, “Son, the only place I don’t smoke is in Muskogee” (Quoted in Bryan Di Salvatore, “Merle Haggard” In *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 223.} Parsons’s words however offer an understanding of the song that not only reflects the multiple ways that overtly political country music could be perceived, but more specifically, how he interpreted a transgressive underside to
“Okie.” Indeed, the kind of negation Parsons perceived in “Okie” is similar to that found in “My Uncle” wherein refusing the draft and crossing America’s geographic boundaries constituted an escape from the reach of American authority.

Cultural historian and popular music critic Martha Bayles writes that “The counterculture was really rooted in the assumptions… that the ‘system’ was rotten; that happiness within it was illusory; that compromise would yield a living death; and that the only hope lay in negation.” Indeed, as “My Uncle” and “Sin City” reflect, negation and escape were crucial means for fulfilling their vision of a “cosmic America,” a conceptual space not limited by geographical boundaries, commitment to specific ideologies, or fixed musical meanings.

The remainder of this chapter will explore how other songs on Gilded Palace of Sin confronted the “hot-button” issues of gender and race in a way that, like “Sin City” and “My Uncle,” mediated country’s cultural politics for their audiences. It becomes evident that in occupying a middle ground between generic eclecticism and steadfast commitment to country music, the Burritos created a larger space for their listeners to examine their musical assumptions and by extension, contradictions within the counterculture itself. Steady thyself dear reader, for it is deeper into the land of dark and light, the land of “cosmic America” that we continue.

**Gender and “Christine’s Tune”**

As much as counterculturalists advocated for the pursuit of alternative lifestyles and attitudes, approaches to sex and gender relations were complex and often, contradictory. Indeed, while advocating for “free love” and liberation from the sexual mores of mainstream society, attitudes toward women and sexual politics were couched largely in patriarchal terms. Thus,

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despite the atmosphere of sexual openness, the sexual revolution of the late 1960s did little to alter the conservative sexual morality that persisted in the minds of many. Pioneering feminist and rock critic Ellen Willis argues, “We all to some degree internalize familialist sexual ideology in its feminine or masculine version… we are all oppressed by having this ideology imposed on us, though some groups are particularly oppressed—women, youth, homosexuals, and other sexual minorities.”75 As such, the 1950s nuclear middle-class family model, that is, the model of social norms for many young people in the late 1960s, contributed to deep-seated ambivalence regarding sex and gender relations.

“Miss Pamela” Des Barres, famed groupie with whom Parsons and the Flying Burrito Brothers spent considerable time in 1968 and 1969, offers an insightful female perspective on how such ambivalence was enacted within male-based artistic circles.76 Often hailing the Burritos as her all-time favorite band, Des Barres, then Pamela Miller, holds Parsons in especially high esteem amongst the Burritos, citing his kindness toward women as a distinguishing feature: “There was never a time that I felt ever once slighted by him and in that world, sometimes you could be ignored easily, there is so much going on, but he never did that with me… he was someone you could hug and grab ahold of and he was not at all ‘cool’ like some guys were, still coming from that era. A lot of men hadn’t gotten soft enough, but he was very warm.”77 As a testament to their closeness, Parsons, who had by 1968 fathered a daughter, Polly, with girlfriend Nancy Ross, entrusted Des Barres to be Polly’s godmother. She often

75 Ellen Willis, “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism,” In The 60s Without Apology, eds. Sohnjya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz and Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 99-100.


77 Quoted in Jessica Hundley, Grievous Angel, 170-171.
performed child-rearing duties alongside Nancy while the Burritos rehearsed or relaxed: “We were very separate, the girls. At the house, when the guys were playing poker in one room, we would be in another room with Polly, hanging out, and they would do what they were doing and we were not invited.”\(^{78}\) Regarding her relationship with Nancy, she recalls further, “We bonded in a female way. It was a real girlie take-care-of-your-man type bond, as the girlfriends/wives of men we loved so much.”\(^{79}\) Acknowledging the tension inherent in this relationship and legacy of the previous decade, Des Barres continues, “Nancy was a flower child like me. We were caught between the fifties and sixties. We wanted to be free feminist women, but we also wanted to take care of our man the way we watched our moms do. We connected that way.”\(^{80}\)

Des Barres’s reflections are indicative of the feelings held by many women within the counterculture. The tasks performed by the women—cooking, cleaning, sewing, child-rearing—closely mirrored prescribed roles of women within the traditional family unit.\(^{81}\) Even though Des Barres acknowledges that what she was doing was “old-fashioned,” her desire to fulfill the needs of Parsons and the Burritos left her trapped into what Ellis describes as a choice between “subordination and abandonment.”\(^{82}\) Significantly though, she seems to have negotiated such a choice in a way that provided her with a unique sense of power: “We were coming into that era where women’s lib had started and it was a new concept. I sort of combined the two by doing

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\(^{78}\) Ibid., 169.

\(^{79}\) Quoted in Meyer, \textit{Twenty Thousand Roads}, 279.

\(^{80}\) Ibid.

\(^{81}\) Echols observes, “if the Beats were about escaping the family, the hippies were about reconstituting it, in all its equality… Although many hippie guys managed to avoid nine-to-five jobs, few hippie girls avoided housework. Baking, cooking, sewing, tending the children were a ‘women’s thing’” (Echols, \textit{Shaky Ground}, 34).

\(^{82}\) Ellis, “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism,” in \textit{60s Without Apology}, 99.
what I wanted. Taking care of a rock star instead of a regular guy.”

Certainly not all women within the counterculture had the privilege of such a combination, but Des Barres’s rationalization shows her agency in coming to terms with the sexual revolution and an acknowledgement that in some ways it mirrored the gendered power relations that it claimed to revolutionize.

If Des Barres’s testimony reflects a female perspective of gender roles at the time, we can look to Burritos’s music for insight into the male perspective. While a number of songs on *Gilded Palace* speak to male and female relationships, the album’s opening track, “Christine’s Tune,” captures the complexity of male-female relationships within their “cosmic” musical landscape.

Addressed to Miss Christine, former girlfriend of Byrd David Crosby and member of the GTOs alongside Des Barres, “Christine’s Tune” is, on the surface, a cautionary tale of the do-wrong woman. Apparently Miss Christine had caused some friction between band members and girlfriends, and Parsons and Hillman responded with a song that not only told of a woman’s dangerous lure, but also the weakness of men:

Chorus:
She’s a devil in disguise.
You can see it in her eyes.
She’s telling dirty lies.
She’s a devil in disguise, in disguise.


84 Significantly, in interviews with women close to the band like Des Barres and Nancy Ross their emotional investments with particular members of the group are often addressed as are their feelings regarding their positions. Interviews with male band members, in contrast, rarely if ever inquire about their love lives or individual notions of masculinity in relation to the women that surrounded them. Industry facts and evidence of creativity are often what interviewers seek. Thus, though Hillman did mention in an interview with Sid Griffin that “Juanita” was “just about some girl” he met and that the Christine of “Christine’s Tune” was “the type of girl who was making life miserable,” his flippancy urges us to turn toward the music to further investigate just who these women were and how they were perceived by the group. See Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 93.

85 Chris Hillman changed the title of “Christine’s Tune” to “Devil In Disguise” in 1972 after Miss Christine was killed in a car accident. Today, it is often listed as “Christine’s Tune (Devil in Disguise).”
Verse One:
Now a woman like that all she does is hate you.
She doesn’t know what makes a man a man.
She’ll talk about the time that she’s been with you.
She’ll speak your name to everyone she can.

Verse Two:
Unhappiness has been her close companion.
Her world is full of jealously and doubt.
It gets her off to see a person crying.
She’s just the kind that you can do without.

Verse Three:
Her number always turns up in your pocket.
Whenever you are looking for a dime.
It’s all right to call her, but I’ll bet you,
The moon is full and you’re just wasting time.

At times spiteful and cruel, and at others, sympathetic and almost tender, the characterization of
the “devil in disguise” alludes to the adverse effects of male promiscuity on the female character,
but never quite implicates the men for their actions. The song’s musical features however shed
more light on these effects, especially the interplay between the male voices and the pedal steel,
which over the course of the tune takes on the powerful, dominating voice of the “devil in
disguise.”

The song begins with strummed acoustic guitars that vamp the progression of the song’s
chorus (I–VII–IV). The entrance of the bass and drums establish the song’s two-step shuffle beat
or “train beat” and Kleinow’s pedal steel enters in a relatively subdued manner with double-stops
and a reverberant clean sound. Again, the soundworld resonates with Bakersfield. The entrance
of Hillman’s and Parsons’s vocals in the opening chorus reinforce that sound, as again, they
harmonize in close intervals. One can also hear the separation across with stereo field of the
voices with Parsons on the left side and Hillman on the right. As a foreshadowing of the she-
devil’s developing power, the pedal steel is present on both sides.
Hillman sings the song’s first verse, describing the “devil in disguise” as a woman who hates and doesn’t understand men, and gossips about her liaisons: “she’ll talk about the times that she’s been with you/ she’ll speak your name to anyone she can.” The pedal steel remains present in the verse across the stereo field, entering into a call-and-response dialogue with Hillman whose voice continues to come from only one side. Though it doesn’t overpower Hillman, the instrument’s presence is more predominant and its timbre grows richer in tone while playing double-stops and chordal figures. In other words, functioning as both an accompaniment and lead instrument, the pedal steel gains a voice on a nearly equal level with Hillman in this opening verse.

Following the second instance of the chorus, the pedal steel leaps forward to the front of the mix to play a brief break before the second verse. Here we find a dramatic change in tone and playing style. Switching from its warm, clear timbre, the pedal steel takes on a screaming overdriven sound. At a very high gain level, the sound becomes almost otherworldly, drastically different from traditional country tones used to begin the song, and much more reminiscent of the distorted guitar tones used by rock musicians such as Neil Young in “Mr. Soul” (1967) and Jimi Hendrix in “Foxey Lady” (1967). Kleinow recalled the use of such effects on the pedal steel, “It was an attempt to dirty up the sound a little bit… It really sounded great, just like Jimi Hendrix.”\(^8\) While his self-comparison to Hendrix is hyperbolic, Kleinow’s break here does call to mind the timbral experimentations that were an almost omnipresent element in rock music at the time. In addition to timbre, Kleinow’s playing style also changes in the break. Moving away from double stops and chords, Kleinow plays single string licks using large intervallic leaps and slides that mimic string bends used on electric guitars. In the context of the song’s lyrics and

\(^{8}\) Quoted in Walker, *God’s Own Singer*, 96.
strummed acoustic guitars, Kleinow’s tone and playing style might be heard as briefly taking on the character of the “devil in disguise.”

The pedal steel recedes as the second verse begins. Sung by Parsons, the lyrics of this verse further add to the woman’s devilish characteristics, but also humanize her to an extent. Indeed, the woman’s world is filled with unhappiness, jealousy and doubt, suggesting that her devilish ways may not give her the power that she appears to possess or be completely of her own volition. Again, the pedal steel bubbles under the surface of Parsons’s vocal delivery, now and then rising in dialogue with it. Far back in the mix, Parsons’s own vocal timbre in this verse sounds compressed and thin. Although the timbre of his voice throughout Gilded Palace consistently retains a somewhat nasal quality, it is all the more pronounced here given its place in the stereo field and the male position constructed in the song’s narrative. Thus, if the pedal steel can be heard as the she-devil (despite her doubt), the weakness of Parsons’s voice tips the balance of power in her direction.

Following the second chorus, the pedal steel takes center stage for the tune’s main instrumental break. The screaming tone returns as do Kleinow’s single string licks, which climb higher and higher, finally climaxing on the root pitch of B-flat in the instrument’s upper register.

Example 3: “Devil in Disguise” pedal steel break (1:50)

After being disguised in the verses as an ostensibly comforting accompaniment to the male, the pedal steel here reveals its true character unabashedly as the she-devil. It is here that we can
more conclusively say that Hillman and Parsons’s vocals and Kleinow’s pedal steel are at
counter purposes that reflect the struggle between masculine vulnerability and feminine power.

Filling out both sides of the mix, Parsons and Hillman sing the song’s last verse together,
giving the she-devil fuller description and almost mystical properties. Although in this cosmic
sonic world Parsons and Hillman have joined forces to battle her or rectify the earlier male
weakness, her lingering presence manifests in the screaming tone and bouncing single-note pedal
steel licks that pepper the verse. Here, Kleinow engages in a call-and-response dialogue with
Parsons and Hillman, that, in light of song’s narrative, sounds almost like mockery. Ultimately,
despite their unified front, the men remain weak against the depths of the she-devil’s deception,
and as the song fades out, we hear the last shrieks of the “devil in disguise” as she reaffirms her
power.

In light of attitudes regarding sex and gender relations within the counterculture, what are
we to make of the Burritos’s lyrical and musical constructions of the female character in
“Christine’s Tune”? On one hand, the “devil in disguise” seems to be a source of pure evil,
luring men into her wicked ways no matter the reason. On the other, she might be viewed as
more of a sympathetic character, one whose unhappiness and subsequent devilry are not
completely unfounded. Indeed, her wickedness is a product of male mistreatment, that is, being
a source of sexual pleasure only when convenient for men and then they assume she’ll afford
them anonymity. Here a dialectical relationship emerges between the male and female
characters in which both are complicit in their shared misery, but ultimately unable to resolve it.

87 Late 1960s blues-rock, popularized by groups such as Cream and Fleetwood Mac, frequently employed imagery
that accorded women with magical properties. As in “Christine’s Tune,” these properties often are used to ensnare
men, and thus, are fought against through sonic means. Alex Woller argues that the musical codes within the blues-
rock “magic trope” point to an increasing recognition of the sexual power of women and how the idealized state of
masculinity tied to sexual proclivity and prowess became compromised in relation to the blues-rock artists
themselves. See Alex Woller, “The Sound of Magic: Masculine and Feminine Power Relations in Blues-Rock”
(paper delivered at the 39th Annual Conference of the Society for American Music, Little Rock, Arkansas, March
2013).
Although in the end it may seem that the she-devil gets the final word, the track’s fade-out suggests a continuing struggle between the male and female characters indicative of the enduring tension embedded within the counterculture’s sexual politics.

Returning briefly to the description of Parsons’s custom Nudie suit that opens this chapter, we’ll recall that brazenly presented on each of the lapels of his jacket was a naked woman. Amidst the other signifiers on the front of his jacket—marijuana leaves, pills, and flowers—this female representation seems at once to assert Parsons’s masculinity while showcasing an earnest appreciation of femininity. Cultural historian Beth Bailey argues that such sexualized imagery was a countercultural tool with which to graphically express “freedom”: “Transgressive sexuality offered a visual and verbal language with which to challenge the Establishment. Represented with purposeful, shocking vulgarity, sex served as a weapon against ‘straight, or non-hip, culture’.” Although the women on Parsons’s jacket are not necessarily “shockingly vulgar” or exploited in the kind of violent imagery that Bailey explores in her work, they nonetheless highlight the issue of sexual representation.

Looking more closely at the cover of *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, one will notice more visual evidence of this issue and the conflict embedded in “Christine’s Tune.” While Parsons and his bandmates are foregrounded in the image, two women seem to solemnly beckon the men to enter the small wooden structure they lean against. Christened “The Gilded Palace of Sin,” the building looks less like a gold-coated palace than a foreboding gate to another dimension, and as such, the women’s inviting auras are permeated with a sense a dread, or at the very least, a sense of dissonance. Remaining outside the doorway, the Burrito Brothers appear to be capable of resisting the lure of the women, yet the female presence and the “Gilded Palace” remain

central to the image. Might the building denote domestication or a doorway to Sin City? In either case, the proximity of the women to its entrance creates a visual analog to the conflicted gender relations found within the musical contents of the *Gilded Palace of Sin*.

In contrast to “Christine’s Tune,” a number of other songs on *Gilded Palace of Sin* enact the patriarchal impulse that flowed through the counterculture more conclusively. Indeed, from “Juanita,” where an angelic seventeen-year-old girl rescues the male protagonist from heartache, booze, and pills, to “Hot Burrito #2,” which opens with the line, “Yes, you love me, and you sew all my clothes,” women are given subservient roles that bolster men physically and emotionally. The Parsons/Ethridge composition, “Hot Burrito #1,” which Chris Hillman called Parsons’s best vocal performance, provides a clear example of such a role and the self-congratulatory tone of the male narrator. Amidst the descending chromatic motion of the band and with a bit of vocal fry, Parsons sings:

You may be sweet and nice,
But that won’t keep you warm at night
‘Cause I’m the one who showed you how
To do the things you’re doing now.

And further,

I’m your toy, I’m your old boy,
But I don’t want no one but you to love me.
No, I wouldn’t lie. You know I’m not that kind of guy.

Although these sentiments appear sincere, implied is a sense that the male speaker is trying to convince himself of his devotion as much as he is his female companion. Why would he lie in the first place? According to Alice Echols, “For women, the so-called sexual revolution was a mixed blessing. Women were having more sex (and with less guilt), but they were also more sexually vulnerable. Instead of undoing the deeply rooted sexual double standard, free love only

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89 For further discussion of “Hot Burrito #1,” see Mather, “Regressive Country,” 164-167.
masked it in countercultural pieties.È90 Todd Gitlin substantiates EcholsÈ’s claims in his discussion of gender relations across New Leftists and counterculturalists broadly: “In the rush toward phantasmagorical revolution, women became not simply a medium of exchange, consolidating the male bond, but rewards for male prowess and balm for male insecurity.”È91 Significantly though, as typified in songs such as “Christine’s Tune” and those briefly described above, this dual role of prize and nurturer that was given to female characters was not without problems. Indeed, the sense of anguish and melancholy expressed by the male characters is contingent on the roles they have ascribed to their female counterparts. Thus, the source of the problem arises from the men themselves and their failure to acknowledge their complicity in it.

If such skewed gender politics existed within factions of the counterculture, the dissemination of sexualized imagery in popular culture only fanned the flames of inequality. In February of 1969, Rolling Stone magazine published a special issue dedicated to groupies. The authors of the issueÈ’s main article, “Groupies: The Girls of Rock,” emphasized the attractiveness and prestige of groupies and ranked them in terms of how they are perceived by male musicians: “all of the most successful are striking in appearance.”È92 The articleÈ’s accompanying photographs feature notable women such as Miss Pamela and Miss Mercy in a variety of billowy, carnivalesque costumes and non-threatening poses. As a whole, groupies are portrayed as sweet, attractive sources of feminine servility.È93 Certainly, in terms of overt sexualization of

È90 Echols, Shaky Ground, 34. Echols observes further, “The male-dominated New Left was almost willfully blind to sexism. After all, this was a movement where slogans like ‘Girls Say Yes to Guys Who Say No’ went uncontested” (69).

È91 Gitlin, The Sixties, 372.


È93 Janet Hilts, John Shepard and David Buckley suggest that the phenomenon of groupies may be understood in relation to the relative lack of opportunities for women in 1960s rock culture. See Janet Hilts, John Shepard and
women in the 1960s, groupies can be considered the most visible extreme, but within popular culture, groupie imagery and sexual license predicated on male permission pervaded mainstream media. Judy Kutulas writes in her discussion of 1970s singer-songwriters and romantic relationships, “The hippie chick permeated television, AM radio, and movies as one of the few counterculture stereotypes to attain instant mainstream credibility. She was objectified, gyrating uninhibitedly—without her bra—to acid rock… Although enticingly rebellious, free love offered women little control over their own sexuality.” Ultimately, male-mediated representations of female sexuality through the mid to late 1960s too often obscured what could have been a line toward more balanced sexual liberation for both sexes.

Amidst such representations, songs such as “Christine’s Tune” reveal the complex social dynamic between men and women at the time, and contradictions within the Burrito’s “cosmic American” vision. As much as this vision advocated for social harmony, some representations of gender within it were conceived from patriarchal positions of power. Significantly though, as the next section will discuss, the group’s cover of Aretha Franklin’s “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man,” motioned toward a kind of gender equality more in line with their inclusive “cosmic” aims.

**Do Right Men and “Do Right Woman”**

By the time of *Gilded Palace’s* release, Aretha Franklin was a national star. In 1967, her

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95 An important contribution, Lisa Rhodes’s *Electric Ladyland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) deconstructs the social and cultural dimensions of “groupie” fandom, revealing the important roles of women in rock that have been obscured in sexist accounts of rock culture.
first single for Jerry Wexler’s Atlantic Records, “I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)” reached number one on *Billboard*’s R&B singles chart and number nine on the Hot 100 chart. Along with its B-side, “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man,” a song written by Memphis musicians and producers, Chips Moman and Dan Penn, the single secured Franklin’s status not only as a pop icon, but also as the voice of soul music. In 1968, *Time* magazine reinforced this title with a front cover that featured the headline “The Sound of Soul” and a painted portrait of the singer.\(^96\) The success of these songs in particular, which were recorded at FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, also called attention to what Wexler called the power of Southern musicians and “Southern style of recording.”\(^97\)

For the Flying Burrito Brothers, and especially native Southerners Parsons and Chris Ethridge, the inclusion of Franklin’s “Do Right Woman” and another Moman/Penn composition, “Dark End of the Street,” was intended to illuminate the connections between Southern-derived soul and country music, and by extension, subvert the cultural and racial boundaries understood to separate them. As Parsons remarked, “You’ve got your Otis Redding, but you’ve also got your Merle Haggard. I suppose that we would correspond and parallel—we would be on the same level as the newest things that are happening in rhythm and blues, like down in Muscle Shoals.”\(^98\) While a number of white artists, now grouped under the “blue-eyed soul” designation, recorded soul music in Memphis and Muscle Shoals in the late 1960s and early 1970s,\(^99\) the Burritos offer a singular instance of white musicians from within the West Coast


\(^{97}\) See Hughes, “Country Soul,” 156.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 91.

\(^{99}\) See Hughes, “Country Soul,” 138-142 for a discussion of “blue-eyed soul” artists such as The Box Tops and Dusty Springfield recording at American Studios in Memphis.
rock community blending the music’s emotive singing style and sparse instrumentation with country. This adaptation of soul elements into the group’s idiomatic country style is one of the most innovative elements of *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, and in light of its countercultural resonance, one of the defining currents to run through their “cosmic American” project as a whole.

Perceptions of soul’s relationship with country music in the national imagination at the time underscore the significance of the Burritos’s work. Historian Charles Hughes observes that by the late 1960s and early 1970s, soul and country had become symbols of the “social, political and cultural rifts between Black and white America.”

He concludes that while soul was celebrated as central to Civil Rights and Black Power activism and as a signifier of authentic Blackness, country music was touted as the voice of white working-class conservatism:

The country/soul divide determined the creative and cultural parameters of each genre and contributed to the larger contours of U.S. racial politics. Scholars, musicians and fans all reiterated this rhetoric, and among certain communities—politically-involved youth, soldiers in Vietnam—the opposition became the basis for activism and open conflict. One’s musical preference, with “soul” and “country” as the supposed stylistic polarities, became a metaphor for one’s deeper ideological beliefs and racial identity.

One might add the counterculture to Hughes’s list of communities, for while a small number of counterculturalists had a qualified acceptance of country, the majority associated the genre with the white conservative voice found in “Okie from Muskogee.” In this light, the Burritos’s conscious blending of country and soul is all the more remarkable, for in negotiating the countercultural opposition to country through soul, the group not only challenged country’s racial associations, but soul’s as well. Ultimately, as a centerpiece of their “cosmic American”

100 Ibid., 1.

101 Ibid., 234.
vision, the Burritos’s country-soul covers, and in particular, “Do Right Woman,” created a space for examining the “ideological beliefs” behind perceived generic and cultural boundaries.\(^{102}\)

Within the counterculture, perspectives on race, and in particular relations between blacks and whites, were fraught with inconsistencies. The community that developed in and around rock owed enormous debts to black culture. As Lipsitz writes, “from the countless numbers of black musicians who provided the core vocabulary of rock music to the activists and intellectuals whose compelling moral vision and devastating social critiques alerted young whites to the shortcomings of their society,” many elements of black culture and politics were embraced by white counterculturalists.\(^{103}\) Yet, significant distance remained between “young whites” and disenfranchised blacks, who in some instances, resented identification with their marginalized positions. As one black resident of New York’s East Village lamented in 1967, “the hippies really bug us, because we know they can come down here and play their games for a while and then escape. And we can’t, man.”\(^{104}\) As large numbers of young whites moved into already crowded urban centers in San Francisco and New York, raising rent for already impoverished residents, friction between those living in voluntary poverty and blacks on the margins rose. Although factions within the counterculture had contributed significantly to civil rights activism, the white counterculture preferred to fashion alternative identities and communities that addressed the alienation of white middle-class life more than racial inequity.\(^{105}\)


\(^{103}\) Lipsitz, “Who’ll Stop the Rain?,” 218.

Despite the relative lack of on-the-ground engagement with racial politics however, popular music did at least acknowledge racial concerns. Indeed, expressions of black pride that had been expounded by civil rights and black power advocates translated into hugely popular songs such as Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” (1967) and James Brown’s “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud” (1969), and labels dedicated to black artists such as Motown in Detroit and Stax in Memphis thrived due to popularity with both black and white audiences.

As a testament to Motown’s crossover power in particular, Chapple and Garofalo point out that in 1967 the black-owned label grossed over $30 million dollars with an estimated 70% of its sales to white audiences throughout the nation.

In spite of the increased racial awareness this success fostered, the countercultural rock community lambasted black artists assumed to have watered down their music for white tastes. Indicative are the words of journalist Peter Garulnick, who chastised Motown for producing music that was “so much more popular, so much more socially acceptable, so much more arranged and predictable, so much more white.”

Others such as Jon Landau expressed similar sentiments, revealing a perception of black authenticity built from the idea that blacks, in Ralph

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107 George Lipsitz posits that the popularity of black-derived music amongst white audiences reflected openness to multicultural dialogue in the late sixties. Accordingly, he points to a number of sixties musical icons who embodied this multiculturalism, citing Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, and James Brown as “‘outsiders’ able to transcend their personal histories and build new identities in an openly multiracial musical environment” (Lipsitz, “Who’ll Stop the Rain?,” 217).


Ellison’s words, “remain unaffected” by the “give and take of acculturation.” In 1967, Landau’s *Crawdaddy* article “A Whiter Shade of Black,” contrasted Motown performers who work in one of the “basic Negro musical forms,” but alter their approach enough to make it appealing to white audiences with “hard core” performers “who won’t or can’t assimilate, and therefore just continue to do their thing.”

While these perceptions limited the appeal of some artists, they led to the veneration of others, particularly blues artists such as Muddy Waters, B.B. King, and to blues in general. Indeed, the ubiquity of blues forms and imagery throughout the works of some of the era’s most popular groups such as Cream, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and the Jimi Hendrix Experience, attests to this fact. Not only a basis for musical experimentation and improvisation, blues connected white musicians with black artists thought to be outside the mainstream purview. Thus, in contrast to Motown artists such as the Temptations and the Supremes, bluesmen like Waters, King, and Buddy Guy became beacons of authenticity not only by virtue of their marginality, but also through Maileresque idealizations of blackness. This


112 In the electric guitar-centric musical world of the counterculture, the adaptability of blues scales, harmonies, and forms to extended improvisation and experimentations with sound, also played a significant role in the idiom’s predominant countercultural presence.

113 See Norman Mailer’s infamous 1957 essay, “The White Negro” where he writes, “Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm.” Norman Mailer, “The White Negro,” *Dissent*, Fall 1957. Archived at: http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957 (Accessed: January 4th, 2014).
point underscores Alice Echols’s astute observation that while popular music in the sixties, and in particular rock, reconstructed meanings of “whiteness” and “blackness” through both social and musical contexts, racial boundaries were also constantly being rearticulated.\textsuperscript{114}

As Otis Redding’s appearance at Monterey indicated though, countercultural critics and audiences did not dismiss soul altogether. Discussing what came to be known as the “Memphis sound” of Stax Records of the late 1960s, Hughes concludes that in the discourse of the period, artists like Redding and Carla Thomas were understood to make “authentically Black music produced by racially integrated, authentically southern musicians.”\textsuperscript{115} Indeed, \textit{Rolling Stone’s} Jon Landau described Redding as a kind of quintessential soul man and “truly a ‘folk’ artist” whose singing was “direct,” “simple,” and “unintellectual,”\textsuperscript{116} while fellow \textit{Rolling Stone} writer Peter Giraudo offered his stamp of approval on southern soul in a 1968 article: “It is music that is universal and unafraid to borrow from sources black, white or brown.”\textsuperscript{117} In light of the counterculture’s qualified identification with Southernness discussed above, Hughes’s

\textsuperscript{114}Echols, \textit{Shaky Ground}, 73. The development of FM radio played a large part in this preference. As fiercely anti-commercial deejays on stations such as San Francisco’s KMPX started broadcasting more and more countercultural rock music, the most popular artists on Top 40 AM stations such as Motown artists like The Supremes and the Temptations were disregarded in favor of non-mainstream blues and jazz musicians. Elevated to the status of authentic black roots musicians in the countercultural imagination, musicians like Miles Davis and B.B. King were seen as artistic forebears to the blues-inflected work of then-current countercultural musicians and thus played on emerging FM stations. For a discussion of the development of KMPX and its role as an underground countercultural radio station in San Francisco, see Eugene Alonzo Smith III, “Within the Counterculture: The Creation, Transmission, and Commercialization of Cultural Alternatives During the 1960s” (PhD Diss.: Carnegie Mellon University, 2001), 257-266.; Michael J. Kramer, “We Are KMPX FM Rock, Complete With All the Contradictions,” in \textit{The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67-93. As Echols observes further, “What promoters and radio programmers of the ‘50s and early ’60s had believed was R&B’s biggest handicap among white teem—its rawness or ‘blackness’—became its selling point in the late ’60s among hip rock audiences, who began to look down upon most ‘commercial’ black music” (Echols, \textit{Shaky Ground}, 166).

\textsuperscript{115}Hughes, “Country-Soul,” 101.


conclusions offer even further reason for the counterculture’s acceptance of soul—it was viewed as quintessentially and authentically Black music produced in a liberated Southern environment of racial integration.

For Parsons and the Flying Burrito Brothers, the actual sounds of soul held more appeal than idealizations of the genre’s ideological underpinnings. Emphasizing short riff-based instrumental accompaniments, syncopated basslines, more minimal textures, and backbeat accents, the Southern soul style and production quality, in contrast with Motown’s sound, was sparser and seemingly less mediated. This sparseness of texture and lack of identifiable lead instrument worked to showcase gospel- and blues-derived vocal styles that frequently employed melismas, bends, and timbral variations. In conjunction with lyrics that often depicted romantic relationships, such vocal styles worked to fuse the emotional ecstasy of spiritual experience with the passion of secular love. Set against slower tempos featuring triplet subdivisions articulated by arpeggiated piano, organ, or guitar parts, these sung “sermons” testified a sense of personal authentication that resonated with the confessional aspect of country the Burritos favored. Indeed, in much of the country that the group tended towards, namely the heartfelt ballads by country singers such as Buck Owens (“Together Again”), Merle Haggard (“Sing Me Back Home”), and Conway Twitty (“Image of Me”), a similarity can be found in the slower tempos, minimal accompaniment and prominent vocal lines suited to emotive embellishment.118 Southern soul also lent itself well to Chris Ethridge’s background in rhythm-and-blues bass playing and Sneaky Pete’s non-traditional approach to the pedal steel. Ultimately, in finding

118 As Parsons insisted, “I was brought up in the South and I never knew the difference between Negro gospel music and country music, it was all just music to me” (Quoted in Walker, God’s Own Singer, 100). Parsons continued, “I knew the difference in the sound and difference in how to play it, but I was taught to play music by black people but I was never aware that was what was called ‘gospel’ or rhythm and blues or blues and rhythm as it used to be called. And the other was called ‘country and western’—I never understood that” (Ibid.).
common musical ground between country and soul in songs such as “Do Right Woman,” the Burritos provided audiences a means to reconcile assumptions of their difference.

From Aretha Franklin’s female perspective, “Do Right Woman” implores men to give women affection and love, for women, like men, also long for respect and can be susceptible to temptation. Through Franklin, the song served as a kind of precursor to the feminist rallying cry that “Respect” would become just a month later. The Burritos’s version however, addresses both men and women, urging both to respect each other:

**Aretha Franklin’s version**

Verse One:
Take me to heart and I’ll always love you,
And nobody can make me do wrong.
Take me for granted, leaving love unshown
Makes willpower weak and temptation strong.

Pre-Chorus:
A woman’s only human,
You should understand.
She’s not just a plaything,
She’s flesh and blood just like her man.

Chorus:
If you want a do right, all days woman,
You've gotta be a do right, all night man.

Bridge:
Yeah, yeah, they say that it’s a man’s world,
But you can’t prove that by me.
And as long as we’re together, baby
Show some respect for me.

*Note: The pre-chorus and chorus are repeated multiple times in the song.*

**Flying Burrito Brothers’s version**

(Alterations in bold)

Verse One: TO WOMEN
Take me to heart and I’ll always love you,
And nobody else could make me do wrong.
Take me for granted and I’ll tag along.
Makes willpower weak and temptation strong.

Pre-Chorus: TO MEN
A woman’s only human,
This you must understand.
She’s not just a plaything
**She expects love just like a man.**

Chorus: TO MEN
So if you wanna do right, **all day** woman,
You gotta be a do right, all night man.

Bridge: TO WOMEN
They say that it’s a man’s world,
But you can’t prove that by me.
So as long as we’re together, baby
**You better** show some respect for me.

Chorus: TO MEN
So if you wanna do right, **all day** woman,
You gotta be a do right, all night man.
You gotta be a do right, all night man.
You gotta be a do right, all night man.
In terms of gender relations, the Burritos’s “Do Right Woman” offers contrast with “Christine’s Tune.” While “Christine’s Tune” depicted a battle between the sexes, “Do Right Woman” advocates for male-female relationships built on shared trust. Women are not reduced simply to “playthings” or “devils,” but people who can be hurt by infidelity and disrespect. As such, the Burritos’s “Do Right Woman” rectifies some of the sexism found throughout *Gilded Palace*.

The song’s blending of musical signifiers supports this spirit of reconciliation. Like Aretha Franklin’s version, the Burritos begin the tune with the first phrase sung a cappella (“take me to heart”). Here it is sung by Parsons, who is then joined by the piano, electric bass, pedal steel, and drums as he completes the line (“and I’ll always love you”). Unlike Aretha Franklin’s version, which is in 6/8, the Burritos adapt the tune to a slow lilting waltz. In addition to the instrumentation, this shift in meter announces the song’s new country orientation.

Although Parsons begins the song by himself, Parsons and Hillman sing much of “Do Right Woman” together in parallel thirds and fourths. In contrast to Franklin’s version, where her solo vocal allowed her to push and pull the tempo, Parsons’s and Hillman’s duet singing necessitates more metric precision on their part. As such, more overt displays of embellishment to the main vocal line are relatively fewer when both men are singing. We can compare, for example, the phrase, “makes willpower weak.” Franklin begins the phrase on an offbeat (beat three) and then uses a bit of rubato on the three syllables of “willpower” to lead into a quick descending melisma on “weak” on beat one of the subsequent measure (in 6/8). Like Franklin, Parsons and Hillman begin the phrase with a pickup (on “make”), but in contrast to her version, emphasize the first two syllables of “willpower” more evenly across the next measure. “Weak” lands just before the downbeat and is again treated with a descending melisma, but it is delayed until the following bar. This alteration emphasizes the vocal duet between Parsons and Hillman.
and Hillman’s subtle embellishment in the upper line.

Example 4a: Aretha Franklin, “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man” (0:43)

Example 4b: Flying Burrito Brothers, “Do Right Woman” (0:47)

These types of rhythmic adjustments are part and parcel not only of Parsons and Hillman’s harmonizing, but are also indicative of the straighter sense of time found in country singing more generally. This is not to say however, that the Burrito’s version of the song discards soul singing style completely, for in vocal phrases where Hillman is absent, Parsons employs melismas, rubato, and more pronounced vibrato at ends of phrases. In the song’s bridge in particular, Parsons reaches the upper registers of his range to embellish “world” and “baby.”

One feature of Franklin’s version that is noticeably absent in the Burritos’s however is the vocal call and response in the song’s chorus. In Franklin’s version, each syllable of “do right all day woman” and “do right all night man” fall on downbeats one and four and are answered by her background vocalists’ repetitions of “do right” which fall on the offbeats of two and three and five and six. As such, there is a strict rhythmic interchange between Franklin and her background singers that emphasizes the call for gender equality inherent in the song’s lyrics. In
the Burritos’s version, Parsons and Hillman are joined by former Byrd, David Crosby, and
together sing each syllable of “do right all day women” and “do right all day man” on the
downbeats without a vocalized answer. This setting, while lacking the vocal interjections, might
be considered just as powerful as Franklin’s in that all three men are completely together in
univocally urging their fellow males to do right. Also, without the response, Parsons’s,
Hillman’s and Crosby’s harmonies highlight a harmonic alteration that the Burritos make to
Franklin’s version. Franklin’s version of the chorus (I-II7/V-V7-I in A major) includes the
secondary dominant, while the Burritos adhere to the more common ii – V7 – I progression.
This alteration not only reinforces the largely diatonic language of the song’s country treatment,
but also limits the amount of blues tonalities throughout the song.

If the vocal elements of the Burritos’s “Do Right Woman” adhere more closely to
country style, we can look to instrumental parts for examples of country-soul blending. In the
absence of the broken-chord acoustic guitar accompaniment and multi-layered organ and piano
parts of Franklin’s version, bassist Chris Ethridge and steel guitarist Kleinow step into more
active roles. Unlike the bass part written by FAME studio bassist David Hood who played on
Franklin’s version, Ethridge utilizes walking lines and slides to non-root pitches while providing
countermelodies to the vocal lines (“tag along” and “temptation strong” in the verse, for
example). Whereas Hood adheres almost exclusively to sustained root pitches played on
downbeats, Ethridge, especially from the pre-chorus on, plays throughout measures and often
uses pickup notes to lead into new ones. Into choruses, Ethridge’s bass shares a leading role
with Parsons and Hillman as they sing “so, if you wanna” by playing a descending
countermelody. Thus, even as he was refashioning Hood’s bass part, he was not altering it to fit
traditional country style. Illustrating Bernie Leadon’s words from above, he eschewed the
“bomp, bomp, bomp, on-the-downbeat” country style in a way that complimented the country elements present in Parsons and Hillman’s vocals.

Kleinow, like Ethridge, also played outside the traditional bounds of country style. In an effort to mimic the broken-chord acoustic guitar figures of Franklin’s version and the string and horn parts that pervaded much of the Southern soul repertoire in general, Kleinow avoids the lyrical single note melody lines and double stops that abound in tunes such as “Christine’s Tune” in favor of rolled chord figures and octave unisons. Kleinow’s words to Parsons biographer Jason Walker speak to these efforts: “It was all unison notes—octave above, octave below. I was trying to blend the sound in, rather than playing the note and quickly bringing the volume up. I experimented with that a lot, since I didn’t have a clue as to how to get that to sound like real strings. That was something I did deliberately to get that effect… I just did little things to make it all sound different.”¹ Indeed, we find prominent use of the octave effect in the song’s bridge. Here, Kleinow’s slow-moving line outlines the bridge’s harmonic progression in way that fills out the instrumental texture, while providing a complimentary melodic counterpoint to Parsons’s solo vocals. Ultimately, in comparison to “Christine’s Tune,” Kleinow’s playing serves a less narrative function, allowing the song’s lyrics and Parsons and Hillman’s vocals to take center stage.

Example 5: Steel guitar countermelody in “Do Right Woman” (2:22)

¹ Quoted in Walker, God’s Own Singer, 97.
In the end, by not sidestepping gender or race, but by addressing them through musical means and syntheses of styles thought to be at odds, the Burritos offered their countercultural audiences new ways of understanding country music and, in turn, the group’s “cosmic” goals. Steve Waksman argues that as a countercultural musician who refused to contain himself within a single cultural tradition, Jimi Hendrix encouraged listeners to reexamine the value of racial, sexual, and aesthetic boundaries. In much the same way, it could be said that in confronting racialized genre prescriptions and patriarchal gender relations in “Do Right Woman,” the Burritos encouraged their audiences to do the same. Thus, in the “cosmic American” world of the Burritos, where the “soul-country-cosmic” current could have easily run through Hendrix’s “electric church,” songs such as “Do Right Woman” held the possibility for challenging assumptions.

Conclusion

In his review of The Gilded Palace of Sin, rock journalist Stanley Booth concluded that the album’s closing track, “Hippie Boy,” reflected the larger goals of the group, summoning a “vision of hillbillies and hippies, like lions and lambs, together in peace and love instead of sin and violence, getting stoned together, singing old time favorite songs.” Indeed, the Burritos end the song with a brief adaptation of “Peace in the Valley,” a well-worn gospel hymn that invokes such a vision. Importantly though, as “Peace in the Valley” conveys, such an idyllic scene can only be realized in death. Ostensibly, one must negotiate the “the sadness, the sorrow, [and] the trouble” of the modern world while living. As this chapter has shown, Parsons and the Burritos

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2 Waksman, Instruments of Desire, 178. Perhaps not so coincidentally, producer Terry Melcher opined that Parsons was “like the white, country Jimi Hendrix” (Quoted in Fong-Torres, Hickory Wind, 149).

offered a means for such a negotiation not through “old time favorite songs,” but through songs that were new, complex, at times oppositional, and at others, resigned, rarely conclusive, and ultimately unconcerned with being completely so. As much as some of the material on *Gilded Palace* advocated escape in the midst of countercultural and American dissolution, their acknowledgement of it through an idiosyncratic “cosmic American” language, made them a unique group within the counterculture, and one that offers us a window into how musicians and audiences traversed the social terrain of the era.

Let us turn very briefly to “Hippie Boy” for some final perspective on the Burritos’s “cosmic American” musical project. In the tradition of country recitations by singers such as Red Sovine and Tex Ritter, Chris Hillman recites a soft-spoken tale from the perspective of a straight member of society who encounters a “hippie boy” on his way to town. Set against organ swells, honky-tonk piano and steel guitar embellishments in slow waltz time, the “hippie boy” recounts the death of a child, another “little hippie boy” who was struck down on the streets of Chicago while delivering a package.⁴

This boy was in Chicago he didn’t know why he was there. He was with his family and friends and he didn’t really care. You might have been one of those who saw The struggle there on your television screen The tragic thing is so much else happened That no one else could have seen.

As the tale ends, we are meant to realize that this “little hippie boy,” just like the Burritos, the counterculture, and the rest of the country, had not emerged unscathed from the struggle between tradition and change in the late 1960s. To this end, the song offers some advice for the future:

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Well, what I’m going to tell you now, you can stay or you can leave. You kind of listened to my story so far but just one more thing: It’s the same for any hippie, bum or hillbilly out on the street. Just remember this little boy and never carry more than you can eat.

Is Hillman referring to drugs here or more broadly to the (ideological) excess of the times?

Though the Burritos could certainly have been delivering this advice with their tongues firmly planted in their cheeks, the song’s larger sociomusical backdrop makes one not quite sure. Thus, like the Burritos’s Nudie suits described at the outset of this chapter, “Hippie Boy” at once points to and obscures the lines between the absurd and the sincere, country music and the counterculture, the United States and “cosmic America.”

In the wake of *The Gilded Palace of Sin*’s poor sales, Parsons and the Burrito Brothers lost steam. Bassist Chris Ethridge left the group, forcing Chris Hillman to take over on bass, and though talented multi-instrument Bernie Leadon joined on lead electric guitar, Parsons’s increasing drug use and lack of focus left the group without a committed leader. A&M’s producers had faith in them as a second-record group, but their follow-up to *Gilded Palace, Burrito Deluxe* (1970) failed to recapture the creativity and “cosmic American” vision of their debut, ultimately suffering the same commercial fate.\(^5\) According to Parsons himself, the second album had been a mistake, and not long after the album hit the shelves in April of 1970, he left the group.\(^6\) It wouldn’t be until 1973 in the midst of country rock’s ascension to the musical mainstream, that Parsons would resurface as a solo artist, and again, situate himself apart from the rest of the country rock field.

\(^5\) Einarson, *Hot Burritos*, 216. Absent the sober religiosity of “Sin City” or the country-fried soulfulness of “Do Right Woman,” *Burrito Deluxe* is more straightforwardly rock in orientation. This is perhaps not surprising given the fact that the album was produced by former Byrds producer Jim Dickson.

\(^6\) Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 127.
CHAPTER FOUR
“A Land That Was Nearly Forgotten”:
“Regressive” Southernness in Parsons’s Late Career

Three years after leaving the Flying Burrito Brothers, on March 13, 1973, Gram Parsons and his touring band, the Fallen Angels, visited Ultrasonic Studios in Hempstead, New York, for a live radio broadcast from WLIR-FM. In front of a studio audience, the band performed thirteen songs that would be released nearly a decade after Parsons’s death as *Gram Parsons & the Fallen Angels: Live 1973* in 1982. Interspersed between tracks from his recently recorded solo album, *GP*, and variety of cover songs¹ are commentary from Parsons and his band members regarding events that had taken place on the road to New York. Specifically, they highlight a visit to the studios of KOKE-FM in Austin, Texas. Apparently, during their radio interview, DJ Rusty Bell asked the group what they thought of “progressive country,” to which Parsons jokingly replied, “we play ‘regressive’ country.”²

More flippant than fervent, this response nonetheless reveals something about Parsons’s position within the country rock world of the early 1970s. Indeed, by 1973, country rock had overcome its growing pains and achieved mainstream success through the work of more pop-influenced acts such as the Eagles and Linda Ronstadt, and become a loose designation for a number of popular hybrid musical forms. As such, country rock encompassed not only the Los Angeles-based community which had given it birth, but also overlapped with the “progressive


country” scene emerging in Austin at the time. That Parsons rejected the term indicates not only a distrust of the “progressive” label, but also more broadly, a way of orienting his work as different from, if not oppositional to, what country rock had become. To better understand this “regressive” period in Parsons’s musical career, this chapter will explore the last phase of Parsons’s career and material from his final solo albums, *GP* (1973) and *Grievous Angel* (1974), calling attention to the means by which Parsons positioned himself uniquely within country rock at the moment of its ascension to nationwide popularity. It will be shown that behind Parsons’s strategy to separate himself from the country rock herd stood an adherence to earlier countercultural tenets and traditional country values rooted in idealized constructions of pre-modern Southernness. Thus, in contrast to the self-conscious experimentation that characterized his work with the Flying Burrito Brothers, in his late career, Parsons reached back to his earliest musical influences while filtering his work through an explicitly Southern lens.

The values of an imagined Southernness had provided country rock musicians in the late 1960s a platform on which to appeal to countercultural fans. However, in their ascendance during the early 1970s, country rockers began to suppress markers of Southernness. As the South was redefined—socially, culturally, politically, and geographically—in light of the emergence of the Sunbelt region and the easing of the region’s socio-economic anxieties, regional idealizations continued to resonate, but were recast so that the Sunbelt subsumed the South. In turn, country rock’s emphases on traditionally Southern locales such as South Carolina as referenced in Parsons’s “Hickory Wind” (1968) were transferred to Sunbelt locations like Winslow, Arizona.

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(Eagles’s “Take It Easy” [1972]) and Colorado (Linda Ronstadt’s “Colorado,” [1973]; Manassas’s “Colorado” [1973]; John Denver’s “Rocky Mountain High” [1972]). Some critics perceived this transference in light of a move from the sense of communal cooperation that characterized the 1960s to the kind of rugged individualism that came to define what novelist Tom Wolfe called the “Me” decade of the 1970s.⁵ Rock journalist Robert Christgau, for example, summed up this shift as it manifest in one of the Eagles’s best-known songs:

> The youth counterculture of the sixties always had a certain eccentric frontier quality to it, with the understanding that frontier life was cooperative as well as individualistic. But the stress of mass cooperation eventually bummed everyone out—it was just too heavy, y’know?—so the new alternative man goes it alone. As the refrain of “Take It Easy” advises: “Lighten up while you still can/ Don’t even try to understand/ Find a place to make your stand/ And take it easy.”⁶

Amidst these shifts in country rock and the nation at large in the early 1970s, Parsons’s continued attention to idealized conceptions of the bucolic, communal, and pre-modern South set him apart from his more successful contemporaries. This attention manifest most clearly in his last two solo albums, *GP* and *Grievous Angel*, where Parsons, musically and lyrically, employed Southernness as a “regressive” strategy to authenticate himself as a Southern artist and to situate himself uniquely within the increasingly “progressive” country rock landscape. Here “regressive” is not used in a negative sense—that is, denoting a kind of musical atrophy—but in the sense that Parsons was drawing on earlier constructions of Southernness at a time when other country rock artists were looking forward amidst broader regional and social developments.

In the years since his death in 1973, Parsons’s background as a Southerner has provided critics and fans with a means for establishing authentic connections between his biography,

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music, and ultimately, his decision to pursue country music, a genre understood to be inherently Southern. During his late career however, Parsons’s deployment of Southerness fit uneasily within the world of country rock and contributed to hindering his success. Nonetheless, wading through the murky Southern mythology engulfing Parsons’s posthumous reputation, it is possible to see how Parsons’s “regressive” Southern strategy helped establish his singular position within country rock’s shifting aesthetics and rise to the national stage. The first part of this chapter will address the larger topic of the romanticized South as a way to frame Parsons’s own Southern self-mythologizing and idealizations made by critics and fans during his lifetime. The second section of the chapter will discuss material on GP, Parsons’s first solo album, both as a reflection of Parsons’s commitment to his earliest musical influences and popular music’s Southern roots, and as an acknowledgement of the contentious social relations that accompany the South’s history. This reading of GP will reinforce the contrast between Parsons’s South-based country rock and the Sunbelt imagery and pop influence that pervaded the work of his peers, the subject of the chapter’s third section. Finally, I will turn to Grievous Angel, Parsons’s second and final studio album. Through an analysis of the album’s title track, “Return of the Grievous Angel,” and the mock-live “Medley Live From Northern Quebec,” I illuminate how Parsons’s Southern constructions critiqued what he perceived as country rock’s then-current distance from its country roots while reinforcing his position as an authentic, cultural outsider. Ultimately, while Parsons’s “regressive” appeals to Southernness in the final phase of his career did little to boost his popularity, they nonetheless augmented both the traditional and unique “cosmic” sensibilities

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7 Historian James Gregory notes that country’s Southerness is often overstated: “Country music historians typically stress the music’s close connection to the culture of the rural and working-class white South, and while acknowledging the importance of New York record companies and other commercial structures, they are happiest telling the story of Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter family, Roy Acuff, and other great musicians who reshaped the sounds and styles of country music while remaining in the South.” See James N. Gregory, The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 180.
that had defined his earlier work. In this way, we can observe a line of continuity between believability and originality, a line that continually surfaced throughout his career, and that continues to inform Parsons’s legacy.

A Weeping Willow in Los Angeles

In Sid Griffin’s 1985 essay, “The Outcast Southerner: Gram Parsons as Iconoclast,” the author gives credit to Parsons for making it “all right to be a Southerner” and for validating the Southern sanctity that “which sometimes get obscured by regional hang-ups.” Likewise, religion scholar Michael Grimshaw writes of the “gospel of Gram,” that is, an invocation of a “latter-day Southern covenant based on landscape and memory as epiphany and the spiritual locus of grace.” Extending this characterization, Grimshaw opines that the theological underpinnings of country music provided Parsons with a “voice of the South in the North and West” that put a “brake upon the utopian and ideological dreams” of the world of rock. Accompanying Griffin and Grimshaw, many writers have made links between Parsons, the South, and country music, citing biographical details of his Southern upbringing in Georgia and Florida to argue for an authentic relationship between his life and music. In the wake of Parsons’s death in 1973 and the subsequent mythologizing of him as the “father of country rock,” hyperbole often obscures the subtlety with which Parsons’s own constructions of

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8 We will recall Richard Peterson’s conception of authenticity outlined in the introduction: “Authenticity… centers on being believable relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being original, that is not being an imitation of the model” (Peterson, Fabricating Authenticity, 220).

9 Griffin, Gram Parsons, 15.


11 Ibid., 97.
Southernness and Southern identity interacted with country rock’s shifting regional and musical aesthetics in the early 1970s.12

Such allusions to Parsons’s Southernness can be seen as an outgrowth of what Zachary Lechner calls the “Down-home South” discourse that many late 1960s counterculturalists drew on for their imagined South.13 In contrast to the “Vicious South,” which represented the region as “backward, mean, aggressively racist, foreboding, and yet tough and masculine,” “Down-home South” representations espoused a vision of the region that was racially neutral, rural, and free from modern, technological, and racial anxieties.”14 Echoing historians David Farber and Anthony Harkins, Lechner points to television programs such as *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* as celebrations of rural, small town life and antimodern critiques of the U.S.’s consumer-based lifestyle.15 As discussed in the previous chapter, such celebrations and critiques were often musically infused into the counterculture through late 1960s country rock. In 1970, *Time* magazine writer Jay Cocks highlighted the work of the Band in particular as indicative of a broader American desire to find refuge from societal ills. In a piece entitled, “Down to Old Dixie and Back,” Cocks placed the group in the context of country rock, writing:

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12 Mather has argued against such exaggerations, citing them as outgrowths of the obsession with American identity politics that existed within rock circles in the late sixties. She observes that in emphasizing Parsons’s Southern upbringing in conjunction with his Harvard education and class status, writers extend Parsons’s credibility to the widest possible number of groups: “If Parsons is as Southern as he can be while simultaneously intellectual (educated not just anywhere, but Harvard), and deeply committed to the Los Angeles rock scene, then he becomes intensely authentic. The combining aspects of the story do not cancel each other out, but give him even more credibility with as many groups as possible, raising the chances that he will indeed strike a working balance between conflicting groups in society” (Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 91-92).

13 Lechner, “The South of the Mind,” 34

14 Ibid., 3.

Though The Band calls it “just music—everything we’ve ever heard or done,” the convenient label is country rock. However labeled, it is a turning back toward easy-rhythmmed blues, folk songs, and the twangy, lonely lamentations known as country music. Country rock is also a symptom of a general cultural reaction to the most unsettling decade the U.S. has yet endured. The yen to escape the corrupt present by returning to the virtuous past—real or imagined—has haunted Americans, never more so than today.\(^\text{16}\)

As the title of Cocks’s article alone suggests, the constructions of “Down-home” Southernness present in the Band’s work defined not only their escapist appeal, but also the appeal of country rock as a whole.

Regarding Parsons, Cocks’s characterization of the Band resonates with the “Down-home” discourse that had begun surrounding Parsons’s life and work just a year earlier when Stanley Booth reviewed the *Gilded Palace of Sin*. We will recall Booth’s assertion that the record was the “most personal Parsons had yet done” and his attention on Parsons’s relationship with the “hostility of the modern world.” Dedicating more than one-third of the review to describing Parsons’s hometown of Waycross, Georgia, where, he writes, “culture exists… only in the anthropological sense,” Booth foregrounds representations of Parsons as a small-town Southern boy lost in the sinful, big city. At the same time, Booth, who had also come from Waycross and come to know Parsons personally, imparts a sense of the small town as backward and isolated in ways that fit more with “Vicious South” discourse. Ultimately, for Booth, Parsons becomes a repository of the region’s lost values, and as the “good old boy” transcends the “violence, illicit sex, drunkenness—in a word, sin—in South Georgia.”\(^\text{17}\)

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Others within the rock world close to Parsons also recognized in him a similar kind of “Down-home” Southernness. Pamela Des Barres described Parsons as having a “sweetness and a weeping-willow-tree genteel Southern mentality,” and late-1960s Sunset Strip insider and author Eve Babitz wrote that Parsons was an “absolute prince…He’s elegant, he has good manners; he knows how to be a gentleman.” One of the most poetic accounts of Parsons’s Southern gentility comes from Miss Mercy, who along with Des Barres, was also a member of the GTOs and Flying Burrito Brother groupie. Relaying her memories of Parsons to Sid Griffin, she wrote,

Pamela always raved on about Gram too and I’m the only GTO who listened… The other girls couldn’t have cared less about Southerners but I was looking for one since the British Invasion had made me bloody sick. I could recall screaming in the midst of it all “If I could just hear a Southern accent,” and I believed in Pamela so off we went to the outskirts of town into the San Fernando Valley…We entered the house and shy Chris Hillman and the cat in this Nudie suit greeted us with a grocery bag full of grass and he was downhome dazzling with sensuous Southern hospitality which just slayed me. But the first words I recall him speaking to me were as he leaned over his pile of records and put on an old George Jones album (whom I had never heard of) right by my face and as a tear fell from his eye he said “This is George Jones, the King of Broken Hearts.” Imagine crying over a hillbilly with a crewcut. Gram put George on and I’ve been indebted ever since.

Aside from critics and fans, Parsons himself was instrumental in establishing his Southern identity. Ever the self-mythologist, Parsons had long been spinning tales about his Southern upbringing and country credibility. Friends recall that Parsons went so far as to tell them that his family home in Florida was used in Gone with the Wind and that his father had been an itinerant country singer and songwriter wandering the South. Parsons’s

18 Quoted in Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 274.
20 Griffin, Gram Parsons, 116.
pronouncements of Southernness were often displayed in interviews as well. Prompted by Bud Scoppa in a 1970 interview, Parsons rhapsodized about his upbringing in the Georgia “swamps” and the ability of Southerners to “talk to Jesus.” Scoppa leads Parsons to emphasize his uniqueness amongst his fellow Southerners:

Scoppa: Yeah, well, you’re kind of the exception to the rule down there.

Parsons: Yeah, right.

Scoppa: They probably wouldn’t know what to do with you either.

Parsons: No… they never did. I was a misfit from the start. But I never learned how to play games. It never really impressed me. I mean, like I don’t really have a Southern accent like most people from South Georgia do. They have heavy, heavy Southern accents. You almost can’t understand then when they talk. But I never developed an accent like that even though I spent thirteen years down there.

Scoppa: You were born there.

Parsons: Yeah, I was born in Winter Haven, Florida.

Scoppa: It’s almost as if you were someplace else before that so that you’d have enough wherewithal to be able to look at it objectively.

Parsons: That’s right.22

Parsons’s admission of difference and supposed power to view the region objectively does not fully diminish his Southernness, but allowed him to construct the region on his own terms. Thus, from a position as both insider and outsider, Parsons appears to be capable of negotiating representations of Southernness with an air of authenticity that stems from lived experience and critical distance. As the following sections illustrate, in the final phase of his career, such musical representations of Southernness offered a nuanced vision of the region that confronted

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22 Griffin, Gram Parsons, 99.
both existing “Down-home” discourses and the South’s ambiguous place amidst larger regional and social shifts within both country rock and the nation at large.

**GP Returns Down-home**

Following his departure from the Flying Burrito Brothers in the spring of 1970, Parsons’s future musical career was uncertain in the midst of his escalating substance abuse and growing reputation for laziness and irresponsibility. He was able to convince A&M Records to sign him as a solo artist however, through a bit of savvy networking with producer Terry Melcher. Sessions for a new album began soon after in late 1970, and Parsons recorded ten songs with the help of musicians such as Clarence White, Earl Ball and Ry Cooder. Not surprisingly though, Parsons’s frequent drunkenness and Melcher’s lack of focus forced A&M to cancel the contract and scrap the recordings that had been made.23 After yet another setback, Parsons and new girlfriend Gretchen Burrell, left Los Angeles for England to accompany the Rolling Stones on their Farewell to Britain tour in March of 1971. When the tour ended, Parsons followed the band to Nellcôte, the famed villa that Keith Richards had rented in the south of France where the Stones would record portions of their now legendary *Exile on Main Street* (1972).24 There Parsons and Richards along with an ever-changing cast of musicians, artists, drug dealers and other hangers-on indulged in a drug-fueled stay that would finally end when instruments were stolen and Richards had had enough of the pressure from French police over drug suspicions.

23 Parsons may have checked the tapes out or Melcher may have taken them. In any case, they’re lost. See Meyer, *Twenty Thousand Roads*, 341.

24 Critics and fans often address Parsons’s influence on the Rolling Stones during this time. Parsons himself told Judith Sims that the group had “done a few country-sounding things” since getting to know him and some claim that Parsons can be heard on the choruses of several songs on *Exile on Main Street* though Keith Richards denies his involvement (Sims, “Ex-Byrd Gram Solos”; Meyer, *Twenty Thousand Roads*, 349). The friendship between Richards and Parsons did foster some musical exchange earlier however. Richards and Mick Jagger allowed Parsons and the Burritos to record their country-tinged track, “Wild Horses,” for *Burrito Deluxe* (1970). See Fong-Torres, *Hickory Wind*, 127-136.
Although Parsons and Richards shared musical connections and a deep friendship, Parsons was ordered out of the villa.25

After a brief stay in England, Parsons and Burrell returned to Los Angeles where Parsons committed himself to pursuing a solo career.26 Amidst a brief reunion with the Flying Burrito Brothers for an East Coast tour, Chris Hillman encouraged Parsons to go hear a young singer from Washington, D.C. named Emmylou Harris. Parsons took Hillman’s encouragement to heart and after meeting and singing with Harris, was convinced that he and the then twenty-five year old folk singer would be a perfect musical match; she, the Tammy Wynette to his George Jones. Speaking of Harris, Parsons told Chuck Casell, “I found a chick singer who’s really good who I want to sing with… Singing with chicks always seems to work out at least half good and if you get a really good chick it works better than anything, because you can look at each other with love in your eyes, right.”27 While Parsons’s thinly veiled sexism is somewhat jarring, his description speaks not only to an awareness of the male-female duet tradition in country, but also to the important performative aspect of onstage male-female interaction within the tradition. Indeed, it was performance conventions such as standing in close proximity and relying on close eye contact that would fuel speculation of a romantic affair between Parsons and Harris years later. After their initial meeting, Parsons promised to fly Harris to Los Angeles as soon as he was set to record. Back in Los Angeles, Parsons wasted little time recruiting former-Byrd manager Eddie Tickner, and securing a contract with Mo Ostin at Reprise Records for two albums.


26 Parsons told Jan Donkers in an interview in 1972, “I think a definite group will probably be a long time coming because I just ain’t into the old group thing too much anymore. I like working as a solo artist” (Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 143).

27 See Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 133-134.
For the first of these albums, what would become *GP*, Parsons approached Merle Haggard to produce. Haggard agreed, but at the last minute backed out, forcing Parsons to come up with a new plan. Ultimately, he decided to produce the album himself and hire the best musicians he could find to play on the sessions. To that end, Parsons hired Elvis Presley’s backing band, the Takin’ Care of Business Band which included drummer Ronnie Tutt, pianist Glen D. Hardin, and guitarist James Burton. With this group signed on, Parsons sent for Harris, former Blind Faith member and bassist Rick Grech, whom Parsons had befriended years earlier, and Barry Tashian, a friend from Parsons’s days in Cambridge and New York. He also managed to enlist Merle Haggard’s sound engineer Hugh Davies, pedal steel legends Al Perkins and Buddy Emmons, and fiddler Byron Berline, all fixtures within country and country rock worlds.

In the context of Elvis Presley’s relationship with Los Angeles’s music scene in the early 1970s, Parsons’s hiring of the Takin’ Care of Business Band reveals as much about Parsons’s musical vision for the album as it does about his commitment to early influences and conscious distancing from his country rock peers. Indeed, despite Presley’s enormous influence on the careers of many country rock musicians and popular music landscape in general, his involvement in formulaic musical comedies throughout the late 1960s, meeting of Richard Nixon in 1970, and Las Vegas show-style choreography and costuming in the early 1970s, had turned off many of these musicians. The energy and rawness of Presley’s early performances and records for Sun Records, foundational for almost every rock and country rock musician in the 1960s, were

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28 Hugh Davies recalls, “I really looked forward to each session and working with Gram...he was interested in getting it recorded with the flavor and style that he wanted” and further, “I could enjoy myself. It was sort of funky country. Not quite rock, but beyond traditional country.” Quoted in John Delgatto, liner notes, *GP/Grievous Angel* (Reprise 9 26108-2 1990), 9.

perceived to have been replaced by glossy, overblown production elements and Presley’s
diverted public performances. As such, despite their consummate musical professionalism,
abilities, and experience, many Los Angeles rockers perceived Presley and his backing band as
inauthentic rock and rollers in gaudy matching outfits. In other words, the Elvis that had
initiated the “rock and roll process” and opened up the “possibilities of life” for postwar youth
such as Bob Dylan and Chris Hillman seemed to have left the building.  

Despite negative perceptions of Presley, it seems that in hiring his band, Parsons still held
him in high esteem just as he did when he saw him perform in Waycross, Georgia, in 1956. For
Parsons, Presley remained a fellow Southerner who had not only changed popular music through
his own fusions of country, gospel, and blues, but also become a living legend. Ever conscious
of his own impact and legacy, Parsons seems to have recognized that a connection to Presley
could fuel his own notoriety and thus, with the financial means to secure it, Parsons got as close
as he could to his hero through hiring his band. Certainly, Parsons also recognized the excellent
musicianship of Tutt, Hardin, and Burton. Longtime performers and session musicians, these
three were professionals well versed in the rock-and-roll and honky-tonk styles that would form
the musical foundation for GP. Ultimately, after years in the Northeast and California trying to
break new musical ground with experimentations that looked more forward than back, in might
be argued that Parsons, in 1972, was coming full circle, or “regressing” back to his earliest
influences and the musical roots of country rock.

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30 Chris Hillman opines, “If you really want to go back to the roots of country rock, it was Elvis. I’m talking Elvis
when he was at Sun Records, when he was good, that initial stuff he did for Sam Phillips. That was untouchable…
After Elvis went in the army, forget it, it was over.” Quoted in Einarson, Desperados, 3. Bob Dylan’s feelings
about Johnny Cash’s early recordings express similar sentiments. He told Doug Brinkley, “I tell people if they are
interested that they should listen to Johnny on his Sun records and reject all that notorious low-grade stuff he did in
his later years. It can’t hold a candlelight to the frightening depth of the man that you hear on his early records.
That’s the only way he should be remembered.” Quoted in Doug Brinkley, “Bob Dylan’s Late-Era, Old-Style
Sessions for *GP* ran from September through October of 1972. Comprised of nearly an even mix of Parsons originals and previously-recorded country songs by Nashville songwriters, the finished album is more polished than much of Parsons’s previous work and more conservative in terms of rock-informed sonic experimentation. Indeed, the loose performances, wailing overdriven steel guitar sounds, and countercultural themes that pervaded his earlier work with the Flying Burrito Brothers are absent, having been replaced by subtle interactions between instrumental parts, focused arrangements and lyrical themes found more often in the rock and roll and honky tonk of the early 1950s and 1960s.31

Of the eleven tracks on the album, two explicitly allude to Southerness: “Streets of Baltimore,” a song penned by Harland Howard and Tompall Glaser in 1966, and “She,” a song co-written by Parsons and Chris Ethridge.32 As what Melton McLaurin calls an “exile song,” “Streets of Baltimore” contrasts the “Down-home” South with the dreary urban North in the face the protagonist’s rural-to-urban move.33 As the song’s lyrics indicate however, these contrasts have less to do with the move itself, but more to do with how experiences of the city affect heterosexual relationships. In narrating his experiences in Baltimore, the speaker is initially optimistic about his new urban surroundings, but as his story unfolds, his urban optimism

31 “Cry One More Time,” for example, features a loping boogie-woogie feel that harkens back to the mid-1950s style of Fats Domino’s “Ain’t That A Shame” (1955)—a landmark in early rock and roll repertoire.


disintegrates as Baltimore begins to taint his only tangible connection to his rural Southern home: his “baby”:

Verse One(a):
Well I sold the farm to take my woman where she longed to be.
We left our kin and all our friends back there in Tennessee.
Then I bought those one way tickets she had often begged me for,
And they took us to the streets of Baltimore.

Verse One(b):
Well her heart was filled with gladness when she saw those city lights.
She said the prettiest place on earth was Baltimore at night.
Well a man feels proud to give his woman what she’s longing for,
And I kinda like the streets of Baltimore.

Verse Two(a):
Then I got myself a factory job, I ran an old machine.
And I bought a little cottage in a neighborhood serene.
Then every night when I’d come home with every muscle sore,
She’d drag me through the streets of Baltimore.

Verse Two(b):
Well I did my best to bring her back to what she used to be.
Then I soon learned she loved those bright lights more than she loved me.
Now I’m-a going back on that same train that brought me here before
While my baby walks the streets of Baltimore,
While my baby walks the streets of Baltimore.

The song’s lyrics also connect to the real experiences of displaced ex-rural dwellers in the mid-twentieth century and to other country “exile songs.” Indeed, in speaking to the blue-collar labor done by many displaced Southerners, the song’s reference to factory work is not unlike that found in “Detroit City,” another song that explores the tension between rural roots and new urban realities. Danny Dill, one of “Detroit City’s” writers, lends authenticity to such lyrical themes. Recalling his contact with displaced southerners and inspiration for the song he remarked, “They did go north. I sat there and talked to these people. They were from Alabama,
West Tennessee, Kentucky, and they’d go to Detroit and work in the car factories. And to keep from being so lonely they’d go sit in a bar and drink.”

Though Parsons was certainly not forced by necessity to relocate, his status as a former Southerner living in Los Angeles adds an autobiographical dimension to his performance of the song. That such explicit claims to Southernness were uncommon within country rock at the time also adds to the significance of Parsons’s decision to record “Streets of Baltimore,” for, on one hand, the song resonates with earlier countercultural representations of the “Down-home” South, and on the other, highlights Parsons’s self-positioning and individualism. By recording a previously written country song with unabashed lyrical signifiers of positive Southernness, Parsons revealed his allegiances not only to the region, but also to representations of the South that recalled a pre-modern America amidst increasing industrialization and mass consumption.

As such, a critical undercurrent runs through Parsons’s “Streets of Baltimore” that sets the stage for his subsequent Southern constructions.

The song’s musical elements bolster the song’s critical dimensions through their adherence to honky-tonk style. Instead of mitigating the effects of traditional country instrumentation with pop production as in the work of other country rockers, Parsons’s studio band foregrounds the interplay between the tune’s prominent instruments—steel guitar and electric guitar—and the song’s narrative. In her discussion of the Eagles’s “Take It Easy,”

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34 Quoted in Dorothy Horstman, Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy (New York: Dutton, 1975), 9-10.

35 Historian Karen L. Cox finds that “seen through the haze of moonlight and magnolias,” the South is often portrayed as either primitive or exotic and used to represent the pastoral ideal and to recall a pre-modern America amidst increasing industrialization, mass consumption, and encroaching modernity. Not only through media such as radio, recordings, and film, but also in advertising and travel literature, non-Southerners were supplied with idealized images of the South that harkened back to antebellum icons, namely plantation life, old Southern aristocracy, cottonfields, the hillbilly, and African-American servitude. On the other side of these mythic constructions of the South, as Cox shows, is the South’s capitalization on such imagery in the form of tourist attractions and perpetuation by Southerners themselves. See Karen L. Cox, Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in Popular Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
Mather highlights how the group took advantage of country’s sonic possibilities, but did so sparingly in an effort to “avoid a strong characterization of traditional country styles.” In contrast, the soundworld of “Streets of Baltimore” heartily encourages such a characterization to both augment the rusticity of the lyrics and showcase Parsons’s commitment to honky tonk, i.e. traditional country, as opposed to “progressive” country rock.

The song begins with the steel guitar, which is quickly joined by the loping two-step beat of the drums and the acoustic rhythm guitar. Parsons’s voice enters soon after and James Burton’s electric guitar replaces—but imitates—the pedal steel with string bends, slides, and hybrid picking. By the time he recorded with Parsons in 1972, Burton was a seasoned veteran of rock and roll and country, having played and recorded with artists such as Ricky Nelson, The Everly Brothers, Merle Haggard, and of course, Elvis Presley. In addition to his impressive resume, Burton had also become known for a distinctive style of playing that employs a combination of string bends and a percussive hybrid picking technique known as “chicken pickin’.” When chicken pickin’, a regular pick is used between the thumb and forefinger in combination with the fingernails of the middle and ring fingers, allowing a player to pluck multiple strings simultaneously or in quick alternation. What is distinctive about Burton’s chicken pickin’ is that while bending or sliding to notes on one string, Burton plays notes on other strings and then immediately dampens them to produce a sort of sharp, muted staccato

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37 Hybrid picking is a technique that involves holding the pick as you normally would between your thumb and index finger, but also using your middle and ring fingers to attack the strings. The difference in sound between a picked attack and one done by the fingers can make for significant timbral variation when combined within a single figure. For a clear example of hybrid picking, see James Burton’s solo in Ricky Nelson’s “Hello, Mary Lou” (1961).
Variations on this technique allow for pedal-steel style licks where ascending or descending movement on one string can be accompanied by notes on other strings. A very clear example of this technique happens in “Streets of Baltimore” around the 1:20 mark. At this point, Burton bends the B-string on G up to A and then back down to G while alternating picking the top E-string on C. Burton is often attributed as one of the founders of this hybrid picking style, which by 1972 had become a distinctly country instrumental style.

Example 6: Electric guitar solo in “Streets of Baltimore” (1:16)

The steel guitar playing of Al Perkins also signifies traditional country in both sound and style. Contrasting the relatively dry timbre of the electric guitar, the steel guitar resonates with a rich warmth that, in conjunction with the song’s lyrics, could potentially be heard as emblematic of the protagonist’s longed-for rural Southern home. Indeed, if the electric guitar’s mimicry of

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38 Important also to chicken pickin’ is that upstrokes are used by the middle or ring fingers to attack strings. This allows for a kind of tight percussive snapping sound that contrasts with notes being held on other strings. Another famous example of chicken pickin’ is Roy Nichols’s opening licks in Merle Haggard’s “Bottle Let Me Down” (1966).

39 Traditional country guitar players during the 1960s and on often sought to imitate pedal steel licks through such techniques. In contrast to guitar players such as Chet Atkins or others of the Nashville Sound Machine, players such as James Burton, Don Rich (Buck Owens), and Roy Nichols (Merle Haggard) used such techniques and greatly influenced prominent country rock guitarists such as Clarence White, Jim Messina of Poco, and David Nelson of New Riders and the Purple Sage.
the steel guitar is understood as an imitation or substitute, then the steel guitar’s presence becomes all the more important, for it signifies as the sonic wellspring from which the rest of the soundworld is drawn. Unlike Sneaky Pete Kleinow of the Flying Burrito Brothers, Perkins approaches the instrument more traditionally. Indeed, throughout “Streets of Baltimore,” Perkins employs alternations of seamless double-stop slides and single note embellishments in the style of Nashville-based pedal steel guitarists such as Lloyd Green and Pete Drake whose playing had been an integral part of recordings by artists like Faron Young, George Jones, and Tammy Wynette.40 The song’s opening serves as a clear example of this style, immediately orienting the listener to the song’s country associations and contrast with the Burritos’s sound.41

If the pedal steel and electric guitar suggest Southernness through their country sound and style, Parsons’s vocal delivery does so more clearly by virtue of his exaggerated Southern accent. Even though he lacked a “heavy” South Georgia accent, at a number of moments throughout “Streets of Baltimore” Parsons reveals a pronounced Southern drawl. His delivery of the words “Tennessee” (su-eeh), “night” (naht), “what” (whot), “walks” (wholks), in particular, reveal this mannered singing. In her discussion of Parsons’s voice, Mather convincingly argues that Parsons’s vocal performances of country songs manifest learned stylistic nuances as opposed to innate natural ones based in deep habit such as language accents.42 In this light then, it is plausible that his accent in “Streets” was intended not only to emphasize the Southern roots of

40 Significantly, both Green and Drake, who had by the late 1960s become known for their traditional playing style, were featured on the Byrds’s Sweetheart of the Rodeo (1968) and Bob Dylan’s John Wesley Harding (1969).

41 In his interview with Chuck Casell, Parsons reflected on what Perkins could have added to the Burrito Brothers. Referring to the group’s third album (without him), he said, “I wish Al Perkins would have been on that album. I think he would have added that steel guitar spirit to it that the Burritos always needed.” See Griffin, Gram Parsons, 129.

42 Mather, “Regressive Country,” 169. While, in comparing Parsons’s vocal mannerisms in “Streets of Baltimore” to his earlier vocal performances of folk tunes from his Shilos days, Mather’s argument is convincing, it could be just as easily reversed so that Parsons’s style of folk singing is interpreted as a Southerner’s reading of urban folk.
the speaker, but also to self-consciously create a connection between the song’s thematic material and Parsons’s own Southern background. Thus, regardless of him having or not having a speaking accent based in “deep habit,” his adopted Southern accent on “Streets of Baltimore” lends credibility to the song’s sentiments and the protagonist’s experiences.

Another explanation of Parsons’s accent is that he was attempting to signify on Bobby Bare’s original recording of “Streets of Baltimore” from 1966. Bare, who possessed what Bill Malone calls an “unalloyed rural voice,” delivered the song’s narrative in a straightforward manner that did not betray any regional vocalizations despite the song’s Southern focus. Bare’s recording bore all the hallmarks of the Nashville Sound—a lush string arrangement, backing choruses, and a smooth, crooning vocal style—and thus, like Bare’s unaccented vocal delivery, tempered the song’s rural Southernness with a more pop-oriented urban soundworld. As we recall from Chapter Two, the Nashville Sound was the country industry’s attempt to appeal to an increasingly urban, middle-class audience. Not so coincidentally, this appeal was not unlike that of Parsons’s country rock peers, who, nearly a decade later, attempted to expand country rock’s reach through similar strategies. As such, we might understand the purpose of Parsons’s accent as twofold: first, to revise the characterization of the song’s speaker to more accurately reflect his Southern roots, and second, to critique and “correct” the de-emphasis of traditional country elements within the song as a whole.

Although the dialogue between Parsons’s “Streets of Baltimore” and Bare’s version is important, the place of Parsons’s version within the mainstream country rock field in 1973


44 Eddy Arnold, Nashville-Sound innovator and country star told an interviewer in 1972, “I stayed pretty much with the same kind of song. What I did was just change my background a little bit—from the down-home kind of fiddle and steel guitar to the violin. And we orchestrated them, so that we could appeal to Middle America rather than just appealing to the minority.” See “Eddy Arnold,” Country Music World, September 1972, 28-31.
underscores Parsons’s distance from its center. As the discussion above highlighted, in terms of song choice, lyrics, instrumentation, and stylistic execution, Parsons’s performance and production of “Streets of Baltimore” asserted his allegiance to representations to “Down-home” Southernness and traditional country, employing both as mutually-reinforcing “regressive” strategies with which to position himself amidst his contemporaries.

“She,” the album’s other explicitly Southern-themed track, follows “Streets of Baltimore.” Composed by Parsons and former bandmate and fellow Southerner Chris Ethridge, “She” also depicts “Down-home” Southernness, but offers an acknowledgement of the complex social forces at work within the region itself. Indeed, implicit in the song’s narrative, which depicts the experiences of young girl working in the “land of the cotton,” is a collision between race, region, religion, and finally, the redemptive power of music. As another facet of Parsons’s Southern representations, the song’s depiction of the region calls attention to its difficult history rather than simply reconstructing it as an idyllic pastoral refuge. The first verse alludes to this history through its rural imagery and oblique references to slavery:

She, she came from the land of the cotton,
A land that was nearly forgotten by everyone.
And she, she worked and she slaved so hard,
A big old field was her backyard in the delta sun.
Ooh, but she sure could sing.
Ooh, she sure could sing.

The third-person narrator’s reference to the “land of the cotton” as one that was “nearly forgotten” suggests an attempt to restore some of the history of the region, and perhaps, on a more critical level, to acknowledge the South’s disappearance within mainstream country rock. In light of the latter interpretation, the narrative voice fuses with that of Parsons’s own and thus adds a personal dimension to the song that resonates with the “regressive” strategy initiated by “Streets of Baltimore.” Also telling is that the rhyme Parsons uses—“cotton” and “forgotten”—
was also used in two other songs with very strong Southern associations: “Dixie” and “Ol’ Man River.” We’ll recall that “Dixie,” in particular, constructs the “land of cotton” as one where “old times are not forgotten.” Thus, signifying on the de facto anthem of the Confederacy, Parsons memorializes not only the contentious history of the South, but also musical portrayals of the region.

The second verse introduces a male character, potentially a landowner or simply a man who takes pity on the girl and is ostensibly capable of “helping” her escape her position:

Then he looked down and he took a little pity,
The whole town swore he decided he’d help her some.
But he didn’t mind if she wasn’t very pretty,
For deep inside his heart he knew she was the only one.
Ooh, but she sure could sing.
Yeah, she sure could sing.

Despite what seem like positive intentions, the ambiguity of the male character’s role does little elevate the status of the girl. Instead, it is again that her musical gifts that transcend whatever the male character’s pity will bring.

The song’s bridge builds on the taglines of the previous verses, reinforcing the musicality of the girl through a depiction of a revival atmosphere or church setting where she leads the singing:

She had faith, she had believin’,
She led all the people together in singing,
And she prays every night to the Lord up above
Singing, “hallelujah, hallelujah!”

The infusion of religiosity authenticates the song’s narrative and traditional Southern locale.

While tracing the subject of religion in the South is beyond the scope of this study, suffice it say that since the early settlement of the region, religion has been a tangible part of the South’s cultural landscape. Certainly, a multitude of religious forms have existed and continue to exist
throughout the Southern Bible Belt, but as historian Charles Reagan Wilson writes, “religious organizations remain central institutions of southern life” as a whole.\textsuperscript{45} Speaking more directly to the mid-nineteenth century, the time period implicit in “She,” Wilson concludes that “religious forms adapted to a stratifying social reality but also enabled Southerners to give voice to yearnings that transcended hierarchies.”\textsuperscript{46} If we consider the female character’s lowly position, her singing and leadership within the church mediate the gender (and implied, racial) inequality inherent in her life beyond religion. While this religiosity does little to address the issue of institutionalized servitude underlying the narrative and by extension, the nineteenth-century Southern experience for some, it paints a more morally ambiguous vision of the region that juxtaposes oppression with spiritual freedom.

The third verse seems to allude to a previous relationship between the girl and an unnamed character. It could be “he,” but in light of his position of power and her having to “go away,” it seems more likely that the unnamed character is someone in a similar position as the girl, and one she must part with:

They used to walk singing songs by the river
Even when she knew for sure she had to go away.
She never knew what her life was to give her
And she never had to worry about it for one single day.
Oh my, but she sure could sing.
Ooh, she sure could sing.

The song ends with a return of the bridge and a repeat of the first verse, reinforcing the female character’s religiosity, musical gifts, and the Southern setting. Ultimately, from the narrator’s perspective, it seems that singing is the girl’s saving grace for it is her musical talent that allows her a singular voice amidst the din of the region.


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
With music as the empowering force in “She’s” narrative, it stands to reason that the song’s musical elements would try to bolster such a message. The song’s harmonic language and instrumental and vocal style reveal that in moving beyond traditional country musical features, Parsons and co-writer Chris Ethridge create a musical palette that, like the song’s narrative itself, adds nuance to country rock’s then-current musical formula.

Harmonically, “She” owes much more to rhythm and blues and soul than the traditional three-chord country progressions of songs like “Streets of Baltimore.” Recall that Chris Ethridge, had, like Parsons, also grown up in the South, and in his younger years, played in a variety of R&B and blues bands before moving to Los Angeles. Reflecting the influence of these genres, Ethridge’s compositions often feature progressions that employ an abundance of seventh chords and secondary dominants. Like Ethridge’s other co-written tune, “Hot Burrito #1,” the progression used in “She’s” verses provides a fairly active harmonic background for Parsons’s relatively static and small-ranging melodic line.47 Unorthodox even for country rock, the verse cycles from I to vii to III7 to vi, which then provides the harmonic anchor for a descending chromatic bass line that leads to IVmaj7 before finally returning to I. The tag in the verses—“she sure could sing”—is supported by two instances of bVIII – IV – I, a modified plagal cadence employed earlier in “Christine’s Tune.”

G   f#m     B7
She, she came from the land of the cotton,

Em            Cmaj7   G
A land that was nearly forgotten by everyone.

G   f#m     B7
And she, she worked and she slaved so hard,

Em            Cmaj7   G
A big old field was her backyard in the delta sun.

47 See Mather’s analysis of “Hot Burrito #1” in “Regressive Country,” 165-166.
Ooh, but she sure could sing.

Ooh, she sure could sing.

The bridge’s harmonic underpinning is a bit less active, with movement between V and I being expanded only by an extended plagal cadence. In conjunction with the “bomp, bomp, bomp” bass line and loping two-step beat that accompanies it, the V-I movement gives the bridge a country gospel feel that highlights the church revival imagery in the lyrics.

She had faith, she had believin’,

She led all the people together in singing,

And she prays every night to the Lord up above

Singing, “ha—lle—lu—jah, hallelujah!”

Like the Flying Burrito Brothers’s inclusion of “Dark End of the Street” and “Do Right Woman,” the R&B and soul-derived elements in “She” not only reflect Parsons’s continuing adherence to a “cosmic” vision of musical pluralism, but also expand GP’s stylistic range. Further, in the context of the song’s Southern backdrop, these elements also reinforce the racial undercurrent that runs through the song’s narrative. As such, although much different than “Streets of Baltimore” in terms of soundworld and style, in terms of establishing a connection between music and region, “She” performs a similar function.

48 Recall from the previous chapter Bernie Leadon’s description of Ethridge’s style as one that eschewed the “bomp, bomp, bomp” often found in traditional country bass playing. Thus, the use of the straightforward tonic-to-dominant bassline, or “bomp, bomp, bomp” line found in the bridge indicates its deliberate function as a reflection of the lyrics.
Capturing the expanse of the “land of cotton,” “She’s” texture is relatively sparse and more atmospheric than “Streets of Baltimore.” Amidst the piano’s steady eighth-note pulses, Burton’s electric guitar in particular plays very little, only embellishing with double-stop figures at beginnings and ends of verses.49 Further back in the mix, Byron Berline’s fiddle plays in higher registers, unobtrusive to the middle range where Parsons’s vocals reside. Like the fiddle, the steel guitar also sticks to the higher register, playing mostly single-note melody lines. Perkins also uses harmonic overtones on the instrument to create ethereal, bell-like sounds that reflect the religious piety inherent in the lyrics of the song’s bridge.

Somewhat ironically, for voicing the story of a girl who “sure could sing,” Parsons’s vocal performance of the song is relatively weak. Indeed, his descending melismas on words at beginnings and ends of phrases are often rushed and uneven and his intonation suffers at points where the melodic line jumps up. Mather notes that while Parsons’s “failure” at executing these types of embellishments, which ordinarily function as signs of virtuosic country singing, rendered Parsons “a country outsider,” it was these kinds of vocal imperfections that gave Parsons his own kind of authenticity.50 In other words, what could be perceived as musical inadequacy may translate as an unabashed willingness to reveal a more authentic self. Indeed, it was often these “mistakes” that critics heard as manifestations of a “worldliness” and “quieter kind of strength” in Parsons’s voice.51 In light of the song’s narrative then, Parsons’s ability to create power amidst weakness paradoxically augments both the frailty and power of the song’s

49 In contrast to the chicken pickin’ on “Streets of Baltimore,” Burton here plays much more like Steve Cropper, the famous soul guitar player who accompanied Booker T and the MG’s and Otis Redding and others at Stax Records in Memphis and whose minimalist style would provide a stylistic hallmark for Southern soul.

50 Mather, “Regressive Country, 164, 168.

female character.\textsuperscript{52}

Ultimately, “She” captures a portrait of a time and place that was, indeed, largely “forgotten” by many of Parsons’s country rock peers at the time of \textit{GP}’s release. Though in the end, the redemptive power of music emerges as the song’s prominent theme, the mingling of race, region, and religion that undergirds the tune goes further than simply imagining the “Down-home” South. Instead, the song offers a more nuanced depiction of the complex social forces at play within the region’s history and place in the national imagination. As such, the South is not simply subsumed into Sunbelt regionalism, but offered as a distinctive space still deserving of acknowledgement and consideration.

\textit{GP} was released in January of 1973 with “She” as the album’s single. Neither the album nor the single made much impact on the charts despite positive reviews like Bud Scoppa’s in \textit{Rolling Stone}. Scoppa, like Stanley Booth in his review of \textit{Gilded Palace}, lauded the album in light of an exaggerated understanding of Parsons’s biography, goals, and importantly, his conflicted Southernness:

Parsons is a south-Georgia boy with a Harvard education, a big inheritance, and a tendency to melancholy. His central theme has always been that of the innocent Southern boy tossed between the staunch traditions and strict moral code he was born to and the complex, ambiguous modern world. He realizes that both are corrupt, but he survives by keeping a hold on each while believing neither.\textsuperscript{53}

While Scoppa’s characterization does little to qualify Parsons’s background, the sense of moral uncertainty that he found in the album captures the broad dialogue between the kinds of Southernness portrayed in “Streets of Baltimore” and “She.” While “Streets” depicts the plight

\textsuperscript{52} Given that duet partner, Emmylou Harris, is featured often throughout \textit{GP}, it is odd that her voice is absent in “She.” To correct some of the uncertainty in Parsons’s vocal or to add a female voice to speak for the song’s female subject, it would seem a logical decision to use her harmony singing to bolster the track overall. Harris did go on to record her own version of “She” for her \textit{Luxury Liner} album in 1977.

\textsuperscript{53} Scoppa, “Review: \textit{GP}.”
of the “innocent Southern boy” struggling in the city and longing for an idealized Southern home, “She” represents the complexity of the Southern experience itself. Despite Scoppa’s praise however, it seems that Parsons’s “regressive” appeals to Southernness, country traditionalism, and adherence to a “cosmic” stylistic language on GP, did not translate to commercial success in light of country rock’s shifting musical aesthetics and regional associations. Let us now turn to a brief discussion of these shifts as a frame for how Southernness would infuse Parsons’s “regressive” strategies with a more overtly critical edge on his follow-up album, Grievous Angel.


Despite the “Vicious South” discourse that dominated national (and some countercultural) representations of the region throughout the late 1960s, by 1972 the South’s reputation as a bastion of cultural backwardness had begun to fade through increases in industrialization, urbanization, and education. Bolstered by population growth and an influx of Northern corporations looking to explore new markets, this economic upturn helped shift the nation’s attention away from the South toward other regions and cities experiencing similar kinds of social and political turmoil (race riots elsewhere, etc.). Thus, anxieties previously thought to be exclusively Southern were recast as national ones, and the South’s image was reconceived in a more positive light.55

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55 Certainly, negative perceptions of the region persisted as evidenced by films such as *Deliverance* (1972) and
Meanwhile, the country rock movement reflected reconceptualizations of the South that had begun taking place throughout the nation. As Mather argues, through the lens of shifting regional discourses, artists such as the Eagles and Linda Ronstadt consolidated musical and social values important to both country rock and pop audiences, and recast Southern associations through Sunbelt imagery that held more national appeal. The Sunbelt, a term first used in 1969 to describe the southern tier of the United States, comprises not only historically Southern states, but also extends West to include Southwestern states such as New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Although physically tied to the South, by virtue of its inclusion of these Western states, the Sunbelt tapped into a sunny idealism unburdened by the historical baggage of slavery and racial oppression. As Carl Abbott writes,

The West or Southwest did not really need the Sunbelt, since it has already had a positive regional reputation. California surfers and Texas “super-Americans” merge easily and directly into the idea of a Sunbelt. The South, however, is fundamentally redefined when it is viewed in terms of the Sunbelt. Having been historically defined in negative terms, the South has found a sort of rescue from its past riding on the coattails of the Sunbelt.

Ultimately, for some of the most successful country-rock musicians, the idea of the Sunbelt allowed Southern themes such as rural life and laidback friendliness to be recast through the no-less idealized romanticism of the West.

songs such as Neil Young’s “Alabama” (1972), the follow-up to his vicious “Southern Man.” Tara McPherson terms the contrasting positive and negative perceptions of the South “a cultural schizophrenia,” that is, the tendency for non-Southerners to define the region as the keeper of idealized national values or, alternately, as an archive of un-American qualities. See Tara McPherson, Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

56 Mather, “Taking It Easy,” 27.

57 Since World War Two, increasing movement north by Mexican immigrant populations, attraction to warmer climates, and increasing agricultural industry, allowed geographers and social scientists to recast boundaries between what was understood as the “traditional” South and the West. See Carl Abbott, “New West, New South, New Region: The Discovery of the Sunbelt,” In Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region, ed. Raymond A. Mohl (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 8–9.

Several of the best-known songs from the Eagles’s self-titled album in 1972 and their follow-up, Desperado, explored themes of individualism and stoic masculinity through Sunbelt imagery. Indeed, Winslow, Arizona is the setting for the iconic “Take It Easy” and the cowboy in “Desperado” is ostensibly out “riding fences” in a Western Sunbelt state. Along with the Eagles, other early 1970s country rock artists such as Pure Prairie League, John Denver, Poco, John Fogerty, and Linda Ronstadt distilled imagery and sound elements that were previously held as distinctively Southern into constructions that reflected a less regionally-bound sense of musical identity. In other words, country rock’s “country” expanded to encompass a much wider musical, geographic, and cultural range. As an indication of the appeal that this expansion held at the time, one can look to the success of songs such as Neil Young’s “Heart of Gold,” Rick Nelson’s “Garden Party,” and the Eagles’ “Take It Easy” and “Witchy Woman,” all songs that reached Billboard’s Top 100 in 1972.

For Parsons, the Eagles and their ilk represented a kind of “bubblegum” pop commercialism. In an interview with Crawdaddy magazine in 1973, Parsons remarked, “The Eagles and some others I would call bubblegum. It’s got too much sugar in it. Life is tougher than they make it out to be.” In a similar vein, in a letter to a friend a year earlier in 1972, Parsons wrote that his music was “still country” but that he perceived no boundaries between musical genres: “I keep my love for variations, even tho I’ve some sort of ‘rep’ for starting what (I think) has turned out t’be pretty much of a ‘country rock’ (ugh!) plastic dry-fuck.”

At the heart of Parsons’s characterization of the Eagles and crude epithet regarding country rock is his continuing belief in the potential of his “cosmic” vision and power of the gritty realism he found

60 Reprinted in Fong-Torres, Hickory Wind, 5.
in country music.

Parsons was not alone in his critique of the direction that country rock had taken. Echoing Parsons, in an article entitled, “Trying to Understand the Eagles,” Robert Christgau charged that the Eagles represented the “ultimate in California dreaming, a fantasy of fulfillment” that missed the “struggle that real fulfillment involves.” Further, Christgau wrote that the Eagles’s music excised “precisely what is deepest and most gripping about country music—its adult working-class pain, its paradoxically rigid ethics” in favor of a false sense of “good feelin’.” Pioneering rock critic Lester Bangs also weighed in on the mid-1970s Eagles, writing that they were “a reproduction of the West without dues, without rawhide… These guys couldn’t lasso a pair of sissy bars.” Even today, the Eagles continue to draw the ire of rock aficionados. Indeed, Parsons biographer David N. Meyer writes that the Eagles’s “country rock—with its self-satisfaction, misogyny, absence of pain, junior high emotions, pop hooks, and facile faux virtuosity—was more than dumb enough to please the broadest American audience. And still is.” At the heart of these criticisms are ideas about the authenticity of country rock and the implications of its rise to mainstream success. It is instructive that the Byrds’s *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* and the Flying Burrito Brothers’s *Gilded Palace of Sin* are regarded as country-rock classics despite their dismal sales while the Eagles’s better-selling early albums are rarely, if ever mentioned in the same breath.

In its early years, country rock sat uneasily within record company strategies of

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62 Ibid.


marketing and distribution and thus received little attention from radio programmers. As Chris Hillman observes, “It was too country to get on FM rock radio, and it wasn’t slick or polished enough to get on country radio.”\textsuperscript{65} Despite the hard work of Parsons, the Flying Burrito Brothers, and other groups such as Dillard and Clark and the Stone Canyon Band, until its breakthrough in 1972 and 1973, country rock hadn’t reached far beyond its countercultural base in Los Angeles and small pockets of fans throughout the country.

Despite this limited reach however, one of the most significant impacts of early country rock was its influence on other musicians within the Los Angeles scene. Indeed, Hillman reflects that although the Flying Burrito Brothers failed to reach a larger national audience, their influence on other musicians “outweighs any monetary gain.”\textsuperscript{66} Members of the Eagles, a “second-generation” country rock group according to John Einarson, were such musicians who learned from the examples set forth by artists like Parsons and the Flying Burrito Brothers. Fellow musician J.D. Souther remarked that the Eagles “watched Gram fall apart onstage and Gene Clark disintegrate at the Troubador bar, and they were going to go ahead and play tight and clean and they were going to get it done.”\textsuperscript{67} Founding Eagle member Glenn Frey emphasized this point, “Everybody had to look good, sing good, play good and write good. We wanted it all. Peer Respect. AM and FM success. Number one singles and albums, great music and a lot of money.”\textsuperscript{68} Although certainly held by Parsons and other “first-generation” country rockers in the late sixties, these goals were submerged beneath musical (and drug) experimentation and


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{67} Quoted in Hoskyns, \textit{Hotel California}, 135.

\textsuperscript{68} Quoted in Cameron Crowe, “Chips Off the Old Buffalo,” \textit{Rolling Stone}, September 25, 1975.
expressions of anti-commercialism in line with countercultural values. Frey’s comments reveal however that, by 1973, mainstream success had become a priority for country rock’s new generation, and a goal achievable through focused work and appeal to a broader audience.

On a musical level, the incorporation of pop-oriented musical elements and a recasting of country rock’s regional associations fueled the success of country rock artists in the early seventies. In particular, well-rehearsed and tightly-controlled harmony singing, less overt use of country instrumental signifiers such as the pedal steel, fiddle, mandolin, and banjo, and the more obvious patina of pop production values were present in many songs that reached the top of the pop charts. Rick Nelson’s “Garden Party,” is illustrative. The song’s laid-back sentiments—“It’s alright now/ I learned my lesson well/ You can’t please everyone/ So you gotta please yourself”—are augmented by lightly strummed and fingerpicked acoustic guitars, background “oohs,” minimal embellishment from a pedal steel that is relatively far back in the mix, and light percussion. It is telling that the song achieved number six on Billboard’s Hot 100 chart in 1972 and remained on Billboard’s Adult Contemporary chart for two weeks.

In her discussion of the Eagles’s “Take it Easy,” Mather finds similar features, highlighting the importance vocal harmony, well-crafted arrangements, and the influence of producer Glyn Johns.69 Eagles founding member and former Burrito Brother, Bernie Leadon recalls Johns’s focus on the band’s singing:

It wasn’t until one or two of us picked up acoustic guitars during a break and we began doing what we had been doing in vocal rehearsals… we sat, singing harmonies with acoustic instruments, and we were singing four-part harmony. He flipped out. “That’s it! You guys are out of your freakin’ minds doing this other shit. That’s it. If you want to work with me I will, but I’m going to make the vocals happen” (original emphasis).70

69 Mather, “Taking It Easy,” 35.

70 Quoted in Einarson, Desperados, 227.
Indeed, in light of this dedication to vocals, many songs on the Eagles’s first album feature skillfully crafted lead and background vocal arrangements in addition to concise instrumental arrangements and a limited showcasing of definitively country instruments and sound elements.

The musical and conceptual shifts that manifest in the work of country rock’s most successful artists in the early 1970s puts Parsons’s “regressive” strategies into relief. As the following discussion of Parsons’s second album, *Grievous Angel*, illustrates, Parsons continued to employ traditional country markers and construct Southernness as the loci of his “cosmic” musical vision, but now more overtly critiqued the “plasticity” he perceived in mainstream country rock. To this end, Parsons adhered to Southernness not only as a means to authenticate his musical credentials, knowledge, and career’s journey, but also to reassert the South as the real “country” of country rock.

“Calling Me Home”: *Grievous Angel*

Following the Fallen Angels’s promotional summer tour mentioned at the outset of this chapter, sessions for *Grievous Angel* began in the late summer of 1973. Like *GP*, the material recorded for *Grievous Angel* was comprised of songs written by country songwriters such as Tom T. Hall (“I Can’t Dance”) and Boudleaux Bryant (“Love Hurts”) as well as a number of previously written and co-written Parsons originals. Personnel for the album again included members of Presley’s Takin’ Care of Business Band and new players including Herb Pederson, Bernie Leadon, Steve Snyder, and Linda Ronstadt, who sang harmony vocals on the album’s last track, “In My Hour of Darkness.” According to Emmylou Harris, Parsons worked with a renewed sense of professionalism and optimism which owed much to the experience gained during their tour. Likewise, bassist Emory Gordy recalled, “there was a lot of energy going on in
the studio for the whole of that album. Gram was bouncing all over the place and Emmy was bouncing around him. They were great, happy sessions.”

As Gordy’s words reflect, Emmylou Harris took on a much more active role in *Grievous Angel*. Although her previous contributions to *GP* were important, her voice was mixed further back in the sonic field as a backing vocal rather than an independent voice in dialogue with Parsons. Such is not the case on *Grievous Angel* however, for throughout the album Harris is mixed as an equal with Parsons. As such, her prominence in songs such as “Return of the Grievous Angel” and “In My Time of Darkness” adds a crucial narrative dimension. As Harris acknowledged above, her contributions to *Grievous Angel* reflect the mature musical partnership that she and Parsons had developed over the course of their touring. Indeed, in existing video of Parsons and the Fallen Angels taken from tour dates the previous summer, one can see that Parsons’s and Harris’s duet singing was facilitated by Harris standing in very close proximity to Parsons and using eye contact as cues for phrase entrances and endings. This performance practice carried over into the recording studio where he and Harris also sung very closely together. As Harris recalls of *Grievous Angel*’s recording session, “We cut it totally live: everybody playing together and Gram and I were singing simultaneously.” In contrast to a number of Harris’s vocal tracks on *GP* where she is not in sync with Parsons, on *Grievous Angel*, she matches Parsons in timing, diction, and emotive display. Indeed, “Return of the Grievous Angel,” “Hearts on Fire,” “Love Hurts,” “Hickory Wind,” and “In My Hour of Darkness,” all songs with slower tempos that Parsons might otherwise have had problems with in terms of

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71 For information regarding personnel and recording sessions for *Grievous Angel* see Meyer, *Twenty Thousand Roads*, 412-414.

72 See “Gram Parsons and the Fallen Angels” DVD, packaged with *Gram Parsons: The Early Years Box Set* (Sierra ASIE 2100, 2010).

73 Ibid., 414.
vocal stability, are bolstered by Harris’s vocal confidence and presence overall.

Of the album’s nine tracks, like GP, two explicitly construct “Down-home” Southernness as a point of nostalgic reflection, comfort, and security: the album’s opening title track, “Return of the Grievous Angel,” and a mock-live reprise of “Hickory Wind,” the song that Parsons had written earlier and performed with the Byrds at the Grand Ole Opry in 1968. Both of these songs offered more overt criticism of mainstream country rock by amplifying the theme of moral uncertainty that Scoppa found earlier in GP, and Parsons’s own personal connections to the region. As such, if the depictions of Southernness in “Streets of Baltimore” and “She” implied a critical dimension to Parsons’s “regressive” formula, “Return of the Grievous Angel” and “Hickory Wind” make it a crucial feature.

“Return of the Grievous Angel” is credited to both Parsons and poet Thomas Stanley Brown, whom Parsons met at a Fallen Angels performance in Boston the previous summer. In contrast to many of Parsons’s most well-known songs such as “Hot Burrito #1” and “Love Hurts” which articulate feelings of heartache, despair, or inescapable pain, “Return of the Grievous Angel” celebrates the hopefulness of heading west, the camaraderie of a traveler’s road, and ultimately, the reassuring promise of returning home:

Verse One - A
Won’t you scratch my itch sweet Annie Rich and welcome me back to town?
Come out on your porch or step into your parlor, and I’ll tell you how it all went down.

Chorus One - B (a)
Out with the truckers and the kickers and the cowboy angels,
And a good saloon in every single town.
(b)
And I remember something you once told me.

74 Thomas Brown is given only brief mention in biographies of Parsons despite his co-write credit on “Return of the Grievous Angel.” Ben Fong-Torres alleges that Brown’s words were meant to chronicle his relationship with his wife, but he did have Parsons in mind when he wrote it, specifically a sad-looking picture of Parsons. See Fong-Torres, Hickory Wind, 194.
And I’ll be damned if it did not come true.
Twenty thousand roads I went down, down, down,
And they all lead me straight back home to you.

Bridge One - C
‘Cause I headed West to grow up with the country,
Across those prairies with those waves of grain.
And I saw my devil, and I saw my deep blue sea,
And I thought about a calico bonnet from Cheyenne to Tennessee.

Verse Two - A
We flew straight across that river bridge, last night half past two.
The switchman waved his lantern goodbye and good day as we went rolling through.

Chorus Two – B’
Billboards and truckstops pass by the Grievous Angel,
And now I know just what I have to do.

Instrumental break over A and B’

Bridge Two - C
And the man on the radio won’t leave me alone.
He wants to take my money for something that I’ve never been shown.
And I saw my devil, and I saw my deep blue sea,
And I thought about a calico bonnet from Cheyenne to Tennessee.

Verse Three - A
The news I could bring I met up with the king, on his head an amphetamine crown.
He talked about unbuckling that old Bible belt and lighting out for some desert town.

Chorus Three - B (a)
Out with the truckers and the kickers and the cowboy angels,
And a good saloon in every single town.
(b)
Oh, but I remembered something you once told me
And I’ll be damned if it did not come true.
Twenty thousand roads I went down, down, down,
And they all lead me straight back home to you.
Twenty thousand roads I went down, down, down,
And they all lead me straight back home to you.

True to Parsons’s unique sense of melancholic pathos is the bit of cynicism that he added to the
song’s bridge—one of just two changes he made to Brown’s lyrics. The lines—“And the man on the radio won’t leave me alone/ He wants to take my money for something that I’ve never been shown”—reference the negative impact of American commerce and thus, articulate a sense of greed-fueled deception underlying the Grievous Angel’s journey. As such, being caught between expanse of the road and the recognition of the greed that helped pave it (“I saw my devil, and I saw my deep blue sea”), the Grievous Angel’s only option is to return home to familiarity. We might contrast this sense of return to the escapist fantasies found in Parsons’s earlier work with the Flying Burrito Brothers. While “Sin City” and “My Uncle” advocated for escape from urban corruption, neither specified where the road out would lead. Ostensibly, it would end in a better “cosmic America,” but one not regionally defined. In contrast, “Return of the Grievous Angel” emphasizes the endpoint, and more clearly marks it as Southern. In this light, it could be argued that Parsons was narrowing his vision of a “cosmic America” while still providing a refuge from modern ills; in other words, transforming his vision to be one more in line with an idealized “Down-home” South rather than an inclusive “cosmic” nation.

Accordingly then, we might tentatively posit that Parsons’s reactionary response to mainstream country rock manifested a modification to his earlier “cosmic” goals consistent with his “regressive” strategies.

Like “Streets of Baltimore” and “She,” “Return of the Grievous Angel” also speaks to an

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75 According to Brown, Parsons changed the word “roughnecks” to “kickers” and added the two bridge lines: “I was giving poetry readings in Cambridge at the time, and I was a fan of Gram’s. I wrote the lyrics in about 20 minutes and gave them to Michael Martin to give to Gram, who was busy fighting with Gretchen. I asked him to tell Gram I’d be at the bar and chatted up Emmy.” Quoted in “‘The Return of the Grievous Angel’: The Story Behind the Song,” When You Awake blog, http://whenyouawake.com/2010/11/12/the-return-of-the-grievous-angel-the-story-behind-the-song/ (Posted: November 12, 2010) (Accessed: January 3rd, 2014).

76 Note also that the “between the devil and deep blue sea” reference echoes the Harold Arlen-Ted Koehler song, “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” (1932). Though Arlen and Koehler’s tune concerns conflicts of the heart, the sense of being stuck between two equally undesirable situations resonates with the Grievous Angel’s dilemma of being torn between the road and home.
earlier time when “calico bonnets,” old-fashioned “parlors,” and switchmen with lanterns were common sights across the American landscape. Unlike “Streets” and “She” however, these archaic images are juxtaposed with elements of twentieth-century modernity such as truckers, radios, and ideas about breaking regional and ideological boundaries, or in the words of the song, “unbuckling that old Bible belt.” Thus, pieces of past and present and of both the old and new America are interwoven to construct a modern-day quest narrative that not only begins and ends in Tennessee, but more broadly, traces a roadmap for Parsons’s Southern project as a whole. In returning to explicitly Southern themes and earlier styles, Parsons can be seen as not unlike the Grievous Angel, a fellow traveler returning south after exploring the “twenty thousand” different (musical) roads that wind through the American experience.

Delaying typical arrival points and employing a rounded structure, Parsons’s large-scale musical layout of the song mirrors the sense of movement and anticipated rest inherent in the narrative. As one can see in the chart below, the verse-chorus bookends provide an overall trajectory of statement-departure-return analogous to the Grievous Angel’s departure and return:

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Featuring contrasting rhythmic profiles and a harmonic progression that delays arrival on the tonic, on a smaller scale, the chorus also captures this sense:

**Chorus 1 – B (a)**

Bb  
Bb7  
Eb

Out with the truckers and the kickers and the cowboy angels,
And a good saloon in every single town.

And I remember something you once told me.

And I’ll be damned if it did not come true.

Twenty thousand roads I went down, down, down,

And they all lead me straight back home to you.

For the first section (a) of the chorus, as the speaker relates his experiences with his fellow road travelers, the band echoes this sense of group camaraderie by playing through downbeats and continuing in the way they had in the previous verse. The movement to the inconclusive IV (Eb) also intensifies the feeling of continuing motion. For the second section (b) however, where the speaker addresses Annie Rich directly, the band holds the downbeats, foregrounding the speaker’s words. Likewise, the IV – V – I progression in this section amplifies the resolve inherent in the speaker’s words. The sense of movement returns in the chorus’s last two lines (“Twenty thousand roads…”) and not surprisingly, so too does the band’s forward momentum. Like the tonicization of IV in (a), the clever bit of word painting Parsons uses on the words “down, down, down” where the bassline descends from I to vi, delays the band being led “straight back home” to Bb. Thus, when the Grievous Angel does finally return home and the chorus finally resolves conclusively, the feeling of rest is all the more powerful.

The song’s instrumental break exhibits traditional country instrumental techniques. Burton, as on “Streets of Baltimore,” utilizes pedal steel-derived string bends, and Berline and Perkins play instrumental duets that recall earlier country recordings such as “Mom and Dad’s
Waltz” (1951) by honky-tonk legend Lefty Frizzell. Perkins recalls, “Gram had a vivid impression of certain people like Elvis, Merle, and others… He tried to follow in their footsteps, right down to guest musicians and getting musicians to play twin parts like were heard on country records of the fifties and sixties that were no longer done.”⁷⁷ In terms of instrumentation and style then, “Return of the Grievous Angel” is not only of a piece with material on *GP*, but signals his continuing allegiance to older sounds and styles. As Perkins’s words reflect, Parsons was again showcasing his “regressive” aesthetic through musical means.

The increased presence of Emmylou Harris’s voice is also a vital part of “Return of the Grievous Angel’s” narrative thrust. Like Hillman and Parsons in the Flying Burrito Brothers, Parsons and Harris duet in close intervals and with parallel contours while avoiding prolonged dissonances or suspensions.⁷⁸ In conjunction with the close-miking of both of their voices, this style of harmony singing captures the kind of male-female vocal blend achieved by other country duet teams such as Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton, George Jones and Tammy Wynette, and Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn, all teams that Parsons sought to emulate with Harris.⁷⁹ Importantly though, as Marcus Eli Desmond Harmon observes, in contrast to country duets of male-female teams such as Jones and Wynette, Parsons and Harris intertwine themselves to form a single subjectivity in “Grievous Angel.”⁸⁰ Thus, eschewing a straightforward representation of

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⁷⁷ Quoted in Walker, *God’s Own Singer*, 163.

⁷⁸ Harris cites the harmony singing of the Louvin Brothers as a particularly powerful introduction to singing not only with Parsons, but also to country music in general. See Griffin, *Gram Parsons*, 155. Harris recalls Parsons giving her a cassette with new music for her to listen to: “On the cassette was Charlie and Ira Louvin. He knew I would listen to it and he knew I would be knocked out by Charlie and Ira Louvin but I had never heard of them before. Once I had heard of them I became a great fan and I had to have everything they recorded” (Ibid.).


Parsons as the voice of the moving Grievous Angel and Harris’s voice as that of Annie Rich at home, their paired voices make the Angel and Annie sound more like traveling partners.

Harris has said that by singing with Parsons she learned the importance of words and emotion: “By singing with Gram, I learned that you plow [the overt emotion of a song] under and let the melody and the words carry you. Rather than this emoting thing, emotion will happen on its own. As you experience life and know more, then [emotion is] gonna come out almost unconsciously as you sing.” Indeed, though capable of musically overpowering the subtlety of Brown’s lyrics, in “Grievous Angel” Parsons and Harris restrain instances of heightened emotion, reserving vocal climaxes for the second bridge following the chorus and the repeated last lines at the end of the song.

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81 Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 370.
Example 7: Vocal harmonies at close of “Return of the Grievous Angel” (3:48)

Ultimately, the resolution inherent in the Grievous Angel’s return South after its western sojourn encapsulates Parsons’s own musical journey within and through the country rock landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The sense of optimism and searching that pervades his earliest country rock forays with the International Submarine Band, the Byrds, and the Flying Burrito Brothers on the West coast is not dismissed, but acknowledged as growth: “‘Cause I headed west to grow up with the country.” Yet, after such searching there is a yearning for home that emerges from nostalgic remembering. Grimshaw writes that “Return of the Grievous Angel” contains all of Parsons’s “conflicting impulses and desires, of the conflicts of past and
present, of locatedness and movement, of quest and memory.” As we have seen throughout this chapter however, these conflicts were resolved in part by Parsons’s appeals to Southernness at a time when the desire for success might have necessitated a move away from the region. As such, as much as this Southernness distanced him from the field in which he had earlier thrived, it provided a connection to his experience while authenticating the discourse of Southernness that surrounded he and his work.

Like “Return of the Givewous Angel,” “Medley Live from Northern Quebec: Cash on the Barrelhead/Hickory Wind” expresses a sense of longing for return. The first in the medley, “Cash on the Barrelhead,” is a cover version of the Louvin Brothers’s song (1956), and the second, “Hickory Wind,” is a reprisal of the song that Parsons performed and recorded in 1968 with the Byrds. Although in subject and style the medley is consistent with material on both *GP* and *Grievous Angel*, it stands as a unique track in that it is presented as a mock-live performance. Recorded in the studio along with the rest of the album’s cuts, several features create a live ambiance, including overdubbed crowd noise, applause, and Parsons’s and Harris’s seemingly off-the-cuff shout-outs to the band and enthusiastic responses to their playing. Leading into the instrumental break in “Cash on the Barrelhead,” for example, Parsons exclaims, “James Burton and his hot paisley guitar!”

As the “Medley” fades in, one hears the band’s opening to “Cash On the Barrelhead” amidst audience cheers and Parsons’s shouts of encouragement. Throughout the performance of the song, well-placed applause continues, fading in and out at beginnings and ends of choruses and at the end of the pedal steel and guitar’s instrumental break. It would appear that the


83 While somewhat absurd, the title alone captures this sense, for Northern Quebec is about as far away from the South as Los Angeles is.
“crowd” knows the song. While the applause for “Cash on the Barrelhead” dies down, “Hickory Wind” begins with an introduction from Parsons describing the song as one “from a long time back.” Continuing to play off the “knowledge” of the fake audience, Parsons acts the part of a seasoned star announcing a classic song that, ostensibly, everyone already knows. In reality, Parsons’s introduction is an overstatement given *Sweetheart of the Rodeo’s* dismal sales figures, and that it had only been six years since Parsons had wrote the song with former ISB-member Bob Buchanan. Apparently, having both spent time at their childhood homes prior—Buchanan in Michigan and Parsons in Florida—the two wrote the song on a train ride from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1967 as a way to express their trepidation about returning to the city. As Buchanan recalled, “We had family and locations that were very familiar and now we’re going back to the City of Angels that was killing all the angels. I think deep down we both had this resentment for that Hollywood thing.”

Importantly, this resentment lingered, for it bears heavily on the “regressive” aesthetic Parsons’s uses in his reprisal of the song.

“Hickory Wind’s” lyrics, as we’ll recall from Chapter Two, invoke longing for a Southern past, referring specifically to the “tall pines” of South Carolina. We’ll also recall that the song was debuted at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville by the Byrds in March of 1968 when the group became the first rock band in history to perform at the Ryman Auditorium. While today the Byrds’s Opry performance is recognized as one of its defining moments, at the time, the Opry audience had serious doubts about a rock band performing on country music’s most hallowed stage. Byrds leader Roger McGuinn remembers, “The Grand Ole Opry was cold…


85 Greenville, South Carolina was the base for Parsons’s commercial folk group, the Shilos, and though Buchanan credits himself with writing the second verse, in the context of Parsons’s performance of the song, allusions to wealth and privilege resonate with listener knowledge of Parsons’s own background. See David W. Johnson, “Crediting ‘Hickory Wind’,” *Folklinks.com*, 2002 (Accessed: November 24, 2013).
they didn’t know what we were about. They didn’t know if we were sincere or making fun of
their music” and Chris Hillman recalls audience shouts of “tweet tweet” and “cut your hair!”
Despite the catcalls however, Parsons, the Byrds’s then-newest member, was ecstatic about the
group’s chance to perform at the venue. As per the arrangement brokered by Columbia
executives and Opry management, the group was to perform two songs by Merle Haggard, “Sing
Me Back Home” and “Life in Prison,” during the half-hour show, which was hosted by Tompall
Glaser and the Glaser Brothers. After the performance of their first song however, Parsons
announced to the audience, Opry radio listeners, and surprised members of his band that instead
of “Life in Prison,” the group would be performing “Hickory Wind” in dedication to his
grandmother. Apparently, the band performed the song without incident, but once offstage,
Opry management berated the group, and Glaser accused Parsons of making him look like a
fool. At a country institution that had previously fired two of country’s most iconic artists,
Hank Williams and Johnny Cash, for disrupting Opry schedules, Parsons had committed an
infraction that today adds to his mythologized outsider status, but at the time, reinforced the
divide between rock and country.

Parsons’s attempt to insert himself into the country tradition through breaking established
“rules” adds a transgressive undercurrent to the song that distorts its pastoral Southern imagery.
Accordingly, it is possible to understand Parsons’s return to “Hickory Wind” on Grievous Angel
as a way to not only remind audiences of the song’s genesis and transgressive history, but also to
intensify the extra-musical meaning that this history engendered. Ultimately, in filtering the

86 Doggett, Are You Ready For the Country?; 56.
87 For an account of the Byrds’s performance at the Opry see Walker, God’s Own Singer, 74.; Christopher Hjort, So
Parsons himself discusses the incident in an interview recorded on Gram Parsons, The Complete Reprise Sessions
(Track 29).
song’s history through constructed liveness, Parsons reveals his continuing adherence to country
conditions and Southernness but at the same time critiques the ways that critics and fans deem
such traditionalism authentic. As such, the liveness takes on a multi-faceted complexity that
straddles the line between believability and originality, sincerity and sarcasm, and expressions of
country and rock authenticity.

Parsons’s use of liveness is not without some precedent, for prior to Parsons’s “Medley,”
a number of artists also created mock-live performances. Bob Dylan, for example, created the
feeling of group camaraderie in “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” (1966) by including shouts,
laughs, and banter from people present in the studio. Likewise, the Rolling Stones overdubbed
crowd noise onto “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long” and “Fortune Teller” for their 1966 release,
*Got Live If You Want It!* Another famous example, of course, is the Beatles’s “Sgt. Pepper’s
Lonely Hearts Club Band” (1966), which is also replete with applause and canned laughter. An
important difference obtains between these examples and Parsons’s “Medley” however.
Whereas Dylan’s “liveness” signifies group participation in an effort to erase performer-audience
distinctions and the Beatles self-consciously draw attention to the very construction of these
distinctions, Parsons uses liveness—that is, his fabricated performer-audience interactions—to
question the authentication process as a whole. Although it may be argued that the Beatles’s
putting-on of the Sgt. Pepper mask implies a similar function, Parsons’s singular position
between country and rock, idioms each with their own notions of liveness and authenticity,
makes his mock-live performance wholly unique.

Perceived sincerity and spontaneity are key markers of authenticity in country music, and

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88 Apparently, due to the horrible sound quality on the actual concert recordings, the Stones were forced to overdub
crowd noise onto these studio-recorded tunes if they were to be included on the live album. See Richie Unterberger,
because accessibility to a performer fosters such interaction, live performance is seen as an indispensable activity.\(^89\) In terms of country’s live performance practices, Richard Peterson cites a list of procedures that country performers use to orient their “performance to the audience in a way that looks spontaneous rather than choreographed.”\(^90\) These include greeting the crowd, introducing band members and often their hometowns, self-promotion, and faithful reprisals of earlier hits.\(^91\) Parsons’s adherence to nearly all of these practices conveys his understanding of such conventions, but his tongue-in-cheek performance of them acknowledges that authenticity itself, as Peterson argues, is something that can be fabricated.

In contrast to country, liveness is much more complicated issue in rock. Indeed, Lawrence Grossberg has gone so far as to completely dismiss live performance as little more than “another occasion” for social activities such as dancing, hanging out, drinking, etc.: “I have found little or no evidence that any significance is attached to it; there is little or no commitment to the value or necessity of live performances in defining some sort of unmediated relation to the performer and the music.”\(^92\) Similarly, Theodore Gracyk writes that “the vast majority of the time, the audience for rock music listens to speakers delivering recordings…” Consequently, rock music is not essentially a performing art, however much time rock musicians spend practicing on

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\(^89\) Jensen observes, “Live performance remains the training ground for new country musicians, a main activity of professionals, and the defining aspect of country music” (Jensen, Nashville Sound, 12). Similarly, in an essay on Hank Williams, Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz write, “Williams never pulled back from the live-performance circuit; audiences were built and maintained by visual contact and live radio.” See Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, “‘Everybody’s Lonesome for Somebody’: Age, the Body and Experience in the Music of Hank Williams,” Popular Music 9, No. 3 (Oct., 1990): 261.

\(^90\) Peterson, Fabricating Authenticity, 226. Peterson concludes, “By watching a band’s action on stage, it is possible to tell a country music band from a band of any other genre because of performance conventions” (Ibid., 225).

\(^91\) Ibid., 226-227.

their instruments and playing live” (original emphasis). On the opposite extreme end, Philip Auslander posits that “while recordings and the visual artifacts of rock culture proffer evidence of authenticity, only live performance can certify it for rock ideology.” Certainly, live performance is important to rock audiences although the degree to which is dependent on a variety of factors in tandem with technological, social, and musical developments.

As the “Medley” demonstrates, such already-complicated ideas about live performance are complicated even further when liveness is fabricated. As outlined in this study’s introduction, as a way to navigate the complexity of authenticating expressions such as liveness, Keir Keightley identifies two families of authenticity– Romantic and Modernist:

<table>
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<th>Romantic authenticity tends to be found more in:</th>
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<tr>
<td>tradition and continuity with the past roots</td>
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<td>sense of community</td>
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<td>populism</td>
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<td>belief in a core or essential rock sound</td>
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<tr>
<td>folk, blues, country, rock’n’roll styles</td>
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<td>gradual stylistic change</td>
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<td>sincerity, directness</td>
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<td>“liveness”</td>
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<td>“natural” sounds</td>
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<td>hiding musical technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modernist authenticity tends to be found more in:</td>
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<tr>
<td>experimentation and progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avant-garde</td>
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<tr>
<td>status of artist</td>
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<tr>
<td>elitism</td>
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<tr>
<td>openness regarding rock sounds</td>
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<tr>
<td>classical, art music, soul, pop styles</td>
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<tr>
<td>radical or sudden stylistic change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>irony, sarcasm, obliqueness</td>
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<tr>
<td>“recorded-ness”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“shocking” sounds</td>
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<tr>
<td>celebrating technology</td>
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While useful for rock, Keightley’s distinctions between Romantic and Modernist authenticity markers could also be extended to country rock and in particular to Parsons’s “Medley.” Using

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93 Gracyk, Rhythm and Noise, 75.

94 Phillip Auslander, Performing Glam Rock (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 76. Auslander charges that live performance is a powerful force in determining authenticity because “it is only in live performance that the listener can ascertain that a group that looks authentic in photographs, and sounds authentic on records, really is” (Ibid., 78).

95 Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 135-139.

96 Ibid., 137.
Keightley’s table, it is possible to conclude that Parsons uses Modernist expressions such as irony and “recorded-ness” as a way to construct Romantic expressions of country authenticity. In turn, Parsons’s authentication process becomes double-edged; on one side, the “Medley” is an authentic “live” country track (Romantic) and on the other, an ironic, but no less authentic constructed recording (Modernist). While not overstating this point, it could be argued further that through such a perceptible construction of authenticity, Parsons was satirically critiquing the artifice of country rock’s successful “men on the radio,” that is, artists he perceived as feigning country credentials for mass appeal. In this light, the staged presentation of idealized Southernness in “Hickory Wind” might have served as Parsons’s musical disapproval of country rock’s move to the inauthentic country of the Sunbelt. Paradoxically, by faking it, Parsons was making his “Medley” the real thing.

In Bud Scoppa’s review of *Grievous Angel* in March of 1974, he wrote,

> On the eerie “Medley Live From Northern Quebec,” Parsons gives a make-believe live performance before an imaginary crowd of bottle-breaking country boys who recognize his tunes from the first note. Parsons seems to be saying that this is where he might have wound up if he had followed the traditional path. His treatment of the imaginary scenario might be interpreted as disdainful, but as he and Emmylou convincingly sing “an old song from a long time back” (his own “Hickory Wind”), there’s a suggestion of regret as well.  

Scoppa’s thoughtful reading of the “Medley” serves as one of the few acknowledgements that Parsons’s self-positioning through what I have referred to as “regressive” strategies may have cost him success. Though it is impossible to know if Parsons would have risen to the same heights had he conformed his work to the regional and musical shifts that were defining country rock at the time, the “suggestion of regret” that Scoppa heard in “Hickory Wind” is revealing. It

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seems that for all of Parsons’s bravado and disdainful criticism of the “bubblegum” commercialism that he perceived in country rock, a shadow of doubt had emerged. Given that Scoppa’s review of the album took place in the wake of Parsons’s death just six months earlier, it is not surprising that his interpretation of the track reads as a retrospective. Yet, such retrospection reveals what may be the underlying message of Parsons’s “regressive” aims in the late part of his career: that, as novelist Thomas Wolfe so famously wrote, “you can’t go home again”:

You can’t go back home to your family, back home to your childhood… back home to a young man’s dreams of glory and of fame… back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory (ellipses in original).  

In circling back to one of his most personal compositions and presenting it in a way that threw its sincerity into question, Parsons announced his resigned acceptance of the fact that his South may have no longer existed.

Conclusion

As “Hickory Wind’s” co-writer Bob Buchanan observed, the sentiments of “Hickory Wind” reflected his and Parsons’s trepidation about returning to Los Angeles. For Parsons, the falseness of “that Hollywood thing” and implicitly, the success of those country rock artists within it served as a basis for his “regressive” strategies in the last years of his life. In considering himself one of the few remaining “angels” in Los Angeles, Parsons continued to adhere to expressions of “Down-home” Southernness in an effort to appeal to both the lingering “cosmic” ideals of countercultural and traditional country audiences rather than filtering Southern lyrical and sonic imagery through other regional lenses for national pop success. In the

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98 Thomas Wolfe, You Can’t Go Home Again (New York, 1940), 706.
end, it seems that his unwillingness to metaphorically become the “man on the radio” reinforced his self-positioning as country rock’s most authentic, but willingly “regressive” grievous angel.

While Parsons’s continuing engagement with Southern themes may have been at odds with mainstream country rock trends, we would be remiss to attribute his relative lack of success exclusively to it. At the same time that the Eagles were climbing the charts, an outgrowth of the country rock movement had emerged in Georgia and Florida that asserted Southern pride as one of its main objectives. Relatively little scholarship has addressed what has been loosely termed *Southern Rock*, but as scholar Mike Butler explains, groups such as the Allman Brothers Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Marshall Tucker Band, “expressed lyrical views and opinions during an era when young Southern white males found themselves at a chaotic period in the search of personal and regional identities, examining their traditional patterns of beliefs and behaviors within a rapidly changing South.”

In contrast to Parsons’s constructions of Southernness, which, as I have argued, were used as “regressive” strategies of self-positioning, Southern Rock’s constructions of the region were used more actively as a means by which white males could identify both as traditional Southerners and as racially progressive. Often paying homage to and drawing on black blues musicians as direct influences rather than on country musicians, Southern Rock bands rebelled against traditional racial ideologies of the white South while simultaneously employing cultural symbols such as the Confederate flag. Butler argues that these ideas, though contradictory,

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100 Parsons actually used Confederate flags as a stage props during his Fallen Angels tour. One angry concertgoer interpreted them as “symbols of Southern repression and racism.” Sid Griffin, on the other hand, understood the flags as a representation of Parsons’s “cosmic” vision: “Gram Parsons’ music, and that of the Byrds, is a universe
indicate Southern white males beginning to separate their regional and racial identities for the first time in Southern history.\(^1\) Although Parsons did implicitly address racial concerns in “She,” a song such as Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Ballad of Curtis Loew” (1974), which centers around the character of an old black bluesman, explicitly engaged race, music, and Southern generational differences as its main foci. That the song would appear on an album that in five months from the time of its release sell over 500,000 copies (*Second Helping*) also speaks to the appeal that such a distinctly and overtly Southern topic and genre held in the early 1970s.

Ultimately, amidst social and regional shifts that were occurring in the wake of the tumultuous late 1960s, Parsons’s employment of Southernness in the last years of his life situated him uneasily amidst his more successful peers. As West Coast-based country rock artists began to eschew Southern themes in favor of Sunbelt imagery and Southern rockers used Southernness as a means to recast white masculinity, Parsons continued to draw on traditional constructions of the region as a means to position himself uniquely within the multifaceted country-rock landscape. Ironically, since his death in 1973, such “regressive” self-positioning in conjunction with the romanticized Southern discourse that surrounded him during his lifetime would prove foundational for the creation and maintenance of his posthumous celebrity and mythic status as the “father of country rock.”

\(^{101}\) Butler, “Luther King Was a Good Ole Boy,” 15.
On September 19th, 1973, Gram Parsons died in a cinder-block motel room in the Joshua Tree National Park from a lethal mixture of morphine and tequila. The park, which was named by Californian travelers who thought the trees resembled Joshua reaching towards heaven, had been a retreat for Parsons since his arrival in California in 1967. On what would be his final trip, Parsons and a few others including an old high school girlfriend, Margaret Fisher, set out for the desert to unwind after the Fallen Angels’s summer tour and sessions for *Grievous Angel* had wrapped up. On September 18th, the group spent the day in town dining and drinking, but Parsons wanted to keep the party going through the night at the motel. Through a fellow Joshua Tree Inn tenant a drug connection was made and before long, both Parsons and Fisher had injected morphine into their arms. Parsons quickly took a turn for the worse and became unconscious. Fisher, recognizing the signs of a drug overdose, enlisted her friend, Dale McElroy, to help her insert ice cubes into Parsons’s rectum, a remedy thought to make an overdose victim come to. Though he did gain consciousness briefly, Parsons faded quickly again. McElroy, having been around illegal drug use before, was hesitant to involve authorities or call for help and by the time Fisher had returned (she had gone to get food and coffee for Parsons), Parsons was again unconscious. Finally, after a number of unsuccessful attempts at CPR, Fisher and McElroy called for an ambulance. Parsons was taken to High Desert Memorial Hospital in Yucca Valley where he was pronounced dead on arrival at 12:15 A. M. on Wednesday, September 19th.
While in historical narratives of popular music, an artist death caused by an alcohol or drug overdose such as Parsons’s may seem cruelly commonplace, what happened after Parsons’s death pronouncement was anything but ordinary. Bob Parsons, upon being notified of his stepson’s death, made arrangements to fly the body to New Orleans where Parsons would be buried.¹ Philip Kaufman, Parsons’s road manager, had other plans. Apparently, Parsons had made a pact with Kaufman at guitarist Clarence White’s funeral that if he should die, he wished to have his ashes scattered in the Joshua Tree Desert. Kaufman, learning of Bob Parsons’s desire to fly Parsons’s body to New Orleans, hatched a plan to steal the corpse from the airport and fulfill Parsons’s wishes. After borrowing a hearse from a friend and enlisting Fallen Angel tour helper Michael Martin as his partner, Kaufman somehow managed to convince airport staff to turn Parsons’s body over to them. Stopping only for beer and a can of gasoline, Kaufman and Martin drove toward Joshua Tree, arriving early in the morning to immolate the body. As it turned out, they picked a spot near Cap Rock, a place that only years earlier, Parsons, Kaufman, Keith Richards, and his then-wife, Anita Pallenberg, had stood looking for UFOs in the Californian sky. It was there that Kaufman, in his beer-soaked grief, poured gasoline over Parsons’s body and set him ablaze, fulfilling the promise he had made and fueling the fire of what would become a mainspring of Parsons’s mythic status in years to come.² Parsons’s body was officially discovered around 10:30 A.M. on Friday, September 21st when campers reported a “burning log” near Cap Rock. Bob Parsons quickly flew to Los Angeles to recover what remains

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¹ Bob Parsons believed that if Parsons’s body was buried in New Orleans, his place of residence, Parsons’s estate would be transferred to him. Bob Parsons had overlooked the fact that Parsons was still married to Gretchen Burrell (despite being separated) and upon Parsons’s death, the estate would be legally hers.

² See Philip Kaufman’s autobiography, *Road Manager Deluxe* (Glendale: White-Boucke Publishing, 2005) for his account of the events leading up to and after Parsons’s death.
were left of Parsons and he was finally interred at Memorial Lawn Cemetery in New Orleans on September 25th.

Today, the details of Parsons’s demise and Kaufman’s body snatching continue to inspire an enormous amount of interest. Both the Joshua Tree Inn and the site of Parsons’s immolation at Cap Rock have become dark-tourist sites for dedicated Parsons fans, and in 2004 Philip Kaufman made a cameo appearance in Grand Theft Parsons, a film based on Kaufman’s real-life heist starring Johnny Knoxville as Kaufman. Certainly, these kinds of sensationalized responses attend to many artists who have died young and in tragic circumstances, but in the context of Parsons’s biography and unique ability to articulate his harmonious vision of country rock, they have elevated him to an almost divine, otherworldly status. Indeed, in its inaugural issue in 1995, No Depression magazine, alternative country’s foremost publication, cited Parsons’s spectral presence alongside still-living country artists such as Willie Nelson and George Jones: “We claim them as our spiritual ancestors, and Gram Parsons as our holy ghost, minister to the shotgun wedding of country and rock’n’roll, long before the Eagles crashed the reception.” Such a claim illustrates how Parsons’s demise has engendered exaggerations of his musical impact and particular elements of his biography. Mather notes that since his death, perceived contradictions within Parsons’s biography (“Harvard-educated hillbilly”) have been overstated in an effort to grant Parsons an authenticity that resonates across the disparate demographics that he sought to reach during his lifetime. While meaning gleaned from such contradictions does indeed weigh heavily on Parsons’s reception as listeners come to know his work, as much, if not more of the fascination with Parsons is conditioned by emphases on the “gothic” elements of his

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3 “No Depression” advertisement, No Depression, Fall 1995, 11.

4 Mather, “Regressive Country,” 158.
death and, in turn, retrospective readings of his Southern background and work that engage with the subject of mortality.

For many, Gram Parsons’s death seemed inevitable, a fated outcome of “doomed Southern DNA” and desire to live out the tragic lifestyle that he and his songs often spoke of.\(^5\)

Importantly, such assumptions tell us just as much about Parsons and his legacy as they do about posthumous fame and the creation of meaning. In this final chapter, I will explore how Parsons’s death and the more tragic details of his biography have impacted understandings of his musical career and compositions in order to flesh out a different, darker side of Parsons’s now-mythical status. In doing so, I will investigate how Parsons himself engaged with the specter of death during his lifetime, and how that engagement provided a frame for the ways survivors would re/de-construct his biography and music after his life ended. The first part of this chapter will examine two of Parsons’s final recordings as “automortographic last acts,” or what literary scholar Thomas H. Kane describes as final works that “resonate with death” and invite survivors to “re-inhabit, reinvestigate the lost subjectivity of the person now-deceased.”\(^6\) The second part of the chapter will discuss such “re-inhabitation and reinvestigation” of Parsons’s life through examining parallels drawn between Parsons’s background and the Southern Gothic. In imagining Parsons as a Southern Gothic character archetype, critics and fans not only impart onto him a sense of cultural authority and authenticity, but also become active participants in the creation and perpetuation of Parsons’s mythic status today.

**Parsons, Death, and “Last Acts”**


\(^6\) Thomas H. Kane, “Last Acts: Automortography and the Cultural Performance of Death in the United States 1968-2001” (PhD Diss.: University of Virginia—Charlottesville, 2003), 1. Kane defines an automortographic last act as “a gesture by the self as it is receding that gets read or received after the fact of death” (Ibid., 156).
From an early age Parsons was well acquainted with death. By the time he was eighteen he had lost both of his parents, and by the time he reached twenty-six, the last year of his life, he had also endured the deaths of a number of close friends—Brandon De Wilde was killed in a car crash in Denver in the summer of 1972 and Byrd-guitarist Clarence White died when a drunk driver hit him as he loaded equipment into a vehicle after a spur-of-the-moment gig in the summer of 1973. In the accounts of those that were close to Parsons, they recall that his response to death was often a sense of detachment. Childhood friend and bandmate Jim Carlton remembers Parsons’s reaction following his mother’s death: “He answered the phone and to some relative he said, ‘Well, she had been declining for quite a while’… He was probably numb. And, as always, cool. Not in a not-caring sense, but in not willing to break down. He was determined to handle it in stride, and did he ever.”

If Parsons’s public face was coolly detached, it seems that privately he struggled to address the pain of his losses. In a letter to his sister, Little Avis, dated November 8, 1965, he wrote:

> I wish there was one thing I could tell you, some clear advice to whisk away all the things that are bothering you right now—the problem is obviously not entirely a growing pain… The best thing we can do is learn from the past and live our lives the right way, so in time, when we can do something to change things, we will be real people. Not sick and haunted by what life has done to us.

Recalling Chapter One in which I discussed Parsons’s transformation of “Brass Buttons” from poem to song around the time this letter was written, we know that such emotional pain was often explored through music, and as Parsons matured, through musical themes found in country music that resonated with his own experiences. As such, Parsons’s understanding and musical

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7 Quoted in Meyer, *Twenty Thousand Roads*, 143.

construction of mortality developed partly in relation to his knowledge of particular strands of
country. The apocalyptic vision of eternal damnation in “Sin City,” for example, drew heavily
on the God-fearing sentiments found in the sacred work of the Louvin Brothers, and others such
as “Hippie Boy,” demonstrated Parsons’s familiarity with the sentiments of country gospel
repertory more generally. While Parsons continued to utilize such constructions throughout his
late career, in his own, more personal compositions, he also began to display an affinity for the
kinds of personal testimony and hymn style found, for example, in the work of Hank Williams.

As Parsons succumbed to the excesses of his wealth and rock star life in Los Angeles, he
began to acknowledge his own mortality more and more to those around him. In May of 1970
Parsons suffered a serious motorcycle accident while out riding with Mamas and the Papas
founder John Phillips. Parsons, who was driving his custom-painted Harley Davidson, lost
control and crashed. Apparently, as Philips bent down to help him, Parsons said, “John, take me
for a long white ride.”

Evidently, Parsons considered this request quite profound, for in a
Melody Maker interview shortly after the incident told the interviewer, “I must be a poet,
because I told John, ‘Take me on a long white road.’ I mean I said that.”

This proverbial pat-on-the-back not only reveals a romanticization of tragedy and the afterlife, but also Parsons’s
conscious deployment of it. A later example of Parsons’s romantic streak is his rambling
introduction to “Drugstore Truck Drivin’ Man” on the Fallen Angels’s 1973 live album in which
he says, “Here is an old song that I did with the Byrds when I was in fear of gettin’ my life taken
away from me. Sometimes all you can do is sing gospel music.”

Certainly not a traditional gospel song, “Drugstore Truck Drivin’ Man” was a song Parsons co-wrote with Roger McGuinn

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9 Fong-Torres, Hickory Wind, 145.


in 1968 as a response to Nashville radio DJ Ralph Emery’s criticism of the Byrds. Set in slow waltz time, the song pokes fun at Emery by likening him to the “head of the Ku Klux Klan” and charges the DJ with dismissing rock and rollers and much of the music that he claimed to like:

Verse Three:
He’s been like a father to me.
He’s the only DJ you can hear after three.
I’m an all night musician in a rock and roll band,
And why he don’t like me I can’t understand.

Chorus:
He’s a drug store truck drivin’ man,
He’s the head of the Ku Klux Klan.
When summer rolls around
He’ll be lucky if he’s not in town.

As we recall from Chapter Two, the Byrds’s Nashville trip was a way to authenticate their country project, so when Emery dismissed the group based on their rock credentials, Parsons and McGuinn took it quite personally. Though it is a stretch to believe that Parsons actually thought Emery’s criticism would kill him when he and McGuinn wrote the song, it is more likely that Emery’s refusal to grant the Byrds Nashville credibility was perceived as a threat to what Parsons believed to be the core of his own identity: an authentic countryness. To not be accepted by the community with which he identified in 1968 brought him close to a figurative death, albeit one that he seems to have recovered from by 1973 when he resurrected the song with the Fallen Angels.

More pronounced than either of the examples above though were Parsons’s actions at Clarence White’s funeral in July of 1973. Services were held at St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Palmdale, California and over one hundred musicians attended, including many from within the Los Angeles-based country rock fraternity. Apparently, much to the chagrin of those gathered,
no music was performed during the service and White’s name wasn’t even mentioned. At the gravesite however, in the midst of confused silence, Parsons alone began to sing “Farther Along,” a traditional hymn that he had sung with the Burrito Brothers in 1970 on *Burrito Deluxe,* and that White had recorded with the Byrds for their record of the same name in 1971:

Verse Two:
When death has come and taken our loved ones
It leaves our home so lonely and drear.
Then do we wonder why others prosper
Living so wicked year after year.

Chorus:
Farther along we’ll know all about it,
Farther along we’ll understand why.
Cheer up, my brother, come sing in the sunshine
We’ll understand it all by and by.

While the hymn concerns a Christian’s distress over the prosperity of the wicked, a sense of hopefulness is derived from the assumption that if they remain faithful, “farther along,” ostensibly in heaven after death, the righteous will “understand why” this is so. If Parsons’s response to grief or fear of death was to sing gospel music as his introduction to “Drugstore Truck Drivin’ Man” proclaimed, this song illustrated it in a much more literal way.

Clarence White’s funeral also became the site of the now-famous death pact between he and Phil Kaufman. Though there are several versions of how the pact was made, according to Kaufman, as the priest sprinkled the casket with holy water, he and Parsons agreed that if either of them should die, “the survivor would take the other’s body out to Joshua Tree, have a few drinks, and burn it.” Apparently, the goal was to avoid “one of those long, family-and-friends funerals,” or in other words, the kind they had just experienced. According to Roger McGuinn, Parsons “didn’t want to be sent back to the hypocrites in his estate who were trying to rip him off

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for all his money.”¹⁴ Both his pact with Kaufman and admission to McGuinn illustrate Parsons’s agency in “scripting” his death. By refusing traditional funeral and instead highlighting celebration (“have a few drinks” and singing) and a desire to be cremated, Parsons not only told his mourners what to do, but encouraged them to think of him in certain ways after he was gone. Significantly, Parsons’s final recordings also contributed to such scripting, not only revealing Parsons’s consciousness of death, but also providing models of bereavement.

In his discussion of the last works, or what he calls, “last acts,” of dead figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Raymond Carver, Charles Bukowski, and Tupac Shakur, literary scholar Thomas H. Kane posits that in particular cases, the dead speak for themselves in the final things they produce and as such, become “agents in the reception of their own deaths”: “The vibrancy in these last acts comes in the invitation to the survivors to re-inhabit, reinvestigate the lost subjectivity of the person now-deceased. The death that intervenes motivates the acts and their reception, creating a desire both in the dying to express their-self and in the survivor to attend to that expression.”¹⁵ Kane further defines these last acts as “automortographic,” that is, as signifying the attempt to represent or even script one’s death.¹⁶ While the most obvious forms of “automortographies” might be suicide notes or a death row inmate’s “last words,” as Kane shows, speeches, works of fiction, and music recordings can also manifest the now-deceased anticipating their posthumous reception. It is the relationship between the subject of death within “last acts” and the fact of the artist’s death itself that serves as an invitation to “re-imagine


¹⁶ Ibid., 4.
their construction” in light of the artist’s life and self-perception.\textsuperscript{17}

While it is possible to look at Parsons’s pact with Kaufman as a last act in that he explicitly addressed his desire for how the real-life aspects of his death would be handled by survivors, I wish to investigate two of his last recordings as similar kinds of expressions. The creation and execution of these recordings allowed listeners to read back into his biography for frames with which to understand his orientation toward the subject of death and the “scripting” of his posthumous reception. While it is not my wish to argue that Parsons, at the time of these final recordings, was or could be aware of his impending demise or that he consciously constructed them as “last acts,” the near universal response to them as prophecies of his own death warrants discussion of them in such a light.\textsuperscript{18} As Kane argues in his discussion of the “last acts” of four dying authors:

\begin{quote}
Death becomes a central component of the works—for plot, for characters’ psychological ruminations, and for the site of reading or reception. But it is impossible to declare with certitude how conscious these writers were of their impending demise. After the fact, however, the survivors (aided by reviews and other machines of promotion) supply that consciousness and authorial intention becomes fixed in relation to their mortality. This begins with the production of posthumous tributes and subsequent reviews of posthumous publications. But the last works participate in this scripting of intention as they reveal the crucial degree of “situated agency.”\textsuperscript{19} In each piece there is an uncanny relation to death that intrigues, that elicits desire and wonder in the reader, that seems more than merely coincidental.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Meyer calls “In My Time of Darkness” a “prayer-cum-prophecy” (Meyer, \textit{Twenty Thousand Roads}, 444) while Scoppa earlier wrote that the song serves as Parsons’s “epitaph,” (Scoppa, Review: Grievous Angel”). See further examples in the discussion below.

\textsuperscript{19} See Joe Moran, \textit{Star Authors} (Alexandria, VA: Pluto Press, 2001). Kane borrows the notion of “situated agency” from Moran, who argues that within the rubric of literary celebrity, some authors reveal “a degree of agency within a field of historical and cultural context” and thereby become participants in their own celebrity (Moran, \textit{Star Authors}, 10). Kane cites novelist Raymond Carver as an example of an author whose alcoholism and boyhood poverty circulated in his stories, and thus gave his portrayals of such subjects credibility (101).

\textsuperscript{20} Kane, “Last Acts,” 144.
Both “$1,000 Wedding” and “In My Time of Darkness” explore the ambiguous space between life and death in their thematic material, and in the context of Parsons’s death, suggest reading them through an automortographic lens.

**Weddings and Funerals for Grievous Angels**

*Grievous Angel* was released four months after Parsons’s death in January of 1974. In addition to the album’s musical contents, both the title and cover art of the album imply intersections between the human and the divine, melancholic and beautiful, and ultimately, life and death. Represented throughout the Christian Bible as intermediaries between God and human beings, angels are often cast as benevolent messengers and guardians, and in more earthly terms, as people who are kind and virtuous. Thus, in describing an angel as “grievous,” which connotes suffering and sorrow, the title alone feels contradictory and unsettling. What has happened to this angel to make it grievous? Where does this sorrowful angel now reside?

The cover art reinforces such feelings, but more emphatically connects the title to Parsons himself. Absent the flashy Nudie Suit or any props to suggest Parsons’s interaction with the world around him, the cover is comprised only of Parsons’s over-exposed visage fading into a sky-blue background. The viewer is left to ponder Parsons’s floating presence in between blue color bars iconic of endless sky.
Album cover art for *Grievous Angel* (1974)

Though my analysis will concern “$1,000 Wedding” and the album’s closing track, “In My Time of Darkness,” musical material throughout *Grievous Angel* mark it as a personal album. As the previous chapter discussed, both “Return of the Grievous Angel” and the mock-live performance of “Hickory Wind” contain autobiographical traces, and to these, we can also add “Brass Buttons,” a reprisal of the song Parsons wrote in his senior year at Bolles and recorded for Jim Carlton nearly a decade earlier. We will recall that Parsons had adapted the song from a poem that addressed the subjects of alcohol-soaked nostalgia and loss in relation to his mother’s alcoholism. Though it is plausible that the song was chosen as a consequence of not having a lot of other original material, in the context of the album’s larger themes, it imparts a sense of continuity through both the use of archaic imagery, autobiographically-inscribed storyline, and preoccupation with absence.

Like “Brass Buttons,” the album’s fifth track, “$1,000 Wedding” portrays loss, but does so more overtly through the lens of mortality. Beginning with a wedding and ending with a
funeral, the song cryptically explores the line between celebration and mourning and liminal space between life and death. Only the most cursory details are revealed as we learn that on the day of a wedding, a bride has simply “went away.” Invitations have been mailed and guests have arrived, but something has happened that neither the groom nor the listener is privy to. Did this bride die or just leave the groom? The narrator, hating to tell us how the groom acted upon learning of his bride’s absence, omits any specifics, only allowing that the groom then “took some friends out drinking.” Although the groom’s friends tell him “everything there was to tell,” we, as listeners outside the story, are kept in the dark. It might also be argued however that the listener is assumed to already possess the song’s backstory much like the “people passing notes” or friends themselves. Such ambiguity puts the listener in the precarious position of being simultaneously inside and outside the narrative.

The song ends with a sermon given by a “Reverend Dr. William Grace” “all about the sweet child’s holy face and the saints that sung out loud,” and a return to the question asked by the groom at the outset of the song: “where are the flowers?” Significantly, “flowers,” manifestations of celebration and remembrance, are absent at both important events. The omission of such decorative details, like those pertaining to the bride’s own absence, opens a space for speculation and paradoxically, becomes the crux of the song’s emotional power. What is going on? Who has actually died? Who is the sweet child? Where are the flowers?:

It was a $1000 wedding supposed to be held the other day and With all the invitations sent, the young bride went away. When the groom saw people passing notes, “not unusual,” he might say, “But where are the flowers for my baby? I’d even like to see her mean old mama, And why ain’t there a funeral if you’re gonna act that way?”

I hate to tell you how he acted when the news arrived. He took some friends out drinking and it’s lucky they survived. Well, he told them everything there was to tell there along the way,
And he felt so bad when he saw the traces of old lies still on their faces.
So why don’t someone here just spike his drink
Why don’t you do him in some old way?
Supposed to be a funeral,
It’s been a bad, bad day.

The Reverend Dr. William Grace was talking to the crowd
All about the sweet child’s holy face and the saints who sung out loud,
And he swore the fiercest beasts could all be put to sleep the same silly way.

“And where are the flowers for the girl?
She only knew she loved the world
And why ain’t there one lonely horn and one sad note to play?
Supposed to be a funeral
It’s been a bad, bad day.
Supposed to be a funeral
It’s been a bad, bad day.”

Parsons biographer Ben Fong-Torres makes a plausible connection between “$1,000 Wedding” and Parsons’s marriage proposal to Nancy Ross earlier in 1968.²¹ Apparently, as Hank Williams had done years earlier, Parsons had wanted to stage his wedding as a concert and charge admission, but the relationship soured and Ross was left only with a custom wedding dress designed by Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors. It seems that Parsons, not the bride, ditched his own “$1,000 Wedding.” Perhaps then, Parsons portrayal of the heartbreak and confusion of the groom might have been inspired by the witnessing of his own fiancé’s hurt.

Parsons’s last interview with Crawdaddy magazine in the summer of 1973 also grounds the song’s storyline in the emotional details of his life. Reflecting on the death of Brandon De Wilde the previous summer, he said,

Death is a warm cloak, an old friend. I regard death as something that comes up on a roulette wheel every once and awhile. It’s sad to lose a close friend. I’ve

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²¹ Parsons recorded a version of “$1,000 Wedding” in Los Angeles in 1969 with only his vocals and piano. This recording appears on Gram Parsons with The Flying Burrito Brothers: Live at the Avalon Ballroom 1969 (Amoeba Records AM 0002, 2007). According to Chris Hillman, the Flying Burrito Brothers attempted to record the song, but it never came together. Hillman went as far as to say, “I hated “$1000 Wedding”… We all hated that song” (Einarson, Hot Burritos, 215).
lost a lot of people close to me. It makes you a little bit stronger each time. They wouldn’t want me to grieve. They would want me to go out and get drunk and have one on them.\textsuperscript{22}

While this reflection neither confirms nor denies the bride’s death in “$1,000 Wedding,” it suggests a link between the song and Parsons’s own response to grief. Indeed, just as Parsons said he would do and instructed Phil Kaufman to do before burning his body, “$1,000 Wedding’s” groom went out and got drunk. In his work on post-traumatic stress, Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk discusses how trauma victims often regulate their emotions by seeking highly stimulating addictive behaviors to reenact the intense emotional arousal of their early trauma, followed by compulsive numbing behaviors.\textsuperscript{23} With an acknowledgement that a psychoanalytic appraisal of Parsons’s grief responses can only be conjectural, his struggle with addiction and preoccupation with death in both his words and music suggest how the psychological trauma of loss affected him.\textsuperscript{24} Although it seems that he didn’t recognize it, going out and getting drunk was part and parcel of Parsons’s own bereavement. No longer able or willing to handle facing loss “coolly” as he had when his mother died, Parsons turned to substances as a way to cope with the pain of traumatic loss.

David Meyer opines that “$1,000 Wedding” suggests the sort of work Parsons might have produced had he lived: “Gram was taking a specific country storytelling tradition to the

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Crawdaddy}, July 1973 reprinted in Fong-Torres, \textit{Hickory Wind}, 190.


\textsuperscript{24} Robert Jay Lifton observes that in those who encounter death, a shift occurs in which death becomes the underlying focus of the conscious as well as unconscious life of the person: “Focusing on survival, rather than on trauma, puts the death back into the traumatic experience, because survival suggests that there has been death, and the survivor therefore has had a death encounter, and a death encounter is central to his or her psychological experience”. See “An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton,” \textit{Trauma: Explorations in Memory}, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 128.
next level, a level of linguistic and narrative sophistication that no one has matched since…

‘Wedding’ remains a breakthrough for Gram and breakthrough in music.” While Meyer’s assessment may be hyperbolic, it recognizes the song as unique in the context of traditional country story songs. Indeed, not quite a murder ballad in the style of the Louvin Brothers’s “Knoxville Girl” and certainly not a straightforward narrative of a failed romantic relationship, the song defies categorization in a number of ways. First; it uses multiple narrative voices. Switching between first and third person modes in what seems almost like a stream-of-consciousness monologue, it is nearly impossible to find a reliable source of narration.

Compounding this unreliability is the use of phrases such as “he might say” and “hate to tell you” and “supposed to be.” It seems as though the withholding of information is deliberate which suggests intentionality on the part of the narrator. This is far different from the third-person omniscient narrative modes normally used in country story songs or their folk predecessors. Second; allusions to both secular and sacred elements with no clear sense of resolution speak to the honky-tonk philosophy of sin and salvation, but subscribes to neither. As such, the only judgment put forward is that both the wedding and funeral have become “bad, bad days” and that the groom should be pitied. These sentiments toward a situation that is assumed to be the reason that someone has been “put to sleep” are relatively tame in comparison to earlier Parsons compositions like “Sin City” that suggested more damning retribution. Third; Parsons’s musical setting eschews the traditional strophic forms found in most country story

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25 Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 442.

26 See also the ominous final verse of Parsons’s “Kiss the Children” from GP:

So don’t play this crazy game with me no longer
‘Cause I won’t be able to resist my rage.
And the gun that's hanging on the kitchen wall, dear,
Is like a road sign pointing straight to Satan’s cage.
songs. Thus, while the instrumentation, instrumental style, and harmonic language signify country, the song’s structure makes a definitive generic assessment difficult.

Not surprisingly, Parson’s unique musical setting and arrangement bolster the sophistication of the lyrics. Similar to the musical language used in other Parsons originals such as “Luxury Liner,” “She,” and “Return of the Grievous Angel,” two tonal centers distinguish sections, but in “$1,000 Wedding” they are also used as a means to underscore the different narrative modes. As can be seen in the harmonic and formal analysis below, Parsons moves between primary (Sections A and B) and secondary (Section C) key areas at points where narrative modes shift between first and third person. These narrative and musical shifts are reinforced even further by the addition of background vocals and increased rhythmic activity.

**Verse One (A section) – Third Person**

D A/C# Bm D
It was a $1000 wedding supposed to be held the other day and
G E D A
With all the invitations sent, the young bride went away.
D A/C# Bm (D/A) G E
When the groom saw people passing notes, “not unusual,” he might say,

**Verse One (B section): – First Person**

D G D (C) - G
“But where are the flowers for my baby? I’d even like to see her mean old mama,
D A/C# Bm (D/A) G D G - E - A
And why ain’t there a funeral If you’re gonna act that way?”

**Bridge (C section) – Third Person – A MAJOR**

A E A
I hate to tell you how he acted when the news arrived.
A E G
He took some friends out drinking and it’s lucky they survived.
D A/C# Bm (D/A) G E
Well, he told them everything there was to tell there a long the way,
Verse Two (B' section) – **Third Person** – D MAJOR

D G D (C) - G
And he felt so bad when he saw the traces of old lies still on their faces.

D A/C# Bm (D/A) G D - (C) - G
So why don’t someone here just spike his drink, Why don’t you do him in some old way?

D (C) - G D G - E - A
Supposed to be a funeral (*Echo of First Person*) It’s been a bad, bad day.

Bridge (C Section) – **Third Person** – A MAJOR

A E A
The Reverend Dr. William Grace was talking to the crowd

A E G
All about the sweet child’s holy face and the saints who sung out loud,

D A/C# Bm (D/A) G - E
And he swore the fiercest beasts could all be put to sleep the same silly way.

Verse Three (B’” Section) – **First Person** – D MAJOR

D G D (C) - G
“And where are the flowers for the girl? She only knew she loved the world

D A/C# Bm (D/A) G D - (C) - G
And why ain’t there one lonely horn and one sad note to play?

D (C) - G D (C) - G
Supposed to be a funeral It’s been a bad, bad day.

D (C) - G D (C) - G E A G D
Supposed to be a funeral It’s been a bad, bad day.

The song contains very little consistency in terms of harmony or where and when narrative modes change. Indeed, the recurring B sections alternate between first and third person modes, and while each of them begin in D major, the addition of the tagline—“supposed to be a funeral”—which uses the bVII (C Major) passing chord, stresses the subdominant, G major. The narrative voice of this tagline, which appears only in the second half of the song, is ambiguous in terms of this instability, for it could be interpreted either as the groom, the omniscient narrator, or perhaps even as the voice of the absent bride. One constant however, is the descending bassline that is outlined immediately in the A section. Moving diatonically from D down to G,
the line and its attendant chord sequence appears in every section of the song, blurring the sectionalized narrative voices and the song’s sectional differences.

Jocelyn Neal writes that when musical form interacts “with textual, thematic, and poetic devices to enhance the telling of the story, and when the same relationships emerge in multiple songs, narrative paradigms emerge.” Particularly important to this discussion are those “narrative paradigms” Neal cites that represent the technique of “implied conversation.” In these, the narrators relay only partial dialogues that invite listeners to infer details left out. Neal writes that this paradigm “is particularly compelling in country music where personal connections between singer and listener are part of the music’s appeal, because the listener becomes an active participant in the song through the inference of the omitted dialogue.”

Indeed, receiving few clues from the song’s multiple narrative voices and musical structure, listeners of “$1,000 Wedding” are left to draw on personal experience and their own knowledge of Parsons’s biography to fill in the song’s details.

In the context of Parsons’s death, such omissions invite even further interpretation, for their implicit engagement with mortality allows one to explore how the subject of death in this “last act” might have related to Parsons’s own. The various questions posed—“Why ain’t there a funeral?” “Why don’t someone spike his drink?” “Where’s the last lonely horn?”—indicate senses of confusion and denial, anger, depression, and (reluctant) acceptance. Not so coincidentally, these emotional states loosely correspond to the famous “five stages of grief” model that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced in her seminal text, On Death and Dying (1969):}

28 Ibid., 46.
1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

While I do not wish to claim that Parsons consciously drew on Kübler-Ross’s model for “$1,000 Wedding,” in invoking nearly all of these stages, the song captures the spectrum of emotional responses that Parsons’s own death caused, and thus, forges an uncanny relationship between the song’s multi-faceted portrayal of grief, Parsons’s death, and his posthumous reception by survivors. Ultimately, what the song doesn’t say says the most.

*Grievous Angel’s* final track, “In My Time of Darkness” also addresses the subject of death, but stands more firmly within the gospel tradition than “$1,000 Wedding.” Though it is the only song co-written by Parson and Emmylou Harris on the album, it draws directly from Parsons’s life experience to show him at a rare confessional moment pleading for the Lord’s help:

Chorus:
In my hour of darkness,
In my time of need,
Oh, Lord grant me vision,
Oh, Lord grant me speed.

Unlike Parsons’s earlier gospel-tinged songs like “Sin City,” “In My Time of Darkness” does not rely on threat of damnation for sins committed, but instead offers short eulogies for three of Parsons’s closest friends. The two “young men” in the first and second verse refer to Brandon De Wilde and Clarence White, respectively, and the “old man” of the third verse refers to Sid Kaiser, a father figure to Parsons who had recently died of a heart attack.³⁰

Verse One:
Once I knew a young man, went driving through the night
Miles and miles without a word, with just his high-beam lights.

Who'd have ever thought they'd build such a deadly Denver bend
To be so strong, to take so long as it would till the end?

Verse Two:
Another young man safely strummed his silver string guitar
And he played to people everywhere, some say he was a star.
But he was just a country boy his simple songs confessed
And the music he had in him so very few possess.

Verse Three:
Then there was an old man, kind and wise with age,
And he read me just like a book and he never missed a page.
And I loved him like my father, and I loved him like my friend,
And I knew his time would shortly come but I did not know just when.

While on the surface Parsons’s delivery refers to others, throughout the song, which Meyer calls a “prayer-cum-prophecy,” are details that can be read as Parsons speaking for and about himself. The song’s second verse about the talented musician, in particular, could just as easily apply to Parsons as it does to Clarence White. Not personified by a vehicle as in “Return of the Grievous Angel” or cast as the mournful groom in “$1,000 Wedding,” Parsons here is just a “country boy” and singer of “simple songs.” In this light, the song’s chorus speaks from an imagined afterlife in which “darkness” becomes more than a metaphor for grief. It becomes death itself and a site of a kind of redemption: “Lord, grant me the vision and speed to end my own death.” Through such an “impossible gaze,” Parsons constructs and enters a realm where he can witness his own death and in turn, allow his listeners to do so as well. For listeners aware of both the song’s real-life inspirations and the fact of Parsons’s death, this realm blurs fiction and reality. As Kane writes, an artist’s biography alongside their biological death authenticates

31 Ibid.
32 Here, I draw on Slavoj Z’iz’ek’s conception of the “impossible gaze” within narrative. He writes, “narrative always involves an impossible gaze, the gaze by means of which the subject is already present in the act of his/her own conception.” See Slavoj Z’iz’ek, A Plague of Fantasies (New York: Verso, 1997), 16.
their impossible gazes: “Their fictions become biographies and their biographies fictions so that the pieces serve as invitations to read fiction biographically and biographies fictitiously.”33

Emmylou Harris’s role in the song bolsters this automortographic reading. Her voice soars above Parsons’s in the song’s choruses and the second halves of verses in a way that not only augments the song’s spiritual hymn-like quality, but also provides a kind of co-narrative in dialogue with Parsons’s. Indeed, accompanying Parsons on lines such as “I loved him like my father, and I loved him like my friend/ and I knew his time would shortly come but I did not know just when” and also asking for help in a “time of darkness,” Harris herself foreshadows, or “scripts” ways that she would honor and mourn Parsons in the years after his death.

In a study of Harris’s career and the subjects of identity, loss, and mourning, Marcus Eli Desmond Harmon convincingly argues that “Harris’s post-Parsons work is a celebration of complicated grief, casting about for ways to both ‘move on’ and stay faithful to the past.”34 In his analysis of “Boulder to Birmingham,” the centerpiece of Harris’s first solo album, Pieces of the Sky (1975), Desmond observes that, while oblique, the song “reflects the specific experience of a particular person, and it relies upon the singer’s ownership of that experience for much of its emotive meaning. Even with the various musical and lyrical signifiers of grief and absence… a significant part of its impact comes from the knowledge that this is Emmylou Harris’s tribute to Gram Parsons.”35 Thus, just as Parsons eulogized his friends (and perhaps himself) in “In My Time of Darkness,” Harris later memorialized Parsons in terms that blurred the lines between fiction and reality:


35 Ibid., 58.
Verse Two:
And I don’t want to hear a sad story
Full of heartbreak and desire.
The last time I felt like this
It was in the wilderness and the canyon was on fire,
And I stood on the mountain in the night and I watched it burn.

Chorus:
I would rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham.
I would hold my life in his saving grace.
I would walk all the way from Boulder to Birmingham
If I thought I could see, I could see your face.

Verse Three:
Well you really got me this time
And the hardest part is knowing I’ll survive.
I have come to listen for the sound
Of the trucks as they move down out on ninety-five,
And pretend that it’s the ocean
Coming down to wash me clean, to wash me clean.
Baby, do you know what I mean?

From her position as a survivor, but victim of the traumatic experience of Parsons’s death, Harris addresses the pain of Parsons’s passing through the lens of their shared experiences.

Accordinly, her “darkness” is the grief-stricken psychological “wilderness” where she wandered in the midst of his passing. Her references to fire and burning allude to Parsons’s immolation in the desert while the Parsons-as-vehicle metaphor in “Return of the Grievous Angel” returns here as Harris’s protagonist listens for the “trucks” that move down “ninety-five,” the highway around Washington D.C. that Parsons surely drove down in route to meeting Harris for the first time. As such, the desire for Parsons’s “sound”—his music and identity—to wash her clean and deliver her from grief resonate with the shared plea for redemption made earlier in “In My Time of Darkness.”

While “Boulder to Birmingham” cannot be an “automortographic last act” in that Harris is still very much alive, the song has the potential to unite mourners through the feeling for its
When Harris asks, “Baby, do you know what I mean?” she is simultaneously addressing her audience and Parsons, counting on each to understand the devastation of her loss and to make connections between her allusions and Parsons’s biography. Though it is impossible for Parsons to answer, her question assumes Parsons’s ability, even in death, to hear her, and thus contributes to according Parsons a meaningful post-death presence. In this way, fellow Parsons mourners possessing the knowledge to know what Harris means by asking the question are joined with her in their grief. On the flip side, if listeners are not aware of whom Harris is addressing, her deployment of the narrative paradigm of “implied conversation” invites them to seek out the omitted details and the haunting presence of Harris’s mentor. In other words, if you, the listener, don’t know what I mean, find out.

While “Boulder to Birmingham” reveals Parsons’s influence on Harris, in a related way it illuminates how “In My Time of Darkness” can be understood as a precursor, or script for her own mourning and subsequent success. Indeed, in interviews since his death, Harris has steadfastly credited Parsons as a father figure and mentor, turning her “onto a whole different world of music” and drawing out the music that was within her. As Harmon notes, Harris has also traded on her status as Parsons’s “artistic widow,” using her own Parsons-informed vision and speed to become one of the most well respected artists within the world of country music.

Five months after Grievous Angel’s release in January of 1974, Allan Jones assessed Parsons’s solo albums. He wrote, “Both GP and Grievous Angel need no analysis. There are no words to describe the sense of desperation and the haunting quality of these works… ‘In My

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36 Kane observes, “in examining automortalogy, we can see where the subject can be instrumental in forming communities of mourners, however momentary, however fleeting. The feeling mobilized through the affective structure of automortalogy, the feeling for the lost subject, has the potential to foster social bridges” (Kane, “Last Acts,” 14).

37 Quoted in Griffin, Gram Parsons, 160.

38 Harmon, “Harris/Cash,” 83.
Hour of Darkness’ says it all. Trapped beneath the skies of uneasy dreams, maybe his death made some kind of sense. Perhaps he has finally found a way out.”

Jones’s assessment not only assumes that Parsons life itself manifested desperation, but also ostensibly that he was searching for ways to end it. Like Jones, longtime Parsons devotee, Bud Scoppa also found a sense of finality in Grievous Angel’s closing track in his review of the album: “Parsons’ final composition, and the album’s last cut, reads almost like a prayer. ‘In My Hour of Darkness’ evokes an agonizing struggle between faith and despair. It can serve as Gram Parsons’ epitaph as well.”

Both these reviews illustrate how reception and interpretation of Parsons’s final recordings were often inextricably bound to the fact of his death, and how the intersections that Parsons was assumed to embody—faith and despair, and ultimately, life and death—mapped onto the affective musical elements that linked his life and music.

These kinds of automortographic readings continue to inform appraisals of Parsons’s life and work. Two of the best biographies of Parsons—Ben Fong-Torres’s Hickory Wind (1991) and David N. Meyer’s Twenty Thousand Roads (2005)—have prologues that begin with descriptions of Parsons’s death and his subsequent burial, and more recently, in 2013, forty years after his passing, the Los Angeles Times commemorated Parsons in an article featuring six representative songs. Not surprisingly, “In My Time of Darkness” is included along with “Sin City” and Wheels.”

“Wheels,” as we will recall from Chapter Three, was a Hillman-Parsons song that addressed countercultural escapism, but Randy Lewis writes that “in retrospect” it

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encapsulates Parsons’s “meteoric life”: “We’re not afraid to ride/ We’re not afraid to die/ C’mon wheels, take me home today/ C’mon wheels take this boy away.”42 Ultimately, in light of his death, retrospection has become the interpretive mode very often used to find meaning in Parsons’s work and way in which survivors authenticate his artistry and mythic stature within country music discourse. As the next section will discuss, such retrospection has also served to connect Parsons with the Southern Gothic, a tradition intimately concerned with the subject of mortality and the sometimes supernatural unease that hangs over the legacy of the past as it manifests in the present.

**Gram Parsons as Southern Gothic**

Soon after the bizarre funeral pyre initiated by Phil Kaufman in the Joshua Tree Desert, the press got hold of the story and Gram Parsons’s name began appearing in newspapers around the country. According to a police officer interview quoted in the *Tri-City Herald* out of Kennewick, Washington on September 21st, 1973, the corpse of Parsons looked “like something out of Transylvania, out of the legend of Count Dracula.”43 A week later, the *Village Voice* speculated on Parsons’s cause of death, citing drug overdose as a possibility: “He was known to have been deeply involved in drugs, especially during his association with the Stones.”44 On the same day, *The Modesto Bee* reported the story, citing Kaufman for stealing Parsons’s body and speculated that the burning of his body “may have been a funeral ritual, or an attempt to destroy

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42 Ibid.


In a more recent piece in the *New York Times* from 2003 celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of Parsons’s death, the writer describes followers of Parsons and those interested in his death as “Grampires.”

In light of these fixations on the more macabre elements of Parsons’s death and the Southern discourse that surrounded him during his lifetime, connections have been made between the darker elements of his biography and Southern Gothicism. These connections were prefigured by Parsons himself, who, as we’ve seen in previous chapters, often emphasized his Southernness over other facets of his biography, and by critics and fans that idealized his background. Not surprisingly, the strange circumstances of Parsons’s death intensified this foregrounding of Southernness, encouraging commentators to read back into Parsons’s life and work through the Southern Gothic, a cultural form at once frightening and unstable, but not without the potential to forge new cultural meanings.

Like other gothic subgenres, the roots of the Southern Gothic tradition can be traced back to eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and to the work of writers such as Horace Walpole, whose *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) helped establish the genre’s parameters. As literary critic Fred Botting notes, the works of Walpole and later Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley both stemmed from and were oppositional to Enlightenment narratives of Reason and progress. Set often amidst crumbling castles and monastery ruins, gothic storylines were populated by ghosts,

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47 Joseph Grant Bain, “Disturbing Signs: Southern Gothic Fiction from Poe to McCullers” (PhD Diss.: University of Arkansas—Fayetteville, 2010), 19.

monsters, and other supernatural elements to remind that “unreasonable” and barbaric elements still existed within well-ordered Enlightenment societies. While America possessed neither the ruined castles nor monarchical or clerical institutions that European gothic writers wrote in the context of, unique cultural pressures led Americans to embrace the gothic and adapt it to their own circumstances. Allan Lloyd Smith writes that among these pressures were the frontier experience, Puritan inheritance, anxieties concerning the then-new democratic ideal, absence of developed “society,” and racial issues concerning slavery and Native American populations.

As such, through the gothic mode, writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe addressed the deep conflicts embedded within a democratic nation grappling with the implications of slavery and the eradication of indigenous peoples.

Although the entirety of the nation experienced the anxious wonder of the wilderness and conflicted guilt throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the pressures Smith describes were acutely felt in the South. In particular, the horrors and cruelty of slavery and related anxieties concerning social class marked the South’s identity as distinct from the rest of the nation, and within this context, a particularly Southern Gothic literary tradition emerged that addressed the region’s conflicted sense of identity. Today, we recognize Southern writers such as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor as exemplars of the

49 See Bain, “Disturbing Signs,” 5.

50 Allan Lloyd Smith, American Gothic Fiction (New York: Continuum, 2004), 4.

51 As literary critic Teresa A. Goddu argues in her discussion of the Southern Gothic, “the American South serves as the nation’s ‘other,’ becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself.” See Teresa A. Goddu, Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3, 4.

52 Ellen Glasgow professed to despair in 1935 that writers including Caldwell, Faulkner, and T. S. Stribling had founded a “Southern Gothic School,” and accordingly wondered if Southern life and literature had become “one vast disordered sensibility” (Ellen Glasgow “Heroes and Monsters,” Saturday Review of Literature 12, May 4, 1935, 3-4).
Southern Gothic. Their employment of the horrifying and ghostly elements of the gothic expressed the Southern experience of the Depression-era and the legacy of the region’s past. Indeed, some of Faulkner’s most famous characters such as The Sound and the Fury’s Quentin Compson and The Hamlet’s Flem Snopes, embody the conflict between the South’s idealized past and the reality of the present, that is, between looking back at the Old South as a model for identity at a time when modernity’s impact on the region was highlighting its failure.

Importantly, these sorts of archetypal characters, represented first in literature, and later in art, film, and music would crystallize the Southern Gothic tradition, and as Joseph Bain writes, probe beyond their individual historical places and moments to present a mode of perceiving and experiencing the modern world.53

In Flannery O’Connor’s 1960 essay discussing the Southern Gothic or what she calls the “Grotesque” in Southern writing, the novelist observed,

In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected.54

Given that much of Parsons’s biography seems to confound “customary kinds of realism” and dislocation from “typical social patterns,” O’Connor’s characterization provides a frame for how and why some critics have represented and fictionalized Parsons and his work as a kind of Southern Gothic. In surveying Parsons’s biography, one could make a laundry list of events that seem to embody the “grotesque” O’Connor describes. From his position as heir to the alcohol-


washed Snively Citrus Grove fortune to the deaths of his parents to his embrace of country music and ultimately, to his overdose and immolation in the Joshua Tree Desert, Parsons’s life seems to contain the haunted, tortured, and nearly “unreal” elements found in many Southern Gothic characters. The parallels between Parsons and Quentin Compson, the second narrator of Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury (1929), for example, bear an almost uncanny resemblance. Like Parsons, Quentin was a young man from the South intimately aware of the region’s racial anxieties and struggling with the burdensome legacy of its past, and like Parsons, also was an heir to an aristocratic, but decaying Southern family who attended Harvard University for a short time. Ultimately, Parsons’s Southern background, dysfunctional family life, and early death seem like the real life manifestation of archetypal characters within the Southern Gothic tradition and thus, it comes as little surprise that Chris Hillman said that Parsons “grew up a Tennessee Williams character,” or that Mather calls Parsons’s family one of “Faulknerian proportion.” Importantly, examples like these abound in contemporary writing on Parsons and situate him within a unique space amongst his rock peers who also died young.

If idealizations of Parsons as a Southern Gothic archetype link him to characters such as Quentin Compson, they also gesture toward a more complex understanding of Southern stereotypes. Margie Burns, in her discussion of the Southern Gothic, observes that two classes of images organize stereotypical perceptions of the region: “antebellum/magnolia/GWTW

55 Apart from these biographical details, psychological parallels also obtain between Parsons and Compson, for in the appendix to the novel, Faulkner describes Quentin as a character who “loved death above all, who loved only death, loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death.” While it may be a stretch to say that Parsons too “loved death above all,” his frequent allusions to death throughout his work and the fact of his deathwish to Philip Kaufman indicate a similar kind of preoccupation. See William Faulkner, “Appendix” In The Sound And The Fury: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, And Contexts Criticism, 2nd edition, ed. David Minter (New York: Norton, 1994), 208.

56 Griffin, Gram Parsons, 85.; Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 89.
mythology, and cotton row/tobacco road/Baby Doll grotesquerie.”57 She writes that these stereotypes embody “the dichotomized but connected fears of a decaying ‘aristocracy’ on one hand, and of a rebellious primitive, ‘earthy’ peasantry on the other.”58 As such, Burns argues that in this polarized picture of the South, there are virtually no figures of upward mobility, that is, both the “magnolia crowd and the tobacco-juice crowd” are stuck in their degenerate histories and unable to move forward.59 Importantly, Parsons is often fictionalized as embodying both of these image classes simultaneously through the fact of his wealthy Southern background and his seemingly paradoxical embrace of ruralness and country music, the soundtrack for a drive along “tobacco road.” Biographer David Meyer captures this imagery in the first paragraph of Twenty Thousand Roads:

Gram Parsons sprang from rich white trash and rural gentility… The critical pathway of his ancestry brings together the moralistic complacency of small-town wealth and the hunger of the small town hustler: two key routes to the American dream, played out in their most lurid Southern form. Out of generations of wanting sprang a man who never pursued anything because he was too busy fleeing from himself.60

Of Parsons’s parents, Meyer continues: “amid all their differences and conflicts, pedigree, money, alcohol, and self-destruction ran through their lives like the helix of their doomed Southern DNA.”61 While assessments such as Meyer’s do little to dispel either stereotype, they complicate them through collapsing the class-based hierarchies of high (aristocracy) and low


58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Meyer, Twenty Thousand Roads, 3.

61 Ibid.
(peasantry) into the single figure of Parsons, who during his lifetime thrived on exploring such social and cultural boundaries. Thus, even though Parsons himself eventually succumbed to his self-destructive addictions and inability to negotiate grief, his elevation to the “father of country rock” mantle since his death complicates how his “doomed Southern DNA” functioned as a bar to upward mobility, but at the same time, contributes to his posthumous success.

The connection between Southern Gothic and country music underlies the sense of authenticity engendered by characterizations of Parsons as Southern Gothic. Indeed, “grotesque” elements of Southern Gothic literature—violence, murder, ghostly visitations—have surfaced in various forms throughout country’s history. The bluegrass tradition in particular, which Teresa Goddu calls the “locus of death and dread in country music,” has long been aligned with the Southern Gothic through its roots in British ballad and broadside traditions and its repertoire of “murder ballads.”62 In canonic bluegrass songs such as “Knoxville Girl,” “Pretty Polly,” and “Down in the Willow Garden,” murder and almost ritualistic misogyny play out amidst Southern landscapes. Outside of bluegrass, mainstream country music has also ventured into the “dark side” often portrayed in Southern Gothic novels.63 Peppered throughout mainstream country’s history are popular songs such as Lefty Frizzell’s “Long Black Veil” (1959), Bobbie Gentry’s “Ode to Billie Joe” (1967), and more recently, Reba McEntire’s remake of Vicki Lawrence’s “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia” (1991), all songs that capture the “grotesque” and otherworldly sense of reality constructed in Southern Gothic literature. More recently, country’s Southern Gothic impulse has found home within the work of alternative country or alt.country


artists such as the Drive-By Truckers, Neko Case, and Blitzen Trapper.\textsuperscript{64} The Athens, Georgia-based Drive-By Truckers in particular, use the discursive practice of the Southern Gothic to problematize the state of working-class whiteness in the New South, that is, the stereotypes of the “primitive, ‘earthy’ peasantry” that Margie Burns noted above. As Travis Stimeling demonstrates in his work on the band, in songs such as “Nine Bullets” (1999) and “Lookout Mountain” (1999), the band works to raise awareness of the continued challenges facing the South’s working poor through Southern Gothic tropes.\textsuperscript{65}

In light of these Southern Gothic manifestations within country music, when one reads back into Parsons’s work through the Southern Gothic lens, it is seen that he not only engaged with the Southern Gothic, but often did so in conjunction with a sense of religious moralism. From “Sin City” to “Devil in Disguise” to “$1,000 Wedding,” not only do conventional gothic tropes abound—apocalyptic visions, senses of dread and doom, supernatural characters and themes—but fundamentalist religiosity often serves as the ideological backdrop for them. Ruth A. Banes discusses this link between the Southern gothic, religion, and country music, writing, “In gothic lyrics, style and subject combine to reveal images of the inward life interpreted through the doctrines of southern fundamentalist religion… Because music can awaken illicit desires and fantasies, the musician will be necessarily at the ‘moral edge’ of Southern society as he or she ‘competes with religion for the heart’s allegiance’.”\textsuperscript{66} As Banes’s observation suggests, Parsons’s tendency toward themes of painful redemption and uncertain reconciliation

\textsuperscript{64} Listen, for example, to “Black River Killer” (2009) by Blitzen Trapper and “Deep Red Bells” (2002) by Neko Case.


with God may have stemmed in part from his own position at Southern society’s “moral edge.” Accordingly, the characters that populate Parsons’s gothic works such as the she-devil in “Christine’s Tune” and the bride and groom in “$1,000 Wedding,” like Parsons, seem to straddle the line between reality and the supernatural, good and evil, and the sin and redemption that is often constructed within gothic portrayals of the Southern experience.67

In his discussion of Southern Gothic and religion in the work of William Faulkner, Henry Carrigan, Jr. writes, “Faulkner excels at portraying depraved, fallen creatures who appear either to mock religion, to have left it behind as a vestige of a failed past, or who are guided by it in some implicit or explicit fashion.”68 Like Bane, Carrigan Jr. situates these portrayals in the context of the writer’s Southern background, citing Faulkner as a Southern Gothic writer “baptized in the blood of the Protestant South where humans are fallen creatures who must see the light of true religion by encountering Jesus in the Bible and by declaring their faith in this incarnation of God.”69 Though perhaps overstating the point, Carrigan Jr. connects the South’s history of fundamentalist evangelicalism with Faulkner’s construction of gothic narratives. In this way, it is possible to understand Parsons, like Faulkner, as a witness to the region’s religious fervor who in turn, saturated his work with biblical allusions.70 As Flannery O’Connor wrote in


69 Ibid., 96.

70 While there is minimal evidence to suggest that Parsons regularly attended church or adhered to any particular Christian sect while growing up in Georgia and Florida, his interest in theology manifest in musical material he was drawn to and performed throughout his career. We will recall his inclusion of spirituals in his early Carlton
the same essay cited above:

Whenever I’m asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. That is a large statement, and it is dangerous to make it, for almost anything you say about Southern belief can be denied in the next breath with equal propriety. But approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted.  

Let us return for a moment to “$1,000 Wedding” for a specific example of Parsons’s own Southern Gothic sensibilities. While the song features neither geographical specificity nor overt references to ghosts or haunting, the song’s Southern Gothicism arises from its “unreality,” generic instability, and failure to resolve the narrative tension created through the absence of a reliable narrative voice. A number of scholars have addressed such instabilities as hallmarks of the Southern Gothic. In particular, American literature scholar Joseph Bain writes, “The destabilizing effects of Gothic narratives heighten the already uncertain stance of the reader, allowing a space to recreate social signs and narratives in meaningful ways. By harnessing this process, Southern Gothic writers draw the reader into a reconstructive practice and demonstrate the liberating, progressive potential inherent in a world composed of received social and cultural narratives.” In this light, the song’s ambiguity and the details Parsons leaves out concerning the bride’s absence become what Bain calls, “Utopian moments in which the reader, urged by the recordings, his continued engagement with Louvin Brothers material, and in particular songs from their Satan is Real album, and his last acts described above, “$1,000 Wedding” and “In My Time of Darkness,” both of which mixed themes of mortality with religion.


Gothic form to construct narrative meaning, realizes that he can re-read and reconstruct other narratives as well” (original emphasis).74 Importantly, Bain’s understanding resonates with the narrative paradigm of “implied conversation” employed in “$1,000 Wedding,” for it highlights the importance of how “destabilizing effects” can draw the writer and reader into meaningful dialogue.

If “$1,000 Wedding’s” “destabilizing effects” serve to broadly connect to the Southern Gothic tradition, they also relate more specifically to one of its central works: *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Divided into four sections, Faulkner’s novel traces the disintegration of an aristocratic Southern family, the Compsons, through the perspectives of the three Compson brothers—Benjy, Quentin, Jason—all mourning the “loss” of their sister, Caddy. It is Caddy Compson and the loss of her virginity that emerges as both the source of the novel’s dramatic tension and the focal point for the novel’s various perspectives.

While elements of Parsons’s biography can be seen to mirror those of Quentin Compson, more important to the discussion of “$1,000 Wedding” is how each of the Compson brothers’ first-person narratives move seamlessly between multiple settings and times, forcing readers to piece together the fragmented, yet vivid world around them. Benjy, for example, is a character unable to think rationally and distinguish between past and present. Words trigger memories of people and places removed from Benjy’s immediate present, and we, as readers, become immersed in the flood of images that exist in Benjy’s mind. At the outset of the novel, for instance, Benjy merges the word “caddie”—as in, golf caddie—with Caddy’s name, and is soon overtaken with remembrances of his youth and Caddy’s care for him. Likewise, Quentin’s section moves between his present at Harvard and previous conversations between him and his

74 Ibid.
father concerning the nature of time and Caddy’s virginity. While Jason’s third section is the most straightforward of the three perspectives, he, like his brothers, is also obsessed with Caddy’s absence and frequently lapses into earlier memories. For all these perspectives offer, however, the reader is still left with a glaring absence: Caddy’s own voice. Thus, Faulkner forces the reader to actively participate in the novel by reading beyond the lines of the novel’s limited text in order to allow Caddy and her past to transcend the boundaries that the narrative(s) situates her within. In light of the discussion in the previous section, one can see how Parsons too used multiple perspectives, narrative voices, and frequent shifts between different episodes to piece together the fragmented voice and back-story of the missing bride. Ultimately though, like Caddy’s in the Sound and the Fury, the vision of the bride is never fully complete, and as such, she becomes a sort of spectral presence urging us to construct our own narrative meanings around her absence.

In addition to female absence and the use of multiple narrative voices, another significant parallel between Faulkner’s novel and “$1,000 Wedding” is the way that religion impacts the invasion of the past within the present. In the novel’s fourth and final section, an omniscient narrator follows Dilsey, one of the Compsons’ black servants, as she leaves the Compson household and heads to church on Easter Sunday. For the first time in the novel, the reader is given an ostensibly objective view not only of the Compson family, but also of “Dilsey’s triumph and her peace” that emerges out of the suffering and fractured “splinters of truth” presented in the first three sections. In this section, a visiting Reverend Shegog delivers a powerful sermon to the congregation at Dilsey’s church. Reverend Shegog, whose voice had a “sad, timbrous quality like an alto horn,” evoked remembrance of the crucified and risen Christ:

“Bredden! Look at dem little chillen settin dar. Jesus wus like dat once. He mammy suffered de glory en de pangs. Sometime maybe she helt him at de nightfall, whilst de angels singin him to sleep; maybe she look out de do en see de Roman po-lice passin.” He tramped back and forth, mopping his face. “Listen, bredden! I see de day. Ma’y settin in de do wid Jesus on her lap, de little Jesus. Like dem chillen dar, de little Jesus. I hears de angels singin de peaceful songs en de glory…”

Den, lo! Bredden! Yes, bredden! Whut I see? Whut I see, O sinner? I sees de resurrection en de light; sees de meek Jesus sayin Dey kilt me dat ye shall live again! I died dat dem whut sees en believes shall never die. Bredden, O bredden! I see de doom crack en de golden horns shoutin down de glory, en de arisen dead whut got de blood en de ricklickshun of de lamb!”

Moved by the profundity of Reverend Shegog’s sermon, Dilsey is filled with the knowledge and hope of restoration: “I seed de beginning, en now I see de endin.” In the context of her being witness to the rise, the decline, and finally, the fall of the Compson family, Shegog’s sermon encourages her to reach outward to God for perspective and perseverance.

While his appearance is much more brief, “$1,000 Wedding’s” Reverend Dr. William Grace is a kind of Faulknerian minister in his own right. Reflective the song’s narrative itself, Grace’s sermon is polysemic, merging biblical references with the narrative’s characters:

The Reverend Dr. William Grace was talking to the crowd
All about the sweet child’s holy face and the saints who sung out loud,
And he swore the fiercest beasts
Could all be put to sleep the same silly way.

Here the “sweet child” might either refer to “de little Jesus” or the absent bride and the “saints who sung out loud” could refer to actual saints or to the “friends” whose old lies contributed to


77 Ibid.

78 As Faulkner writes of Dilsey and her family in his appendix to the novel, “They endured” (Ibid., 215).

79 Another possibility could be that the “sweet child” is the child of the bride and groom, or illegitimate child from the bride’s infidelity.
the groom’s anguish. Grace’s reference to the “fiercest beasts” is also a biblical one, most likely referring to the beasts that populate the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. That these beasts could be subdued in the “same silly way” as the groom speaks to the power of the bride’s absence and the groom’s grief. Ultimately, Grace’s words in “$1,000 Wedding” merge the past and present into what Jean-Paul Sartre describes as a kind of “super-reality” within Faulkner’s work:

The past takes on a sort of super-reality; its contours are hard and clear, unchangeable. The present, nameless and fleeting, is helpless before it. It is full of gaps, and, through these gaps, things of the past, fixed, motionless and silent as judges or glances, come to invade it… The present is not; it becomes. Everything was.

In this light, the final mention of the funeral, or the space where the funeral is “supposed to” exist in the present, is filled by the “motionless and silent” past and the lingering, haunting presence of the doomed “$1,000 Wedding” and its absent bride.

The song’s final reference to “one lonely horn” also has the potential for multiple meanings in the context of Sound and the Fury’s final section, for on one level it is not unlike the description that Faulkner used to describe Reverend Shegog’s voice: “sad, timbrous quality like an alto horn.” On another deeper level, it could be interpreted as yet another biblical reference, but with more hopeful connotations. In the Book of Revelation, seven horns are sounded one at a time to cue various apocalyptic events. These are the horns that Reverend Shegog referenced in his sermon: “I see de doom crack en de golden horns shoutin down de glory.” Importantly, the last of these, the seventh horn, signals the proclamation of Christ as ruler forever under the

80 See Revelation 13.

“Kingdom of Our Lord.” Accordingly, that “$1,000 Wedding’s” groom is wondering where such a horn is after the Reverend Dr.’s sermon indicates that despite his sadness, he may recognize the power of the clergymen’s words, and like Dilsey, see “de endin,” that is, to have gained some perspective on the past and his own loss.

In his now-famous essay, “Time in the Work of Faulkner,” from which the above quote was taken, Sartre continues, “As soon as we begin to look at any episode, it opens up to reveal behind it other episodes, all the other episodes. Nothing happens; the story does not unfold; we discover it under each word, like an obscene and obstructing presence, more or less condensed, depending upon the particular case.”82 Certainly, Sartre’s words could just as easily apply to “$1,000 Wedding” as they do to The Sound and the Fury, but perhaps more meaningfully, we can use Sartre’s observation to think about how episodes within Parsons’s biography reveal other episodes behind them. Indeed, just as the gothic details of Parsons’s death open up windows through which to investigate the subjects of the South and death itself throughout his life and work, so too can we look to his songs for insight into the biographical details that helped produce them.

In the end, it is nearly impossible, if not misguided, to imagine that Parsons’s Southern experience and the tragedies that accompanied his life played no part in the music he wrote and the lifestyle he pursued. That biographers, critics, and fans have interpreted these elements through the discourse of the Southern Gothic is important though, for in doing so, they not only establish Parsons as a singular, but intensely complex figure, but also become agents in the creation of another facet of Parsons mythology. In his discussion of the gothic and the American experience, Gregory Pepetone writes, “The Gothic imagination gives expression and meaning to life’s darkly mysterious, painful, frightening, and seemingly irrational experiences by embracing

82 Ibid., 265.
them as a potential source of insight and transcendence.\textsuperscript{83} Likewise, Eric Savoy writes that the
gothic tendency “is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new
significance.”\textsuperscript{84} In light of both these perspectives, it is possible to understand how the
construction of Parsons as a Southern Gothic character satisfies the desires of fans and critics for
their own “insight and transcendence” amidst the pain of his passing. Thus, just as Parsons
himself exercised his Southern Gothic imagination in an effort to create “new significance” for
the groom in “$1,000 Wedding,” so too do survivors transform his death in a way that invokes
the Southern Gothic’s liberating potential.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Coda – Return of the Grievous Angel}
\end{center}

\begin{quote}
\textit{"Gram might have evolved into a guy who got this
cult thing going, but I don’t think anybody around
here knew that guy. He became that guy. Maybe
he’s still in the process of becoming something"}

- Jim Carlton\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

In an unreleased song entitled “I’ve Done Everything Hank Did But Die,” country artist
Keith Whitley sings,

\begin{quote}
Old Hank was my hero, since I was a kid,
And I grew up re-livin’ all the crazy things he did.
Whiskey drinkin’, honky-tonk singin’, stayin’ out all night
Livin’ hard and dying young was just a way of life.

Sadly, Whitley did end up doing what Hank did. He died in 1989 at age 34 from alcohol
poisoning just as his career was beginning to blossom. Significantly though, Whitley’s song is
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{83} Gregory G. Pepetone, \textit{Gothic Perspective on the American Experience} (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 22.
\textsuperscript{84} Eric Savoy, “Introduction,” In \textit{American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative}, eds. Robert K.
Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), ix.; Savoy draws here on Julia Kristeva, \textit{Powers
\textsuperscript{85} Quoted in Fong-Torres, \textit{Hickory Wind}, 8.
just one among many that use Williams’s life and music as a model for the idealized “hard livin’” honky-tonk hero. From Moe Bandy’s “Hank Williams, You Wrote My Life” (1976) to David Allen Coe’s “The Ride” (1983) to Mark Chesnutt’s “Talkin’ to Hank” (1992), Williams is depicted as a kind of country prophet, and in some cases, as a ghost re-establishing earthly presence through narrators interested in his legend. Barbara Ching writes, “He managed to both burn out and go out in a blaze of glory. Thus, the magnitude of his stardom and untimely death set a high performance standard of hard living and hard dying.” Ultimately, as it has for Parsons, time has mythologized Williams and intensified the perceived importance of his life and work. As honky-tonk legend Ernest Tubb said in 1969, “No one, even Hank Williams, no one person can possibly live all the things that he wrote about.” Yet, in reinvestigations of his life in light of his quintessential honky-tonk death, Williams is seen to have lived all that he wrote about. Indeed, according to Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, “He encompassed the experiences of life’s full range of contradictions, hopes, and failures… Millions of fans could feel that he ‘wrote their lives,’ because even when they did not know him, they could feel that he knew the places they had been.”

Given the details of Gram Parsons’s death and his own hard livin’, it is not surprising that connections have been made between him and Williams. In 1976, Chris Hillman told Crawdaddy magazine in an article entitled, “Gram Finale: The Profoundly Sick Life and Mysteriously Perverse Death of the Prince of Country-Rock,” “He wasn’t planning what year to

do a Hank Williams, but it was a matter of time." In the same article, Chris Ethridge echoed Hillman: “He was a good Southern boy, loved to rock and roll, sad all the time. He wanted to go out like Hank Williams, and he did.” More recently, Bernie Leadon also linked Parsons with Williams, telling Jon Einarson, “Gram was just a romantic. He set out to become legendary by dying young. He saw that it worked well for James Dean and Hank Williams. I think he thought that was a great idea, to live a tragically excessive life, die a tragic hero, and become immortal. And he pulled it off.”

The relationship between Parsons and Williams is not unfounded, for parallels do obtain between biographies: both grew up in the South, both wrote and performed in the honky-tonk idiom, and both died before thirty as a result of complications from substance abuse. We will also recall Parsons’s custom-designed Nudie suits and Williams-style wedding plans with Nancy Ross. Perhaps most important though is that like those that attend to Williams, the myths surrounding Parsons have been distilled through the assumption that he too lived the honky-tonk life, one that captured that “dualistic sentiments” that Richard Peterson finds in Williams’s work: “More than any artist before him, Hank Williams exemplified in his song lyrics (as in his own life) the stark contrasts of hard work and dissipation, family loyalty and alienation, home and the open road, profound love and bitter hatred, good and evil.” As we’ve seen throughout this study, Parsons too existed within and through these contrasts.


90 Ibid.

91 Quoted in Einarson, Desperados, 264.

92 Peterson, Fabricating Authenticity, 178.
While connections made by Parsons’s friends and bandmates suggest that Parsons’s death was at least partially self-inflicted and modeled after William’s, critics have taken the next step in securing the link between the musicians at an existential level. Both Jon Einarson and Peter Doggett, two of country rock’s central authorities, cast Parsons in the same tragic role. Einarson calls Parsons “the ill-starred Hank Williams of country rock,” while Doggett writes, “Like Hank Williams, Parsons exists beyond music: he’s become a role model for mavericks and outsiders, a paragon of excess whose lifestyle has proved as influential as his art.”93 Such links not only indicate the importance of Parsons’s early death in establishing his mythical status, but in linking Parsons to Williams, situate him within the pantheon of country music stars, a place that as Doggett notes, he may not have reached had he lived: “Death saved him from his ambivalent destiny as a pioneer who wanted only to stay safe at home in the bosom of country music.”94

Tellingly, Doggett’s assessment echoes that of Williams biographer Colin Escott, who opined that, “If [Williams] had lived a few years longer (even sober and productive), he would have become an embarrassment to the changing face of country—too hillbilly by half. But in arriving when he did and dying when and how he did he became a prophet with honor.”95 While Doggett’s and Escott’s comments are impossible to prove, they highlight Williams’s and Parsons’s steadfast commitment to honky tonk-rooted country music and how such commitment might have had consequences in the face of drastic musical and industrial shifts taking place within each artists’ particular country contexts.96 As such, Williams and Parsons are joined

96 For Williams, had had he lived, he would have had to face the face wave of rock and roll in the mid-1950s and the emergent Nashville Sound. Parsons, as discussed in Chapter Four, experienced these consequences firsthand as his
through a sense of shared traditionalism that positions them apart from dominant mainstream trends. We might think of such idealized traditionalism as an echo of Parsons’s own “regressive” self-positioning discussed in Chapter Four.

Joli Jensen writes that “posthumous fame allows celebrity figures to slip loose from the moorings of biography and geography, so they can better serve the current purposes of those who need them—to sell, to enjoy, to identify with, to interpret.” Accordingly, the ways that Parsons’s life has been re-inhabited—by critics, biographers, friends, and scholars—in light of his death reveal something about the experience and expression of loss and the creation of meaning. For many close to Parsons and who actually knew him, his death was the inevitable, but no less tragic result of him living out his honky-tonk dreams to become an authentic country star. For others, Parsons’s death was the ordered end to a Faulknerian narrative and the beginning of a Southern myth. For the alternative country community today, Parsons’s death allowed a “holy ghost” to inhabit the margins of country music and preside over the kinds of musical unions that Parsons’s “cosmic” vision called for years earlier. In nearly all of these formulations and the many others that attend to Parsons there is the emergence of new ideas and a sense of possibility that is prompted by his death, a space for “light and transcendence.”

Certainly there exists a danger in the unquestioning imposition of meaning onto celebrities, both dead and living, but, if one can become knowledgeable about the originating contexts and processes through which such meaning is constructed as Jensen urges, we may learn something

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97 Joli Jensen, “Posthumous Patsy Clines: Constructions of Identity in Hillbilly Heaven,” In Afterlife as Afterimage: Understand Posthumous Fame, eds. Steve Jones and Joli Jensen (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 139. Jensen writes, “Aspects that might speak strongly to a particular segment of the audience might repel others, so they tend to disappear, in favor of those elements that will allow a figure to speak to many audiences” (Ibid., 139).

98 Warning about the dangers of narcissistic imposition of meaning onto celebrities, Jensen urges that we should:
about ourselves and the experiential bases from which such meanings spring. In other words, we might gain the vision and speed to find our own light in the darkness.

“We need to recognize the limits to what we can learn from the pantheon of people we create with our admiration” (Ibid., 138).
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