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KATHERINE RODEGHIER/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

## WHERE THE MUSIC LIVES ON

Rock music lost a planeload of talent one cold night in Iowa long ago, but Clear Lake still sways with tunes. **Page 3**

Chicago Tribune  
**TRAVEL**

# The music didn't really die



KATHERINE RODEGHIER/PHOTOS FOR CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Oversize frames echoing Buddy Holly's signature glasses show visitors the entrance to the Memorial Site, marking where he died in a plane crash north of Clear Lake, Iowa, in 1959.

## ... it's still alive in Clear Lake, Iowa

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER  
Chicago Tribune

CLEAR LAKE, Iowa — The goofy glasses got to me. Oversize, coal-black frames fastened to a fence post along a dusty gravel road in northern Iowa seemed funny and sad at the same time.

Funny because their cartoonish outline felt so out of place on the edge of a cornfield. Sad because they marked the entrance to the site of a fatal plane crash on a winter night in 1959.

Clear Lake has a reputation for two things: 1. the lake, Iowa's third largest, measuring 12 miles by 2.5 miles, with two state parks, beaches, campgrounds and excursions on a paddle-wheeler; and 2. the place where the music died, as songwriter Don McLean so eloquently relayed in "American Pie."

The hit song references the death of rock 'n' roll greats Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson following their performance Feb. 2, 1959, at Clear Lake's Surf Ballroom. The dance hall still stands, and music blasts from the stage in a couple of concerts a month.

It stays true to its original ocean beach club decor of palm trees, blue sky and crashing waves. The cloud machine still works — sometimes.

Designated a landmark by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Surf was among the first of the big-band ballrooms to embrace rock 'n' roll in the 1950s with appearances by the Everly Brothers, Little Richard, Roy Orbison and Ricky Nelson. Elvis, however, never entered the building.

In addition to hosting evening concerts, the Surf Ballroom & Museum opens during the day for fans who want to see its Wall of Fame with rock star memorabilia and the original 50-by-90-foot maple dance floor flanked by rows of vintage six-person booths. Visitors lovingly walk up to the stage and the pay phone Holly used to call his wife on the night he died. In the graffiti-covered Green Room, "American Pie" lyrics scrawled on the wall have been signed by McLean himself. His original manuscript of the song sold at auction in the spring for \$1.2 million.

As the song goes, the loss of those three artists left a hole in the soul of rock 'n' roll. The three, along with Dion and the Belmonts,



Images of Ritchie Valens, Buddy Holly and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson hang above booths in the Surf Ballroom.



Clear Lake has a long history as a resort town, thanks to boating and beaches. More than half of the homes are owned by nonresidents.



The current Surf opened in 1948. It's designated a landmark by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Frankie Sardo, Waylon Jennings, Tommy Allsup and Carl Bunch, were on a 24-day tour of the Midwest that had been one of the Midwest's worst winters, and the heat on their tour bus had failed. Holly had had enough of the cold, so he chartered a small plane to take him and bandmates Jennings and Allsup to Fargo, N.D., their next stop.

But Valens said he'd never flown on a small plane, so he asked Allsup for his seat. They flipped a coin, and Valens won the toss. Richardson had the flu, so Jennings gave him his seat. When Holly heard about the switch, he poked fun at Jennings, saying he hoped his bus would freeze up. Jennings continued the

ribbing, saying he hoped Holly's plane would crash, a flippant remark that Jennings said long haunted him.

The plane took off from the Mason City Municipal

Airport that stormy night and crashed less than six miles away in a field north of Clear Lake. Debris scattered over 300 yards. All three, and pilot Roger Peterson, were ejected and died instantly.

**Iowa once had more ballrooms per capita than any other state, and the Surf is among the few that remain.**

barbed-wire fence to the memorial: An inscribed stainless-steel guitar and three stainless-steel records stand on the spot where the plane came to rest. Visitors leave trinkets and coins, some in foreign

currency. Three glass angels, each with a solar cell, light up at night. A kooky wind turbine made from Jell-O molds spins in the breeze.

In 1979, a Buddy Holly tribute concert at the Surf Ballroom marked the crash's 20th anniversary. It evolved into the Winter Dance Party now held each year on a weekend close to the anniversary. What began as a one-night concert has morphed into a four-night party that brings out to 3,200 people out into the cold of northern Iowa, including a large contingent from England, where Holly was especially popular. Tickets go on sale in October.

Iowa once had more ballrooms per capita than



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### If you go

#### Visitor information:

[www.clearlakeiowa.com](http://www.clearlakeiowa.com)

#### Surf Ballroom & Museum:

[www.surfbalroom.com](http://www.surfbalroom.com)

#### Lady of the Lake:

[www.cruiseclearlake.com](http://www.cruiseclearlake.com)

any other state, and the Surf is among the few that remain. The first Surf opened in this resort town in 1933 and burned down in 1947. The current ballroom rose the next year across the street, featuring performances by bands led by Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Lawrence Welk.

Clear Lake had its beginnings as a lake resort in the 19th century and was on the Circuit Chautauqua until 1913, a cultural circuit that brought everything from thoughtful lectures to entertainment into rural regions. Evangelist Billy Sunday and temperance activist Carrie Nation spoke here, along with William Jennings Bryant and Booker T. Washington. In the '20s and '30s, bootleg liquor flowed in supper clubs, dance halls and a casino.

Now the town is "the Hamptons of Mason City," joked Tim Coffey, executive director of the chamber of commerce. Halfway between Des Moines and Minneapolis, the town of fewer than 8,000 residents swells to 17,000 in summer. About 70 percent of its housing is owned by nonresidents.

Visitors ride the Lady of the Lake paddle-wheeler and frequent three beaches. Clear Lake City Beach is near downtown, Clear Lake State Park has a 900-foot sandy beach on its 55 acres, and McIntosh Woods State Park has an unsupervised beach on a peninsula that juts into the lake. On hot summer days, picnickers fill parks and campgrounds, and sun lovers sprawl on the sand, a radio or smartphone playing tunes of today and days gone by, proof that the music memorialized here indeed has not died.

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance reporter.