

**This interview with
DON MCLEAN
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 13, 2017.**



Don McLean

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS: There is some debate (some may say controversy) about where you started writing “American Pie.” Would you like to set the record straight now?

Don McLean: Yes. When I started writing the song, I lived in a little gate house owned by James Bennenson, Jr. It was in Cold Spring on the Hudson, a little town near Garrison, just north of Peekskill.

So, I lived in that gate house because I needed a place to stay, because I had no money at the time. I was working with Pete Seeger’s environmental effort to save the Hudson River.

I wrote the first part of the song, from “Long, long time ago” to “The day the music died,” there. The chorus was written in the same houses about a month later. I wrote the remainder in the home of my first wife’s parents in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania.

LOC: When was the first time you performed the song?

DM: The first time I performed it was at Temple University in Philadelphia. I had to have a little girl hold up the lyrics for me.

LOC: Where’d you get the little girl from?

DM: I called her up from the audience. I was there opening for the great Laura Nyro.

LOC: Did the song immediately get a good reaction from that first audience?

DM: No. Not really. Though it picked up as it went along. But it only really got recognition after I made the record, when people started to really listen to the song.

LOC: Do you find that there’s a time (say day or night) or a place where/when you are most productive as a songwriter?

DM: My creativity, as it is, comes in waves. I did a lot of writing about a year ago; I'm not doing much at all now. It goes like that.

I think I'm kind of a lazy writer. I don't think of myself as a songwriter. I don't have to get up every day and sit down and write.

I think I'm more of a rambler. And if I can write a song I want, and like,.... It's if I have something to say. I'm more dedicated to "rambling" than to the identity of being a songwriter. I like singing other people's songs, going places, seeing things.

LOC: Who are some of the songwriters that you admire and who have inspired you?

DM: Who inspired me? All sorts of people. Brian Wilson. Bob Nolan of Sons of the Pioneers, who wrote all those songs of the West.

Dylan, especially in the beginning and up through his baptism, [not] after that. I'm sure he's written additional good songs but I haven't really listened to them.

You know, I've always listened to very good pop writers like Carolyn Leigh, Irving Berlin, Cy Coleman, any of those....the Gershwin Brothers; show music... Rodgers, Hart, Hammerstein.

Lots of folk writers. I've always really liked the one-off songwriters—the song "Garbage," you know, those environmental songs by people that are not songwriters.

I've always like English ballads—Child Ballads, "False Knights on the Road," things like that.

Many, many different styles, from different periods. I like blues--Josh White. I like Lester Flatt and some of those great bluegrass guys.

I could go on... I loved the Beatles. And Buddy Holly and his diversity of ideas, of musical ideas. I've found that same sort of thing in the Sons of the Pioneers—the structures that they used—and in the Beach Boys.

LOC: How did the idea of "American Pie" come to you—meaning, did you think, "I want to write a song about Buddy Holly" or some other particular thing?

DM: The first part of the song—up to "The day the music died"--just came out of me one day, like a genie out of a bottle. I sang it into a tape recorder.

Then, over a period of a time, I developed an idea: I wanted to write a song about America but not have it be "This Land Is Your Land" or "America, the Beautiful." I was thinking about the *size* of America, but not about any one thing.

I had a theory in my head that music and politics were parallel and moved forward. That's how I thought it out, and I thought, "That's a cool idea." So that was the initial idea that was behind it, the germination.

LOC: As I'm sure you are aware, over the years entire Masters's theses have been written about "American Pie" and its meaning and symbolism. So many articles. How do you react to that? Does it fascinate you? Do you sort of chuckle at it?

DM: I don't really think about it much. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about "Don McLean," quote, unquote, or about my songs. If songs come out and people like them, okay.

The song has had a lot of funny...funny things happen to it. At one time, it was used to torture Iraqis! *[Laughs.]* After 9/11, it was banned [from radio] for a while, along with a lot of other songs like “Imagine.”

Strange things have happened to it. There have been funny parodies like “The Day the NASDAQ Died” and things like that.

LOC: The length of the song was—and is—quite unusual for a pop hit. Did you encounter any resistance to releasing the song in its full length as a single?

DM: I think there might have been but, because of the situation I was in—I was in an odd situation. “American Pie” was my second album, the first was with a record company called Media Arts and that company went belly up during the making of my second album so, at first, there seemed like no point in even trying to finish the project but then United Artists took over the company and we finished the album.

United Artists was so anxious to get material, to change the company into something other than a label that just released music from movies, and to become a real, viable label, they were just happy to have the project.

Now, if I had been with them [all along], and had had someone working with me, they might have had an issue with the length and wanted changes but, because of the situation I was in, that didn’t happen.

LOC: Were you surprised by how fiercely people connected with “American Pie” when it was released?

DM: I really was. It happened immediately. It was like an electric sensation and it’s been a sensation ever since. Attention to the song is always coming back.

You know, I’ve never commented on the lyrics. I’ve never changed in my stance on that. To me it’s like with a movie like “Gone With the Wind,” when you find out it wasn’t really filmed at Tara, it loses something you can’t get back.

So I’ve never talked about the song or “meanings.” Sometimes people who knew me at the time, old road managers or sidemen, will come out and say, “Well, I know what this means! Because he told me!” Well, they’re lying, I never told anyone.

As soon as it came out, people knew, they knew it was about Buddy Holly and the plane crash. But, what it’s like is like going down “Alice in Wonderland’s” rabbit hole. You go down, you take that tragic moment, but then you start living this experience that I tried to create.

It’s sort of like the song “A Day in the Life” and what they [the writers] did with the music and lyrics: it has strange lyrics—mundane, even—and then they turn on you. It’s like Technicolor almost, but with words. It’s a different kind of drug.

LOC: When you perform “American Pie” now, do you do it differently than you did at the beginning of your career?

DM: I try to treat every song with respect. I never just drone through it or act like I’m being dragged by the ear by the song. Like I think Elvis did near the end of his life; he disrespect the hits that made him famous and then sing songs that he never should have sung.

A lot of artists will do that, massacre their songs live in order to be “creative.” I always liked Sinatra’s approach—he’d do them like they were on record or damn close and that’s what I like. The Stones do that also.

Always with respect, always with verve, and with vigor.