

American Pie by Don McLean

Introduction

"It's the first Rock dream"
- Don McLean, BBC Radio 1 Interview

Having reputedly been turned down by thirty four record companies, McLean signed with the record label Media Arts in 1969. Written in 1971 as the finale to his stage performances, American Pie was the culmination of ideas gathered over ten years. "That song didn't just happen," said Don. "It grew out of my experiences. 'American Pie' was part of my process of self-awakening; a mystical trip into my past." Don called the song a complicated parable open to different interpretations. "People ask me if I left the lyrics open to ambiguity. Of course I did. I wanted to make a whole series of complex statements. The lyrics had to do with the state of society at the time." (Ref: internet)

Some see the song as McLean's justification for giving up rock and roll and turning more to folk music. He had been touring for about a year with Pete Seeger on a project called 'The Hudson River Sloop Restoration,' sailing on the Hudson River in an ecology campaign and soon after the song was released.

Strangely when Don performed it to the public for the first time, asking a young girl to hold up the pages of lyrics, he was greeted with an indifferent reaction from the audience. Though, some may say they were just stunned into silence!

Recorded on May 26th 1971 in New York, the song got its first radio play in the U.S at the end of June on WNEW-FM & WPLJ-FM to mark the closing of Filmore East the famous New York concert hall.

The full version of the song was eight and a half minutes long & in November 1971 it was released on a double sided single. It was too long to fit on one side of a 45 rpm single. This was still the most common format at the time of the songs release. It was not played fully on radios or by DJ's as it would have required turning the record over. It was also during an era when for every song played, an advert was played. To this day, in the age of the CD, night clubs still only play part of the song!

Since sifting through all the research about the song, it's evident that American Pie is about McLean giving up rock & roll since the death of such great stars as Holly, and the emergence of artists who had become money obsessed.

However the song has tones, which come across even more strongly than these points about society as a whole changing. The sadness about the Vietnam war, the threat of nuclear attack from Russia, race riots, and the death of JFK shattering the idealism. This for me is the picture that McLean paints so well in this song. His disillusionment becomes more apparent as the song progresses. As McLean puts it "American Pie speaks to the loss that we feel. That's why that song has found the niche that it has" - Don McLean, [VH1 Interview](#)

The song is also about the degeneration of America in terms of religion & McLean's longing for the wholesome days of the 50s when musicians were God fearing & which some believe a metaphor for American Pie. (Ref: M Green)

For McLean 50s Rock represented his innocent years. The song chronicles important events in the 60s as well as McLean's own growth & loss of innocence as well as his attempt to retain it. The song is in fact highly autobiographical, with McLean featured in every verse. (Ref: Mark Jordan)

In the late sixties and early seventies, Don was obsessed with what he called "the death of America" -- the loss of many things he believed in while growing up. "In a sense, 'American Pie' was a very despairing song but it can also be seen as very hopeful. Pete Seeger has said that he saw it as a song in which people were saying something. They'd been fooled, they'd been hurt, and it wasn't going to happen again. (Ref: [internet](#))

Many people have theorized about what the words "American Pie" actually mean: It's a metaphor for the times (Ref: Marv Bloom). I think Don took different episodes from the American music and political events from the 60's. I think it is an analogy - The pie is the American events of the decade of 60's, and the slices are every episode he is describing. (Ref: Alex J)

You may disagree, so read this interpretation and then make up your own mind.

Enjoy!

Saul Levitt
Site Creator

Verse 1

**A long long time ago
I can still remember how that music used to make me smile
And I knew if I had my chance
That I could make those people dance
And maybe they'd be happy for a while
But February made me shiver
With every paper I'd deliver
Bad news on the doorstep
I couldn't take one more step
I can't remember if I cried
When I read about his widowed bride
But something touched me deep inside
The day the music died**

This refers to the 50s, the time when [Buddy Holly](#) was alive. It also is about McLean's desire to entertain people. Many teenagers at that time dreamed of playing at High School dances.

"I still remember this light going off in my head as I was sitting up in my little room writing my songs & em thinking about Buddy Holly and just how sad that was and how much - & I loved that guy, & how much I loved his music & how much I felt for him"

"..emotional thing I started to write this A long, long time ago, about how it felt when I was a paperboy & I opened up these papers & a lot of things are in the chorus that's a whole other thing..... & this whole fantasy came out & the song was written" - Don McLean, [BBC Radio 2 interview](#), November 4th 1993

Buddy Holly was killed in a plane crash on February 3, 1959. He had been married to Maria Elena for less than a year. She was pregnant. Soon after Holly's death, she had a miscarriage. The marriage had been kept a secret due to a race difference and the public opinion particularly in the wake of [Jerry Lee Lewis's](#) marriage to his 14 year old cousin.

The year after the plane crash, McLean's father passed away.

"As you can imagine, over the years I've been asked many times to discuss and explain my song "American Pie". I have never discussed the lyrics, but have admitted to the Holly reference in the opening stanzas. I dedicated the album American Pie to Buddy Holly as well in order to connect the entire statement to Holly in hopes of bringing about an interest in him, which subsequently did occur. "

"Sorry to leave you all on your own like this but long ago I realized that songwriters should make their statements and move on, maintaining a dignified silence. " - Don McLean, Castine, Maine

Holly was seen as an influence of Bob Dylan, The Beatles and McLean. He was seen as a person who was not afraid to be himself, despite the clean cut thick rimmed glasses image.

The Beatles name may have been inspired by Holly: "Stuart (Sutcliffe) did think up the name Beetles because it was an insect and he wanted to associate it with Buddy Holly's group The Crickets as the Quarry Men used a lot of Holly's numbers in their repertoire. John did add the 'a'. (Ref: [internet](#)) Though this is the most plausible explanation, a more bizarre one comes from John Lennon & also mentions a pie! "It came in a vision--a man appeared in a flaming pie and said unto them. From this day on you are Beatles with an A. Thank you, Mister Man, they said, thanking him." - John Lennon, Mersey Beat, July of 1961

Don McLean's only other job apart from being a singer and songwriter was a paperboy. (see earlier quote)

The plane crash that killed [Buddy Holly](#) also killed [Ritchie Valens](#) and [The Big Bopper](#). (Jiles P. Richardson) All were well known at the time & had collectively sold 10 million records worldwide in the 12 months before their deaths.

Thanks to Don, February 3rd 1959 became known as "The Day The Music Died" The pilot Roger Peterson was not certified to fly instrument flights. When the weather deteriorated with clouds and light snow, he tried to make the plane climb, but instead it fell earthwards and killed all four of them.

{Refrain}

**So, bye-bye, Miss American Pie
Drove my chevy to the levee
But the levee was dry
And them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
Singin' this'll be the day that I die
This'll be the day that I die**

The title of the song, is commonly thought to be a reference to the plane that Buddy Holly was killed in. It was reputed to be called 'Miss American Pie'. However McLean refutes this theory "The growing urban legend that "American Pie" was the name of Buddy Holly's plane the night it crashed, killing him, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper is equally untrue. I created the term." - Don McLean, 1999

The plane was a Beech Bonanza model 35, S/N-1019 identification N3794N which crashed approximately 5 miles northwest of Mason City Municipal airport, Iowa. The plane didn't have the name "American Pie" or "Miss American Pie" it only had a serial number.

Waylon Jennings gave his seat up to Richardson, who was running a fever and had trouble fitting his stocky frame comfortably into the bus seats. When Holly learned that Jennings wasn't going to fly, he said, "Well, I hope your old bus freezes up." Jennings responded, "Well, I hope your plane crashes." This friendly banter of friends would haunt Jennings for years. Tommy Douglas Allsup told Valens, I'll flip you for the remaining seat. On the toss of a coin, Valens won the seat and Allsup the rest of his life. (Ref: [internet](#))

McLean has been quoted as saying: "I only dedicated the album to Buddy I never said it was about him but radio people sensed right away that there was this connection between the day the music died & the dedication on the album. They would play American Pie, they would play 'That'll be the day' & I remember hearing it on the radio & thinking well this is great this is amazing what music can do. I am bringing Buddy back to everybody" - Don McLean, [VH1 Interview](#)

"Bye Bye Miss American Pie" could be saying goodbye to the "apple pie" image of 1950s America as things changed in the U.S. (Ref: Doug L)

[Chevrolet](#) (Chevy) cars were a particular symbol of the American middle class.

"The levee" refers to the man made banks that hold back a river. Or as described by Don himself "A levee is a pile of dirt." Apparently going to the levee is common practice among teenagers then & now as a place to drink and hang out with friends. (Ref: Doug L) Don even mentions this in a radio interview. The music of the area, such as country and rhythm & blues, were the source of rock & roll. McLean may also be hinting at the source of the music having dried up for him.

But is McLean either using double meaning or trying to mislead us here? Rye is whiskey distilled from Rye, though this makes for a good play on words, there is another explanation that seems to work better. Rye is a place in New York. Don McLean's home town was nearby New Rochelle. "The Levee" was a music playing bar in New Rochelle that closed, so Don & his rock & roll music loving buddies had to drive across the river to drink & listen to music in Rye. (Ref: Doug Staub, Mark Jordan, Marc Mullinax) Listening closely, it sounds like Don may be saying "them good old boys were drinking whiskey **in** Rye not **and** Rye".

There are also a number of other references to "the levee" neither of which resonate for me as well as the above. The Grateful Dead's song, Friend of the Devil, written & released in 1970 on the American Beauty album contains the lyrics "I ran down to the levee, but the Devil caught me there!" (Ref: Ed Chapin) Another reference comes from an old chevy tv ad though this has not been confirmed: "On a holly on a road or on a levee.. performance is sweeter nothing can beat her life is completer in a chevy". (Ref: Miya)

One of Holly's songs was 'That'll be the Day.' It contains the words 'That'll be the day that I die.'

Verse 2

Did you write the Book of Love
And do you have faith in God above
If the Bible tells you so
Do you believe in rock n' roll
Can music save your mortal soul
And can you teach me how to dance real slow
Well, I know that you're in love with him
'Cause I saw you dancin' in the gym
You both kicked off your shoes
Man, I dig those rhythm & blues
I was a lonely, teenage broncin' buck
With a pink carnation and a pickup truck
But I knew I was out of luck
The day the music died
I started singin'

'The Book of Love,' was a hit for [The Monotones](#) in 1958. The song asked: "Oh, who wrote the Book Of Love?"

The music was also beginning to become the 'religion of the youth,' with many preachers speaking out against it. [Don Cornell](#) did a song in 1955 called 'The Bible Tells Me So. This contains the lyrics "How do I know, the Bible tells me so." There is also a religious song with the lyrics 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' McLean was known to be religious. Some people thought that music could 'save your soul.' The roots of rock were based in the church with a lot of the early musicians starting off there. Elvis had an album of hymns and Holly had been a choir boy.

The Lovin' Spoonful had a hit in 1965 with John Sebastian's "Do you Believe in Magic?". The song has the lines: "Do you believe in magic it's like trying to tell a stranger 'bout rock and roll." This seems to fit with Don's line of "Do you believe in rock & roll?" (Ref: [internet](#)) Somewhat ironically, in the 1999 hit movie American Pie, two of the main characters in the choir sing this song in a singing competition! The line "Can music save your mortal soul" seems to reinforce the idea of 50s rock music being a metaphor for religion. (Ref: Robert Emery)

In the early part of rock & roll, slow dancing was very important. This declined later in the 60s as drugs and guitar solos became more prominent. Dancing was seen as a way of showing love for one another, and dance partners were not changed as easily as they are now. Dancers had to take off their shoes, as they would tear up the basketball court floor. This was known as the 'sock hop.' R & B had been purely for black audiences, originally known as 'race music,' it developed into Rhythm & Blues. White teenagers started to listen to it, and it became more acceptable in the music charts.

A bucking bronco is a usual cowboy term for unbroken horse, here turned to play on 'young buck' - young man. 'A White Sport Coat (with a Pink Carnation),' was a chart hit for [Marty Robbins](#) in 1957. Don has released an [album](#) of Marty Robbins tracks in 2001. More recently Jimmy Buffet released an album called 'A White Sport Coat with a Pink Crustacean.' The pickup truck was seen as a symbol of sexual independence particularly in Texas.

But why was McLean "out of luck"? Perhaps this is again about Holly's death & what it brought with it in the music industry & the changes in society at large.

{Refrain}

Verse 3

Now for ten years we've been on our own
And moss grows fat on a rollin' stone
But that's not how it used to be
When the Jester sang for the King and Queen
In a coat he borrowed from James Dean
In a voice that came from you and me
Oh, and while the King was looking down
The Jester stole his thorny crown
The courtroom was adjourned
No verdict was returned
And while Lenin read a book on Marx
The quartet practised in the park
And we sang dirges in the dark
The day the music died
We were singin'

The song was written about ten years after the plane crash that killed Buddy Holly. Hence "ten years we've been on our own."

So what are the origins of the next line? Well the phrase "A rolling stone gathers no moss" has been explained as: "A person who never stays long in one place will never be encumbered by responsibilities. Conversely, the person who is on the move all the time will never accomplish much either. The proverb is based on the Latin: Saxum volutum non obducitur musco. It has been traced back to around the first century B.C. (Publilius Syrus). In 1546, it was included in John Heywood's book of proverbs. First cited in the United States in 1721 in 'A Word of Comfort to a Melancholy Country' by John Wise (1652-1725)." From "Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings" by Gregory Y. Titelman, 1996). (Ref: [internet](#))

This said, the phrase features in a number of other songs. Most notably in Buddy's "Early in the Morning" with the line "Well you know, a rolling stone, don't gather no moss." It could therefore have been Buddy who was the "rolling stone" that didn't gather any moss but now dead, the moss is growing fat upon him (also the gravestone) but perhaps Don will always see him as a rolling stone. (Ref: Jessi)

Jimi Hendrix also uses a play on this phrase in the song "Highway Chile" with the lyrics "And everybody knows the boss, (was boss) a rolling stone gathers no moss" (Recorded 04/03/67)

[Muddy Waters's](#) also had the song "Rolling Stone Blues", which following his English tour, [The Rolling Stones](#) named themselves. The line could refer to them. They were seen, as selling out and at one point became citizens in countries outside of Britain to avoid paying taxes.

Or is it [Brian Jones](#), a member of the Stones. He died on July 10th 1969, hence "moss grows fat on a rolling stone." (Ref: Rainer Walinski)

The 'Rolling Stone,' could also be [Bob Dylan](#) who did the song 'Like a Rolling Stone,' in 1965 which was his first big hit. In this time Dylan stayed at home and collected royalties from his songs.

"But that's not how it used to be" appears to be recollecting what it was like when musicians such as Buddy Holly were still around and before money took over the music industry.

The Jester is Bob Dylan as will become clearer later in the song.

In 1962 Dylan went to England to star in a BBC programme as a rebel of some sort. During his visit, he sang in a few clubs, these were his first gigs in the UK. On the 23rd December of that year he performed at "[The King & Queen](#)" pub in 1 Foley Street, London. So Dylan literally "Sang for the King & Queen". (Ref: [internet](#)) Dylan was also known in his early years as a comic singer, hence "The Jester" because of his light funny comical material. (Ref: Coseo)

In Dylan's song "Down in the Flood", the lyrics say "Now it's king for king, Queen for queen."

Another take on this line, is that [President](#) and Jackie Kennedy are the "King and Queen". While not present at the [March on Washington](#), (August 28, 1963) they are said to have watched on TV. (Ref: Doug L) Originally Kennedy tried to stop the march going ahead, but as this failed, he publicly embraced it. [Martin Luther King](#) gave his famous "I have a dream" speech & Dylan (the Jester) sang with Joan Baez. Perhaps King & Baez were the "King & Queen".

Kennedy did however meet King and other civil rights campaigners after the march for talks.

Kennedy's Presidency was also known as Camelot. This was seen to be like King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. This fairy tale like time was shattered with JFK's assassination. Things became more cynical with the onslaught of the Vietnam War that followed. There was also a popular play at the time by Lerner & Loewe that was called 'Camelot.' The play, which showed on Broadway, starred Richard Burton, Julie Andrews and Robert Goulet. It portrayed optimism and innocence and the quest for the good and noble. Many people felt this reflected how they felt about JFK and his presidency as well as his cabinet and those in the White House.

[James Dean](#) the late teen idol, who starred in the film Rebel Without a Cause, wore a red wind breaker. The coat is symbolic in the film. In the film Dean lends the coat to a friend who is later killed. Dean's father sees the shot guy wearing the coat and thinks it is Dean. Also, when Dean puts on the coat, it meant it was time to face the world and do what he thought had to be done. The week after the movie was released virtually every clothing store in the U.S. was sold out of red windbreakers. On the cover of the album 'The Freewheelin,' Bob Dylan is seen in a red wind breaker in a street shot resembling Dean in the film. Both Dean & Dylan had a similar impact as a symbol for the youth - they had something to say and demanded to be listened to.

The 'voice that came from you and me,' refers to Dylan's untrained, common voice of the people. He also sings folk music that is seen as music of the masses.

The "thorny crown", a reference to Christ, also implies McLean is saying that Elvis ("The King") was a martyr, though I prefer to think that McLean is intimating that Dylan is stepping into Elvis's place taking the "crown" that was tainted. (Ref: R.E. Prewitt) In the 60s Elvis was losing popularity & was off starring in films. Many of the fans were listening to Bob Dylan & the Beatles instead. Elvis did make a comeback in 1969 (Ref: Shawn, Damian McCready) But perhaps this was too late. Music would be changed forever.

Dylan ("The Jester") had said that he wanted to be as famous as Elvis who had been one of his idols. Elvis has become known as the King, but does this link with the "King" in the previous verse? It wouldn't surprise me if McLean used different references of "King & Queen" & "The King was looking down". He could simply be using different word plays like the Lennon / Lenin references. (see below)

The King looking down could also be about Kennedy in heaven. The reference to Christ with the 'thorny crown,' implies that kids looked up to Dylan more than to the president.

There was no verdict by the Warren Commission on who killed Kennedy as the alleged assassin had been killed. "The Commission has found no evidence that either Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby was part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign, to assassinate President Kennedy." Warren Commission Report.

"The courtroom" could also be about the Chicago 7. Late in 1969, a group of protesters were prosecuted over inciting riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. (August 21-26, 1968) The jury convicted all but Weiner and Froines, but ultimately all the riot charges and contempt-of-court jail sentences were dropped by higher courts or the government. (Ref: [internet](#))

Prosecutor Thomas Foran and Judge Julius Hoffman clashed continually with the defendants. In particular, Seale's manner of conducting his own defence led to his spending three days in court bound and gagged; his case was then declared a mistrial, and he was sentenced to four years for contempt of court. The Chicago Eight thus became the Chicago Seven. In February 1970, five of the seven were found guilty, but an appeals court overturned the convictions in the fall of 1972, citing Judge Hoffman's procedural errors and his overt hostility to the defendants. (Ref: [internet](#))

"Lenin read a book on Marx," is perhaps one of the best lines in the song due to the double meanings. [Vladimir Lenin](#), Stalin's predecessor as leader of Soviet Russia who founded Communism & was popular due to his interpretation of Communism must have learnt and followed the ideology of [Karl Marx](#) who had the basic idea of Communism / Socialism.

Or could it be [John Lennon](#) learning about Marxism which would also make a lot of sense as it influenced The Beatles music. Marx could also be [Groucho Marx](#), though this doesn't fit quite as neatly.

However the John Lennon / Groucho Marx play on words was a common one at the time the song was written. A comedy group called The Firesign Theatre have an album called 'How can you be in two places at once when you're not anywhere at all?' The cover shows a picture of John Lennon and Groucho Marx. A famous French witticism translated as; I'm a Marxist of the Groucho variety.

The quartet may be [The Beatles](#), and the park may be taken from the song Strawberry Fields. Another Beatles take could be based on the movie "Yellow Submarine". In it the Blue Meanies attacked Pepperland with "Anti-music" missiles among other things. The music died in Pepperland as the projectiles landed on people, draining them of colour. In the park the Beatles quartet were playing along with the mayor who was practicing in a chamber music quartet. The Beatles are stopped from playing by the music missile & one by one the three players in the other quartet are picked off by the missiles, leaving only the Lord Admiral to escape. The movie was not a U.S one, but Beatles based. Bizarrely, their own voices are not used except in the final scene. The film was commercial & may have threatened the integrity of the music industry. Despite this it was still big in the US. (Ref: Ed Chapin)

Alternatively "The Quartet" could be the group The Weavers. Under the McCarthy era they were blacklisted. McLean was friends with Lee Hays of The Weavers in the early 60s while performing in coffee houses & clubs in upstate New York & NYC. Hayes was well acquainted with Pete Seeger who was also a member of The Weavers. Seeger, McLean & others took a trip together on the Hudson River.

Dirges or funeral songs could again be referring to the death of rock & roll, in particular Buddy Holly & 50s music, but also mourning rock & roll's comparative innocence at the time (Ref: M Green)

"Dirges in the dark" could be linked with the East coast power blackout on November 9th 1965. Radio spread news within 10 minutes. Soothing, calming, continuous dialogue, was played enjoining people to stay put. Citizens directed Manhattan traffic. There were reports of singing in the streets, on Third Avenue there was the sound of Christmas Carols (Ref: J K, [internet](#))

{Refrain}

Verse 4

**Helter Skelter in a summer swelter
The birds flew off with a fallout shelter
Eight miles high and falling fast
It landed foul on the grass
The players tried for a forward pass
With the Jester on the sidelines in a cast
Now the half-time air was sweet perfume
While the Sergeants played a marching tune
We all got up to dance
Oh but we never got the chance
'Cause the players tried to take the field
The marching band refused to yield
Do you recall what was revealed
The day the music died
We started singing**

'Helter Skelter,' a [Beatles](#) song, which featured on the 'White' album, was the subject of controversy, as [Charles Manson](#) claimed that the song inspired him and God or the devil had spoken to him. He led his followers in the Tate-LaBianca murders in the summer of 1969.

'The summer swelter' could refer to the summer of love, but perhaps more plausible 'the long, hot summer' the name given to the Summer of 1965. An area of Los Angeles which had race related riots known as '[The Watts Riots](#).' They were started in South Central just a bit West of Watts. More people were killed in the riots than in the 'LA Riots,' but not as much damage was done to property. While the dates of Watts & the Tate-LeBianco murders don't match up, perhaps McLean is just painting an image of the unsettled times.

A 'fallout shelter' is a bomb shelter where you would hide from radioactive fallout following an atomic bomb. Some families built a shelter in their back yard though this was fairly uncommon.. People stocked them with bottled water, canned food and even guns. The guns were to shoot your neighbours to keep them out of the shelter. (nice!!) Air raid drills took place frequently.

The shelters were particularly popular in America in the 50's when Russia also got the A-bomb. Russia was a perceived threat due to the 'cold war.' The American government went to great lengths to make citizens fear the Soviet Union and it's growing number of weapons. People were constantly reminded of the danger with jingles and television clips. Though Russia was seen as a threat, it was only when they became allies with Castro that the real threat was apparent, with the advent of the Cuban Missile Crisis when they put the USSR's missiles a couple of hundred miles off American shores.

The album cover of Bob Dylan's "Bringing it all Back Home, (released March 22nd 1965) on the left has a sign of a fallout shelter. Dylan's song Mr Tambourine Man (on this album) was The Byrds (see below) first hit. Perhaps this means the Byrds propelled Dylan to greater popularity than he achieved on his own. (Ref: Dennis Jacques)

The term fallout shelter is also a colloquism for a rehab clinic. (Ref: M Green)

The fears of nuclear war were played on during the 1964 presidential campaign. [Barry Goldwater](#), was a Republican senator from Arizona and a retired colonel in the Air Force. He was a right-wing ultraconservative. He was going to run against [Lyndon Johnson](#), (LBJ) who was currently President after JFK's assassination, but an

[View campaign commercial](#)

advertisement was shown on television that became very famous. A little girl is seen picking flowers in a big field with blue skies. An authoritative male voice is counting down. When the countdown finishes there is a big mushroom cloud from an atomic bomb.

Apparently the advert was only screened once, but played on the fear that Goldwater would enter the country into an atomic war. This was enough to get him badly defeated in the election. Johnson was elected in 1964 but declined to run for President again in 1968 due to public reaction to the Vietnam war policy.

The group, [The Byrds](#), had a song called 'eight miles high,' which was the first song banned for drug references. That said, The Byrds always denied it was a drugs song & claimed it was about a flight during their 1965 UK tour. It was however still banned by radio for drugs lyrics. (Ref: Greg Gilder) 'Fallin fast,' is another term for a drugs crash or coming down. 'Landing proud on the grass,' again refers to drugs, as one of the band members was arrested for possession of drugs. One of the band members also left the group as they refused to fly in a plane. (Ref: Gene Clark)

A fallout shelter was sometimes known as the "Fifth Dimension", this was also the title of the album by The Byrds with the song 'Eight Miles High.' In the 1950s, there was a fascination with sci-fi, and a fallout shelter was seen to have a futuristic appearance. The Beatles also had a line in 'Helter Skelter,' that went 'I'm coming down fast but I'm miles above you.' It has also been suggested that "eight miles high and falling fast" could be about a plane such as a B-52 that flies at about 40,000 ft (very roughly eight miles up) and could drop an atom bomb. (Ref: Mark Mirski)

"Landed foul out on the grass," could be a baseball reference. A baseball playing field, or diamond, is divided into fair territory, where almost all of the defending team plays, and foul territory. The batter tries to hit into fair territory. If he hits into foul territory his hit doesn't count, though if the defending team catches it the batter is out. Assuming it's not caught, an announcer might say "it landed foul".

In the stadium there's (typically) a fairly narrow strip of grass between the foul line and the seats. Most foul balls end up in the seats, well away from the field of play. A few foul balls will land in this strip of grass, fairly close to the field of play. Thus, if a ball lands foul on the grass, it was pretty close to being fair (and hence a hit). So the image of a ball landing foul on the grass is of something that almost worked, but didn't quite. (Ref: Ted Robinson)

The next line refers to a "Forward pass," which is a reference to American football. This insinuates that an advantage is being taken.

The forward pass holds a special place in American football. Introduced in 1906 it was seen as a major innovation "The turning away from the unimaginative and brutal mass attack and instead toward the open, fast-striking offence with the pass as a weapon appealed to players and spectators alike" The quarterback throws the ball over arm in a graceful spinning arc that can gain 20- 30 yards where running would only gain a few. (Ref: John Flanagan)

Combining references to these two very American sports contributes to the nostalgic feel of the song.

The "Players could be musicians trying to progress, with a "Forward pass", in their music. The marching band were the old school band who refused to conform. (Ref: Jonathan Caldwell) Alternatively it could relate to The Beatles, Sgt Pepper.

A very different take is that the "Players" are activists & rioters who were convinced they were going to create a better world. They thought they could move things forward socially & politically, in a drastic and qualitative way that nobody had tried before. The analogy is of a forward pass in football which is an exciting & somewhat risky play that can move things forward dramatically. (Ref: John Flanagan)

'The Jester on the sidelines in a cast,' again is Bob Dylan, and after an almost fatal motorcycle accident, on July 29th, 1966 he was out of action for 9 months. Many have speculated what injuries he had, though I believe the details were never released. After his time in seclusion he returned with a different style of music. (Ref: Matt Wensel, [internet](#))

The players could be other musicians trying to break into the market. Now Dylan was away, they were given a chance.

An alternative interpretation could refer to the American Football player [Joe Namath](#). (Ref: Nate Degn) It's said the McLean really disliked Namath, though this has not been confirmed.

Namath was sidelined with injuries for 19 games in 1970 and 1971 but regained his all-pro status in 1972. Namath became only the third quarterback in pro football history to pass for 400 yards in two games during the same season. (Ref: [internet 1](#) , [internet 2](#))

The 'sweet perfume could be a drugs reference, as Bob Dylan met The Beatles at Kennedy Airport when they came to the US in 1964 and introduced them to marijuana. 'The Sergeants,' are most likely The Beatles, as seen in 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.' Again, the players could be other bands trying to make a success in the music industry, but due to The Beatles success this was not possible. The band [The Monkees](#) were a contrived band, and actors. This could explain the reference to players as well.

Half time entertainment at a football game is a marching band that parades the field in formation. The idea of them refusing to yield at half time adds to the surrealism. (Ref: John Flanagan)

Not getting a chance to dance relates to The Beatles concert in 1966 at Candlestick Park which lasted for 33 minutes. This was their last live concert. They had decided after their L.A shows they wanted to go back to London. However they had a contract with KYA radio station to play at Candlestick Park. On the day of their Hollywood Bowl show, they were served a summons. In the end they played the Candlestick Park show on August 29, 1966 to a crowd of 24,000 screaming fans. The Beatles could not hear themselves sing, as the crowds were so loud. The band didn't want to be there, and for them, as they say, the rest is history.

Surely then, "What was revealed" were The Beatles split. Maybe them refusing to yield, was their continued popularity even after they split up.

It was also well documented that big business was one factor in ruining the relationship of The Beatles, even after they owned the Apple Corporation record label in 1968, which came apart by early 1970. "Do you recall what was revealed." They were planning to donate money to causes and do great things with art and peace. However Linda McCartney's father was a big entertainment lawyer from New York. There were lots of clashes that took place, and some were thought to be due to them. (Linda McCartney passed away in 1998, her maiden name was Linda Eastman)

A very different interpretation could be that this verse is about the Kent State University riots of May 4th 1970.(Ref: Tom Davidson) 4 students were shot and killed by American National Guard troops in Vietnam War protests. The "sweet perfume" could an ironic reference to tear gas. The "Sergeants" could be the National guard & "The marching band refused to yield" could be how the protest was so violently quashed. (Ref: Joe Zemp, Mark Mirski, John Flanagan) The "Marching band" could also represent the military-industrial complex which refused to yield its support for the Vietnam war in spite of the people (football team) trying to end it (take the field) (Ref: Marv Bloom)

Yet another possibility is Sergeant Barry Sadler's 1966 hit "Ballad of Green Beret" which supported the Vietnam war. The song stayed at Number 1 for 5 or 6 weeks, keeping other anti-Vietnam songs off the air for a time. (Ref: Chris Holmes)

Don McLean commented about 'players tried to take the field....' He said it was an allusion to the people at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago who tried to 'take the field' in the streets protesting but turned back by Chicago police. 'the marching band' (of police)

refused to yield. Many were hurt and arrested. (Ref: Bill Wilson) (Not verified)
In addition, "the marching tune" could be the draft for the Vietnam war. "We all got up to dance" "Players" or activists - They wanted to take the field, in other words take over and replace the existing institutions (the establishment and the military-industrial complex to use phrases of the time) and create something better. Many people wanted to join in ("dance"). However they didn't get the chance because "the marching band refused to yield": the existing institutions fought back and wouldn't give in (marching band = establishment, police, national guard) "Do you recall" / "But not a word was spoken", presumably meaning that despite all the screaming, crying and dreaming, most of what was said in this period was not worth much (or fell on deaf ears) (Ref: John Flanagan)

{Refrain}

Verse 5

**Oh, and there we were, all in one place
A generation lost in space
With no time left to start again
So come on, Jack, be nimble, Jack be quick
Jack Flash sat on a candlestick
'Cause fire is the devils only friend
Oh, and as I watched him on the stage
My hands were clenched in fists of rage
No angel born in Hell
Could break that Satan's spell
And as flames climbed high into the night
To light the sacrificial rite
I saw Satan laughing with delight
The day the music died
He was singing**

The first line undoubtedly is about [Woodstock](#) music festival (August 15th 1969). The Moon walk in 1969 could play a part in this verse. It could even refer to Irwin Allen's TV show "Lost in Space" which was popular in the U.S in the sixties. This may be a childhood memory of Don's which evokes feelings of the innocence of the space age. This contrasts starkly with the terror of nuclear war mentioned earlier. (Ref: Bob Smith, Fred Robinson, Mark Rushing, Bob Katz)

It also seems to refer to the 'hippie era' where being on drugs is known as 'spaced out'. It was also a time when teenagers seemed alienated from their parents, and disillusioned by the government spending too much money on the space race & Vietnam war instead of solving domestic poverty & social inequities. Cynics even said JFK conceived of the race to the moon to deflect attention from the aborted Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba & Johnson / Nixon continued emphasis on space exploration to instil national pride during the costly & ultimately unsuccessful Vietnam war. The "Generation lost in space" could be those who ignored messages of folk songs of 50s & 60s and dwelled on the spectacle of space exploration rather than solving problems on earth (Ref: Bob Katz)

This generation was called the 'lost generation' The reference to time could be about all the time people spent on drugs, and not living in the 'real world.' However it could also refer to the destruction of the environment and being unable to put it right. Its also been suggested that it could refer to the soldiers generation lost in Vietnam.

"Jack be nimble Jack be quick" may refer to President Kennedy having to use quick diplomacy during the Cuban missile crisis to avert a nuclear war. "Fire is the devils only friend" may be mocking the communists belligerence. (Ref: Asad Jaleel) That said the rest of the verse doesn't really fit. Perhaps Don is once again using double meaning i.e. Cuban missile crisis & the Stones concert.

Jack could be a reference to Mick Jagger ([The Rolling Stones](#)) and comes from their song 'Jumpin Jack Flash.' (1968) The Stones, like The Beatles played a number of concerts at Candlestick park ("sat on a candlestick") however it appears, these were 1981 & onwards, after American Pie was written.

Jack Flash is also a term used for the drug Heroin. Fire could also refer to drugs meaning that they are an evil substance. It has been suggested to me that "Fire is the devil's only friend",

can also be a reference to The Grateful Dead, because they suggested that Hell's Angels be used for security. (see interpretation of next verse) (George Hartranft, USA)

A detective who works on drugs cases told me that the term "Jack Flash sat on a candlestick" is commonly used to describe the method by which heroin is prepared for consumption. Heroin is usually left cooking on a fire on top of a spoon. Many heroin users use that term to describe the preparation of such drug. This would certainly fit with the rest of the verse.

It has also been suggested that "Jack Flash sat on a candlestick" may refer to the Apollo 1 spacecraft catching fire on the launch pad. "Jack Flash" having been used as a generic astronaut term as in Flash Gordon. (Ref: Thom West, JK)

Could "My hands were clenched in fists of rage" be Don McLean himself at The Stones Altamont concert?

This is about the 'Hell's Angels who worked as security at The Stones concert at [Altamont Speedway](#) in December 1969. In the darkness near to the front of the stage where The Stones were playing, the 'Hell's Angels' beat and stabbed a man called Meredith Hunter to death. He was killed during the singing of 'Sympathy for the Devil,' ("satan's spell") which Jagger, at the time, said they would never perform again. Due to McLean's religious grounding, he may have disapproved of The Stones and their songs about the devil. ('Satanic Majesties' Request' & 'Sympathy for the Devil')

The flames could be the bonfires around where the concert was, and Meredith being seen as a sacrifice. Satan therefore appears to be Jagger, as he was prancing about on stage while Meredith was being beaten.

"Rite" is a form of ritual. (Ref: Fred Robinson) This may imply that Hunter's murder was a ritualistic killing or sacrifice.

{Refrain}

Verse 6

**I met a girl who sang the blues
And I asked her for some happy news
But she just smiled and turned away
I went down to the sacred store
Where I'd heard the music years before
But the man there said the music wouldn't play

And in the streets the children screamed
The lovers cried, and the poets dreamed
But not a word was spoken
The church bells all were broken
And the three men I admire most
The Father, Son and the Holy Ghost
They caught the last train for the coast
The day the music died
And they were singin'**

[Janis Joplin](#) is most likely the "girl who sang the blues." The 'unhappy news,' is likely to be her heroin overdose in October 4th, 1970, which resulted in her death. Amazingly enough this is the one line of the song that hasn't caused many alternative interpretations though I do still wonder if others exist.

'The sacred store' is most likely a record store. The stores abandoned the practice of allowing customers to preview records in the store in little booths. Records also changed format in the 1960's. Buddy Holly's singles were released on '78 records (playing at 78 revolutions per minute). By the end of the 60's a '78 was virtually unplayable with the music industry long since moving to '45s for singles and '33s for albums. (Ref: Denis Morgan)

More specifically the store is likely to be Fillmore East. Bill Grahams site for concerts, said by some to be the greatest rock & roll venue of all time. However it shut down due to the small size of acts it attracted. (Ref: John Clark) Again this seems to refer to Don's own experiences: "Where I'd heard the music years before". Presumably "The music wouldn't play" as the venue was shut down & no one wanted to hear the music of Buddy and others. The [concert list](#) of the venue makes for some interesting reading.

"American Pie" was recorded on 26 May 1971 and a month later received its first radio airplay on New York's WNEW-FM and WPLJ-FM to mark the closing of The Fillmore East. (Ref: [internet](#))

Another take on this line, is that the "Sacred store" refers to the relative holiness of 50s music. "The music wouldn't play" because by then 50s music was no longer popular. (Ref: M Green) Alternatively it could be The Weavers who were blacklisted & their music taken off the shelves in record shops. (Ref: John Wilson & Missy)

The children screaming seems to refer to Vietnamese children. At the time [Life Magazine](#) published horrifying photos of the children during the war. Perhaps most famous was of a young girl who was covered in Napalm. However horrifying, the photo was, there has been much debate as to whether the Napalm in this case was dropped by U.S. planes.

The children screaming, could also be the Vietnam protests and riots. The 'Flower Children,' who were beaten by police and National Guard troops. This was most prevalent at the People's Park riots in Berkeley in 1969 and 1970.

"Lovers" could be the widowed wives of soldiers that died in the war. Not a word being spoken could be people not talking about the crisis of war because of the pain of thinking

about lost loved ones. (Ref: Brett) Perhaps it could also be the protestors being silenced by the National Guard.

"The lovers" could also be the hippies, who "cried" as they campaigned for peace. 'The poets,' were perhaps also dreaming of peace, and in the 60s could express their feelings more freely through poetry.

The broken church bells could refer to the dead musicians who can no longer produce music, but also the 'Is God Dead,' question posed in [Time Magazine](#) on October 22nd 1965, asking if this was the end to organised religion.

Time Magazine initially wrote an article based on Thomas J.J Altizer, associate professor of Bible and religion at Emory. From this the state of God's health started being debated in the New York Times, Daily News, sermons, talk shows, theological journals & even bumper stickers! Then Time revisited the issue posing the question "Is God Dead?" Altizer's name became synonymous with a God-killer & Altizer along with young theologians called themselves Christian Atheists. (Ref: [internet](#))

In this era people drifted from the traditional religions to Eastern religions, New Age religions, cults and various other things. This was due to many factors including the churches not keeping up with the times. They said that sex was evil, birth control was a major sin, dancing was bad, and so on. Then suddenly in the late 60 s the church decided to change, and masses were no longer held in Latin, musical instruments were brought into churches to appeal to the young. This type of thing still goes on today, with shortages of priests and nuns, and a declining attendance rate & an interest in Eastern Religions continues to grow.

The church bells reference could also be about Holly et al having produced 'holier' music. (Ref: M Green) This also is about the musicians having died & lost hope of saving America in a new era where free love & drugs prevailed. (Ref: M Green) This continues the theme of degeneration with the relative holiness of 50s music not being played & no longer popular.

"The three men I admire most" line troubled me for some time, and I have come to the conclusion that apart from the religious references to the trinity of God which reflect McLean's beliefs, the answer for me is simple. I believe "The Father, Son & Holy Ghost" refers to Holly, Valens and the Big Bopper. (Ref: Asad Jaleel) While McLean obviously admired Holly, the other two, were also killed and may have been seen by McLean as part of the innocence of Rock that now was destroyed. What their death stood for meant the end of an era in music & the end of song. Holly was linked to the innocence of the time and the song reflects Don's admiration for him.

The train reference could be a synonym for having died, as in 'went west,' and this would then make it clear that it was the three that he referred to, as the last verse again mentions the plane crash or "The Day The Music Died."

"Gone west" could also refer to the "Is God Dead' article. (Ref: Robert O Connor, Dick Cleary)

There have been many other explanations for this verse, particularly with reference to "The Father, Son & Holy Ghost".

JFK, Martin Luther King & Bobby Kennedy were all assassinated. (a popular song of the time Abraham Martin & John makes the reference to Bobby as well) Many people of the generation felt these were the three men who would have changed the direction of many of the issues. They were the political voice of that generation and the feeling of hopelessness that reigned during the time after the assassination of 1963 and especially so after the assassination of 1968 making it another "Day the music died". (Ref: Tresha O'Connor, Doug L)

Alternatively "The Father" is Martin Luther King, JFK is the "Son," and Malcolm X is "The Holy Ghost." While this seems idealistic, it does not seem to fit quite as nicely as the rest of the song, where McLean relies heavily on other musicians, and less on other famous people.

Chuck Barry could also be, "The Father" of R&R, Rick Nelson, the "son" of the Nelsons on TV and Pat Boone the "Holy Ghost", well known as a clean cut Christian artist.

Albert Grossman could also be "The Father." He was Dylan's manager as well as managing many other stars. Therefore Dylan is the "Son," and Holly is the "Holy Ghost."

{Refrain}

**Bye-bye, Miss American Pie
Drove my chevy to the levy
But the levy was dry
And them good old boys were drinking whiskey and rye
Singing this'll be the day that I die**

**They were singin'
Bye-bye, Miss American Pie
Drove my chevy to the levy
But the levy was dry
And them good old boys were drinking whiskey and rye
Singing this'll be the day that I die**

American Pie by Don McLean

Conclusion

Don McLean rarely gives interviews about the meaning of the song. However in the 70's while American Pie was at number one in the charts, he gave an interview that was broadcast on radio.

"American Pie really was.....well, it started to actually happen as an idea in my head after I thought about the death of Buddy Holly.....and that whole period of my life when I was a teenager. And I began to just tune-in, rather naturally, on the feelings that I had about the period of my life. And from that, I developed an idea which I was going to turn into a parable....a story with a moral....which originally had nothing to do with Bob Dylan, The Beatles, or The Stones."

"It was a story about America. And the fact that people were drawn into the song as a result of symbols that I chose to use, was the reason I chose to use those symbols in the first place." - Don McLean

"...which has in a sense this central theme which is American Pie, this anthem which I wanted to write and then its almost like, now I am going to tell you little side stories about this little dream that you just come out of after you heard this song, so that was the idea of the record" - Don McLean, [BBC Radio 2 interview](#), November 4th 1993

"I try to create music that represents me - where I came from and who I am. I'll sing about my experiences, growing up white and middle class in New Rochelle." - Don McLean (Ref: [internet](#))

With little else said about the song from Don McLean himself this perhaps adds to the mystery of it. There were rumours that he also refused to play the song for several years. It is thought that he started singing it again after seeing the lyrics printed on the cover of the final issue of the original [LIFE Magazine](#). However, Don refutes this. (Ref: Tom Ware)

"Because of an off-hand funny comment I made backstage at a concert years ago, a story circulated that the song {American Pie} has been a burden and even that I didn't sing it for a while. That's completely false. I am very proud of 'American Pie' and the many satellites that grow from it and revolve around it. For many years I carried my songs around and now they carry me around. I have always sung 'American Pie' for my audience and would never think of disappointing them since it is they who have given me a wonderful life and untold affection for almost 30 years." - Don McLean 1999

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