

## “A Country Beatle”

Some images and memories seem to come sprinkled with stardust, as if they'd been waiting years for just the right moment to reveal themselves. That's the only way to describe the photo Jim Stafford had loaded onto a laptop. Standing in the middle of his parents' old living room, he pulled up and enlarged the image of four boys—bandmates. Stafford pivoted and turned the computer toward the very spot the picture had been taken two generations before, likely 1961.

From left to right, Stafford, Gram Parsons, Lamar Braxton, and Bill Waldrup, one of the earliest incarnations of their garage band, the Legends, are immortalized in black and white. Unlike so many other pictures from his teen years where Gram is somber or trying to look cool, his smile here is unabashed and bright. He had joined a fraternity of young teens who loved their guitars, and with each chord, each hour of practice, the guitar was loving them back. It's a quintessential photo of Florida's garage-band days, and to see it for the first time with Stafford in his old living room, in the very spot it was taken, made the experience far more moving.

“Now here I am flipping the bird,” said Stafford, pointing to himself in the photo playing guitar with his middle finger extended on the

neck. “That was always my little way of saying ‘howdy.’” Maybe that explains why all the boys in the picture are laughing.

Off Snively Avenue on Fifth Street in a working-class enclave called Eloise, due south of Winter Haven, Jim Stafford stopped in front of that tiny shotgun home where his earliest memories revolve around his father Woody playing guitar on the front porch to gain the attention of passersby. In this uncommonly musical corner of Florida, Stafford remembered the neighbor who wrote a song recorded by Chet Atkins. Even when he became a recording star himself, Stafford said, “I kept running into people who were from here.”

We pulled up to the old building that had housed the family business, Quality Cleaners. Now rows and rows of mattresses were being sold there, only no one seemed to be minding the store. “The layout is still the same,” said Stafford, walking toward the back. In an alcove, Stafford pointed out an area that used to be the front counter: “I remember playing the guitar right here with the clothes right back here.” He pointed out the lobby space where the Legends once rehearsed.

Just a block behind the old dry cleaning store, Stafford directed us to the middle-class ranch home where his older sister still lives.

Stafford sat on the bed in what appeared to be a guest room. “I spent three months sitting on the edge of that bed working on ‘Spiders and Snakes,’” Stafford said of his 1974 top-five hit record co-written with David Bellamy. “So many of us who grew up playing guitar spent a lot of time like this, sitting on the edge of their beds working on stuff.” On a wall in the dining room is Stafford’s gold record indicating sales of 500,000 copies of the single.

The youthful partnership between trust-fund teen Gram Parsons and working-class kid Jim Stafford was an early manifestation of Parsons’s idea of Cosmic American Music. Their mutual love of the guitar spanned what were clearly defined socioeconomic classes in Winter Haven. Talent was Jim Stafford’s equalizer.

Stafford pointed to a spot in the living room where he “made a little history” through nothing more than a conversation with Gram Parsons. It was Parsons himself who told friends this was a turning point in his career path, during his 1965 summer of change.

For Big Avis’s funeral, childhood buddies Henry Clarke and Dickey Smith made the trip from Waycross. They found Gram lounging on his

bed in the Piedmont Drive home. He greeted them with a smile, shook their hands, then lay back down on the bed cross-legged, “drinking Jack Black straight.” Jim Carlton said the best thing he could do was offer to get Gram out of there. Jim dropped Gram at Donna Class’s house.

Little Avis was fourteen when her mother died. “Why should I cry?” she wrote. “Mother would be much happier in heaven.” Diane and Little Avis soon came under the care of their great aunt’s maid, Erka Lee Lewis. Hers is another example of the sacrifices domestics were expected to make for their moneyed employers: “She had left twelve children home with her husband,” Little Avis marveled. “She was the first strong woman I had ever known.”

Gram’s ultimate escape was, as always, the music. After all the mourning, he hit the road for his creative center: New York City. On the way, he stopped in Myrtle Beach for some postgraduation, much-needed good times with the Shilos. “We went down and played at a place with a bunch of girls,” Joe Kelly remembered. “We had thirty people in this beach house and put on a show for our friends that night.” It was the last time Gram and the boys from South Carolina were together as the Shilos.

“I’m headed north and I’m never comin’ back south again,” Gram said, shaking their hands. “Good luck to all the rest of you.” As expected, Joe Kelly and George Wrigley ended up going off to college. For Paul Surratt, Gram’s departure meant the loss of a friend and all the ambitions they shared. “That’s the first time I’d ever been really depressed and stayed like that for days,” Surratt remembered. Shattered at the prospect of not achieving musical success alongside Gram, Surratt joined the Navy. The Bob Jones University recordings remain a legacy to the band’s talent and potential had the boys been older and their timing a little better. The summer of 1965 was a natural time for all of them to move on.

Gram was on his way to the Village and a studio apartment just off Bleecker Street. Dreading the prospect of summer in Miami, Paul Broder told his parents he needed to take a college Spanish class and instead hooked up with Gram in New York. “It was a really enlightening experience,” Broder recalled. “One day we went to a bunch of folk clubs, where he was sitting in with different people.” The next day they

went to a Dodgers-Yankees old-timers game with Fred Neil and Dave Van Ronk. Sitting in the stands, the group swilled beer and smoked joints.

Raised in St. Petersburg, Neil started out writing songs for the likes of Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison before becoming a revered member of the Greenwich Village folk scene. In the liner notes to Neil and Vince Martin's 1964 folk album, *Tear Down the Walls*, John Sebastian said of Fred Neil: "Fred was a natural linkup of various musical styles. The thing that was so different about Fred was that he had not only a southern background, but was one of the first guys that was crossing racial boundaries in his style in a sense."

Through Fred Neil's records, Gram could also put a voice to the pain in his life. Neil's song "A Little Bit of Rain" is considered a folk and blues classic. With its soul-stirring richness and depth, Neil's voice has been described as a "healing instrument." Neil achieved fame as the man who wrote "Everybody's Talkin'" from the film *Midnight Cowboy*.

In the Village, Gram was impressed by Native American singer-songwriter, Buffy Sainte-Marie, one of the first artists to write a protest song about Vietnam. After a throat infection, Sainte-Marie became addicted to painkillers. Gram later did his own "cover" version of her stark, autobiographical song about the odyssey, called "Codeine." In New York, the drug culture was coming on and Parsons was now at the forefront.

"Did you like that pot we smoked last night?" Gram asked Paul Broder, "Because I've got this stuff called Owsley."

"I had never even heard of LSD at that time," Broder recalled. "We dropped some acid and he invited some girlfriends over. We had this great party and I was tripping for days. Every time I would take a shower and move my hand, there would be trails . . . it had to be a massive dose."

Gram played for Broder the poem he turned into a musical homage to his mother, "Brass Buttons":

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  
Oh, but I remember everything she said

One of Gram's neighbors that summer was another guitarist from the Florida youth center days, Stephen Stills, and his future Buffalo Springfield bandmate Richie Furay. The trio jammed and talked about the possibility of forming a folk rock band. Gram also met up in the Village with former child star and budding musician Brandon De Wilde. At the time De Wilde made a name for himself playing Joey Starrett in the 1953 western, *Shane*. And it was De Wilde who uttered those unforgettable words at the film's end: "Come back, Shane!" De Wilde would later prove instrumental in convincing Gram to move to California.

On August 23, 1965, as reported by biographer David Meyer, Parsons and De Wilde saw the Beatles at Shea Stadium. Surely the sound of 50,000 screaming girls had to evoke—if not eclipse—the experience of seeing Elvis in 1956.

That summer, his adventures into drug use cost Parsons an important career contact: would-be music producer Dick Weissman, who had already recorded two sessions with him. While Parsons was in New York, for a short time he shared an apartment with Weissman's brother-in-law. The scene Weissman walked in on one day left a lasting and unsavory impression:

"It appeared to me that Gram was cooking up heroin," Weissman remembered. "This was a shock to me. The smell almost made me sick, and left me with no desire to have anything to do with Gram again, I didn't."

The Village scene as Parsons had known it the past two summers was changing. Fred Neil headed to Coconut Grove, Florida, for refuge from his own struggles with hard drugs. Stephen Stills went off to Southern California to join the likes of David Crosby and John Phillips. In June 1965 the Byrds hit number-one with "Mr. Tambourine Man." And there was Gram—the urban folkie, the schoolboy still looking for a direction. He would find it in a fateful conversation with an old friend back home in Florida.

"He was a little disenchanted. He was in a turning point clearly," recalled Gram's big-brother figure Jim Stafford. "He was seeing that the folk thing wasn't gonna happen." A year after leaving for Nashville, Stafford was back home. Gram was back from the Village preparing for his move to Harvard. It was summer of 1965 and the two were sitting

in Stafford's house in Winter Haven. Stafford recalled what he told Parsons:

"I just blurted it out without thinking about it at 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."

Gram did not react as if this were some revelation. But, "he kind of perked up. I think he liked it," Stafford said. He never wanted it to appear he was trying to claim credit, because his idea at the time was not in the same context as Gram's eventual move to so-called Cosmic American Music. "He may have had a little more vision at the moment than I did," Stafford said with a laugh. Stafford was simply trying to think of a gimmick for Gram to sell records

Gram later told Jim Carlton that his move to country started with that advice from Jim Stafford.

The Beatles had dabbled in a little country music that year. Included as the B-side for their hit "Yesterday" was a toe-tapping cover of Buck Owens's 1963 hit "Act Naturally," featuring Ringo on lead vocals. After seeing the spectacle at Shea, the words "country Beatle" had to take on a special resonance. Gram took Stafford's advice and ran with it. Within a span of less than three years, Gram and his country vision would join forces with the most important and influential American band of the 1960s: the Byrds.

But first, Gram had to follow through on the promise he'd made to Rufus McClure and his commitment to pursue an Ivy League education.