

Understanding

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# American Pie I

An American Experience

# Introduction to American Pie

In the autumn of 1971 Don McLean's elegiac *'American Pie'* entered the collective consciousness, and almost fifty years later remains one of the most discussed, dissected, and debated songs that popular music has ever produced.



Benny Andrews,  
*Did the Bear Sit Under a Tree?*,  
1971,

*'Oil on Canvas With Painted Fabric Collage and Zipper.'*



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A cultural event at the peak of its popularity in 1972, it reached the top of the Billboard 100 charts in a matter of weeks, selling more than 3 million copies; and at eight and a half minutes long, this was no simple feat.

But this was no ordinary song... boldly original and thematically ambitious, what set American Pie apart had a lot to do with the way we weren't entirely sure what the song was about, provoking endless debates over its epic cast of characters.

These controversies remain with us to this day.



A L o s t A m e r i c a

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But however open to interpretation the lyrics may have been, the song's emotional resonance was unmistakable: McLean was clearly relating a defining moment in the American experience ...something had been lost, and we knew it.



# The Life of Buddy Holly

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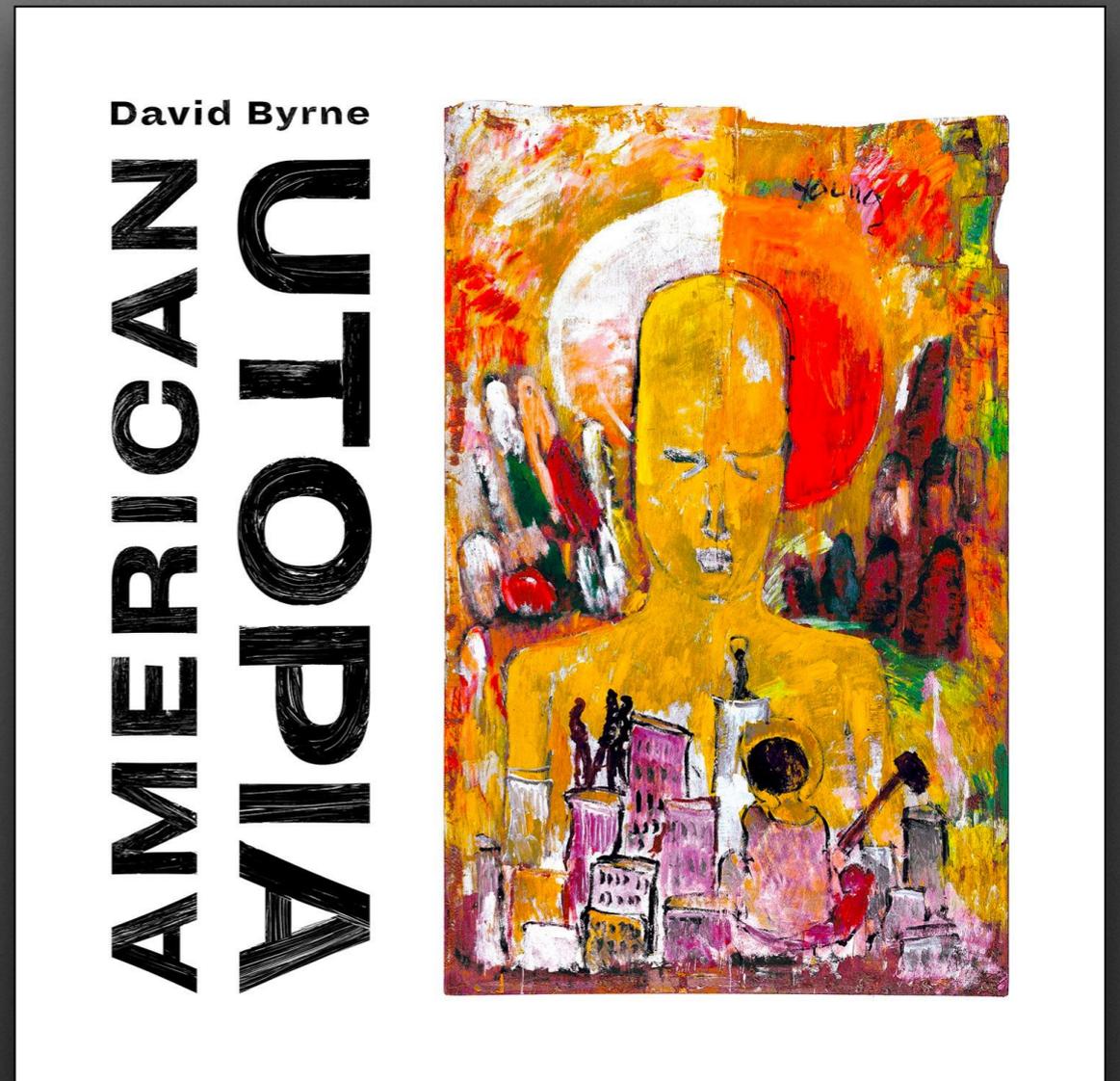


Opening with the death of singer Buddy Holly and ending near the tragic concert at *Altamont Motor Speedway*, we are able to frame the span of years the song is covering... 1959 to 1970... as the "10 years we've been on our own" of the third verse.

It was across this decade that the American cultural landscape changed so quickly and so radically, passing from the relative optimism and conformity of the 1950s and early 1960s to the rejection of those values by the various political and social movements of the mid and late 1960s.

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Coming as it did near the end of this turbulent era, *American Pie* seemed to be speaking to the precarious position we found ourselves in, as the grand social experiments of the 1960s began collapsing under the weight of their own unrealized 'Utopian Dreams,' while the quieter, hopeful world we grew up in receded into memory.



# The Disillusionment

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As 1970 came to a close and the world this generation had envisioned no longer seemed viable, a sense of disillusion and loss fell over all of us; we weren't the people we once were.

But we couldn't go home again either, having challenged the assumptions of that older order. The black and white days were over forever.



# The Final Goodbye

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Bye bye, Miss American Pie.



# The Golden Age of The 1950's

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The 1950s are fondly remembered as a kind of golden age in American history, a charmed moment in time when the country seemed more confident and hopeful than it has ever been.

A period of unprecedented economic prosperity, it was the era when the majority of Americans, freed from the constraints of the Great Depression and World War II, took some time off from the uncertainties of life to simply enjoy themselves; and in a long, giddy parade of marriages, babies, automobiles, suburban homes and kitchen appliances, celebrated their achievement of the American Dream.

Never before had the wealth of a nation been so widely distributed.



# The Post World War II Years

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But American enthusiasms during these years were rooted in more than just the good things that money could buy.

American victories in World War II had been great moral victories for the country as well, and as the United States rose to economic and political world dominance in the postwar years, national pride went soaring right along with it.

Americans at mid-century were mighty impressed with America - and happy ... for awhile. America had no idea about what was getting ready to happen.



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“In that era of general good will and expanding affluence, few Americans doubted the essential goodness of their society.

After all, it was reflected back at them not only by contemporary books and magazines, but even more powerfully and with even greater influence in the new family sitcoms on television.

These - in conjunction with their sponsors' commercial goals - sought to shape their audience's aspirations.

However, most Americans needed little coaching in how they wanted to live.

They were optimistic about the future.”

- From *The 1950s* by David Halberstam



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