

Impersonator, guitarist continue Buddy Holly's musical legacy

David Burke The Quad-City Times Friday, January 16, 2009
Tommy Allsup's first memory of that Midwest rock 'n' roll tour 50 years ago was the temperature.

"It was cold," he recalled in a telephone interview from his home in Crowell, Texas.

"Those old buses they were getting for us to tour in were buses out of Chicago," he said. "They kept freezing up. The heaters wouldn't work. I think we had five buses, and it was a very cold winter, maybe 15 below. That was before (wind) chill factors."

It was so cold that ...

... the drummer had to be taken to a hospital for frostbite after riding in the bus for too long.

... everyone bundled up as well as they could while going from one stop to the next.

... the stars of the tour chartered an airplane so they could have a warm ride and get a good night's sleep.

That plane crashed 50 years ago Feb. 3 in Clear Lake, Iowa, killing Buddy Holly — for whom Allsup had been the guitar player for about a year — as well as J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson and Ritchie Valens.

The tour that led to "the day the music died" wound through several Midwestern cities, including Davenport, where it played the Capitol Theatre on Jan. 29, 1959, before coming to a fateful end days later.

Allsup's first memory of Davenport was being able to see the Mississippi River.

"That was always a sight for us to see, being from the west," the Oklahoma native said. "Seems like we were driving around a lot that day we were in Davenport."

Allsup will be back in the Capitol on Saturday night, part of a show that re-creates the final tour. The Capitol is one of two stops at original locations for the tour in which Davenport had the only theater among a long list of ballrooms.

Now 77, Allsup said he didn't hear the news about Holly until he and the tour's road manager checked into the next stop, Fargo, N.D.

"I walked in the lobby and saw a picture of the Big Bopper on the TV. I just assumed they were advertising the show that night," he said. "I told the clerk, 'Put me in the room next to Buddy Holly,' and he said, 'Hadn't you heard? Those guys died in a plane crash last night.'"

The rest of the band was asleep on the bus, so Allsup went to wake up Waylon Jennings — who was Holly's bass player before becoming a music star in his own right — to tell him the news.

"He didn't believe it," Allsup said.

As for Allsup, "It didn't really soak in until a couple hours later, after we got settled into the room."

Allsup and Jennings did the best they could that night to re-create Holly's show, switching off on lead guitar, but "it's just a blur in my memory," Allsup said.

After a lengthy career that included being the founder and producer of the country swing band Asleep at the Wheel, Allsup is again playing alongside a guitar player with hiccupping vocals and thick, horned-rim glasses.

He teamed up with Johnny Rogers, a Chicago-based Buddy Holly impersonator, in 2005 and they have been playing together ever since.

Rogers estimates there are 40 to 50 Buddy Holly tribute acts nationwide, and he is flattered that Allsup is part of his act.

"Just having him by my side says it all," Rogers added.

When they walk into a venue, he said, Allsup will recall his previous gigs there.

"It just brings a flood of memories back. He just drifts back in time when we're onstage together. He just gets lost — you can see it in his eyes," Rogers said. "When you play a place where Buddy's been, you can almost feel the presence. It just makes it more real, especially when you see his guitarist, Tommy Allsup."

Rogers said he also feels a spirit when he steps into a venue where Holly played.

"That's my goal, to play just about every place he played," the 36-year-old said. "I'm off to a pretty good start."

Also on the bill for the 2009 edition of the tour are 18-year-old Holly impersonator **Richie Lee** and rockabilly group the Shackshakers. The night will include the music of Holly, Valens and the Big Bopper, as well as Dion and the Belmonts, another act on the bill.

Allsup and Rogers are gratified to see all of the golden anniversary commemorations of the plane crash, but they said Americans have only a fraction of the reverence for Holly and the rest that people in England do.

This summer, the two are off on a five-week tour of England, where the fan base encompasses multiple generations.

"It's just incredible the knowledge they have on Buddy and myself," Allsup said. "They know more about me than I know."

Touring after all these years still brings back memories for Allsup, as well as the fans.

"People come up to me and say, 'I saw you here 50 years ago,' " he said with a chuckle. "If I would have known, I'd have said, 'See you in 50 years' and they'd laugh at me."

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IF YOU GO

What: "The Last Tour," featuring Buddy Holly impersonator Johnny Rogers, as well as Holly guitarist Tommy Allsup, **Richie Lee** and the Shackshakers

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 24

Where: The Capitol Theatre, 326 W. 3rd St., Davenport

How much: \$26.50 and \$19.50

Information: (563) 326-8820 or TheCapDavenport.com