

Norm Gregory's interpretation of *American Pie*

After all I have probably listened to this song more times than anyone. In early 1971 I started collecting thoughts and comments from conversations surrounding American Pie . . . in the summer of 1994 when KJR-FM came on the air bringing American Pie back to the radio . . . the questions and discussions over the song started again. This time I had a head start. - Norm Gregory.

Don McLean's *American Pie* is the most talked about, most analyzed song of the '70s. The entire history of rock 'n' roll is in there somewhere, hidden in ambiguous imagery that lends itself to endless interpretations. Even though McLean refuses to explain the song (*If I told people what I meant, they'd just say, "No you didn't".*)... He did tell me in early 1972: "...When I first heard "American Pie" on the radio, I was playing a gig somewhere, and it was immediately followed by *Peggy Sue*. They caught right on to the Holly connection right away, and that made me very happy. I was quite interested in America - I still write about the different aspects of America - and to me, something was slipping away and I couldn't quite put my finger on how to express it. I was sitting up in this little house where I lived and I just started to write this first verse about the day I cut open this bunch of papers [he was a paperboy in his hometown of New Rochelle, New York] and saw that Buddy Holly had been killed. The memory unlocked a whole bunch of things. Suddenly the song wrote itself...'

" 'I can't necessarily interpret *American Pie*" any better than you can,' Don McLean told a *LIFE* magazine reporter in 1972. But McLean did provide an important clue about his eight minute, 27 second melange of pop music: 'Buddy Holly was the first and last person I ever really idolized as a kid. Most of my friends liked Elvis Presley. More of them liked Presley than Holly. But I liked Holly because he spoke to me. He was a symbol of something deeper than the music he made. His career and the sort of group he created, the interaction between the lead singer and the three men backing him up, was a perfect metaphor for the music of the '60s and for my own youth.' Well . . . let's take a walk though

***AMERICAN PIE* by Don McLean**

The entire song is a tribute to Buddy Holly and a commentary on how rock and roll music changed in the years since his death. McLean is lamenting the lack of "danceable" good time party music in rock and roll and (in part) attributing that lack to the absence of Buddy Holly et. al.

(Verse 1)

A long, long time ago...

"American Pie" reached #1 in the U.S. in 1972; the album containing it was released in 1971. Buddy Holly died in 1959.

I can still remember how That music used to make me smile. And I knew if I had my chance, That I could make those people dance, And maybe they'd be happy for a while.

One of early rock and roll's functions was to provide dance music for various social events. McLean recalls his desire to become a musician playing that sort of music.

But February made me shiver,

Buddy Holly died on February 3, 1959 in a plane crash in Iowa during a snowstorm.

With every paper I'd deliver,

Don McLean's only job before becoming a full-time singer-songwriter was being a paperboy.

*Bad news on the doorstep... I couldn't take one more step. I can't remember if I cried
When I read about his widowed bride*

Holly's recent bride was pregnant when the crash took place; she had a miscarriage shortly afterward.

But something touched me deep inside, The day the music died.

The same plane crash that killed Buddy Holly also took the lives of Richie Valens ("La Bamba") and The Big Bopper ("Chantilly Lace"). Since all three were so prominent at the time, February 3, 1959 became known as "The Day The Music Died".

So...

(Refrain)

Bye bye Miss American Pie,

Don McLean dated a Miss America candidate during the pageant.

*Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry Them good ol' boys were drinkin
whiskey and rye Singing "This'll be the day that I die, This'll be the day that I die."*

One of Holly's hits was "That'll be the Day"; the chorus contains the line "That'll be the day that I die".

(Verse 2)

Did you write the book of love,

"The Book of Love" by the Monotones was a hit in 1958.

And do you have faith in God above, If the Bible tells you so?

There's also an old Sunday School song which goes: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so"

Now do you believe in rock 'n roll?

The Lovin' Spoonful had a hit in 1965 with John Sebastian's "Do you Believe in Magic?". The song has the lines: "Do you believe in magic" and "It's like trying to tell a stranger 'bout rock and roll."

Can music save your mortal soul? And can you teach me how to dance real slow?

Dancing slow was an important part of early rock and roll dance events -- but declined in importance through the 60's as things like psychedelia and the 10-minute guitar solo gained prominence.

Well I know you're in love with him 'Cause I saw you dancing in the gym

Back then, dancing was an expression of love, and carried a connotation of commitment. Dance partners were not so readily exchanged as they would be later.

You both kicked off your shoes

A reference to the beloved "sock hop". (Street shoes tear up wooden basketball floors, so dancers had to take off their shoes.)

Man, I dig those rhythm 'n' blues

Some history. Before the popularity of rock and roll, music, like much else in the U. S., was highly segregated. The popular music of black performers for largely black audiences was called, first, "race music," later rhythm and blues. In the early 50s, as they were exposed to it through radio personalities such as Allan Freed, white teenagers began listening, too. Starting around 1954, a number of songs from the rhythm and blues charts began appearing on the overall popular charts as well, but usually in cover versions by established white artists, (e. g. "Shake Rattle and Roll", Joe Turner, covered by Bill Haley; "Sh-Boom", the Chords, covered by the Crew-Cuts; "Sincerely", the Moonglows, covered by the Mc Guire Sisters; Tweedle Dee, LaVerne Baker, covered by Georgia Gibbs). By 1955, some of the rhythm and blues artists, like Fats Domino and Little Richard were able to get records on the overall pop charts. In 1956 Sun records added elements of country and western to produce the kind of rock and roll tradition that produced Buddy Holly.

I was a lonely teenage broncin' buck With a pink carnation and a pickup truck

"A White Sport Coat (And a Pink Carnation)", was a hit for Marty Robbins in 1957. The pickup truck has endured as a symbol of sexual independence and potency, especially in a Texas context.

But I knew that I was out of luck The day the music died I started singing...

Literally, John Lennon reading about Karl Marx; figuratively, the introduction of radical politics into the music of the Beatles. The "Marx-Lennon" wordplay has also been used by others, most notably the Firesign Theatre on the cover of their album *How Can You Be In Two Places At Once When You're Not Anywhere At All?*

The quartet practiced in the park

A reference to the Weavers, who were blacklisted during the McCarthy era. McLean had become friends with Lee Hays of the Weavers in the early 60's while performing in coffeehouses and clubs in upstate New York and New York City. He was also well-acquainted with Pete Seeger; in fact, McLean, Seeger, and others took a trip on the Hudson river singing anti-pollution songs at one point. Seeger's LP "God Bless the Grass" contains many of these songs.

And we sang dirges in the dark

A reference to some of the new "art rock" groups which played long pieces not meant for dancing.

The day the music died. We were singing...

Refrain

(Verse 4)

Helter Skelter in a summer swelter

"Helter Skelter" is a Beatles song which appears on the *White* album. Charles Manson, claiming to have been "inspired" by the song (through which he thought God and/or the devil were taking to him) led his followers in the Tate-LaBianca murders. "Summer swelter" a reference to the "long hot summer" of Watts.

The birds flew off with the fallout shelter Eight miles high and falling fast

The Byrd's "Eight Miles High" was on their late 1966 release "Fifth Dimension." It was one of the first records to be widely banned because of supposedly drug-oriented lyrics.

It landed foul on the grass

One of the Byrds was busted for possession of marijuana.

The players tried for a forward pass

Obviously a football metaphor about the Rolling Stones, i.e. they were waiting for an opening which really didn't happen until the Beatles broke up.

With the jester on the sidelines in a cast

On July 29, 1966, Dylan crashed his Triumph motorcycle while riding near his home in Woodstock, New York. He spent nine months in seclusion while recuperating from the accident.

Now the halftime air was sweet perfume

This line and the next few refer to the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The "sweet perfume" is tear gas.

While sergeants played a marching tune

The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" music in general as "marching" because it's not music for dancing. But music with a message to which we march.

We all got up to dance Oh, but we never got the chance

The Beatles' 1966 Candlestick Park concert only lasted 35 minutes and there wasn't any music to dance to.

'Cause the players tried to take the field, The marching band refused to yield.

A reference to the dominance of the Beatles on the rock and roll scene. For instance, the Beach Boys released "Pet Sounds" in 1966 -- an album which featured some of the same sort of studio and electronic experimentation as "Sgt. Pepper" (1967) -- but the album sold poorly. It's a comment about how the dominance of the Beatles in the rock world led to more "pop art" music, leading in turn to a dearth of traditional rock and roll.

Do you recall what was revealed, The day the music died? We started singing

Refrain

(Verse 5)

And there we were all in one place

Woodstock.

A generation lost in space

A reference to hippies, who were sometimes known as the "lost generation", partially because of their particularly acute alienation from their parents, and partially because of their presumed preoccupation with drugs.

With no time left to start again

The "lost generation" spent too much time being stoned, and had wasted their lives.

So come on Jack be nimble Jack be quick

A reference to Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones; "Jumpin' Jack Flash" was released in May, 1968.

Jack Flash sat on a candlestick

The Stones' Candlestick park concert.

'Cause fire is the devil's only friend

The Stones were playing with fire . . .

*And as I watched him on the stage My hands were clenched in fists of rage No angel
born in hell Could break that satan's spell*

While playing a concert at the Altamont Speedway in 1969, the Stones appointed members of the Hell's Angels to work security. In the darkness near the front of the stage, a young man named Meredith Hunter was beaten and stabbed to death -- by the Angels. Public outcry that the song "Sympathy for the Devil" had somehow incited the violence caused the Stones to drop the song from their show for the next six years.

And as the flames climbed high into the night To light the sacrificial rite

About Altamont, and in particular Mick Jagger's prancing and posing while it was happening. The sacrifice is Meredith Hunter, and the bonfires around the area provide the flames.

I saw satan laughing with delight

Satan would be Jagger.

The day the music died He was singing...

Refrain

(Verse 6)

I met a girl who sang the blues

Janis Joplin.

And I asked her for some happy news But she just smiled and turned away

Janis died of an accidental heroin overdose on October 4, 1970.

I went down to the sacred store Where I'd heard the music years before

The "sacred store" was Bill Graham's Fillmore West, one of the great rock and roll venues of all time.

But the man there said the music wouldn't play

Nobody is interested in hearing Buddy Holly et.al.'s music.

And in the streets the children screamed

"Flower children" being beaten by police and National Guard troops; in particular, perhaps, the People's Park riots in Berkeley in 1969 and 1970.

The lovers cried and the poets dreamed

The trend towards psychedelic music in the 60's.

But not a word was spoken The church bells all were broken

The broken bells are the dead musicians: neither can produce any more music.

And the three men I admire most The Father Son and Holy Ghost

Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, and Richie Valens.

They caught the last train for the coast

A way of saying that they had left the scene (or died -- "went west" as a synonym for dying).

The day the music died

And they were singing...