American Pie
Don McLean

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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.

So bye-bye, miss American pie.
Drove my chevy to the levy,
But the levy 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."

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 and 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',

"bye-bye, miss American pie."
Drove my chevy to the levy,
But the levy was dry.
Them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
And singin', "this'll be the day that I die.
"this'll be the day that I die."

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
And 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 Lennon read a book of Marx,
The quartet practiced in the park,
And we sang dirges in the dark
The day the music died.

We were singing,
"bye-bye, miss american pie."
Drove my chevy to the levy,
But the levy was dry.
Them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
And singin', "this'll be the day that I die.
"this'll be the day that I die."

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,
"bye-bye, miss American pie."
Drove my chevy to the levy,
But the levy was dry.
Them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
And singin', "this'll be the day that I die.
"this'll be the day that I die."

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 devil's 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 the 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,
"bye-bye, miss american pie."
Drove my chevy to the levy,
But the levy was dry.
Them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
And singin', "this'll be the day that I die.
"this'll be the day that I die."

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 singing,
"bye-bye, miss American pie."
Drove my chevy to the levy,
But the levy was dry.
And them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
Singin', "this'll be the day that I die.
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Introduction

In the autumn of 1971 Don McLean's elegiac *American Pie* entered the collective consciousness, and over thirty years later remains one of the most discussed, dissected and debated songs that popular music has ever produced. 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 mean feat. But this was no ordinary song, either: 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. And these controversies remain with us to this day. 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. 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 is across this decade that the American cultural landscape changed radically, passing from the relative optimism and conformity of the 1950s and early 1960s to the rejection of these values by the various political and social movements of the mid and late 1960s.

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. And 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 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.

Bye bye, Miss American Pie.

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

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

The same cannot be said of the 1960s. Just as the fifties was an era of great optimism and consensus, the sixties became its antithesis, as the black and white values of the status quo embraced by the previous generation—the sense of the "essential goodness" of American society—no longer rang true. Emerging from the civil rights issues that had been simmering since World War II, and spurred on further by an unpopular war in Southeast Asia, this generation's dissatisfaction with American culture grew markedly more pronounced, as many of the assumptions about the society we were born into were called into question:

...the civil rights and antiwar and countercultural and woman's and the rest of that decade's movements forced upon us central issues for Western civilization—fundamental questions of value, fundamental divides of culture, fundamental debates about the nature of the good life.

From *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* by Todd Gitlin

The rules were changing. And so was the music. As American values were shifting through this period, a corresponding shift can be observed in rock 'n' roll, as it moved away from the exuberant simplicity of the 1950s to the more literate and politically charged subject matter of the 1960s. And as the music reflected these changes it also became symbolic of them, producing a defining musical figure at each major turning point: Bob Dylan at the more cerebral beginnings of the radical sixties, the Beatles during its more idealistic middle period, and the Rolling Stones closer to its anarchic end.

So even though *American Pie* appears to chronicle the course of rock 'n' roll, it is not, as is sometimes suggested, a mere catalogue of musical events. In using the cast of rock 'n' roll players from the 1960s and setting them against the backdrop of Buddy Holly's death, they become polarized—metaphors for the clash of values occurring in America at this time: Holly as the symbol of the happier innocence of the fifties, the rest as symbolic of the sixties growing unrest and fragmentation. And as each verse sums up chronological periods in time—the late 1950s, 1963-66, 1966-68, 1969, 1970—another blow against the happier innocence of another era is registered: another day the music dies.

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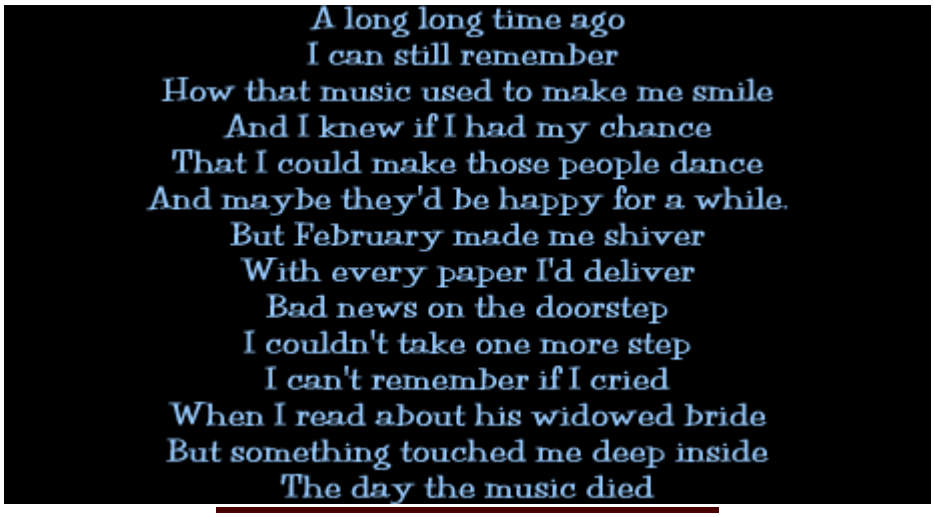
The song can be divided into roughly 5 sections: the prologue (verse 1), which looks back from the early seventies and introduces the catalyst for the story about to unfold; Act 1 (verse 2), which, along with the chorus and verse 1, establishes the 1950s as the reference point for the rest of the song; Act II (verses 3 & 4), in which the story builds on the growing conflicts of the 1960s; Act III (verse 5), the apocalyptic climax of the story; and the epilogue (verse 6), the song's coda.

Verse 1:



Prologue

As the 1960s come to a close, we find the narrator nostalgic for the music of his youth and the simple, joyous spirit it once brought him. He then turns his attention to a seminal event—the death of some key figure in music history—that shattered his joy. It is well known by now that Buddy Holly is this individual, having died in a plane crash in February of 1959.

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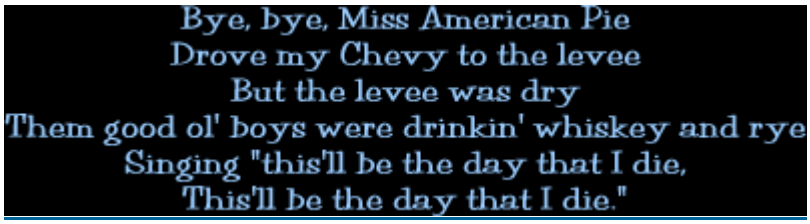
Though this is by far the simplest verse in *American Pie*, it is nonetheless a crucial one (along with verse 2), as it sets up the drama that is about to unfold. The narrator here is nostalgic for a simpler and more optimistic kind of music—a music that can make people smile, and that could help them forget their troubles—and a music that very much represents the happier optimism of the 1950s in America. He also identifies Buddy Holly by the month of his death (February) and the "widowed bride" he left behind. As the embodiment of this music, Holly's passing had a profound effect on him: as it will become clearer in the next verse, this music and the simple innocence and optimism of it has its corollary in the psychology of America in the fifties, so that the day the music died becomes the day the innocence and optimism died—blow number one. Holly's death was a watershed for him, and is the pivot around which the song will turn.


Bye, bye, Miss American Pie
Drove my Chevy to the levee
But the levee was dry
Them good ol' boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
Singing "this'll be the day that I die,
This'll be the day that I die."

The Long Goodbye

A primary key to understanding American Pie can be found here in the chorus, as the theme of America's lost innocence is most clearly stated.

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So bye bye, Miss American Pie

"Miss American Pie"* is "as American as apple pie," so the saying goes; she could also be a synthesis of this symbol and the beauty queen Miss America. Either way, her name evokes a simpler time in American life when these icons held more meaning. She is the America of a passing era, and he is bidding her farewell.

Drove my Chevy to the levy
But the levy was dry

"Drove my Chevy to the levy" alludes to a drive "along a levy" mentioned in a series of popular 1950s Chevrolet television commercials sung by Dinah Shore:

Drive your Chevrolet through the USA,
America's the greatest land of all
On a highway or a road along a levy...
..life is completer in a Chevy
So make a date today to see the USA
And see it in your Chevrolet

Listen 127kb

and which serves as a signpost to that era—just as the Chevrolet itself is a familiar icon of 1950s America. Also, given that a drive to a levy carries the suggestion of romance in a car, we can almost see him on a date here. But the date is over, the levy is dry—someone he once loved has betrayed him; something that once gave him sustenance has evaporated.

And just for the record:

1968

From "*1968 in America*" by Charles Kaiser:

Nineteen sixty-eight was the pivotal year of the sixties: the moment when all of a nation's impulses toward violence, idealism, diversity, and disorder peaked to produce the greatest possible hope—and the worst imaginable despair. For many of us who came of age in that remarkable era, it has been twenty years since we have lived with such intensity. That is one of the main reasons why the sixties retain their extraordinary power over every one old enough to remember them. The sixties and the thirties were the only modern decades in which large numbers of Americans wondered out loud whether their country might disintegrate. From this distance the massive unemployment of the Depression looks like a bigger threat than the upheavals of the more recent period. But unlike the still puzzling moods of the sixties, the nature of American despair in the thirties was never mysterious: People were miserable because they were hungry, fearful because they weren't sure anyone would ever figure out how to put them back to work again.

...Thus, as 1968 began, these were some of the sources of the malaise gnawing away at many of the six million draft-age students in college, the largest group of undergraduates in American history: an absence of religious conviction; an unwanted intimacy with the nuclear void; an unexpected familiarity with political assassination—Malcolm X's in 1965, as well as John Kennedy's in 1963—and a yearning for the idealism that was the most evocative part of Kennedy's presidency. Together these disparate elements fed two seemingly contradictory but actually complementary impulses: the desire to create our own culture, a world of our own where we could retreat from the world of our parents; and the need to embrace causes larger than ourselves, crusades that would give us the chance to define ourselves as moral people.

...television news was bruising everyone's nerve endings nightly. In 1968 it brought the War in Vietnam and the war in the ghetto into every dorm room and living room with a power no other medium could match. The pictures Americans saw made millions of them intensely uncomfortable with themselves: pictures of the South Vietnamese national police chief shooting a suspected Vietcong in the head during Tet, of Martin Luther King's casket, and of Bobby Kennedy's bleeding body on a hotel kitchen floor; pictures of the uprisings all over America after King's death and the worst fires in the city of Washington since the War of 1812. Ghetto insurrections were followed by campus revolts, most dramatically at Columbia University. For the first time since their invention, televised pictures made the possibility of anarchy in America feel real.

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 bottles are raised to the good old days, as "them good old boys"* of Lubbock, Texas mourn the death of their favorite son, Buddy Holly; these figures could also symbolize a more naïve view of the world. But most significantly, "This'll be the day that I die" is a rewording of the line "'Cause that'll be the day when I die" from the chorus of Holly's hit That'll be the Day, in which the singer fears the worst should his love leave him: for the narrator, his love has left him, and this is McLean's way of both mourning the death of that music and way of life, and pointing to Holly as his symbol of it.

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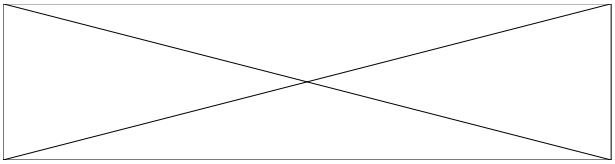
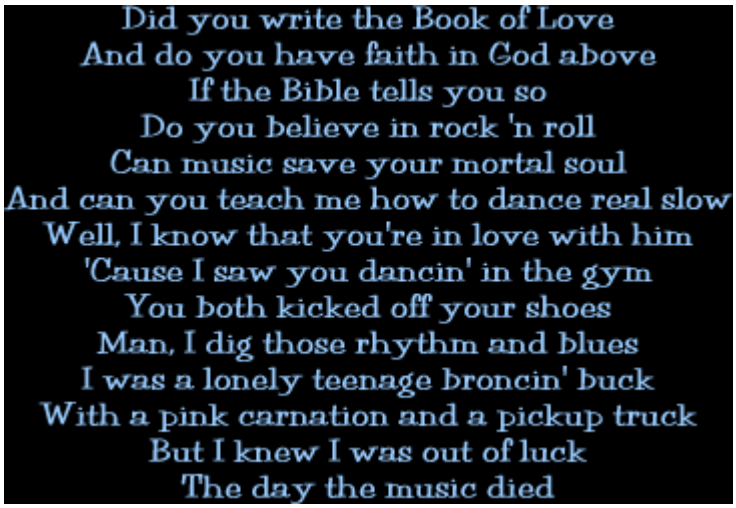
So "Miss American Pie" represents a simpler, more innocent time in American life, but that time has passed—she is no longer with him. To quote Buddy Holly:

You say you're gonna leave
You know it's a lie
'Cause that'll be the day when I die.



Verse 2:



The Good Book

The narrator now reaches a little further back in time to the days of his youth, the late 1950s—a time of sock hops, pickup trucks and pink carnations—as he courts a woman who ultimately spurns him. This is a fickle lady here, and the narrator questions her loyalties. An important verse in that it also introduces a religious

So Long Hopalong Cassidy

Author

Sources

Credits

Guests

Links

metaphor that will echo throughout the rest of the song.

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Did you write the Book of Love

This is a woman of some importance to the narrator—and if she may have written the Book of Love, she is most likely a symbolic figure, as these lines from the 1957 hit by The Monotones, *The Book of Love*, suggest:

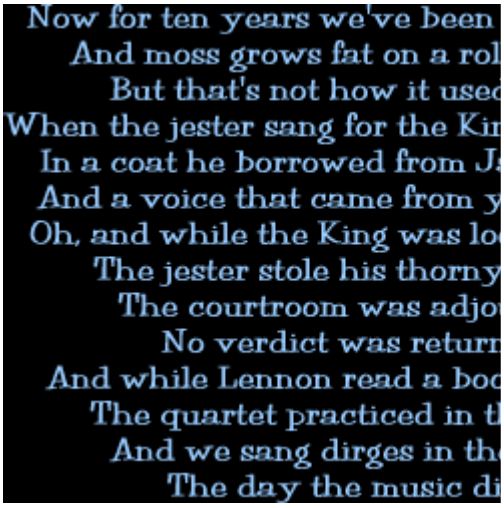
Tell me, tell me, tell me
Oh, who wrote the Book Of Love?
I've got to know the answer
Was it someone from above?

He then asks her where her loyalties lie—does she have an unquestioning faith in the established order ("if the bible tells you so"), or will this change?

And do you have faith in God above
If the Bible tells you so

INTRO | *VERSE 1* | *CHORUS* | *VERSE 2* | *VERSE 3* | *VERSE 4* | *VERSE 5* | *VERSE 6* | *CONCLUSION*
THE FIFTIES | *THE SIXTIES* | *1968* | *ALTAMONT* | *HOPPY DON McLEAN*

Verse 3:



The Royal Court

Having previously established the world the narrator grew up in, he now becomes an increasingly disillusioned observer. Bob Dylan, representing the forces of revolutionary change that are brewing in American society at this time, is this verse's primary musical figure, and is used as a symbolic challenge to the older social order represented by Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley. But by the end of this verse, the Beatles—practicing in the park—are readying a revolution of their own that will sideline Dylan later in the song.

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Now for ten years we've been on our own
And moss grows fat on a rolling stone
But that's not how it used to be

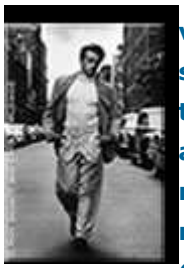
Though this verse takes place between the years 1963 and 1966, these first lines look back from the year 1970—ten years or so after Holly's death. "A rolling stone gathers no moss" is an old cliché used to describe someone who never puts down roots, but here the cliché is turned on its head, reflecting how the wholesale rejection of conventional values had become commonplace by 1970—and that's not how it used to be. This line could also foreshadow the anarchy that the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger symbolizes at the song's climax in verse 5. By 1970 we had lost our way, it seemed. To quote Bob Dylan:

How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a rolling stone?

Verse 3, continued

When the jester sang for the King and Queen
In a coat he borrowed from James Dean
And a voice that came from you and me

Following on the previous reference, the Jester here is commonly associated with Bob Dylan, and who is further identified by the James Dean coat he wears on the cover of his late 1963 album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*—the setting of which also intentionally plays off of the Dean persona, as seen in the photograph below.



This also dates the opening of this verse close to the year 1964—a significant year, following as it did the assassination of John Kennedy, and considered by some the year the radical sixties began. Dean is best remembered as *A Rebel Without A Cause* in the film of the same name—an image of alienated youth and rebellion that fits with Dylan's role in the music of this period. The "voice that came from you and me" further identifies him—not only did his music work on a more literate and introspective level than anything attempted before in rock 'n' roll music, but it was also sung with (and I'm being charitable here) a distinctly unpolished voice. But most importantly, his was the voice of his generation—our voice—as much of his more popular work of this period were songs of protest, putting him at the political forefront of this increasingly rebellious generation. And finally, the Jester is a trickster figure in mythology, serving to advise royal authority through undermining it—certainly a role that Dylan seemed to fill. So Dylan heralded a new order emerging in popular music, and by analogy, the promise of a new order in the culture at large.

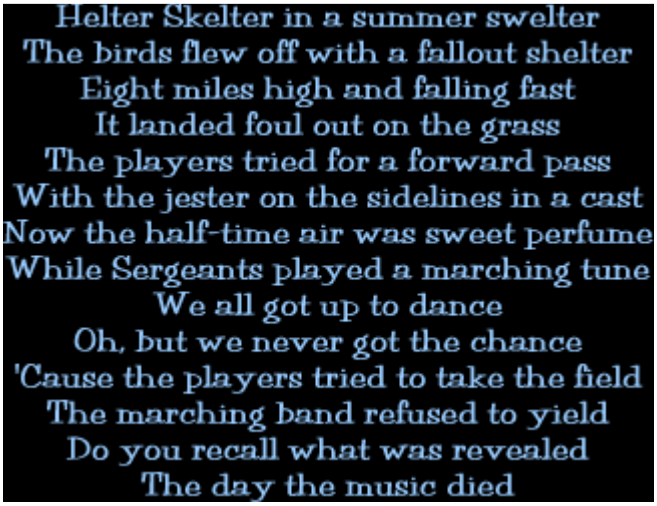
The King is a title commonly given to Elvis Presley—the "King of Rock 'n' Roll"—who

dominated and epitomized rock and roll up to this point in time. The Queen, though a few names have been suggested for her (Connie Francis, Aretha Franklin), is more likely a figurehead here, as there was no corresponding "Queen of Rock 'n' Roll" at this particular time. What seems most likely here is that the image of a royal court is being suggested—the Jester having gone before the court of rock 'n' roll to challenge its dominion by Presley. And as the "music" in *American Pie* is synonymous with the culture of America, a similar challenge is confronting the country, as the younger generation challenges the assumptions of the older order it grew up with. This notion is amplified further in the next lines.

And while the King was looking down
The jester stole his thorny crown
The courtroom was adjourned
No verdict was returned

Presley, as the former voice of a more benign kind of alienation and rebellion to the youth of the 1950s, had by this time become somewhat old news, as this generation anointed Dylan their new spokesman. But even as the poet was in the vanguard of the developing shift away from rock 'n' roll's earlier, simpler thematic roots, the jury was still out on the outcome of America's emerging cultural revolution—no verdict was returned. As Dylan emerges as rock 'n roll's new spiritual leader, the thorny crown is an apt symbol; this is perhaps too a picture of the price of fame.

Verse 4:



The Players' Field

We now move into the most explosive period of the radical sixties, between the years 1966 and 1969. Where only a few years before the social and political system had been solid (if a bit petrified) and largely unchallenged, by this time it had begun to come considerably undone; an unpopular, ill-defined war in Southeast Asia only served to fan the flames. Increasingly, the established American culture itself was being viewed as an enemy in need of transformation, and this generation responded by growing more and more revolutionary. And once again the music was mirroring these changes, as the Beatles—influenced by the emerging Counterculture and their own forays into eastern mysticism and drugs—began to significantly alter the shape of rock 'n' roll, much as Dylan had before them; they were, in fact, replacing Dylan as the voice of their generation.

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As the sixties revolution gathered momentum, the youth movement itself also gathered more players, as the more organized and pragmatic unity of the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (largely represented by the Students for a Democratic Society [SDS], and more or less symbolized by Bob Dylan in verse 3) began fragmenting into the Women's Rights, Black Power, Antiwar and Counterculture movements;

the Progressive Labor and Revolutionary Youth Movements; as well as their militant sub-factions: the Black Panthers, The Weathermen, Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers (yes, that was their name)—all seeking, to one degree or another, to influence the course of American culture. But of all of these it is the Counterculture that looms largest in our memory. Though they did not achieve much politically, their style of dress and behavior were enormously influential, as were the drug, sexual and spiritual freedoms they espoused—all of which were in-your-face affronts to the more staid, traditional values of the status quo. And it was their philosophies of peace and brotherly love—vague and ill-formed as they were—that seemed to best characterize this generation at this time, at least in the eyes of the general public.

In light of the growing conflicts of this period a football field is an appropriate setting, a battlefield on which the radical youth culture players and the forces of the establishment clash. But once again we find the songwriter mixing his metaphors, using the "marching band" to symbolize both the Counterculture (the Beatles) and the armed civil militia.

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Verse 4, continued

Helter Skelter in the summer swelter
The Byrds flew off with a fallout shelter
Eight miles high and falling fast

These opening lines are full of portent: chaos in the summer heat; the birds (nature), sensing danger, retreat to safety from an impending explosion—the helter skelter, explosive "long hot summers" of protest and rioting during this period. In 1967, youth culture hippies from across the country made an exodus to San Francisco's Haight Ashbury district to live out the Counterculture's mantras of brotherly love and drug-induced transcendence—the benign eye of the storm that was that year's self-proclaimed "Summer of Love." But these calm waters were to be short-lived, as events in the coming months challenged the Counterculture's euphoria: the violent Oakland anti-draft protests; the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King (and the ensuing riots by Blacks across the nation); the riots at Columbia University and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—just to name a few. "Helter Skelter" aptly describes the chaotic events of this period, and also refers to the Beatles' song of the same name, released on their White Album of 1968. The Byrds' 1966 release, *Eight Miles High*—used here to suggest a bomb falling—seems strangely prophetic now: "Eight miles high/And when you touch down/You'll find that it's stranger than known" —lines that spoke to the drug culture of the period, but can also in retrospect be foreseeing the rapidly escalating anarchy about to erupt in America; not coincidentally, both songs speak of falling fast.

It landed foul out on the grass
The players tried for a forward pass

The ball is wild during these years, as the youth culture players begin to aggressively set themselves (the "forward pass") against the government they are attempting to transform; the civil authorities in turn do not take kindly to these challenges (the ball "landing foul on the grass"), and soon come to meet them with a fury of their own. But something of a free-for-all is also ensuing among the many radical political players struggling for field position (the "forward pass") in the American cultural dialogue. The more pragmatic agendas of the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left had by this time begun losing their original cohesion, sprouting the Womens' Rights, Black Power, Antiwar and Counterculture movements; and by decade's end, the more militant groups: The Black Panthers, The Weathermen—all striving to influence this generation towards their own particular interpretation of how American society should be. But it is the Counterculture, with its wholesale rejection of mainstream values, that comes to hold center stage. The musical players—Bob Dylan (symbolically representing the

New Left/Antiwar contingent); The Beatles (carrying the torch for the Counterculture); and many others (the Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, the Byrds, the Rolling Stones), can all be viewed as competing on the playing field of rock 'n' roll, and symbolic of the contending liberal political forces at play during this period.

With the jester on the sidelines in a cast

Bob Dylan, sidelined by a nearly fatal motorcycle accident on July 29, 1966, and further overwhelmed by the pressures of his own success, retreated to Woodstock, NY to recuperate from his wounds, both physical and psychological. His output following this period (with the exception of 1967's *John Wesley Harding*) was not as critically well-received as his earlier work, as he retreated from the lyrical complexity and social commentary that had characterized his previous efforts, becoming less the spokesman for his generation. Increasingly sidelined too was the organizing arm of the New Left—the SDS—as other competing groups tended to dilute their political unity. Needless to say, like Dylan, they became less the dominant spokesmen for their generation—a role that, it can be argued, the Counterculture was now assuming (though the Counterculture really had no political agenda to speak of), and a role that musically the Beatles were filling as they began to take their music more seriously and embrace the drugged spirituality of the Counterculture.

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 Devil's 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 the flames climbed high into the night
To moonlight the sacrificial rite
I saw Satan laughing with delight
The day the music died

The Devil's Own

American Pie **now reaches its apocalyptic climax, as the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger takes center stage at the bloody concert held at Altamont Motor Speedway, California, in the fall of 1969. The flower children drew together here once more to re-stoke the communal goodwill of the successful Woodstock Music Festival of a few months earlier; but even as Woodstock was seen as a landmark in the Counterculture movement, Altamont is widely regarded as the event that signaled its demise. Reality steps in.**

• • •

And there we were all in one place
A generation Lost in Space
With no time left to start again

The flower children gathered at Altamont 300,000 strong, in a frenzy of drugs, alcohol and escalating violence. Woodstock it was not. The grand experiment losing steam, as the solutions endorsed by the drug culture—" turn on, tune in, drop out"—merely left them "lost in space," adrift, with no place left to go; with no momentum left to start the revolution over again.

So come on, Jack be nimble, Jack be quick
Jack Flash sat on a candlestick
'Cause fire is the Devil's only friend

Jack Flash is a reference to the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger and their song *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, in which the protagonist nimbly plays with fire to boast of his freedom. Darkness now reigned with The Stones, as evidenced by their albums *Beggars Banquet* in 1968 and *Let It Bleed* in 1969—works that embraced a more aggressive nihilism than their previous efforts, and which put them at the forefront of rock's growing cultural estrangement. This allows McLean to use Jagger as representative of someone freely pushing the social envelope and inciting rebellion—and in direct opposition to the values of a previous era. Given the theme of lost faith that runs through the song—and in this atmosphere of anything goes—it is an easy thing

to see him as the Devil; the photograph above by Ethan Russell of Jagger onstage at the concert in a flowing red cape only serves to reinforce this imagery. To quote the Stones, "War, children, it's just a shot away."

Verse 5, continued

In the documentary film of the concert—1970's *Gimme Shelter* (the title taken from the Stones song of the same name)—two concerned young men in the audience can be seen pleading with Jagger to end the show, which he defiantly refuses to do. By the end of the film Jagger is indicted as the key figure who could have brought the violence to a close by simply leaving the stage and ending the concert; whether this might have incited a riot in itself is difficult to say.

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

Watching *Gimme Shelter* one can see that the audience is spellbound by the Stones (just as many were easily carried along by the youth movement's promises), and many of them storm the stage throughout the day; the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang ("No angel born in hell"), hired as security for the concert, violently defend the stage, but to little avail. Jagger is used in the song as the catalyst for the anarchy unfolding, both at the concert and symbolically in the youth culture at large.

And as the flames climbed high into the night
To moonlight the sacrificial rite

As a black man in the audience wielding a gun moves towards the stage, Hell's Angels intercept and stab him to death—the "sacrificial rite." But the sacrifice being offered here is also the burning down of the remnants of the old social order. The Stones, unaware of what is happening, continue to play. And a song they performed shortly before this event—*Sympathy for the Devil*—serves to further underscore Jagger's satanic aura:

Verse 5, continued

To most observers, the violence and indifference of the crowd at Altamont spelled the end of the sixties cultural revolution, as author Todd Gitlin, in his book *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (and himself an eyewitness to the concert), cogently describes:

...the effect was to burst the bubble of youth culture's illusions about itself. The Rolling Stones were scarcely the first countercultural heroes to grant cachet to the Hell's Angels. We had witnessed the famous collectivity of a generation cracking into thousands of shards. Center stage turned out to be another drug. The suburban fans who blithely blocked one another's views and turned their backs on the bad-trippers were no cultural revolutionaries. Who could any longer harbor the illusion that these hundreds of thousands of spoiled star-hungry children of the Lonely Crowd were the harbingers of a good society?

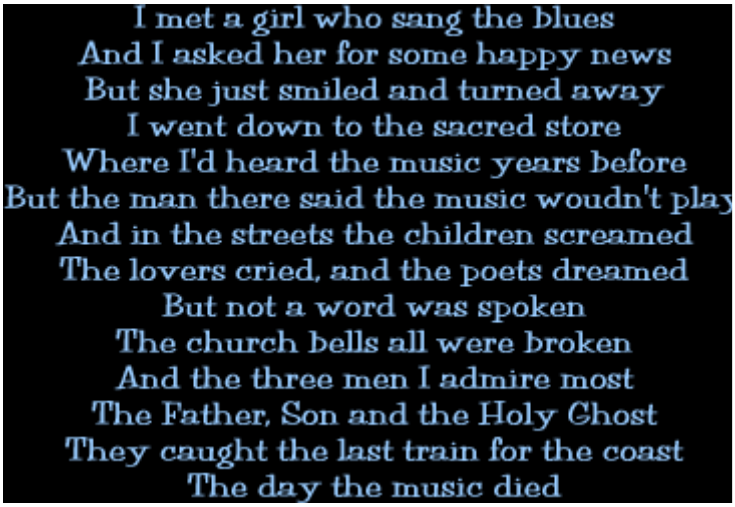
I saw Satan laughing with delight
The day the music died.

• • •

So Mick Jagger, symbolizing the indifference and self-centeredness of the crowd, is the focal point of the evening's proceedings, and for the narrator bears responsibility for not preventing—and perhaps even provoking—what occurred there. He also epitomizes a threatening, aggresive rebellion inherent in their music, and of how far removed we were from the more benign, harmonious America of the 1950s. He is the song's Antichrist, completing the apocalyptic work of tearing down the older, peaceful world that the other musical players of the sixties had figuratively already started. And he is one more blow—the final blow—against the innocence of another era.

The verse that follows finds the narrator walking through the aftermath of the 1960s cultural revolution.

Verse 6:



Epilogue

A wistful resignation falls over the scene, as the narrator walks among the ruins of his generation, searching for any signs of the world he once knew. And to the numbed surprise of the flower children all was not well either, as their enormous hopes for a Good Society and an American culture of transcendent values had by now begun to seem like so much smoke. Their idealism shattered, what is left in its wake is something of a wasteland, as their illusions fade under the specter of their indifference at Altamont.

• • •

I met a girl who sang the blues
And I asked her for some happy news
But she just smiled and turned away

A cynical figure, who when asked for any "happy news"—any return to the innocence and stability of an earlier time—can only smile knowingly and walk away. This is most likely the rock 'n' roll blues singer Janis Joplin, whose death in 1970 of a heroin overdose seemed to reinforce—along with the drug overdose deaths of rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix a few months earlier and The Doors' Jim Morrison a few months later—the failures of the movement. The requested "happy news" also echoes the "maybe they'd be happy for awhile" music of the first verse, bookending the song.

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

The sacred store would be a record store, following on the religious/musical metaphor established in verse two. But the music of years before would no longer play: literally, the music stores that had once provided listening booths for their customers were by this time no longer offering this service. But even more than this, the cynicism of this generation had annihilated the innocent world the narrator had grown up in; that kind of music wouldn't play anymore. He can't go home again.

Verse 6, continued

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

Beyond all the noise and violence of this tumultuous era, the America that survives this decade is not the America we knew a scant 10 years earlier. With so many of the assumptions of that older order undermined, little familiar remained to believe in, and our once buoyant faith in American culture appeared irrevocably lost. The old religion was dead: 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

These three enigmatic figures resonate strongly with this period, and carry more than one association—the most obvious being the three performers (Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper) who died in an Iowa cornfield that fateful day in 1959. They could also be symbolic of the three political assassinations of the 1960s—John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King—whose violent deaths shook the foundations of American optimism and naiveté during these years. But given that the "Father, Son and the Holy Ghost" seem to be alive and well and living in the present tense of this verse (1970), we might look elsewhere to identify them. In a quote from a January, 1972 Life magazine article, Don McLean—

speaking of Buddy Holly—gives us a better clue to the identity of this trio: "He was a symbol of something deeper than the music he made. His career and the sort of group he created, the interaction between the lead singer and *the three men* [italics mine] backing him up, was a perfect metaphor for the music of the 60s and for my own youth." So these three men could also be the Crickets, representing the surviving remnants of Holly's enthusiastic spirit, and by association symbolic of the happier optimism of their time.

But these religious figures hold an even greater symbolic importance: in the wake of this decade's disillusioning cynicism and fragmentation, the "Father, Son and the Holy Ghost" represent a faith in America that had once permeated American life, and that—hope against hope—might still redeem the disorder that had befallen us. But the holy trinity, finding no sympathetic hearing and resigning themselves to the inevitable (having held out for "the last train"), pack up their bags and retire to the coast: the believers had lost faith in their gods, and the gods can only retreat.

And they were singin'...

Conclusion

As American culture was transformed through the decade of the 1960s, the popular entertainment of the day registered these changes, just as it always has. But more than any other idiom, rock 'n' roll was its most accurate barometer: from the early social outrage of Bob Dylan, the Beatles' contagious countercultural idealism, or the fierce nihilism of the late sixties Rolling Stones, rock 'n' roll defined the generation coming of age in these turbulent years, giving it voice and charting its course as no other popular art form did. It was the perfect metaphor for these changes, and McLean found in it a way to describe the dislocating sense of loss we were feeling—to enduring effect.

Regarding the meaning of *American Pie*, the songwriter has remained characteristically silent, with a few exceptions—especially this one, giving some indication of his intentions:

"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 his 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."

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. In another, though, it was very hopeful. Pete Seeger told me 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. That's a good way to look at it—a hopeful way." *

In identifying its frequently overlooked theme of America's lost innocence, the meaning of *American Pie* becomes more evident, as its cast of characters are better placed in their historical and cultural context. Still, portions of the song remain cryptic, and as the songwriter readily admits, deliberately so: like any good poem, keeping the language suspended imparts a dreamlike

quality to it, allowing the lyrics to resonate deeper in the listener than a more literal approach would. But it is also this ambiguity that has generated so much debate, and that has kept *American Pie* on the pop culture map these many years.

• • •

A good deal of what I've said here isn't new, and for those of you who've heard it all before, my apologies—though I do feel that I've made some new contributions. But in drawing together and laying out the broader outline of the song, I hope that I have given those who may still have questions—or who haven't even considered its larger historical context—a more comprehensive understanding of *American Pie*.**

Jim Fann

The Fifties

The following is excerpted from the introduction to David Halberstam's book "*The Fifties*":

...the fifties appear to be an orderly era, one with a minimum of social dissent. Photographs from the period tend to show people who dressed carefully: men in suits, ties, and—when outdoors—hats; the women with their hair in modified page-boys, pert and upbeat. Young people seemed, more than anything else,"square" and largely accepting of the given social covenants. At the beginning of the decade their music was still slow and saccharine, mirroring the generally bland popular taste. In the years following the traumatic experiences of the Depression and World War II, the American Dream was to exercise personal freedom not in social and political terms, but rather in economic ones. Eager to be part of the burgeoning middle class, young men and women opted for material well-being, particularly if it came with some form of guaranteed employment. For the young, eager veteran just out of college (which he had attended courtesy of the G.I. Bill), security meant finding a good white-collar job with a large, benevolent company, getting married, having children, and buying a house in the suburbs.

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. Young men who had spent three or four years fighting overseas were eager to get on with their lives; so, too, were the young women who had waited for them at home. The post-World War II rush to have children would later be described as the "baby boom" (everything else in the United States seemed to be booming, so why not the production of children as well?) It was a good time to be young and get on with family and career: Prices and inflation remained relatively low; and nearly everyone with a decent job could afford to own a home. Even if the specter of Communism lurked on the horizon—particularly as both superpowers developed nuclear weapons—Americans trusted their leaders to tell

them the truth, to make sound decisions, and to keep them out of war.

For a while, the traditional system of authority held. The men (and not men and women) who presided in politics, business, and media had generally been born in the previous century. The advent of so strong a society, in which the nation's wealth was shared by so many, represented a prosperity beyond their wildest dreams. During the course of the fifties, as younger people and segments of society who did not believe they had a fair share became empowered, pressure inevitably began to build against the entrenched political and social hierarchy. But one did not lightly challenge a system that seemed, on the whole, to be working so well. Some social critics, irritated by the generally quiescent attitude and the boundless appetite for consumerism, described a "silent" generation. Others were made uneasy by the degree of conformity around them, as if the middle-class living standard had been delivered in an obvious trade-off for blind acceptance of the status quo. Nonetheless, the era was a much more interesting one than it appeared on the surface. Exciting new technologies were being developed that would soon enable a vast and surprisingly broad degree of dissidence, and many people were already beginning to question the purpose of their lives and whether that purpose had indeed become, almost involuntarily, too much about material things.

The Sixties

The following is an excerpt from the introduction to Jon Margolis' book, "*The Last Innocent Year: America in 1964 (The Beginning of the Sixties)*":

There never was an innocent year.

...But there was a time when the delusion of innocence was easy to believe, when the myth was at least as useful as it was deceiving. That time ended when 1964 did.

If the delusion of innocence ended in 1964, something else began: the Sixties. The calendar tells us decades begin when the next-to-last number of the year changes. We know better. When Americans at century's end hear that now-cliched term the Sixties, the hopeful and relatively placid years of John Kennedy's campaign and presidency do not come to mind. Their tumultuous aftermath does. If the tumult did not start in 1964, it blossomed then...

From every perspective except the calendar's, 1964 started forty days early, when John F. Kennedy was murdered in Dallas. The wonder is that the belief in American innocence was not murdered that day, too. In retrospect, perhaps it was, but because beliefs do not die as cleanly as people do, their deaths can escape recognition. America spent the months after John Kennedy's death in denial. A few clung to the idea of an ersatz resurrection by hoping that Kennedy's successor would choose Robert Kennedy as vice president. Almost everyone tried to tell him or herself that the assassination, for all its horror, was an aberration, that the country and its culture remained strong, healthy, and essentially unchanged. They were wrong. On January 1, 1964, the dourest observer of the passing scene could not foresee a country in which students would rise up against their elders, city dwellers would set fire to their neighborhoods, large numbers of privileged young people would openly flout the law, and women would begin to wonder whether the male sex was their oppressor. By year's end, the most optimistic observer of the passing scene would have wondered about all that—if an optimistic observer could be found. For 1964 was the first year since the end of World War II, if not in the twentieth century, in which events challenged, if they did not overwhelm, America's habitual optimism. Sure, there had always been naysayers and grouches—from Thoreau to Mark Twain to Ambrose Bierce—but these had been a minority even among

the intellectuals. The prevailing ethos had been that although there were problems aplenty, they could all be solved thanks to democracy, freedom, the market economy, and plain old American know-how. That ethos was not destroyed in 1964, but it was shaken, and the shaking came from the American people themselves, who rose up—not as one, but as many diverse, disagreeing (and disagreeable) factions against the elites who had been governing them. For the first time, some even wondered whether America's problems should be solved. These uprisings destroyed the consensus.

The Sixties, continued

And from the introduction to *The 1960s Cultural Revolution* by John C. McWilliams:

When history produces an era as momentous and as electrifying as the 1960s, we should anticipate a very durable legacy. We also can assume that such a turbulent era will foment historical repercussions for decades to follow. Progressing at a dizzying, frenetic pace, the sixties were seemingly synonymous with rebellion and conflict. If, in every century, one decade stands out from the rest as a time of challenge and trial, anguish and achievement, in the twentieth century in the United States that decade is the 1960s. No other decade, save the 1860s, when the nation was at war with itself for four years, has been so tumultuous. The 1960s was a revolution by almost any definition. Americans revolted against conventional moral conduct, civil rights violations, authoritarianism in universities, gender discrimination, the establishment, and, of course, the war in Southeast Asia. Within a generation, the national consensus forged during the nation's victorious effort in World War II had come under attack. A counterculture of hippies, or young people distressed with mainstream society, challenged widely accepted cultural practices and espoused an alternative lifestyle. Conflict and disillusionment, as expounded in Tom Hayden's 1962 Port Huron Statement, a declaration of counterculture political ideology inaugurating the emergence of the New Left, abruptly shattered social harmony. Traditional conformity gave way to unprecedented individualism and a reexamination of the conventional code of conduct. Change is inevitable and seldom a graceful operation, but the cultural revolution it produced in the 1960s was as profound as it was pervasive, touching virtually every aspect of American life. The sixties was an era when Americans did not so much greet the dawn as confront it.

Pleased to meet you
Hope you guessed my name, oh yeah
But what's confusing you

Is just the nature of my game

Just as every cop is a criminal
And all the sinners saints
As heads is tails
Just call me Lucifer
'Cause I'm in need of some restraint

Altamont

The following excerpt is from Todd Gitlin's book "The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage:"

The tale has been told many times of how, at Altamont, among three hundred thousand fans, the Hell's Angels, serving as semiofficial guards, killed a young fan, black, who had a white date and the temerity to offend the Angels (by getting too close to them, or their motorcycles, or the stage), and then, at some point, pulled a gun—all the while Mick Jagger was singing "Under My Thumb." I heard about the killing that night, on the radio, having left before the Stones took the stage. But by the time I left, in the late afternoon, Altamont already felt like death. Let it sound mystical, I wasn't the only one who felt oppressed by the general ambience; a leading Berkeley activist told me he had dropped acid at Altamont and had received the insight that "everyone was dead." It wasn't just the Angels, shoving people around on and near the stage, who were angels of death. Behind the stage, hordes of Aquarians were interfering with doctors trying to help people climb down from bad acid trips. On the remote hillside where I sat, stoned fans were crawling over one another to get a bit closer to the groovy music. Afterward everyone was appalled and filled with righteous indignation. But exactly who or what was at fault? On a practical plane, there were movie-rights squabbles; greed had played its part in preventing adequate preparations. But the effect was to burst the bubble of youth culture's illusions about itself. The Rolling Stones were scarcely the first countercultural heroes to grant cachet to the Hell's Angels. We had witnessed the famous collectivity of a generation cracking into thousands of shards. Center stage turned out to be another drug. The suburban fans who blithely blocked one another's views and turned their backs on the bad-trippers were no cultural revolutionaries. Who could any longer harbor the illusion that these hundreds of thousands of spoiled star-hungry children of the Lonely Crowd were the harbingers of a good society?