

Don McLean

Career Biography

Don McLean was born on October 2, 1945, in New Rochelle, New York, to Elizabeth and Donald McLean. By the age of five he had developed an interest in all forms of music and would spend hours listening to the radio and records that were around the house. Childhood asthma meant that Don missed long periods of school and while he slipped back in his studies, his love of music was allowed to flourish. He would often perform shows for family and friends.

As a teenager, he purchased his first guitar (a Harmony F Hole with a sunburst finish) from the House of Music in New Rochelle and took voice lessons paid for by his sister. These lessons combined with running, walking, and swimming, helped Don to develop breath control, which would later allow him to sing long, continuous phrases, in songs such as "Crying", without taking a breath. The exercise also meant his asthma improved.

In 1961, Don took his only vacation with his father – a trip to Washington D.C. Sadly, a few months later his father died. Don was just 15 years old.

By this time, Don's musical focus was on folk music thanks, in part, to The Weavers landmark 1955 recording "Live at Carnegie Hall". Don was determined to become a professional musician and singer and, as a 16-year-old, he was already making contacts in the business. After getting his home number from the telephone directory, Don phoned Fred Hellerman and later, Erik Darling. Don and Erik became friends and Don visited his apartment in New York.

Through Erik Darling, Don recorded his first studio sessions with Lisa Kindred and was invited to join a group with Darling and the other members of the Rooftop Singers. However, even at that time, Don saw himself as a troubadour and turned down the offer.

While at Villanova University in 1963 (he stayed for just four months), Don met and became friends with Jim Croce and President Kennedy was assassinated.

After leaving Villanova, Don was managed by Harold Leventhal Management. This started a six-year period during which time Don performed at venues like The Bitter End and Gaslight Café in New York, the Newport Folk Festival, The Cellar Door in Washington, D.C., The Main Point in Philadelphia, the Troubadour and Ash Grove in Los Angeles and over forty colleges throughout New York and New England. He appeared alongside artists like Herbie Mann, Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry, Melanie, Steppenwolf, Pete Seeger, Janis Ian, Josh White, Ten Wheel Drive, The James Gang and others.

Don also found time to attend night school at Iona College and, in 1968, graduated with a Bachelors degree in Business Administration but turned down a prestigious scholarship to Columbia University Graduate School.

While singing at The Caffe Lena, the New York State Council for the Arts invited Don to become their Hudson River Troubadour. He accepted and spent the summer traveling from town to town in the Hudson Valley, giving talks about the environment and singing songs for whoever would turn up to listen.

A year later, Don was a member of the first crew of the Sloop Clearwater. With Pete Seeger, they

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travelled the Atlantic seaboard giving concerts at each port and being featured in the news wherever they went.

In 1969, Don recorded his first album, "Tapestry", in Berkeley, CA. The student riots were going on outside the studio door as Don was singing "And I Love You So" inside. The album was first released by Mediarts and attracted good reviews and achieved some commercial success. It succeeded in transforming Don McLean from an unknown to an underground sensation. FM radio loved the "Tapestry" album and very quickly, Don became a headliner in nightclubs and colleges across the country.

The transition to international stardom began in 1971 with the release of "American Pie". "American Pie" was recorded on 26th May 1971 and a month later received its first radio airplay on New York's WNEW-FM and WPLJ-FM to mark the closing of The Fillmore East, the historic rock & roll concert venue.

Thirty years later, "American Pie" was voted number 5 in a poll of the 365 "Songs of the Century" compiled by the Recording Industry Association of America and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The top five were:

"Over the Rainbow" by Judy Garland

"White Christmas" by Bing Crosby

"This Land Is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie

"Respect" by Aretha Franklin;

and "American Pie" by Don McLean.

"American Pie" was issued as a double A-side single in November 1971 and charted within a month. Because of Don McLean's FM-underground career which started with "Tapestry," the "American Pie" album was played extensively on FM radio. This caused AM radio to play the full eight-minute song at the #1 position. "American Pie" then became the longest song ever to become #1. The single "American Pie" and the album "American Pie" were an international sensation, causing Don McLean to become an international superstar. Every line of the song was analyzed time and time again to find the real meaning. Don refused to sanction any of the many interpretations.

The second single, "Vincent", charted on 18th March 1972 going on to reach US#12, UK#1. The "American Pie" album remained at #1 in the UK for 7 weeks in 1972, and in the UK charts for 53 consecutive weeks.

In the wake of "American Pie", Don became a major worldwide concert attraction and was able to call upon material not only from his two albums but from his extensive repertoire of American popular music, 1950s rock & roll and folk music, in addition to the complete catalogues of singers such as Buddy Holly, Nat King Cole, Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Pete Seeger, and Frank Sinatra, just to name a few.

The years spent playing gigs in small clubs and coffee houses in the 60s paid off with sell-out concert performances worldwide. Don's first concert at the Albert Hall in 1972 was a triumphant success.

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Concert footage and other video clips played to McLean songs formed the award winning 1972 film "Till Tomorrow" produced by Bob Elfstrom (a project they had started working on in 1968).

With all this success, "Tapestry" was reissued by United Artists and charted in the USA on 12th February 1972 reaching #111 and the top-15 in the United Kingdom; it includes two of Don's most famous songs: "And I Love You So" and "Castles in the Air".

Don's third album, simply entitled "Don McLean", included the song "The Pride Parade" that provides an insight into Don's immediate reaction to stardom. Don told "Melody Maker" magazine in 1973 that "Tapestry" was an album by someone previously concerned with external situations. "American Pie" combines externals with internals and the resultant success of that album makes the third one ("Don McLean") entirely introspective".

The fourth album, "Playin' Favorites" became a top-40 hit in the UK in 1973 and included the classic, "Mountains of Mourne" and Buddy Holly's "Everyday", a live rendition of which returned Don to the UK singles chart. McLean said, "The last album ("Don McLean") was a study in depression whereas the new one ("Playin' Favorites") is almost the quintessence of optimism, with a feeling of "Wow, I just woke up from a bad dream".

1973 was another great year for Don McLean the songwriter and Don McLean the performer. Perry Como recorded "And I Love You So" from the "Tapestry" album and took it to the UK top-5 and American top-30. Como's version was nominated for a Grammy but was beaten by "Killing Me Softly With His Song" sung by Roberta Flack and written by Norman Gimbel and Charles Fox apparently after Lori Leiberman had attended a McLean concert at the LA Troubadour and heard McLean sing "Empty Chairs". At the time, Gimbel and Fox were writing songs for Lori Leiberman. Leiberman is also a songwriter and the notes that she made after seeing McLean contain many of the phrases included in the lyrics of song. The notebook was taken from her by Norman Gimbel and was never returned. Lori Leiberman has always maintained that McLean was the inspiration for "Killing Me Softly With His Song".

Throughout the 1970s, Don McLean remained an in-demand concert performer. In 1975, 100,000 fans attended his London Hyde Park concert, second only to The Rolling Stones at that time. 1977, saw a brief liaison with Arista Records that yielded the "Prime Time" album. In 1978, Don's career began again in Nashville where he would work with Elvis Presley's backing singers, "The Jordanaires" and many of Elvis's musicians. The result was "Chain Lightning" and the UK No 1, "Crying". The early 1980s saw further chart successes with "Since I Don't Have You", a new recording of "Castles in the Air" and "It's Just the Sun".

In 1987, the release of the country-based "Love Tracks" album gave rise to the hit singles "Love in My Heart" (top-10 in Australia), "Can't Blame the Wreck on the Train" (US country #49) and "Eventually".

Four years later, Don hit the UK top-10 with "American Pie" prompting many appearances on radio and TV including a one-hour special with Nicky Campbell on BBC radio 1, and the recording of the Manchester concert for video release in 1993. A favorite memory for many fans is Don performing

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"American Pie" live on "Top of the Pops" in 1991.

In 1992, many previously unreleased songs became available on "Favorites and Rarities" while "Don McLean Classics" featured new studio recordings of "And I Love You So", "Vincent" and "American Pie". In 1994, Don appeared at the Buddy Holly tribute in the USA, and "Guns and Roses" took a replica of Don's version of "Since I Don't Have You" (a US top-20 hit for Don in April 1981) to the UK top-10. In 1995 "American Pie" returned to the top-40; this time in "techno-music" format performed by European artist, Just Luis.

In 1996, "Killing Me Softly With His Song", performed by The Fugees, was one of the biggest selling singles of the year.

Don McLean credits his 1997 performance of "American Pie" at Garth Brooks' Central Park concert (attended by over 500,000 people) as the beginning of his third career comeback. According to Don, his first "comeback" had been the release of "Vincent" and the second, the North American release and massive success of Roy Orbison's "Crying", which foreshadows the return of Orbison to major stardom.

"Brooks was joined on stage by two surprise guest stars, Billy Joel and Don McLean, who brought down the house with an acoustic rendition of "American Pie." (CNN, 1997) Video clips from this moment were used exclusively for media coverage around the world.

Two years later Garth Brooks repaid the favor by appearing as a special guest (with Nanci Griffith) on Don's first ever American TV special, broadcast on PBS and now available as the "Starry Starry Night" video, DVD and CD.

A month later, Don McLean wound up the 20th century by performing "American Pie" for President Clinton. McLean performed the song in front of the Lincoln Memorial, facing the Washington Memorial to 600,000 people. This is the same place McLean visited with his father in 1961. President Clinton personally invited McLean to have dinner at the White House for individuals who had influenced the twentieth century.

In 2000, Madonna recorded a cover version of "American Pie" that on release in the UK entered the official singles chart at number 1 and made the US top-30 on air play points alone. This prompted EMI to release a new "Best of Don McLean" CD that gave Don his first top-30 album chart entry in almost 20 years.

McLean said: "Madonna is a colossus in the music industry and she is going to be considered an important historical figure as well. She is a fine singer, a fine songwriter and record producer, and she has the power to guarantee success with any song she chooses to record. It is a gift for her to have recorded 'American Pie.' I have heard her version and I think it is sensual and mystical. I also feel that she's chosen autobiographical verses that reflect her career and personal history. I hope it will cause people to ask what's happening to music in America. I have received many gifts from God but this is the first time I have ever received a gift from a goddess."

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"American Pie" was named one of the Top 5 Songs of the 20th Century by the RIAA, and in 2002 was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

Even more surprising than Madonna having a hit with a Don McLean song, was George Michael's decision in 2003 to record "The Grave", from the American Pie album, as a protest against the Iraq war. He recorded the song for MTV and performed it live on Top of the Pops.

Don said: "I am proud of George Michael for standing up for life and sanity. I am delighted that he chose a song of mine to express these feelings. We must remember that the Wizard is really a cowardly old man hiding behind a curtain with a loud microphone. It takes courage and a song to pull the curtain open and expose him. Good Luck George."

The 21st Century has seen a number of new honors for Don McLean and his music. Iona College conferred an honorary doctorate on Don in 2001 and, in February 2002, "American Pie" was finally inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

In 2004 Don McLean was inaugurated into the National Academy of Popular Music Songwriters' Hall of Fame and in 2007 he shared his life story in Alan Howard's biography, titled "Killing Us Softly With His Songs".

In 2009 his studio album, "Addicted to Black", was released and in 2010 he returned to Europe for a seven nation tour, including the Royal Albert Hall, London on May 7th.

2011 has seen another tour of UK and Ireland, including a sensational appearance at Europe's largest music festival, Glastonbury.

In February 2012 McLean won the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards Life Time Achievement award.[49] In March 2012, the PBS network broadcast a feature-length documentary about the life and music of McLean called Don McLean: American Troubadour produced by four-time Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Jim Brown.

In 2015, one of McLean's four handwritten manuscripts of the lyrics to "American Pie" was auctioned by Christies, selling for just over \$1.2 Million.

2017 brought a huge honor when "American Pie" was inducted into the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry, joining less than 500 works including "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," other classical music compositions, infamous live broadcasts, and similar recordings.

In 2018, McLean released his 19th studio album, *Botanical Gardens*, to critical acclaim. Arguably one of his most reflective recordings to date. As he characterized it, "The inspiration for the project started years ago when I would walk in the beautiful gardens in Sydney, Australia near the Opera House. I would dream young dreams and it was a comfort and an inspiration. I was always young inside, like we all are, and I felt it again there."

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Don McLean continues to receive honors for his musical discography. Throughout his career artists including Garth Brooks, Madonna, Drake, Josh Groban, Weird Al Yankovic, and others have recorded songs written by the Songwriter Hall of Fame member. In October 2019, McLean was bestowed with plaques certified by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) for gold, platinum, and multi-platinum sales in the United States, as well as presentations from Australia, Austria, Belgium, France, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom were bestowed on McLean.

2019 honored Don with a star on the Las Vegas Walkway of Stars and his song "And I Love You So" was the theme for Prince Harry and Megan Markle's wedding.

"As a songwriter your songs are like your children, and you are hopeful everyone loves them as much as you do, but rarely is that the case. I am so grateful that songs I have written have touched so many lives and have been recorded by so many great artists," said McLean. "Today's presentation has truly blown me away as I never realized the success that my songs have brought to these amazing people."

Don landed a new recording contract with Time Life in 2020, with whom he released 11 albums containing 173 tracks as well as a new album "Still Playin' Favorites". 2021 saw Don's "American Pie" featured in the Avengers' *Black Widow* and the new Tom Hanks movie *Finch*. Don received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, celebrated the 50th anniversary of "American Pie," recorded a version of the song with a cappella group *Home Free*, resulting in the video which was #1 for 8 weeks on the country music video charts, a children's book has been written, and much more!

McLean continues to license his music and lyrics to commercials, movies, and fellow artists. McLean's body of work is published through Benny Bird Company, Inc and administered through Universal Music Publishing. Don McLean owns five trademarks. They are: Don McLean, American Pie, The Day The Music Died, Bye-Bye, Miss American Pie, and Starry Starry Night.