

The music lives: Last Tour concert preserves spirit, songs of Buddy Holly

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WATERLOO - Music lovers across the nation mourned on Feb. 3, 1959, when newscasters announced that a plane carrying Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson had crashed earlier that morning in a cornfield outside Clear Lake.

All three musicians and their pilot died on impact, shocking fans and leaving a gaping hole in the burgeoning rock scene. Just the night before, the trio had played the Surf Ballroom on their Midwest "Winter Dance Party" tour.

"The historical significance of this being the first tragedy of the rock 'n' roll era just hits home with baby boomers like me," said Jack Dreznes, a Chicago record store owner who helped organize a tribute tour to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the crash. "It was a traumatic

experience, but the passion for the music has never gone away."

On Jan. 30, The Last Tour stops at Waterloo's Electric Park Ballroom, where Holly played during the 1958 "Summer Dance Party." A tribute band including Tommy Allsup - a guitarist on Holly's final tour band - will re-create many of the artist's hits. Rounding out the ensemble is Chicago-based Holly impersonator Johnny Rogers and 18-year-old rocker Richie Lee, of Des Moines. The Shackshackers, from Duluth, Minn., will be the backup band.

Although the crash is referred to as "The Day the Music Died," a term popularized by Don McLean's "American Pie," The Last Tour is one way for fans to keep Holly's memory - and his music - alive, said Dennis Farland, another tour organizer. Songs made popular by Valens and the Big Bopper, such as "La Bamba" and "Chantilly Lace," also will be performed.

"Especially today, with all the things going in the world, people like to escape to a more naive and gentler time," said Farland, who also coordinated a 1999 tribute tour. "We see people standing up next to the stage with tears running down their cheeks because they connect with the music and they remember the tragedy."

Buddy Holly performed nationally for only 18 months but has had a long-lasting impact on the music business. Performers as diverse as the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and the Rolling Stones count the singer-songwriter among their influences. Buddy Holly & the Crickets were responsible for hits including "Oh, Boy," "Peggy Sue," "Rave On" and "Maybe Baby."

Playing those tunes at tribute concerts takes boomers back to their youth and introduces a new generation to Holly's music, said Rogers, a longtime fan who has been portraying the artist since 2005.

"Buddy's music is the perfect formula," he said. "It's got catchy lyrics, it's simple and it doesn't last very long. A Buddy Holly song is two minutes, tops."

Rogers, who has played tribute concerts at Clear Lake, said he is looking forward to The Last Tour. In addition to Waterloo, shows are scheduled in Medina, Minn., Milwaukee, Davenport and Mankato, Minn.

"As the world's biggest Buddy Holly fan, this is very personal for me," Rogers said. "It's almost 50 years to the day that he did his tour, and this will help keep the music alive and keep it going."

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