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Learning The Game: How John Lennon Learned to Stop Worrying and Love His Inner Geek

Tim Riley, *Rock's Backpages*, November 2006

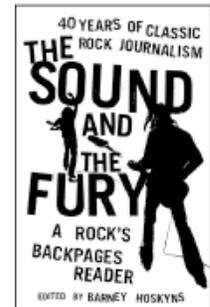
LONG BEFORE "POST-MODERN" became pure jargon, Buddy Holly put quotes around his "normalcy" to disarm rock machismo.

Holly, the "King of the Sixth Grade," hiccupped his hormones out loud, flipping everybody's high school jitters into metaphor. His futuristic Stratocaster guitar gave his horn-rimmed glasses sudden but certain panache, and in a style crowded with "hipsters," "Marlon Brando with a guitar" as Jackie Gleason dismissed Elvis Presley, Holly pushed "normal" to extremes. On his records, everyday stuff turned radical. In musical terms, squeezing the eccentric from the banal meant deconstructing all the elements of song as recording, from verse-refrain-bridge constructions to bending analog tape to do your song's will. This persona, the ordinary as cosmic, consumes the *Complete Buddy Holly* (Purple Chick), last year's underground epic, a 10-CD remaster of everything Holly touched. This grand, sprawling patchwork weaves early 1953 appearances on KDAV with Jack Neal as "Buddy and Jack" with radio spots, alternate takes, even phone messages to reluctant executives. His chart action wedges a creative infinity into two years, from 1957 up to his plane crash on February 3, 1959.

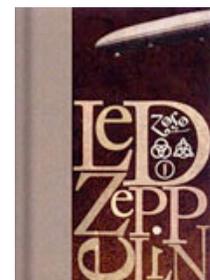
It opens with a 1949 home recording of Hank Snow's 'My Two-Timin' Woman', before Buddy's voice has changed (with a respectable guitar solo), and closes six CDs later with Holly's solo acoustic 'Apartment Demos', which include the bizarrely slow takes of 'Slippin' and Slidin', sped up for Chipmunks effect. The final four volumes (7-10) are devoted to stereo and mono remasters, the mid-60s string overdubs, Holly's guitar sessions, radio feeds, and singles by others Holly treasured enough to arrange for himself. On disc four, during several outtakes of Bo Diddley's 'Mona', Holly sounds like Pete Townshend warming up for 'Pinball Wizard'. It's a set to get lost in. Now the Chick has assembled a companion *Complete Buddy Holly DVD*, which compiles all extant performance and tour footage into a montage of Holly's infinitely brief career. Together, the CD box and 30-minute DVD comprise the most comprehensive picture of Holly ever published. Like fellow Texan Roy Orbison, who had also worked with producer Norman Petty, Holly personified rock's transformative power, and his influence reached far beyond his hiccups, songwriting, virile guitar work, stiff but arresting stage presence, and deceptively simple recordings. His guileless smile still contains multitudes.

Holly first embraced of rock'n'roll as a natural outgrowth of country-and-western. Like a lot of other kids in Elvis Presley's audience, he understood that the genius of the new Teen Jesus from Memphis was *sui generis* by definition. Metaphorically, this meant accentuating your strangeness was a game anybody could play – even, or perhaps especially, if you were the squarest looking guy in the class. Holly's success spoke for all the like-minded classmates who thrilled to Presley's singing and rebellion but found his sexual bravado out of reach. Here was the easy-to-overlook kid, the Class Generic, who stole the talent show by unleashing rabid, lascivious rockabilly on his unsuspecting classmates. To Holly's ear, this raucous style shot straight out of the perfectly respectable country-and-western he grew up on and its wayward cousin, honky-tonk. Everything on the West Texas airwaves told him he was right: on Lubbock's KDAV playlist, DJ "Hipockets" Duncan played Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins next to Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell.

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As Holly's British biographers John Goldrosen and John Beecher write:

"...Artists such as Holly, Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and the Everly Brothers were always thought of as country artists in the west Texas area, and their records were played as heavily on the country stations as on pop stations. KDAV owner Dave Stone remembers, 'We thought of rockabilly as just being another kind of country music, so we always played it.' ... [Holly's guitarist] Tommy Allsup remembers frequently seeing Holly's records, and those of similar artists, on jukeboxes in country & western nightclubs." [Goldrosen and Beecher, page 108]

While working around Lubbock with his next partner Bob Montgomery (Neal had married in 1954), Holly introduced himself to Presley at Lubbock's Cotton Club in early 1955. He came away dazed that the King was so approachable and soft-spoken, a real country boy; onstage the King was greased lightning, offstage he was all shucks. The "Buddy and Bob" act opened for Elvis the next morning at a Pontiac dealership. "And when the next KDAV Sunday Party rolled around," write Goldrosen and Beecher, "Buddy was singing Elvis's songs." The next time Presley came through town, Holly and Montgomery met him outside Lubbock and gave him the tour: Elvis and Buddy, just two hicks cruising town, talking trash. Holly's DJ contacts got him a disastrous early Nashville session in early 1956 for Decca with Owen Bradley (the smoothie who dressed up Patsy Cline in satin and strings) before he retreated to Clovis, New Mexico, with one Norman Petty. Along the way, Holly left Montgomery and most of his C&W material behind (although not its plaintive undertow), and formed a band, the Crickets.

Holly's country twang was quickly subsumed by his creeping love for R&B. Among early rock'n'rollers, he ranks among the elite few who followed Presley onto the R&B charts. *Billboard* reviewed 'That'll Be the Day' in its June 10, 1957, issue. By early August, the side had entered the Hot 100. Simultaneously, the record appeared on the R&B charts, and peaked in September at number 1 pop and number 2 R&B. Georgie Woods, one of the top DJs on WDAS, Philadelphia's popular black station, gave 'Day' some of its most important support. Holly's black material was at least as insolent as Presley's: he did Hank Ballard's salacious 'Work With Me Annie', and Holly's older brother Larry describes a scene from 1956:

"We went to get a load of tile in San Angelo (Texas), Buddy and I, in an eighteen-wheeler. There was a little colored beer joint just outside of town. We were hungry and wanted some hamburgers, so we went in and sat down. They had a three-piece colored band playing. Buddy went up and started talking to them, and they knew from how he talked that he was a musician. One of them said, 'Hey man, why don't you play one!' Buddy said, 'Don't mind if I do!' He picked up that electric guitar, and as soon as he touched it, the sound was completely different. He played 'Sexy Ways', and everyone looked up. Somebody made a phone call and people started coming in, and it wasn't long until that place was packed. They wouldn't let him quit. That place was dead when we got there, but it was rocking when we left." [Goldrosen and Beecher, page 28]

Here was a lily-white teen who won over black listeners with their own style – and made it look easy, even "normal," in the Jim Crow South. But where Presley was at ease singing to and about women, Holly romanced with an unfathomable resolve that spoke more to male experience. A defining feature of Holly's appeal was almost invisible, and perhaps best observed from the stage. Here's Holly's friend and touring companion, Phil Everly:

"Young girls would fill the audience in the early shows. As it progressed to the evening, it filled up with men and if you were getting a lot of girl reaction, like screams and things, it would start to wane. You had to really deliver when the men got there, because they weren't so anxious to do any screaming for you. But Buddy Holly was an exception – He would go over more on those evenings when there was a bigger male audience." [Goldrosen and Beecher, page 87]

Tracing male anxiety became one of Holly's most fruitful and influential themes ('Learning the Game', 'Maybe Baby').

Reconciling Holly's look to his sound was something of a puzzle. His visual impression was overwhelmed by those thick horn-rimmed glasses, your basic "geek" billboard across any teenager's forehead. Holly tried contact lenses to escape the "four-eyes" stigma, but found them uncomfortable. "On one tour later that year [1956], he did attempt to perform without glasses, but that experiment ended one night when he dropped his pick and had to get down on his hands and knees to search for it." [Goldrosen and Beecher, page 24] Don Everly remembers that "television host Steve Allen, who wore solid black frames, was in their minds an example of someone who could wear glasses and still look 'cool' by emphasizing the fact" [Goldrosen and Beecher, page 24.]

So Holly simply shifted into reverse. He changed from the thin plastic and metal frames to thick all-black frames with pronounced curves (purchased for him in Mexico by his Lubbock optician, say Goldrosen and Beecher, page 86). Allison coaxed Holly's new look: "I said to him, 'If you're going to wear glasses, then really make it obvious that you're wearing your glasses.' I think Phil Everly had something to do with that, too..."

Where his glasses cried "dork," Holly's hiccups unraveled into something ineluctably weird and wonderful: somehow, Holly made the corniest nonsense seem naturalistic, impossible to sing straight ("Ah-Well-ah well-ah well-ah little things that you say and do..."). Picture that line smoothed into a self-conscious style and it goes limp. Coy on the surface, his glottal ticks and baby-talk seemed to toy with more substantial ideas ("Ah, ha, ha-ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha..." in 'I'm A-Gonna Love You Too', threat or come-on?). His records had such pure strangeness that even their distant echoes became hits for Peter and Gordon ('True Love Ways', 1966), Bobby Vee ('Lookin' For Someone to Love', 1968) and Linda Rondstadt ('That'll Be the Day', 1976, and 'It's So Easy', 1977).

Like Dylan, whose vocal mannerisms he anticipated, Holly the songwriter was his own best interpreter – everything "straight," "square," and "innocent" in his sound became ironic. 'Peggy Sue' starts out being vaguely sing-songy only to become persistent and then obsessive, and finally a sneer. Against his onrushing acoustic guitar, the "uh-oh"s and "Sue-hoo-hoo, ooh-oo-hoo-hoo-hoo"s ring out like melismatic pebbles skipping water. If he caught Peggy's attention, it's because he became purely beguiling in his pursuit; if she went on acting like he didn't exist (and the song never decides), he repeated her name beneath his breath as the next best thing to holding her in his arms.

This keen understanding of visual cues, and of sound as symbol, worked even when some of his hits got remade as pop crossover tracks with strings. As Dave Laing points out in his long out-of-print 1972 book on Holly's music, on Holly's last session ('Raining In My Heart', 'Moondreams', 'True Love Ways' and 'I Guess It Doesn't Matter Anymore') he played off strings like Sam Cooke would: as an ultimatum. Instead of sinking down into them, he made them cower, defied them where others caved. "The strings soaring above him come to embody the fate which in the song dominates him...." Laing writes. Jonathan Cott heard this too:

"The irrepressible optimism of this song, like the adolescent confidence of 'That'll Be the Day' and 'Think It Over' or the incantatory trance of 'Listen to Me' and 'Words of Love' conveys Holly's magical notion that the insistent repetition of one's wishes ("The dreams and wishes you wish/In the night when lights are low" – 'Well All Right') is in fact the fulfillment of the wish itself; and, as in ritual, the rapture of song becomes the proof of this magic and, in the end, the magic itself. – Jonathan Cott, *Rolling Stone Illustrated History Of Rock'n'roll*

Holly's wolf-in-sheep's-skin musical persona took on more layers in the studio. He was among the earliest to double-track his own voice, and in Petty he found a classically-trained technician who enjoyed experimentation. Holly's records constantly reached towards new sounds, and are drenched in creative growth in just under two years of chart activity (1957-59). His first single, 'That'll Be the Day' reached number 1 in England in September of 1957, and after his death on

February 3, 1959, British fans book-ended his run with a final number 1 posted on February 28, 'It Doesn't Matter Anymore' (by Paul Anka). Rock'n'roll has a whole sub-genre devoted to posthumous hits, a song that looms over a performer's death like an oracle resounding through pop eternity, from Sam Cooke's 'A Change Is Gonna Come' in 1963 through John Lennon's 'Woman' at the end of 1980. Holly's remains the most existential of the breed.

AT AGE SIXTEEN THROUGHOUT MOST OF 1957, JOHN LENNON WORSHIPPED HOLLY as only a teenager could. At first this attraction seems awkward: Lennon was a neighborhood bully, a tough-talking Ted who ruled by intimidation and cruelty. But he devoured Buddy Holly records, and studied them the way geeks take apart clocks, just to see how they work; they were so cleverly layered that to learn and perform them comprised a tutorial in rock form. In doing so, Lennon sponged as much from Holly's persona as his music. (This also cues Lennon's choice of Paul McCartney as his partner, like a tyrant who leans on his diplomat.) There's a lot to Lennon's Holly identification: Where Holly's toughness skirted anger, his rhythmic sense often did away with drums. On songs like 'Baby I Don't Care', and 'Not Fade Away', Jerry Allison didn't even need a drum set to stir up motion: he simply tapped his sticks on a cardboard box; 'Well... All Right' featured only cymbals. And with all ears focused on Holly's inexplicably bubbly vowels and precious consonants, his screwball instrumentation could seem oddly appropriate. 'Everyday' featured a cornball celesta, played by classically-trained Vi Petty, Norman's wife (probably influenced by the celesta in Chuck Willis's 'It's Too Late', from 1956, as Goldrosen and Beecher point out). This process of inventing your sound and image in the studio was a key to Holly's recordings, as it would be for Lennon's:

"'Words of Love' was Holly's first experience with overdubbing. Although multi-track recording machines were not in use then, it was possible to add voices or instruments to a tape by playing the tape through again while performing new "live" sounds, and recording everything together on a second machine... On the final master, as far as the ear can tell, drums, bass, rhythm guitar (played by Holly) and one vocal were recorded first; Holly then added the lead guitar part and two vocal lines. Though Holly may not have consciously planned it that way, this order took advantage of the loss of fidelity caused by dubbing. By the time the recording was completed, the drumming had receded in to the background, providing a distant, rolling rhythm which can be felt and heard but does not obscure the vocal or guitar patterns. Similarly, recording the vocal last gave the song a close, intimate feeling, by placing the vocal in front of the varying guitar patterns." [Goldrosen and Beecher page 65]

Norman Petty: the George Martin of New Mexico!

"Before Elvis there was nothing," Lennon would recall. There are conflicting reports, but after Presley's 'Hound Dog' and 'Heartbreak Hotel', the next singles to hit Lennon were Jerry Lee Lewis's 'Whole Lotta Shakin'', quickly followed by Little Richard's 'Long Tall Sally', which a Quarry Bank friend Michael Hill bragged was "better than Elvis." Lennon was skeptical, and then completely seduced. "When I heard it ['Long Tall Sally'], I couldn't speak. You know how you are torn. I didn't want to leave Elvis. We all looked at each other, but I didn't want to say anything against Elvis, not even in my mind. How could they be happening in my life, BOTH of them? And then someone said: 'It's a nigger singing.' I didn't know Negroes sang. So Elvis was white, and Little Richard was black. 'Thank you, God,' I said. There was a difference between them..." [Goldman, page 63]

Shortly thereafter, most reports agree that the first song Lennon would master, and among the first McCartney would hear him perform, was Holly's 'That'll Be the Day'. He learned it from his mother Julia on her banjo. Lennon remembers her "endless patience until I managed to work out all the chords. She was a perfectionist. She made me go right through it over and over again until I had it right. I remember her slowing down the record so that I could scribble out the

words. First hearing Buddy absolutely knocked me for a loop..." [quoted in *The John Lennon Encyclopedia*, by Bill Harry, page 514]

So, how exactly does the schoolyard thug brag about his mother teaching him Buddy Holly on the banjo? Julia Stanley Lennon, a lively 42 in 1956, was eccentric, garrulous, and so ahead of her time that she lived with her de facto second husband, John Dykins, out of wedlock. Her first husband, John's father Alfred Lennon, was a merchant seaman and infrequent husband; when John was 5, after giving up a second child for adoption right after the war, Julia reluctantly bowed to family pressure and installed John at her sister Mimi's.

As early as 1955, Julia had named her cat "Elvis" and strung wires from her living room's radiogram to carry the music's signal to extension speakers in the surrounding rooms. This was sheer innovation for the time. John copied Julia's setup at his aunt's home in Mendips, so he could listen to Radio Luxembourg at night in his cramped bedroom upstairs. As he came of age, he increasingly spent time at Julia's home. "And to think it was my own mother who was turning me on to it all," Lennon later wondered. He would always regret missing Buddy Holly's only tour of England in March, 1958, but he probably caught him on TV at his best friend Pete Shotton's, either *Saturday Night at the London Palladium*, or BBC's *Off the Record* (snatches of which appear on *Complete Buddy Holly* DVD, along with home movie footage of the band in walking around the UK). Tony Bramwell, one of the Beatles' publicists, recalls the years of ribbing he took from McCartney for winning a school prize and attending Holly's Liverpool Empire show, and shaking Holly's hand afterwards [in his memoirs, *Magical Mystery Tours*, 2005]. Lennon would have been similarly envious. From the moment 'That'll Be the Day' entered the British charts in early 1958, Lennon watched the entirety of Holly's career, from his split with the Crickets to his "pop" strings – unlike Presley, who got a crew cut and joined the Army.

Julia Stanley died in a hit-and-run accident four months after Holly's UK tour, in July of 1958, six months before Holly's own death. This froze these songs into emotional crystal for Lennon: two of his most profound mentors, oedipal and professional, were snatched by violent accident in the months surrounding his 17th birthday. In the coming months, Lennon and McCartney (who had lost his mother at 14), named their band after these Crickets, and consciously strove for the self-contained ideal of a group that performed its own material. The B side to this ideal is how Holly branded other peoples' songs, like 'Rave On', 'Raining in My Heart', 'Blue Days Black Nights', 'Oh Boy,' "I'm Gonna Love You Too", 'Fool's Paradise', and 'It Doesn't Matter Anymore' with his ineffable hiccups. Even when Holly did other peoples' songs, they seemed like originals, Lennon and McCartney noted.

On early Beatle records, Holly's influence explodes like buckshot in their rhythms. Take those signature triplets from 'That'll Be the Day' (across the bar on the repetition of line "You-make-me-cry-hie__you/Say you're gonna leave me"). Ringo works them into the final "yeah" of those colossal "Yeah Yeah Yeah"s in 'She Loves You', as well as the clinching cadence of 'I Want to Hold Your Hand', both direct Holly quotes. These hiccups across the bar accent the beat by tugging against it; the effect was of emphasis by diminution, a tack the Beatles reworked to their own sensibility.

Of course, numerous Holly songs were in live Beatle sets long before 'Words of Love', appeared on *Beatles For Sale* in 1965. They had been playing 'It's So Easy' and 'Peggy Sue' and 'That'll Be the Day' and 'Think It Over' and 'Maybe Baby' and 'Crying Waiting Hoping' and 'Mailman, Bring Me No More Blues' throughout Hamburg, England, and many of their BBC radio appearances. At the height of Beatlemania, they played up the giant Buddy Holly C&W subtext by covering Buck Owens ('Act Naturally'), and then wrote their own answer song, 'What Goes On'. In late Beatles, Holly reappears frequently: "The sun is up the sky is blue..." from 'Dear Prudence' is lifted straight from the Boudleaux-Bryant song Holly made famous, 'Raining in My Heart'. And during the *Get Back* sessions in early 1969, Lennon collapsed into a fearsomely complacent take of 'Mailman Bring Me No More

Blues' (on *The Beatles Anthology, Vol. 3*); it's the sound of Julia and then Holly dying in the same bleak season. (Bob Thiele helped write the number in honor of 'Blues, Stay Away From Me', a Delmore Brothers country song that rode the Johnny Burnett Trio's bucking bronco version. [Goldrosen and Beecher, page 66])

Beyond all this, Holly echoes inside the larger frame of Lennon's career. Holly is the outsider even in Lennon's most cherished pantheon: Presley, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and the almighty Chuck Berry. But where Holly covered songs by Presley, Berry, Lewis, Bo Diddley and Bill Haley, none of these others covered Holly songs, whether out of oversight or sheer intimidation. (Not covering someone else's material in this game speaks volumes.) Did this crew consider Holly too eccentric for "mainstream" rock'n'roll? No matter: Holly adopted them as his own. At the very least, Holly gave Lennon some notion of how many ideas and sounds you might pack into a short period of time. And if this supernaturally awkward Texan could create a space for himself, why not Scousers? Aren't groups simply a collection of individuals with marked dissimilarities? And don't we understand Lennon best in terms of Paul the Showman, George the Sage, and Ringo the Foil, the gang he gathered around him?

Then there's the Marshall Crenshaw link: Crenshaw got his start playing John Lennon on Broadway's *Beatlemania*, and returned as Buddy Holly in the Richie Valens biopic, *La Bamba*, in 1987. Some unsung editor at the *Encyclopedia Britannica* tapped Crenshaw to write its Buddy Holly entry; notice how Crenshaw's quotes double perfectly as descriptions of the Beatles:

"The Crickets records feature unusual microphone placement techniques, imaginative echo chamber effects, and overdubbing, a process that in the 1950s meant superimposing one recording on another... The Crickets camped out at Petty's studio for days at a time, using it as a combination laboratory and playground. They were the first rock and rollers to approach the recording process in this manner."

Well into his solo career, Lennon juiced up band rehearsals by lapsing into Holly numbers. A bootleg from the 1974's *Rock'n'Roll* sessions includes an unflinching take of 'That'll Be the Day', a stiff belt to the gut. And Lennon envied McCartney's purchase of Holly's publishing in 1975, from which a large portion of his fortune springs. (McCartney also participated in various British Holly tributes, and produced a featherweight tribute called *Holly Days* in 1977, which perversely casts Denny Laine as lead vocalist. Some years later, McCartney participated in a 1986 BBC documentary called *The Real Buddy Holly*.) Lennon pursued 'Peggy Sue' down through 1974, a tabloid drunk on an epic bender, still reaching with another God, Phil Spector, for everything 'Peggy Sue' had to teach him. (In fact, the set list Lennon and Spector came up with owed a lot to Holly, who had also sung 'Rip It Up', 'Reddy Teddy', 'Slippin' And Slidin'', 'Peggy Sue', and 'Send Me Some Lovin'.) For all his renown, the man who wrote 'Strawberry Fields Forever' and 'Cold Turkey' was still intimidated by his teenage reverie, 'That'll Be the Day'.

There is a direct line, though, between 'Changing All Those Changes' and 'Tomorrow Never Knows', between 'Love's Made a Fool of You' and 'She Said She Said'. Holly records animate structure through texture to make his work an ongoing lesson in songs as recordings; he was, in his unassuming way, as much medium as message. (Any post-modernists want to take a stab at differentiating verse from refrain of 'It's So Easy'?) With the Beatles, Lennon and McCartney carried these ideas beyond four- and eight- track, the line between where a song ends and its recording begins simply evaporates; where the music and lyrics of 'Rain' and 'A Day in the Life' stop and the noise limiters, backward tapes and overdubbed effects start. To say these elements are inseparable grossly oversimplifies the distinction – on the best Beatle records, song and sound become organically entwined, in the same way Buddy Holly's seeming naïveté is girded by sophistication. Holly's ghost hovers over Beatle records, it's there in the way they confide in us as intimate equals while playing genius between the grooves. In a

letter to a Holly fan, Lennon wrote, "He made it O.K. to wear glasses. I was Buddy Holly." [Goldrosen and Beecher, page 159].

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