Remembering Buddy

By Dan McCue

It's no exaggeration to say that J.I. "Jerry" Allison played drums in one of the most important bands in the early history of rock and roll. Long before The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Band, and the scores of other groups who have absorbed its influence over the decades, there was Buddy Holly and the Crickets.

With "That'll Be the Day" and the string of hits that followed over a remarkable two year period, including "Peggy Sue," "Oh Boy," "Rave On," "It's So Easy" and "Everyday," Holly and his band mates put their hometown of Lubbock, Texas on the map as a hotbed of creativity.

They also created a distinctive musical genre within the early framework of rock and roll. With melodic, but heavily rhythmic songs powered by two guitars, a bass and drums, they almost single-handedly created the template for what a band was supposed to look and sound like.

But of course, it was Holly's death in a plane crash Feb. 3, 1959, alongside J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson and Ritchie Valens, "the day the music died," the would cast the career of the north Texas rocker as legend.

The music and Holly's tragically abbreviated life would inspire a host of musical careers centering on Lubbock and a handful of surrounding communities, including those of Roy Orbison, Waylon Jennings, and later, those of Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, and Lloyd Maines.

The plane crash following a performance in Clear Lake Iowa, would also spawn a rash of periodic tributes, including the movies *The Buddy Holly Story* and *La Bamba*, musical tributes spanning everything Don McLean's "American Pie" to Weezer's Buddy Holly," and even lead to Holly's inclusion as a character in several novels.

So it was something of a surprise when I tracked down Allison and got him to talk about a bygone era that has seemingly never gone away. It wasn't that he was at all dismissive; just that in his easy-going way he made it sound all so matter of fact.

"To tell you the truth [making music] was all there really was to do in Lubbock," he said in a warm and resonate voice that peeled the cobwebs from the passage of years.

"And that's the one thing that kind of bothered me about *The Buddy Holly Story*," he said. "You know that scene where they had his parents yelling at him to knock off the noise during a band rehearsal? Well, that was just bull.

"A parent – any parent – would rather you were trying to make music than hanging out on the street drinking beer," he said.

For Allison, the desire to make music took hold in the fifth or sixth grade (he apologetically couldn't remember which), and quickly led to his playing drums on the school band. A year of private lessons

followed, by which time he begun playing with Holly, bassist Joe B. Maudlin, and a second guitarist, Niki Sullivan.

The group rehearsed either at Holly's parent's home or in the back room of Allison's family's house at 2215 6th Street.

It there that the group decided to call itself The Crickets, inspired by another musical group called The Spiders. It was also in that house, which has long since been demolished, that Holly and Allison collaborated on one of their most enduring songs, "That'll Be the Day."

In this case, Allison said, the legend does hold true. The night before the aspiring musicians had gone to see the movie western The Searchers and head heard John Wayne repeat the phrase time and again throughout the movie.

"We wrote the song the very next day," he said.

But penning a hit and having it recognized as such are not the same thing. Holly had already had some success on local radio with Buddy and Bob, a bluegrass due he formed with Bob Montgomery while still in junior high school, but the business of making records would be challenge.

His break came after seeing Elvis Presley perform in Lubbock in 1955. Inspired, Holly and the band began to draw ever-more influences into their sound.

"We'd go to see Elvis whenever he played," Allison said. "There was a bar that the acts used to come to after their shows, and we played at it. I asked him one time why he didn't have a drummer, and Elvis said, 'If I did, I would sound like Bill Haley.' But the next time he came he had D.J. Fontana on drums."

He also had a new local opening act, with the Crickets being asked to open Elvis show in Lubbock that October. It was during that show that they caught the eye of a Nashville talent scout that led to aborted attempt at recording in the Mecca of country music and a steady diet of playing alongside the likes of Bill Haley and the Comets.

Allison remembers Elvis and Holly getting along well.

"Elvis was, by that time, in a different class; he was already a movie star or on the verge of that. But the one thing I do remember clearly is Buddy teaching Elvis how to play "Money Honey" on the guitar, which eventually showed up on Elvis' first album."

But for the entire band's success locally, breaking into the "big time" wasn't easy.

In rapid succession, the band was turned down by both Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts program and Roulette Records.

They would also be signed and unceremoniously dropped by the Decca label, which had tried forecast them as a country music combo, before finally hitting pay dirt with Brunswick Records – ironically a Decca subsidiary – in the spring of 1957.

“The truth is, I always thought we would be signed by a record label and be successful,” Allison said. “I thought Buddy had a lot of talent. We’d go to shows pretty often and we through we were as good as or better than the people we saw. Buddy was pretty confident. I guess we were all kind of cocky.”

The contract they did finally land was unique in two respects: With it they became the first rock and roll band to record without direct supervision from their label. When songs were done, the band simply sent the finished product to the label.

“We recorded at Norman Petty’s studio in Clovis, New Mexico, and basically what had happened was we went in and rerecorded ‘That’ll Be the Day,’ which we’d done for Decca in a much different style, thinking it was just going to be a demo as we tried to get another record deal.

“Well, we sent it to Coral [another Decca subsidiary which would issue Holly “solo recordings” throughout his career], and they liked it. They said, ‘That’s fine. Send some more. It sure was fun doing it that way.”

The other unique arrangement was that duel distribution, for band and Holly as a solo artist, through Brunswick and Coral.

“The beauty of it was we put out twice as many records that way,” Allison said. “What distinguished them was that the Buddy Holly cuts had no backup vocals, while on The Crickets records they would overdub the background voices.

“The Crickets didn’t actually sing on the records; we would cut the instrumental tracks and Buddy’s vocals and then the backup vocals would be added by Petty later,” he said.

But providing the pulse for Holly’s songs on what today would be considered a very rudimentary drum kit, was only one of Allison’s contributions to the music the band made. As already noted in the case of “That’ll Be the Day,” he also had a significant hand in the songwriter, ranking him among Holly’s very few collaborators.

“Basically, I could collaborate with Buddy when the occasion arose because I could play other instruments [besides the drums],” Allison said. “I could play guitar well enough to write a song. I play the piano, although I don’t play much anymore.”

Among the songs that Allison co-wrote with Holly were “Not Fade Away” and “Well, All Right.”

And it was Allison who suggested Holly change the name of a song he was working on from “Cindy Lou” to the now famous “Peggy Sue,” in honor of the drummer’s then girlfriend and later wife.

Although the couple’s relationship would be immortalized again by Holly with “Peggy Sue Got Married,” the two would later divorce.

“It was a childhood romance that went afoul,” Allison said.

Decades later, the title “Peggy Sue Got Married” would be borrowed for the title of a film starring Kathleen Turner.

“I thought it was pretty funny when I heard about it,” Allison said. “But you know, Buddy wrote that one on his own. I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

But if Holly and the Crickets were determined to make a mark in the record business in the mid-1950s, they were also increasingly serious about taking their show out on the road.

“We played a lot of joints, frankly. “Bars, roller skating rinks – even from the back of a truck at a supermarket opening,” Allison said.

And everywhere they went was courtesy of Holly’s ’55 Oldsmobile.

“The biggest problem was Joe [Maudlin]’s stand-up bass,” Allison chuckled. “It was a big car, so we’d take the drums and two amplifiers and just pack them inside, and sit on them if we had to. The bass on the other hand, had to be tied to the roof.”

But as the records came out, the bookings – and presumably, the transportation to them -- got decidedly better.

“We played the Brooklyn Paramount and even played the Apollo for about a week August 1957 because they thought we were a black group when they booked us,” Allison said. “And we used to go out on those big package shows, where there’d be something like 20 acts on the bill and each group would do one or two songs.

“The first time we did it we played one song, then the next record would come out and we’d get to do two songs. I was 17, just out of Lubbock – it was lots of fun,” he said.

On stage, Buddy Holly was “one of the very best,” in Allison’s estimation.

“In those days, a lot of people tried to copy Elvis, to try to generate that response, but Buddy never did that. He’d do his own stuff,” Allison said.

Behind him, the band did everything it could to draw attention to itself.

“We’d be as silly as we could be, cutting up all the time, Joe B. ‘riding’ the bass and so forth,” Allison said. “As for the stage setup, all we had was the one microphone, for Buddy, and maybe the bass would be miked sometimes, but never the drums. Looking back on it, the funny thing is that people complained that we played too loud.”

It was while on the road, during dates in New York, that Allison first heard a Buddy Holly and the Crickets being played outside Lubbock .

“I remember we were in a restaurant and one of our songs was playing on the jukebox,” he said. “I turned to Buddy and the guys and said, ‘We are happening! We have made it!’

“I’m really affected by that even now,” Allison added.

But for all success the Cricket’s enjoyed, strains emerged in their partnership as Holly’s interests began to diverge from those of his band mates.

In June 1958, Holly met Maria Elena Santiago, a receptionist for New York music publisher Peer-Southern Music, and the couple quickly married. By then, Holly had become enamored with the New York music scene and wanted to explore it. The band, meanwhile, decided to head back to Lubbock.

Good bye’s said, the Hollys moved to an apartment on 9th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York’s Greenwich Village. It was there that he recorded a series of acoustic songs and song fragments, known as the “Apartment Tapes,” which were released after his death with extensive overdubbing and additional musicians added to the mix.

Although bootlegs of the recordings circulated for years, it would be decades before most fans heard Holly’s takes on “Crying, Waiting, Hoping” and “What to Do,” not to mention a countrified turn on Little Richard’s “Slippin’ and Slidin’” as he originally recorded them in the fall of 1958.

By all accounts, the last six months of Holly’s life were a time of exploration, with the Texas musician frequenting New York Jazz clubs like The Blue Note, The Village Gate and the village Vanguard. He also reportedly registered for acting classes with Lee Strasburg’s Actor’s Studio, hoping that walking in the footpaths of Marlin Brando, James Dean and other Studio artists would pave the way to a film career.

“Movies were something we talked about, almost from the very beginning,” Allison said. “We had offers to do those Allen Free movies, like Go Johnny Go, but we held out for a starring role that never came.”

“Whenever somebody asks about the movies, I always say, ‘I wish we had,’” he said.

But if Holly’s time in New York was beginning to expand the breadth of his artistry, it also took an enormous toll on his personal finances. Just as in the case of the Crickets, Holly’s relationship with Norman Petty had frayed with his move to the East Coast; Petty responded by withholding his royalties.

The situation drug on for months. Finally Holly hired attorney Harold Orenstein, who had previously represented the Everly Brothers in a contractual dispute. Despite Orenstein’s efforts, Holly still couldn’t get his hands on his royalties fast enough to keep up with expenses. As Christmas 1958 approached, Maria Elena learned she was pregnant.

Seeing touring as his only alternative, Holly signed on to perform on the Winter Dance Party tour with Dion and the Belmonts, Valens and Richardson, and assembled a backing band consisting of Tommy Allsup on guitar, Waylon Jennings on bass and, briefly, Carl Bunch on drums. By January 23, Holly was once again on the road.

But the brutal conditions and dreary string of very modest dates in a frozen Midwest soon took its toll. After a week of criss-crossing Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa in a poorly heated bus, Bunch had to quit

due to frostbite. For the remaining dates, Carlo Mastralango, bass singer for the Belmonts, filled in for him.

By the time the tour pulled into Clear Lake, Iowa on February 2 for a date at the Surf Ballroom, Holly had also had enough, and fatefully decided to lease a plane from Dwyer's Flying service in Mason City, Iowa to fly he, Allsup and Jennings to the tour's next stop in Forgo, North Dakota.

That night, before a crowd that had paid $1.25 a head to attend, Holly walked out onstage alone to perform a country tune, "Gotta Travel On," before calling the band onstage to play a 25 minute set that including "That'll Be the Day," "Peggy Sue," "It's So Easy," "Everyday," "Oh Boy," "Early in the Morning," "Rave On," and a new number written in New York, "It Doesn't Matter Anymore."

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Holly's leasing of the plane had become the talk of the performers. After Holly's set ended, Richardson waylaid Jennings and quickly talked the future country music legend into relinquishing his seat.

Allsup initially resisted Valens' efforts to trade a seat on the bus for a seat on the plane, but eventually agreed to toss a coin for it on condition that if he lost, he would get to use the large sleeping bag Richardson had purchased for the tour. Valens won the toss.

Holly then called home, either from the Surf Ballroom or the airport, a detail lost to history. What is known is that by about 10 p.m., pilot Roger Peterson was preparing the Flying Service's Beechcraft Bonanza for the flight.

While most forecasts for the night indicated there would be acceptable conditions for the flight, by the time the party was ready to take-off at 12:55 a.m., advisories had been issued for reduced visibility due to heavy snow and fog. It is believed Peterson never saw those advisories.

The flight lasted all of about five minutes. Hubert Dwyer, the owner of the plane, later told investigators that he watched from the tower and the plane rose and banked to the left, and saw the tail light of the single engine aircraft "descend until out of sight."

It wouldn't be until 3:30 a.m., by which time the plane should have been in Fargo that anyone sensed something had gone terribly wrong. Officials at Hector Airport in North Dakota called Dwyer to tell him Peterson hadn't been heard from.

Six hours later, Dwyer took off in a second small plane intending to fly Peterson's intended route. He was likely only in the air a few minutes when he saw the wreckage of the plane in a cornfield less than five miles from the airport.

Investigators would later conclude that poor weather conditions and pilot error caused the crash in which the plane barreled into the ground at 170 miles per hour, and then tumbled end over end another 600 feet before coming to rest against a wire fence. A coroner said all aboard died instantly of massive trauma.

Back in Lubbock the same night the Crickets had once again assembled in Allison's house. Having decided to break with Petty themselves, they were anxious to talk to Holly about reuniting. Allison recalled that he and Mauldin called Maria Elena, who told them Holly was playing the Surf Ballroom that night, and provided details on the rest of the tour's itinerary.

Allison said they then called the ballroom, only to be told Holly had already left. They then called ahead to Fargo, leaving a message Holly would never get. The next morning, like everybody else in Holly's hometown, the Crickets learned about the crash from the radio.

Maria Elena would suffer a miscarriage two weeks later. The surviving Crickets played the remaining Winter Dance Party dates, and have stayed together since, playing four or five dates a month as the spirit moves them.

But like all survivors of tragedy, they were also left with a nagging sense of what might have been.

"Waylon told me that Buddy said he was going to get us back together to tour England," Allison said.

"Even after all these years, it's still unbelievable to me," he added. "We learned to play rock and roll together. He was my best friend."

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