

Buddy Holly: Legend

Buddy Holly is a legend. His short life of twenty two years can be verified by living witnesses and contemporary documents and while his life has become enmeshed in some rock and roll myths, his story is not itself one.

In its original usage, legend referred to the saints lives read in monasteries, and there is an element of the hagiographic in the stories told about Holly. By dying early he remains incorruptible, forever young in people's memories in contrast to those who didn't die soon enough and became bloated and putrefied like Elvis Presley. Evidence of veneration to this day exists with his web site being maintained by his wife as a cyber-shrine to the ever youthful rock icon and his relics being housed in a memorabilia collection in a museum in his home town of Lubbock, Texas. The oral tradition of his work lives on the thousands of bands aping his songs and stylisations and endlessly recapitulating them as if they were sacrosanct ritual. Anniversaries are celebrated or mourned with annual Buddy Holly days celebrated by such acolytes as Paul McCartney who went so far in his worship as to play in a like named band and to buy the copyrights to Holly's songs.

Legendary accretions have become attached to the Holly story so that his brief time of fame is spun into something larger and more awesome. Due to the opportunistic posthumous releases of tarted up demos, it was said that he had survived the crash and was in hiding in New Mexico. His wife was reported to have had dreams of fireballs from which she awoke screaming the night before he died. Eddie Cochran was said to be obsessed with his friend's death and played his records ad nauseum in the weeks before his own fatal accident. Rumours that the plane crash was no accident and that the pilot was shot with Holly's gun soon after

take-off persist, despite negative findings in coroner and aviation authority investigations.

His life has been interpreted in movies, musicals and songs which all add to the legend with their individual perspectives and innovations. The underwhelming use of strings on some of his last recordings is memorialized in the movie “The Buddy Holly Story”, by the session strings players marveling at the young man asking for pizzicato to represent falling raindrops just as classical composers did, in the best corny Hollywood tradition of legendary presentations of songwriters in film biographies. “American Pie” by Don McLean uses Holly’s death, “the day the music died” in mythic fashion to explain McLean’s own sense of loss and his disillusion with the way music had changed. In a different way his legend became incorporated into the myth of the rock star who dies young and leaves a good looking corpse.

If Holly had not lived he may have needed to be created to explain that stereotypical rock star who dies tragically young and unfulfilled. That would be true myth, but having lived he is only legendary.