

Leaving aside the fact that Altamont ended in well-known disaster, an anecdote from the festival's aftermath illustrates a chronic problem between Parsons and his bandmates. In the post-concert bedlam, Parsons whisked himself away in the Stones copter while his "Brothers" were left to fend for themselves. He left the band a few months later. Thanks to his family, Gram had a \$50,000 a year trust fund (some serious coin in those days) and could afford to lose interest in projects and groups, unlike his colleagues who had to work up careers for themselves. As Keith Richards tells it, Parsons had quit the Byrds in London back in '68 under the guise of ethical objections to touring in South Africa—but only after Keith had told him what apartheid was. Closer to reality was that he probably wanted to stay in England and get high with the boys, something that he excelled at.

So it went for the last few years of his life, the pendulum swinging between inspired musical creation and erratic personal behavior while battling the same addiction problems that plagued his parents, only with hard drugs thrown into the mix. This doesn't abate with his marriage to Gretchen Burren or with the formation of his own *Fallen Angel* band, with whom he is often too inebriated and/or unfocused to perform coherently with. But Parsons' new crew does feature his new golden-voiced duet partner Emmy Lou Harris, who helped right the ship and played a key role on his two masterful solo albums, on which he was also backed by members of Presley's band including guitarist James Burton.

Parsons had truly come into his own. "Return of the Grievous Angel", which kicked off his second solo LP, was so expansive in its geographical and psychic details that it matched Jack Kerouac at his country-crossing peak. "The news I could bring/I met up with the king/On his head an amphetamine crown," he sang in a melancholic nod to his boyhood idol. Later in the same verse he mentions "lighting out for some desert town," an eerie foreshadowing of events that took place right after he wrapped up recording. In September '73 Parsons headed out to his beloved Joshua Tree national park with a few friends, telling loved ones he needed to dry out, presumably referring to his substance-abuse issues and not the local climate. But instead Parsons ended up dying of a heart seizure after a

tequila and morphine binge. Hennig takes an unflinching look into the infamous incident that took place afterwards, an act residing in the mind of the average rock fan only as a vague anecdote. Parsons' road manager/enabler Phil Kaufman, acting on a casual comment made by Gram at the July funeral of latter-day Byrds guitarist Clarence White, took it upon himself to rent a hearse and claim the singer's body, taking it from the airport before it could be flown back to the Parsons' clan back down South. In a sequence of events that seems like a bizarre cross between the Keystone Cops and Edgar Allan Poe, Kaufman and an accomplice fooled airport authorities into giving them the body and, with the two of them drunk as a skunk, drove the casket back out to Joshua Tree for what can only be described as a partial cremation.

It says a lot of Hennig's approach up to this point that *Fallen Angel* doesn't suffer from the onscreen inclusion of the dubious Kaufman and his unrepentant and self-satisfied comments. On one hand, this can be seen as a sensationalistic move, giving voice to the unsavory death-cult attitude that sometimes revolve around long-gone rock icons. But Kaufman's segments reveal more about himself than anything. "If Gram were alive today, he'd still be dead" is a typical Kaufman quip. Yeah, Phil, with you standing by with a gas can in one hand and a cigarette lighter in the other; I don't doubt it for a minute. What a creep. Hopefully, viewers will come away more impressed with other aspects of *Fallen Angel* which have a more decidedly lasting value: the bittersweet reminisces of family and old acquaintances, the rare live clips of Parsons' influences (Lefty Frissell, Merle Haggard, Buck Owens), Keith Richard's understated look back to the era and his old friend, the straight-up integrity of careerists and survivors like Hillman and Emmy Lou and, of course, Parsons' compelling charisma and exceptional music filling the screen and speakers. You're left pondering a moment near the end of the film where James Burton, seated in a studio, cradling a guitar, an early-rock stalwart still active in the 21st century, insists that Parsons would be famous today if he had lived. It's not hard to imagine that an audience would have caught up with Gram and that he would have settled comfortably into a role as a respected veteran artist, playing some outdoor festivals in the summer, doing the odd date on *Austin City Limits*. Sometimes it's hard to look past the inevitability of the

drug-related casualties of that time, but to Henning's credit he gives us that little extra to ponder, while steering clear of the easy deification that sometimes mars this kind of biographical treatment.

Tim Buckley: My Fleeting House
Produced by Rick Fuller MVD Visual
109 minutes

Speaking of handsome, earnest and slightly aloof singer-songwriter types who died in the '70s and left a cult audience in their wake, this is the first official release of the known performance clips and television appearances from Tim Buckley. He had a gift not just for music but also for defying critical and audience expectations. Buckley is probably most remembered for the way he appeared on the Monkees' TV series finale, sitting alone with his 12-string acoustic guitar, exuding bushy-haired, tilted-head hippie sensitivity while singing the mysterious-sounding "Song to the Siren." Over time, Buckley's music evolved to include jazzy and even avant-garde elements. It's all here in chronological order, from appearances on long-forgotten public television programs to the BBC's estimable *Old Grey Whistle Test*. One particularly great find is a show (called *The Show*) emanating from a Hershey, PA studio where between songs Buckley raps about religion and politics with *Catch-22* author Joseph Heller and the floor-sitting audience.

With many rearview videos like these the peripheral moments are often the most entertaining—Buckley's anti-war song on Leonard Bernstein's "Inside Pop" TV special is interrupted by the host's portentous narration explaining his feelings for the new Youth Music ("a great deal of it is good"). Also fun to see is a snippet of Buckley on the couch for the Steve Allen show, seated next to that era's establishment showbiz types who try to impress ol' Tim by using words like "groovy" in a sentence.

Not strictly a documentary, *My Fleeting House* does feature commentary before each song by ex-bandmates and the author of a Buckley biography. This can be skipped over via a menu setting if the viewer only wants the music. Interestingly, the subject of Buckley's own untimely demise is not broached. Sorry to say, it was another what-were-they-thinking combo of hard drugs and booze that cut down his contemporary in *Fallen Angel*.