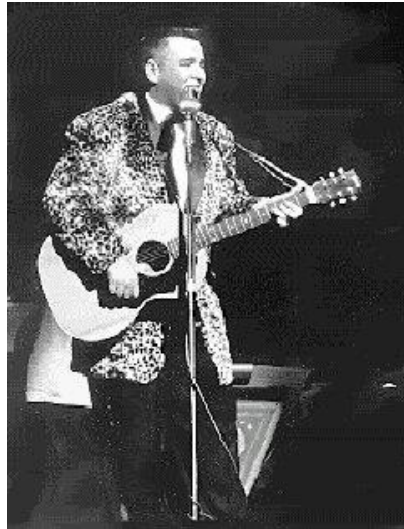


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# THE BEAUMONT ENTERPRISE

*When popular Beaumont  
deejay J.P. Richardson  
died on Feb. 3, 1959, with  
Buddy Holly and Ritchie  
Valens, he left behind more  
than 'Chantilly Lace' ... he  
left a briefcase of songs  
never sung, a widow, a  
daughter and unborn son,  
and a vision of a brave  
new rock world*



## LOST SONGS OF THE BIG BOPPER

**By RON FRANSCCELL**  
*Feb. 3, 2005*

CLEAR LAKE, IOWA –Jay Richardson brushes away snow that's drifted around the corpse-cold granite monument outside the Surf ballroom, the last place his dead father ever sang a song.

Four words are uncovered: *Their music lives on.*

But it's just a headstone homily in this place where they say the music died. A sharp wind slices off the lake under a steel-gray sky. It's the dead of winter and almost nothing looks alive here. The ballroom – a rock 'n' roll shrine that might not even exist today except for three tragic deaths – is locked up for the weekend. Skeletal trees reach their bony fingers toward a low and frozen quilt of clouds. A tattered flag's halyard thunks against its cold, hollow pole like a broken church bell.

And not a word is spoken.

Richardson bows his head, as if to pray. This is a holy place to him.

“I wish I hadn’t done that,” he says after a moment.

Is he still haunted by the plane crash that killed a father he never knew? Can a memory be a memory if it’s only a dream? Why does it hurt him to touch this stone?

“Cuz now my damn hand is cold,” Richardson says, smiling against the wind.

Now we know one important thing about the Little Bopper: he inherited his father’s legendary sense of humor.

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*“He always hated leaving.”*

**Adrienne “Teetsie” Richardson Wenner, the Bopper’s widow,  
who died in Beaumont in 2004 at age 67**

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The plane crash that took the lives of J.P. “Big Bopper” Richardson, Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens is one of rock music’s pivotal moments, more significant than an electrified Dylan or that little show at Woodstock.

Why?

After the crash in Clear Lake on Feb. 3, 1959, rock ‘n’ roll changed. Singer Don McLean immortalized the moment as “the day the music died” in his pop-dirge American Pie. But it was Holly, Valens, the Bopper and their pilot who died. The music (and the audience) merely changed forever.

By 1959, the little world of rock ‘n’ roll had shrunk even further. Elvis was in the Army, Chuck Berry was still on the rise (and soon headed for jail), Little Richard was in seminary, and Jerry Lee Lewis was effectively blacklisted.

Holly’s career had slumped, and at 22, he needed money. Valens, a 17-year-old Latino kid from Pacoima, Calif., had just hit the charts with his ballad, Donna, (its flip-side was Valens’ version of a traditional Mexican song, La Bamba.)

And J.P. Richardson, a 28-year-old disc jockey at Beaumont's KTRM radio station, was still enjoying the popularity of his hit single, Chantilly Lace, released only six months earlier.

Richardson had already become a local radio legend in Beaumont. He was born in nearby Sabine Pass and grew up in Beaumont's Multimax Village, a World War II housing development. He'd been hanging around the KTRM studio since his days at Beaumont High School, where he graduated in 1947, and somebody finally gave him a job.

The pudgy, shy, crew-cut, chain-smoking "Jape," as he was known to friends, hosted an easy-listening show for years, but when station owner Jack Neil wanted to capitalize on teenagers' growing demand for rhythm-and-blues music, Jape created a jive-talking alter ego he called "The Big Bopper."

The character was so distinct from the real-life Jape, most listeners thought he was an altogether different guy — probably a black hipster who spun the hottest new tunes that were slightly racy in the mid-1950s.

Jape was thoughtful and reserved, but the Bopper was bold, charismatic and flamboyant. Later, after becoming a star, most photos showed him mugging, goofy, pop-eyed and theatrical.

After a stint in the Army, Jape came home to Beaumont and KTRM with big dreams. In May 1957, 27-year-old Jape set the world record for continuous broadcasting — 122 hours and 8 minutes — at the Jefferson Theater. In the last hours of the marathon, after he began to hallucinate, he leaned on his friend and fellow DJ Gordon Baxter.

"Bax, I've died," Jape said. "Honest to God, I've died, been across and back. They talked to me. It's OK, Bax, don't be afraid to die. It was light over there, and warm. I didn't want to come back ..."

Jape wrote songs in his spare time at KTRM. In June 1958, he recorded his first song, The Purple People Eater Meets the Witch Doctor. But every record had two sides, and Jape didn't have a second song. On the road between Beaumont and the Houston recording studio, he wrote a B-side ditty he called Chantilly Lace, a two-minute novelty song that is both innocent and suggestive, arguably the world's introduction to phone sex.

Chantilly Lace exploded onto the charts. Less than a month after it came out, The Big Bopper appeared on Dick Clark's Saturday Night Beechnut TV show. He peddled some other songs he'd written, like White Lightnin' and Running Bear, which would be No. 1 hits for two other Beaumont singers, Johnny Preston and George Jones.

By year's end, Chantilly Lace had sold more than 1 million records. He earned a gold record, which was to be delivered to him Feb. 8, five days after the Clear Lake show.

That fall, Jape also told a British magazine about another idea he had: He called them "music videos." He imagined a jukebox that played both music and a short film of the artist singing it. He'd filmed three of his own songs and had proposed the idea to his producers.

"It will ultimately become standard practice for every record artist to make a film of himself performing his record," he told DISC magazine, which published its story under the headline "Records will Be Filmed!" in January 1959. "These short films will be sent to all of the television DJs and producers who will select the best of them for their programs."

Was a performer widely considered to be a one-hit clown-prince of rock 'n' roll really one of rock's most visionary thinkers?

"It's a side that was revolutionary and proves he was much more than the one-hit wonder many have called him," says rock expert Bill Griggs of Rockin' 50s magazine. "We owe J.P. Richardson, The Big Bopper, much more credit than just for Chantilly Lace."

Japes was finally making it big and he told his pregnant wife that he planned only to milk pop music for a couple years, then buy his own radio station in Denver.

That was his dream.

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*"Turn out the moon  
And put it away.  
The moon was made for lovers  
That's what people say."*  
**Lyric fragment found**

## **in J.P. Richardson's briefcase at crash site**

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The singers had never met before they embarked on the Winter Dance Party tour. The Bopper and Valens would earn a princely wage of up to \$800 a week for the three-week bus tour across the upper Midwest.

But it was a nightmare. The tour scribbled illogical lines across the snowy back roads of the Heartland in ramshackle, unheated buses, often back-tracking to make poorly planned gigs. The musicians grew tired and sick.

Then the bad weather turned worse. By the time they reached Clear Lake, Iowa — the 11th concert in 11 days — the temperatures had been below freezing for 12 days.

Buddy Holly didn't want to spend another freezing night on the bus, so he chartered a plane to carry him and his two bandmates, the Crickets, after the Surf Ballroom concert to Fargo, N.D., for the next show.

But the Big Bopper was sick with the flu. He asked if there was any room on the four-seater plane. Holly's bass player, a skinny Lubbock kid named Waylon Jennings, took pity on the Bopper and traded his seat for Richardson's warm, new sleeping bag.

Later, in the Surf dressing room, Valens flipped a coin with the other Cricket, Tommy Allsup. He called heads, and heads won. He got a seat on the plane, and Allsup got to live.

The plane took off at 1 a.m. in sub-freezing winds, lowering visibility and light snow. Five miles northwest of the little airport at Mason City, Iowa, the plane plowed into a farmer's field, killing all four on board. The three singers' bodies and some of their possessions were thrown from the wreckage into the frozen black night.

It was rock 'n' roll's first great tragedy.

The next morning, searchers found the debris and the frozen corpses. In the pocket of the Bopper's light-blue cotton pants, they discovered some dice, his wedding ring, a guitar pick and \$202.53 in cash. They also found the Bopper's briefcase, which

contained a half-empty pint of whiskey, some aspirin, a hairbrush and mirror, some ties and a guitar strap — and fragments of song lyrics he hadn't yet set to music.

For all his vision about the future of pop music and songs he had yet to sing, The Big Bopper couldn't have foreseen his most significant, albeit dubious, achievement: He was among the first of a long line of rock stars made mythic by dying young.

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*“I had a dream long ago  
And someday I hope to follow it through  
To travel around this world  
And meet all the people my daddy knew.”*  
**From “Second-hand Memories,” a song by  
The Bopper’s son Jay Richardson**

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Jay Richardson, now 45, has clearly already grappled with his grief. He was born almost three months after his father died, so he has only secondhand memories of his dad.

Except one.

He once dreamed his father stood behind him at a family dinner. Placing his hand on Jay's shoulder, the Bopper said, “Don't worry, son. Everything will be OK.”

It was only a dream, but it doesn't matter to Jay. He considers it the only true contact they ever had.

For five years, Jay has toured in a musical tribute to his father, Holly and Valens. He's sung his father's songs more often than his father sang them.

Other performers are imitating Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens, but Jay has the Bopper's DNA.

When he dons his leopard-skin jacket and answers a prop phone with his father's signature "Hellooooo, baaaaby!" he's as close to his father as he'll ever be.

Sometimes after the show, fans who saw his father during his six meteoric months of fame approach Jay with tears in their eyes. They want to shake his hand or hug his neck. They want to be close to The Big Bopper again.

He signs autographs as "Big Bopper Jr."

Jay's oldest son is the fourth J.P. Richardson, and his three children all know more now about their famous grandfather than Jay knew growing up in a home where the Bopper wasn't discussed much.

That's all changed now.

"We still have those 23 lyrics," Jay says. "Those are what we call the 'lost songs of The Big Bopper.' They've all got music now."

Richardson was buried in Beaumont. From Germany, U.S. Army Pvt. Elvis Presley sent a wreath of yellow roses encircling a guitar. As Jape's funeral cortege slowly rolled toward Forest Lawn Cemetery, his friend Gordon Baxter played Dixieland jazz on the radio, and many radios along the funeral route were tuned in.

A granite monument to his father has been erected at the Surf Ballroom. A steel one stands in the sad cornfield in Clear Lake. But Beaumont, Jape's hometown, hasn't shown the same adulation. In the mid-1960s, the City of Beaumont's Parks Department renamed a leftover Multimax building the "J.P. Richardson Community Center," but today the structure is mostly used for storage.

Jape's headstone at Forest Lawn Cemetery is simple and unremarkable. The clock he watched at KTRM hangs on a back wall of the Quality Cafe.

No streets are named for him. No festivals celebrate his life. No park recalls the Bopper's memory.

Jay, who lives in Katy, would love for Beaumont to pay a higher tribute to his father but considers it unseemly to lobby for it.

"Some years on Feb. 3, the newspaper only has one line that says, 'Today in history, a 1959 plane crash killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and some other guy in Clear Lake, Iowa,' " he says.

Richardson's accomplishments surpass being "some other guy" who died there. Chantilly Lace is ranked by Broadcast Music Inc. among America's 800 most-played songs. With 2.7 million radio plays, that's more than 12 years of continuous airtime if it were played over and over again.

After Hollywood's Buddy Holly Story and La Bamba lionized the other two singers who died in the crash, interest in Richardson's life story simmered. Screenplays exist, but no film is yet in the pipeline.

His idea for music videos was way ahead of its time. When MTV figured out a way to do it more than 20 years later, it transformed the music world.

Today, the Bopper's songs earn up to an estimated \$100,000 for his heirs, who still haven't settled how the money should be divided.

Ironically, the Bopper never made much money for himself on his music. When he died, his estate was valued at \$11,111.50 (about \$72,000 in 2004 dollars) but \$10,000 was unpaid royalties on Chantilly Lace.

In fact, the Richardson family had only \$8 in the bank when the Bopper died.

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*"There are ghosts here."*  
**Inscription on Don McLean's photo  
on the wall of the Surf Ballroom**

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For Jay, the frozen Iowa cornfield where The Big Bopper drew his last breath is more hallowed ground than the gravesite in Beaumont.

In 1988, a fan erected a steel monument on the spot where the wreckage was found, and today people leave sundry offerings to the fallen stars: coins, rosary beads, album covers, cans of beer, flowers, even credit cards. Jeff Nicholas, who owns the farm now, leaves it all there for other pilgrims—thousands every year—to see.



“It’s just simple stuff,” he says. “Those were simple times. Sure, we could put up a neon floodlight, but that’s not who these guys were.”

Beyond the marker, about 40 feet on the other side of a barbed-wire fence, searchers found The Big Bopper’s body. Jay has seen the news photos from the crash site, which clearly show the corpses scattered amid the debris.

Jay walks out to the spot alone.

Leaving the cornfield on a frigid late-January day much like the morning the crash was found, Jay shares a secret.

“There was something I didn’t tell you back there at the Surf,” he says. “Something inside. I didn’t want to say that the granite (of the monument) feels probably as cold and hard and frozen as my dad was when they found him in that field. I think about that, and it makes me sad.”