

Big Bopper: Passenger Number 3

By Tim Wilton

Chartered by three men who had each paid \$36 for the one-way flight from Mason City, Iowa to Moorehead, Minnesota, the red Beechcraft B35 Bonanza was hardly recognizable as it eerily lay still against a barbed wire fence.

After skidding and rolling nearly 600 feet through the northern end of Albert Juhl's frozen stubbled cornfield in the early morning darkness of February 3, 1959, the planned two-hour flight tragically ended less than ten minutes after its 1 a.m. take-off.

A single wing stuck straight up in the air from its balled up fuselage, countless metal parts and pieces were scattered about for hundreds of feet, and its signature V-shaped tail was shattered. Encased in the wrecked Bonanza was the young pilot, Roger Peterson. On the ground less than twenty feet away were the lifeless bodies of passengers **Charles Holley** and **Richard Valenzuela**. In the adjacent cornfield beyond the barbed wire fence was the broken body of third passenger **J. P. Richardson**.

The wreckage and the bodies were not found until nearly nine hours after the crash and according to the county coroner, all four men died instantly from gross trauma to the brain. Additionally, investigators concluded that the crash was due to a combination of poor weather conditions and pilot error, noting that the Bonanza's pilot was not yet certified for nighttime instrumentation.

For many music historians this was rock music's first great tragedy as it lost one of its greatest innovators in **Buddy Holly**, and one of its most promising crossover artists in **Ritchie Valens**. Both have been lionized by Hollywood in big budget movies, and Holly is still regarded as one of the greatest contributors to American popular music whose influence still resonates greatly today.

However, lost in all of the posthumous accolades and tributes directed at Holly and Valens is the largely unknown story behind the third member of rock's original tragic trinity, J. P. Richardson, aka "**The Big Bopper.**"

Born in Sabine Pass on October 24, 1930 Jiles Perry Richardson, Jr. was the oldest of three sons born to oil field worker and driller Jiles Perry Richardson, Sr. and his wife Elise. Shortly after J.P. was born, the family moved to Port Arthur, and then eventually settled in Beaumont, where he graduated from Beaumont High School in 1949.

Preferring to be called "**Jape**" by his friends and family, Richardson enrolled at Lamar College to study pre-law, and also joined the school band and chorus. While at Lamar, Richardson worked a part-time shift at the local AM radio station, **KTRM** and within a couple of years, he dropped out of Lamar after his station manager promoted him to a full time slot on the air.

On April 18, 1952 Richardson married **Adrienne Joy Fryon**, a Louisiana native. In early 1953, Richardson was promoted to supervisor of announcers for KTRM, and later that year in December, he and his wife welcomed their first child into the world, **Debra Joy**.

Richardson's quick ascent at KTRM was interrupted in March 1955 when he was drafted into the Army. After basic training at Fort Ord, Calif., Richardson was stationed at Fort Bliss near El Paso as a radar instructor for two years until his honorable discharge in March 1957. While in the Army, Richardson began honing his skills as a songwriter, scribbling down lyrics and ideas, all the while making big plans for the future.

Upon his return to Beaumont, Richardson took over the "Dishwasher's Serenade" shift at KTRM, which ran from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. However, one of the station's main sponsors recognized Richardson's talent for talk and suggested to station owner **Jack Neil** to give him a new time slot. By this time, a new dance craze called The Bop was sweeping across high school and college campuses, and Neil wanted to capitalize on teenagers' growing demand for rhythm and blues.

Having been given the 3 to 6 p.m. slot at KTRM, the husky, shy, crew-cut, chain-smoking Richardson became "The Big Bopper", a jive-talking bigger than life alter ego who played the latest and greatest in R&B music and had a devoted audience of listeners. In May 1957, Richardson broke the record for continuous on-air broadcasting when he spent a total of five days, two hours and eight minutes straight playing records. During this record marathon, Richardson spun 1,821 records, showered during five-minute newscasts, lost 35 pounds, and reportedly was paid \$746.50 for his overtime.

Despite the notoriety brought on by The Big Bopper persona, Richardson stayed grounded by doting on his wife and young daughter at home, while seriously making a go at writing songs and playing his guitar whenever he had a few minutes to himself. It was during this time that he would write both *White Lightning* and *Running Bear*. *White Lightning* would later go on to be **George Jones'** first number one country hit (1959), while *Running Bear* would become a number one hit for Port Arthur native **Johnny Preston** by the end of 1959.

Houston music impresario **Harold "Pappy" Dailey** "discovered" Richardson and quickly signed him to Mercury Records at the end of 1957. His first single, *Beggar to a King*, did not make an impression on the charts. Richardson then cut a novelty record, *The Purple People Eater Meets The Witch Doctor*, for D Records, a Mercury Records imprint owned by Dailey, but it also failed to register on the charts. However, the record's b-side did stand out--not as a novelty record, which it was--but instead as a legitimate coming-out-party for the larger than life Big Bopper. Hastily put together by Richardson in the recording studio, *Chantilly Lace* impressed Mercury so much that they bought it and released it in the summer of 1958.

Chantilly Lace, with its distinct introduction and undeniably racy lyrics (it is arguably the very first booty call to ever be put down on vinyl), reached number six on the 1958 pop charts, spent 22 weeks in the Top 40, and was certified gold after selling more than a million copies.

The single's success enabled Richardson to take some time off from KTRM and go on the road to promote *Lace* as well as other songs he had written and was planning to record. For Richardson, touring

offered a quick and lucrative paycheck each week to send back home to his wife, who was pregnant with their second child. Reportedly, Richardson had a keen business mind and had confided in his wife that he planned on milking his new found music success for a couple of years, earning and saving enough money so that he can buy his own radio station. And according to music historian **Gill Griggs**, Richardson was the first to coin the term "music video." Furthermore, in a January 1959 interview with *Disc Magazine*, Richardson matter-of-factly stated, "...it will ultimately become standard practice for every recording artist to make a film of himself performing his record." The Big Bopper had already filmed three of his own songs, and had planned more.

That same month, Richardson signed on to co-headline the "**Winter Dance Party**" music tour with Buddy Holly and his newly reformed **Crickets**, **Dion and the Belmonts**, and Ritchie Valens. Scheduled to play 24 dates in three weeks, the Winter Dance Party was a grueling tour of one-night stands in far-flung midwestern cities that dotted the Snow Belt. However, Richardson was offered a princely sum of \$800 a week to perform just a few of his songs each night, and so he readily accepted the gig.

Because it was put together with very little forethought, the Winter Dance Party was a logistical nightmare for its performers and crew. The bus they traveled on kept breaking down and its heating system was not equipped to handle the extreme cold. Tour drummer **Carl Bunch** suffered frostbite on his feet and had to be admitted to a hospital. While Bunch was laid up, Holly and Valens each took turns playing the drums during the tour. By the time the Winter Dance Party reached Clear Lake, Iowa, Richardson had developed a severe case of the flu.

Incidentally, Clear Lake was never intended to be a stop on the Winter Dance Party tour. But the promoters saw an open date that could be filled, and offered the show to the manager of **The Surf Ballroom** in Clear Lake. He eagerly accepted, and the show got booked for February 2.

Cold, tired and frustrated by the inadequacies of the tour bus, Holly and a couple of his band mates decided that, after the Clear Lake gig ended, they would go to neighboring Mason City and charter a plane to fly them to their next show on the tour in Moorehead, Minnesota, which was several hundred

frozen miles away. Roger Peterson, a local pilot who flew for Dwyer Flying Service at Mason City Municipal Airport, arranged the flight.

Upon learning after the Clear Lake show that Holly had indeed chartered a private plane, the very ill Richardson asked Cricket bassist and fellow Texan **Waylon Jennings** if he would be willing to give up his seat. Jennings obliged and upon learning what he had done, Holly jokingly teased his bassist, telling him, "I hope your ol' bus freezes up!" to which Jennings jokingly replied, "Well, I hope your damn plane crashes!"

Meanwhile, Valens had never flown in an airplane and had asked Holly's guitarist **Tommy Allsup** if he would be willing to flip a coin for the remaining seat. Valens called heads and won the remaining seat next to Holly and Richardson.

Despite the fact the chartered Beechcraft B35 Bonanza was technically a three-passenger plane, the fourth headliner of the Winter Dance Party tour, Dion DiMucci, was approached about joining Holly, Valens and Richardson. However, Dion balked at paying the \$36 fare. Growing up in a household that struggled to make ends meet, Dion could recall the countless arguments his parents had about the \$36 they paid each month for the small apartment they rented. Dion just could not bring himself to pay what amounted to be a whole month's rent for a two-hour plane ride.

The last person to see Holly, Valens, Richardson and Peterson alive was the manager of The Surf Ballroom, **Carroll Anderson**, who drove the three musicians to the Mason City Municipal Airport.

Jerry Dwyer, owner of Dwyer Flying Service, recounted to the Federal Aviation Agency that he watched the B35 Bonanza take off around 1 a.m. Less than five minutes later, he noticed the lights of the plane started to descend from the sky to the ground. Dwyer thought this was merely an optical illusion due to the curvature of the horizon and basically thought nothing of it.

Peterson promised Dwyer that he would file his flight plan once the plane was airborne, but a call to the tower was never made. Dwyer finally contacted the authorities around 3:30 that morning after the airport in Fargo, ND reported that the plane never arrived.

Retracing Peterson's route that morning in another plane, Dwyer discovered the wreckage around 9:15 a.m. in Albert Juhl's cornfield, approximately 15 miles northwest of the Mason City Municipal Airport. By the end of the day, news of Dwyer's sad discovery made headlines around the world, while at the same time unintentionally spawning a major cottage industry for music historians, mythologists and conspiracy theorists.

In addition to the well-known movie treatments given Holly and Valens in the last couple of decades, **Don McLean's** sprawling 1971 musical tribute to Holly's death (and the loss of America's innocence), *American Pie*, still receives major airplay around the world. As a result, even today's most casual music fan knows the stories of Ritchie Valens and in particular, Buddy Holly. But somehow forgotten in all of this music lore is the life and times of J.P. Richardson, "The Big Bopper."

At the time of his death, the 28 year-old Richardson had been building a recording studio in his Beaumont home and had plans to buy a radio station in Denver, Colorado. He had more than twenty songs written down waiting to be recorded by him and others. His son, **Jay P. Richardson**, was born a few months after the fatal crash. Today, he tours the country as "**The Big Bopper, Jr.**" in an oldies revue that travels the same circuit as the Winter Dance Party of 1959.

Finally, it is important to know that despite McLean's earnest intentions and heart wrenching lyrics, the music never really died that cold February morning in Albert Juhl's cornfield. If anything, it simply went on without three of its brightest stars.

For more information on The Big Bopper, visit his son's website at www.officialbigbopper.com. Another well-researched site can be found at www.findadeath.com.

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

Despite recorded first hand accounts of that day's tragic events, some of the myths born out of the February 3, 1959 plane crash tragedy continue to persist today. Among these myths:

--The plane was named "American Pie." As a matter of fact, the Beechcraft B35 Bonanza, tail number N3794N, never had a name.

--The coin flip between Valens and Allsup took place at the airport just before takeoff. Actually, local Winter Dance Party emcee **Bob Hale** presided over the flip at The Surf Ballroom. Valens called heads and sealed his place in the tragedy. Years later, Allsup would open a dance club named "The Heads Up Saloon." And contrary to the myth popularized in the movie, *La Bamba*, Valens was not sick when he won the coin flip with Allsup--only Richardson had the flu.

--The plane took off in a blinding snowstorm. According to the Air Traffic Communication Center report that originated out of the Mason City Municipal Airport at 12:58 a.m., the wind was south, gusting to 20 miles per hour, and the temperature was 18 degrees. The amount of snow falling from midnight to 6:30 a.m. on February 3rd was listed as "trace." There was no blinding snowstorm.

--There was foul play on board the plane. Actually, Holly was known by his friends and band mates to carry a .22 caliber revolver in his overnight bag while on tour. When his gun was found in Juhl's thawed cornfield later on that spring, many people theorized that Holly might have had a disagreement with the pilot or even one of his co-passengers, and perhaps the gun was fired in-flight. Plane owner Jerry Dwyer even insisted at the time that his pilot had to have been "incapacitated" when the plane went down, thus fueling the rumor of foul play. However, the gun was inspected by authorities and was confirmed that it was not fired.

--Lastly, a rumor had circulated for a long time that Richardson might have initially survived the crash, only to crawl away from the wreckage before finally dying from exposure. This might explain why his body was found a greater distance from the plane than the others. To finally dispel this rumor, Jay Richardson had his father's body exhumed earlier this year so that a definitive autopsy could be performed. Well-known forensic anthropologist and head of the famed "Body Farm" at the University of

Tennessee, **Dr. Bill Bass**, performed the autopsy and concluded that Richardson did indeed die instantly from massive trauma.