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“The Early Stars of Rock ‘N’ Roll”

A 50th anniversary concert in memory of three of the pioneers of rock ‘n’ roll took place recently in Clear Lake, Iowa. It was in that western town that they performed for the last time.

The morning after their engagement, Feb. 3, 1959, Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. “the Big Bopper” Richardson were killed. The small chartered aircraft taking them to the next stop on their tour, crashed in a cornfield.

Half a century later they are well remembered by their generation as popular, timeless and tragic personalities. Buddy Holly and his group *The Crickets* were an inspiration to The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Another popular rock group paid tribute to Holly with their inspired name *The Hollies*.

Within a relatively short span of time all three young men had topped the record charts. Valens had a golden hit serenading *Donna*, Richardson’s novelty *Chantilly Lace* was a million-seller and Holly, who is remembered as a recording icon, had a string of best sellers including *That’ll Be the Day*, *Peggy Sue* and *Every Day*.

It was four years earlier that rock ‘n’ roll arrived on the popular music scene, when Bill Haley and his comets recorded *Rock Around the Clock*. It was written in



Gord & Paul Anka at Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas, 1981

1953, but became a world-wide hit two years later when Haley introduced it on the sound track of the film, *The Blackboard Jungle*. The dark drama about troubled teens starred Glenn Ford and Sydney Poitier. It was the first major motion picture that featured rock music. With its roots in rhythm and blues the “new sound” exploded on the popular music scene.

The majority of the parents of that period were not supportive of the “new sound”, but the teenagers loved it. I must confess that at that time I did not foresee that rock would not only survive changing times but dominate the pop music scene.

In the preceding years there had been new musical sounds that were wildly popular. Notably, the folk craze of the 1950's, which lasted only a few years. Groups like *The Kingston Trio*, *The New Christy Minstrels* and *The Weavers* were universally popular but in time faded from the music scene.

When I joined the staff of CFRA in 1954, I developed a radio format for high school and college students, *The Campus Corner*, which in time became *The Campus Club*. As the host of those programs I emceed the big touring rock 'n' roll shows at the old hockey arena, The Auditorium. It was demolished when the Civic Centre was constructed. The site where it was located is now the national headquarters building of the YM/YWCA.

The first rock star to appear on "The Aud's" special events stage was Bill Haley. In 1955, the well known record shop owner and impresario, Alex Sherman, brought him to Ottawa. Haley's music and his group's performance enthralled the sell-out audience. As the emcee of his show I recall that night vividly -- and the other rock extravaganzas that followed. Almost all the top performers on the hit charts were headliners at the *Old Aud*.

Across town at Lansdowne Park was the equally popular venue for touring performers, *The Coliseum*. In the 1950's and 60's a star-studded line-up of young artists appeared at both locations. It was my pleasure to introduce and interview among others, Buddy Knox, Jimmy Bowen, Sonny James, The Everly Brothers, Pat Boone, The Diamonds, Chubby Checker, Marty Robbins, Herman's Hermits, Connie Francis, The Crew Cuts, Bobby Curtola, Anita Bryant and our own exceptional home-grown artists, The Staccatos, The Esquires, and my good friend of over 50 years, Paul Anka.

Of all the stars that I met and introduced on stage, one performer is foremost in my collective memory. It was April 3, 1957, when Elvis Presley "brought down the house" at The Auditorium. My interview with Elvis on that memorable day has been well documented and preserved on a collector's CD.

As I look back over the passage of time and its fleeting years, I remember fondly the friends I made and the times we shared in those happy days. Occasionally I come into contact with my radio teenagers of yesteryear. It is

always a pleasure when we share memories of those dear old days when our world was young.