

PAT CRAIG: ONE HAND CLAPPING

Relive the day the music died with 'Buddy'

IN THE AGE of rock, the day the music dies comes too frequently.

But the music never really dies -- the people who make it do.

Hip-hop heroes gunned down in limousines.

Earlier, it was cocaine giving Saturday night fever to dandies and sending them to disco inferno; still earlier, heroin and booze giving the dirt nod to Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and Brian Jones.

Drugs, drowning and the dizzying free-fall following fame take a constant toll on those who make music for young people.

It's always been that way, and by now has become a horrifying feature of pop culture. But it wasn't that way back 40-some years ago when rock was new and most of us were achingly innocent. And the death of three young rock 'n' roll kids in an Iowa plane crash truly made many feel the music had died.

J.P. Richardson, "The Big Bopper"; Richie Valens, not even out of his teens; and Buddy Holly, a West Texas musical genius at only 22, lost their lives in the Iowa crash. And it felt like some kids from the high school down the road had died tragically. Only this time, it meant big gaps in the youthful soundtrack.

"That'll be the day," sang Holly, "when I die."

The day, of course, wasn't to come that soon, and maybe that's why the music of the three young performers, particularly Holly, has remained so much in the forefront of popular music. Countless performers from the past five decades have said Buddy Holly and the Crickets inspired and influenced their music. Movies have been made about his life, and a musical about the days before the music died, "Buddy," is running at the Post Street Theatre in San Francisco.

"It seemed like the first real rock tragedy," says Travis Poelle, who donned the horn-rim glasses and dyed his hair black to play the title role. "It was like the dream's over."

This version of "Buddy" has been playing, with some differences in cast, for the past nine months, in Carmel, where it started, San Jose and Los Angeles. So when it opened here in previews earlier this week, it was already an experienced production.

The musical came from England, where it premiered in 1989 and enjoyed a 12-year run in the West End. It essentially covers Holly's brief career, and ends with a re-creation of the final concert in Clear Lake, Iowa.

"People think we may be lip-syncing, or that our instruments are turned off and somebody else is playing, but it's us; you get a real concert when you come to see us," says Poelle, who trained in classical voice and learned his Texas twang by listening to Holly records over and over. "It's interesting to see how the audience reacts. San Francisco has a pretty sophisticated theater-going audience that knows how it's supposed to act. So the first few numbers, they give us polite applause; then they realize they can dance and shout and then it's great. The audience really is another cast member in this."

For Poelle, who was born decades after Holly died, there are obviously no firsthand memories of the legendary singer.

"Before I got the part, I knew some of his songs," he says. "And, of course, it's hard to grow up in the United States and not at least have some subconscious knowledge of his songs and who he was."

After he won the part, Poelle watched every inch of footage he could find of Holly performing. He bought biographies of the singer and listened endlessly to his records and became impressed with what the young singer could do with the primitive equipment of his day.

Holly innovated overdubbing his voice, when the process had to be done mechanically, and he was the first to use strings in a rock 'n' roll arrangement.

"He died so young and really was deified," says Poelle. "When someone like that dies young, it does become sort of a romantic tragedy. Who knows what would have happened if he had lived. He definitely was going in a very progressive direction. I think he was starting in the direction of wanting to cultivate talent; he might have been producing."

Poelle's education in Holly history continued into the run of the show. He had the opportunity, for example, to chat with Holly's widow, Maria Elena.

"I was on the radio, and she was on the phone, and I sang 'True Love Ways' for her," he says. "She said, 'Are you single?' So I figured I passed the test."

Maria Elena Holly attended productions at both Carmel and San Jose, and Poelle met with her several times.

"She told me stories, lots of stories about how he proposed and what happened after he left the band," he says. "So I know a lot of intimate details that aren't in the show."

He was impressed with Holly's will do to his own kind of music. "Growing up in Lubbock, Texas, he had to fight against the pre-established culture of Texas and country-and-western music. He had that to push against and say 'No, I want to do something else.'"

And like most young performers of his era, Holly was mercilessly taken advantage of financially by producers and record companies -- performers then just wanted to make their music, and didn't think about royalties and writing fees, Poelle says. In fact, the reason Holly agreed to perform on the fatal winter tour was because he had no money.

What surprised Poelle was the fact that Holly seemed to know, instinctively, he wasn't going to live long.

"He asked his wife to marry him the first day they went out, and they got married three weeks later," he says. "And he recorded so many songs in just a few years. He had so many records in such a small amount of time, it was like he knew, subconsciously, he didn't have much time."

"Buddy" continues in previews through Tuesday, with opening night Wednesday in the theater at 450 Post St. Tickets, at \$35-\$63, may be reserved by calling 415-321-2900 or <http://www.buddyrocks.com/>.