

JOHN GRIBBIN

NOT FADE AWAY

THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF BUDDY HOLLY



**'CHARMING
& ENTHUSIASTIC'
DAILY EXPRESS**

JOHN GRIBBIN
NOT FADE AWAY
THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF BUDDY HOLLY



First published in the UK in 2009 by
Icon Books Ltd, Omnibus Business Centre,
39–41 North Road, London N7 9DP
email: info@iconbooks.co.uk
www.iconbooks.co.uk

This electronic edition published in the UK in 2012 by Icon Books Ltd

ISBN: 978-1-84831-384-2 (ePub format)
ISBN: 978-1-84831-385-9 (Adobe ebook format)

Sold in the UK, Europe, South Africa and Asia
by Faber & Faber Ltd, Bloomsbury House,
74–77 Great Russell Street,
London WC1B 3DA or their agents

Distributed in the UK, Europe, South Africa and Asia
by TBS Ltd, TBS Distribution Centre, Colchester Road,
Frating Green, Colchester CO7 7DW

This edition published in Australia in 2012
by Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd,
PO Box 8500, 83 Alexander Street,
Crows Nest, NSW 2065

This edition published in the USA in 2012 by Totem Books

Inquiries to: Icon Books Ltd, Omnibus Business Centre,
39–41 North Road, London N7 9DP, UK

Text copyright © 2009 John and Mary Gribbin

The author has asserted his moral rights.

The extract from *The Autobiography of Eric Clapton*, published by Century, is
reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, or by any means, without prior
permission in writing from the publisher.

Typeset in 11 on 15½ pt Palatino by Wayzgoose

Buddy Holly didn't give birth to rock 'n' roll, but he sure rocked the cradle.

Carl Perkins

We used to watch *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* ... One night they had Buddy Holly on the show, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven; that was when I saw my first Fender guitar. It was like seeing an instrument from outer space and I said to myself: 'That's the future – that's what I want' ... Of all the music heroes of the time, he was the most accessible, and he was the real thing. He wasn't a glamour puss, he had no act as such, he clearly was a real guitar player, and to top it all off he wore glasses. He was like one of us. It was amazing the effect his death had on us. After that, some say the music died. For me, it really seemed to burst open.

Eric Clapton, *The Autobiography* (Century, 2007)

For my friend in Lubbock, Texas – Bill Jolley

And for the next generation of Buddy Holly fans, Bella and William

Acknowledgements

Thanks to John Beecher for all of the Buddy Holly material he has supplied over the years, to Ben Gribbin for a critical reading of the first draft of this book, and to David Glasson for musical insights. Simon Forge and Michael Kenward played no direct part in the present project, but have shared many a Buddy Holly moment with me in the past five decades. Without any one of them, it would not have turned out the same way. Sonny Curtis and Kevin Montgomery took the trouble to put me right on some dates and other facts, Joe's Vintage Guitars helped with information about 1950s Fender Stratocasters, and Carl Bunch provided the playlist for the last tour. Gary and Ramona Tollett provided details of the 'That'll Be The Day' recording session, while Sherry Holley and Larry Holley helped with some family background. Quotes credited as (*Memories*) are from the superb collection gathered together by Jim Dawson and Spencer Leigh. The archive of the Buddy Holly Center in Lubbock is the source for the exact dates of his tours and other activities.

Special thanks to Warwick Bilton for technical help ([see Chapter Five!](#)).

For once, Mary Gribbin played no direct part in the writing of this book, but deserves thanks for tolerating my obsession with Buddy Holly for most of the past 50 years.

Although I have tried to check all the facts and make the story as accurate as possible, after half a century there is inevitably some uncertainty about the exact details of certain events; if anyone finds errors in my version of the story, or has additional information, I'd be glad to hear from them with a view to getting it right next time. I can be contacted via john@gribbin.co.uk

John Gribbin trained as an astrophysicist at Cambridge before becoming a full-time science writer, and he is the ‘master of popular science writing’, according to the *Sunday Times*. He has worked for *Nature* and the *New Scientist*, and has contributed to *The Times* and the *Independent*. His numerous books include *In Search of Schrödinger’s Cat* and *Science: A History*. *Not Fade Away* is his first-ever non-science title.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[Reminiscing](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[Little Baby](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[Learning the Game](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[That'll Be The Day](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[Rave On!](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[Gone](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[Not Fade Away](#)

[Sources and Further Reading](#)

[Index](#)

[Picture Section](#)

INTRODUCTION

Reminiscing

I wasn't quite a teenager when Buddy Holly died. On 3 February 1959 I was just six weeks short of my thirteenth birthday. The news of Holly's death in a plane crash, along with the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens, made a relatively small impact on me at the time. It was the older boys at school who were shocked by the news, and stood in dazed groups in the playground discussing what seemed to them like the end of the world. I knew Buddy Holly and the Crickets from their hit singles played on the radio (Radio Luxembourg, listened to under the blankets in bed at night), but at that tender age I hadn't purchased any of them myself. My own musical taste leaned more to Lonnie Donegan, the Everly Brothers, Lord Rockingham's XI, and (of course) Elvis Presley. I was the proud possessor of the Kingston Trio's version of 'Tom Dooley' on a 78 rpm record.

But in the wake of the events of 3 February 1959, the first 45 rpm record I bought was an EP by Holly containing the hits 'Peggy Sue' and 'Listen to Me', with their B-sides 'Everyday' and 'I'm Gonna Love You Too'. The first LP I bought was, curiously, *The Buddy Holly Story Volume Two* – so many of my friends had copies of the first *Buddy Holly Story* album, which was required listening at any gathering, that somehow I never got around to getting my own copy until years later. By 1962, I was enough of a Holly fan to be incensed when Tommy Roe had a big hit with 'Sheila', a blatant rip-off of 'Peggy Sue'. And my enthusiasm has remained at that level; nine of the top 25 most played tunes on my iPod are by Holly.

I'm in good company. The Beatles took the inspiration for their name largely from Holly's group, the Crickets; they took the inspiration for their early efforts at songwriting from Holly, and chose the Crickets' 'That'll Be The Day' for their first attempt at recording. George Harrison later said, 'Buddy Holly was my first favourite and my inspiration to go into the music business' (*Memories*). The Hollies took their name entirely from Buddy, while the Searchers took theirs from the name of the movie in which John Wayne repeatedly utters the line 'That'll be the day', itself the inspiration for the song. The Rolling Stones first hit the UK top ten with 'Not Fade Away' – a Buddy Holly song. And Bruce Springsteen sings Buddy Holly songs in his dressing room to warm up before going on stage.

Without Holly, the British music boom of the 1960s, and all that it influenced, would have been very different. He was so influential because he could do everything – by the end of his short life he was not only writing the songs, and performing them in a self-contained unit with the Crickets, but was producing records too. Although the Crickets also performed as a trio, Holly's band essentially invented the now classic

group line-up of two guitars, bass and drums. They sometimes dispensed with the second guitar, because Holly was also a superb and original guitarist who could produce a sound like lead and rhythm at the same time. Playing second guitar in Holly's band was about as pointless as the proverbial fifth wheel.

Elvis was undoubtedly a greater performer – but Elvis didn't write songs, didn't produce records, and was no more than a competent guitar strummer. Buddy Holly did it all, and he did it all so well. Appreciated much more in Britain than in his homeland, he was the inspiration for dozens of groups who thought 'If he can do it, so can we.' Some were right; many were wrong. But the ones who were right included the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In the words of his biographer Philip Norman, 'there is a case for calling Buddy Holly the [twentieth] century's most influential musician'.

How did this phenomenon happen? How did a young man who was only 22 when he died, and whose career lasted just eighteen months from the time of his first hit record to his death, change the face of popular music? And why is he still so popular – the musical *Buddy* has now been running for nearly as long as Holly's entire life! The simple answer is, 'Because he was the best'. This book aims to look a little more deeply at the phenomenon, and explain how a Texan country boy from Lubbock became the best, travelling from country music to rock 'n' roll and beyond. The earliest known recording of Buddy Holly singing and playing the guitar reveals a frighteningly competent twelve-year-old musician – the same age that I was when Holly died. He was recording for at least ten of his 22 years.

It isn't my intention here to present a fully rounded biography of Buddy. Rather, I want to focus on the music that was the centrepiece of his life – both his own music and the influences that made him the musician he was, but especially his own recordings, rather than the minutiae of the almost non-stop grind of touring. None of us can go back to the Trocadero cinema in south London on 1 March 1958 to see and hear Buddy Holly live; but we can all play his recording of 'Rave On', and gain something by knowing how and when the record was made.

More literally than of any other recording artist, music was Buddy Holly's life. The story of Buddy Holly's life in music spans the ten years following that first recording; but the story of Buddy Holley (as he was born) begins twelve years earlier, on 7 September 1936.

CHAPTER ONE

Little Baby

Charles Hardin Holley was born in Lubbock, Texas, at 3:30pm on Monday, 7 September 1936. He wasn't actually such a little baby; family members say he weighed in at 6½ pounds. The local newspaper, the *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, reported him as a more hefty 8½ pounds; but they got at least one other important fact wrong in the birth announcement, which read in full:

A daughter weighing 8½ pounds was born at 6:10 o'clock Monday afternoon at Clark-Key Clinic to Mr and Mrs Lawrence O. Holley of 7913 Sixth Street.

The baby was a late addition to the family of Lawrence Odell (or 'L.O.') Holley and his wife Ella, née Drake. They already had two older sons, Larry (born in 1925) and Travis (born in 1927), as well as a daughter, Patricia Lou (born in 1929). From the beginning of his life, Charles Hardin was known as Buddy, a common American nickname for the youngest boy in a family; the name even appears on official documents such as his driving licence. His surname, Holley, was shortened to Holly by a spelling mistake on his first recording contract, and Buddy kept it as his professional name; the mis-spelling was common (L.O.'s name is written as 'Holly' on Buddy's birth certificate), and he probably felt that he might as well go with the flow. For consistency, I'll always refer to him as Buddy Holly.

Lubbock is a city on the dry plains of northern Texas, far away from the bright lights of places like Houston and San Antonio, and named after a Texan hero of the Civil War, Thomas S. Lubbock. In the United States, the term 'city' doesn't have quite the same connotations that it has in Europe – it simply refers to an urban area with some degree of self-government, for example, with an elected mayor. Some US cities have populations of under a thousand people, while others are measured in hundreds of thousands. Lubbock lies 300 miles west of Dallas and 124 miles south of Amarillo on Interstate 27. It was founded in 1891, less than 50 years before the birth of Buddy Holly, as a centre of the cotton-farming industry, and the population only reached 4,000 in 1920, although it soared to more than 20,000 over the next ten years. By 1930, the city's history proudly recalls, it also had three banks.

Texas itself didn't join the Union until 1845, nine years after gaining its independence from Mexico, so in spite of its latitude it has a distinctly different history from that of the old southern states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and

South Carolina. Apart from cotton, the only other important activity in Lubbock is the university, founded in 1923 as Texas Technical College and now known as Texas Tech, today offering 150 degree courses and with more than 28,000 enrolled students.

Lubbock is in the Bible Belt of America, claiming to have more churches per head of population than any other city in America. Right up until 1972 it was officially alcohol-free, and for almost as long it was racially segregated. Texas isn't always regarded as part of the formerly segregated 'Deep South' by non-Americans, but to put this in perspective, Lubbock is actually at about the same latitude as the heart of the state of Georgia, birthplace of Little Richard.

So Buddy Holly grew up in a poor but hardworking and loving family, in an out-of-the-way corner of America where religion played a big part in everyday life, but where black people and Hispanics were regarded as racial inferiors. One result of this was that he had little contact with blacks until he discovered their music. He was born in the midst of the Depression, when his father had to take a succession of low-paid jobs to support the family, and they had to move house half-a-dozen times in twelve years in the constant search for affordable accommodation. The house where he was born, at 1911 6th Street, was a simple single-storey building no bigger than a modern holiday chalet; the site is now an empty lot. But Lubbock doesn't seem to have suffered as severely from the Depression as many parts of the country – L. O. always seems to have been able to find work of some sort.

On his mother's side, Buddy could claim some exotic ancestry. Her grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee, and Larry Holley recalls his half-Indian grandfather's pride in his native American ancestry. That made Buddy one-eighth Cherokee. Somewhat less romantically, Ella Drake's family belief that they were descended from the famous privateer Sir Francis Drake cannot be true, since the Elizabethan adventurer had no children. She had married L.O. in 1924, and was 34 when Buddy was born; L. O. was a year older than her. He had been raised on a farm near the town of Honey Grove, less than 100 miles from Dallas and even closer to Paris, Texas, but moved to Vernon, Texas, some 150 miles to the east of Lubbock, to find work. He also found Ella Pauline Drake there, but they moved to Lubbock a year after their marriage because there were better prospects of work in an expanding city, where Ella's parents had migrated a little earlier. The Holleys belonged to the Tabernacle Baptist Church, one of many splinter groups in the American South, which teaches an almost literal interpretation of the Bible and expects a tithe of (usually) 10 per cent of the earnings of its followers.

All of this may give the impression of a grim Depression childhood for Buddy; but such an impression would be wrong. He was the indulged youngest child of the family, doted on by his mother and with two big brothers that he hero-worshipped. He certainly had an easier life than his siblings, and was the first member of the family to graduate from high school. Although lacking other forms of entertainment, the family were all (except L.O.) musical. Larry played violin and piano, Travis accordion and later guitar, and Ella and Pat could sing.

The two older brothers performed together at local talent shows, with Buddy eager to join in. When he was five, his parents bought him a toy violin and prevailed upon Larry and Travis to let him 'accompany' them at one of these competitions. Since Buddy couldn't actually play the instrument, Larry smeared the strings with grease so

that it wouldn't make a sound; but the judges were so taken with the cute kid sawing away and singing alongside his big brothers that they won a \$5 prize.

Larry in particular became a role model for Buddy – a hard-working, adventurous character, afraid of nothing. Buddy, says Larry, was 'a cute little kid' who enjoyed being pulled around the yard in an old apple crate, as if he were on a sled; 'he really liked that.' But not long after Buddy's success in the talent show, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought America into the Second World War, and both Larry and Travis eventually left to join the Marines. Both survived to return home. Travis, who fought at Iwo Jima in February 1945, brought with him a guitar, bought from a shipmate, which he taught Buddy to play. Larry was among the soldiers earmarked for the invasion of the main island of Japan, and his life was among those almost certainly saved by the use of the atomic bombs that forced the Japanese surrender; the High Command had anticipated 90 per cent casualties in the invasion.

Buddy's interest in music had stagnated somewhat after that talent show, and although he began taking piano lessons at the age of eleven, after nine months he decided that this wasn't what he wanted to play, even though his teacher had told his parents that he was a quick learner and one of her best pupils. He dropped the piano and decided to switch to the guitar after listening to one of his fellow pupils on the school bus playing and singing on the daily journey, and his parents, ever-indulgent, bought him a steel guitar. That didn't suit him either, and he asked for one like his brother had; it duly came, from a pawnshop. Travis taught him the basics, but before long Buddy, who had a musical ear and learned to play by listening, not by reading music, was telling Travis where he was going wrong. 'He was a quick study and learned fast. In fact, before long he was showing *me* new things ... He'd say, "There's another chord that goes in there, Trav.'" (VH1) From then on, the family recall, Buddy was hardly ever seen without a guitar in his hands. He would play on the school bus with his friends, at home in his room, and sitting out on the front steps. The music he played was, of course, country and western, *the* big sound of the 1940s in the American South.

American country music had its origins, musically speaking, in an amalgamation of traditional styles brought to the New World by settlers; but instead of sticking to the traditional subject of love, the lyrics tended to deal also with practical events in the everyday working life of people like ranchers ('cowboy' or 'western' songs) and miners, and with disasters and tragedies such as train wrecks and murders. By the mid-1920s, 'hillbilly' music was being both recorded and broadcast on the radio; a good example is Harry McClintock's 'Big Rock Candy Mountain' from 1928. The first real stars of the genre were the Carter Family, a vocal trio who wrote literally hundreds of songs in the 1920s and 1930s; one member of the original trio, Maybelle, was the mother of June Carter, who wrote 'Ring of Fire' and married Johnny Cash. Other influential artists of the time were Jimmie Rodgers and Gene Autry.

Where Buddy grew up, though, the important part of the name 'country and western' was 'western', which essentially refers to West Texas. It stemmed from a marriage between country music and big-band jazz, developed in the 1930s, originally in a band featuring vocalist Milton Brown and fiddler Bob Wills. Wills went on to form the Texas Playboys, producing a string of hits in the late 1930s and 1940s, including 'New San Antonio Rose' in 1940. The western brand of C&W was very

much music to dance to, at hops, jamborees and hoe-downs, which led to a more experimental approach to the music and the early acceptance of instruments such as electric guitars and drums – drums in particular were anathema in the traditional country music of the old states of the South, such as Tennessee, the home of the country music capital, Nashville. The other important feature of western music was that everybody played it – or at least, everybody played some kind of music, except for the few, like L. O. Holley, who couldn't carry a tune. This must have originally been because there was nothing else to do for entertainment in West Texas, but the tradition of playing in bands not just at school but among groups of friends, performing for each other and anyone else who would listen, was firmly established by the time Buddy Holly began to take a serious interest in music in the 1940s. So there was nothing unusual about Buddy's musical activity and aspirations; in that sense, he was very much a product of the time and place where he was born. It's just that he was so much better than all the other kids who picked guitar for a hobby and dreamed of becoming a star.

One of those other kids was Buddy's friend, Bob Montgomery, who featured strongly in Buddy's musical development in the 1950s; but they didn't meet until 1949. Buddy's first school had been the Roscoe Wilson Elementary School, in the city of Lubbock proper; but in 1946 the need to find cheaper accommodation forced the Holley family to move outside the city limits. Buddy had to transfer to the Roosevelt Elementary School, which involved the long bus ride on which he first heard a fellow pupil playing the guitar, and where he later played his own guitar and sang songs, including Bill Monroe's 'Gotta Travel On', to entertain the other students. At the age of twelve, partly thanks to his musical prowess, Buddy was the most popular boy in his class, recognised when he was voted, together with a girl named Barbara Denning, 'King and Queen of the Sixth Grade'. It was around this time, in 1949, that Buddy recorded himself performing Hank Snow's 'My Two Timin' Woman' (bizarrely inappropriate material for a twelve-year-old!) on a wire recorder that a friend who worked in an electronics store had 'borrowed'. There must have been other recordings made at the time, but none seem to have survived; this 1½-minute song is all we have from the pre-teenage Buddy.

Apart from the quality of the performance itself, the most important thing about the recording is that it highlights the kind of music that Buddy was listening to on the radio and being influenced by. Snow was a Nashville-based country music star, best remembered now for his 1950 hit 'I'm Movin' On'. Musically, 1949 was also an important year not just for country music but for pop music in general, with the emergence of Hank Williams, already a major country star, as a mainstream 'crossover' artist, with the huge success of his definitive recording of 'Lovesick Blues'. Williams' music could be heard in Lubbock thanks to his live broadcasts on country music stations – the *Louisiana Hayride* on KWKH from Shreveport, throughout 1948, and the *Grand Ole Opry* on WSM from Nashville, where he started in 1949. Buddy was fascinated by the Hank Williams sound, which involved a semi-yodelling style that stretched and bent individual syllables of words over several notes, and tried to copy it. But as John Goldrosen has pointed out, there was more to it than that. Williams wrote songs from the heart, drawing on his personal life and speaking directly to his audience, rather than simply performing (in effect, acting) someone

else's message. The fact that so many of his songs dealt in a plaintive or wistful fashion with lost or unrequited love simply made them even more appealing to teenagers (and precocious sub-teenagers).

Another big influence on both Buddy Holly and Bob Montgomery was the brand of country music known as bluegrass. Bluegrass is based on acoustic stringed instruments, in particular the fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin and stand-up bass. The term originated with the band Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys, which had this classic line-up, although other instruments, such as the accordion, are also sometimes featured. It was his interest in bluegrass music that explains why Buddy took up the banjo in the late 1940s and even taught himself to play the mandolin, although the guitar remained his main instrument. There are similarities between bluegrass music and jazz, because in each case the instruments take turns playing the melody and improvising on it, while the others provide the backing. This can lead to exciting 'duelling' between the instruments; fascinating, and challenging, to any competent budding musician.

Monroe formed his band in 1939, but developed the definitive bluegrass style between 1946, when banjo player Earl Scruggs joined the line-up, and 1948, soon being copied by others. This line-up of the band also featured singer-guitarist Lester Flatt; Flatt and Scruggs left the Bluegrass Boys in 1948 to form their own equally influential group, the Foggy Mountain Boys. Much later, Scruggs recorded with saxophonist King Curtis, who also played on Buddy Holly's record 'Reminiscing'.

Another influence on Buddy Holly came from country duet performers, close harmony teams such as the archetypal Louvin Brothers (real brothers, but originally named Ira and Charlie Loudermilk; the singer-songwriter John D. Loudermilk, who wrote Eddie Cochran's 'Sittin' in the Balcony', is their cousin). In the late 1950s, this style was developed in pop by the Everly Brothers, and through them influenced such artists as the Beach Boys and the Beatles.

Not long after Buddy recorded 'My Two Timin' Woman', an upturn in the family's fortunes enabled them to move back into the city of Lubbock, where they lived at 3315 36th Street. This meant that at the age of thirteen Buddy started seventh grade at the J. T. Hutchinson Junior High School, where he was reacquainted with some of his peers from Roscoe Wilson Elementary, and made new friends as well. Among his circle of acquaintances were Bob Montgomery, Don Guess, and Jerry Ivan 'J.I.' Allison, who was actually a grade below Buddy in school. Montgomery could sing and play guitar; Guess played steel guitar and stand-up bass, and was already writing songs; Allison played the drums. But at first, they didn't all play together.

It was Buddy and Bob who first started to make their own music as a team, developing a mixture influenced by both bluegrass and rhythm 'n' blues, which they heard on the radio from a show called 'Stan's Record Review', broadcast every night at 10:30 by KWKH in Shreveport, Louisiana. R&B was at the time entirely black, or 'race', music, and it was not considered respectable for decent, white Baptist boys to even listen to it, let alone play it.

It's widely accepted that R&B originated in the late 1930s and early 1940s, linked to the rise of radio and television and the availability of tape recorders, which made it possible for independent record producers to both make records and get them heard. The single most important originator of the music was Louis Jordan, a former jazz

musician, who started recording with a small group in 1938 in a style known as jump blues. This rapidly spread, developing regional variations, around cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana, and Memphis, Tennessee. Jordan's influence can be directly traced through later artists such as Chuck Berry, B. B. King and James Brown, with Chuck Berry and Little Richard in particular developing it into rock 'n' roll.

The lyrics of early R&B were often not so much suggestive as explicitly sexual, and the term 'rock 'n' roll' itself came originally from R&B as a euphemism for sex, as is clear in Roy Brown's classic 'Good Rocking Tonight', a hit for Wynonie Harris in 1948, which Holly himself later recorded, as did Elvis Presley. The sexual connotations were an attraction for the teenage duo, but the music was what really mattered, and it was the quality of the R&B performances put on record by black musicians that led Holly to revise the racially prejudiced attitudes he had grown up with. Unlike many of the white kids, who found the softer sound of black groups like the Drifters or the Clovers appealing, Buddy and Bob became fans of the real blues and superior musicianship offered by artists such as Lightnin' Hopkins, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Little Walter.

The appeal of such music was enhanced for white teenage boys by its flavour of forbidden fruit. Parents frowned upon it, and even those radio stations that broadcast it from distant locations like Louisiana mostly aired it late at night. As they grew older, Buddy and his friends would listen in one of their (or their parents') cars, straining to catch the sounds as the signal faded in and out, turning the car around when the music faded, to try to get better reception.

Although still strictly amateurs, as well as practising together and listening to music, Buddy Holly and Bob Montgomery seized any chance they could to perform in front of an audience, and quickly built up a reputation at school. In 1950, they were asked to perform a number as part of the entertainment for a parents' night at J. T. Hutchinson Junior High, but the organisers of the event didn't bother to ask them what song they were planning to sing. The staid adult members of the audience were shocked when the two teenagers chose to perform the song 'Too Old to Cut the Mustard', which they dedicated, tongue in cheek, to their teachers. A Bill Carlisle song, it recounts how when the singer was young he had to 'fight the girls off with a stick', but that now they say he makes them sick, because he's 'too old to cut the mustard'.

It seems a harmless enough bit of schoolboy fun today, but in 1950 Bible Belt America it was so outrageous that the embarrassed Ella Holley was seriously worried that her son would get expelled from school for his cheek. Wisely, though, the teachers ignored the incident. The students, however, were impressed both by the duo's nerve and by their performance itself. It was this show that first made Jerry Allison aware of Buddy Holly's talent, although the two of them didn't get together until they were in high school proper a couple of years later.

The move to the Thomas S. Lubbock High School, known locally as 'LHS', happened for Buddy and Bob in 1952, when Buddy was sixteen. The same year, they made home recordings of two songs which have survived as scratchy acetates, the quite listenable 'I'll Just Pretend', with Bob singing lead while Buddy plays mandolin and sings harmony, and the badly damaged 'Take These Shackles From My Heart', with Buddy taking the lead vocal. A year or so later they recorded the Bill Monroe song 'Footprints in the Snow' under similar circumstances, again with Montgomery

taking the lead vocal. These home recordings, and the move to LHS, effectively mark the end of Buddy Holly's musical babyhood. By 1953, he was already performing on a professional basis as one half of a duo – though not with Bob Montgomery – and they were about to make their (unpaid) debut on a local radio station, KDAV.

CHAPTER TWO

Learning the Game

In 1951, the year Buddy turned fifteen and started his final year at junior high, two things happened to change his life. The first seemed trivial, or at worst an inconvenience. The school nurse noticed that he had poor eyesight, and an optometrist's examination showed that his uncorrected vision was only 20/800 in both eyes. A person with 20/40 vision can only see from 20 feet what a person with normal vision can see from 40 feet, so Buddy could only see from 20 feet what a person with normal vision can see from 800 feet. Some accounts say that he was 'legally blind', since 20/200 vision or worse is considered legally blind in the US – but only if that is the *corrected* vision. With glasses, Buddy could see OK, so he certainly wasn't legally blind (if he had been, he couldn't have had a driving licence). Like many adolescents, though, he was embarrassed by the nerdy look that glasses gave him, and he chose inconspicuous frames which he avoided wearing whenever possible.

This was more of an inconvenience for Buddy than for most of his short-sighted peers, because around the same time he started performing music on a slightly less amateur basis. It started when L. O. Holley was working on a building site where a young carpenter's assistant, Jack Neal, used to entertain the crew by singing and playing his guitar during lunch breaks. Neal, who had been born in Fort Worth, Texas, on 3 March 1934, was an accomplished musician and a big fan of country singers such as Hank Williams and Ray Price, who took over Hank Williams' band, the Drifting Cowboys, when Williams died. (In 1954 Price wrote 'Release Me', later a huge hit for Englebert Humperdinck.) After hearing Neal play, L.O. suggested that he should get together with Buddy, and they soon became firm friends and dedicated practice partners. A rugged, outdoors type (in spite of his slight stature), Neal also took Buddy, two years his junior, out hunting and fishing. But music was the core of their relationship, with Jack playing rhythm and doing most of the singing while Buddy played lead. They played every gig they could get, including entertaining the kids at local movie theatres before the Saturday morning shows; it was the audience response they got in such unpromising surroundings that encouraged Buddy to begin to think seriously about making a career in music. Early in 1953, in an essay written for a school assignment, he wrote: 'I have thought of making a career out of western music if I am good enough.'

Around the same time, Niki Sullivan, another student at LHS but a year younger than Buddy, saw Holly performing knock-out versions of Hank Thompson's 'Wild Side of Life' and Lloyd Price's 'Lawdy, Miss Clawdy' (both released in 1952) in school one lunchtime. Even though he was just sixteen, the choice of songs

encapsulates the way Holly would change popular music – one a country classic, very much white man’s music, the other all-out R&B, or race music. As much as anyone, it was Holly who put the two together to make rock ‘n’ roll.

Music was by far the most important thing in Buddy Holly’s life even at this early stage. Sullivan, who later became one of the Crickets, was reported as saying that if Buddy had a choice between playing his guitar and going on a date, he’d play his guitar wherever there was an audience. But, like other red-blooded American teenage boys of his time, he was also interested in girls, drink, and smoking. Although Lubbock was officially dry, it was easy to get hold of beer, which was just about all Holly could handle because of a stomach problem, later diagnosed as an ulcer. This didn’t stop him occasionally drinking to excess, but the dire consequences (and parental disapproval) meant that this happened only rarely. Smoking was also something his parents disapproved of, and which he tried unsuccessfully to hide from them; but in the fifties this was not only widely socially acceptable but almost a required symbol of male maturity. Experimenting with sex, as most teenagers do, Buddy also dated several of the ‘wrong sort’ of girls as far as his parents were concerned; but the one he settled on as his steady date went so far in the other direction that in the end it led to the break-up of their relationship.

Buddy had met Echo McGuire when they were both children at the Roscoe Wilson Elementary School. They were in the same grade – their birthdays were just four months apart – and they had both been delivered by the same doctor, but in different hospitals. Although they lost touch when the Holleys temporarily moved out of the city, they were in the same circle of friends at junior high and then at LHS, and Buddy and Bob Montgomery used to play table tennis with Echo at the McGuire house. Echo’s family were considerably more affluent than the Holleys; her father owned a dry-cleaning business, as well as his own house in a nice part of town, while the Holleys lived in more modest rented accommodation. They also attended a different church, which meant far more in 1950s America than it would in England today.

The McGuires were members of the Church of Christ, a sect so strict that it regarded music as the work of the devil, and forbade it even in church; girls who shaved their legs were regarded as fallen women, and dancing was strictly not on the agenda. It’s hard to think of anyone less suited, on those grounds, for Buddy Holly. But Echo was an attractive doll of a girl, just five feet tall, her face framed in a halo of dark hair. She was also intelligent – a ‘straight A’ student – but deeply committed to her religion, and even at that early age planning a career in the ministry. Nevertheless, in 1952, in the autumn of their first year at LHS, Buddy asked Echo for a date, and she accepted. They went to a football game together, then on to the Hi-D-Ho drive-in, a favourite fast-food establishment where teenagers could cruise around checking out who was there (and who they were with) before pulling up for a burger or one of the ‘Hidey’ specials. The situation was slightly awkward because Bob Montgomery also wanted to date Echo; but in any case her mother said she was too young to go steady, so for a time she would go out with one of them on a Friday and the other on the Saturday. But by the spring of 1953 she had stopped dating Montgomery and was going steady with Buddy, who had won over her parents with his charm.

Although Buddy didn’t even kiss Echo until they had been dating for a year, the relationship was a serious one which lasted through high school and ended only after