

An Explanation of the Song, *American Pie*

AMERICAN PIE by Don McLean

The entire song is a tribute to Buddy Holly and a commentary on how rock and roll changed in the years since his death. McLean seems to be lamenting the lack of "danceable" music in rock and roll and (in part) attributing that lack to the absence of Buddy Holly et. al.

(Verse 1)

A long, long time ago...

"American Pie" reached #1 in the US in 1972, but the album containing it was released in 1971. Buddy Holly died in 1959.

**I can still remember how
That music used to make me smile.
And I knew if I had my chance,
That I could make those people dance,
And maybe they'd be happy for a while.**

One of early rock and roll's functions was to provide dance music for various social events. McLean recalls his desire to become a musician playing that sort of music.

But February made me shiver,

Buddy Holly died on February 3, 1959 in a plane crash in Iowa during a snowstorm.

With every paper I'd deliver,

Don McLean's only job besides being a full-time singer-songwriter was being a paperboy.

**Bad news on the doorstep...
I couldn't take one more step.
I can't remember if I cried
When I read about his widowed bride**

Holly's recent bride was pregnant when the crash took place; she had a miscarriage shortly afterward.

**But something touched me deep inside,
The day the music died.**

The same plane crash that killed Buddy Holly also took the lives of Richie Valens ("La Bamba") and The Big Bopper ("Chantilly Lace"). Since all three were so prominent at the time, February 3, 1959 became known as "The Day The Music Died".

So...

(Refrain)

Bye bye Miss American Pie,

Don McLean dated a Miss America candidate during the pageant. (unconfirmed)

**Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry
Them good ol' boys were drinkin whiskey and rye
Singing "This'll be the day that I die,
This'll be the day that I die."**

One of Holly's hits was "That'll be the Day"; the chorus contains the line "That'll be the day <pause> that I die".

(Verse 2)

Did you write the book of love,

"The Book of Love" by the Monotones; hit in 1958.

**And do you have faith in God above,
If the Bible tells you so?**

In 1955, Don Cornell did a song entitled "The Bible Tells Me So". Rick Schubert pointed this out, and mentioned that he hadn't heard the song, so it was kinda difficult to tell if it was what McLean was referencing.

There's also an old Sunday School song which goes:
"Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so"

Now do you believe in rock 'n roll?

The Lovin' Spoonful had a hit in 1965 with John Sebastian's "Do you Believe in Magic?". The song has the lines:

"Do you believe in magic/it's like trying to tell
a stranger 'bout rock and roll."

**Can music save your mortal soul?
And can you teach me how to dance real slow?**

Dancing slow was an important part of early rock and roll dance events -- but declined in importance through the 60's as things like psychedelia and the 10-minute guitar solo gained prominence.

**Well I know you're in love with him
'Cause I saw you dancing in the gym**

Back then, dancing was an expression of love, and carried a connotation of commitment. Dance partners were not so readily exchanged as they would be later.

You both kicked off your shoes

A reference to the beloved "sock hop". (Street shoes tear up wooden basketball floors, so dancers had to take off their shoes.)

Man, I dig those rhythm 'n' blues

Some history. Before the popularity of rock and roll, music, like much else in the U. S., was highly segregated. The popular music of black performers for largely black audiences was called, first, "race music", later softened to rhythm and blues. In the early 50s, as they were exposed to it through radio personalities such as Allan Freed, white teenagers began listening, too. Starting around 1954, a number of songs from the rhythm and blues charts began appearing on the overall popular charts as well, but usually in cover versions by established white artists, (e. g. "Shake Rattle and Roll", Joe Turner, covered by Bill Haley; "Sh-Boom", the Chords, covered by the Crew-Cuts; "Sincerely", the Moonglows, covered by the Mc Guire Sisters; Tweedle Dee, LaVerne Baker, covered by Georgia Gibbs). By 1955, some of the rhythm and blues artists, like Fats Domino and Little Richard were able to get records on the overall pop charts. In 1956 Sun records added elements of country and western to produce the kind of rock and roll tradition that produced Buddy Holly.

I was a lonely teenage broncin' buck With a pink carnation and a pickup truck

"A White Sport Coat (And a Pink Carnation)", was a hit for Marty Robbins in 1957.

**But I knew that I was out of luck
The day the music died
I started singing...**

Refrain

**(Verse 3)
Now for ten years we've been on our own**

McLean was writing this song in the late 60's, about ten years after the crash.

And moss grows fat on a rolling stone

It's unclear who the "rolling stone" is supposed to be. It could be Dylan, since "Like a Rolling Stone" (1965) was his first major hit; and since he was busy writing songs extolling the virtues of simple love, family and contentment while staying at home (he didn't tour from '66 to '74) and raking in the royalties. This was quite a change from the earlier, angrier Dylan.

The "rolling stone" could also be Elvis, although I don't think he'd started to pork out by the late sixties.

It could refer to rock and rollers in general, and the changes that had taken place in the business in the 60's, especially the huge amounts of cash some of them were beginning to make, and the relative stagnation that entered the music at the same time.

Or, perhaps it's a reference to the stagnation in rock and roll.

But that's not how it used to be When the jester sang for the King and Queen

The jester is Bob Dylan, as will become clear later. There are several interpretations of king and queen: some think that Elvis Presley is the king, which seems pretty obvious. The queen is said to be either Connie Francis or Little Richard. But see the next note. An alternate interpretation is that this refers to the Kennedys -- the king and queen of "Camelot" -- who were present at a Washington DC civil rights rally featuring Martin Luther King. (There's a recording of Dylan performing at this rally.)

In a coat he borrowed from James Dean

In the movie "Rebel Without a Cause", James Dean has a red windbreaker that holds symbolic meaning throughout the film (see note at end). In one particularly intense scene, Dean lends his coat to a guy who is shot and killed; Dean's father arrives, sees the coat on the dead man, thinks it's Dean, and loses it.

On the cover of "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan", Dylan is wearing just such a red windbreaker, and is posed in a street scene similar to one shown in a well-known picture of James Dean. Bob Dylan played a command performance for the Queen and Prince Consort of England. He was **not** properly attired, so perhaps this is a reference to his apparel.

And a voice that came from you and me

Bob Dylan's roots are in American folk music, with people like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. Folk music is by definition the music of the masses, hence the "...came from you and me".

**Oh, and while the King was looking down
The jester stole his thorny crown**

This could be a reference to Elvis's decline and Dylan's ascendance. (i.e. Presley is looking down from a height as Dylan takes his place.) The thorny crown might be a reference to the price of fame. Dylan has said that he wanted to be as famous as Elvis, one of his early idols.

**The courtroom was adjourned,
No verdict was returned.**

This could be the trial of the Chicago Seven.

And while Lennon read a book on Marx,

Literally, John Lennon reading about Karl Marx; figuratively, the introduction of radical politics into the music of the Beatles. (Of course, he could be referring to Groucho Marx, but that doesn't seem quite consistent with McLean's overall tone. On the other hand, some of the wordplay in Lennon's lyrics and books is reminiscent of Groucho.)

The quartet practiced in the park

There are two schools of thought about this; the obvious one is the Beatles playing in Shea Stadium, but note that the previous line has John Lennon *doing something else at the same time*. This tends to support the theory that this is a reference to the Weavers, who were blacklisted during the McCarthy era. McLean had become friends with Lee Hays of the Weavers in the early 60's while performing in coffeehouses and clubs in upstate New York and New York City. He was also well-acquainted with Pete Seeger; in fact, McLean, Seeger, and others took a trip on the Hudson river singing anti-pollution songs at one point. Seeger's LP "God Bless the Grass" contains many of these songs.

And we sang dirges in the dark

A "dirge" is a funeral or mourning song, so perhaps this is meant literally...or, perhaps, this is a reference to some of the new "art rock" groups which played long pieces not meant for dancing.

The day the music died.

We were singing...

Refrain

(Verse 4)

Helter Skelter in a summer swelter

"Helter Skelter" is a Beatles song which appears on the "white" album. Charles Manson, claiming to have been "inspired" by the song (through which he thought God and/or the devil were taking to him) led his followers in the Tate-LaBianca murders. Is "summer swelter" a reference to the "Summer of Love" or perhaps to the "long hot summer" of Watts?

The birds flew off with the fallout shelter

Eight miles high and falling fast

The Byrds' "Eight Miles High" was on their late 1966 release "Fifth Dimension". It was one of the first records to be widely banned because of supposedly drug-oriented lyrics.

It landed foul on the grass

One of the Byrds was busted for possession of marijuana.

The players tried for a forward pass

Obviously a football metaphor, but about what?
It could be the Rolling Stones, i.e. they were
waiting for an opening which really didn't happen
until the Beatles broke up.

With the jester on the sidelines in a cast

On July 29, 1966, Dylan crashed his Triumph 55
motorcycle while riding near his home in Woodstock,
New York. He spent nine months in seclusion while
recuperating from the accident.

Now the halftime air was sweet perfume

Drugs, man.

While sergeants played a marching tune

Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band".
Or, perhaps McLean refers to the Beatles' music
as "marching" because it's not music for dancing.
Alternatively, the "marching tune" could refer
to the draft. (See below)

We all got up to dance

Oh, but we never got the chance

The Beatles' 1966 Candlestick Park concert only
lasted 35 minutes.
Or, following on from the previous comment, perhaps
he meant that there wasn't any music to dance to.

**'Cause the players tried to take the field,
The marching band refused to yield.**

This could be a reference to the dominance of the Beatles on the rock and roll scene. For instance, the Beach Boys released "Pet Sounds" in 1966, an album which featured some of the same sort of studio and electronic experimentation as "Sgt. Pepper", but the album sold poorly because the Beatles' release got most of the press.

Some folks think this refers to either the 1968 Democratic Convention or Kent State.

This might also be a comment about how the dominance of the Beatles in the rock world led to more "pop art" music, leading in turn to a dearth of traditional rock and roll.

Or finally, this might be a comment which follows up on the earlier reference to the draft: the government/military-industrial-complex establishment refused to accede to the demands of the peace movement.

**Do you recall what was revealed,
The day the music died?
We started singing**

Refrain

(Verse 5)

And there we were all in one place

Woodstock.

A generation lost in space

Some people think this is a reference to the US space program, which it might be; but that seems a bit too literal. Perhaps this is a reference to "hippies", who were sometimes known as the "lost generation", partially because of their particularly acute alienation from their parents, and partially because of their presumed preoccupation with drugs. It could also be a reference to the awful TV show, "Lost in Space", whose title was sometimes used as a synonym for someone who was rather high... but I keep hoping that McLean had better taste. :-)

With no time left to start again

The "lost generation" spent too much time being stoned, and had wasted their lives? Or, perhaps, their preference for psychedelia had pushed rock and roll so far from Holly's music that it couldn't be retrieved.

So come on Jack be nimble Jack be quick

Probably a reference to Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones; "Jumpin' Jack Flash" was released in May, 1968.

Jack Flash sat on a candlestick

The Stones' Candlestick park concert?

'Cause fire is the devil's only friend

It's possible that this is a reference to the Grateful Dead's "Friend of the Devil". An alternative interpretation of the last four lines is that they may refer to Jack Kennedy and his quick decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis; the candlesticks/fire refer to ICBMs and nuclear war.

And as I watched him on the stage My hands were clenched in fists of rage No angel born in hell Could break that Satan's spell

While playing a concert at the Altamont Speedway in 1968, the Stones appointed members of the Hell's Angels to work security (on the advice of the Grateful Dead). In the darkness near the front of the stage, a young man named Meredith Hunter was beaten and stabbed to death -- by the Angels. Public outcry that the song "Sympathy for the Devil" had somehow incited the violence caused the Stones to drop the song from their show for the next six years. This incident is chronicled in the documentary film "Gimme Shelter". It's also possible that McLean views the Stones as being negatively inspired (remember, he had an extensive religious background) by virtue of "Sympathy for the Devil", "Their Satanic Majesties' Request" and so on. I find this a bit puzzling, since the early Stones recorded a lot of "roots" rock and roll, including Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away".

**And as the flames climbed high into the night
To light the sacrificial rite**

This could be a reference to Jimi Hendrix burning his Stratocaster at the Monterey Pop Festival.

It's possible that this refers to the burial of Kennedy, but I'm not sure I buy this. For one thing, it doesn't fit chronologically, and for another, McLean seems more interested in music than politics.

**I saw satan laughing with delight
The day the music died
He was singing...**

Refrain

(Verse 6)

I met a girl who sang the blues

Janis Joplin.

**And I asked her for some happy news
But she just smiled and turned away**

Janis died of an accidental heroin overdose on October 4, 1970.

**I went down to the sacred store
Where I'd heard the music years before**

There are two interpretations of this:
The "sacred store" was Bill Graham's Fillmore East,
one of the great rock and roll venues of all time.

Alternatively, this refers to record stores,
and their longtime (then discontinued)
practice of allowing customers to preview
records in the store.

It could also refer to record stores as "sacred"
because this is where one goes to get "saved".
(See above lyric "Can music save your mortal soul?")

But the man there said the music wouldn't play

Perhaps he means that nobody is interested in
hearing Buddy Holly et.al.'s music? Or, as above,
the discontinuation of the in-store listening booths.

And in the streets the children screamed

"Flower children" being beaten by police
and National Guard troops?

The lovers cried and the poets dreamed

The trend towards psychedelic music in the 60's?

**But not a word was spoken
The church bells all were broken**

It could be that the broken bells are the dead
musicians: neither can produce any more music.

**And the three men I admire most
The Father Son and Holy Ghost**

Holly, The Big Bopper, and Valens
-- or --
Hank Williams, Presley and Holly
-- or --
JFK, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy
-- or --
the Catholic aspects of the deity.
McLean had attended several Catholic schools.

They caught the last train for the coast

Could be a reference to wacky California religions,
or could just be a way of saying that they've left.
Or, perhaps this is a reference to the famous
"God is Dead" headline in the New York Times.

The day the music died

This tends to support the conjecture that the "three
men" were Holly/Bopper/Valens, since this says that
they left on the day the music died.

And they were singing...

Refrain (2x)

Chords to the song:

The song appears to be in G; the chords are:

Intro: G Bm/F# Em . Am . C .
Em . D
G Bm/F# Em . Am . C .
Em . A . D . . .
Em . Am . Em . Am .
C G/B Am . C . D .
G Bm/F# Em . Am . C .
G Bm/F# Em . Am . D .
G . C . G . D .

Chorus: G . C . G . D .
G . C . G . D .
G . C . G . D .

Em . . . A . . . (all but
Em . . . D . . . last chorus)

C . D . G C G . (last chorus)

Other notes:

"Killing Me Softly With His Song", Roberta Flack's Grammy Award-winning single of 1973, was written by Charles Gimble and Norman Fox about McLean.

The Big Bopper's real name was J.P. Richardson. He was a DJ for a Texas radio station who had one very big novelty hit, the very well known "Chantilly Lace". There was a fourth person who was going to ride the plane. There was room for three, and the fourth person lost the toss -- or should I say won the toss. His name is Waylon Jennings...and to this day he refuses to talk about the crash.

About the "coat he borrowed from James Dean": James Dean's red windbreaker is important throughout the film, not just at the end. When he put it on, it meant that it was time to face the world, time to do what he thought had to be done, and other melodramatic but thoroughly enjoyable stuff like that. The week after the movie came out, virtually every clothing store in the U.S. was sold out of red windbreakers. Remember that Dean's impact was similar to Dylan's: both were a symbol for the youth of their time, a reminder that they had something to say and demanded to be listened to.

American Pie is supposed to be the name of the plane that crashed, containing the three guys that died.

Dan Stanley mentioned an interesting theory involving all of this; roughly put, he figures that if Holly hadn't died, then we would not have suffered through the Fabian/Pat Boone/et.al. era...and as a consequence, we wouldn't have *needed* the Beatles -- Holly was moving pop music away from the stereotypical boy/girl love lost/found lyrical ideas, and was recording with unique instrumentation and techniques...things that Beatles wouldn't try until about 1965. Perhaps Dylan would have stuck with the rock and roll he played in high school, and the Byrds never would have created an amalgam of Dylan songs and Beatle arrangements.

Lynn Gold tells me that "Life" magazine carried an annotated version of American Pie when the song came out; does anybody have a copy?

Andrew Whitman brings a sense of perspective to all of this by noting:

>As to what they threw off the bridge, Bobbie Gentry once went on record with
>the statement that it was the mystery that made the song, and that the mystery
>would remain unsolved. Don McLean later used the same device to even greater
>success with "American Pie," which triggered a national obsession on figuring
>out the "real meaning" of the song.

Well, probably not a national obsession, but certainly the life's work of many talented scholars. According to the latest edition of the "American Pie Historical Interpretive Digest" (APHID), noted McLean historian Vincent Vandeman has postulated that cheezy country songs may have played a much more prominent role in the epic composition than had originally been thought. In particular, the "widowed bride," usually supposed to be either Ella Holly or Joan Rivers, may in fact be Billie Jo. According to this radical exegesis, the "pink carnation" of McLean's song is probably what was thrown off the Tallahatchie Bridge, and was later found by the lonely, teenaged McLean as he wandered drunkenly on the levee.

Of course, such a view poses problems. McLean vehemently denies any knowledge of Choctaw Ridge, and any theory linking the two songs must surely address this mysterious meeting place of Billie Jo and her husband Billy Joe. Vandeman speculates that Choctaw Ridge may have been the place McLean drove his Chevy after drinking whiskey and rye, and that McLean may have been unaware of the name because of his foggy mental state. Still, there appear to be many tenuous connections in Vandeman's interpretation - Tammy Wynette as the girl who sang the blues, the proposed affair between Wynette and Billie Joe which later led to d-i-v-o-r-c-e and Billy Joe's suicide, the mysterious whereabouts of George Jones, and why McLean insisted on driving a Chevy to the levee instead of a more economical Japanese car.

My own view is that none of it makes much sense. Vandeman's theory is intriguing, but it seems far more logical to hold to the traditional interpretation of "American Pie" as an eschatological parable of nuclear destruction and the rebirth of civilization on Alpha Centauri.

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In 2015, Don McLean auctioned off the original manuscript for his song, *American Pie*. It included the famous “lost verse” shown below. The final verse of the recorded version describes a bleak America: the music has gone and even the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are heading for the coast. But his notes offer the tantalizing prospect of a lost redemptive verse. It describes falling to his knees to pray: “And I promised to give all I have to give, If only he would make the music live again.”

Here is the lost verse...

And there I stood alone and afraid
I dropped to my knees and there I prayed
And I promised him everything I could give
If only he would make the music live
And he promised it would live once more
But this time one would equal four
And in five years four had come to mourn
and the music was reborn.

Boy boy miss American pie
Love my Henry + the Gony
So the Gony was dry
How good all boys were then
Whiskey and eyes
and banjos made the music for
A while

and there I stood alone and afraid
I knelt to my knees and there I prayed
And I promised to give an I had
to give

If only he would make it live again
he promised I would live once more
But this time we would equal
and in five years the four ~~men~~ ^{men}
and the music lived again

WHAT THOSE LYRICS REALLY MEAN



'Drove my Chevy to the levee'

Cheap Chevrolet pick-up trucks were a favourite among young men. A 'levee' could mean a 'party', and obviously one where there was no alcohol would be 'dry'.



'Bad News on the doorstep, I couldn't take one more step'

The deaths in a plane crash in Iowa in 1959 of musicians Buddy Holly (left), The Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens were rock music's first big tragedy. The line 'I can't remember if I cried when I read about his widowed bride' refers to the fact that 22-year-old Holly had only recently married.

'But February made me shiver'

The month that Buddy Holly died. His plane was found a day after crashing in a snow-covered field.



'When the jester sang for the King and Queen in a coat he borrowed from James Dean'

Widely believed to be referring to how Bob Dylan (right), in the leather jacket he wore on the cover of his *Freewheelin'* album, had replaced Elvis Presley in America's affections.



'Now the half-time air was sweet perfume, While sergeants played a marching tune. We all got up to dance Oh, but we never got the chance'

Most likely refers to the day in May 1970 when students at Kent State University, Ohio, were enjoying a day out and smoking pot near a demonstration against President Nixon who'd just announced an extension of the Vietnam war to Cambodia. The day ended with the Ohio National Guard shooting dead four students and injuring nine (left).



'Helter Skelter in summer swelter'

After ordering the horrific murders of the actress Sharon Tate (who was eight months pregnant with film director Roman Polanski's child) and friends, killer Charles Manson (right) claimed he had received instructions to carry out the execution in Los Angeles in August 1969 from the innocuous Beatles' song *Helter Skelter*.



Here is another interpretation:

Verse 1

A long, long time ago...

American Pie was written in 1971 and the time McLean is going to talk about is the 1950's. This seems like a long time ago 'cause of all the turmoil that occurred in the 60's.

I can still remember how that music used to make me smile.
McLean's favorite music was that of the 50's.

And I knew if I had my chance, that I could make those people dance, and maybe they'd be happy for a while.
In the 50's, the major purpose of music was for dancing (sock hops). He wanted to play rock & roll so people could have a good time.

But February made me shiver
Buddy Holly died on February 3, 1959 in a plane crash in Iowa. He was McLean's hero.

With every paper I'd deliver
Donny boy's only other job besides songwriting was a paper boy.

Bad news on the doorstep, I couldn't take one more step
This story was obviously on the frickn' front page and made McLean freeze in his tracks.

I can't remember if I cried
He can't remember if he cried.

When I read about his widowed bride
Holly's wife was pregnant when the accident occurred and soon after had a miscarriage.

But something touched me deep inside
I don't even wanna know!

The day the music died.

The crash took the lives of three current rock legends: Holly, Richie Valens and the Big Bopper, so now Feb. 3, 1959 is called "The day the music died." The music that died is considered the standard rock & roll songs. The crash was the final blow («--keyword) to this music 'cause these three were that only major artists left. Elvis was drafted, Little Richard (or "Little Dick") turned gospel, and Chuck Berry was arrested for screwin' a prostitute.

Verse 2

Did you write the book of love?

"The Book of Love" was a hit in 1968 by the Monotones.

And do you have faith in God above, if the Bible tells you so?

In 1955, Don Cornell wrote "The Bible Tells Me So" and there is a Sunday School song "Jesus Loves Me," with the line "For the Bible tells me so."

Now do you believe in rock & roll?

This is from the great song "Do You Believe in Magic?" by the Lovin' Spoonful, written by John Sebastian in 1965. One of the lines is like trying to teach a stranger 'bout rock & roll," and another is "the magic's in the music and the music's in me." The "magic" this Johnny was talking about is the ability of a song to stick in your head. Often times songs bring back memories of the past, this is what the magic is. This magic is especially in rock & roll, 'cause you experience it without thinking about it or trying to analyze the bloody lyrics (like some asshole is right now). Another lyric is "so just blow your mind." (Don't think about it).

Can music save your mortal soul?

Given all that, can music help you get through life? I'm sorry I can't answer that. All of these questions ask about life and if God exists.

And, can you teach me how to dance real slow?

Dancing in the 50's wasn't like it is today. If you danced with someone, you then were committed to them.

Now I know that you're in love with him, 'cause I saw you dancing in the gym.
Like I said, dancing was serious shit. McLean caught his love cheating on him.

You both kicked off your shoes
Reference to a "sock hop."

Man, I dig those rhythm and blues
He's depressed, and you listen to that kinda of music. There's a style of music for every feeling.

I was a lonely teenage broncin' buck
ummmm.....yeah, so was I.....

With a pink carnation and a pickup truck
A pickup truck was a symbol of sexual freedom (and it rhymes with "buck" and "luck"),
and Marty Robbins had a hit with "A White Sport Coat (And a Pink Carnation) in 1957.

But I knew I was out of luck, the day the music died.
These old crazy things that worked in the fifty's no longer work, 'cause the 60's brought
a new social revolution. Peace Out!

Verse 3

Now for ten years we've been on our own

The music died 1959, McLean more than likely started writing this song around 1969.

And moss grows fat on a rolling stone
The great Bob Dylan wrote "Like a Rolling Stone" in 1965. This was his first MAJOR
change from folk music. In late 1966, Dylan was involved in a motorcycle accident, and
hid in his house in Woodstock, NY for a good year, hence the "fat," and the moss shows
the time change. Dylan didn't really get his muse back till 1975.

but that's not how it used to be.

McLean liked Dylan as a folk singer in the early sixties more than his folk-rock style in the mid sixties. (I wonder what he thinks of Dylan's religious phase!)

When the jester sang for the king and queen

Ok, the jester's Bob Dylan. The king is Peter Seger and the queen is Joan Baez. These were the two big names in folk at the time early '60's). During the Newport Folk Festival in 1963, Dylan was honored to play his own set and then combine with these two legends to sing his song "Blowin' in the Wind."

In a coat he borrowed from James Dean

In the Dean movie "Rebel Without A Cause," he wears a red windbreaker. On the cover of the Dylan's "Freewheelin'," he is seen also in a red windbreaker. This cover also resembles a famous picture of Dean. This ties in with the previous line 'cause this album is were Dylan really took off, with such songs as "Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall."

And a voice that came from you and me.

This means two things. 1. Dylan was the spokesman for the 60's (and he was) and 2. He didn't have the best singing voice in the world, and even you and me could sing like him (but you could write like him if Shakespeare «he's in the alley» himself told you what to say!)

Oh, and while the king was looking down

This could mean two things; Pete Seger remained a traditional folk singer, while Dylan was constantly reinvented himself and therefore became unbelievably popular. This could also be a reference to Elvis (the King of rock and roll), because he joined the U.S. Army and reportedly dropped his soap everyday in the shower.

The jester stole his thorny crown

While Elvis was in the army, Dylan took his spotlight and changed the whole music business. The thorny crown is the price of fame, and is referenced with Jesus's thorny crown before he was murdered.

The courtroom was adjourned, no verdict was returned

This deals with the Kennedy assassination. Lee Harvey Oswald was never convicted because he was murdered.

And while Lennon read a book of Marx

This is about the Beatles music becoming political. Songs like "Revolution" (1968) (which actually mentions Chairman Mao) were much different than "Love Me Do" (1963). Many American adults thought the Beatles were bad for the American youth, especially after Lennon's remark in 1966 about Christianity. He said "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first: rock 'n' roll or Christianity." This started anti-Beatles burnings and such.

The quartet practiced in the park

The quartet was the Beatles (there were four, not including if Paul McCartney is really dead!) and the park thing is Candlestick Park, the place of their last concert. It was practicing 'cause their music would grow after they stopped touring (their first project after this was "Sgt. Pepper" which is considered the best album of all time).

And we sang dirges in the dark, the day the music died.

A dirge is a funeral song. These songs were for the Kennedy's (John and Robert) and Martin Luther King, all who died in the mid 60's. And remember- "Dark" rhythms with "Park"

Verse 4

Helter Skelter in a summer swelter

Charles Manson is one of the most dangerous cereal killers ever (his favorite was coco-puffs). In the summer of 1968, he massacred an entire family 'cause of the Beatles song "Helter Skelter," which appeared on the white album. He thought that the Beatles were warning America about the racial conflict and it was "coming down fast." He thought the Beatles were the four angels mentioned in the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Manson wrote the title of the song on the wall in blood after committing the murders. Also, he thought in "Revolution 9" that Lennon was saying "rise" instead of "right," thought the line "They need a damn good wacking" from "Piggies" was telling him to kill people and

the "Hollywood Song" in "Honey Pie" was about him 'cause he lived near Hollywood. He was dropping too much acid and thought the Beatles were talking directly to him and told him to kill those people.

The Byrd flew off with to a fallout shelter

The Byrd's were a popular folk-rock group, with the huge cover of Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man," in 1965. One of the members was arrested for possession of marijuana and a fallout shelter was another name for a rehab program. A strange note is that Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" appeared on his "Bringing It All Back Home" record, and on the lower left corner of the cover is a fallout shelter sign.

Eight miles high and falling fast.

"Eight Miles High" was the first ever psychedelic song (it was written while high on speed, and the sound of the guitar was supposed to sound like a saxophone). The falling fast part is probably about the fact that the Byrd's abandoned folk-rock for country music with the album "Sweetheart of the Rodeo," in 1967

Then landed in the foul grass

Foul grass meaning marijuana.

The players tried for a forward pass

Here the football metaphor starts. The players are the protesters in the 60's. The forward pass was their movement to change the situation they were in, full of government corruption.

With the jester, on the sidelines in a cast.

remember jester=Dylan. In late 1966, while riding near his house in Woodstock, NY, he briefly glanced into the sun and lost control of his bike. When he went to brake, they locked up on him and sent him flying off the motorcycle. It took him about 9 months to recover (or was he just pregnant and trying to hide it from the world????), in which time he very rarely left the house, hence the cast.

Now the half time air was sweet perfume

Flower Power, groovy baby! Drugs, man, drugs.

While sergeants played a marching tune

Sgt. Pepper, Beatles, 1967, recently named the most influential album of all time. First ever concept album. First to have lyrics printed on the back. First to have a design on the protector of the record. Included an elaborate cover design and cut-outs. As far as the music goes, it had drug references in Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, sitars, animal sounds and studio trickery. In the song "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!" at one point in the sound the engineer was instructed to cut the tape into small pieces, scatter them around, then tape them back together. In "A Day in the Life" (which was banned from the radio 'cause of the drug reference line "I'd Love to Turn You On"), after the piano cords die out, there is a minute of silence, followed by a high pitched sound (by the request of John Lennon, especially to annoy the family dog), then a loop of Beatles gibberish to make the owners of the LP think that the needle had stuck! What was I talking about again?

We all got up to dance, but we never got the chance

Oh yeah, American Pie!! That's a good song...anyway, the Beatles helped to start a new kind of music that was meant to be listened and not danced to (how do you dance to "Within You and Without You"?).

'Cause the players tried to take the field

Players=Protesters. In 1968, at the Chicago Democratic convention, protesters rioted, and some were beaten by the police. It is now known as the days of rage. Also in 1970, at Kent State University, four students were killed by the National Guard in response to their anti-Vietnam protests, which inspired the song "Ohio" by CSN & Neil Young.

The marching band refused to yield

The Beatles had some anti-violence songs that made protesters think twice about the way they were acting. "All You Need is Love" (1967) says there is a better way than violence, and in "Revolution" (1968) one of the lines is "But when you talk about destruction, don't you know that you can count me out." The Beatles were in no way pro-government (as seen in 1968's "Piggies," which is about Congressmen), but they were against violence.

Do you recall what was revealed, the day the music died.

So what was revealed? ...well look at today, the president gets more ass than a toilet seat. As Dr. Evil says in Austin Powers, "Face it, freedom failed" or more accurately, the protests failed. The government is more corrupt now than ever before. McLean wasn't a big 60's fan and here is putting down the efforts of the failed generation.

Verse 5

And then we were all in one place

Woodstock Performing Arts Festival took place in August in 1969. 400,000 of McLean's generation were there. It took place at Woodstock (actually Bethel) because that's where Dylan was hiding, and they were hoping he would come out and play. Unfortunately he turned it down for the "Isle of Wight" concert.

A generation lost in space

The moon landing was of course in 1969, David Bowie's "Space Oddity" was released (which was about 'major Tom' who got lost in space), there was a TV show called "Lost in Space" and this is a drug reference, the 60's are generalized by saying everyone in the entire world was on acid.

With no time left to start again

It took them a whole decade to get to this point, the generation's time was quickly fading. McLean thinks they wasted most of their time on drugs.

So come on Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack flash sat on a candlestick

"Jumpin' Jack Flash" was a hit for the Rolling Stones. In this song, Mick Jagger compares himself with Jesus. This line comes from the nursery rhyme that has the line "Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jumps over a candlestick."

'cause fire is the devil's only friend.

The Stones sold out to the devil. Their only comeback to the Beatles "Sgt. Pepper" was their album "Their Satanic Majesties Request." Seeing that you've probably never heard of this, you can imagine that it pretty much sucks. Also, their song "Sympathy for the Devil," proves that they were desperate to sell their records (the Beatles were SOOOOO much better!). Was it really worth celebrating the devil?

Oh, and as I watched him on the stage

No, it wasn't. In December of 1969, the Stones attempted another Woodstock, this time at Altamont Speedway. This time it was a free concert, with the Hell's Angel's handling the security. The biggest mistake was paying them in advance, but instead of money, with beer and handfuls of acid. While the stones were singing "Sympathy for the Devil," a black man was beaten and stabbed to death by the Hell's Angels. They soon began beating everyone, include a member of the Jefferson Airplane.

My hands were clenched in fists of rage

He was pissed.

No angel born in hell could brake that Satan's spell

"angels born in hell" a.k.a. the "Hell's Angels!" When you have sympathy for the devil, you're asking for trouble.

As the flames climbed high into the night, to light the sacrificial rite

The stones were helicoptered out of there it became so crazy, hence the "climbed high."

It's like the Stones started the living hell, and left in the middle of it...what's up with that? The sacrifice to the devil was the man's life.

I saw Satan laughing with delight, the day the music died.

This was the definitive ending of the sixties. The generation that was lost in space was now lost on earth. Before the only violence was between the hippies and the police, now it was amongst themselves. Satan had won, in one final blow.

Verse 6

I met a girl who sang the blues and I asked her for some happy news, but she just smiled and turned away.

Janis Joplin is most the girl who sang the blues. Her big hits were "Piece of My Heart" and "Me and Bobby McGee." She died of an accidental heroin overdose on October 4, 1970. McLean is still trying to find happiness like in the beginning of the song "Maybe they'd be happy for a while," "That music used to make me smile." (Note the tone of the

song is very similar in these two verses) But this time the smile isn't for happiness but regret.

I went down to the sacred store
Here he's talking about record stores that sold 50's albums.

Where I heard the music years before, but the man said the music wouldn't play
By the 70's, the 50's music was almost ignored by everyone. Hundreds of great albums were released in the 60's, and it seems that everyone has forgot about the 50's.

And in the streets the children screamed

The youth of America were beaten in the streets especially at the end of the decade.
(Like I said earlier, the Kent State murders and the Chicago Democratic Convention)

The lovers cried and the poets dreamed
In Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," he says: "I met one man he was wounded in love, I met another man he was wounded in hatred," showing that love hurts sometimes as much as hate.

But not a word was spoken. The church bells all were broken.
Again in "A Hard Rain...", the line is "I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken." Simon and Garfunkel had a hit with "Sound of Silence." The church bells all were broken shows that people have forgotten God. All things that are so sacred are gone, love, faith, happiness, peace. In Dylan's "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," one verse goes: Disillusioned words like bullets bark . As human gods aim for their mark . Made everything from toy guns that spark . To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark . It's easy to see without looking too far. That not much is really sacred. McLean isn't the only one that feels this way. He was obviously a religious man, and is very disappointed that they have abandoned God.

And the three men I admire most, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost
The trinity of God, McLean was Catholic.

They caught the last train for the coast.

God has left. Time magazine even featured a cover story "Is God Dead?" The generation has failed, and "with no time left to start again." It was now up to the next generation to put things right (and they did a terrible job might I add).

The day the music died. And we were singing...

This last verse is the hardest to explain...Remember, McLean never would talk about what the lyrics definitely mean, so it's not perfectly clear. Some people believe there were more references to the Kennedy's (him being the king and his wife the queen), but I feel his presence is felt though the songs from the 60's better. Ps, this took me forever.

Refrain

So bye, bye Miss American Pie

Don McLean was dating one of the Miss America contestants during one of the pageants. Also the "American Pie" part is a symbol of the American Dream (at least of the 50's), it was also the name of the plane that crashed and killed Holly (or so goes the rumor).

Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry

The American automobile was the Chevy. The levee business shows that America wasn't fertile anymore (at least in the sense of music). "Chevy" rhymes with "levee."

And them good old boys were drinking whiskey and rye singing "This will be the day that I die, this will be the day that I die."

The traditional Americans are depressed with the current lifestyle (60's). The song comes from Buddy Holly's "That'll be the day," that eventually says "that I die."

Another interesting note brought to my attention by Scott Tilles, is that the Levee was a bar in Purchase, NY near McLean's hometown. There is also a Levee, NY which is about 15 minutes from the school he attended.

This second interpretation was found on the following web site:

<http://webpub.alleg.edu/student/c/carsonm/amerpie.htm>