



By Chet Flippo

"Mick had been singin' with some rock & roll bands, doin' Buddy Holly . . . Buddy Holly was in England as solid as Elvis."

—Keith Richard

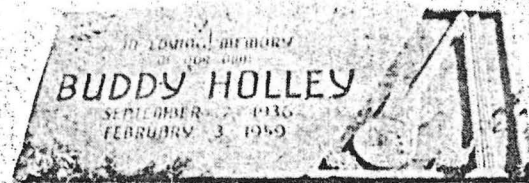
NEW YORK—Buddy Holly would have been 40 years old on September 7th. Had he not flamed out in 1959 in that infamous plane crash that also claimed the Big Bopper and Richie Valens, the man today might be a giant stalking the land, smashing discos with his left hand and giving Elton John a good haymaker with his right. On the other hand, he might be onstage nightly in Las Vegas, yet another paunchy embarrassment lingering from the Fifties. That's not very likely; yet so little is known of him—other than his recorded legacy, which is really meager—that it's just playing parlor games to conjecture what Holly would have become.

What little music he did leave—only 17 singles and three albums were released while he was alive—is still so influential it's hard to believe his professional recording career lasted only a couple of years.

Even now, Paul McCartney, who in 1973 bought the bulk of

Buddy Holly's Sketchy Chapter in the Book of Rock

We're still singing those old songs



the Holly catalog (excepting material published after his death), declared the first week of September "Buddy Holly Week" (his slogan is "Every Day Is a Holly Day") and Denny Laine of Wings is in the studio cutting "It's So Easy" and "I'm Looking for Someone to Love" (produced by McCartney). MCA Records is releasing three Buddy Holly maxi-singles in Britain (a maxi-single has two cuts on each side) and is repromoting *Buddy Holly the Legend* (released as *The Buddy Holly Story* in the States). In October, *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, a BBC 2 TV program, will show a kinescope of Buddy Holly as he appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Meanwhile, Linda Ronstadt's new single is Holly's "That'll Be the Day" and Billy Swan's is "You're the One." Holly's legacy, at least in this country, remains one more of influence than of popular acceptance; indeed, Don McLean's one inspired composition ("American Pie") was a flat declaration that "the music" died with Holly.

Even so, Buddy Holly's chapter in the history of American rock remains sketchy. His grave site in Lubbock, Texas, is more familiar to visiting European

Hollyphiles than to locals. A cabal of conspiracy freaks—who are only half-kidding—trade theories about the cause of his death. Last year Twentieth Century-Fox started filming *Not Fade Away*, a fictionalized account of one Holly tour, but company executives got cold feet and dropped it. A similar fate befell *The Buddy Holly Story*, a planned TV movie.

In short, the man is a Grade-A American Hero: equal parts genius and myth.

The genius is obvious to anyone who has heard his music. He and Elvis and Chuck Berry set the standards for American rock 'n' roll. The myth feeds on his personal obscurity. There has been only one serious attempt at a Holly biography and it is not as thorough as it might have been. *Buddy Holly: His Life and Music* is itself obscure; written by John Goldrosen, it was published last year by the Bowling Green University Popular Press and has yet to make it to airport paperback racks. Not a great deal was written about Holly while he was alive, so Goldrosen was faced with the task of reconstructing Holly's life from interviews with friends and relatives. All this is done thoroughly—up

to a point. There was one very important figure in Holly's life, a figure around whom controversy continues to swirl, Norman Petty, now 48, was the leader of the Norman Petty Trio and was running a studio in Clovis, New Mexico, when he met Holly. Petty eventually became Holly's manager, cowriter and producer, and it was he who sold McCartney the Holly catalog (for an undisclosed price). Goldrosen makes serious charges in his book that Petty was not as aboveboard as he should have been with Holly's money, that he put his own name on songs that he had no part in writing and that he botched posthumous record releases with insensitive overdubbing.

The problem is that the book contains few quotes from Petty. I went to see Petty, to ask him about these things. "It seemed rather strange," said Petty, "that out of the excellent research he evidently did, that I spent no more than 10 or 15 minutes with the man. I remember I was impressed with his courtesy. I don't think there were ever any pointed questions aimed at me whatsoever. As far as publishing irregularities, I didn't have anything to do with the actual me-



Buddy Holly (l), Norman Petty (r)

chanical end of publishing. Peer-Southern Publications paid out the royalty checks and I resent the implication. As a matter of fact, I've made considerably more money off my own songs and my own efforts than I ever made off the Buddy Holly records."

On the matter of overdubbing records after Holly's death, Petty conceded it's a sore point with Holly fans but defended himself: "Some of the tapes by themselves really did not do Buddy justice without some technical help.

"And the implication that I didn't write the songs, I really don't like."

I reminded Petty that, at least in the case of "That'll Be the Day," for which Petty claims part-authorship, it's a matter of history that Holly wrote the song before he met Petty.

"That's correct," he said.

Why then is Petty's name on it?

"Well, there are several things that were involved in that that really I don't want to get into because I do think it would be involving other personalities, and at this stage it would be better to not try to lash out at someone."

