

Special Section

## **The Gram Parsons project; Ottawa play raises iconic musician back to life**

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In a classic career-enhancing move, 26-year-old musician **Gram Parsons** died of a morphine and tequila overdose in a cheap California motel in 1973. The alt-country pioneer has since grown to near-mythic status among his countless fans.

An unusually truthful singer and gifted songwriter who left us country rockers like Luxury Liner and haunting numbers like Hickory Wind (co-written with Bob Buchanan), Parsons has been celebrated in special concerts, including one at [Cisco](#) Ottawa Bluesfest in 2004. Elvis Costello, among others, has covered his songs. Two tribute albums featuring the likes of Sheryl Crow and Beck have helped keep him fresh in our memories. Parsons -- or at least the bizarre theft of his corpse by friends who, believing they were following his wishes, subsequently tried to cremate him at Joshua Tree, California -- was even the inspiration for a film, *Grand Theft Parsons*.

Without a single hit record, he was named one of the hundred most influential artists of all time by Rolling Stone in 2004. Parsons was sweet and shy, spoiled and impossible to work with, starting or playing with multiple bands, including The Flying Burrito Bros. and, briefly, the Byrds, as well as performing solo over his short musical career.

Now the musician is spotlighted in a theatrical concert produced and directed by Ottawa journalist, musician and Parsons aficionado Michael Bate and co-written by David McDonald. *Grievous Angel: The Legend of Gram Parsons* takes place at the NAC Fourth Stage this weekend and the Black Sheep Inn in January.

In tackling Parsons, Bate says he's dealing with a "complicated guy."

Bate met and interviewed the singer just months before his death and reports Parsons was simultaneously consumed with a death wish, once saying he'd welcome his own demise as he would a warm cloak, and yet hungry for musical recognition.

As if underscoring his complexity, an iconic photo of Parsons finds him sporting a Nudie-style jacket emblazoned with marijuana leaves on the front and, across the back, a red crucifix. There's nothing in Parsons' glance over his shoulder to suggest mockery, although the message that he spent a lifetime ping-ponging between sin and salvation rings loud and clear.

To portray his perplexing subject, Bate settled on a format that's roughly 70 per cent Parsons' musical repertoire and 30 per cent monologue and dialogue. He credits Sneezy Waters' *Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave* as a structural model for the show, and says he was selective in how he presents Parsons.

"If we just portray him as he really was, this falling-down, stupid drunk (that he became), nobody's going to buy a ticket," Bate says. "So we start when he was at the peak of his game and tell the story of the downward spiral. In that sense, it is a more romantic view, a side of him I prefer to remember."

Bate, who organized that 2004 Bluesfest tribute and presented a snippet of *Grievous Angel* at this summer's festival, says it was his long-ago interview with Parsons that inspired the show. However, until recently, he was kept occupied by his long-time job as publisher of the satire and gossip magazine *Frank*. As well, he had no one to play Parsons or Emmylou Harris, who was Parsons' duet partner toward the end of his life.

Then Bate met Anders Drerup, an Ottawa musician and self-confessed Parsons addict, and snapped him up. For Harris, he chose Kelly Prescott, a third-generation musician from the Family Brown and Prescott clans.

When he heard the two sing Love Hurts, immortalized by the real Parsons and Harris, Bate says he was sold.

For Drerup, who had never acted before, the role has been a steep learning curve. "It's quite a thing, man; the workload is staggering," he says. Staggering, indeed. Although the show focuses on the period between 1968 and 1973, when the adult Parsons was working as a musician, Drerup is playing a man whose youthful baggage reads pure southern gothic.

Raised mostly in Waycross, Georgia, Parsons was born into both wealth and an emotional black hole. His father, "Coon Dog" Connor, killed himself when Parsons was 12. His mother Avis, heiress to a citrus fortune, died of alcohol poisoning the day Parsons graduated from high school. His stepfather Bob Parsons died of cirrhosis of the liver, but not before committing Parsons' younger sister Avis to a mental institution. Small wonder, says Bate, that Parsons' home life -- or lack thereof -- sparked the sense of betrayal that courses through his music.

A piano player and guitarist from a young age, Parsons abandoned Harvard University to pursue music. He eventually discovered country music and, crossing it with rock, established himself as one of the fathers of alt-country and country-rock. He also discovered substance abuse, and it fast became a toss-up which he preferred more -- drugs or music. Even the Rolling Stones, with whom Parsons partied hard, wearied of him.

All this, including the constant war between his old-fashioned southern moral code and the siren call of the corrupt, modern world, informs Parsons' writing and his often harrowing, oddly innocent vocals.

In the end, says Bate, there was a sad inevitability to Parsons' life. Money, women, drugs -- nothing could shield him from whatever black thing gnawed at his insides.

Even so, Parsons merits celebration, his music a critical part of the American popular canon and the man himself intriguingly contradictory.

## [Entertainment The Scene](#)

### **Musical tells tragic life of Gram Parsons**

Grievous Angel, Nov. 6-7 at NAC Fourth Stage

By [DENIS ARMSTRONG](#)

In a celebrity-obsessed world, the celebrities we obsess over the most are those tragic rock icons who blazed a trail but died way too young -- Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Keith Moon, Kurt Cobain.

One of the least known, but perhaps most tragic, was American country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons, who gets his due in a new musical biography -- Grievous Angel: The Legend of Gram Parsons.

Parsons' family was a magnet for tragedy. When Gram was 12, his dad "Coon Dog" Connors committed suicide two days before Christmas after discovering his wife was having an affair.

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Then, like a figure out of a Tennessee Williams' play, Gram's mother promptly remarried Bob Parsons and drank herself to death five years later. During that time, the stepfather had Grams' younger sister Avis committed to a psychiatric institution before he eventually died of cirrhosis of the liver.

Initially, Parsons seemed unscarred by his family's epic dysfunction. He was the Harvard-educated heir to a fortune who also happened to be a spectacularly gifted guitarist and songwriter with the International Submarine Band, The Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers before going solo. Later, he paired up with singer Emmylou Harris.

"Things came easily to him," says Michael Bate, who wrote and directs Grievous Angel.

"He was the coolest guy in the room, the only person who could upstage Mick Jagger at a party, he had so much charisma."

Despite seeming to have it all, Parsons couldn't escape the isolation and abandonment he experienced as a child, hiding in booze, cocaine and heroin.

He died in 1973 at age 26 after an overdose of morphine and tequila in Joshua Tree, Calif.

In his final drunken request, he asked to be cremated, with his ashes spread around the spiritually significant Joshua tree.

Tour manager-friend Phil Kaufman absconded Parsons' body from the tarmac at LAX airport, drove it out into the desert, got drunk and tried to burn the body, but had to abandon the gruesome task, leaving the body a 39-lb. mass of charred cinder.

"Even in death, Parsons was a slow-motion suicide, a tormented artist who went to the dark side for inspiration and fell in," Bate laments.

Bate met his hero in March, 1973 in Boston, six months before his death. That 30-minute conversation turned into Grievous Angel. Named after Parsons' final album, Bate's sketch of his hero is seven parts concert and three parts Greek tragedy, with Anders Drerup as Parsons and Kelly Prescott as Emmylou Harris.

"For Parsons, there was always a struggle between sin and salvation. If he had met Emmylou Harris a couple of years earlier, he might still be alive today. She almost saved him. But ultimately, he was destined to end tragically."

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SCENE SETTER

GRIEVOUS ANGEL: THE LEGEND OF GRAM PARSONS

- Where: National Arts Centre, Fourth Stage

- When: Friday and Saturday, 8 p.m.