

Romig: "Not Fade Away"

# **"Not Fade Away":**

The Geographic Dimensions of Buddy Holly's Meteoric Career

Kevin Romig







The career of native Texan Buddy Holly is often described as “meteoric.” Within 18 months of his first hit, “That’ll Be the Day,” which charted on the *Billboard* Top 40 list in 1957, Holly released seven other songs that made the *Billboard* Top 40.<sup>1</sup> He and his band toured extensively throughout the United States, Canada, Australia, and Great Britain, while many contemporaries, such as Elvis Presley, did not tour much, if at all, outside of the United States. Holly quickly established himself as a rock and roll pioneer before his untimely death in an airplane crash on February 3, 1959, while on tour in the American Midwest.<sup>2</sup> Holly was only 22 years old when he perished on the ill-fated flight along with fellow pop stars Ritchie Valens and J.P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson.<sup>3</sup>

Holly, his band members, and his manager/recording engineer, Norman Petty, had worked tirelessly during the mid- to late 1950s writing and recording new material. Holly’s innovative and driven approach to producing catchy tunes placed him firmly within the upper echelon of rock and roll artists at a time when the market was crowded with aspiring musicians. The bespectacled and somewhat awkward-looking Holly was perhaps an unlikely candidate to become a teen idol, especially considering that he was following in the footsteps of such stars as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Nevertheless, Holly—along with his band, the Crickets—still managed to rise rapidly to the top of the rock and roll scene during its early years.

Although Holly's rise to fame may have seemed meteoric, it actually required not only tremendous musical talent but also a commitment to an often-grueling tour schedule, which, in some ways, contributed to his premature death. This essay examines the demanding pace of early rock and roll tours by tracing the geographic dimensions of Buddy Holly's professional touring schedule. In doing so, this article sheds light on important factors that contributed to the rather chaotic and haphazard 1959 "Winter Dance Party" tour and Holly's fatal plane crash.

Buddy Holly's short career is remarkable for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it spans two distinct genres of music. These include the R&B-inspired rock and roll music popularized by Elvis Presley, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis, as well as the more melodic pop music made famous by artists such as Frankie Avalon and Paul Anka. As rock and roll gained national popularity during the mid- to late 1950s, promoters often organized tours that included several artists or groups, each performing short, sometimes 15-minute, sets. Unlike many major touring acts today, which employ a cadre of assistants and sound engineers to prepare an arena-sized auditorium for a one-night show, early rock and roll tours were hastily organized for smaller ballrooms or theaters, and the artists were expected to provide their own instruments and equipment. Furthermore, performers often faced hostility from local civic leaders, who feared that rock and roll promoted suggestive lyrics, lewd behavior, and interracial mingling of audiences at a time in which segregation was still solidly entrenched throughout much of the country. Ironically, such negative publicity often helped garner greater attention for these tours and actually attracted larger crowds.

The youngest of four children, Charles Hardin "Buddy" Holley was born September 7, 1936, in Lubbock, Texas. His parents had relocated to Lubbock because the local Texas Technical College (now Texas Tech University) provided opportunities for employment.<sup>4</sup> Resources and consumer items were scarce in West Texas during the Great Depression and World War II, but those who knew Buddy Holly say that he was rarely seen without some sort of guitar after the age of ten. While Holly's early musical influences included singing at the local Tabernacle Baptist Church, he also admired Bob Wills, Hank Williams, Mahalia Jackson, Woody Guthrie, Slim Whitman, and other secular singers.<sup>5</sup>

Lubbock provided few opportunities for an aspiring young musician in the 1940s and 1950s. The town prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages, so there were few dance halls or honky-tonks.<sup>6</sup> Local radio did not provide much in the way of music besides easy-listening pop and country. However, Holly's life would change dramatically on January 2, 1955, when, as a senior in high school, he witnessed Elvis Presley perform at the Lubbock Fair Park

Coliseum.<sup>7</sup> From that day on, Holly devoted countless hours of practice and energy toward becoming a rock and roll star.<sup>8</sup> In fact, when Presley returned to Lubbock for a show in February 1955, Holly and his friend Bob Montgomery, performing as a duo, were hired as one of the opening acts for Presley. Prior to switching to rock and roll, "Buddy and Bob" had become a popular Western swing and honky-tonk act that opened for Floyd Cramer and other national stars who appeared in Lubbock.<sup>9</sup>

Although it might seem odd that Holly transitioned so easily from Western swing to rock and roll, in many ways it was a logical progression. Western swing was an eclectic blend of country, blues, jazz, swing, and other genres pioneered by fellow Texans Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and others during the 1930s. Because Western swing already had broken long-standing racial barriers by blending Anglo, African-American, Mexican-American, and other ethnic musical influences, it helped set the stage for the same type of interracial, cultural "cross-pollination" seen in rock and roll during the 1950s. In fact, Michigan-born Bill Haley, the first rock and roll artist to make the *Billboard* pop charts with the 1953 hit "Crazy, Man, Crazy," was strongly influenced by Western swing in his formative years as a musician. As early as the 1940s, his band, Billy Haley and the Four Aces of Western Swing, already was blending honky-tonk, Western swing, R&B, and pop to help lay the foundation for the emergence of rock and roll.<sup>10</sup>

As one might expect, Lubbock did not have much of a recording infrastructure in the 1950s. However, Holly was aware of the well-respected Petty Studios, 100 miles northwest of Lubbock in Clovis, New Mexico. Norman Petty, a professional performer of easy-listening music, operated a studio in the loft above the family auto-repair and fuel station in Clovis. Petty's keen ear for tone and harmony fit well with Holly's drive, determination, and musical talent.<sup>11</sup> The two worked many late-night sessions, so the noise of daytime traffic would not interfere with the recordings. Because Petty was more of an artist than a promoter, he focused primarily on producing high-quality recordings rather than promoting Holly's songs to record labels and radio stations. Consequently, many of these recordings languished in studio vaults in Clovis, despite Holly's eagerness to have a hit. Nevertheless, Holly eventually signed a contract with Decca Records. The company misprinted his last name as "Holly" (without the "e"), and the meek nineteen-year-old made no effort to correct the error.<sup>12</sup>

Buddy Holly's first professional tour began in April 1956. He spent a week in Oklahoma touring as an opening act for Faron Young's Grand Old Opry show. Buddy and the Two Tones (Sonny Curtis and Don Guess) were paid \$10 apiece per day, plus room and board.<sup>13</sup> The Lubbock trio did not have proper clothing for their first tour, so they stopped in Oklahoma City and each purchased two shirts and a pair of white pants. Buddy and the

Two Tones were billed as "extra added attractions" on the tour. As such, they were relegated to following the main tour bus in the Holley family's 1955 Oldsmobile.<sup>14</sup>

As novices, the three young musicians were just happy to be sharing a bill with such up-and-coming stars as Faron Young and Carl Perkins. The trio enjoyed such simple yet newfound pleasures as ordering steak each night for dinner, since their expenses were paid. The precise itinerary of this first tour is unknown, but Holly used this opportunity to hone his image. Realizing that his thick eyeglasses were a detriment to his stage presence, he decided to try and play without them at one of the shows. However, during the set he dropped his guitar pick on the floor and could not see where it had landed. Limited by his 20/800 vision, Holly was forced to crawl around on the stage until he finally located the pick. He quickly realized just how necessary his eyeglasses were, and that would be the last time he tried to play without them.<sup>15</sup>

From the success of the Grand Old Opry tour, Buddy and the Two Tones were contracted to perform as featured artists on the January 1957 "Major Road Tour of Country Artists," featuring Hank Thompson, Wanda Jackson, Hank Locklin, Mitchell Torok, and Cowboy Copas.<sup>16</sup> The tour played in 14 cities across the southeastern United States and took the boys from Lubbock all the way to Miami, Florida. (See Figure 1.) Although Buddy and the Two Tones were listed as featured performers, they were still expected to provide background melody to the other acts when necessary. While these early tours helped Buddy and the Two Tones establish themselves as country music artists, both Guess and Curtis eventually decided to leave the group. From this point on, Holly was able to focus increasingly upon rock and roll as his primary musical genre.<sup>17</sup>

With the loss of the Two Tones, Holly recruited Jerry Allison, a recent graduate of Lubbock High School, and a distant cousin,

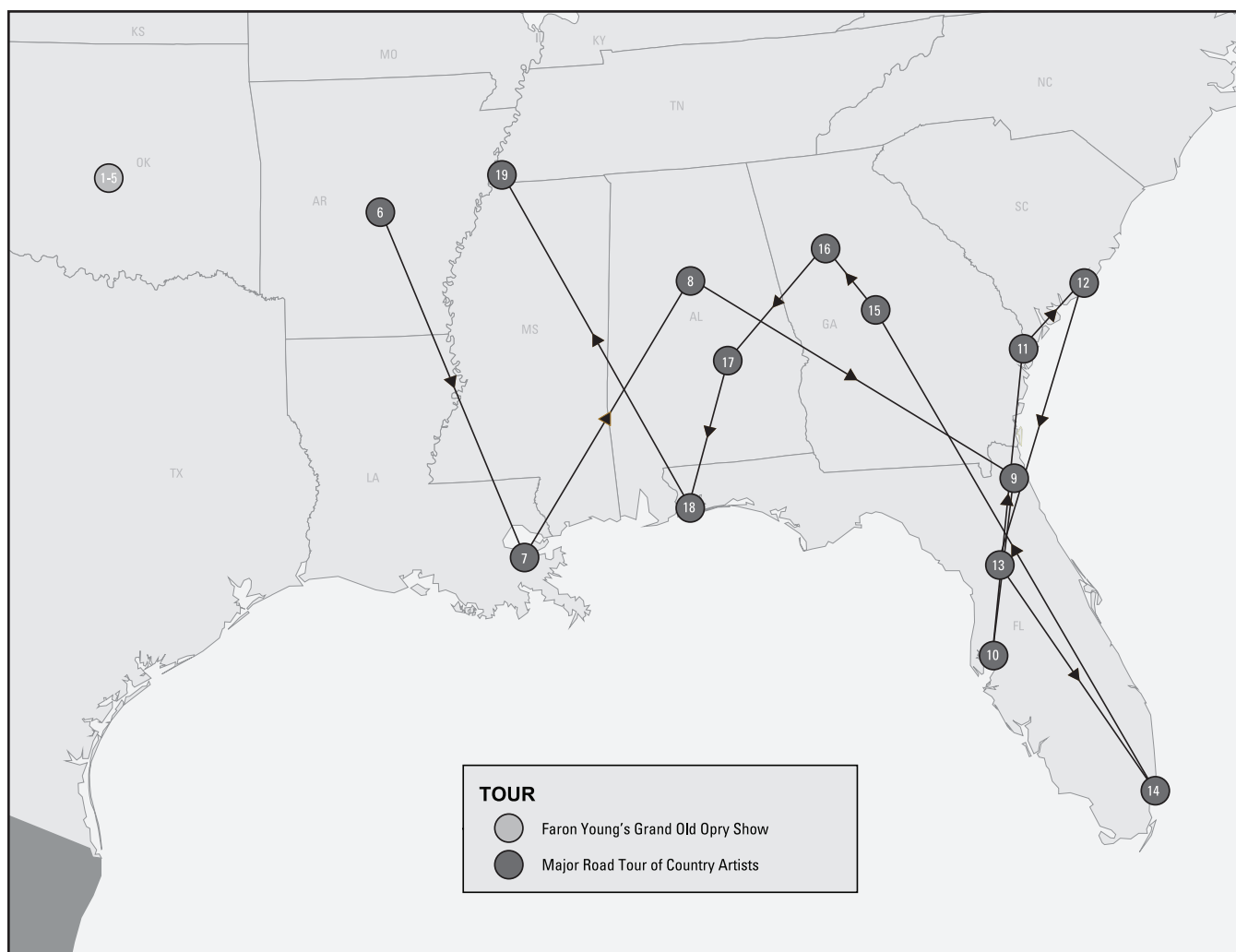


Figure 1. Buddy and Bob's tour itinerary during 1956 and 1957. Courtesy Kevin and Julie Romig.

Niki Sullivan, to join the band. Holly also found a sixteen-year-old bass player, Joe B. Maudlin, whose main asset was that he owned his own instrument. The new group, now known as Buddy Holly and the Crickets, soon had a hit in 1957 with "That'll Be the Day." The song's popularity earned the young group an opportunity to play as part of an R&B tour of the Northeast, which featured Clyde McPhatter, Otis Rush, Edna McGriff, Oscar and Oscar, and the Hearts. This odd pairing of four young white boys from Lubbock with a more experienced group of African-American artists resulted from a misunderstanding. As it turned out, the tour promoter mistakenly thought he had hired a different band named the Crickets, comprised of all black artists.<sup>18</sup>

Undaunted, Holly and the Crickets remained with the R&B tour, which performed at historically African-American venues in Baltimore, Washington, and New York during the late summer of 1957.<sup>19</sup> (See Figure 2.) Many black listeners were wary of the young Texans and their rock and roll music, although most audiences

responded well to the group's hit, "That'll Be the Day." To appease the crowd at Harlem's Apollo Theater, a traditionally African-American venue, Holly played a few of his original songs but also several popular tunes by black singer Bo Diddley. The Harlem audience seemed to appreciate this gesture by the band.<sup>20</sup> While the R&B tour did not effectively match the Crickets with their ideal target market, it did help them establish a reputation as bold performers. After this tour, Holly and the Crickets made their first appearance on the popular television show *American Bandstand*.

Capitalizing on the Crickets' recent success in the Northeast, New York disc jockey Alan Freed booked the Lubbock quartet on his Labor Day "Holiday of Stars Show" at the Paramount Theater in Brooklyn. The show featured Little Richard, Larry Williams, the Del Vikings, the Clefones, and Mickey and Sylvia. The Freed concerts were grueling programs that included at least 29 shows per week.<sup>21</sup> The first performance began at 11:00 a.m., with each artist playing two or three songs and then yielding the stage to the

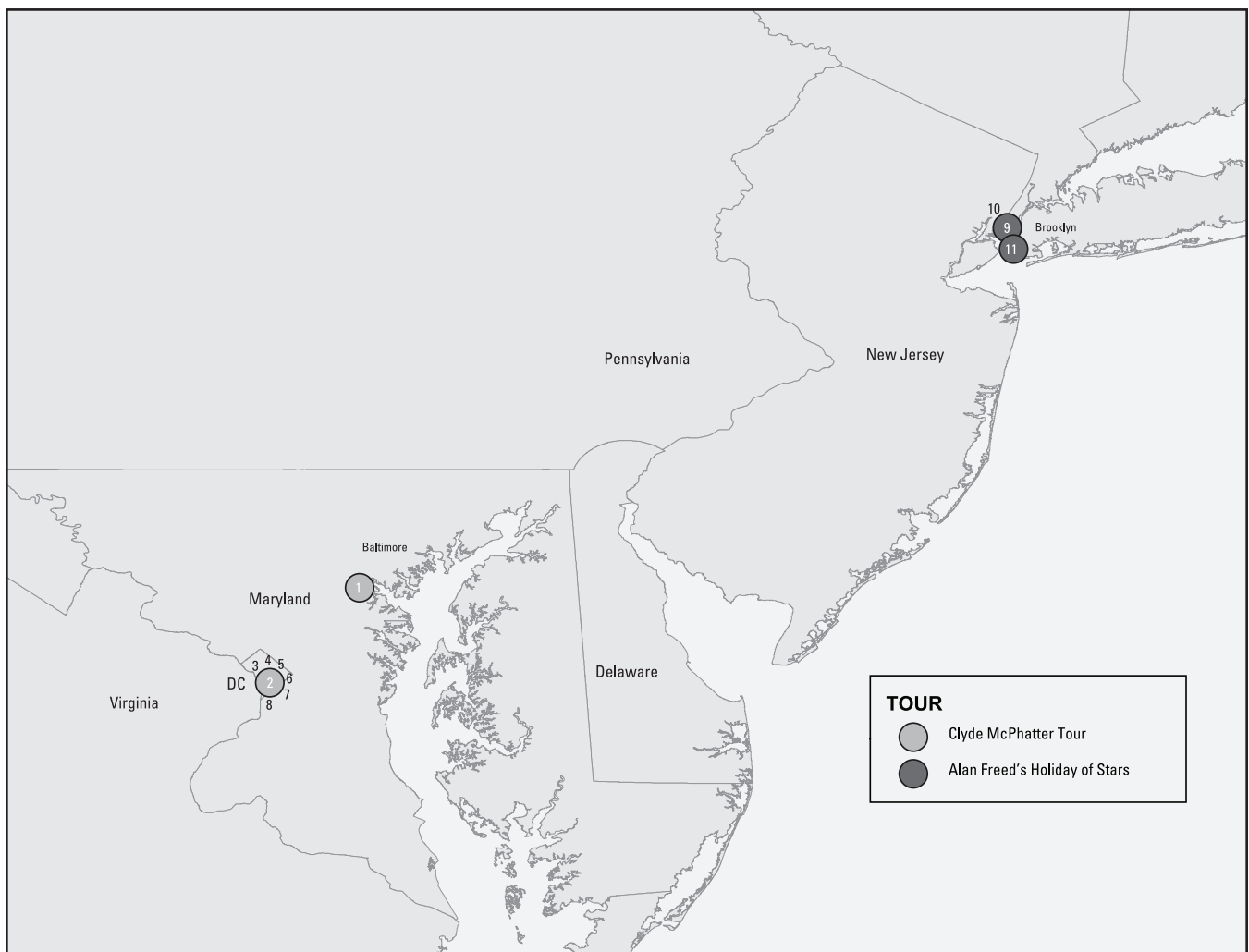


Figure 2. Holly's early rock and roll performances in August and September 1957. Courtesy Kevin and Julie Romig.

next group. Every day, there were five to seven shows with the final one ending at about 2:00 a.m. Following the last act, a Western or detective movie helped clear the audience from the theater. During these brief appearances, Holly and the Crickets honed their performing skills in order to keep the crowd energized. The hectic performance schedule was stressful, but it forced Holly and his band mates to learn to be better musicians and entertainers. As dizzying as this early career schedule might seem, it would only become more intense as the group gained greater fame.

By late 1957, Buddy Holly and the Crickets were becoming better known, and they were invited on their first North American tour with Irving Feld's "Biggest Show of Stars." Feld was one of the most successful rock and roll booking agents in New York, and his talent agency put together a tour of 70 cities in 80 days during the autumn of 1957. ( See Figure 3.) This tour included such prominent artists as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Paul Anka, the Everly Brothers, Frankie Lymon, the Drifters, LaVern

Baker, Clyde McPhatter, Johnnie & Joe, the Spaniels, and the Bobbettes.<sup>22</sup> The tour's main purpose was to maximize profits for the agency and record companies by exposing these musicians to as broad a national audience as possible. As the tour crisscrossed the continent, all the artists were packed into a single bus, in which Holly often would shoot craps with Chuck Berry. This ended when Berry became successful enough to purchase his own Cadillac and drive himself to the shows.<sup>23</sup> After Berry became less accessible, Holly and the Crickets befriended the Everly Brothers, who helped the young Texans refine their image. Don and Phil Everly convinced Holly to trade his old-fashioned, clear plastic and silver-framed eyeglasses for a pair of black, horn-rimmed frames popularized by television celebrity Steve Allen.<sup>24</sup> These new glasses soon became a part of Holly's signature look.

The itinerary for these tours was so packed that performers had little chance to rest except on the bus ride to the next gig. The Feld Agency proved much more adept at promotion than tour- or

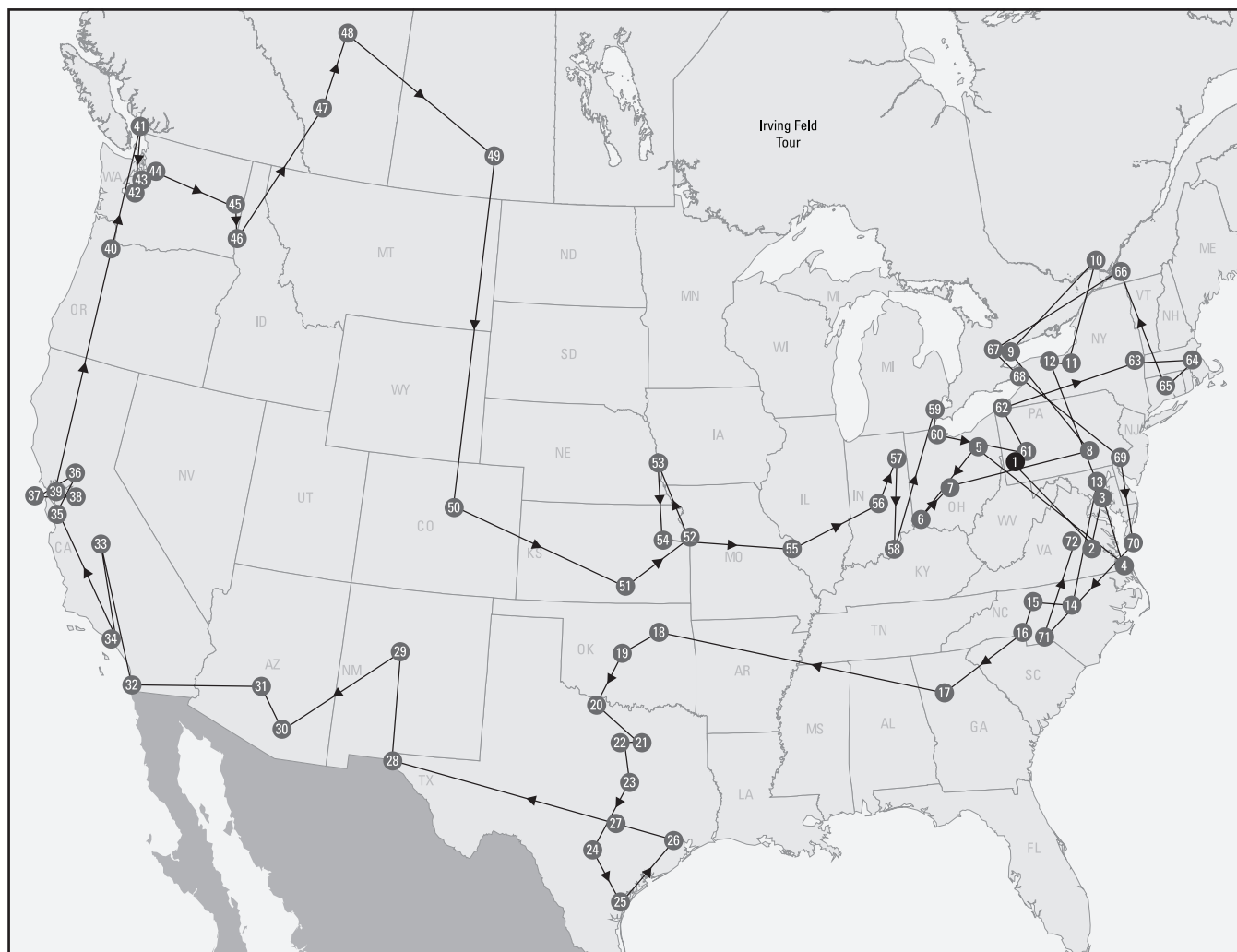


Figure 3. Holly's appearances on the 1957 Irving Feld Biggest Show of Stars tour. Courtesy Kevin and Julie Romig.





(L-R) Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, & Joe Mauldin, 1958.  
Courtesy Los Angeles Times.

route-planning. As seen in Figure 3, the tour would often bypass a city only to return the following day. For example, on September 10, 1957, the tour played in Akron (northeast Ohio) then in Cincinnati (southwest Ohio) the following night. On September 12, the tour returned to central Ohio to play in Columbus. The Feld tour circumnavigated the United States and Canada in 1957, playing in the usual large cities but also performing in smaller towns, such as Wichita Falls, Texas, and Moscow, Idaho.

In addition to being constantly in motion, the Feld tour also frequently changed its artistic lineup. By the time Feld's "Show of Stars" reached the West Coast, the Spaniels, Johnnie & Joe, and the Bobbettes had been replaced by newer, more popular acts, such as Eddie Cochran and West Texans Buddy Knox and the Rhythm Orchids. The Crickets' popularity soared while on the 80-day excursion, and public demand for the group's recordings continued to grow. Norman Petty, who had recorded Holly in Clovis, met up with the tour after its performance in Oklahoma City.<sup>25</sup> Since the Norman Petty Trio played regularly at Air Force officers' clubs across the Southwestern United States, Petty used his connections at Tinker Air Force Base in Midwest City, Oklahoma, to set up a makeshift recording studio at the officers' club. It was there that Holly and the Crickets recorded four more songs, including "Maybe Baby," which would chart in March 1958.<sup>26</sup>

While travelling between Atlanta and New Orleans, the Feld tour was stopped by police, and the musicians were notified that their buses would have to be racially segregated.<sup>27</sup> They also found out that white artists would not be allowed to perform with black artists in Columbus, Georgia, Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Birmingham, Alabama. By the time the tour reached Tulsa, Oklahoma, on September 28, the buses had again been desegregated, and black and white musicians were able to ride and perform together once more. Despite the Crickets' growing national fame, they were disappointed with the lukewarm

reception they encountered in their home state of Texas. In fact, neither Lubbock nor Amarillo had been booked as stops on the tour. Furthermore, when the show made an appearance in Waco, Texas, a majority of the Crickets' audience was made up of family and friends who had driven from Lubbock. It seems that the rather conservative culture prevalent throughout West Texas at the time meant that the Crickets and their rock and roll music would not be widely accepted for at least a few more years.

Coming off of their most successful tour in December 1957, the band boasted three hit records and had appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. When they returned to Lubbock for a break, they expected to be treated like rock and roll royalty. Holly arranged for a limousine to pick them up at the Lubbock airport. However, no entourage awaited their arrival, nor were any local dignitaries there to present the hometown heroes a key to the city. Due to a miscommunication, Holly came home to an empty house without his parents or any family members there to witness his arrival in the limousine.<sup>28</sup> Despite these disappointments, Holly still reveled in his newfound success as a performer. He bought his parents a new Chevrolet Impala automobile, paid off a few minor debts he had incurred, and quickly headed off to Clovis to record more music.

After agreeing to perform for another round of Alan Freed shows in December 1957, Holly and the Crickets once again hit the road on another, shorter (17-day) Irving Feld Tour called "America's Greatest Teenage Recording Stars," playing several venues east of the Mississippi River. (See Figure 4.) Around this time, there was a growing public backlash against rock and roll, especially among parents, civic leaders, segregationists, and others who feared that this new music would undermine traditional social mores and encourage interracial mingling. Holly, who was never comfortable with the more rebellious "bad boy" image often associated with rock and roll, managed to avoid much of this conflict when the Crickets joined Paul Anka and Jerry Lee Lewis for a brief tour of Australia during January 1958.<sup>29</sup> In Australia, the tour performed before arena-sized crowds that were especially impressed by the Crickets. In fact, Jerry Lee Lewis later admitted that Buddy Holly was the true star of the show.<sup>30</sup>

Because the Australia tour was high-profile, Norman Petty accompanied the Crickets as their manager. Petty was a deeply religious person and insisted that his artists not smoke, drink, or curse. In addition to the many commercial appearances the tour made in Australia, the musicians also played a charity performance at Melbourne's Nurses Clinic to help raise funds for low-income patients.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps an omen of what lay ahead, the tour's plane was forced to make an emergency landing on the island of Canton on the flight back to the United States.<sup>32</sup>

On the heels of the Australian tour, Holly and the Crickets joined Jerry Lee Lewis, Bill Haley, the Everly Brothers, and the

Royal Teens on a brief six-day tour of Florida known as "The Big Gold Record Stars" in February 1958. The Everly Brothers headlined the tour, but Jerry Lee Lewis did his best to steal the show with his wild onstage antics, which included jumping on his piano and playing the instrument with his fists and feet. The Florida tour went smoothly for the most part, except for the "local talent" hired to back the Everly Brothers at one of the shows: the promoter had hired three high school kids who were not skilled enough to provide adequate backup.<sup>33</sup> When Holly heard of the problem, he and the Crickets volunteered as replacements.<sup>34</sup>

In March 1958, Holly and the Crickets began a tour of Great Britain. Upon their arrival in London, the Texans were greeted with cold and gloomy weather. This drastic change was difficult for the band, especially considering that they had just come from playing in Florida. However, their spirits were buoyed by the fact that this was a Buddy Holly and the Crickets tour, not the

typical pre-packaged arrangement in which they were simply part of a larger lineup of stars. In fact, the band was the headliner with local British bands opening. Holly had three hit records in the United Kingdom at the time, and there seemed to be an insatiable demand for his music. The large crowds in London for the Crickets' first shows were generally well behaved, although quite enthusiastic about the group's performances.<sup>35</sup>

The Crickets' stage persona was somewhat different from that of other rock and roll bands at the time. For example, Holly would often use folksy and self-deprecating humor on stage. As the Texans zigzagged across Britain for the next three and a half weeks, Holly developed a severe cold. Drummer Jerry Allison talked incessantly of his fiancée, Peggy Sue Gerron. Norman Petty and his wife, Vi, spent much of their time sightseeing. Holly was fascinated with automobiles, so Petty arranged a special tour of the British Motors plant in Longbridge.<sup>36</sup>

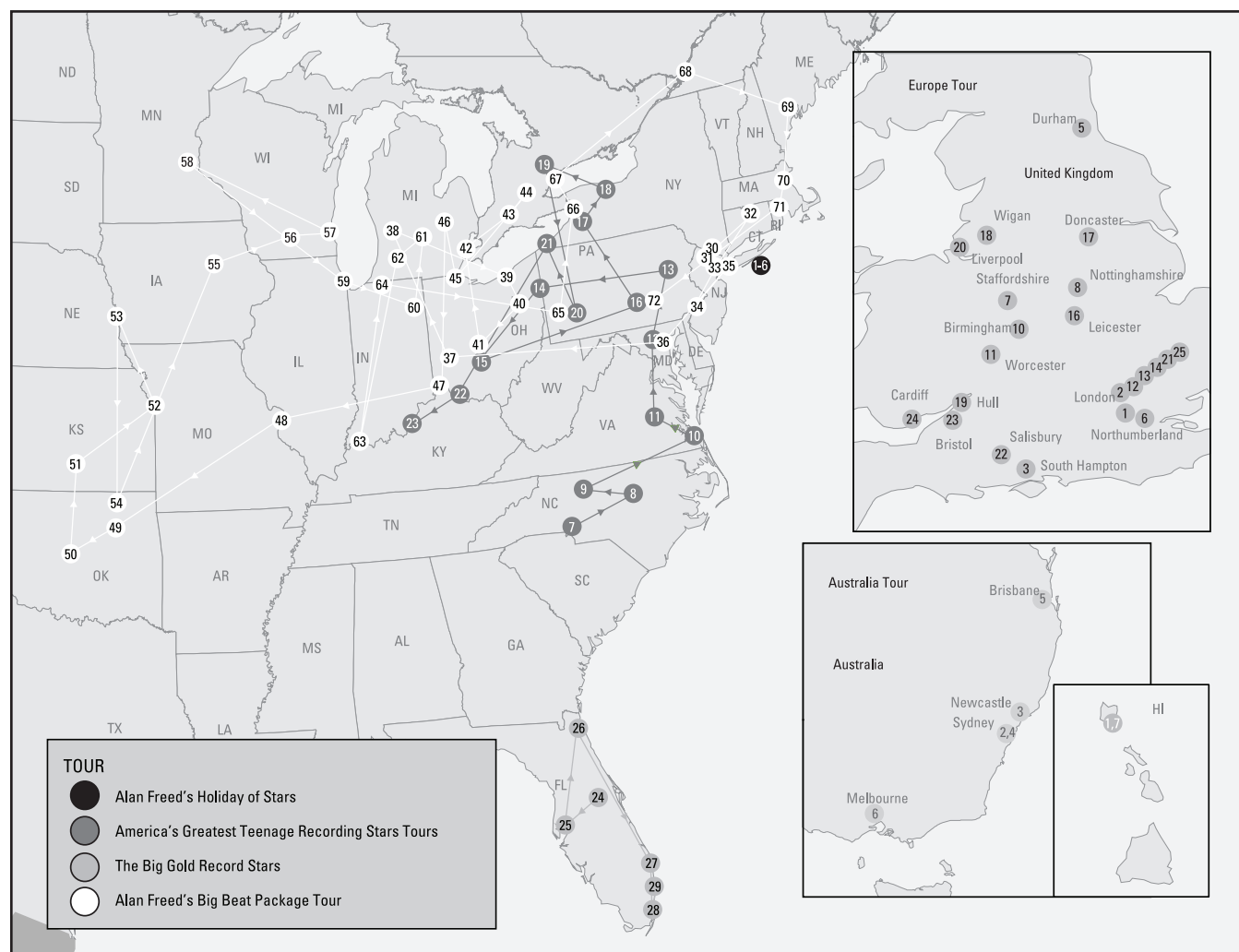


Figure 4. Holly's 1958 appearances in the United States, Great Britain and Australia. Courtesy Kevin and Julie Romig.

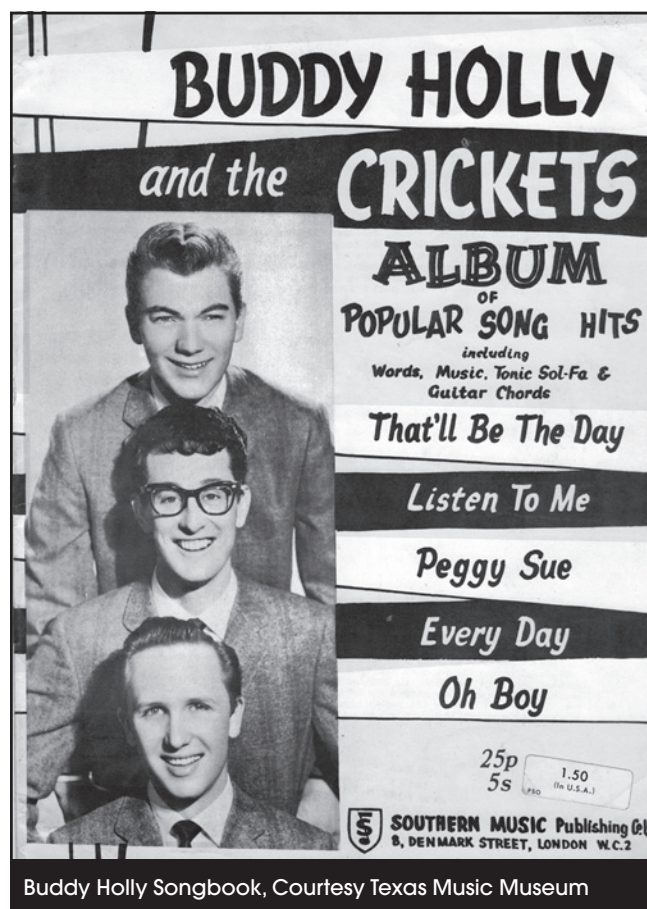


Eventually, the group tired of the constant touring and became homesick for Texas. As they grew increasingly exhausted and anxious, the Crickets began to get on each other's nerves. While preparing for their final show in West London, Joe Mauldin lit a cigar to celebrate the end of the tour. Jerry Allison and Holly were disgusted with the cigar's smell, and Holly was concerned that the smoke might hurt his voice. Mauldin refused to extinguish the cigar, and a fight erupted among the three. In the tussle, the caps on Holly's front teeth were dislodged and broken. Norman Petty decided to cover the small stumps with chewing gum.<sup>37</sup> As the Crickets left the stage at the end of the show, Petty exclaimed that it was their worst performance he had ever witnessed.<sup>38</sup>

Three days after returning to Texas, the group headed out on another grueling 44-day North American tour, known as the "Big Beat Tour," which had been arranged by Alan Freed.<sup>39</sup> In the early days of rock and roll, it was important for artists to capitalize on their often-fleeting popularity. Even musicians who had multiple hits, such as the Crickets, had to tour almost continuously in order to promote their music and to comply with the record company's contractual obligations. Worn out from the U.K. tour, Norman Petty decided to remain in Clovis, which meant the band was unencumbered by his strict rules about smoking, drinking, and cursing. Also on the tour were Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, Frankie Lymon, Danny and the Juniors, and other more minor artists. The tour got off to a rough start, as Lewis and Berry argued over who should headline each show. During the first concert in Brooklyn, Freed designated Berry as the headliner. This infuriated Lewis, who doused his piano with lighter fluid and set it afire in an attempt to upstage Berry.<sup>40</sup>

One major improvement made for this tour was the use of airplanes to transport the musicians, instead of buses or private automobiles. Holly loved being able to fly, and he enjoyed the camaraderie among the artists, including talking to other performers about potential collaborative projects. As he learned more about the music business from other artists, Holly became increasingly aware of the professional shortcomings of his own manager, Norman Petty. Holly and the band eventually came to believe that Petty kept too tight a reign on their finances and on their artistic freedom. From this point onward, Holly would gradually distance himself from Petty and seek alternative professional guidance.

Although Alan Freed's "Big Beat Tour" was loaded with talent, attendance for most shows was lackluster. The novelty of rock and roll was waning, and public animosity toward the music was growing. At the same time, the rigors of touring were taking a toll on the artists. Jerry Lee Lewis began drinking heavily and was unable to perform in Waterloo, Iowa. As the musicians reached Boston, Massachusetts, toward the end of the tour, Freed launched



Buddy Holly Songbook, Courtesy Texas Music Museum

a vigorous promotional campaign on local radio. However, racial tensions erupted during the concert as some audience members threw bottles and other items at Chuck Berry during his performance. Police in riot gear had to forcibly disperse the crowd. Soon afterward, the Boston archdiocese condemned rock and roll, and Massachusetts Governor William Fleming introduced a bill to ban rock and roll music from all government buildings.<sup>41</sup>

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover used this incident to argue that rock and roll was part of a Communist conspiracy to undermine Western freedom and democracy. Under fire on many fronts, Freed cancelled the remaining "Big Beat" shows in Troy, New York, New Haven, Connecticut, and Newark, New Jersey. Disappointed and arriving back in Texas a few days earlier than scheduled, Holly and the Crickets decided to disembark from their flight in Dallas, rather than continue on to Lubbock. The group went shopping for new motorcycles in Dallas and then drove the remaining 320 miles home to Lubbock. Although Holly and the Crickets were now international stars, they were still not widely celebrated in their hometown. It is possible that Holly's decision not to fly back to Lubbock but rather arrive more discreetly on a motorcycle was his way of coping with the rather tepid reception he believed awaited him in Lubbock.<sup>42</sup>

Although Holly was dismayed about his lack of celebrity status in his hometown, Lubbock's indifference toward the pop star also offered some advantages. Holly was able to travel around town on his Ariel Cyclone motorcycle without being noticed and to hang out with old friends without being mobbed for autographs. He also enjoyed taking leisurely fishing trips with his older brother, Larry. Ever the eager musician, Buddy Holly occasionally drove to Clovis and recorded new material at Norman Petty's studio. It was during these sessions following the "Big Beat Tour" that Holly recorded two more smash hits, "It's So Easy (To Fall in Love)" and "Heartbeat."<sup>43</sup>

Holly and the band declined an offer for another tour in June 1958 in order to rest, relax, and record more music. Amid slumping record sales, the Crickets headed to New York to record at Decca Studios. While in New York, Holly met Maria Elena Santiago, a receptionist at Peer-South Music.<sup>44</sup> Holly was smitten with the diminutive Puerto Rican-American and attempted to impress her with his West Texas "Spanglish" phrases.<sup>45</sup> Within a few days,

Holly had asked Maria Elena to marry him.<sup>46</sup> Although the couple's marriage was mostly harmonious, it did help create a deeper rift among Holly, Norman Petty, and the remaining Crickets, in part because Holly moved to New York City to live with his bride rather than staying in Lubbock, as Petty and the band had wanted.

By the summer of 1958, the big package tours of rock and roll stars were losing popularity, largely because of the fallout created by the Freed tour riots in Boston, along with the logistical difficulties involved in organizing such tours. Nevertheless, Buddy Holly and the Crickets had three Top-40 songs and needed a way to tour. They agreed to sign up for a low-profile tour called the "Summer Dance Party," which played smaller venues (mainly ballrooms) across the Upper Midwest. (See Figure 5.) Holly and the Crickets were headliners, with Tommy Allsup and his Western Swing Band as the opening act. Most of these venues were not in urban centers, but instead in rural vacation spots across the Midwest, such as Wausau, Wisconsin, Muskegon, Michigan, and

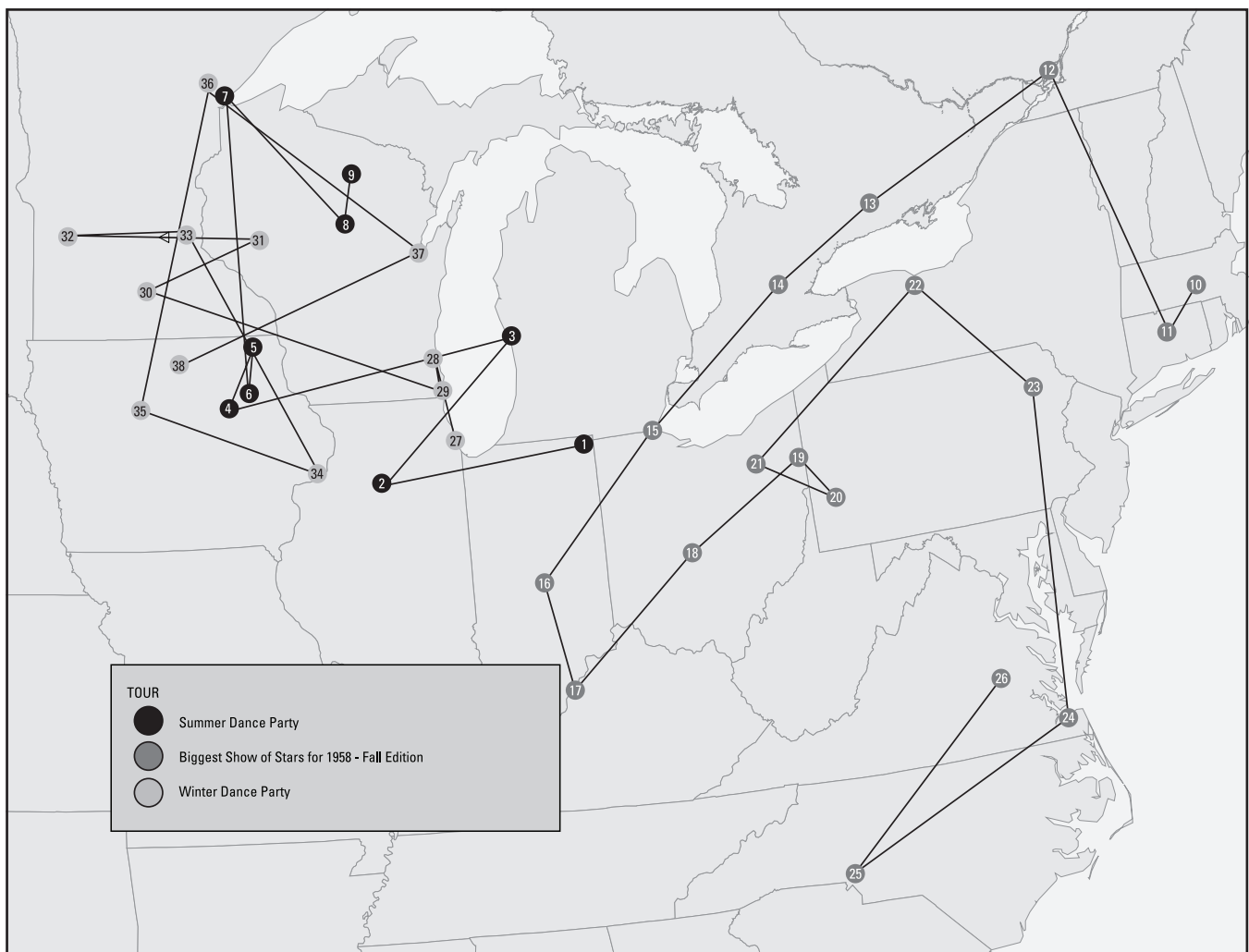


Figure 5. Holly's final three tours. Courtesy Kevin and Julie Romig.

Oelwein, Iowa. Borrowing an idea from Chuck Berry, Holly used his own Lincoln sedan and a DeSoto station wagon to transport his small entourage from town to town.<sup>47</sup>

Since many of the tour stops were at lake retreats, Holly and Joe Mauldin often went water skiing. For three days in Iowa, Holly had a room in Fort Dodge and spent time relaxing on the Cedar River.<sup>48</sup> However, these recreational breaks were not always restful. One day, Holly decided to try and swim across a frigid lake near Rhinelander, Wisconsin. As he began to suffer hypothermia and struggled to stay afloat, the singer had to be rescued.<sup>49</sup>

Although the large package tours were becoming increasingly unwieldy, the General Artists Corporation put together an event called the "Biggest Show of Stars for 1958 - Fall Edition," which included larger North American cities east of the Mississippi River. This tour reflected certain changes taking place in the world of popular music. Buddy Holly and the Crickets represented the only true rock and roll act, while pop stars Frankie Avalon, Bobby Darin, and Dion & the Belmonts rounded out the lineup. To provide more opportunity for Holly to showcase his vocal talents, Tommy Allsup signed on as the fourth Cricket, taking over lead guitar duties from Holly.

Now a married man, Holly followed the tour bus in his taupe-colored Cadillac accompanied by his wife. Because she was already familiar with the music industry, Maria Elena was in charge of collecting the band's money. She kept it in a plaid bag along with a .22-caliber pistol that Buddy always carried in case of emergency.<sup>50</sup> Because he was a teen idol, the record company tried to downplay Holly's marriage. Maria Elena was usually introduced as the Crickets' secretary. Increasingly concerned about Norman Petty's management style, she encouraged her husband to consider hiring a new manager who could better navigate the difficult waters of the ever-evolving music business. Holly also was becoming keenly aware of how popular music was changing, as Frankie Avalon and Bobby Darin crafted a smoother pop sound. In an attempt to follow these trends, Holly scheduled a recording session in New York with Dick Jacobs at the end of the tour in October 1958. This recording session, often called the "strings session" because of the orchestra backing Holly's vocals, is where he recorded "It Doesn't Matter Anymore" and "True Love Ways." Holly was pleased with this new, more polished sound, so he felt compelled to end his relationship with Petty and the technologically limited Clovis studio. However, Petty had anticipated this move and was reluctant to hand over money that he owed Holly. Making matters worse, Petty convinced Crickets Jerry Allison and Joe Mauldin to remain with the Petty Studios, thereby making the determination of ownership of the songs and royalties more complicated. Relations among Holly, Petty, Allison, and Mauldin would remain tense until the singer's death a few months later.<sup>51</sup>

Buddy and Maria Elena Holly relocated to a Greenwich Village apartment in New York in late 1958. Buddy wrote and recorded music on his own and planned future collaborative efforts with Eddie Cochran and Bobby Darin, along with a six-week tour of Europe in 1959. Although this might seem to be a placid period in Holly's life, he still faced many challenges. Living in New York, it was difficult to resolve his back-pay issues with Norman Petty in New Mexico. Eager to generate some additional income, Holly called the General Artists Corporation to inquire about any touring opportunities during the winter of 1958-1959. Holly was soon booked on a three-week tour of the Midwest, known as the "Winter Dance Party."<sup>52</sup>

Featured artists on this tour included Dion and the Belmonts; Frankie Sardo; a new artist from California named Ritchie Valens, whose hits included "La Bamba" and "Donna"; and a disc jockey from Beaumont, Texas, named J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson, who had written and recorded the smash hit "Chantilly Lace." Former Crickets Jerry Allison and Joe B. Mauldin were still under Norman Petty's management, so Holly hired Tommy Allsup on lead guitar, Carl Bunch on drums, and Waylon Jennings on bass.<sup>53</sup> Holly met Jennings years earlier when the two worked at KDAV radio station in Lubbock. Jennings served as Holly's bass player only toward the end of Holly's career; however, Jennings would eventually move from sideman to front man, as he went on to have his own very successful career in country music.<sup>54</sup> Maria Elena Holly had intended to go along on the "Winter Dance Party" tour, but she was pregnant and did not feel up to traveling.

From the outset the "Winter Dance Party" was plagued with problems, including bad weather, poor management, and difficult traveling conditions. The three-week tour was a string of one-night stands with distances of nearly 400 miles between performances. The musicians played in small-town ballrooms that were most often used for polka bands.<sup>55</sup> Local transportation consisted of reconditioned school buses with engines and heaters that frequently broke down. Due to the relentless travel schedule, the performers were often expected to sleep overnight on the buses. During the first ten days of the tour, seven different buses needed to be replaced. This caused additional stress for the musicians who already faced a grueling schedule.

January 1959 was unusually cold, but large numbers of local teens still turned out for the "Winter Dance Party." In fact, a crowd of 6,000 came to the Milwaukee show.<sup>56</sup> The January 31st show in Duluth, Minnesota, included in its audience a young Robert Zimmerman, who would go on to musical stardom under the stage name of Bob Dylan. Following the Duluth concert, an eighth bus broke down on the way to Appleton, Wisconsin, along U.S. Highway 51 in the north woods of Wisconsin. The marooned performers had no heat and had to endure temperatures of minus-



30°F in the early morning hours of February 1st. When help finally arrived, Carl Bunch, the Crickets' drummer, had frostbite on his feet and was taken to a hospital in Ironwood, Michigan.<sup>57</sup> Because of the delay, the afternoon show in Appleton was cancelled, and the other performers took a passenger train to Green Bay.<sup>58</sup>

Buddy Holly was plagued by a cold throughout much of the tour, while the Big Bopper was dealing with flu-like symptoms. Nevertheless, the February 1st show in Green Bay went on without the Crickets' drummer, while other musicians took turns playing the drums in Bunch's absence. The artists reluctantly boarded another bus after the Green Bay show and headed for Clear Lake, Iowa, the site of their next scheduled performance. Clear Lake had not been on the original itinerary for the "Winter Dance Party," but the General Artists Corporation had already cancelled a few other shows due to inclement weather. So, this "makeup" date was a late booking on what had previously been designated as a day off for the musicians.<sup>59</sup>

The tour arrived at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa, at 7:00 p.m., one hour before the show was scheduled to begin. Irritated at the lack of sleep and basic creature comforts, Holly decided to charter a plane to take him and the remaining Crickets (Allsup and Jennings) ahead to Fargo, North Dakota, before the next night's show in neighboring Moorhead, Minnesota. About 1,300 fans came to see the "Winter Dance Party" in Clear Lake.<sup>60</sup> During the show, J.P. Richardson, who had the flu, asked Waylon Jennings if he could take his seat on the chartered flight. Jennings agreed to ride the bus to Moorhead and give his seat on the plane to the Big Bopper.<sup>61</sup>

Once Ritchie Valens became aware of the seat exchange, he asked Tommy Allsup if he could have his seat on the plane. Allsup was well aware of the benefits the chartered flight provided over another long bus ride, so he ignored Valens's pleas. The final performance of the evening was the trio of Holly, Valens, and the Big Bopper singing "La Bamba." As Holly and Richardson prepared to leave for the airport in Mason City, Valens finally convinced Allsup to flip a coin to determine who would get the final seat on the plane.<sup>62</sup> Valens won the coin toss and soon joined Holly and Richardson. The single-engine, four-passenger Beechcraft Bonanza airplane was chartered through Dwyer's Flying Service. The owner, Jerry Dwyer, was unavailable to fly to Fargo because of a prior commitment. Instead, a less-experienced 21-year-old pilot named Roger Peterson flew the plane. Peterson was regarded as "below average" in instrument flying, had hearing problems, and was believed to suffer from vertigo.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, he was well aware of the celebrity status of his passengers and was very attentive to his pre-flight obligations. The weather was cold, but not extreme, as the conditions at take-off were 18°F with snow flurries. The cloud ceiling had fallen to 7,000 feet, meaning that

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**RAY LEWIS**  
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**FEBRUARY 2, 1959 - DANCING 8 to 12pm**

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♪ **WINTER DANCE PARTY** ♪

**THESE TOP RECORDING STARS IN PERSON**

★



**Big Bopper**  
"Chantilly Lace"

★



**Buddy Holly**  
and The Crickets  
"Peggy Sue"

★



**Ritchie Valens**  
"La Bamba"  
"Come On, Let's Go"

★

**Dion**  
and The Belmonts  
"I Wonder Why"

★

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Concert poster for Buddy Holly's final performance.  
Courtesy Center for Texas Music History.

Peterson would have to rely increasingly on his instruments as they ascended. Less than five minutes into the flight, early on the morning of February 3, 1959, the plane slammed into a snowy field only eight miles from the airport, instantly killing Peterson, Holly, Richardson, and Valens.

The headline in the February 3rd evening edition of the *Lubbock Journal* read, "Lubbock Rock and Roll Star Killed." The town that had largely ignored Holly and his musical career now prepared for his funeral. Waylon Jennings and Tommy Allsup were pressured into finishing the "Winter Dance Party" tour. Because of cargo restrictions on the ill-fated flight, Holly had asked Jennings to carry his Fender Stratocaster guitar on the bus. For the final week of the tour, Jennings performed on the Stratocaster in tribute to Holly. The five-week pregnancy of Maria Elena Holly ended tragically in a miscarriage due to the stress associated with her husband's untimely death.<sup>64</sup>

When reflecting on the "meteoric" career of Buddy Holly, fans often focus on the plane crash that abruptly ended the lives of these three young artists. However, it is important to remember that the flight was an anomaly in terms of Holly's normal touring regimen. Most of his career was spent on buses or private automobiles shuttling from town to town, ballroom to ballroom, in conditions that seem utterly deplorable today. In Post-World War II America, organizers of early rock and roll tours often cut corners in order to maximize profits while capitalizing on what typically was fleeting fame for most of these artists. Managers and record companies pressured musicians to undergo arduous tours in order to sell more records. Most of these artists were eager for fame and fortune, so they tended to accept this type of exploitation in order to further their careers. Despite the negative aspects of these hastily arranged and poorly organized tours, there was a good deal of camaraderie that flourished among the musicians. Likewise, the ability to perform regularly before live audiences gave these artists a national platform upon which they could create, innovate, and reshape music history.

While the poorly planned "Winter Dance Party" certainly contributed to Buddy Holly's untimely death, such large package tours also gave Holly the opportunity to work with other professional musicians and to develop his own unique style. During his short career, Buddy Holly underwent a remarkable transformation, from mild-mannered country performer to one of the most revered and influential figures in rock and roll. Although the package tours that Holly and his contemporaries endured are no longer common, many of today's musicians still face grueling tour schedules, including long hours on the road and weeks apart from family and friends. Nonetheless, many music fans still imagine that the life of a touring musician is glamorous and exciting.

While Buddy Holly did not have a long musical career, his touring and performing were crucial in spreading rock and roll

music across the cultural landscape of North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Holly and the Crickets performed in such major urban centers as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto, Sydney, and London, but they also appeared in numerous smaller communities, providing teenagers from all backgrounds the opportunity to experience new musical styles and performance techniques.

Playing more than 250 shows in an 18-month period on three continents at a time before commercial jet travel and the Interstate Highway System were widely available is nothing short of remarkable. Buddy Holly's 1958 tour of Great Britain is considered by many music historians to be the catalyst that helped spark the so-called British Invasion of the 1960s, as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other young English bands that admired and emulated Buddy Holly brought their own brand of rock and roll to America.<sup>65</sup>

Buddy Holly's career also serves as a reminder of the inaccuracy of the oft-cited "Big Bang" theory of rock and roll, which credits Sam Phillips and his Sun Studios in Memphis as being the "birthplace" of rock and roll, since Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and other young rockabilly artists made some of their first recordings there. As important as Phillips and Sun Records were to the early development of rock and roll, it is important to remember that many other artists were performing and recording rock and roll elsewhere across the country, and that rock and roll itself had deep and expansive roots in R&B, Western swing, and other musical genres that had been around for decades. Buddy Holly and the Crickets from Lubbock, Texas, certainly were one such group of musicians that would forever change the world of popular music through their pioneering efforts in rock and roll, despite the logistical challenges they often faced in taking that music to their fans. ★

## Notes

- 1 Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits*, 6th edition (New York: Billboard Publications, 1996).
- 2 Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 200.
- 3 Martin Huxley and Quinton Skinner, *The Day the Music Died* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 12.
- 4 Ellis Amburn, *Buddy Holly: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 10-13. The Holley family lived in many different rental houses throughout the greater Lubbock area.
- 5 Samuel J. Ayers, *Buddy Holly: A Legacy of Music* (Lubbock: Hermosa Creations, 1999), 17.
- 6 Nolan Porterfield, "Sandstorm: Reflections on the Roots of West Texas Music," *Journal of Texas Music History* 2.2 (Fall 2002): 39-44.
- 7 Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 200.
- 8 Joe W. Specht, "I Forgot to Remember to Forget: Elvis Presley in Texas-1955," *Journal of Texas Music History* 3.1 (Spring 2003): 7-13.
- 9 Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 198-201.
- 10 Ibid., 196-201.
- 11 Gary W. Moore, *Hey Buddy: In Pursuit of Buddy Holly, My New Buddy John, and My Lost Decade of Music* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2011), 92-93.
- 12 Martin Donell Kohout, "Buddy Holly," in *The Handbook of Texas Music*, ed. Roy Barkley (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 141.
- 13 For a good discussion of Holly's early career, see John Goldrosen and John Beecher, *Remembering Buddy* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986).
- 14 Philip Norman, *Rave On: The Biography of Buddy Holly* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 74-77.
- 15 Ibid., 78. Holly was very concerned about his appearance on stage.
- 16 Ibid., 98.
- 17 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 59.
- 18 Kohout, "Buddy Holly," 141.
- 19 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 83-85. These venues were all located in historically black sections of town and did not normally feature white talent.
- 20 Norman, *Rave On*, 138. Bo Diddley was a well-known R&B artist on the Chess Records label.
- 21 Ibid., 139-140.
- 22 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 96.
- 23 Ibid., 97. In the 1988 documentary, *Hail, Hail Rock and Roll*, Chuck Berry admitted that he did not like to fly.
- 24 Ibid., 93.
- 25 Norman, *Rave On*, 147-148. Petty was well aware of the public demand for more music from Buddy Holly and the Crickets, which led to the session in Midwest City.
- 26 Ibid., 147-148.
- 27 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 98-99.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Bill Griggs, *Buddy Holly Online*, <http://www.buddyhollyonline.com/tour1958.html> (accessed on March 29, 2011).
- 30 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 115.
- 31 Norman, *Rave On*, 177-181.
- 32 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 137.
- 33 Norman, *Rave On*, 182.
- 34 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 140-141. Holly was skilled on guitar and drums, as well as being an exceptional vocalist.
- 35 Norman, *Rave On*, 185. British teens had rioted when attending Bill Haley and the Comets' concerts the previous year.
- 36 Ibid., 188-189.
- 37 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 148-149. Holly had false teeth made to cover his crooked and discolored natural teeth in order to improve his appearance on stage and in publicity photos.
- 38 Norman, *Rave On*, 191.
- 39 Ibid., 192; see also Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 196-199. Freed is often mistakenly credited with coining the term "rock and roll." Variations on the term "rock and roll" had been used by blues, Western swing, R&B, and other artists since the late 1920s.
- 40 Norman, *Rave On*, 193.
- 41 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 163. This was a collective attempt to officially denounce rock and roll music.
- 42 Norman, *Rave On*, 195. Holly and his pals ran into a convective thunderstorm on their way back to Lubbock while on their motorcycles.
- 43 Ibid., 196-197.
- 44 Kohout, "Buddy Holly," 141.
- 45 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 70. "Spanglish" is a vernacular form of mixed English and Spanish spoken commonly throughout the American Southwest.
- 46 Ayers, *Buddy Holly*, 27.
- 47 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 171.
- 48 Moore, *Hey Buddy*, 63.
- 49 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 172.
- 50 Ibid., 189. Holly had been a fan of Western movies and thought of himself as a cowboy at heart.
- 51 Norman, *Rave On*, 228-234. Petty was able to keep control of the money until ownership of royalties between Holly and the Crickets was determined.
- 52 Ibid., 240-241.
- 53 Rick Koster, *Texas Music* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 80.
- 54 Cathy Brigham, "Waylon Jennings" in *The Handbook of Texas Music*, ed. Roy Barkley (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 161-162.
- 55 Larry Lehmer, *The Day the Music Died: The Last Tour of Buddy Holly, The "Big Bopper," and Ritchie Valens*, (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 1997), 64.
- 56 Ibid., 63.
- 57 Norman, *Rave On*, 267-268. Bunch did not return to perform in the "Winter Dance Party."
- 58 Amburn, *Buddy Holly*, 239.
- 59 Norman, *Rave On*, 268.
- 60 Ibid., 270.
- 61 Huxley and Skinner, *Day the Music Died*, 8, 84. Many people mistakenly believe that Waylon Jennings was part of this now-legendary coin toss, although it actually involved only Tommy Allsup and Ritchie Valens.
- 62 Norman, *Rave On*, 271. The Beechcraft Bonanza had a maximum capacity of one pilot and three passengers.
- 63 Ibid., 277. Dwyer was anxious about Peterson's handling of the takeoff and flight because of his poor record in instrument flying. However, Dwyer was even more concerned about the young pilot's ability to land in Fargo, where the weather was reportedly worse than it was in Mason City.
- 64 Ibid., 293-294. Jennings was not able to attend Holly's funeral, because he was obligated to continue the "Winter Dance Party." While Holly was laid to rest, Jennings was on a tour bus in Illinois.
- 65 Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 200; Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, aesthetics and sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 66.

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