

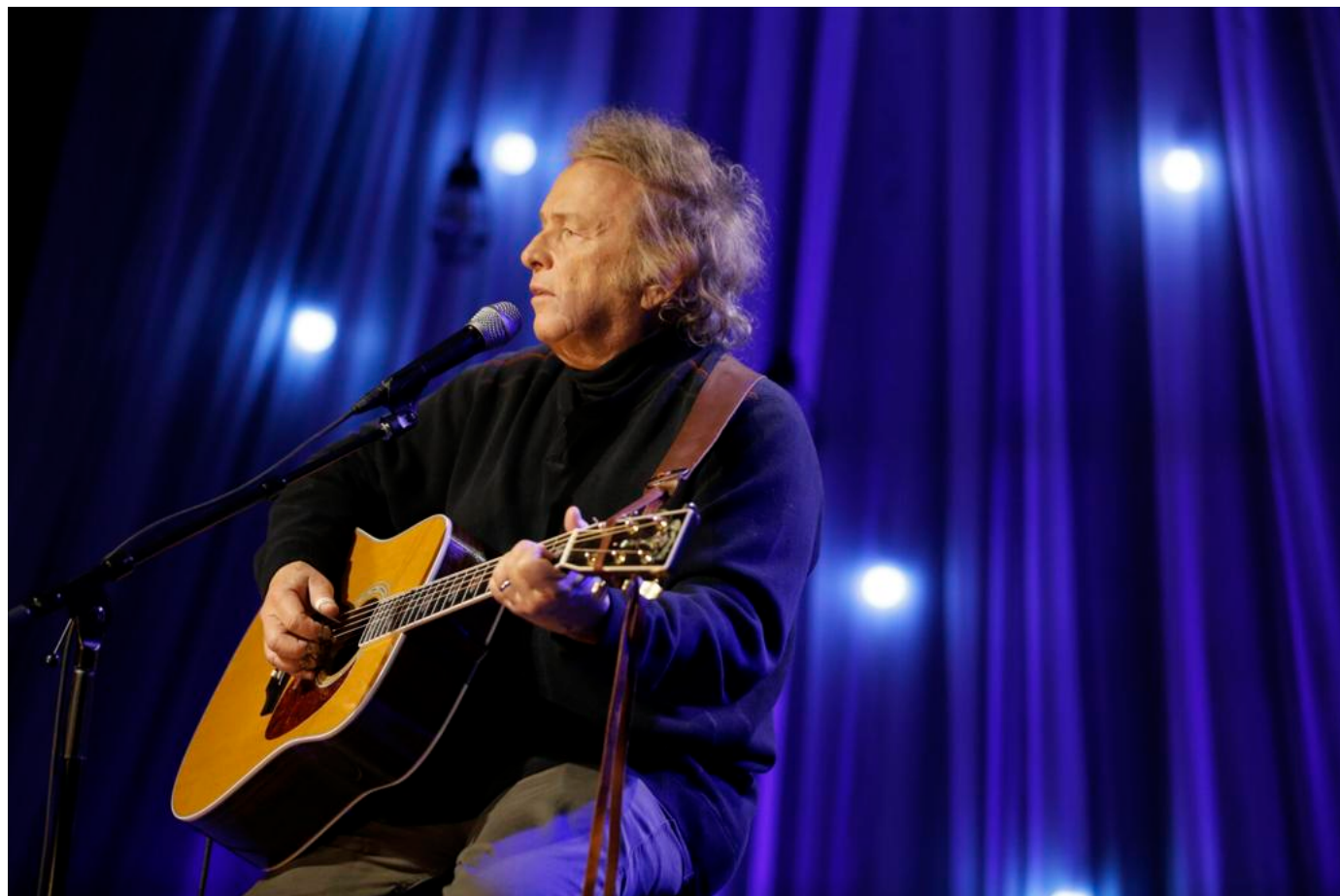
https://www.mainstreet-nashville.com/music/don-mclean-talks-american-pie-origins-and-songs-relevance-today/article_e9fb28e0-836d-11ec-be5a-ab0343c05d4d.html

TOP STORY

Don McLean talks 'American Pie' origins and song's relevance today

By Josh Ewers Main Street Nashville

Feb 3, 2022



Don McLean recently spoke with Main Street Nashville on the origins of his iconic and enduring song “American Pie” ahead of a 50th anniversary show at the Ryman Auditorium in May.

Mark Humphrey / Associated Press

Don McLean’s “American Pie” is baked with bittersweet notions of the prosperous facade of the 1950s giving way to the dynamic and tumultuous 1960s, but the poet believes the song remains relevant today.

McLean recently sat down with Main Street Nashville to talk about the song's cultural ingredients and its endurance amid a changing ethos ahead of a 50th anniversary show at the Ryman Auditorium on May 12.

The song was penned at a time when many had a complex relationship with the country.

“I was always interested in America. I loved everything about it, and also was very angry at Nixon and LBJ and the things they were doing and the war that we were in for 16 years, which got us absolutely nothing,” McLean said. “And so everybody got madder and madder ... and I didn’t start out that way.”

McLean grew up in a conservative, traditional and “uncreative” household in New Rochelle, New York. As many know, he was a 13-year-old working a paper route in 1959 when he heard the news Buddy Holly had been killed in a plane crash, forming the autobiographical basis for the song’s intro.

But “American Pie” is about much more than just one event. And the tragedy of Buddy Holly became only its jumping-off point when he began to write it in 1970.

“I always kept the memory of the Buddy Holly thing. Buddy kind of faded away really in the 1960s, but not with me,” McLean said. “And I had decided to write a ‘big song’ about America. One day, I was up in my room in this little house I was living in, and I started with ‘a long, long time ago’ and went right through to ‘the day the music died’ into the tape recorder.

“I had finally found the beginning of the song I wanted to write, inadvertently using Buddy’s plane crash. It just came to me on my ‘radio.’ Most of my songs come to me from a place that I don’t understand even.”

By that time, McLean was already headlining nightclubs and college concerts, having toured with the likes of Ten Wheel Drive, Steppenwolf and the James Gang.

His journey as an artist and cultural observer, however, had started earlier.

McLean says he first began to feel the sense of change the song expresses on a personal level while attending Iona Preparatory School in the early 1960s.

“A lot of speakers would come and speak outside in the warmer weather,” McLean explained. “So I saw Muhammad Ali and Howard Cosell, when (Ali) got blacklisted from boxing. I saw H. Rap Brown when the Black Panthers spoke. I saw senators and Robert Kennedy spoke there and all kinds of people. It was a very good education that I got by actually seeing these people.”

McLean still recalls one day in particular that made the age of shifting cultural, racial, political and sexual paradigms more tangible than any one iconic speaker could have.

What began as another day at school led him along the next steps of his own personal walk in tandem with the country’s journey, the latter of which he’d chronicle in his most famous work.

“There was a protest going on about the war in Vietnam. And it was 1966, I guess. And I watched these guys who had the courage to march on this particular campus,” McLean said. “I gave my books to somebody else, and I got in and marched with them. And that was the day everything changed. That was the day I decided that I couldn’t live the old way anymore.”

And so it was that like so many of his college-aged peers, McLean left behind some of the ideals of his conservative upbringing.

“That was the moment when I started to become one of them, instead of a member of the society that I was brought up in,” McLean said. “And that continued on then when I got out of school. I then went up the Hudson River and started singing with Pete Seeger, who was blacklisted as a communist and was still receiving threats of bodily harm all the time.”

In the late 1960s, McLean’s early-career phase would continue to intersect with the country’s transitional tremors, leading up to the recording of his magnum opus in the early 1970s.

“By the time the song was written, there was much more violence in America then, cities on fire,” McLean said. “My first album was in Berkeley, California — ‘Tapestry’ in 1969. All the time guys would come to the sessions who’d been gassed. There were riots every day. And the police would use tear gas, and the sidemen would come and they were coughing and their eyes were red. So I was right in the middle of everything.”

For a decade everything in McLean’s life had unknowingly been building toward his writing “American Pie,” perhaps helping to produce its saga-channeling quality.

“It’s got a strange, bittersweet darkness to it, and at the same time, it’s rollicking and sort of happy. It’s odd to see thousands of people happily singing ‘that’ll be the day that I die,’ “ McLean said. “It’s just a combination of conflicts in many ways. And I think that’s America.

“See, America is a mess. Always is. We always have all these struggles. Everything goes along well, and then you have a Vietnam War, and suddenly a brother turns against another brother. Happens all the time.”

Fifty years later, he spoke on the conflict he still readily sees in the country

today, on tensions rooted in rampant factionalism on both formal sides of the American political aisle and in shades of the past.

“I was pretty left wing, but I don’t agree with political correctness at all. I don’t agree with canceling people. I think it’s like the 1950s when they had the blacklist,” said McLean, referencing the removal of a statue of Teddy Roosevelt on horseback flanked by an African American and Native American from the American Museum of Natural History as a recent example.

“This whole philosophy, really, of making Americans doubt everything that matters to them. That’s a way of undermining the country. It’s a way of undermining our self-esteem.”

McLean then referenced a passage from George Orwell’s “1984” describing a climate wherein “the party is always right” to speak on the polarizing nature of political discourse in 2022.

“That is different from what I was in the middle of when ‘American Pie’ was being written. The country was still more or less philosophically normal,” McLean said. “You had Democrats and Republicans, but we were all Americans. And you had the loyal opposition, but you didn’t have this hatred of the two parties.”

McLean lays blame for that particular issue at the feet of the 24-hour news cycle’s shift toward entertainment over substance.

“The left and the right have been fueled really by these radio and television programs, MSNBC and Fox, you know. Fox is hard right. And MSNBC, CNN are hard left,” McLean said.

“I’m not for anybody, but the whole time Trump was in power, I never saw them

say a good word about this guy in four years. At Fox, all they did was say good things about him, no matter what he did.

“So it’s ridiculous and it’s divided the country because people don’t read newspapers anymore. They don’t want detail or to look into things.”

To explain what he believes to be one of the main roots of America’s newfound age of disconnected divisiveness, McLean harked back a full 50 years, to his old “big song” about America.

“The idea of (‘American Pie’) is that music and politics influence each other while going forward. That’s the notion that I have ... and so it’s continuing to do that, even for these 50 years,” McLean said. “Now we have the music that is the right music for Donald Trump to be president. It’s empty. It’s egotistical. It’s ugly. It’s vapid. It’s somewhat mean. So the theory is continuing to play out.”



'American Pie' - Don McLean

Feb 3, 2022

"It's got a strange, bittersweet darkness to it, and at the same time, it's rollicking and sort of happy. It's odd to see thousands of people happily singing 'that'll be the day that I die.' It's just a combination of conflicts in many ways. And I think that's America."

Don McLean

about "American Pie"

Josh Ewers

Arts & Entertainment Reporter