

## Unsolved Mystery: The Strange Death of Bobby Fuller

by Tim Wilton

**I**t was a hot July afternoon in Hollywood, California, exactly forty years ago, when the battered, gas soaked body of Robert Gaston Fuller was found dead lying across the front seat of his mother's car. Nearby were a book of matches and a rubber siphoning tube, while an empty gas can laid in the back seat. Crime scene investigators quickly dismissed the case as a *suicide*. A few months later, the findings were changed to read *accidental death due to inhalation of gasoline*. And just as quickly: Case closed.

Such a tragic ending as this was typical in 1960's Hollywood, the promised land of make believe and eternal sunshine. Of sudden fame and great fortune. And of broken promises and shattered dreams.

However, the tragic death of Robert Gaston Fuller--Bobby Fuller--was not typical, nor was it make-believe. Nor was it a suicide, or even an accident, according to his friends and family. At best, Bobby Fuller's death is still an unsolved homicide that never received its due diligence, therefore begging the most obvious questions:

(a) Why would a guy who had so much talent *and* opportunity kill himself by drinking gasoline?

(b) Who killed Bobby Fuller?

Born in 1942 in Goose Creek, Texas, to Lawson and Loraine Fuller, Bobby and his older brother by three years, Randy, began playing with musical instruments as kids growing up in Salt

Lake City, Utah, where his father had moved them shortly after Bobby was born. In 1956, Lawson Fuller moved the family back to Texas, this time to El Paso, and it was here in west Texas that Bobby Fuller would start to make his mark in music while in the very large shadow cast by his hero, Buddy Holly, another west Texan.

Resolving to make music his life's pursuit, Bobby quit college in the fall of 1960 and took a job selling guitars and amplifiers in a music store, all the while building a solid reputation in and around El Paso as a drummer. He had also taken up the guitar that Randy had abandoned while he was away at school and taught himself how to play. Additionally, Bobby was putting together a home studio in his parents' living room that utilized what many believed to be the world's first backyard echo chamber.

In February 1961, the body of Fuller's estranged half-brother, Jack, was found murdered. Friends said that this event had impressed upon Bobby the brief nature of life on earth, and may explain his hell-bent-for-leather quest to succeed in music. By 1962, he was recording his own original compositions as well as covers by Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran, with his brother on bass, Jim Reese on rhythm guitar, and Dalton Powell on drums. And although all of the records by the band so far had been released under Bobby's name alone, the band was finally finding its groove and had been enjoying great regional success on stage, on the radio and in El Paso-area record bins.

Seeking fame outside of El Paso was a no-brainer for the ever-self promoting musician. Bobby lined up a month's worth of gigs on the west coast with the hope of attracting major label interest. The only label that showed any interest was Del-Fi Records, run by Bob Keane and best known for launching the career of the late Ritchie Valens, and producing "surf music" records. Turned down by Keane, who had challenged Fuller to come back with something that would "knock him out," Bobby went back to his home studio in El Paso with his band mates and subsequently launched his own record label, Exeter Records.

Exeter released three Bobby Fuller singles in 1964, as well as records by other El Paso acts including the Sherwoods and Los Paisanos. Of the three singles Fuller put out, it was the second

one that started to gain momentum: his (home recorded) version of Sonny Curtis's *I Fought The Law*. Sonny Curtis was a member of Buddy Holly's band, The Crickets, and had written *I Fought The Law* for an album they had released years earlier, *The Crickets In Style*.

With tapes in hand, Bobby reintroduced his band to Bob Keane at Del-Fi Records in Hollywood, and they were signed on the spot with the promise of having free reign in the Del-Fi studios and a well-oiled distribution chain to get their music out into the public's hands.

About four months after its release, *I Fought The Law* by the Bobby Fuller Four had entered the Top 10 music chart, and eventually became one of a handful of rock songs that clearly defined the rebellious attitude of rock music in all its wretched glory. The lyrics speak for their selves:

*"Robbin' people with a... BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! ...six-gun,*

*I fought the law and the law won, I fought the law and the law won..."*

And it was only five months later that Bobby Fuller, aged 23 and at the height of his still-flourishing career, was found dead in the front seat of his mother's Oldsmobile, *in broad daylight*, less than a hundred yards away from the apartment that he had shared with his brother Randy.

According to documents and press releases that were put out by Del-Fi Records, there were numerous mistakes made by the Hollywood division police officers on that day, July 18, 1966, when they found Fuller. These documents had even suggested a possible police cover-up.

When Fuller was found, the doors of the Oldsmobile were unlocked, the windows were closed tight, and no keys to the vehicle were found inside. Upon arrival, police officers had found a book of matches on the seat next to Fuller. And according to an eyewitness, Fuller had traces of dried blood around his chin and mouth, and that his face and chest were bruised as if he had been beaten. His right hand still clenching the siphon hose, Fuller was drenched in gas from head to toe.

An empty gas can that was found in the back seat was thrown away by one of the policeman, apparently thinking that it was not vital to the investigation. The car was never dusted for fingerprints, nor was it impounded and/or thoroughly searched by the authorities.

When an off-hand remark to the local press at the scene was made alleging that it was a "clear case of suicide," the news outlets ran with it as the official findings on the scene, despite the fact that the final coroner's autopsy report stated that Fuller's death was accidental due to inhalation of gasoline. Also included in the report was the comment that Fuller had been despondent over his recent job situation.

However, a Stanford University crime professor had reported in 1966 "...no one has ever successfully killed themselves by drinking gasoline...one could not be able to keep it down." The report concluded that a person would simply throw up before they could die from it. Additionally, an eyewitness had stated that the coroner had found traces of gasoline in Fuller's lungs, proving that he could not have swallowed it.

The autopsy remained unchanged, yet wild rumors and even more wild theories swirled about Fuller's 'accidental death'.

It was known in the closed knit circles of Hollywood that Bobby enjoyed experimenting with LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs. And so a rumor had gotten out that Bobby had overdosed at a Malibu beach party the night before he was found. The people at the party were celebrities, and to avoid a scandal, they poured gasoline down his throat, saturated his hair and clothes, and had planned to torch the car and make it look like a mob slaying. The car was never torched, no drugs were found in his body, and there were no traces of swallowed gas.

Another theory describes Fuller's sad fate as a probable crime of passion.

At the time of his death, Fuller had been seeing a young woman named Melanie, whose ex-boyfriend was the jealous type, and was a club owner with supposed ties to the mob. After Fuller's death, Melanie disappeared and had not been heard from in years. When she finally surfaced, she denied any knowledge of Fuller's death.

Still, other mysterious circumstances took place in the days following the discovery of Fuller's body.

Randy Fuller and the band's road manager, Rick Stone, were nearly run off the road one evening by a car that had been following them. And a private investigator, hired by Fuller's parents and Bob Keane, quit the case after a few days when a would-be assassin shot at him.

The music business in 1960's Hollywood was rife with ties to organized crime and Faustian-like deals, and so the premature demise of Bobby Fuller and the suspicious circumstances surrounding it have stirred conspiracy buffs to simply (and generically) blame the mob for his 'accidental' death.

Although Fuller's death is still unsolved after forty years, it is important to note that while he was alive, he made important and provocative music that is still being enjoyed today, and for years *I Fought The Law* had been covered by the likes of The Clash, The Dead Kennedys, and Green Day, as well as being a short lived anthem for Apple's iTunes, and had influenced dozens of rockers from Bruce Springsteen and John Mellancamp to Billy Idol and Lou Reed.

For further evidence, be sure to check out the Del-Fi release, *Never To Be Forgotten*, a 3-CD collection of their complete official recordings that also includes many unreleased songs and alternate versions of their charted hits.