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METAIRIE, La. -- To really appreciate dead tourism, you have to dig beneath the surface. I've visited the resting places of Jim Morrison in Pere-Lachaise in Paris, John Steinbeck in Salinas, Calif., and Dean Martin in Westwood Memorial Park in Los Angeles.

While I was at a recent New Orleans Zephyrs baseball game, a fan told me that iconic country singer-songwriter Gram Parsons was "buried" beyond the right field wall of Zephyr Field in Metairie. The suburb -- also the birthplace of Ellen Degeneres -- is just west of New Orleans. Parsons' final resting place is in the Garden Memories Cemetery, 4800 Airline Highway, past the Zephyrs' stadium and the New Orleans Saints' training facilities.

Parson's colorful death ranks beyond Morrison of the Doors. The former Flying Burrito Brother checked out on Sept. 19, 1973, after checking into Room 8 at the Joshua Tree Inn, east of Los Angeles. According to a death certificate, he died of "drug toxicity, due to multiple drug use." He also loved tequila; he was only 26.

His New Orleans-based stepfather Bob Parsons claimed the body, wrongly assuming that Louisiana law would give him access to Parsons' estate. But Parsons' road manager Philip Kaufman and valet Michael Martin intervened. They fulfilled Parsons' death wish and road tripped his casket from the Los Angeles International Airport to Cap Rock in Joshua Tree where it was doused in alcohol and gasoline and set afire. Johnny Knoxville starred in the 2003 film "Grand Theft Parsons," which depicts the scheme and features a Parsons soundtrack.

Later in 1973 Bob Parsons had the remains of Parsons' remains relocated to Metairie, where it rests near an oak tree with two elegant bronze markers. One marker features a sketch of Parsons (born Cecil Ingram Cooper) strumming a guitar. Beneath that marker there is a marker with a heavenly cross and a lyric from Parsons' "From In My Hour of Darkness": "Another young man safely strums 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 confess/and the music he had in him so very few possess." Then, a small rectangular piece reads: "Your soul lives on through your music/Your spirit lives on in our hearts."

These are new markers. Up until last year, the Parsons gravesite consisted of a personalized vase and a stone that carried the words "God's Own Singer." Not only did Gram Parsons have much to do with New Orleans, he didn't write the 1970 Flying Burrito Brothers song "God's Own Singer." That song was written by future Eagle Bernie Leadon. Parson's New Orleans based family members arranged for the new settings.

It took a long time for my New Orleans photographer and I to find Parsons' plot R-12-11-2. I wandered into mausoleums and walked around several dozen headstones. I felt creepy. Just as the cemetery was preparing to close, I ran into the girl friend of Pedro Cedeno, the groundskeeper and gravedigger who attended to Parsons' grave. She called Cedeno on her cell and he took us to the gravesite.

Cedeno, 50, is from Havana, Cuba. His father Conrado was a corn and sugar farmer. He is a fan of traditional country music. "I love the music," he said while looking over Parsons' grave. "When I drink three, four beers, I like it even more. I've been taking care of his grave for four years. Dust covers the stone and I try to keep the stone clean. When you clean it, you shine it. I try to keep the ground level. I weed it. I'm happy. One day we are all going to die."

Cedeno came to America in 1980. He first settled in Peoria, Ill. before reuniting with family in New Orleans. He got married in New Orleans and had children in New Orleans. He drove a cab before beginning work at Garden Memories in 1999. He lives in a small apartment near a work shed on the cemetery grounds.

"For me, Garden Memories is the land of opportunity," he said. "I'm the only one who lives here, day and night, before and after Katrina. When Katrina was here, I was here. I never left. We never had a flood or high water. We have lots of trees, 100, 200 years old and we lost plenty of trees. But this is one of the only cemeteries in the region that did not have floods."

More Europeans visit the Parsons marker than Americans, according to Cedeno. "They drop off flowers, sometimes a bottle of wine," he said. One fan gave Cedeno a portrait of Parsons. The portrait hangs in Cedeno's apartment.

The singer-songwriter's remains are next to a headstone belonging to "The Cookie Monster." Cedeno looked at the Cookie Monster marker and said, "He killed himself. He was a dreamer in love with somebody. That's what the family told me."

The cemetery was quiet and the sun was starting to set beyond the oak trees. Cedeno walked back to his red pickup truck, where mattresses were stacked like soft couplets in the rear cab. "I'm bringing the mattresses to a friend," Cedeno said with a giving smile. "He lost all his property in Katrina. I'm trying to collect things from my co-workers. Everyone needs a good meal and someplace comfortable to sleep."

Cedeno said he hoped to see me again, but I told him I hoped it wouldn't be under any of his professional obligations. He laughed and waved goodbye. I felt alive. A New Orleans ballgame led to what's left of Gram Parsons led to a friendly Cuban gravedigger.

And that is why I travel.

