

Buddy's Widow Talks

Maria Elena Holly Diaz talks about her life with Buddy, her disapproval of his manager, why she agreed to the movie, and more.

By Bobette Riner

A human being can be remembered in many different ways upon his or her death: by the person's offspring, financial and material achievements, or even philosophies.

Not all of these remembrances are blessings because what may be regarded as a legacy to one individual can be another's poison. But Buddy Holly's legacy—his music—remains a universal, unanimous blessing.

His music is not all he left behind after the fatal plane crash on Feb. 3, 1959. He had a beautiful young bride, Maria Elena, who had just told him of the child they were to have. The legacy was not to carry on further: a distraught Mrs. Holly miscarried shortly after her husband's death.

Weaker people might not make it back up from the depths of such a double tragedy, especially when painful reminders of a true love's ways are continually in the air (any of his greats such as "That'll Be the Day," "Rave On" or "True Love Ways"). But Maria Elena Holly Diaz—she has remarried—has made it, and it wasn't easy. Even now, she says, Buddy's "Not Fade Away" haunts her. And fan mail from Buddy's followers around the world continues to pour in, contributing to the constant reminder of her role as Buddy Holly's widow.

This role—a painful distinction she alone knows—is as integral a part of her life as the roles as a wife and mother of children, with whom she lives in the suburb of Irving.

Her son, Miguel Diaz, once issued the ultimatum that he would learn to play the drums and piano only if he could learn to play Buddy Holly's records. Miguel's attractive mother relates the incident animatedly, as is true to her character, and when asked about her present husband's reaction to the ultimatum, she laughs. Evidently Mr. Diaz is quite understanding.

Maria Elena Holly Diaz is devoted to her family, active in the community, yet still remains her own woman.

This steadfast self-reliance may have been strengthened "the day the music died," but Maria Elena has never been a clinging woman. While on tour with Buddy and the Crickets, she would pretend to be Buddy's secretary and maintain an aloof distance, even around crowds of groupies begging to see Buddy!

When she first met Buddy, she was a secretary for Southern Music Company in New York, having moved from Puerto Rico to live and work with her aunt. Their two-week courtship in August of 1958 led to a wedding at Buddy's parents' house, the Lubbock home of Mr. and Mrs. L.O. Holley. Buddy was building a new one there for his parents when Maria Elena met him, and had dreams of setting up a recording studio, also in his home town.



Maria Elena Holly as she looked at the time of her marriage to Buddy Holly. Photo taken on their honeymoon in Acapulco.

But the couple made New York their base and rented an apartment in the Village, not far from Maria Elena's aunt.

Such proximity was convenient to the Hollies, because they lacked a piano in their apartment in those early days of their marriage, and Maria Elena's aunt let them come in during the day and use hers while she was at Southern Music (she still is there, by the way). "Buddy wrote a few songs there, like "Stay Close to Me" and "Peggy Sue Got Married", Maria Elena tells us now. Those days allowed the couple to plan and dream about the future. Buddy would design furniture for them, using his drafting training—"if he hadn't been a musician, he would have been a draftsman," Maria Elena guesses, adding that Buddy was quite artistic and did the elaborate (Elvis-style) designs on one of his guitars himself.

When Buddy died, Maria Elena gave his parents his possessions, excluding a motorcycle now owned by a man in Austin and the Buddy Holly song catalogue, now owned by a true fan by the name of Paul McCartney. Buddy's manager, Norman Petty, sold those publishing rights to McCartney.

Maria Elena maintains a warm rapport with the Holleys, and they equally divide

the royalties from Buddy's music. As executor of Buddy's estate, Maria Elena receives one-half of the royalties from Buddy's music, which include Buddy's own recordings (now number 1 on the charts in England) and other artists' versions, by Black Oak, the Rolling Stones, Blind Faith, Linda Ronstadt, her manager Peter Asher, etc.

The legend of the man, his music and the royalties from that music is all that's tangible of Buddy Holly's existence now. His widow insists there would be more to feed the memory if Norman Petty, had only taken the pains to give Buddy the professional treatment usually accorded to true talent: "Norman never believed in advertising or promotion—he never took a page out in *Cashbox* or any of the other big entertainment magazines—"I don't believe in it" is what he'd say," she shook her head. (Maria Elena was as firm in her disapproval of Norman Petty then as she is now. In fact, she said she opened Buddy's eyes to Petty's dictatorial stinginess, and Petty was released from his duties as Buddy's manager a couple of months before the plane crash, which possibly could have saved Petty's life.)

"So an artist not as talented as Buddy would still get ahead with the right management. Norman wouldn't even get decent publicity pictures made—he'd take them himself or get his secretary to do it!" Artists' promotion is hardly as home-spun nowadays, but even then it was considered cheap. "Even Elvis had it better from the beginning. Buddy's fans wish there was more [promotional material, films, and other such memorabilia] for them to go on," she added. Very few people possess original Buddy Holly memorabilia, with the leading collectors being Bill Griggs of Connecticut (the leader of the Buddy Holly Memorial Society) and our very own Steve Bonner of Oak Cliff, who possesses an extensive photo collection and is quite generous with it. (See related story.)

Interest should snowball with the release of *The Buddy Holly Story*, a film which will use the "larger than life" theory to portray the legend. Maria Elena Holly Diaz has negotiated for years with various producers and film companies in order to get the proper results. "You don't know what they're going to do once they get the screen rights—I didn't want a movie of the same [aesthetic] caliber as *Saturday Night Fever*—the music is sensational but that's about it."

Maria Elena is pleased with the product even though she does not feel as enraptured as most critics do about Gary Busey's portrayal of Buddy. "Oh, he's good, for what he's trying to do," she smiles wistfully. "But he's just not *Buddy*."