

1959



TIME  
LIFE  
MUSIC

*The*  
**ROCK 'N' ROLL**  
•ERA•

Digital Remaster

1959

- 1 **Charlie Brown** The Coasters
- 2 **A Teenager in Love**  
Dion and the Belmonts
- 3 **So Fine** The Fiestas
- 4 **Donna** Ritchie Valens
- 5 **Dream Lover** Bobby Darin
- 6 **16 Candles** The Crests
- 7 **Stagger Lee** Lloyd Price
- 8 **What'd I Say (Parts 1 and 2)** Ray Charles
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*Lloyd Price*

*Santo and Johnny*

As commemorated in Don McLean's 1971 hit, *American Pie*, February 3, 1959, will always be known as "the day the music died." Rock 'n' roll didn't really die in the plane crash that killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J. P. Richardson (the Big Bopper), but their deaths closed rock's first golden age. At the time, the three singers were part of the Winter Dance Party, a package tour playing one-nighters in the Midwest.

On February 2, the Winter Dance Party pulled into Clear Lake, Iowa, for a show at the Surf Ballroom. Because of the grueling bus rides between dates, Holly chartered a plane so that after the show he and his band could fly ahead, get some rest and do laundry before their performance in Moorhead, Minnesota. The Big Bopper convinced Holly's bassist, Waylon Jennings, to relinquish his seat on the small plane, and Valens flipped a coin with Holly's guitarist, Tommy Allsup, for the remaining seat. Valens won. Minutes after takeoff the Beechcraft Bonanza crashed in a frozen cornfield, taking the lives of the pilot and the three stars.

Ironically, *Billboard's* report on the accident, "Tragedy Fails to Halt GAC Winter Tour," focused less on the devastating loss than on the two teen idols, Frankie Avalon and Jimmy Clanton, who were hastily brought in as tour replacements. Over the years, it has become clear that Holly's death robbed rock 'n' roll of one of its most brilliant and influential artists. It has also become clear that the choice of Avalon and Clanton was symptomatic of popular music's shift away from authentic rockers, rich in blues and country roots, to bland crooners rich mostly in good looks.

Undoubtedly, the death of Ritchie Valens also cheated rock 'n' roll out of one of its brightest new talents. Only 17 when he released his first single, *Come On, Let's Go*, the young Mexican-American followed it in late 1958 with

a two-sided smash that earned him his slot on the Winter Dance Party. One side was *La Bamba*, sung in Spanish; the other, **Donna**, a love song Valens wrote for his high-school sweetheart. It was typical of the many soft and slow ballads popular in 1959.

Also on the Winter Dance Party bill were Dion and the Belmonts, who scored their first top-10 hit in 1959 with **A Teenager in Love**, a song written specifically for the Bronx group by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman. With its portrait of the tortures of young love and its musical blend of street-corner doo-wop and teen balladry, the record possessed the essential traits of rock 'n' roll hit making in a year when the unrestrained rocking of Little Richard, now a traveling evangelist, was sorely missed.

Another New York City vocal group, the Crests, also evoked the agony and ecstasy of teen romance with **16 Candles**. This racially mixed quartet was led by Johnny Maestro, who would find success again in the late '60s as lead singer of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Unlike the R & B hits of a few years earlier, which often cast love in earthy, even raunchy terms, the teen ballads of the late '50s enveloped romance in a haze of unfulfilled longings. Characteristic were **Dream Lover** by Bobby Darin and the incantatory plea **Sea of Love** by Phil Phillips. Phillips was an 18-year-old bellhop from Lake Charles, Louisiana, who, appropriately, wrote the song for his girlfriend. Santo and Johnny's dreamy steel-guitar instrumental, **Sleep Walk**, also seemed tailor-made for a dark rec room full of teenagers — some slow dancing, some necking, some pledging eternal love.

No 1959 hit conjured teen-age innocence better than the Fleetwoods' intimate **Come Softly to Me**. Gary Troxel met Barbara Ellis and Gretchen Christopher at Olympia (Washington) High School and they formed a vocal trio originally called Two Girls and a Guy. Interesting-

ly, *Come Softly to Me*, recorded a cappella with Troxel shaking his car keys (instruments were added later), is one of the few hits in which the full title is never sung.

Rock 'n' roll's drift from raucous R & B to more subdued pop sounds was also exemplified in the career of the highly influential vocalist Clyde McPhatter. McPhatter began as a gospel-style shouter with the Dominoes and the original Drifters, but as a solo act he refined his sound to appeal to a broader audience. Though **A Lover's Question** proved catchy and contagious, it was fairly tame compared to the open eroticism of his hits with the Drifters, such as *Honey Love* and *Such a Night*.

A year after the Drifters disbanded in 1958, manager George Treadwell took a Harlem vocal group, the Five Crowns (with lead singer Ben E. King), rechristened them the Drifters, and sent them to work with Atlantic's song-writing and production team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. In a studio experiment that Leiber felt was a disaster, the producers used a Brazilian rhythm, heavy doses of echo, odd string charts and out-of-tune timpani. The result was the magnificent **There Goes My Baby**, which set the hit-making course of the new Drifters and heavily influenced rock production approaches for the next few years.

Not surprisingly, Leiber and Stoller's pet project, the Coasters, turned out three of the year's most memorable rock 'n' roll songs. The two writers continued to fashion satirical "playlets" for the comic doo-wop group and, in 1959, they successfully took aim at a dreaded skin affliction (**Poison Ivy**), Hollywood movie clichés (*Along Came Jones*) and the familiar class clown. **Charlie Brown** offered kids everywhere a true antihero, the goof-off who helped relieve the boredom of education by imaginatively tormenting teachers and then feigning persecution: "Why's everybody always pickin' on me?"

Another Leiber-Stoller composition unexpectedly became one of the year's biggest hits when jump blues





*The Fiestas*

singer Wilbert Harrison hit No. 1 with the rhythmically insistent shuffle **Kansas City**. First recorded in 1952 by Texas bluesman Little Willie Littlefield (and originally titled *K.C. Lovin'*), the song spawned a number of cover versions and, over the years, *Kansas City* has been recorded by artists as diverse as Little Richard, Peggy Lee, the Beatles and Trini Lopez. Harrison disappeared from the charts only to resurface a decade later with *Let's Work Together*, another hit built on a blues shuffle.

In New Orleans, Huey "Piano" Smith had recorded a rollicking original called **Sea Cruise**, complete with an authentic bell buoy and foghorn introduction. However, Ace Records owner Johnny Vincent replaced Smith's vocals with those of Frankie Ford, a white teenager who was willing to travel to promote the record.

Another New Orleans artist, Lloyd Price, hit the top of the charts with **Stagger Lee**, a rock 'n' roll version of an old Southern folk song, *Stack o' Lee*. When Price appeared on *American Bandstand*, Dick Clark made him sanitize the lyrics so that Stagger Lee doesn't shoot Billy, but instead Billy apologizes.

In 1959 the full-fledged penetration of the gospel style into pop music was realized in Ray Charles' revolutionary **What'd I Say**. Underscored by a simple chord progression played on electric piano, Charles' uninhibited moaning and crying, done in dramatic call-and-response with his Raelets, brought the emotional fervor of black gospel singing to AM radio. Raw, lowdown and like nothing else on the pop airwaves in 1959, *What'd I Say* heralded the arrival of Charles as a giant in American music.

The year also had its share of oddities, the most unusual being Bill Parsons' **All-American Boy**, if only because the singer was actually Bobby Bare. Bare's satirical talking blues about his impending induction into the army was recorded as a demo for his friend Bill Parsons to use as a B side if Parsons should land a record deal. While Bare was in the army, Fraternity Records released the

*Ritchie Valens*

song, mistakenly attributing it to Parsons, and it soared to No. 2. Bare, who later developed a successful career as a country singer, had no hard feelings and encouraged his friend to tour and promote the record as his own.

Though 1959 did produce numerous rock 'n' roll delights, the music was increasingly ruled by labels and businessmen interested in marketing teen idols and "safe" sounds for consumption by America's youth. The transformation of Fabian Forte — a teenager snatched off the streets of Philadelphia solely because of his good looks — into a major star was symbolic. Since Elvis had entered the army, the record industry had turned out one pretender to the King's throne after another. Unfortunately, most of these would-be kings could barely curl their lips, much less swivel their hips.

— Joe Sasfy



*Bobby Darin*

## DISCOGRAPHY

\*Indicates highest Billboard chart position

**1. Charlie Brown** (2:18) The Coasters • *Music and lyrics by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Original issue: Atco 6132. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 2\**

**2. A Teenager in Love** (2:35) Dion and the Belmonts • *Music and lyrics by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman. Original issue: Laurie 3037. Released by arrangement with Continental Communications Corp. No. 5\**

**3. So Fine** (2:22) The Fiestas • *Music and lyrics by Johnny Otis. Original issue: Old Town 1962. Courtesy of Old Town Record Corp. No. 11\**

**4. Donna** (2:23) Ritchie Valens • *Music and lyrics by Ritchie Valens. Original issue: Del-Fi 4110. Courtesy of Rhino Records. No. 2\**

**5. Dream Lover** (2:29) Bobby Darin • *Music and lyrics by Bobby Darin. Original issue: Atco 6140. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 2\**

**6. 16 Candles** (2:52) The Crests • *Music and lyrics by Luther Dixon and Allyson R. Khent. Original issue: Coed 506. Courtesy of Janus Records. No. 2\**

**7. Stagger Lee** (2:22) Lloyd Price • *Music and lyrics by Lloyd Price and Harold Logan. Original issue: ABC-Paramount 9972. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 1\**

**8. What'd I Say (Parts 1 and 2)** (5:05) Ray Charles • *Music and lyrics by Ray Charles. Original issue: Atlantic 2031. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 6\**

**9. I Cried a Tear** (2:35) LaVern Baker • *Music and lyrics by Al Julia and Fred Jay. Original issue: Atlantic 2007. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 6\**

**10. I Want to Walk You Home** (2:21) Fats Domino • *Music and lyrics by Antoine Domino. Original issue: Imperial 5606. Courtesy of EMI America Records, a Division of Capitol Records, Inc. No. 8\**

**11. Sea of Love** (2:19) Phil Phillips • *Music and lyrics by Phil Battiste (Phil Phillips) and George Khoury. Original issue: Mercury 71465. Under license from PolyGram Special Projects, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc. No. 2\**

**12. Sea Cruise** (2:43) Frankie Ford • *Music and lyrics by Huey*

*Smith. Original issue: Ace 554. Courtesy of Janus Records. No. 14\**

**13. Poison Ivy** (2:39) The Coasters • *Music and lyrics by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Original issue: Atco 6146. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 7\**

**14. Kansas City** (2:22) Wilbert Harrison • *Music and lyrics by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Original issue: Fury 1023. Courtesy of Wilbert Harrison. No. 1\**

**15. The All-American Boy** (2:54) Bill Parsons • *Music and lyrics by Bill Parsons and Orville Lunsford. Original issue: Fraternity 835. Courtesy of Janus Records. No. 2\**

**16. A Lover's Question** (2:32) Clyde McPhatter • *Music and lyrics by Jimmy Williams and Brook Benton. Original issue: Atlantic 1199. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 6\**

**17. Sleep Walk** (2:21) Santo and Johnny • *Music by Ann Farina, John Farina and Santo Farina. Original issue: Canadian American 183. Courtesy of Pausa Records. No. 1\**

**18. There Goes My Baby** (2:09) The Drifters • *Music and lyrics by Benjamin Nelson, Lover Patterson and George Treadwell. Original issue: Atlantic 2025. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 2\**

**19. Personality** (2:33) Lloyd Price • *Music and lyrics by Lloyd Price and Harold Logan. Original issue: ABC-Paramount 10018. Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc. No. 2\**

**20. I've Had It** (2:39) The Bell Notes • *Music and lyrics by Ray Ceroni and Carl Bonara. Original issue: Time 1004. Courtesy of Janus Records. No. 6\**

**21. Sorry (I Ran All the Way Home)** (2:30) The Impalas • *Music and lyrics by Harry Giosasi and Artie Zwirn. Original issue: Cub 9022. Under license from PolyGram Special Projects, a Division of PolyGram Records, Inc. No. 2\**

**22. Come Softly to Me** (2:22) The Fleetwoods • *Music and lyrics by Gary Traxel, Gretchen Christopher and Barbara Elts. Original issue: Dolphin 1. Courtesy of EMI America Records, a Division of Capitol Records, Inc. No. 1\**



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