

# “That’ll Be The Day”--The Crickets (1957)

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*Buddy Holly*



*Original 45rpm*



*“The Searchers”*

Perhaps Sonny Curtis, singer, songwriter, musician and one-time Buddy Holly bandmate, said it best: “Buddy Holly lives whenever rock and roll is played.”

During what was only an 18-month career as a widely-known musical artist, Buddy Holly as a solo artist (for Coral Records) and Buddy Holly and the Crickets (for Brunswick Records), recorded 10 singles that appeared on “Billboard’s” Top 100 popular music chart and 11 in the magazine’s rhythm and blues chart. In the United Kingdom, an incredible 27 of their records made it into the Top 100.

Buddy Holly was a prolific songwriter, gifted musician, talented singer, and innovator in the recording studio. He was one of the first performers to overdub, harmonizing with his own voice. The original Crickets (Holly, J.I. Allison, Niki Sullivan, and Joe B. Mauldin) established the line-up which became standard for rock and roll bands—lead guitarist, rhythm guitarist, bass player, and percussionist. Holly was also one of the first rock ‘n’ roll artists to popularize the Fender Stratocaster guitar.

In 1986, “Rolling Stone” rated Holly as number 13 among the magazine’s “100 Greatest Artists.” That same year, Holly became a charter member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Tragically, the life of 22-year-old Buddy Holly, along with his fellow Winter Dance Party performers Ritchie Valens and J.P. “The Big Bopper” Richards, as well as their young charter pilot, were cut short in a plane crash in northern Iowa early on the morning of February 3, 1959. In late 1971, after the release of Don McClean’s chart-topping ballad “American Pie,” the fatal crash was immortalized as “the day the music died.”

While songs like “Peggy Sue,” “Oh Boy!” and “Not Fade Away” were all immensely popular, “That’ll Be the Day” was Buddy Holly and the Crickets’s first hit and ultimately best-selling record.

It all began on Thursday May 31, 1956. Buddy, J.I. Allison (the Crickets future drummer), and Sonny Curtis (Buddy’s off-and-on bandmate) saw the debut of the John Ford western “The Searchers,” which was playing at the State Theater in Lubbock, Texas, where the boys lived.

John Wayne, the lead actor, portrayed a cowboy searching for his niece who had been captured by Indians. During the movie, Wayne's character utters a line of bravado: "That'll be the day."

A few days later, Holly suggested that he and Allison write a song.

"That'll be the day," J.I. jokingly replied, mimicking the line from "The Searchers."

"Yeah, that sounds like a good one," Buddy replied.

As Allison recalled, it took Holly "about 30 minutes" to write the song. From day one, Buddy Holly was certain "That'll Be the Day" would become a hit record.

"That'll Be the Day" followed a circuitous and most unusual path to the top of charts. On July 22, 1956, Holly first recorded the song for Decca Records in Bradley's Barn on Nashville's famed Music Row. Paul Cohen, Decca's Director of Artists and Repertoire (A & R), and Owen Bradley, the session producer, spent an unsuccessful year trying to make a country and western singer out of Buddy Holly. After 19 takes, Bradley proclaimed "That'll Be the Day" as "the worst song I've ever heard."

After his record contract was not renewed by Decca, an ambitious and driven Holly took his talents to Norman Petty Studios in Clovis, New Mexico, 100 miles west of Lubbock. On a sub-freezing night in late February of 1957, Buddy (lead singer and guitarist), J.I. Allison (percussionist), Larry Welborn (stand-in bassist who would later be replaced by Cricket Joe B. Mauldin), and Nikki Sullivan (rhythm guitarist), joined by three background vocalists, and, together, recorded "That'll Be the Day" in only two takes. "I'm Looking for Someone to Love," the single's flip side, actually took longer to record.

The rock 'n' roll version of "That'll Be the Day" was more energetic and lower pitched than the countrified version recorded in Nashville. The record is classic early rock 'n' roll with a driving, rhythmic beat sometimes referred to as the "Texas Shuffle."

Norman Petty traveled to New York with the demo record, determined to sell it to a record company. Mitch Miller, Columbia Record's Director of A & R, had no interest in "That'll Be the Day," proclaiming "rock and roll is just a passing fad; I give it six months." However, Peer Southern Publishing's Murray Deutch had a decidedly different opinion about the record: "I just flipped for it."

After Deutch played the record for the A & R Directors at ABC and Atlantic records, he was rebuffed. Undeterred, Deutch took "That'll Be the Day" to Bob Thiele, A & R Director for Coral Records. Thiele was so impressed with the demo that he did not even ask for a master recording.

However, when Thiele played the record for the president and vice-president of Decca Records, the song was ridiculed as "junk" and a "joke." After Thiele literally threatened to resign, Decca executives allowed Brunswick, its least prestigious subsidiary label, to release "That'll Be the Day." Even then, only 1,000 initial copies of the record were pressed.

When "That'll Be the Day" was released on May 27, 1957. "Billboard" magazine rated it as mediocre—"medium rockabilly" whose "performance is better than the material." Then, the record followed a most unconventional route. Starting slowly on the national level, its regional sales eventually drove the single to the top. George Woods, a disc jockey at Philadelphia's

WDAS, and Tom Clay (using the professional name Guy King) at Buffalo's WWOL, played "That'll Be the Day" so often, its popularity spread like wild fire.

On July 29, 1957, six weeks after "That'll Be the Day" was released, "Billboard" magazine now characterized it as a "best buy record." Not quite two months later, on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, "That'll Be the Day" climbed to number one on "Billboard's" popular music chart. For three consecutive months, the record remained in "Billboard's" Top 30. By the end of the year, "Cash Box" magazine named Buddy Holly and the Crickets as the "Most Promising Vocal group of 1957."

The song that took so long to reach the top eventually became a rock 'n' roll anthem.

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