

= The Day the Music Died =

On February 3, 1959, rock and roll musicians Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson were killed in a plane crash near Clear Lake, Iowa, together with the pilot, Roger Peterson. The event later became known as "The Day the Music Died", after singer and songwriter Don McLean so referred to it in his 1971 song "American Pie".

At the time, Holly and his band, consisting of Waylon Jennings, Tommy Allsup, and Carl Bunch, were playing on the "Winter Dance Party" tour across the Midwest. Rising artists Valens and Richardson had joined the tour as well.

The long journeys between venues on board the cold, uncomfortable tour buses adversely affected the performers, with cases of flu and even frostbite. After stopping at Clear Lake to perform, and frustrated by such conditions, Holly decided to charter a plane to reach their next venue in Moorhead, Minnesota. Richardson, who had flu, swapped places with Jennings taking the latter's seat on the plane, while Allsup lost his seat to Valens on a coin toss.

Soon after take-off, late at night and in poor, wintry weather conditions, the pilot lost control of the light aircraft, a Beechcraft Bonanza, which subsequently crashed into a cornfield, leaving no survivors.

= = Background = =

Buddy Holly terminated his association with the Crickets in November 1958. For the start of the "Winter Dance Party" tour, he assembled a band consisting of Waylon Jennings (bass), Tommy Allsup (guitar), and Carl Bunch (drums), and the opening vocals of Frankie Sardo. The tour was set to cover 24 Midwestern cities in as many days. New hit artist Ritchie Valens, J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson and Dion DiMucci (of Dion and the Belmonts fame) joined the tour to promote their recordings and make an extra profit.

The tour began in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on January 23, 1959. The amount of travel soon became a logistical problem. The distance between venues had not been properly considered when the performances were scheduled. Adding to the disarray, the tour bus was not equipped for the weather. Its heating system broke down shortly after the tour began, in Appleton, Wisconsin. While flu spread among the rest of the performers, drummer Bunch was hospitalized in Ironwood, Michigan, for severely frostbitten feet. The musicians replaced that bus with a school bus and kept traveling. As Holly's group had been the backing band for all of the acts, Holly, Valens, and DiMucci took turns playing drums for each other at the performance in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and Clear Lake, Iowa.

On Monday, February 2, the tour arrived in Clear Lake. The town had not been a scheduled stop, but the tour promoters, hoping to fill an open date, called the manager of the local Surf Ballroom, Carroll Anderson (1920–2006), and offered him the show. He accepted, and they set the show for that night. By the time Holly arrived at the venue that evening, he was frustrated with the tour bus and decided to charter a plane to take him, after the show, to Fargo, North Dakota. The party would have picked him up for the next tour stop, in Moorhead, Minnesota, saving him the journey in the bus and leaving him time to get some rest.

= = Flight arrangements = =

Manager Anderson called Hubert Dwyer, owner of the Dwyer Flying Service, a company in Mason City, Iowa, to charter the plane to fly to Hector Airport in Fargo, the closest one to Moorhead. Flight arrangements were made with Roger Peterson, a 21-year-old local pilot described as a "young married man who built his life around flying".

The flying service charged a fee of \$36 per passenger for the flight on the 1947 single-engine, V-tailed Beechcraft 35 Bonanza (registration N3794N), which could seat three passengers plus the pilot. A popular misconception, originating from Don McLean's eponymous song about the crash, was that the plane was called American Pie. In fact, no record exists of any

name ever having been given to N3794N .

Richardson had contracted flu during the tour and asked Waylon Jennings for his seat on the plane . When Holly learned that Jennings was not going to fly , he said in jest : " Well , I hope your ol ' bus freezes up . " Jennings responded : " Well , I hope your ol ' plane crashes " , a humorous but ill @-@ fated response that haunted him for the rest of his life .

Ritchie Valens , who had once had a fear of flying , asked Tommy Allsup for his seat on the plane . The two agreed to toss a coin to decide . Bob Hale , a DJ with KRIB @-@ AM , was working the concert that night and flipped the coin in the ballroom 's side @-@ stage room shortly before the musicians departed for the airport . Valens won the coin toss for the seat on the flight . Dion had been approached to join the flight , although it is unclear exactly when he was asked . Dion decided that since the \$ 36 fare ( equivalent to US \$ 292 @. @ 20 in today 's money ) equaled the monthly rent his parents paid for his childhood apartment , he could not justify the indulgence .

= = Take @-@ off and crash = =

After the show ended , Anderson drove Holly , Valens , and Richardson to the Mason City Municipal Airport . The weather at the time of departure was reported as light snow , a ceiling of 3 @, @ 000 feet ( 910 m ) AMSL with sky obscured , visibility 6 miles ( 9 @, @ 700 m ) and winds from 20 to 30 mph ( 32 to 48 km / h ) . Although deteriorating weather was reported along the planned route , the weather briefings pilot Peterson received failed to relay the information .

The plane took off normally from runway 17 ( today 's runway 18 ) at 12 : 55 a.m. Central Time on Tuesday , February 3 . Dwyer , the owner of the flight service company , witnessed the take @-@ off from a platform outside the control tower . He was able to see clearly the aircraft 's tail light for most of the brief flight , which started with an initial left turn onto a northwesterly heading and a climb to 800 ft . The tail light was then observed gradually descending until it disappeared out of view . Around 1 : 00 a.m. , when Peterson failed to make the expected radio contact , repeated attempts to establish communication were made , at Dwyer 's request , by the radio operator , but they were all unsuccessful .

Later that morning , Dwyer , having heard no word from Peterson since his departure , took off in another airplane to retrace his planned route . Within minutes , at around 9 : 35 a.m. , he spotted the wreckage less than 6 mi ( 9 @. @ 7 km ) northwest of the airport . The sheriff 's office , alerted by Dwyer , dispatched Deputy Bill McGill , who drove to the crash site , a cornfield belonging to Albert Juhl .

The Bonanza had impacted terrain at high speed , estimated to have been around 170 mph ( 270 km / h ) , banked steeply to the right and in a nose @-@ down attitude . The right wing tip had struck the ground first , sending the aircraft cartwheeling across the frozen field for 540 feet ( 160 m ) , before coming to rest against a wire fence at the edge of Juhl 's property .

The bodies of Holly and Valens had been ejected from the torn fuselage and lay near the wreckage . Richardson 's body had been thrown over the fence and into the cornfield of Juhl 's neighbor Oscar Moffett , while pilot Peterson 's body was entangled in the plane 's wreckage . With the rest of the entourage en route to Minnesota , it fell to ballroom manager Carroll Anderson , who had driven the party to the airport and witnessed the plane 's takeoff , to identify the bodies of the musicians . County coroner Ralph Smiley certified that all four victims died instantly , citing the cause of death as " gross trauma to brain " for the three artists and " brain damage " for the pilot .

= = Aftermath = =

Holly 's pregnant wife , María Elena , learned of his death from the reports on television . A widow after only six months of marriage , she suffered a miscarriage shortly after , reportedly due to " psychological trauma " . Holly 's mother , on hearing the news on the radio at home in Lubbock , Texas , screamed and collapsed . María Elena Holly did not attend the funeral and has never visited the gravesite . She later said in an interview : " In a way , I blame myself . I was not feeling well when he left . I was two weeks pregnant , and I wanted Buddy to stay with me , but he had

scheduled that tour . It was the only time I wasn 't with him . And I blame myself because I know that , if only I had gone along , Buddy never would have gotten into that airplane . "

The " Winter Dance Party " tour did not stop ; Waylon Jennings and Tommy Allsup continued performing for two more weeks , with Jennings taking Holly 's place as lead singer . Meanwhile , the funerals of the victims were being held individually ; Holly and Richardson were buried in Texas , Valens in California , and pilot Peterson in Iowa .

= = Official investigation = =

The official investigation was carried out by the Civil Aeronautics Board ( CAB , precursor to the NTSB ) . It emerged that pilot Roger Peterson had over four years of flying experience , of which one with Dwyer Flying Service , and had accumulated 711 flying hours , of which 128 on Bonanzas . He had also logged 52 hours of instrument flying training , although had passed only his written examination , and was not yet qualified to operate in weather that required flying solely by reference to instruments . He , and Dwyer Flying Service itself , was certified to operate only under visual flight rules , which essentially require that the pilot must be able to see where he is going . However , on the night of the accident , the low clouds obscuring the stars , the lack of a visible horizon , and the absence of ground lights over the sparsely populated area would have made visual flight virtually impossible .

Furthermore , Peterson , who had failed an instrument checkride nine months before the accident , had received his instrument training on airplanes equipped with a conventional artificial horizon , as source of aircraft attitude information , while N3794N was equipped with an older @-@ type Sperry F3 attitude gyroscope . Crucially , the two types of instruments display the same aircraft pitch attitude information graphically in opposite ways .

The CAB concluded that the accident was due to " the pilot 's unwise decision to embark on a flight " that required instrument flying skills he had not demonstrated to have . A contributing factor was the pilot 's unfamiliarity with the old @-@ style attitude gyroscope fitted on board the aircraft , which may have caused him to believe he was climbing when he was , in fact , descending ( an example of spatial disorientation ) . Another contributing factor was the " seriously inadequate " weather briefing provided to the pilot , which " failed to even mention adverse flying condition which should have been highlighted " .

= = Subsequent investigations = =

On March 6 , 2007 , in Beaumont , Texas , the body of J.P. Richardson was exhumed to rebury it in a more fitting part of the local Forest Lawn cemetery . The musician 's son Jay Perry took the opportunity to have his father 's body re @-@ examined to verify the original findings , and asked forensic anthropologist William Bass to carry out the procedure .

Among the rumors surrounding the accident this second examination sought to verify was that an accidental firearm discharge took place on board the aircraft and caused the crash , since two months after the event , a farmer had found at the crash site a .22 pistol known to have belonged to Buddy Holly . Another rumor had Richardson surviving the initial impact and crawling out of the aircraft in search for help , prompted by the fact that his body was found farther from the wreckage than the other three .

Dr. Bass and his team took several X @-@ rays of Richardson 's body and eventually concluded that the musician had indeed died instantly from extensive , nonsurvivable fractures to almost all of his bones ; no traces of lead from any bullet was found , either . Coroner Smiley 's original report was therefore confirmed .

= = = Calls to reopen the investigation = = =

In March 2015 , the National Transportation Safety Board ( NTSB ) , the successor to the Civil Aeronautics Board , received a request to reopen the investigation into the accident . The request

was made by L. J. Coon , a retired pilot from New England , who felt that the conclusion of the 1959 investigation was inaccurate . Coon suspected a possible failure of the right rudder , or a problem with the fuel system , as well as a possible improper weight distribution . Coon also argued that Peterson may have tried to land the plane and that his efforts should be recognized . In April 2015 , the NTSB declined the request , citing that the evidence presented by Coon was insufficient to merit the reconsideration of the original findings .

= = Legacy = =

= = = Notification of victims ' families = = =

Following the miscarriage suffered by Holly 's wife and the circumstances in which she was informed of his death , a policy was later adopted by authorities not to disclose victims ' names until after their families have been informed .

= = = Memorials = = =

A memorial service for Roger Peterson was held at Redeemer Lutheran Church , Ventura , Iowa , on February 5 . A funeral was held the next day at St. Paul Lutheran Church in his hometown of Alta ; Peterson was buried in Buena Vista Memorial Cemetery in nearby Storm Lake . Peterson 's grave site is located at coordinates N 42 39 @.@ 189 W 095 13 @.@ 996 . Peterson 's parents would later receive condolence letters from the families of Holly and Valens .

= = = = Films = = = =

The accident is mentioned in the biographical film The Buddy Holly Story ( 1978 ) . The accident is also depicted in the Ritchie Valens biopic La Bamba ( 1987 ) .

= = = = Memorial concerts = = = =

Fans of Holly , Valens , and Richardson have been gathering for annual memorial concerts at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake since 1979 . The 50th @-@ anniversary concert took place on February 2 , 2009 , with Delbert McClinton , Joe Ely , Wanda Jackson , Los Lobos , Los Lonely Boys , Chris Montez , Bobby Vee , Graham Nash , Peter and Gordon , Tommy Allsup , and a house band featuring Chuck Leavell , James " Hutch " Hutchinson , Bobby Keys and Kenny Aronoff . Jay P. Richardson , the son of the Big Bopper , was among the participating artists , and Bob Hale was the master of ceremonies , as he was at the 1959 concert .

= = = = Monuments = = = =

In June 1988 , a four @-@ foot @-@ tall granite memorial bearing the names of Peterson and the three entertainers was dedicated outside The Surf Ballroom with Peterson 's widow , parents and sister in attendance ; the event marked the first time that the families of Holly , Richardson , Valens and Peterson had gathered together .

In 1988 , Ken Paquette , a Wisconsin fan of the 1950s era , erected a stainless steel monument that depicts a guitar and a set of three records bearing the names of the three performers perished in the accident . The monument is on private farmland , about 1 ? 4 mi ( 0 @.@ 40 km ) west of the intersection of 315th Street and Gull Avenue , 5 mi ( 8 @.@ 0 km ) north of Clear Lake . A large plasma @-@ cut steel set of Wayfarer @-@ style glasses , constructed by Michael Connor of Clear Lake , similar to those Holly wore , sits at the access point to the crash site .

Paquette also created a similar stainless steel monument to the three musicians located outside the Riverside Ballroom in Green Bay , Wisconsin , where Holly , the Big Bopper , and Valens played

their second @-@ to @-@ last show on the night of February 1 , 1959 . This second memorial was unveiled on July 17 , 2003 . In February 2009 , a further memorial made by Paquette for pilot Roger Peterson was unveiled at the crash site .

= = = = Roads = = = =

A road originating near the Surf Ballroom , extending north and passing to the west of the crash site , is now known as Buddy Holly Place .

= = = = Songs = = = =

Eddie Cochran 's " Three Stars " ( 1959 ) is the first song to commemorate the musicians .

Don McLean later addressed the accident in his song " American Pie " ( 1971 ) , dubbing it " the Day the Music Died " , which for McLean symbolized the " loss of innocence " of the early rock @-@ and @-@ roll generation .

Waylon Jennings mentioned the accident in his song " A Long Time Ago " ( 1978 ) , which he co @-@ wrote with Shel Silverstein . In the song , he says , " Don 't ask me who I gave my seat to on that plane | I think you already know . "

= = = Books = = =