

THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

CIVIL AERONAUTICS BOARD

This is the wreckage of the airplane crash that killed rock 'n' roll music icons Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "the Big Bopper" Richards 65 years ago.

A TROUBLE-PLAGUED WINTER TOUR

Holly, Valens and Richardson are part of a winter barnstorming tour of Midwestern concert venues. Also on the tour is Dion DiMucci of the Belmonts, who would become famous in the 1960s for "Runaround Sue" and "The Wanderer."

The tour is a low-cost affair, with long bus rides between venues and grueling nightly performances. First, the heater on the bus stops working. Then, on Jan. 31, the bus breaks down in rural Wisconsin. The singers burn newspapers in the aisle to stay warm until help arrives. The drummer of Buddy Holly's band is hospitalized with frostbite.

When the heaters on the bus conk out again after a Sunday afternoon show in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Holly has had enough. While waiting for repairs, he calls ahead to charter an airplane to fly after the show that night in Clear Lake, Iowa, to their next stop in Moorhead, Minnesota. The plan: To catch up on sleep and laundry.



SURF BALLROOM

The Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa

The Winter Dance Party performs for 1,299 fans Feb. 2 at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake.

Joking around after the show, Holly learns that his bass player, Waylon Jennings, has given up his seat on the plane for Richardson, who's suffering from the flu.

"Well, I hope your old bus freezes up again," Holly tells his friend. "Well, hell, I hope your old plane crashes," Jennings jokes back.

Valens begs Holly's guitarist to give up his seat. They flip a coin. Valens wins the toss.

POOR WEATHER AND AN INEXPERIENCED PILOT



TRIP ADVISOR

The bean field where the plane crashed

Holly, Valens and Richardson climb aboard a tiny 1947 Beechcraft Bonanza. They take off in a light snow, moments before 1 a.m.

The 21-year-old pilot, Roger Peterson, climbs to 800 feet and then turns north. Moments later, the plane smashes into a bean field at 220 mph.

The plane is reported missing, but search parties don't begin looking until daylight. Eight hours after the crash, the owner of the plane spots the wreckage piled up against a fence, just 5 miles from the airport.

All three singers had been ejected from the plane in the crash. They and the pilot are dead and covered in fresh snowfall.

Investigators rule the accident was probably due to the pilot flying in conditions under which he'd need to rely on instruments. They noted Peterson had flunked an instrument flight check the previous year.

Twelve years later, singer Don McLean writes a song, "American Pie," that describes Feb. 3, 1959, as "the day the music died."



"American Pie" stays at No. 1 on the Billboard charts for four weeks in 1972, ironically outperforming most of the songs released by Holly, Valens and the Big Bopper.

THE SINGERS

BUDDY HOLLY, 22



FROM: Lubbock, Texas

WAS: A young country music songwriter who once opened for Elvis Presley in 1956. He later shifted to rock 'n' roll.

BECAME: One of the most influential musicians of his day. He and two friends formed the Crickets, singing Holly's songs.

HITS:

- "That'll Be the Day" — No. 1 in August 1957
- "Peggy Sue" — No. 3 in November 1957
- "Oh Boy" — No. 10 in December 1957
- "Maybe Baby" — No. 17 in March 1958

Holly split from his band in late 1958, moved to New York and worked on converting to a solo career. He hired three session players to work with him on the Winter Dance Party tour of the Midwest.

RITCHIE VALENS, 17



FROM: Pacoima, Calif.

WAS: A high school student who dropped out in 1958 after the owner of a small record label signed him to a contract.

BECAME: The first Mexican-American musician to break into the rock 'n' roll music scene.

HITS:

- "Donna" — No. 2 in December 1958
- "La Bamba" — No. 22 in January 1959

J.P. RICHARDSON, 28



FROM: Beaumont, Texas

WAS: A radio disc jockey. He began calling himself "the Big Bopper" after a dance called the Bop became popular on college campuses.

BECAME: A noted songwriter, writing two No. 1 hits: "White Lightning" for George Jones and "Running Bear" for Johnny Preston.

HIT:

- "Chantilly Lace" — No. 6 in August 1958

Sources: "The Day the Music Died" by Larry Lehmer, "The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits" by Joel Whitburn, "This Day in Music" by Neil Cossar, the Des Moines Register, the BBC, History.com, Time magazine, Rolling Stone