

## **American Pie**

### **Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, The Big Bopper, and the day the music died**

The following pages offer the most detailed explanation of the song, the lyrics, to American Pie that you will find anywhere. Some of the information is fact, some is rumor; we only serve to entertain by providing the information in its entirety. Enjoy it and let us know if you have other ideas!

American Pie is rumored to be based on the name of the plane (A Beechcraft Bonanza, Number N3794P) in which Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens were killed. It is said that the song is a tribute to Buddy Holly and commentary on how rock and roll has changed in the years since his death. Ironically, according to McLean, the song is not about Buddy Holly but was dedicated to him. The following will provide a unique look at the meaning of the lyrics Don McLean wrote over 20 years ago. Some of the interpretations are accurate, some are outlandish. Some say, this song is a history of Rock n' Roll.

### **The analysis and interpretation of Don McLean's song lyrics**

*A long, long time ago...*

"American Pie" reached #1 in 1972, shortly after it was released. Buddy Holly ; unfortunately, 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.*

Sociologists credit teenagers with the popularity of Rock and Roll, as a part of the Baby boomer generation, they found themselves in a very influential position. Their sheer number were the force behind most of our country's recent major transitions. McLean was a teenager in 1959 and he begins by simply commenting that the music had an appealing quality to him as well as the millions of other teens. McLean also had an intense desire to entertain as a musician. His dream, to play in a band at high school dances, was the dream of many young boys who wanted to make people dance to Rock and Roll.

*But February made me shiver,*

Buddy Holly died on February 3, 1959, in a plane crash in Iowa during a snowstorm. Its rumored that the name of the plane was: American Pie.

With every paper I'd deliver,

Don McLean's only job besides being a full-time singer/song writer 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 tragically 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 a pageant and broke up with her on February 3, 1959. (Unconfirmed interpretation)

So its probably...

Just a reference to the plane, "American Pie" that crashed.

*I 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."*

Driving the Chevy to the levee almost certainly refers to the three college students whose murder was the subject of the film 'Mississippi Burning.' The students were attempting to register as black voters, and after being killed by bigoted thugs their bodies were buried in a levee. Them good ol' boys being: Holly, Valens, and the Big Bopper, They were singing about their death on February 3. 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; hit in 1958."Oh I wonder, wonder who... who, who wrote the book of love?"

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

\*\*In 1955, Don Cornell did a song entitled "The Bible Tells Me So." It was difficult to tell if it was what McLean was referencing. Anyone know for sure?

There is also an old Sunday School song that goes:"Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so" McLean was somewhat religious.

*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?*

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

McLean was asking many questions about the early rock 'n roll in an attempt to keep it alive or find out if it was already dead.

*Well I know that 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*

Before the popularity of rock and roll, music, like much elsewhere in the U. S., was highly segregated. The popular music of black performers for largely black audiences was called, first "race music," later softened to 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 McGuire 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. (Also, Jimmy Buffet does a song about "a white sport coat and a pink crustacean." :-))

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

## *Refrain*

*(Verse 3) Now for ten years we've been on our own*

McLean was writing this song in the late 60's, about ten years after the crash.

*And moss grows fat on a rolling stone*

It's unclear who the "rolling stone" is supposed to be. It could be Dylan, since "Like a Rolling Stone" (1965) was his first major hit; and since he was busy writing songs extolling the virtues of simple love, family and contentment while staying at home (he didn't tour from '66 to '74) and raking in the royalties. This was quite a change from the earlier, angrier Dylan.

The "rolling stone" could also be Elvis Presley, although I don't think he started to pork out by the late sixties. he-he!

It could refer to rock and rollers, and the changes that had taken place in the business in the 60's, especially the huge amounts of cash some of them were beginning to make, and the relative stagnation that entered the music at the same time.

Or, it could refer to the Rolling Stones themselves, many musicians were angry at the Stones for "selling out." I discovered that John Foxx of Ultravox was sufficiently miffed to write a song titled "Life At Rainbow's End (For All The Tax Exiles On Main Street)." The Stone sat one point became citizens of some other country merely to save taxes.

*But that's not how it used to be When the jester sang for the King and Queen*

The jester is Bob Dylan, as will become clear later. There are several interpretations of king and queen: some think that Elvis Presley is the king, which seems rather obvious. The queen is said to be either Connie Francis or Little Richard. See the next note.

An alternate interpretation is that this refers to the Kennedys -- the King and Queen of "Camelot" -- who were present at a Washington DC civil rights rally featuring Martin Luther King. (There's a recording of Dylan performing at this rally. The Jester.)

The third interpretation is that the jester could be Lee Harvey Oswald who sang (shouted) before he was shot for the murder of the King (JFK).

*In a coat he borrowed from James Dean*

In the movie "Rebel Without a Cause," James Dean has a red windbreaker that holds symbolic meaning throughout the film (see note at end). In one particularly intense scene, Dean lends his coat to a guy who is shot and killed; Dean's father arrives, sees the coat on the dead man, thinks it's Dean, and loses it. On the cover of "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan," Dylan is wearing just such a red windbreaker, posed in a street scene similar to movie starring James Dean.

Bob Dylan played a command performance for the Queen of England. He was \*not\* properly attired, so perhaps this is a reference to his apparel.

*And a voice that came from you and me*

Bob Dylan's roots are in American folk music, with people like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. Folk music is by definition the music of the masses, hence the "...came from you and me."

*Oh, and while the King was looking down The jester stole his thorny crown*

Likely a reference to Elvis' decline and Dylan's ascendance (i.e. Presley is looking down from a height as Dylan takes his place). Consider that Elvis was in the army at the time of Dylan's ascendancy and a common Army marching song sings, "Ain't no use in looking down, ain't no discharge on the ground". The thorny crown might be a reference to the price of fame. Dylan has said that he wanted to be as famous as Elvis, one of his early idols.

or...

Lee Harvey Oswald being the jester who ended the reign of JFK and "stole his crown."

or...

A third interpretation is the quote made by John Lennon and taken out of context indicating that John felt The Beatles were more popular than Jesus. John and The Beatles took the crown from Christ.

*The courtroom was adjourned, No verdict was returned.*

This could be the trial of the Chicago Seven.

but its more likely to be...

The fact that no verdict was returned for the assassination of JFK because the assassin was killed so the court was adjourned.

*And while Lennon read a book on Marx,*

Or it could be be...

And while Lenin read a book on Marx,

Someone has to introduce Vladimir Lenin, the father of Marxist communism, to the ideology of Karl Marx.

I love the play on words here...

Literally, John Lennon reading about Karl Marx; figuratively, the introduction of radical politics into the music of The Beatles. (Of course, he could be referring to Groucho Marx, but that doesn't seem quite consistent with McLean's overall tone. On the other hand, some of the wordplay in Lennon's lyrics and books is reminiscent of Groucho.) The "Marx-Lennon" word play 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 Beatles "Here, There and Everywhere," for example. Also, a famous French witticism was "Je suis Marxiste, tendance Groucho." (I'm a Marxist of the Groucho variety).

*The quartet practiced in the park*

There are two schools of thought about this; the obvious one is The Beatles playing in Shea Stadium, but note that the previous line has John Lennon \*doing something else at the same time\*. This tends to support the theory that this is 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; 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 "dirge" is a funeral or mourning song, so perhaps this is meant literally...or, perhaps, this is a reference to some of the new "art rock" groups that played long pieces not meant for dancing. In the dark of the death of Holly.

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

*Refrain*

*(Verse 4) Helter Skelter in a summer swelter*

"Helter Skelter" is a Beatles song that 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.

Is "summer swelter" a reference to the "Summer of Love" or perhaps to the "long hot summer" of Watts?

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

Without a doubt this refers to the Byrds who helped launch David Crosby to super stardom. The Byrd's song "Eight Miles High" was found on their late 1966 release "Fifth Dimension." They recorded this song when some of the groups members were considering leaving (some of the groups members actually left the group because they refused to fly in an airplane). A fallout shelter was sometimes referred to as the fifth dimension because of the 1950's fascination with

sci-fi and the futuristic appearance of a fallout shelter. This was one of the first records widely banned because of supposedly drug-oriented lyrics.

But...

Another idea considers The Beatles' "Helter Skelter." A line from the song reads, 'I'm coming down fast but I'm miles above you.' The similarity is pretty obvious.

*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, but about what? It could be the Rolling Stones, i.e., they were waiting for an opening that really didn't happen until The Beatles broke up.

With regard to the next idea, the players maybe other musicians who received the opportunity to shine when Dylan was injured.

*With the jester on the sidelines in a cast*

On July 29, 1966, Dylan crashed his Triumph 55 motorcycle while riding near his home in Woodstock, New York. He spent nine months in seclusion while recuperating from the accident. This gave a chance for many other artists to become noticed (see the next interpretation).

*Now the half-time air was sweet perfume*

Drugs, man.

Well, now, wait a minute; that's probably too obvious (wouldn't want to make it easy). It's possible that this line and the next few refer to the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The "sweet perfume" is probably tear gas.

It could be the fact that since Dylan was temporarily out of the picture, the future looked bright for many artists. The Stones, for example, may have been given a brief chance.

*While sergeants played a marching tune*

Following from the second thought above, the sergeants would be the Chicago Police and the Illinois National Guard, who marched protesters out of the park where the Convention was being held and into jail.

Alternatively, this could refer to The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." Or, perhaps McLean refers to The Beatles' music as "marching" because it's not music for dancing.

Or, finally, the "marching tune" could be the draft.

\*\**(What did the Stones release in '66??)*

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

The Beatles' 1966 Candlestick Park concert only lasted 35 minutes. But at this point The Beatles were not "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" (1967)

Or, following on from the previous comment, perhaps she was considering the hippies who were protesting the Convention. They were known for playing their own folk music.

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

Some folks think this refers to either the 1968 Democratic Convention or Kent State. If the players are the protesters at Kent State, and the marching band the Ohio National Guard...

This could be 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 that featured some of the same sort of studio and electronic experimentation as "Sgt. Pepper" (1967). The album sold poorly because of The Beatles.

The other Beatles reference here refers to the Monkees. The Monkees were merely actors (or players), they were not a true band but a fabrication attempting to replicate The Beatles. The players tried to take the place of the Fab Four but the band wouldn't step down.

Or finally, this might be a comment that follows up on the earlier reference to the draft: the government/military industrial-complex establishment refused to accede to the demands of the peace movement.

*Do you recall what was revealed, The day the music died?*

\*\*Check for any controversies released on Feb,3, 1959.

*We started singing*

*Refrain*

*(Verse 5) And there we were all in one place*

Woodstock.

*A generation lost in space*

Some people think this is a reference to the US space program, which it might be (the first moon landing took place in '69); but that seems a bit too literal. Perhaps this is 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 (which was referred to as being "spaced-out.")

Being on drugs was sometimes termed -- being lost in space because of the TV show, "Lost in Space," whose title was used as a synonym for someone who was rather high... I keep hoping that McLean had better taste. :-)

*With no time left to start again*

The "lost generation" spent too much time being stoned, and had wasted their lives. Or, perhaps, their preferences for psychedelia had pushed rock and roll so far from Holly's music that it couldn't be retrieved.

*So come on Jack be nimble Jack be quick*

Probably 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? (unconfirmed)

Jack Flash is also a cockney slang term for pharmaceutical heroin. If you know how to use heroin, you understand the reference.

*'Cause fire is the devil's only friend*

It's possible that this is a reference to the Grateful Dead's "Friend of the Devil."

An alternate interpretation of the last four lines is that they may refer to Jack Kennedy and his quick decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis; the candlesticks/fire refer to ICBMs and nuclear war.

*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 1968, the Stones appointed members of the Hell's Angels to work security (on the advice of the Grateful Dead). 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" (because of "satan's spell") had somehow incited the violence and caused the Stones to drop the song from their show for the next six years. This incident is chronicled in the documentary film "Gimme Shelter."

It's also possible that McLean views the Stones as being negatively inspired (he had an extensive religious background) because of "Sympathy for the Devil," "Their Satanic Majesties'

Request"and so on. This is a bit puzzling, since the early Stones recorded a lot of "roots" rock and roll, including Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away."

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

The most likely interpretation is that McLean is still talking about Altamont, and in particular Mick Jagger's prancing and posing and "climbing high" while it was happening. Or the bonfires around the area could provide the flames. The sacrifice is Meredith Hunter.

(It could be a reference to Jimi Hendrix burning his Stratocaster at the Monterey Pop Festival, but that was in 1967 and this verse is no doubt set in 1968.)

*I saw Satan laughing with delight*

If the above is correct, then Satan would be Jagger.

*The day the music died He was singing...*

*Refrain*

*(Verse 6) I met a girl who sang the blues*

Ms. Janis Joplin, the lady of the blues.

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

Janis died of an accidental (accidental my ass!)heroin overdose on October 4, 1970.

Or...

The girl might be Roberta Flack. Its rumored that she wrote, "Killing Me Softly (with his song)," in response to this lyric in his song.

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

There are two interpretations of this: The "sacred store" was Bill Graham's Fillmore West, one of the great rock and roll venues of all time. Alternatively, this refers to record stores, and their long time (then discontinued) practice of allowing customers to preview records in the store. (What year did the Fillmore West close?)

It could also refer to record stores as "sacred" because this is where one goes to get "saved." (See above lyric "Can music save your mortal soul?")

*But the man there said the music wouldn't play*

Perhaps he means that nobody is interested in hearing Buddy Holly et. al.'s music? Or, as above, the discontinuation of the in-store listening booths.

*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.

It is possible that this refers to the Vietnamese children. Life magazine was famous for publishing horrifying photos of children in Vietnam during the Vietnamese War.

*The lovers cried and the poets dreamed*

The trend toward psychedelic music in the 60's? Or again the hippies who were both great lovers and poets who would then be crying because of the difficulties of their struggle and dreaming of peace.

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

It could be that 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*

Holly, The Big Bopper, and Valens -- or -- \*\*Hank Williams, Presley, and Holly (check this) --or -- JFK, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy -- or -- or simply the Catholic aspects of the deity. McLean had attended several Catholic schools.

*They caught the last train for the coast*

Could be a reference to wacky California religions, or it could just be a way of saying that they've left (or died -- western culture has used "went west" as a synonym for dying). Or, perhaps this is a reference to the famous "God is Dead" headline in the New York Times. Some have suggested that this is an oblique reference to a line in Procol Harum's "Whiter Shade of Pale," but I'm not sure I'd buy that; firstly, all of McLean's musical references are to much older roots: rock and roll songs; and secondly, I think it's more likely that this line shows up in both songs simply because it's a common cultural metaphor.

*The day the music died*

This tends to support the conjecture that the "three men" were Holly/Bopper/Valens, since this says that they left us on the day the music died.

*And they were singing...*

*Refrain (2x)*

## **Comments: James Dean, Waylon Jennings, The Beatles, and Bob Dylan**

There were supposed to be four people on the plane. There was only room for three. The fourth person lost the coin toss -- or should I say won the toss. His name is Waylon Jennings. Jennings was the bass player for Holly's band at the time. Some people say that Holly had chartered the plane for his band, but that Valens and/or Richardson was to replace Jennings who was sick that night.

About the "coat he borrowed from James Dean": James Dean's red windbreaker is important throughout the "Rebel Without a Cause," not just at the end. When he put it on, it meant that it was time to face the world, time to do what he thought had to be done, and other melodramatic but thoroughly enjoyable stuff like that. The week after the movie came out, nearly every clothing store in the U.S. was sold out of red windbreakers. Remember that Dean's impact was similar to Dylan's: both were a symbol for the youth of their time, a reminder that they had something to say and demanded to be heard.

Some figure that if Holly had not have died, then we would not have suffered through the Fabian/Pat Boone era... and consequently, we wouldn't have "needed" the Beatles (I have strong arguments opposing that opinion). Holly was quickly moving pop music away from the stereotypical boy/girl love lost/found lyrical ideas, and was recording with unique instrumentation and techniques...things that Beatles would not try until about 1965 (although I still credit the Beatles with all the musical revolutions). Without Holly's death, perhaps Dylan would have stuck with the rock and roll he played in high school and the Byrds never would have created an amalgam of Dylan songs and Beatle arrangements.