



FIG. 1 — THE STAGE THAT SURVIVES. THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE SONGS THAT DON'T.

The songs never **sung**

Twelve musicians who died mid-verse

History Unwritten

Free preview: chapter one of twelve

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Every chapter begins with what the record shows and says plainly where the record ends. The documented parts are documented. The alternative histories are reasoned, not claimed. Nobody, including this book, knows what would really have happened. This free preview contains the first chapter. The complete ebook is available at historyunwritten.page-shelf.com

Contents

01	Buddy Holly, 1959: The Plane That Did Not Take Off	4
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CHAPTER 1

Buddy Holly, 1959: The Plane That Did Not Take Off



Buddy Holly, 1959 · AI-generated illustration

The Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa, held its last note a little after midnight on February 2, 1959. Buddy Holly had played two sets with a pickup band, backing singers Dion and the Belmonts, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. Richardson, known onstage as

the Big Bopper. The tour was called the Winter Dance Party, twenty four one night stands across the frozen upper Midwest in twenty three days, booked by an agency that gave almost no thought to the distances between towns, the condition of the bus, or the fact that a Midwest February routinely drops well below zero at night.

The bus itself had already failed once. Its heater had broken days earlier, and the drummer, Carl Bunch, had been hospitalized in Ironwood, Michigan, with frostbite in his feet, bad enough that he could not go on. Holly had been playing dates with a borrowed rhythm section and sleeping, when he slept at all, in a coat on a bus seat with newspaper stuffed against the windows. He had had enough of it. Sometime that afternoon or evening he asked about chartering a plane to get himself, and whoever wanted to come, ahead to the next stop, Moorhead, Minnesota, so there would be time to do laundry and rest before the following night's show. The airfield that could take the charter was not in Moorhead itself but across the river in Fargo, North Dakota, at Hector Airport, close enough to serve the same date.

Hubert Dwyer, who ran a small flying service out of Mason City Municipal Airport, took the charter. The airplane was a Beechcraft Bonanza, tail number N3794N, a four seat single engine machine, and the pilot was Roger Peterson, twenty one years old, a local flight instructor with several hundred hours logged, mostly by sight rather than by instruments. Peterson held a private pilot's certificate and was working toward an instrument rating, but he had already failed one attempt at the checkride for it and had not yet passed a second. That distinction mattered more than anyone at the airport that night seems to have weighed.

There were three seats besides the pilot's. Holly took one. Waylon Jennings, playing bass in Holly's band that winter, had a seat and gave it up, at Richardson's request, because Richardson had a bad cold and the unheated bus was punishing him. Tommy Allsup, the guitarist, had the third seat and lost it to Ritchie Valens on a coin toss backstage. Jennings has said in interviews across the following decades that as he handed his seat over, Holly told him, in the joking register of two men who had spent three weeks freezing together, that he hoped the bus froze up again, and Jennings answered that he hoped the plane crashed. Jennings carried that exchange for the rest of his life.

The Bonanza left Mason City a little before one in the morning on February 3. Snow was falling, light at the airport but worsening to the north, and the night was without a visible horizon, the kind of dark in which a pilot flying by feel rather than by instruments can lose track of which way is up. Dwyer watched the plane's lights climb and then disappear into the weather. Six minutes or so after takeoff, the aircraft struck the ground at high speed and nearly level attitude in a cornfield owned by a farmer named Albert Juhl, about five miles northwest of the airport. Juhl found the wreckage the next morning. Holly, Valens, Richardson, and Peterson were all dead at the scene. Investigators from the Civil Aeronautics Board later concluded that Peterson, not rated to fly on instruments alone, had most likely become spatially disoriented in the dark and snow, misreading the attitude gyro in a plane whose instrument was of a different design than the one he had trained on, showing pitch in a way he was not used to reading, and had flown the aircraft into the ground without ever realizing he was descending.

Holly was twenty two. That is the record, checked and cross checked for more than sixty years: a broken bus heater, a hospitalized drummer, a charter arranged in an afternoon, a coin toss, a pilot who had already failed one instrument checkride, and six minutes of flight into snow. What follows is not that.

To understand what a longer life would have meant, it helps to know what the twenty two years had already produced, because Holly was not a beginner cut off before he started. He was, by February 1959, already changing shape as an artist, and the change is documented, not guessed at.

He was born Charles Hardin Holley on September 7, 1936, in Lubbock, Texas, the youngest of four children in a family that sang and played instruments around the house without any of it being a profession. Lubbock was flat, dry, conservative, and full of radio: country and western on one station, gospel on Sunday, and, as Holly got older, the rhythm and blues coming up from Southern stations at night. He took piano lessons as a small child, tried the violin, and settled on the guitar around age eleven, which he never really put down again. By his early teens he had teamed up with a school friend, Bob Montgomery, as a duo billed as Buddy and Bob, playing country and bluegrass on a Sunday afternoon program on the Lubbock station KDAV, and by then he was already writing songs rather than only performing other people's.

The break that mattered came in 1955, when Holly's local band opened for Elvis Presley on a swing through West Texas. Presley's effect on Holly was immediate and specific: it was permission to combine the country music Holly already knew with the harder

backbeat of rhythm and blues, and to do it with a full band rather than a solo act. A talent scout who saw Holly around that time recommended him to Decca Records, and in 1956 Holly went to Nashville to record under the label, with sessions produced under Decca's staff arrangements and overseen in the studio by Owen Bradley. The results were stiff, unremarkable, and did not sell, and Decca dropped him within the year. The contract Decca cut him loose from carried a clause forbidding him to rerecord the same songs under his own name for five years, a piece of ordinary industry boilerplate that turned out to matter a great deal, because when Holly and a new producer, Norman Petty, cut a version of one of those Nashville songs, "That'll Be the Day," in Petty's small studio in Clovis, New Mexico, they released it not under Holly's name but under a new one invented for the band backing him: the Crickets. The workaround became a lasting identity. Brunswick Records, a Decca subsidiary, issued the Crickets records, while Coral, another Decca label, issued records credited to Holly as a solo artist, often built from the same sessions, so that for a period Holly was effectively signed twice over to the company that had already once let him go.

It was in Petty's Clovis studio, a hundred miles from Lubbock, where the rates were cheap and the hours were whatever Holly wanted them to be, that he built the sound that made him matter. "That'll Be the Day" went to number one in 1957. "Peggy Sue," "Oh Boy," "Maybe Baby," and "Not Fade Away" followed within about a year. What set the records apart was not volume or novelty but construction: close doubled vocal takes, hand claps used as a rhythm instrument, a Fender Stratocaster played in rhythm figures

that outlined chords in ways few guitarists on pop radio were doing at the time, and a willingness to leave in the imperfections, the hiccuping vocal breaks, that other producers would have smoothed out. Holly also wore heavy black framed glasses on stage at a time when almost no one else with a hit record did, because he was nearsighted and had simply stopped hiding it. The look became as recognizable as the songs.

The Crickets' reach that year went further than the charts. A New York booking agency, working from the records alone and not knowing what the band looked like, put them on the bill at the Apollo Theater in Harlem in the summer of 1957, an almost entirely Black venue that had assumed from the rhythm and blues feel of the songs that the Crickets were a Black group. The band's first house of the week was cold, and by most accounts of the engagement it took several nights of playing before the room came around, but by the end of the run they had won it. Holly and the Crickets appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show twice, on December 1, 1957, and again on January 26, 1958, television exposure of a kind few rock and roll acts of the moment were given more than once. In the spring of 1958 the band toured England for three weeks, Holly's only trip overseas, playing theaters to audiences that included teenagers in Liverpool who would remember the shows, and the records that followed them, for the rest of their lives.

By late 1958 the arrangement that had made him was falling apart. Petty controlled the publishing and much of the money moved through Petty's accounts before it reached the musicians, and Holly, married that August to Maria Elena Santiago, a young woman he had met through her work at a New York music publishing

company and proposed to on their first meeting, wanted out from under it. He split from the Crickets as a business entity, though not entirely as friends, moved with his wife into an apartment in Greenwich Village, and began working without Petty. He recorded "True Love Ways" in October 1958 in New York with the arranger and conductor Dick Jacobs, using a full string section, a deliberate departure from the two guitar, bass, and drums sound the Crickets records had built his name on. In the weeks before the Winter Dance Party tour, alone in the Village apartment with a home tape recorder, he cut a batch of solo demos, just voice and acoustic guitar, songs still being worked out, later released long after his death as an unfinished sketch of where he might have gone next. He took the Winter Dance Party tour that January largely because he needed the money; the split from Petty had left his finances tied up in litigation, and a low budget tour of the Midwest, undignified as the conditions were, paid in cash and paid promptly.

That is the shape of the twenty two years: a fast, complete first act, already ending, with a second act sketched in string arrangements and apartment tape hiss but not yet recorded properly, and a bus with a broken heater standing between him and the next city.

The hinge is narrow and it sits at Mason City Municipal Airport on the night of February 2, in the interval between the weather briefing Roger Peterson received and the moment he took the runway. Peterson called the airport's weather bureau contractor for a briefing before the flight. What he was given described conditions as marginal but flyable by visual reference, and there is a documented gap in the record as to whether a later teletype sequence report, one that would have shown the ceiling and visibility continuing to drop

to the north along the route, was fully relayed to him before departure. Small charter flights at rural airports in 1959 were commonly delayed for an hour, or held until morning, when a briefer flagged worsening conditions and the pilot lacked an instrument rating to fall back on. That was not an unusual precaution; it was the ordinary, boring safety margin such flights operated with. Dwyer, who owned the aircraft and the business, had the standing to hold the flight, and by some accounts he watched it climb into the dark with visible unease.

Change one fact, and only one: the full sequence report reaches Peterson, or Dwyer, before the engine starts, and the flight is held for morning, when the front had cleared. Nothing else about the tour needs to be different. The bus is still broken. Carl Bunch is still in an Ironwood hospital. Holly is still exhausted and still wants to be ahead of the pack for once. He simply does the thing thousands of touring musicians have done when a charter falls through: he rides the bus one more night, grumbling, and flies out, or is driven out, the next day once the weather has broken. Valens and Richardson do the same. Waylon Jennings never has to carry the exchange about the bus and the plane, because neither one goes wrong. This is the plausible version: not a heroic rescue, not a change of heart, just an hour's delay for a weather update that regularly happened elsewhere and did not happen there.

What that hour buys is not only Holly's life. It is Ritchie Valens's, seventeen years old and two months into national fame off "La Bamba" and "Donna," and J.P. Richardson's, twenty eight, a former Texas radio disc jockey turned novelty hitmaker with "Chantilly Lace," who had reportedly written more songs than he had yet had

the chance to record. All three survive the winter of 1959. So does Roger Peterson, twenty one, who in this version logs his instrument rating later that year and keeps flying charters out of Mason City for a long time afterward, his name known only to the small number of people who ever charter a plane there, not to the rest of the world.

For Holly specifically, the years directly after 1959 most plausibly continue the direction already visible in "True Love Ways" and the Village apartment tapes: strings, ballads, a slower and more considered studio pace than the Crickets years, and a business arrangement in which he, having already fought Norman Petty over publishing once, keeps closer control of his own masters and songwriting credits than most of his contemporaries did. Roy Orbison, working the same Nashville and Texas circuits, offers one comparison for what a surviving Holly's middle period might have resembled: ballad heavy, string laden, occasionally out of step with the guitar bands crowding the charts, but capable of hits when the material was strong. Whether Holly would have kept innovating at the pace of 1957 and 1958, or whether he would have settled into a steady, respectable career the way many first generation rock and roll singers did once the novelty of the music itself wore off, is not something the record can answer. It is reasoned guesswork built on the direction of his last sessions, not a documented fact.

The nineteen sixties bring the clearest and most checkable consequence, because it runs through people whose testimony exists. John Lennon and Paul McCartney were teenagers in Liverpool when Holly's records reached England, and the influence is not disputed: the Quarrymen, the skiffle group that became the Beatles, made their first private recording in 1958 as a cover of

"That'll Be the Day," taped a few months after Holly's own band had played their city. Lennon later spoke about Holly's ordinariness, a plain looking man in glasses who wrote his own songs and played his own guitar, as proof that a person did not need to look like a matinee idol to make records that mattered. The name Beatles itself, arrived at in 1960, is widely understood as an echo of the Crickets, insect for insect, a private joke about lineage that the band never fully hid. If Holly is alive and recording through the start of the British group's rise, the plausible scene is not a rewriting of the Beatles' history but an addition to it: a working musician in his mid twenties, watching from New York or Texas as a band on another continent builds hits out of the chord voicings and vocal doubling he had put on record a few years earlier, and, at some point, very possibly meeting them. Holly had toured Britain in 1958 to enthusiastic houses; a second visit in the years the Merseybeat scene was breaking is easy to imagine and impossible to document, because it never had the chance to happen.

One piece of the actual historical record deserves to be stated plainly because the counterfactual bears on it directly. In the real history, Paul McCartney bought the publishing rights to Buddy Holly's song catalogue in the 1970s, through his company MPL Communications, and has hosted an annual celebration of Holly's music, called Buddy Holly Week, in London for decades since. That purchase was possible because Holly was dead and his catalogue, tied up through Petty's companies and later estates, eventually came onto the market. A Holly who lived past 1959, having already broken from Petty once over exactly this kind of control, is a far less likely seller of his own songs twenty years later. The most

defensible historical statement is a negative one: the specific event of McCartney owning Holly's publishing is a product of Holly's death, not something a longer life would simply have delayed. In its place, one can reasonably picture something looser and less documentable, an admiring relationship between an older American rock and roll songwriter and the young British group who had learned from his records, possibly a session, possibly nothing more than mutual public praise. Historians of the period differ on how close that relationship would plausibly have grown, and nothing in the surviving record settles it.

Through the nineteen seventies, a surviving Holly, now in his late thirties and early forties, sits alongside Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, and the reunited Everly Brothers as an artist from rock and roll's first wave working the revival circuit that decade rewarded generously. Two real markers from that decade sharpen the point by contrast. In 1971 the songwriter Don McLean released "American Pie," an eight and a half minute single that reached number one on the strength of a chorus mourning what it called the day the music died, a phrase that entered ordinary language as shorthand for the Clear Lake crash and has stayed there since. That song, as written and as heard by tens of millions of people, exists because Holly did not survive; it is a monument built on the specific fact of his death, and a Holly who lived past 1959 removes the occasion for it entirely, not merely postpones it. In 1978 a biographical film, "The Buddy Holly Story," brought Gary Busey an Academy Award nomination for playing him, the kind of retrospective treatment usually reserved for artists whose careers have already closed. A living Holly, forty one that year and, in this version, still recording,

is a far less obvious subject for that kind of film; the more plausible fate for the project is a television profile of a working veteran, or no film at all, since Hollywood rarely make-believes the life of someone still out on tour.

The nineteen eighties bring one clean, checkable date. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted its first class in 1986, and Buddy Holly was in it, honored posthumously alongside Presley, Berry, and others. In this longer version of his life, Holly is fifty that year and inducted while he can attend the ceremony himself, which would make him one of the few members of that inaugural class present to accept the honor in person rather than have it accepted on his behalf. That distinction, small as it sounds, changes how the evening is remembered by everyone in the room, though there is no way to know what he would have said standing at the podium. The following year, in 1987, a film about Ritchie Valens, "La Bamba," became a modest hit and returned his signature song to the top of the charts thirty years after it had first climbed there. In the world where the plane never crashed, Valens is forty six in 1987, and the film that actually got made, a tragic biopic built around a seventeen year old's death, most likely does not exist in that shape; the more plausible artifact is an anniversary profile of a middle aged musician still occasionally charting, not a dramatization of his last months.

A further decade carries the same exercise usefully into the nineteen nineties, because two real, checkable events from that decade depend on Holly's absence in ways worth working through rather than skipping past. In 1994 the rock band Weezer released a song called "Buddy Holly" on their debut album, paired with a widely

seen music video, directed by Spike Jonze, that spliced the band into footage built to resemble the 1950s sitcom "Happy Days." The song and the video work because Holly, by then, functioned as a fixed cultural marker of a frozen decade: glasses, a name, a beat, safely distant and safely dead. A Holly who kept working into his own fifties and sixties is a harder man to use that way. He is not a period signifier borrowed for a joke about nostalgia; he is a peer of the songwriters doing the borrowing, possibly aware of the record himself, possibly asked for comment by a journalist covering it, which is a wholly different and far less documentable relationship than the one that actually exists between a dead icon and a band paying tribute to him. In 1997 the Recording Academy gave Buddy Holly a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, an honor the Academy has given to both living and deceased artists but which most often goes to people who can walk up and accept it. In this version, Holly is sixty that year, and the award is not a memorial gesture but an ordinary one, indistinguishable from the same honor given the same year to other veteran performers still working the circuit. Neither of these two nineteen nineties artifacts, the Weezer song as culture actually made it or the Lifetime Achievement Award as culture actually gave it, needs to be false in the real timeline for the point to hold; both are simply harder to picture happening in quite the same form to a man who was still around to have opinions about how he was being remembered.

Beyond that point the honest answer is that the trail runs out, not because nothing would have happened but because nothing did happen, and a documentary account has to stop where invention would have to begin. A Holly who reached his eighties would be

turning ninety in the year this chapter is being written, an age a small number of his contemporaries, Little Richard among them, did reach. Whether he would have kept performing, retired from the industry that had briefly nearly bankrupted him in a fight over his own songs, or simply lived quietly on the royalties he had, by then, fully controlled, is not a question the historical record can answer, because in the world that actually happened he never got the chance to choose.

The documented part of this chapter is the part that occurred: the broken bus heater, the hospitalized drummer, the charter arranged on the afternoon of February 2, 1959, the coin toss between Tommy Allsup and Ritchie Valens, Waylon Jennings giving up his seat to J.P. Richardson, Roger Peterson's incomplete instrument qualification, and the crash six minutes after takeoff into a snow covered cornfield outside Clear Lake, Iowa, that killed all four men aboard. The hinge, a delayed weather report and a held flight, is reasoned from ordinary aviation practice of the period and from the specific, recorded gap in what Peterson was told before he took off; it did not happen, but it plausibly could have. Everything after that hinge, the further records, the possible meeting with a young band from Liverpool who had already taken his chord shapes and his name for their own, the induction he might have accepted in person, the awkward fit of a living Holly inside songs and films and video clips that in fact were built entirely around his absence, belongs to reasoned speculation built on the direction his last sessions and business decisions were already taking, not to fact. Where it thins out entirely, past the nineteen nineties, this chapter says so and

stops, because that is where the true record already stopped, on a cold night in Iowa, six minutes after a small plane left the ground.