

Teen keeps Holly's music alive

LEE, from Page 1E

rhythm tracks with his trap set and bass guitar in the basement. Then he moves upstairs into his bedroom to overdub his lead guitar and vocals.

These low-fi recordings aren't intended for release. They're part of Lee's meticulous self-evaluation, to help him nail Holly's signature vocal hiccup and chordal guitar solos.

His band teacher at North High, Christian Baughman, says Lee was perhaps "born in the wrong decade."

"He's kind of stuck in between two worlds," Baughman said. "He can get goofy in the halls — he has that aspect to him. But when you sit down and chat with him, he's got that maturity about him."

Lee performed last October in a school fundraiser and caused such a stir with his hour-long set of 1950s-'60s rock that there's talk of starring in his own show this semester.

"Everybody knows about Richie," said fellow North High sophomore Jonavae Meeks. "I had a crush on him in middle school."

Most of today's students have no idea who Buddy Holly is, would never choose the song "Not Fade Away" as one of their cell phone ringtones. But Lee still made a big impression in seventh grade when he strummed and belted out "La Bamba," made famous by Ritchie Valens, who died in the same plane crash that killed Holly.

To be precise, Lee was allowed to perform in the talent show at Harding Middle School, but not to compete. It was already

Buddy Holly concerts

FEB. 2-4 — " '50s in February" at the Surf Ballroom, Clear Lake, with Nelson, Wanda Jackson, of the Mezcals Brothers, members of the Crickets and more. Tickets range \$20-\$35 through www.iowatix.com.

FEB. 10 — "Winter Dance Party" starring John Mueller as Buddy Holly at the Val Air Ballroom, West Des Moines. Tickets cost \$25 through Ticketmaster, 243-1888 in Des Moines.

acknowledged by then that he was too much of a professional musician.

"He's, like, one of the few people that I know my age that is actually driven to do something," Meeks said. "Not that many people are worried about careers. Everyone wants to date and get in trouble."

Even Carl Bunch, the last drummer who took the stage with Holly at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake the night of the plane crash, has pegged Lee as a potential successor to today's top Holly impersonators. Bunch has performed with Lee and will do so again Feb. 2 in Decorah.

"He's not just another pretty face," the 66-year-old drummer said of Lee.

How did this 21st-century teen get caught up in this pop culture time warp?

"My parents always listened to (oldies rock) on the radio, and that was the music I grew up with," Lee said. "It has that certain sound that other music just doesn't really have. The guitar playing is interesting, and the vocals are awesome."

Books about Holly, biographies and memorabilia are strewn around Lee's bedroom. A toy guitar hangs on the wall, the one he strummed at age 7 when he won a radio station-sponsored Holly impersonation contest at Merle Hay Mall. (Holly was only 5 when he won a cash prize at a local talent show.)

Lee's stacks of CDs are dominated by not just Holly but also Eddie Cochran, Del Shannon and Hank Williams. A shrine arranged on a shelf on the wall pays tribute to another of his retro idols, James Dean.

When Lee flips on his radio, the music is local oldies on KIOA-FM 93.3.

"I like everything about the era," Lee said.

"We're still trying to figure him out," said his mother, Nancy Luckenbill, 56, who, like Lee's dad, Tillman, works at Mill Pond Retirement Community in Ankeny. Lee drops his own Luckenbill surname for the stage; similarly, Holly was born Charles Hardin Holley.

"We always had KIOA on," said his mom. "The music just seemed to grab him."

"My dad used to play trivia on the radio with me," Lee elaborated. "It was mostly Buddy Holly songs that he'd quiz me on . . . My dad had an old cassette tape of Holly's,

and I listened to that and played along with it."

Since then, Lee has steadily evolved into a professional musician who now fronts his own trio, the Fabulous 50's, and performs with sidemen four times his age.

"When Richie's in his prime, we'll be dead," jokes his bassist, Steve Breese.

Drummer Mike Lozano added that "Richie is a stickler for getting us to do the song as close to the recording as possible."

"If he were to start doing music . . . of the '70s and '80s, then he'd be just like every other band that's playing around the state," Lozano said. "This differentiates him from other bands, a novelty appeal that people like."

That appeal has attracted occasional press since Lee won that first contest at age 7. But now the stakes are higher.

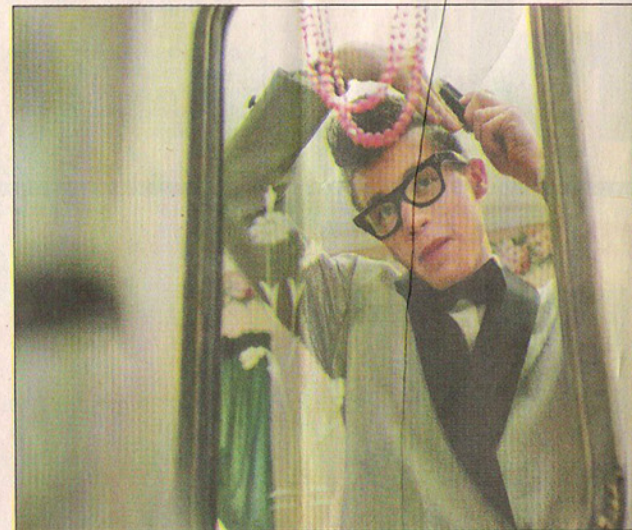
Lee is developing serious musical chops and spending most weekends playing gigs. A year and a half ago, he hired Myron Kelleher of Waterloo, 59, and a retired plumber, as his manager and booking agent.

"Sometimes we gotta stop and think, hey, he's still just a 15-year-old kid, you know," Kelleher said.

"If he was playing . . . today's pop music this well, I really think he'd be a national name," Baughman said.

Lee "finally" enrolled in guitar lessons when he was 11, with local bluesman/rocker Bob Pace, who refers to his star pupil as a "tape recorder or jukebox when it comes to the '50s."

"He practices incessantly," Pace said. "You won't find a more



DAVID PETERSON/THE REGISTER

Richie Lee uses a mirror in the living room of his home to perfect his pompadour. Lee has been performing as Buddy Holly since the age of 7. He spends most weekends playing gigs.

dedicated kid at his age. Once his voice changed . . . now he's got the voice for it, he's on pitch and he's really good."

Paul Waters of Davenport shares Lee's infatuation with the rock legend.

Bitten by the Holly bug at age 15 in Lubbock, Texas, Waters worked for years as a musician, often playing Holly tributes, and eventually settled in Iowa. He struck up a friendship with Lee and serves as a mentor.

Waters first watched Lee perform a couple of years ago at the Col Ballroom in Davenport and was impressed.

"Richie just had this energetic, naive quality that was bursting at the seams," Waters said. Lee's predominantly gray audiences

seem to have a favorite question for this young oldies rocker: "Are you gonna stick with it?"

"Of course," is Lee's quick reply.

These days he's also a budding banjo picker with an appreciation for Flatts & Scruggs and other bluegrass greats — which seems to indicate that he is only slipping further back into the past rather than catching up with the times.

"With what Richie's doing, Buddy could last another 50 years," said Bunch, whose life in Palmdale, Calif., still revolves around Holly. "That's what keeps us going. People get hold of the magic and run with it."

And to think that as a musician Lee hasn't even hit his stride.

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