

NOT FADE AWAY

'Listen To Me: Buddy Holly' celebrates the musical pioneer's innovation, genius

By Mike Greenblatt

HE MAY BE DEAD, but Buddy Holly's career is in full swing. It's a damn shame, too, since one would be hard-pressed to find another recording artist whose premature death — in this case on February 3, 1959, at age 22 — robbed the world of so much music, a lifetime of innovation. It's a point that can be debated forever. >>>>>

Think of it: Holly saw Elvis in '55, chucked his bluegrass duo, formed a band and started hiccupping his vocals rockabilly-style, furiously writing up a storm of songs. He toured England only once but inspired a generation of acolytes ... including The Beatles (who name themselves after Holly's Crickets). His was a self-contained rock band in an age when singers sang songs of other songwriters. He charted 27 times. He died in the infamous plane crash that also killed The Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens (tour mate Dion and Holly bassist Waylon Jennings stayed on the bus).

Not even death can overtake the vibrant, brilliant music of the bespectacled kid from Lubbock, Texas, who was anything but a hick.

A half-century later, recording artists continue to record — and find hits with — Holly's songs.

"Look at all the great songs he wrote in such an incredibly short career," muses Peter Asher, the Grammy-Award winning producer of both "Listen To Me: Buddy Holly" (Verve Forecast), a various-artists tribute album, and a PBS concert special with many of the same artists that is scheduled to air in December.

"He was a smart, determined, rather erudite guy. Had he lived, he not only would have written a ton more great songs, but he would have for sure gone on to start his own label and produce other artists," Asher says. "He wouldn't have fallen by the wayside as a druggie or rest on past laurels to play Vegas. He'd be a major mogul today at 75, and I bet he'd still be alive. It's interesting to speculate what would have happened had we not lost him so early, because he was so very cool."

Asher knows a little something about cool. As half of Peter & Gordon, his McCartney-penned "World Without Love" partly defined 1964 pop culture. He then discovered, managed and produced James Taylor for 20 years; spearheaded the 1970s southern California rock ascent of Linda Ronstadt (including singing background harmonies on her hit single version of "It's So Easy"); produced Cher, Diana Ross and 10,000 Maniacs; and produced and managed Bonnie Raitt. But talk to him, and it's all about what he's working on now and what he'll work on tomorrow as one of the most respected industry bigwigs in Hollywood.

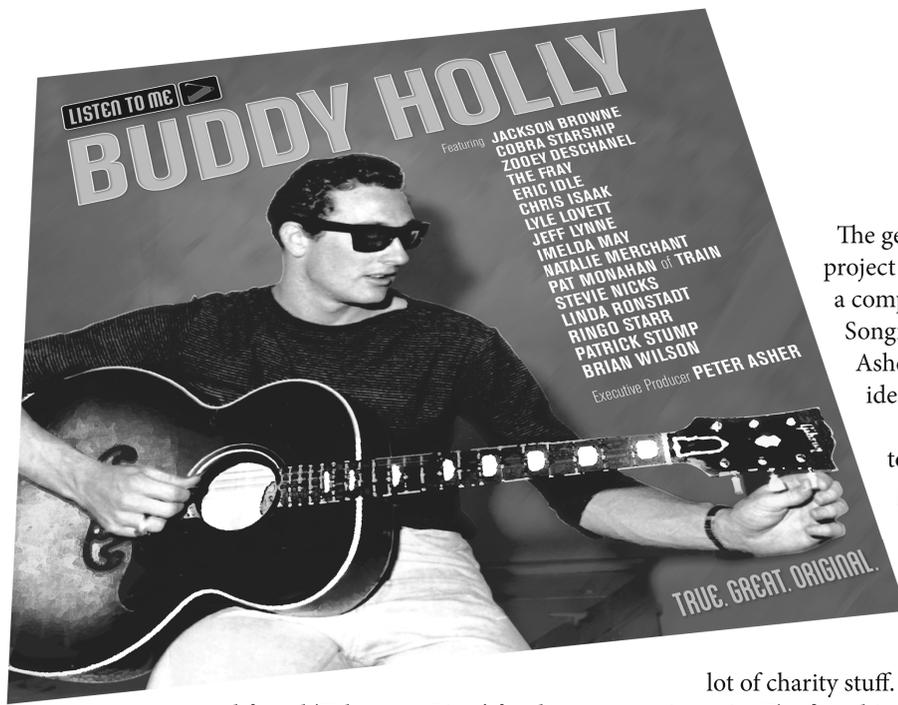
Buddy Holly's music was the focus of two tribute projects in 2011: "Listen To Me: Buddy Holly" and "Rave On Buddy Holly."

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"Listen To Me: Buddy Holly" starts off with a terrific reading of "Not Fade Away" by Stevie Nicks, the song with the Bo Diddley beat that The Rolling Stones famously covered. It's the type of tune that lends itself to interpretation, and Nicks nails it. "Maybe Baby," in the hands of Train frontman Pat Monahan, is cool, breezy, casual pop. Then comes a stunner: Brian Wilson's singular Beach Boy aesthetic was never more suited to another author than that of Holly. His title tune, "Listen To Me," is sheer magic.

Throughout the album, there are moments that shine with creativity: from the trumpet solo on Imelda May's "I'm Looking For Someone To Love" to the mournful violin in Natalie Merchant's oh-so-sad "Learning The Game." Asher agrees.

"Natalie's version makes you cry," he adds. "It's amazing. Buddy Holly's original is so bouncy. But read the lyrics. We slowed it down and gave it a whole 'nother meaning. Same thing with The Frays' song. I love The Frays



and found 'Take Your Time' for them. Both songs were so much fun to redo like that."

Ringo Starr's "Think It Over" sounds like a long-lost Beatle track. Fellow Fab, Sir Paul McCartney, participated in a different Holly tribute earlier this year that aimed to turn Holly's material inside-out in an attempt to take an alternative spin on the material.

"It was funny," admits Asher, "because we didn't know there would be two tributes. I don't think anybody did. It got rather confusing. It's like when two different movie companies make the same movie. But, in the end, it's a good thing, because it shows how fluid the songs are and how they can work in different ways."

The genesis of this project started when a company called Songmasters called Asher with an idea.

"They came to me and explained what they do and who they are," Asher recounts. "They do a

lot of charity stuff. I was happy to jump in. The first thing we did, of course, is sit down and make lists of who we'd like to have, who might actually say yes, and who we could get. We asked quite a lot of people over a period of time. Some people said yes right away. Some people said maybe. Some people said no, because they were too busy or they didn't care that much about Buddy Holly. There were all kinds of different responses. Stevie Nicks, for instance, was in from the beginning. She worked with my friend, Waddy Wachtel, one of my favorite guitar players. So Waddy and I co-produced the Stevie track. She was great! She's on the TV show, as well. Just fantastic! In fact, I just finished mixing her live version.



Boz Scaggs, Graham Nash and Peter Asher perform at Hollywood's Music Box Theatre in celebration of Buddy Holly.



Fleetwood Mac songstress Stevie Nicks chose to record "Not Fade Away" in tribute to Buddy Holly.

Nicks chose to perform Holly's 'Not Fade Away.'
"She knew right away she wanted that one. It was the first one we did," Asher said.

The strength and beauty of Holly's timeless melodies and lyrics on such songs as "True Love Ways" (Jackson Browne) and "Crying Waiting Hoping" (Chris Isaak) are accentuated by the respectful and soulful interpretations on the album. And if timelessness is the true barometer of genius, even those who never heard a song like "Words Of Love" would have to fall in love with it in the hands of Jeff Lynne. For the album, Songmasters opted to go with Ronstadt's original hit single of "That'll Be The Day." Asher agreed, citing it as the definitive version.

The last song recorded was Zoey Deschanel's take of 'It's So Easy.' The actress was unable to take part in the PBS concert due to her taping session for her new Fox TV show "New Girl."

"I'd always liked her voice on the She & Him records, and I read somewhere she was a big Linda fan," Asher said. "In her case, I just found her in my house! She was actually at a party our daughter Victoria was having. I was upstairs and my wife said, 'Y'know, Zoey Deschanel's here.' So I came downstairs and asked her to participate."

Asher is all over the PBS special, co-hosting, producing and dueting with Lyle Lovett on "Well All Right."

The one oddball moment, the one crazy tack-on to the end of the album that you have to take with a grain of salt, as if granting genius its eccentricities, is the formerly beautiful "Raining In My Heart" by Eric Idle.

"That's Eric and I sitting around having a glass of wine and talking," Asher confesses. "He's my best friend, and we hang out together a lot. I was telling him about the project and how much fun I was having doing it. I played him some of the tracks. And he said, 'What if I did a recitation?' We were thinking of the Peter Sellers version of 'A Hard Day's Night,' which we both loved. In the end, it ended up much less to do with that and more to do with the Spike Milligan records that we both loved as kids in England and the Spike Jones records we grew to love in America."

Between Buddy Holly, film work, and the constant quest to discover new sound, Peter Asher has plenty on his plate. He's teamed with German film composer Hans Zimmer, with whom he just finished soundtrack work for the animated feature film "Madagascar 3." He loved working with Rodrigo y Gabriela so much on "Pirates of the Caribbean" that he's producing the Mexican guitar duo's next album.

"You need to know to know who they are," he enthuses. "They're amazing ... just incredible instrumentalists. I didn't know that much about them until we decided to use them on 'Pirates.' They're hugely successful. They recently did two nights at The Hollywood Bowl, completely sold out. Just the two of them playing guitars! I just spent 10 days recording with them in Cuba, a fantastic experience." **GM**



Lyle Lovett (above) and singer-songwriter Shawn Colvin (below) perform during the "Buddy Holly: Listen to Me – The Ultimate Buddy Party" event, which was filmed in September for PBS. The program is slated to air in December (check local listings.) Lovett also recorded the track "Well All Right" for the "Listen to Me: Buddy Holly" tribute album.



Songmasters:

The people behind the Buddy Holly tribute



photo courtesy Lester Cohen / © 2011 Songmasters, LLC

The Buddy Holly special features Raul Malo, Boz Scaggs, Graham Nash, Gabe Saporta, Paul Anka, Victoria Asher, Waddy Wachtel, Chris Isaak, producer Peter Asher, Michelle Branch, Lyle Lovett, Shawn Colvin and Patrick Stump.

When Peter Asher was first contacted with the idea of a Buddy Holly tribute, it didn't take him long to decide to sign on.

"I was 14 in 1958 when Buddy Holly toured England and I didn't go," Asher said from his Capitol Records office. "I wish I had."

Asher's love of Holly aside, there was no question that he was the right choice to helm "Listen to Me: Buddy Holly," said Jennifer Cohen, co-founder of Songmasters, the company behind the project.

"To us, Peter is Buddy's best curator, possessing a genuine love of Holly's music, an extensive and exceptional record of performing and producing some of the most notable versions of Holly's songs, and a lifetime career of producing award-winning albums and records," said "He was not only the obvious choice for a Holly tribute, he was the only choice worth considering. Through both this album and this concert, he has once again shown why he deserves the accolades he has received."

The Buddy Holly project is the first in Songmasters' planned Listen to Me Series, which pays tribute to groundbreaking artists who continue to inspire fans and musicians today.

"So much of rock starts with Buddy Holly: the configuration of the guitar-based band, the contemporary singer-songwriter-performer, even the independent producer of his own creative work," Cohen said. "And so much of Buddy Holly's music and legacy is captured in the remarkable career of Peter Asher."

Cohen co-founded Songmasters in 1994, when she was head of product development for Warner Music International. She wanted to use her lifetime experience in music and entertainment to bring its power to the service of important charitable and educational efforts. To that end, she's worked on such prestigious projects as the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, AmFAR (for AIDS research) and "Share Our Strength" (ending childhood hunger) benefits.

Hooking up corporate clients to benefit charities using music and events, acting as global music distributors with the 2006 creation of The Music Coalition, Cohen and senior partner Regan McCarthy not only developed better deals for artists, but have received two Ford Foundation grants for their efforts.

"We are pleased with the wide variety of work that we have done, and plan to do," said Cohen. "Technology has made it easier to create and produce music, but harder to develop a music career. Young talent today has more competition, more pressure to fit a mold, fewer resources, and almost no guidance in how to develop a successful life in music. We thought we might be able to help in our own small way to give young artists a real shot."

The "Listen To Me" project was created out of that impulse.

"Simply put," she continues, "'Listen to Me' is a series that features today's great performers honoring their musical roots: the true, great, original performers who changed music and culture to raise substantial support for the next generation of outstanding music makers and innovators. Benefiting music industry charities include the Grammy Foundation, Artists House Music, and the Songwriters Hall of Fame, which awards the Holly Prize.

For more information about Songmasters and the Listen To Me project, visit www.songmasters.org.

—Mike Greenblatt