

Don McLean *American Pie*

A long long time ago¹
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.
But February made me shiver
With every paper I'd deliver²
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 bride³
But something touched me deep inside
The day the music died⁴
So

Refrain:

Bye-bye, Miss American Pie⁵
Drove my Chevy to the levee
But the levee was dry
And them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
Singin' this'll be the day that I die
This'll be the day that I die

Did you write the Book of Love
And do you have faith in God above⁶
If the Bible tells you so
Do you believe in rock 'n roll
Can music save your mortal soul
And can you teach me how to dance real slow
Well, I know that you're in love with him
'Cause I saw you dancin' in the gym⁷
You both kicked off your shoes⁸
Man, I dig those rhythm and blues
I was a lonely teenage broncin' buck
With a pink carnation and a pickup truck⁹
But I knew I was out of luck
The day the music died
I started singin'

{Refrain}

Now for ten years we've been on our own¹⁰
And moss grows fat on a rollin' stone¹¹
But that's not how it used to be
When the jester sang for the King and Queen¹²
In a coat he borrowed from James Dean¹³
And a voice that came from you and me
Oh, and while the King was looking down
The jester stole his thorny crown¹⁴
The courtroom was adjourned
No verdict was returned¹⁵
And while Lennon read a book of Marx¹⁶
The quartet practiced in the park
And we sang dirges in the dark¹⁷
The day the music died
We were singing

{Refrain}

Helter Skelter in a summer swelter¹⁸
The Byrds flew off with a fallout shelter
Eight miles high and falling fast¹⁹
It landed foul out on the grass
The players tried for a forward pass²⁰
With the jester on the sidelines in a cast²¹
Now the half-time air was sweet perfume
While the Sergeants played a marching tune
We all got up to dance
Oh, but we never got the chance²²
'Cause the players tried to take the field
The marching band refused to yield
Do you recall what was revealed
The day the music died?
We started singing

{Refrain}

Oh, and there we were all in one place²³
A generation Lost in Space
With no time left to start again
So come on, Jack be nimble, Jack be quick
Jack Flash sat on a candlestick²⁴
'Cause fire is the Devil's only friend
Oh, 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
And as the flames climbed high into the night
To light the sacrificial rite
I saw Satan laughing with delight
The day the music died
He was singing

{Refrain}

I met a girl who sang the blues
And I asked her for some happy news
But she just smiled and turned away²⁵
I went down to the sacred store
Where I'd heard the music years before
But the man there said the music wouldn't play
And in the streets the children screamed
The lovers cried, and the poets dreamed²⁶
But not a word was spoken
The church bells all were broken
And the three men I admire most The Father, Son and the
Holy Ghost²⁷
They caught the last train for the coast²⁸
The day the music died
And they were singing

{Refrain}

They were singing bye-bye, Miss American Pie
Drove my Chevy to the levee
But the levee was dry
Them good old boys were drinking whiskey and rye
Singin' this'll be the day that I die

¹ The plane crash occurred on February 3, 1959—about ten years before McLean wrote the song

² At the time McLean was 13, and a paperboy in New York

³ Buddy Holly's marriage to Maria Elena Santiago, a Puerto Rican woman 6 ½ months earlier was kept from the public because of the race difference and general public skepticism of rock marriages, especially after Jerry Lee Lewis married his 14-year old cousin. Maria Elena was pregnant with his baby, but suffered a miscarriage shortly after the plane crash.

⁴ With the death of Buddy Holly, Richie Valenz, and The Big Bopper, the day was referred to as the day the music died; one of Holly's hits was "That'll be the Day" with the line "That'll be the day that I die."

⁵ American Pie was the name of the plane

⁶ 1955: Don Cornell's song "The Bible Tells Me So"; 1958: The Monotones' song "The Book of Love"

⁷ Dancing partners in the 1950s were not readily exchanged, for slow dancing was an expression of love and commitment

⁸ Reference to the sock hops of the 1950s

⁹ Marty Robbins' 1957 hit "A White Sport Coat (And a Pink Carnation)"; pickup trucks have been a symbol of sexual independence

¹⁰ "American Pie" was written about ten years after the fatal plane crash

¹¹ Three references to the rolling stone: Bob Dylan's first major hit "Like a Rolling Stone", the aphorism "A rolling stone gathers no moss, and the group The Rolling Stones

¹² The Jester is Bob Dylan, the King and Queen have a few possibilities, but the most likely one is Elvis as the king and Little Richard as the Queen

¹³ On the cover of Bob Dylan's *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* he is wearing a red windbreaker, which looks a lot like the one James Dean wore in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

¹⁴ Elvis was forced into military service and Dylan took over, but the line also reminds us of Elvis' religious upbringings

¹⁵ Although Dylan hoped to become as famous as Elvis, there is no true king of rock during the early 1960s

¹⁶ A pun of John Lennon to Vladimir Lenin and their beliefs in communism

¹⁷ The Beatles practiced in Europe with hits but it was just practice because America was the arena, and where they would change rock music forever

¹⁸ The Beatles' "Helter Skelter" from their White album, apparently inspired Charles Manson to lead his followers into the Tate-LaBianca murders

¹⁹ The Byrds' "Eight Miles High" was on their 1966 album *Fifth Dimension*, and was one of the first to be widely banned because of its supposed drug-oriented lyrics. The next line discusses the busting of one of the Byrds for possession of marijuana

²⁰ The players are the Rolling Stones waiting for an opening which didn't really happen until the Beatles broke up

²¹ On July 29, 1966 Dylan crashed his motorcycle and spent nine months in seclusion recuperating from the accident

²² The Beatles' 1966 Candlestick Park concert lasted only 35 minutes

²³ Woodstock, 1969, where the "Lost Generation" gathered, and they were all high

²⁴ Jack is Mick Jagger, and the following lines refer to the concert at the Altamont Speedway in 1968. During their song "Sympathy for the Devil," the security—Hell's Angels—beat and stabbed a young man named Meredith Hunter (the sacrifice) to death

²⁵ Janis Joplin, as the girl, died of an accidental heroin overdose on October 4, 1970

²⁶ The "Flower Children" were beaten by police and National Guard troops, most likely during the People's Park riots in Berkeley in 1969 and 1970. They were also lovers and poets. The trend shifted towards psychedelic music in the late 1960s also

²⁷ Most likely Holly, The Big Bopper, and Valenz, but could also be Hank Williams, Presley, and Holly, OR JFK, Martin Luther King, and RFK, OR simply the Catholic aspects of the deity.

²⁸ Another way to say they have died (in western culture "went west" was a synonym for dying).