

# Understanding American Pie

## An Interpretation

### Introduction

In the autumn of 1971 Don McLean's elegiac *American Pie* entered the collective consciousness, and over thirty years later remains one of the most discussed, dissected and debated songs that popular music has ever produced. A cultural event at the peak of its popularity in 1972, it reached the top of the Billboard 100 charts in a matter of weeks, selling more than 3 million copies; and at eight and a half minutes long, this was no mean feat. But this was no ordinary song, either: boldly original and thematically ambitious, what set *American Pie* apart had a lot to do with the way we weren't entirely sure what the song was about, provoking endless debates over its epic cast of characters. And these controversies remain with us to this day. But however open to interpretation the lyrics may have been, the song's emotional resonance was unmistakable: McLean was clearly relating a defining moment in the American experience—something had been lost, and we knew it. Opening with the death of singer Buddy Holly and ending near the tragic concert at Altamont Motor Speedway, we are able to frame the span of years the song is covering—1959 to 1970—as the "10 years we've been on our own" of the third verse. It is across this decade that the American cultural landscape changed radically, passing from the relative optimism and conformity of the 1950s and early 1960s to the rejection of these values by the various political and social movements of the mid and late 1960s.

Coming as it did near the end of this turbulent era, *American Pie* seemed to be speaking to the precarious position we found ourselves in, as the grand social experiments of the 1960s began collapsing under the weight of their own unrealized utopian dreams, while the quieter, hopeful world we grew up in receded into memory. And as 1970 came to a close and the world this generation had envisioned no longer seemed viable, a sense of disillusion and loss fell over us; we weren't the people we once were. But we couldn't go home again either, having challenged the assumptions of that older order. The black and white days were over.

Bye bye, Miss American Pie.

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The 1950s are fondly remembered as a kind of golden age in American history, a charmed moment in time when the country seemed more confident and hopeful than it has ever been. A period of unprecedented economic prosperity, it was the era when the majority of Americans, freed from the constraints of the Great Depression and World War II, took some time off from the uncertainties of life to simply enjoy themselves; and in a long, giddy parade of marriages, babies, automobiles, suburban homes and kitchen appliances, celebrated their achievement of the American Dream. Never before had the wealth of a nation been so widely distributed. But American enthusiasms during these years were rooted in more than just the good things that money could buy. Allied victories in World War II had been great moral victories for the country as well, and as the United States rose to economic and political world dominance in the postwar years, national pride went soaring right along with it. Americans at mid-century were mightily impressed with America—and happy for awhile:

In that era of general good will and expanding affluence, few Americans doubted the essential goodness of their society. After all, it was reflected back at them not only by contemporary books and magazines, but even more powerfully and with even greater influence in the new family sitcoms on television. These—in conjunction with their sponsors' commercial goals—sought to shape their audience's aspirations. However, most Americans needed little coaching in how they wanted to live. They were optimistic about the future.

From *The 1950s* by David Halberstam

## Verse 1:

A long, long time ago...  
I can still remember  
How that music used to make me smile.  
And I knew if I had my chance  
That I could make those people dance  
And, maybe, they'd be happy for a while  
But February made me shiver  
With every paper I'd deliver.  
Bad news on the doorstep;  
I couldn't take one more step.  
I can't remember if I cried  
When I read about his widowed bride,  
But something touched me deep inside  
The day the music died.

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## Prologue

As the 1960s come to a close, we find the narrator nostalgic for the music of his youth and the simple, joyous spirit it once brought him. He then turns his attention to a seminal event—the death of some key figure in music history—that shattered his joy. It is well known by now that Buddy Holly is this individual, having died in a plane crash in February of 1959.

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Though this is by far the simplest verse in *American Pie*, it is nonetheless a crucial one (along with verse 2), as it sets up the drama that is about to unfold. The narrator here is nostalgic for a simpler and more optimistic kind of music—a music that can make people smile, and that could help them forget their troubles—and a music that very much represents the happier optimism of the 1950s in America. He also identifies Buddy Holly by the month of his death (February) and the "widowed bride" he left behind. As the embodiment of this music, Holly's passing had a profound effect on him: as it will become clearer in the next verse, this music and the simple innocence and optimism of it has its corollary in the psychology of America in the fifties, so that the day the music died becomes the day the innocence and optimism died—blow number one. Holly's death was a watershed for him, and is the pivot around which the song will turn.

## Chorus:

**So bye-bye, miss american pie.  
Drove my chevy to the levee,  
But the levee was dry.  
And good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye  
Singin', "this'll be the day that I die.  
"this'll be the day that I die."**

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## The Long Goodbye

A primary key to understanding *American Pie* can be found here in the chorus, as the theme of America's lost innocence is most clearly stated.

## **So bye bye, Miss American Pie**

"Miss American Pie"\* is "as American as apple pie," so the saying goes; she could also be a synthesis of this symbol and the beauty queen Miss America. Either way, her name evokes a simpler time in American life when these icons held more meaning. She is the America of a passing era, and he is bidding her farewell.

## **Drove my Chevy to the levee But the levee was dry**

"Drove my Chevy to the levee" alludes to a drive "along a levee" mentioned in a series of popular 1950s Chevrolet television commercials sung by Dinah Shore:

And which serves as a signpost to that era—just as the Chevrolet itself is a familiar icon of 1950s America. Also, given that a drive to a levee carries the suggestion of romance in a car, we can almost see him on a date here. But the date is over, the levee is dry—someone he once loved has betrayed him; something that once gave him sustenance has evaporated.

## **Verse 2:**

**Did you write the book of love,  
And do you have faith in God above,  
If the Bible tells you so?  
Do you believe in rock 'n roll,  
Can music save your mortal soul,  
And can you teach me how to dance real slow?**

**Well, I know that you're in love with him  
'cause I saw you dancin' in the gym.  
You both kicked off your shoes.  
Man, I dig those rhythm and blues.**

**I was a lonely teenage broncin' buck  
With a pink carnation and a pickup truck,  
But I knew I was out of luck  
The day the music died.**

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## **The Good Book**

The narrator now reaches a little further back in time to the days of his youth, the late 1950s—a time of sock hops, pickup trucks and pink carnations—as he courts a woman who ultimately spurns him. This is a fickle lady here, and the narrator questions her loyalties. An important verse in that it also introduces a religious metaphor that will echo throughout the rest of the song.

## **Did you write the Book of Love**

This is a woman of some importance to the narrator—and if she may have written the Book of Love, she is most likely a symbolic figure, as these lines from the 1957 hit by The Monotones, *The Book of Love*, suggest:

He then asks her where her loyalties lie—does she have an unquestioning faith in the established order ("if the bible tells you so"), or will this change?

## **And do you have faith in God above If the Bible tells you so**

This kind of unquestioning faith also has its corollary in the simpler faith Americans once held in the American way of life, a belief that had many convinced during the 1950s that they were living in God's country. But who is this woman? Because we will see her rejecting the narrator by the end of this verse, it is safe to say that she represents American herself, as we were about to leave behind the placid conformities of the 1950s for the radical changes awaiting us in the next decade. Though not explicitly stated, she is most likely Miss American Pie.

## **Do you believe in rock 'n roll Can music save your mortal soul**

The music now becomes an object of faith, carrying forward the religious imagery of the preceding lines. Faith in the music now replaces faith in God: essentially what is being said here is that the music of this particular period will be standing in for a simpler religious faith, which as previously mentioned represents the simpler, unquestioning innocence of the time. This metaphor of the sacredness of the music will be encountered again and again as the song unfolds—from "the sacred store" (where he'd heard the music years before) to the broken church bells, the "Father, Son and the Holy Ghost," and even their antithesis—"Satan laughing with delight." From this point forward, whatever is couched in religious terms (with one exception in verse 3) can be seen as referring back to this music, which in turn is a metaphor for the happier innocence and faith of the 1950s.

## **And can you teach me how to dance real slow?**

This is a romantic dance. He is courting her. The slow dance itself is yet another reference to the fifties and the kind of dancing that went out of fashion in the following decade; it also alludes to the slower pace of life in America at this time.

**Well, I know that you're in love with him  
'Cause I saw you dancin' in the gym  
You both kicked off your shoes  
Man, I dig those rhythm and blues  
I was a lonely teenage broncin' buck  
With a pink carnation and a pickup truck  
But I knew I was out of luck  
The day the music died**

A picture of a sock hop from the fifties—when high school gyms were used as venues for school dances, where the students danced in their socks to preserve the polished wood floors. We see the narrator being rejected here, as the object of his affection finds comfort dancing with another. She has stood him up, leaving him behind with his flower and his truck: she has moved on beyond this era (the pink carnation and the pickup truck), leaving the narrator alone and stranded. Bye bye Miss American Pie

### Verse 3:

**Now for ten years we've been on our own  
And moss grows fat on a rollin' stone,  
But that's not how it used to be.  
When the jester sang for the king and queen,  
In a coat he borrowed from James Dean  
And a voice that came from you and me,  
  
Oh, and while the king was looking down,  
The jester stole his thorny crown.  
The courtroom was adjourned;  
No verdict was returned.  
And while Lennon read a book of Marx,  
The quartet practiced in the park,  
And we sang dirges in the dark  
The day the music died.**

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### The Royal Court

Having previously established the world the narrator grew up in, he now becomes an increasingly disillusioned observer. Bob Dylan, representing the forces of revolutionary change that are brewing in American society at this time, is this verse's primary musical figure, and is used as a symbolic challenge to the older social order represented by Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley. But by the end of this verse, the Beatles—practicing in the park—are readying a revolution of their own that will sideline Dylan later in the song.

**Now for ten years we've been on our own  
And moss grows fat on a rolling stone  
But that's not how it used to be**

Though this verse takes place between the years 1963 and 1966, these first lines look back from the year 1970—ten years or so after Holly's death. "A rolling stone gathers no moss" is an old cliché used to describe someone who never puts down roots, but here the cliché is turned on its head, reflecting how the wholesale rejection of conventional values had become commonplace by 1970—and that's not how it used to be. This line could also foreshadow the anarchy that the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger symbolizes at the song's climax in verse 5. By 1970 we had lost our way, it seemed. To quote Bob Dylan:

**How does it feel**

**To be on your own**

**With no direction home**

**Like a rolling stone??**

## Verse 4:

**Helter skelter in a summer swelter.  
The birds flew off with a fallout shelter,  
Eight miles high and falling fast.  
It landed foul on the grass.  
The players tried for a forward pass,  
With the jester on the sidelines in a cast.**

**Now the half-time air was sweet perfume  
While the sergeants played a marching tune.  
We all got up to dance,  
Oh, but we never got the chance!  
'cause the players tried to take the field;  
The marching band refused to yield.  
Do you recall what was revealed  
The day the music died?**

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## The Players' Field

We now move into the most explosive period of the radical sixties, between the years 1966 and 1969. Where only a few years before the social and political system had been solid (if a bit petrified) and largely unchallenged, by this time it had begun to come considerably undone; an unpopular, ill-defined war in Southeast Asia only served to fan the flames. Increasingly, the established American culture itself was being viewed as an enemy in need of transformation, and this generation responded by growing more and more revolutionary. And once again the music was mirroring these changes, as the Beatles—influenced by the emerging Counterculture and their own forays into eastern mysticism and drugs—began to significantly alter the shape of rock 'n' roll, much as Dylan had before them; they were, in fact, replacing Dylan as the voice of their generation.

As the sixties revolution gathered momentum, the youth movement itself also gathered more players, as the more organized and pragmatic unity of the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (largely represented by the Students for a Democratic Society [SDS], and more or less symbolized by Bob Dylan in verse 3) began fragmenting into the Women's Rights, Black Power, Antiwar and Counterculture movements; the Progressive Labor and Revolutionary Youth Movements; as well as their militant sub-factions: the Black Panthers, The Weathermen, Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers (yes, that was their name)—all seeking, to one degree or another, to influence the course of American culture. But of all of these it is the Counterculture that looms largest in our memory. Though they did not achieve much politically, their style of dress and behavior were enormously influential, as were the drug, sexual and spiritual freedoms they espoused—all of which were in-your-face affronts to the more staid, traditional values of the status quo. And it was their philosophies of peace and brotherly love—vague and ill-formed as they were—that seemed to best characterize this generation at this time, at least in the eyes of the general public.

In light of the growing conflicts of this period a football field is an appropriate setting, a battlefield on which the radical youth culture players and the forces of the establishment clash. But once again we find the songwriter mixing his metaphors, using the “marching band” to symbolize both the Counterculture (the Beatles) and the armed civil militia.

**Helter Skelter in the summer swelter  
The Byrds flew off with a fallout shelter  
Eight miles high and falling fast**

These opening lines are full of portent: chaos in the summer heat; the birds (nature), sensing danger, retreat to safety from an impending explosion—the helter skelter, explosive "long hot summers" of protest and

rioting during this period. In 1967, youth culture hippies from across the country made an exodus to San Francisco's Haight Ashbury district to live out the Counterculture's mantras of brotherly love and drug-induced transcendence—the benign eye of the storm that was that year's self-proclaimed "Summer of Love." But these calm waters were to be short-lived, as events in the coming months challenged the Counterculture's euphoria: the violent Oakland anti-draft protests; the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King (and the ensuing riots by Blacks across the nation); the riots at Columbia University and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—just to name a few. "Helter Skelter" aptly describes the chaotic events of this period, and also refers to the Beatles' song of the same name, released on their White Album of 1968. The Byrds' 1966 release, *Eight Miles High*—used here to suggest a bomb falling—seems strangely prophetic now: "Eight miles high/And when you touch down/You'll find that it's stranger than known" —lines that spoke to the drug culture of the period, but can also in retrospect be foreseeing the rapidly escalating anarchy about to erupt in America; not coincidentally, both songs speak of falling fast.

## **It landed foul out on the grass The players tried for a forward pass**

The ball is wild during these years, as the youth culture players begin to aggressively set themselves (the "forward pass") against the government they are attempting to transform; the civil authorities in turn do not take kindly to these challenges (the ball "landing foul on the grass"), and soon come to meet them with a fury of their own. But something of a free-for-all is also ensuing among the many radical political players struggling for field position (the "forward pass") in the American cultural dialogue. The more pragmatic agendas of the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left had by this time begun losing their original cohesion, sprouting the Womens' Rights, Black Power, Antiwar and Counterculture movements; and by decade's end, the more militant groups: The Black Panthers, The Weathermen—all striving to influence this generation towards their own particular interpretation of how American society should be. But it is the Counterculture, with its wholesale rejection of mainstream values, that comes to hold center stage. The musical players—Bob Dylan (symbolically representing the New Left/Antiwar contingent); The Beatles (carrying the torch for the Counterculture); and many others (the Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, the Byrds, the Rolling Stones), can all be viewed as competing on the playing field of rock 'n' roll, and symbolic of the contending liberal political forces at play during this period.

## **With the jester on the sidelines in a cast**

Bob Dylan, sidelined by a nearly fatal motorcycle accident on July 29, 1966, and further overwhelmed by the pressures of his own success, retreated to Woodstock, NY to recuperate from his wounds, both physical and psychological. His output following this period (with the exception of 1967's *John Wesley Harding*) was not as critically well-received as his earlier work, as he retreated from the lyrical complexity and social commentary that had characterized his previous efforts, becoming less the spokesman for his generation. Increasingly sidelined too was the organizing arm of the New Left—the SDS—as other competing groups tended to dilute their political unity. Needless to say, like Dylan, they became less the dominant spokesmen for their generation—a role that, it can be argued, the Counterculture was now assuming (though the Counterculture really had no political agenda to speak of), and a role that musically the Beatles were filling as they began to take their music more seriously and embrace the drugged spirituality of the Counterculture.

## **Now the half-time air was sweet perfume While Sergeants played a marching tune**

Considered the high point of the sixties Counterculture movement, the brief Summer of Love, spanning the spring and summer of 1967, was viewed by many as the flowering of the movement—the "sweet perfume;" this year also more or less marks the midpoint (the "half-time air") of the sixties cultural revolution that gained momentum around 1964 and started winding down around 1970 (at least from McLean's perspective in 1971; strictly speaking, the radical sixties sputtered on into 1975). "Sweet perfume" would then obviously have another meaning too, as the "half-time air" was ripe with marijuana. Only a few months before, the Beatles had released arguably their best album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which became the



defining musical statement for the Summer of Love, and figuratively the “marching tune” of the Counterculture. But the “marching band” also holds a double meaning, as the “Sergeants”—both civilian and military—can be viewed as figuratively waiting in the wings, playing their own “marching tune” in preparation for the rising tide of the youth culture’s rebellion.

## **We all got up to dance But we never got the chance**

During the brief moment of youth culture harmony that was the Summer of Love, it may well have appeared to the narrator that a different kind of innocence had come along to replace the sort he had grown up with; getting up to dance would then be symbolic of embracing the current euphoria as a kind of throwback to the happier world he once knew. But as events in the coming months were to turn violent, he would not get the chance to dance to this new music. Rock music itself had also by now moved beyond its original dance-based roots towards more experimental and drug related influences—and in stark contrast to the simpler rock ‘n’ roll of the 1950s.

## **'Cause the players tried to take the field The marching band refused to yield**

As the radical youth culture players began attempting to wrestle civil authority away from the civil authorities (taking the field), they moved away from the peaceful, symbolic tone of the Summer of Love towards the confrontational violence that began with the anti-draft protests in Oakland, California later that fall. The “marching band” now becomes more clearly symbolic of the civil authorities, as the militia—the police in particular—pushed back, and pushed hard: the marching band refusing to yield. But if we are to keep the music as the metaphor of change, what could then be said here too is that the Beatles—a formidable musical force to be reckoned with by now—have at this moment in time supplanted Dylan as spokesmen for their generation, and in so doing gain the field advantage—the marching band refusing to yield. And as the Counterculture is represented by The Beatles in the song, it too briefly gains the high ground, their influence on American culture growing significantly at this time. Which brings us to:

## **Do you recall what was revealed**

—the song’s most ambiguous line. Some have suggested that it refers to John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s 1968 release entitled *Unfinished Music No. 1—Two Virgins*—on the cover of which stands the two artists, naked as the sun; others have said that it refers to the widespread rumors a little later of Paul McCartney’s death; while most choose not to wrestle with this line at all. But in the context of the pivotal 1968 riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, this line is most likely speaking of the Chicago police department’s brutality there, revealing the dark underside of one of our most cherished institutions.

But another incident around this time also bears mentioning. In the fall of 1968, as the Miss America contest was holding its annual beauty pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the first protest in the pageant’s history occurred. The fledgling Women’s Liberation Movement, critical of the pageant’s stereotyping of women as mere sex symbols and housewives, gathered outside of the Convention Center where the event was being held, carrying signs of “No More Beauty Standards” and “Welcome to the Cattle Auction,” and even crowning a live sheep “Miss America.” But the real focus of the demonstration centered on the “Freedom Trash Can” that the women protesters had set up, tossing into it false eyelashes, wigs, curlers, high heels, girdles and brassieres to symbolically free themselves from these sexual stereotypes. The discarded bras in particular garnered the most media attention, and given Mclean’s penchant for sexual innuendo in his lyrics during these early years of his career (see “Milkman’s Matinee,” “Narcississma” and “Birthday Song”), “do you recall what was revealed” could then be describing these (ostensibly) braless protesters, ending this verse on a humorously sly note and pointing to the Miss America protest as yet another rejection of the old mores and attitudes of 1950s America.

Blow number four—another day the music dies. So as the sixties revolution starts coming to a head during these chaotic years, the battle lines are drawn and the inevitable bloody conflicts come to pass. And the

youth culture players themselves grow increasingly diverse, all vying for a voice in the American cultural dialogue; but of all of them, it is the Counterculture that speaks the loudest. And the Beatles, embodying in their music much of the Counterculture's idealism and collective harmony, emerge as the dominant symbols of this period's revolutionary euphoria: all you need is love.

### Verse 5:

**Oh, and there we were all in one place,  
A generation lost in space  
With no time left to start again.  
So come on: jack be nimble, jack be quick!  
Jack flash sat on a candlestick  
Cause fire is the devil's only friend.**

**Oh, and as I watched him on the stage  
My hands were clenched in fists of rage.  
No angel born in hell  
Could break that satan's spell.  
And as the flames climbed high into the night  
To light the sacrificial rite,  
I saw satan laughing with delight  
The day the music died**

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### The Devil's Own

*American Pie* now reaches its apocalyptic climax, as the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger takes center stage at the bloody concert held at Altamont Motor Speedway, California, in the fall of 1969. The flower children drew together here once more to re-stoke the communal goodwill of the successful Woodstock Music Festival of a few months earlier; but even as Woodstock was seen as a landmark in the Counterculture movement, Altamont is widely regarded as the event that signaled its demise. Reality steps in.

**And there we were all in one place  
A generation Lost in Space  
With no time left to start again**

The flower children gathered at Altamont 300,000 strong, in a frenzy of drugs, alcohol and escalating violence. Woodstock it was not. The grand experiment losing steam, as the solutions endorsed by the drug culture—"turn on, tune in, drop out"—merely left them "lost in space," adrift, with no place left to go; with no momentum left to start the revolution over again.

**So come on, Jack be nimble, Jack be quick  
Jack Flash sat on a candlestick  
'Cause fire is the Devil's only friend**

Jack Flash is a reference to the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger and their song *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, in which the protagonist nimbly plays with fire to boast of his freedom. Darkness now reigned with The Stones, as evidenced by their albums *Beggars Banquet* in 1968 and *Let It Bleed* in 1969—works that embraced a more aggressive nihilism than their previous efforts, and which put them at the forefront of rock's growing cultural estrangement. This allows McLean to use Jagger as representative of someone freely pushing the social envelope and inciting rebellion—and in direct opposition to the values of a previous era. Given the theme of lost faith that runs through the song—and in this atmosphere of anything goes—it is an easy thing to see him as the Devil; the photograph above by Ethan Russell of Jagger onstage at the concert in a flowing red cape only serves to reinforce this imagery. To quote the Stones, "War, children, it's just a shot away."

In the documentary film of the concert—1970's *Gimme Shelter* (the title taken from the Stones song of the same name)—two concerned young men in the audience can be seen pleading with Jagger to end the show, which he defiantly refuses to do. By the end of the film Jagger is indicted as the key figure who could have brought the violence to a close by simply leaving the stage and ending the concert; whether this might have incited a riot in itself is difficult to say.

**And as I watched him on the stage  
My hands were clenched in fists of rage  
No angel born in hell  
Could break that Satan's spell**

Watching *Gimme Shelter* one can see that the audience is spellbound by the Stones (just as many were easily carried along by the youth movement's promises), and many of them storm the stage throughout the day; the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang ("No angel born in hell"), hired as security for the concert, violently defend the stage, but to little avail. Jagger is used in the song as the catalyst for the anarchy unfolding, both at the concert and symbolically in the youth culture at large.

**And as the flames climbed high into the night  
To moonlight the sacrificial rite**

As a black man in the audience wielding a gun moves towards the stage, Hell's Angels intercept and stab him to death—the "sacrificial rite." But the sacrifice being offered here is also the burning down of the remnants of the old social order. The Stones, unaware of what is happening, continue to play. And a song they performed shortly before this event—*Sympathy for the Devil*—serves to further underscore Jagger's satanic aura:

To most observers, the violence and indifference of the crowd at Altamont spelled the end of the sixties cultural revolution, as author Todd Gitlin, in his book *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (and himself an eyewitness to the concert), cogently describes:

...the effect was to burst the bubble of youth culture's illusions about itself. The Rolling Stones were scarcely the first countercultural heroes to grant cachet to the Hell's Angels. We had witnessed the famous collectivity of a generation cracking into thousands of shards. Center stage turned out to be another drug. The suburban fans who blithely blocked one another's views and turned their backs on the bad-trippers were no cultural revolutionaries. Who could any longer harbor the illusion that these hundreds of thousands of spoiled star-hungry children of the Lonely Crowd were the harbingers of a good society?

**I saw Satan laughing with delight  
The day the music died.**

So Mick Jagger, symbolizing the indifference and self-centeredness of the crowd, is the focal point of the evening's proceedings, and for the narrator bears responsibility for not preventing—and perhaps even provoking—what occurred there. He also epitomizes a threatening, aggressive rebellion inherent in their music, and of how far removed we were from the more benign, harmonious America of the 1950s. He is the song's Antichrist, completing the apocalyptic work of tearing down the older, peaceful world that the other musical players of the sixties had figuratively already started. And he is one more blow—the final blow—against the innocence of another era.

The verse that follows finds the narrator walking through the aftermath of the 1960s cultural revolution.

## Verse 6:

**I met a girl who sang the blues  
And I asked her for some happy news,  
But she just smiled and turned away.  
I went down to the sacred store  
Where I'd heard the music years before,  
But the man there said the music wouldn't play.**

**And in the streets: the children screamed,  
The lovers cried, and the poets dreamed.  
But not a word was spoken;  
The church bells all were broken.  
And the three men I admire most:  
The father, son, and the holy ghost,  
They caught the last train for the coast  
The day the music died.**

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## Epilogue

A wistful resignation falls over the scene, as the narrator walks among the ruins of his generation, searching for any signs of the world he once knew. And to the numbed surprise of the flower children all was not well either, as their enormous hopes for a Good Society and an American culture of transcendent values had by now begun to seem like so much smoke. Their idealism shattered, what is left in its wake is something of a wasteland, as their illusions fade under the specter of their indifference at Altamont.

**I met a girl who sang the blues  
And I asked her for some happy news  
But she just smiled and turned away**

A cynical figure, who when asked for any "happy news"—any return to the innocence and stability of an earlier time—can only smile knowingly and walk away. This is most likely the rock 'n' roll blues singer Janis Joplin, whose death in 1970 of a heroin overdose seemed to reinforce—along with the drug overdose deaths of rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix a few months earlier and The Doors' Jim Morrison a few months later—the failures of the movement. The requested "happy news" also echoes the "maybe they'd be happy for awhile" music of the first verse, bookending the song.

**I went down to the sacred store  
Where I'd heard the music years before  
But the man there said the music wouldn't play**

The sacred store would be a record store, following on the religious/musical metaphor established in verse two. But the music of years before would no longer play: literally, the music stores that had once provided listening booths for their customers were by this time no longer offering this service. But even more than this, the cynicism of this generation had annihilated the innocent world the narrator had grown up in; that kind of music wouldn't play anymore. He can't go home again.

**And in the streets the children screamed  
The lovers cried and the poets dreamed  
But not a word was spoken  
The church bells all were broken**

Beyond all the noise and violence of this tumultuous era, the America that survives this decade is not the America we knew a scant 10 years earlier. With so many of the assumptions of that older order undermined, little familiar remained to believe in, and our once buoyant faith in American culture appeared irrevocably lost. The old religion was dead: the church bells all were broken.

**And the three men I admire most  
The Father, Son and the Holy Ghost  
They caught the last train for the coast  
The day the music died**

These three enigmatic figures resonate strongly with this period, and carry more than one association—the most obvious being the three performers (Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper) who died in an Iowa cornfield that fateful day in 1959. They could also be symbolic of the three political assassinations of the 1960s—John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King—whose violent deaths shook the foundations of American optimism and naiveté during these years. But given that the “Father, Son and the Holy Ghost” seem to be alive and well and living in the present tense of this verse (1970), we might look elsewhere to identify them. In a quote from a January, 1972 *Life* magazine article, Don McLean—speaking of Buddy Holly—gives us a better clue to the identity of this trio: “He was a symbol of something deeper than the music he made. His career and the sort of group he created, the interaction between the lead singer and *the three men* [italics mine] backing him up, was a perfect metaphor for the music of the 60s and for my own youth.” So these three men could also be the Crickets, representing the surviving remnants of Holly's enthusiastic spirit, and by association symbolic of the happier optimism of their time.

But these religious figures hold an even greater symbolic importance: in the wake of this decade's disillusioning cynicism and fragmentation, the “Father, Son and the Holy Ghost” represent a faith in America that had once permeated American life, and that—hope against hope—might still redeem the disorder that had befallen us. But the holy trinity, finding no sympathetic hearing and resigning themselves to the inevitable (having held out for “the last train”), pack up their bags and retire to the coast: the believers had lost faith in their gods, and the gods can only retreat.

## **Conclusion**

As American culture was transformed through the decade of the 1960s, the popular entertainment of the day registered these changes, just as it always has. But more than any other idiom, rock 'n' roll was its most accurate barometer: from the early social outrage of Bob Dylan, the Beatles' contagious countercultural idealism, or the fierce nihilism of the late sixties Rolling Stones, rock 'n' roll defined the generation coming of age in these turbulent years, giving it voice and charting its course as no other popular art form did. It was the perfect metaphor for these changes, and McLean found in it a way to describe the dislocating sense of loss we were feeling—to enduring effect.

Regarding the meaning of *American Pie*, the songwriter has remained characteristically silent, with a few exceptions—especially this one, giving some indication of his intentions:

“That song didn't just happen,” said Don. “It grew out of my experiences. *American Pie* was part of my process of self-awakening; a mystical trip into my past.”

Don called his song a complicated parable, open to different interpretations. “People ask me if I left the lyrics open to ambiguity. Of course I did. I wanted to make a whole series of complex statements. The lyrics had to do with the state of society at the time.”

In the late sixties and early seventies, Don was obsessed with what he called "the death of America" —the loss of many things he believed in while growing up. "In a sense, *American Pie* was a very despairing song. In another, though, it was very hopeful. Pete Seeger told me he saw it as a song in which people were saying something. They'd been fooled, they'd been hurt, and it wasn't going to happen again. That's a good way to look at it—a hopeful way." \*

In identifying its frequently overlooked theme of America's lost innocence, the meaning of *American Pie* becomes more evident, as its cast of characters are better placed in their historical and cultural context. Still, portions of the song remain cryptic, and as the songwriter readily admits, deliberately so: like any good poem, keeping the language suspended imparts a dreamlike quality to it, allowing the lyrics to resonate deeper in the listener than a more literal approach would. But it is also this ambiguity that has generated so much debate, and that has kept *American Pie* on the pop culture map these many years.