

Social changes in the 50s to the 70s decades, as sung in american pie

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Don McLean's "American Pie" is an absolute classic and an epic of folk-rock music, and one I've grown up hearing since before I could even walk. I had always wondered what the seemingly cryptic lyrics were about, looked into it a bit a couple years ago, and now have done so again, somewhat deeper. While the Buddy Holly plane crash story is the most commonly heard interpretation of this song, its true scope is much broader than one single event. As a whole, this song seems to be a multifaceted story of the "innocent" and hopeful 1950s American zeitgeist being corrupted by the turmoil of the very late 50s-early 70s, especially within a musical context. I feel the most prudent way to discuss this theme, and the more specific references made in the song, is to walk through it verse by verse.

The first verse, in which McLean recounts his memories of 50s rock n' roll music, and how it made people happy. These first lines of the song set up an image of a Happy-Days setting, helping set the sociocultural baseline high, in preparation for it to fall throughout the duration of the song. It makes sense that this song came out when it did, in the middle of the darkness that was the Vietnam War, Nixon Administration, and so many other turbulent factors, and in a period of glossy-eyed nostalgia for the Eisenhower days, which was captured by this and several other songs, as well as by films like American Graffiti. Still within this first verse, however, is where the story begins its descent. McLean, who was an actual paperboy in 1959, describes his reaction to "The day the music died," or February 3rd, 1959, on which rising stars Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valenzuela, and J. P. Richardson ("The Big Bopper"). In addition to Elvis Presley's career hiatus due to his tenure in the army (even though, admittedly, his career remained very strong, due to the

steady release of prerecorded material), Chuck Berry's arrest, and Little Richard's departure from rock n' roll, this event signaled a real shift, by both fate and trend, away from the bright, bouncy days of original rock n' roll.

The next verse is less clear, but can still be held to a cohesive message.

McLean discusses the simple nature of young love in the 1950s, one reliant on courtship via the dancefloor, and on what Catholics like himself attest to as the fruits of faith in God. He suggests "music [can] save your mortal soul," appraising it as a force similar in power to that of the deity he just mentioned, showing his strong convictions and admiration for the music of his youth, and his faith in it to help and guide him in romantic pursuits.

However, the music of the 1960s was by-and-large less "danceable" than that of the decade prior, and despite his possession of a romantic desire and freedom to roam (his "pink carnation" and "pickup truck"), he became a lonely teen because he couldn't keep up with the complexities of the new social order. It is in this way that McLean essentially suggests that the death of rock n' roll and the spirit of the 50s killed love itself (ironic, considering the 60s were the decade of the Summer of Love and the Sexual Revolution, but biting nonetheless).

A great deal of commentary is packed into the next passage, much of which deals with the convoluted state of music over the past ten years (at the time of writing). I don't want to attempt to read too much into what appear to be McLean's criticisms of Bob Dylan in this verse, and I don't know what his opinion of Dylan actually is. However, to suggest "moss grows fat on a rolling stone" seems to imply that he did not appreciate Dylan's similarly

named song, and most likely his switch to electric instrumentation in large. McLean describes “The Jester” (Dylan) as initially a man in a coat “borrowed from James Dean” (on the cover of *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*) who acted as “a voice [of] you and me.” It seems though that McLean is trying to say that once Dylan crossed over into the rock genre, he stole the crown from Elvis, who had previously dominated the field, and that no one seemed to care. He goes on to criticize The Beatles, particularly Lennon, for politicizing themselves, particularly communistically.

The darkness and negativity grows, as McLean illustrates in the next two verses a decade wasted by drugs and fruitless protest. He uses The Byrds as an example and metaphor for musical artists and groups burning out, getting into drugs, and ending up in rehab (if they were lucky). Through a variety of sports-related metaphors (I’m unsure what, if any, significance the sports connection has, aside from being a convenient venue for metaphor), it is described how the new culture, one both driven and expressed by music, made attempts to create some grand social upheaval, but accomplished little. Popular interpretation of the “players [trying] to take the field” is that it is representative of either the 1968 Democratic Convention, Kent State Massacre, or both, and that the “marching band” that refused to yield was, essentially, the powers-that-be. By the time of Woodstock, the hippy generation was already at the end of its defining decade. They were a whole “generation lost in space,” with, as McLean appears to argue, little more than a loss of faith to show for the decade that had passed.

In the last true verse, McLean parses with the death of Janis Joplin (the “ girl who sang the blues”), and with a sad walk to a record store that no longer carries the 50s hits that it used to. The country’s youth is screaming in the streets and the Love Generation is being torn apart by the war, all of which paints a dark image to contrast with the utopian one presented at the song’s very beginning. It is here that McLean again, and more blatantly, relates fifties culture to a higher power. When he writes that “ the church bells all were broken’ and that the holy trinity “ caught the last train for the coast,” he essentially suggests that God died with rock n’ roll.

The song concludes on a somber note as “ American Pie” is bid goodbye, implying the death of what McLean sees as the American zeitgeist. The times have now irrevocably changed, for what he does not see to be the better.