

BLAZING COFFIN FOUND IN DESERT

Rock Singer's Body Stolen and Set Afire

A coffin containing the body of a folk-rock singer was found ablaze in Joshua Tree National Monument Friday several hours after it was stolen from Los Angeles International Airport.

The coffin of Gram Parsons, 27, once a member of the Byrds rock group, was taken from a dock at the airport at 10 p.m. Thursday while awaiting shipment to New Orleans for burial.

Parsons died early Wednesday of still unknown causes after being discovered unconscious in a Joshua Tree hotel room.

Two men arrived Thursday night at the National Airlines dock in an old black hearse and told attendants there Parsons' family had changed

its mind and wanted the body flown from Van Nuys Airport.

The body was turned over to the two men after they signed receipts for it and they drove away with the coffin in the aged hearse.

Parsons' relatives later said they had made no change in plans, according to Sgt. John Hamilton of the Venice detective division.

The burning coffin was found about 9 a.m. near Cap Rock by visitors to the national park, in the desert about 200 miles from the airport.

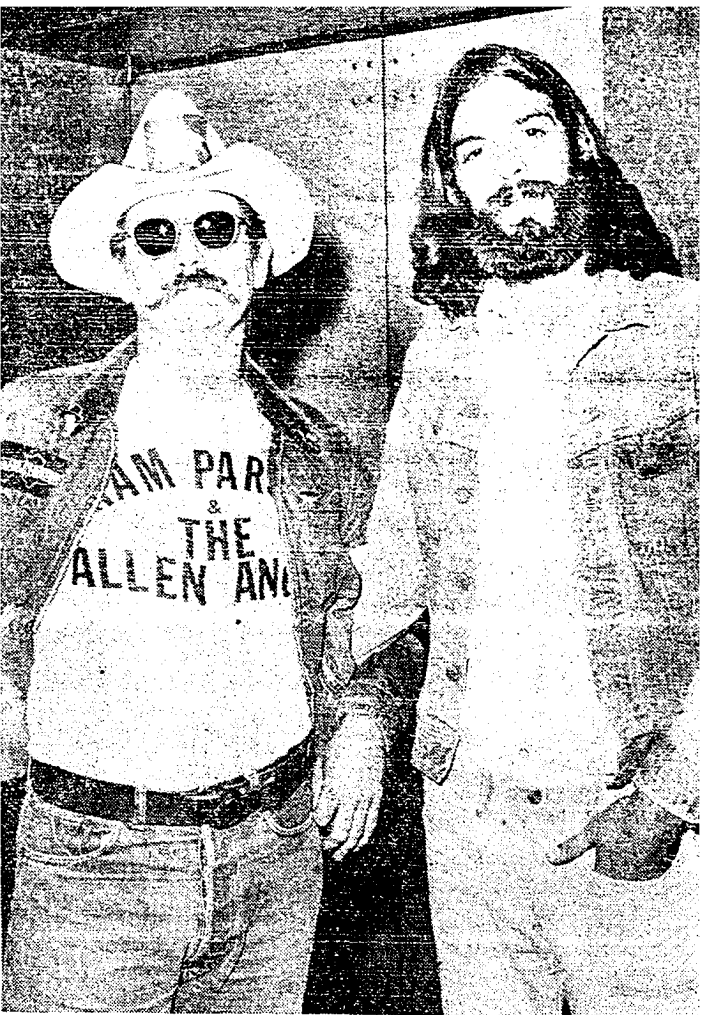
Investigators said it matched the description of that containing Parsons' remains and that the charred body inside showed evidence of having been autopsied.

An autopsy was performed on the body of Parsons after he died at Hi-Desert Memorial Hospital in Yucca Valley at 12:15 a.m. Wednesday. The San Bernardino sheriff's office said death apparently resulted from natural causes, the nature of which remains undetermined.

Sgt. Hamilton, said investigators had no immediate explanation for either the theft of Parsons' body or the burning of the coffin in the desert.

Asked if the circumstances appeared ritualistic, he replied, "It kind of looks like it."

Early visitors to the park Friday said that before the flaming coffin was found, an old hearse bearing two white males was seen near Cap Rock.



ARRAIGNED—Philip Kaufman, left, and Michael Martin leave West Los Angeles Municipal Court after their arraignment on charges of stealing and burning the body of rock singer Gram Parsons. Both remained free on bail after pleading not guilty.

Times photo by George R. Fry

ROCK SINGER'S MANAGER

Body Theft Suspect Arrested

The road manager of the late rock singer Gram Parsons was arrested Wednesday on suspicion of stealing his client's body at Los Angeles International Airport and setting it afire in Joshua Tree National Monument last week.

The suspect, Philip C. Kaufman, 38, was arrested by Los Angeles detectives at his Van Nuys home on a warrant charging grand theft.

Although they have arrested a suspect, police admitted they still are seeking a motive to explain the bizarre episode. Kaufman declined to talk when apprehended, detectives said. He later was released on bail.

Meanwhile, the old, black hearse

believed used to transport Parson's body from the airport to Joshua Tree also was found Wednesday, Det. Sgt. John Hamilton reported.

The hearse was located in front of the Hollywood Hills home of a second suspect, identified in a warrant which also charged grand theft, as Michael D. Martin, 26. Martin is being sought by police.

Parsons, 27, died of an apparent heart attack last week while on vacation in the desert town of Joshua Tree, about 70 miles east of San Bernardino.

Officers said the body and coffin were at the airport awaiting transfer to New Orleans for burial

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when two men drove up in a hearse and told airline employes the family wanted the remains taken to Van Nuys Municipal Airport for a private flight to Louisiana.

After signing a receipt for the body, the pair loaded the coffin into the hearse and drove off. Some time later the body was discovered in a smoldering coffin in the monument area.

Police said Kaufman and Martin were identified from photos shown to witnesses at the airport and national monument.