

# “American Pie”—Don McLean (1971)

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Essay by Alan Howard (guest post)\*



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Don McLean*

Don McLean’s “American Pie” is partly biographical and partly the story of America during the idealized 1950s and the bleaker 1960s. It was initially inspired by Don’s memories of being a paperboy in 1959 and learning of the death of Buddy Holly. “American Pie” presents an abstract story of McLean’s life from the mid-1950s until the end of the 1960s, and at the same time it represents the evolution of popular music and politics over these years, from the lightness of the 1950s to the darkness of the late 1960s, but metaphorically the song continues to evolve to the present time. It is not a nostalgia song because “American Pie” changes as America, itself, is changing. For McLean, the transition from the light innocence of childhood to the dark realities of adulthood began with the deaths of his father and Buddy Holly and culminated with the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, which was the start of a more difficult time for America. During this four year period, Don moved from an idyllic childhood, through the shock and harsh realities of his father’s death in 1961, to his decision, in 1964, to leave Villanova University to pursue his dream of becoming a professional singer.

The 1950s were an era of happiness and affluence for the burgeoning American middle class. Americans had a feeling of optimism about their prospects for the future, and pride in their nation which had emerged victorious from World War II, setting the world free from the tyranny of Nazi Germany. Popular music mirrored society. Performers such as Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, and Bill Haley and the Comets recorded feel-good records that matched the mood of the nation. Sinister forces such as communism were banished, and serious folk groups, like the Weavers, were being replaced by the beat poets who, as members of the intelligentsia, were excused their lack of optimism.

The 1960s was the antithesis of the previous decade. The exuberant simplicity of the 1950s was displaced by a much more volatile and politically charged atmosphere. People were asking questions. The cozy world of white middle class America was disturbed, as civil rights campaigners marched on Washington, D.C., and Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The following year saw the 1964 Civil Rights Act become law. On the world stage, America’s leading super-power status was being challenged by the Soviet Union, and its military might was being tested by the Vietnamese. Even in music America soon found itself overrun by a British invasion. The 1960s was a turbulent time for McLean’s generation. By 1971, America was still deeply

troubled. The Vietnam War was out of control and the anti-war movement was gathering momentum.

Other events of the time, such as the successful launch of Apollo 14, did little to restore the national pride. “American Pie,” in the opinion of the song’s producer, Ed Freeman, was the funeral oration for an era: “Without it, many of us would have been unable to grieve, achieve closure, and move on. Don saw that, and wrote the song that set us free. We should all be eternally grateful to him for that.”

“American Pie” received its first airplay in the summer of 1971 on Pete Fornatel’s show on WNEW-FM in New York; it was played to mark the closing of the Fillmore East, a famous rock music venue. This was a live acoustic version, not the forthcoming hit record, but nevertheless it received an immediate and intense audience reaction. A few months later, in October, the first “American Pie” LP was delivered to WNEW-FM. Pete Fornatel played the whole record non-stop. “American Pie” reached No. 1 or No. 2 in every country in the world. In Britain, the album remained a chart topper for 54 weeks, stretching from 1972 to 1974.

For many the release of “American Pie” transformed Don McLean into a prophet and a superstar. “Time,” “Life,” and “Newsweek” all ran major stories on McLean and his remarkable song. During January and February of 1972, “American Pie” was the most played song on the radio. Twelve months later, it was still going strong. The song had touched a nerve, yet no one was sure what it was about. Was it about Kennedy or Buddy Holly? Was it a biblical prophecy, or an ecological protest song? “Life” magazine called the lyrics “a melodic and melancholy summing up of the recent history of pop music.”

Thirty years later, “American Pie” was voted number five in a poll of the 365 “Songs of the Century” compiled by the Recording Industry Association of America and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The top five were:

- “Over the Rainbow” by Judy Garland
- “White Christmas” by Bing Crosby
- “This Land Is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie
- “Respect” by Aretha Franklin
- “American Pie” by Don McLean

Today, Don McLean says that writing “American Pie” was about his life, what he lived through and what he experienced as a participant and witness to American music and politics. His intention was never to be evasive, or to create some sort of guessing game. “American Pie,” for Don, is not just a *roman a clef*, it is an American dream; it is an allegory.

Nearly 50 years on, Don McLean continues to write and sing what he wants, and in the process he has transcended all the usual categories in popular music making. He has done what few writer-performers ever are able to do: he has become an authentic original. Don McLean is a national treasure, one of the most singular and durable of all our popular vocalists and writers.

*Alan Howard is Don McLean's biographer and friend. In 2007, he authored the book "The Don McLean Story: Killing Us Softly with his Songs," which told McLean's life story for the first time. Howard lives in the UK where he is a university professor.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.