

The Day Before The Music Died

By

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Synopsis: *The Day Before The Music Died*. This play can be performed with 8-10 actors over about two hours (with intermission). Sets are minimal, basically one seedy “event room” in a motel in a small, mid-Western town. There are fourteen musical moments, many of them full songs, in this play.

Sheldon Fox traveled with the 1959 Winter Dance Party Tour that included early rock singers Ritchie Valens, Dion, Buddy Holly, and the Big Bopper. Thirteen years later, he is being interviewed by Ricardo Casagrande, a writer doing a story on Valens, Dion, Buddy Holly, and the Big Bopper. The occasion for the story is the 1971 release of Don McLean’s *American Pie*, the song that memorializes the famous plane crash that killed Valens, Holly, and the Big Bopper. Claiming to be an understudy for Dion’s backup group the Belmonts, Sheldon has put together a detailed account of the events of the day before the crash. He is obsessed with Dion and gives his version of five hours in the Paradise Motel “event room” in Clear Lake, Iowa. After this stop on the 1959 Winter Dance Party Tour, the four singers will continue on with a chartered bus and small plane. Those on the plane (Ritchie, Buddy, and Big Bopper) will die as it crashes in a field outside of Clear Lake, and Dion will survive as a passenger on the cold bus.

In the first of two acts, Ritchie, Buddy, Dion, and the Big Bopper reflect on their careers in reaction to the miserable tour conditions--no heat on the bus while they suffer with colds and the flu. The tour conditions make them question their aspirations as pop singers and celebrities. In act two, where Sheldon introduces the action again, they discover that Ritchie, more of a visionary than they realized, has far-reaching plans for American pop music, starting with those in the room. He wants them to help with the democratizing of American music in new and exciting directions. The play ends as Sheldon (who now reveals his insanity) performs the “lost song” that is part of Ritchie Valens’ legacy to the world. Since he dislikes Ritchie and laments his overshadowing of Dion during the tour, he vows never to let the song go public.

Basic to this play are questions about what it is to be American—a cultural visionary like Buddy Holly, someone striving for craft perfection (art for art’s sake) like Dion, a crude pragmatist like the Big Bopper, or someone dedicated to living the reality of a multicultural democracy like Ritchie Valens.

Cast of Characters

(The play can be performed with 8 to 10 actors—for example, seven men and one woman or eight men and two women.)

Sheldon Fox	Roadie/guitar tech who claims to be a back-up singer for the Belmonts. He's also the play's narrator.
Ricardo Casagrande	The writer who is interviewing Sheldon.
Ritchie Valens	First Spanish-language, crossover rock star.
Buddy Holly	Pioneer, early rock star.
Dion DiMucci	Early rock star.
Big Bopper	Early rock star.
Bob Keane	Ritchie Valens' producer.
Donna Ludwig	Ritchie Valens' girlfriend.
Concepción Valenzuela	Ritchie Valens' mother.
Abraham	Old black singer who influenced Ritchie.

ACT ONE

Scene 11.1

SETTING:

Initially, the setting DSC is Sheldon's music room in his house where he welcomes Ricardo, a writer doing a story on the twelve-year anniversary of the plane crash that killed the three rock stars. After that, lights come up downstage center on the Paradise Motel "event room" in Clear Lake, Iowa—roughly 30' x 20' with a folding table against two of the walls and two old couches facing each other in the middle of the room. There is an entry door against the back wall and also a big, school clock. A dial telephone sits on top of a piano DSC.

TIME:

First, 3 February 1972; and then February 2 1959.

RICARDO

(Sheldon and Ricardo come in with two folding chairs, and Ricardo is carrying a reel-to-reel tape recorder. Sheldon has a cardboard box full of notes. They have trouble carrying all of this, and they quickly set up DR about five feet apart and close to the audience.) Thanks for hosting me. I think that we can get the whole interview done today.

SHELDON

Glad to help.

RICARDO

Okay, (he points to Sheldon) go! Please state your name and connection with Dion and the Belmonts.

SHELDON

(He's taking stacks of notes out of the box and is trying to talk at the same time.) Hello. I'm Sheldon Fox. For thirteen years I've been the back-up singer for Dion's group the Belmonts. If one of those guys gets sick, I jump in. I've traveled with them everywhere.

RICARDO

Don McLean released a hit song *American Pie* this last October about the 1959 plane crash that killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper. What's your connection with the events surrounding that crash?

SHELDON

Well, I was, like, a part of the 1959 Winter Dance Party Tour that took them around the country—with twenty-four shows to be exact. I started out as a roadie and a guitar tech, but I became the fourth Belmont.

RICARDO

You've gone to a lot of trouble putting together an account of what happened the day before they died, right?

SHELDON

Yeah, I'm probably the world's expert on the events of that day. I wasn't there for everything, but I've had thirteen years to ask Dion every conceivable question about what was said when it was said. I've filled in few lines of conversation here and there, but what I have is 99% of what actually happened.

RICARDO

That's amazing. So you can tell us in detail about the day before those singers died?

SHELDON

(He brings out more notes from his box,) I can—every minute. I've got it all down, somewhere, especially in regard to Dion. He's a genius, you know.

RICARDO

My readers will want to know more about Ritchie Valens, and the piece I write may focus mostly on him.

SHELDON

That's fine, but I can tell you that I'm tired of Ritchie Valens, and probably other people are, too! He gets way too much attention even now.

RICARDO

People even talk about a "lost song"—some great song that Ritchie left but that no one has heard. I thought you might know about that.

SHELDON

I might. It's been thirteen years, and I may have something to share on that. Give me some time to think about it.

RICARDO

You're kidding. You can tell me about the lost song? Do you have it?

SHELDON

I might. If this interview turns out okay, you could be hearing the lost song when we're done.

RICARDO

You've got to be kidding? Okay, where do we start?

SHELDON

Well, we were all sick with colds and the flu. It was a bad tour.

RICARDO

What do you mean?

SHELDON

We were playing to packed crowds, but we were sinking fast with colds and flus, except for Ritchie. He was just a kid and going strong.

RICARDO

What was Ritchie like?

SHELDON

When he sang "La Bamba," even the musicians crowded on the sidelines and watched.

RICARDO

You must have admired him.

SHELDON

Not really. I saw through him. He was a cheap Mexican wannabe. He was trying to act white.

RICARDO

Hey, wait, wait. Hold on!

SHELDON

Well, he was! You know what I mean.

RICARDO

Okay, okay. Let's start from the beginning.

SHELDON

That would be in the event room of the Paradise Motel in Clear Lake. (Lights go dark downstage right and come up on the motel event room DSC.)

RITCHIE

(The audience can hear Ritchie, Buddy, Dion, and the Big Bopper outside the door on the back wall. Ritchie is jiggling the doorknob trying to enter.) It's 9:00. It's supposed to be unlocked.

BIG BOPPER

(He comes crashing through the door.) It is. See.

RITCHIE

So where's our food? We ordered hot cereal, eggs, and . . .

DION

(He looks at a thermostat on the wall.) It's colder than shit in here. What the . . .? It's locked!

BIG BOPPER

(He bangs the cover on the thermostat to open it and adjust the heat.) No. It's open!

RITCHIE

(He sneezes and wipes his nose.) This gets better, or I'm outta here. You can do the whole enchilada tonight.

BUDDY

(He comes in last and shudders with cold.) You can't leave early, no way.

BIG BOPPER

Come on, Ritch. "La Bamba" is the hit of the tour. You have a cold, and I have the damn flu. Let's get through one more show.

DION

This is the Greatest Tour That Shouldn't Have Been—ever! No heat on the damn bus. The toilet's broken. It's *really* cold.

BUDDY

You know the deal—miss a show, and you lose half your pay.

DION

(He sneezes again.) But no one told us that we'd be freezing our asses off.

BIG BOPPER

(The phone rings, and he answers.) Tour from hell! What do you need? (He listens.) No, no. Ritchie can't talk right now. He is in an important meeting. (He hangs up the phone.)

RITCHIE

What did you do that for? I'm here!

BIG BOPPER

We're trying to talk! It was only one of your spic relatives.

RITCHIE

Come on! That was my brother Bob. He calls when he can't get Angelina to sleep after a bottle. I sing over the phone, and I'm the only one who can get her to sleep.

BIG BOPPER

Bullshit. Anyone could do that. Forget about it.

RITCHIE

She's my niece. Let me have the damn phone!

DION

Why do you people spend so much time talking to each other? "Must talk to fellow Mexican every two minutes!" I could get her to sleep just like that (he snaps his fingers)!

RITCHIE

Give me the phone!

BIG BOPPER

Call your brother back (Ritchie takes the phone and dials.) Listen and learn: (Big Bopper takes the phone and puts it on the piano near the audience as he starts to sing.)

Hey, baby, you know
 What I like. I want you
 To go to sleep even though
 It's not night.

Wrapped in your Chantilly
 Blanky real tight.
 Bebop, a bing, bang boom!

Come on, baby, go to sleep
 Real fast, pretty soon it
 Will be noon.

Snuggle close with your Chantilly
 Lace blanky.
 Bebop a bing, bang boom.

Go to sleep! Go to sleep!
 Bebop a bing, bang boom (There is a rim shot. He comes back up stage.) That should do
 it!

RITCHIE

You're kidding. If she hears that, she'll never sleep again!

DION

(He moves DSC with the phone still on the piano.) Nice try with the Lullaby. Try this,
 (Looks back at Big Bopper.) Help me with the chorus. (As he moves closer to the
 audience, Sheldon enters through the upstage door and leans against one of the folding
 tables as he listens to Dion sing.)

Oh, baby, hear my song.
 It's bound to ring true
 And it can't be wrong.
 You know that after you
 Eat, it's not time to feel blue.

(Big Bopper joins in on the chorus.)

Sha na na na, na na na Sha na na na na.
 Sha na na na, na na na Sha na na na na.

It's your own story, since
 Five weeks ago—
 Eat, sleep, and a diaper change!
 My little darling, my little darling,
 your sleep time keeps me sane.

(Big Bopper joins in on the chorus.)

Sha na na na, na na na Sha na na na na.
 Sha na na na, na na na Sha na na na na.

Don't tell me you can't,

Or soon I'll be sleeping, too.
My lids are heavy, oh, so, so true!

(Big Bopper joins in the harmony.)

Sha na na na, na na na Sha na na na na.
Sha na na na, na na na Sha na na na na.

(He draws out the next word with Big Bopper harmonizing with him.) Sleeep! (He returns upstage dusting off his hands.)

SHELDON

(Steps forward applauding.) Yes! You nailed it. Way to go. (He continues to clap too long.)

BUDDY

(Buddy stands and turns toward Sheldon.) Hey, umm (he is searching for his name but can't remember it), you, hoof over to the garage downtown and check on the bus.

SHELDON

Right now?

BUDDY

Right now.

SHELDON

I'm on it (he exits the upstage door).

RITCHIE

(He makes a thumb's down gesture.) Not going to cut it.

BUDDY

(He walks to the stage edge where the phone and piano are.) Okay, here's the real deal from the headliner. Listen up! (he plays chords on a guitar for "It's So Easy to Fall in Love" for about a verse before he jumps in.)

It's so easy to fall asleep.
It's so easy to fall asleep.
So easy.
So easy.

So easy.

So easy.

So easy.

So easy.

Some say that sleep is for fools

But you need to forget the rules. (They all join in harmony for the chorus.)

Oh, oh, oh.

It's so easy to fall asleep

It's so easy to fall asleep

So easy.

So easy.

So easy.

So easy.

So easy.

So easy.

Baby, it's time to fall asleep,

So close your eyes without a peep.

Look into your heart and you will see
that sleep was meant to be!

(They all join in harmony).

It's so easy to fall asleep

It's so easy.

So easy

So easy.

So easy.

It's so easy to fall asleep

It's so easy.

So easy

So easy.

So easy.

It's so easy to fall. . .a. . .sle-ee-ee-ep! Yeah! (He returns up stage.)

BIG BOPPER

(He claps in slow, mocking fashion.) Now we're ready for the Mex version!

RITCHIE

(He walks downstage to the piano with the phone.) That was, yeah, okay. You guys are terrible dads! But now you are going to hear the real deal. Hola, Bob!

(He listens to the phone.)

No, no, it's okay. I'm ready. Can she hear me? (He listens and then starts humming Brahms' lullaby into the phone. After a few seconds, he begins to sing his song to that melody. As Ritchie sings, Dion and Big Bopper fall asleep.)

Good night, mi Angelina,
Oh, mi little querida,
The time is here for sleep, m'hijita.
It's time for you to dream.

Hear my voice, mi amor.
Let your lids close once more.
Hear my voice, mi amor,
This moment shall keep.
Drift off now, mi preciosa.
Dream of me in your sleep.

Hear my voice, mi querida,
It is time for rest.
Sleep now, mi amor,
You'll learn that's what's best.

Buenas noches, m'hijita, Te quiero. (He picks up the receiver.) Did that do it? (He Listens.) You, too! Te queiro.

BIG BOPPER

(He wakes up with a start.) Oh, oh, oh.! So cute!

DION

(He also wakes up with a start.) Why are we waiting for breakfast in this cheap-ass ice-box?

BIG BOPPER

I thought Buddy was going to tell us about the new bus.

BUDDY

I'll check with. . .that guy. What's his name?

BIG BOPPER

I think that Ritchie has something to tell us (They all sit and turn to look at Ritchie.)

RITCHIE

I've got a surprise, but nothing right now.

DION

(He sneezes and wipes his nose.) Is that the only reason we're here?

BIG BOPPER

Ritchie can probably share a little more.

RITCHIE

What are you talking about?

BIG BOPPER

You might headline the next tour. Does that ring a bell?

RITCHIE

You're pulling my leg, right?

DION

What the hell? Kids come along to learn and go to bed early. We should be singing Ritchie to sleep at night.

BIG BOPPER

I heard Buddy on the phone saying that Ritchie is our rising star and will be the headliner next time.

DION

You're already pissing me off.

RITCHIE

I don't know anything about headlining.

DION

You don't know anything about playing with your best-friend Buddy?

RITCHIE

I know that tonight I want to be in my warm bed with my mama bringing me Mexican hot chocolate.

BIG BOPPER

What are you, eighteen?

RITCHIE

Seventeen.

BIG BOPPER

What the hell? Why are you even here?

RITCHIE

I'm paying a debt to someone.

BIG BOPPER

This is about your Mexican relatives, right?

RITCHIE

I don't want to go into that.

DION

Last time I checked, "La Bamba" is not even *real* Mexican music.

BIG BOPPER

It's a rock song with Mex words thrown in.

DION

In case you haven't noticed, you're a rock singer, and we're doing rock 'n roll here! You know—Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, and Buddy fuckin' Holly.

[Scene 2]

RITCHIE

I'll tell you my story about "La Bamba," which is real Mexican music.

(Lights go dark on center stage, and he walks to downstage right where a young blond teenage girl, dressed in party clothes, sits at a small table at a wedding party. There are party sounds, voices, and dishes clinking. Ritchie sits at the table. It's December 1958 and around 8ish pm.)

Look, I can live with your parents hating me, but you don't believe in me either!

DONNA

(As she speaks, the Mexican wedding song "La Bamba" starts playing in the background.) My parents don't get you.

RITCHIE

Don't get me? I don't exist for them. I'm nothing.

DONNA

I know that you are Mexican, but to me you're just a, just a, just a boy. I, I don't see color.

RITCHIE

Al. . .right, what does that mean? You don't think that I can make it as a singer.

DONNA

I just. . .don't. . .want. . .you. . . to be disappointed. You are a Mexican, and you may not go as far as you want. Here in the valley, everyone loves you.

RITCHIE

What if I got famous and was on TV? Would they suddenly think I was okay for you?

DONNA

Maybe they would. I know—that's crazy. Why do people have to see color? I don't.

RITCHIE

Sure you do. You think I'm a Mexican, and sometimes I feel you're just doing me a favor dating me. I'm your good deed for the week.

DONNA

That's not true. I, I . . .

RITCHIE

I don't think you'd marry me and have *Mexican* children. . . .

DONNA

I, I'm not sure. . . .

RITCHIE

Never mind. All I know is that I love the music. . . . (Music gets louder.) Hear that?

DONNA

What? I thought that you might be thinking of me. . . .

RITCHIE

I, I am, for sure.

DONNA

Okay, I want to play a game that I saw on TV. Close your eyes, and tell me the best two sounds that you've ever heard in your life. . . . Time's up.

RITCHIE

Alright. The two best sounds that I've ever heard are your voice, so sweet and beautiful, and. . .and. . . .

DONNA

Oh, Ritchie, thank you. Te quiero. Is that right?

RITCHIE
No, it's te amo.

DONNA
What's the other one?

RITCHIE
This song that's playing. . . .

DONNA
Have you heard it before?

RITCHIE
Oh, sure. It's "La Bamba." I've heard it all my life. When I hear it, it's like I'm in Veracruz walking along the streets with smelly old buildings, kids playing on the sidewalk, and tacos on the corner.

DONNA
What's so special about that?

RITCHIE
Oh, dios mio. It's the life of the streets. Everyone is moving around with cars skidding and people singing.

DONNA
You love a girl and a song?

RITCHIE
Yeah, I guess so. You sound like America, and "La Bamba" sounds like Mexico!

DONNA
Maybe "La Bamba" connects with your father. He came from Veracruz, right?

RITCHIE
He died homesick for Veracruz. He could never get used to the U.S.

DONNA

Couldn't anyone help him?

RITCHIE

I guess not, I know that I let him down, and I think that he was disappointed that his family couldn't save him. (She exits.)

[Scene 3]

BIG BOPPER

(Big Bopper walks to downstage right as Donna exits. Lights go dark and come up on downstage center. He claps slowly.) Ah. Your girlfriend has the sound of America! So cute. (Buddy enters through the back door.)

DION

And "La Bamba" is the sound of Mexico, whatever that is!

RITCHIE

It's people dancing at a wedding or moving around the city. When I hear it, I'm happy.

DION

But why should you be a star based on one damn song and a ballad about your smoochie-moochie? This is really pissing me off! (He sneezes.) You're a Mex. . . .

RITCHIE

Hey, hey. Look. Why can't you see me as "American" as you are?

BIG BOPPER

Because you aren't.

BUDDY

You're all "American."

DION

I'm a star, too. I closed the last show with "Run Around Sue" and brought the house down! Remember?

BUDDY

That was great, but with Ritchie there's something big that starts with his fans and spreads to everyone else. It's contagious.

BIG BOPPER

Screw that! He's not a *real* American!

BUDDY

(He pulls a folding table forward and takes a seat behind it facing the audience.) All rise! (They all rise.) The Buddy Holly High Court of what it means to be a *real* American is now in session. You may be seated.

Everyone hears in Ritchie something uplifting and powerful. You know that. J.P., let's start with your *American* story?

BIG BOPPER

Well, I was in college in Beaumont, Texas, and I got a summer job as station manager at KTRM.

RITCHIE

On air?

BIG BOPPER

No, but I was creating the Big Bopper character on the side.

BUDDY

You had to practice to be Big Bopper?

BIG BOPPER

Yes, jerk off. I did. Eventually, I did a demo to see if I could be funny and interesting for kids.

BUDDY

Could you?

BIG BOPPER

Fuck you.

DION

If Ritchie's going to be the next headliner, do you still want to keep doing the Big Bopper bit?

BIG BOPPER

Yeah. Why wouldn't I?

DION

I thought you had other plans.

BIG BOPPER

Well, I do. I want to make a pile and buy a lumber yard. I want to get out while I can. I'm about money. (Pause.) For me, that's America.

BUDDY

(He looks toward Dion.) So what's your story? Did you make it on your own, too?

DION

Doo Wop was big in the streets in the Bronx, and we sang it for hours every day to big crowds. We were into harmony and getting the perfect sound.

BUDDY

How did you get your shot?

DION

Mohawk Records heard me on the street and signed me.

BIG BOPPER

Must be nice to be born in "It's A Wonderful Life"?

DION

No big drama. I know. I know.

BIG BOPPER

(He looks at Buddy.) How did you get to the top of the charts so fast?

BUDDY

I opened for Elvis and Bill Haley—mainly because there weren't many rock 'n roll acts to choose from. I was in the right place at the right time!

DION

You were lucky!

BUDDY

I was also ready to go in different directions--into gospel, country, and rhythm and blues.

BIG BOPPER

Ritch, what's your story?

RITCHIE

I was playing local gigs in the valley, and I met a guy with a small label.

DION

That was it?

RITCHIE

Bob Keane. I loved playing in the neighborhood, and here was this white guy who only cared about hit records and cashing in.

[Scene 4]

(Lights go dark on downstage center and come up on downstage right. Ritchie walks down there, sits in a chair, and takes up his guitar for a recording session with a microphone in front of him.)

Oh, Donna, oh, Donna

Oh, Donna, oh, Donna

I had a girl

Donna was her name

Since she left me

I've never been the same

'Cause I love my girl

Donna, where can you be?

Where can you be?

Now, that you're gone

I'm left all alone

All by myself

To wander and roam

'Cause I love my girl

Donna, where can you be?

Where can you be?

Well, darlin', now that you're gone

I don't know what I'll do

All time and all my love for you

I had a girl

Donna was her name

Since she left me

I've never been the same
 'Cause I love my girl
 Donna, where can you be?
 Where can you be?

Oh, Donna, oh, Donna
 Oh, Donna, oh, Donna
 Oh

BOB

(Keane enters from downstage right.) That was great. But, let me see. . . I want a little more crispness in the chords. Pop 'em out. Let's try it again.

RITCHIE

Huh? Pop what out? What are you talking about?

BOB

Here--let me have that for a moment. (He begins tuning Richie's guitar.)

RITCHIE

Hey, wait, what are you doing?

BOB

You'll see.

RITCHIE

But it doesn't need tuning. . . .

BOB

It needs my special touch. Keep talking. . . .

RITCHIE

I remember stories about the devil tuning Robert Johnson's guitar to collect his soul. Are you collecting my soul?

BOB

Not your soul, man—just hit records and money—that's my goal.

RITCHIE

I thought about your name idea, and I guess "Ritchie Valens" would be okay. My mom was against it.

BOB

(He's preoccupied and keeps tuning and humming the tones.) Good. Good. I'm glad.

RITCHIE

But I don't think that I can do the other thing.

BOB

(He is still tuning.) What other thing?

RITCHIE

You know--the rock 'n roll version of that Veracruz wedding song?

BOB

Why not? You speak Spanish, right?

RITCHIE

Well, no. I don't. I, I . . .

BOB

You don't speak Spanish? What kind of Mex are you?

RITCHIE

I'm not a Mexican. Come on!

BOB

So you don't speak Spanish. . . .

RITCHIE

I want to sing Mexican songs in Spanish--and rock 'n roll songs in English.

BOB

(He hands the guitar back to Ritchie.) It should have the right sound now. See what you think.

RITCHIE

(He plays several chords and some riffs.) What did you do?

BOB

Just a little bit of my custom tuning. Like it?

RITCHIE

It sounds amazing, almost like magic.

BOB

So tell me again why you won't do "La Bamba."

RITCHIE

I'd let down my dad all over again.

BOB

Worrying about your dad is not going to pay the bills.

RITCHIE

My dad raised us in the U.S., but this country didn't work for him, and he lost faith in me as someone who could help him. I can't forget that.

BOB

It's better for you to sing in English anyway. It will make money. Take your cookies when they're passed. That's my motto.

RITCHIE

(He interrupts.) I feel bad that my dad couldn't make it here. I don't expect you to understand.

BOB

Do you want to play little bars for the rest of your life?

RITCHIE

I want to be someone. . . .

BOB

There is a hit version of "La Bamba" out there waiting for you to sing it. I know that, and you know that. Grow up. Making money will make you a *real* American. (He exits.)

[Scene 5]

BUDDY

(Buddy walks down to Ritchie and starts talking as lights go dark on DSR and

come up on DSC.) Good thing that you listened to Keane.

BIG BOPPER

You guys talk about all of the American music that you know. What's that about?

RITCHIE

We're into gospel, rhythm and blues, country music, and singers like Mahalia Jackson and Ray Charles.

BIG BOPPER

Who's Ray Charles?

RITCHIE

You know, the guy on the radio who sings "What'd I Say?" It's big.

BIG BOPPER

How does it go?

BUDDY

(He sits at the piano and plays the opening to "What'd I Say?") Remember now? Great song!

RITCHIE

Let's go. I've got the first verse.

Hey mama, don't you treat me wrong
 Come and love your daddy all night long
 All right now, hey hey, all right
 See the girl with the diamond ring
 She knows how to shake that thing
 All right now now now, hey hey, hey hey
 Tell your mama, tell your pa
 I'm gonna send you back to Arkansas
 Oh yes, ma'm, you don't do right, don't do right
 Aw, play it boy.

BUDDY

(He sings while playing the piano.)

When you see me in misery
 Come on baby, see about me
 Now yeah, all right, all right, aw play it, boy
 When you see me in misery
 Come on baby, see about me
 Now yeah, hey hey, all right
 See the girl with the red dress on
 She can do the Birdland all night long.

RITCHIE

I'll take it from here!

BIG BOPPER

Me, too. I remember this now.

RITCHIE AND BIG BOPPER

Yeah, yeah, what'd I say, all right
 Well, tell me what'd I say, yeah
 Tell me what'd I say right now
 Tell me what'd I say
 Tell me what'd I say right now
 Tell me what'd I say
 Tell me what'd I say yeah

(Ritchie and Big Bopper bump chests and sit down.)

BUDDY

Hey, get up, it's not over! (Ritchie and Big Bopper jump up to sing the last verse.)

RITCHIE

Hey!

BIG BOPPER

Ho!

RITCHIE

Hey!

BIG BOPPER

Ho!

RITCHIE

Hey!

BIG BOPPER

Ho!

RITCHIE

Hey!

BIG BOPPER

Ho!

RITCHIE AND BIG BOPPER

Ah! Make me feel so good (make me feel so good)
 Make me feel so good now yeah (make me feel so good)
 Woah! Baby (make me feel so good)
 Make me feel so good yeah (make me feel so good)
 Make me feel so good (make me feel so good)
 Make me feel so good yeah (make me feel so good)
 Huh (huh) ho (ho) huh (huh) ho (ho) huh (huh) ho (ho) huh
 Awh it's all right (baby it's all right)
 Said that it's all right right now (baby it's all right)
 Said that it's all right (baby it's all right)
 Said that it's all right yeah (baby it's all right)
 Said that it's all right (baby it's all right)
 Said that it's all right (baby it's all right)

BUDDY

(He leaves the piano and bumps chests with the other two.) Way to go, guys!

DION

I get it. This is American music, “Peggy Sue,” “What’d I Say,” and “La Bamba.” (He looks at Ritchie.) You really can rock!

BIG BOPPER

So how did you come around to playing “La Bamba”?

[Scene 6]

RITCHIE

There was one big night last year at the VA Building in the valley. I was booked to do a show. . . . (Light comes up DSR. Ritchie walks down here to join Concepción, his mother. Behind them is a dressing screen with a charro suit hanging on it.) Thanks for staying with me, mamá. I’m nervous.

CONCEPCIÓN

You've played here many times.

RITCHIE

I know, but Bob Keane is out there tonight.

CONCEPCIÓN

M'hijo, you can do it.

RITCHIE

I have the rock 'n roll version of "La Bamba" to do tonight.

CONCEPCIÓN

Is there a problem with that?

RITCHIE

I don't want to let my dad down again.

CONCEPCIÓN

We live in America, m'hijo. Why would we come here if we weren't going to mix things up a little. Your father didn't always understand that.

RITCHIE

I think that he blamed me, maybe all of us. I let him down.

CONCEPCIÓN

I'll tell you a story. When we got married in the valley, we had Mexican cousins, second cousins, third cousins, uncles, all coming in. Also, our east L.A. relatives and friends came.

RITCHIE

I've seen the pictures--a beautiful wedding.

CONCEPCIÓN

Your father had a wedding suit for the ceremony. But afterwards he wore that charro suit back there for his Mexican relatives. He also bought a JC Penney suit for his American relatives. That's how he thought.

RITCHIE

You can't wear two suits at the same event!

CONCEPCIÓN

You don't think so?

RITCHIE

What happened?

CONCEPCIÓN

The Mexicans were crowded into the backyard, and the L.A. relatives were packed in the kitchen.

RITCHIE

Okay.

CONCEPCIÓN

He would go into the yard wearing the charro suit and then run upstairs to get into the JC Penney suit. He would then run back down to squeeze into the kitchen. He changed suits ten times that night.

RITCHIE

Oh, dios mio! And he just kept switching?

CONCEPCIÓN

Your father lived not to disappoint anyone--ever.

RITCHIE

Maybe I'm a little like him.

CONCEPCIÓN

You can't live that way, m'hijo. You have to let some things die, even commit little murders when you have to. You have to learn to move on to survive. That's part of change.

RITCHIE

It is hard letting parts of your life die.

CONCEPCIÓN

Death is part of life, m'hijo. Don't make it your enemy.

RITCHIE

Won't I destroy something important when I mix Mexican and American music?

CONCEPCIÓN

Something in you will be less pure, for sure, but Mexico won't crash and burn.

RITCHIE

(He takes off his suit jacket, walks back to put on the charro jacket.) I want to wear this.

CONCEPCIÓN

I think that your father would be happy. (She straightens his jacket.) America is where we embrace change, m'hijo. (Pause). I think you need to take a chance and do "La Bamba" tonight.

RITCHIE

(He walks with his guitar to center stage. As he does so, an off-stage announcer says, "and now give a big welcome to Ritchie Valens and his flying guitar!" (He initially plays the wrong notes and quickly retunes his guitar. He looks toward his mother on the sidelines.)

CONCEPCIÓN

(She mouths the following in a stage whisper.) Your father is watching.

RITCHIE

Para bailar la bamba
 Para bailar la bamba se necesita una poca de gracia
 Una poca de gracia pa' mi pa' ti y arriba y arriba
 Ah y arriba y arriba por ti seré, por ti seré, por ti seré

Yo no soy marinero
 Yo no soy marinero, soy capitán,
 Soy capitán, soy capitán

Bamba bamba

Para bailar la bamba
 Para bailar la bamba se necesita una poca de gracia
 Una poca de gracia pa' mi pa' ti ah y arriba y arriba

Para bailar la bamba
 Para bailar la bamba se necesita una poca de gracia

Una poca de gracia pa' mi pa' ti ah y arriba y arriba
Ah y arriba y arriba por ti seré, por ti seré, por ti seré
Bamba bamba (etc.)

[LIGHTS GO DARK]

[END OF SCENE]

[END OF ACT]

Intermission

ACT TWO

Scene 12.1

SETTING: In the opening scene, Sheldon is in his music room still being interviewed by Ricardo. After that, the scene is the Paradise Motel event room in Clear Lake, Iowa. Buddy, Big Bopper, and Dion are all asleep—Buddy on one couch, Big Bopper on the other, and Dion stretched out on one of the back tables.

TIME: 2 February 1972; 2 February 1959. It is 10:30 am.

RICARDO

I know how you feel about Dion, but your story is mainly about Ritchie Valens. Are you aware of that?

SHELDON

Yes, it is, isn't it? I'll admit it. Ritchie emerged as the star of the tour, but I never thought he deserved his success.

RICARDO

And what about the lost song we all hear about? Do you know anything about that?

SHELDON

Let's talk about that later. Look, Dion worked hard for what he had. When he was a kid, he sang at the dinner table and to himself during mass. In high school, he sang to the ceiling when he was in bed at night. He sang to the dog in his parents' backyard. When he was a senior in high school, he sang to the guys in the locker room during P.E—and almost got beat up several times. Dion stood on street corners in the Bronx for hours every day, always striving to become a better singer.

RICARDO

Yeah. He worked hard and made it. Lots of people do that.

SHELDON

It was more than hard work. Sometimes he got sick of practicing non-stop every day. And yet when his group wasn't singing on street corners, they sang in his garage long into the night. He wanted perfection, and that meant never giving up.

RICARDO

So why did you dislike Ritchie?

SHELDON

After all of Dion's hard work, this little weirdo comes along who is only seventeen, and people fell all over themselves to hear his little spic songs. He opened his nasty mouth, and hit songs came out like flies escaping a mango. Everyone wanted to hear little Ritchie!

RICARDO

So he didn't deserve success?

SHELDON

No, he didn't, and I hated him for what he got! I especially hated him when I stood there with the others and watched him sing. We all stood there envious, nervous, and transfixed. I felt the draw, too, and wanted him to go on forever.

RICARDO

So you did admire him.

SHELDON

Of course! He was brilliant--everyone did, but that was nothing compared to what I felt when he started sharing his big ideas.

RICARDO

What big ideas?

SHELDON

He wanted to help folks accept different kinds of people in America. He wanted to open the American song book to all of America--something like that.

RICARDO

So he was a thinker, too?

SHELDON

Sure. The pretty face and the sweet voice fronted for a glorious vision that I could never have created to save my life. Maybe Dion couldn't either.

RICARDO

Was there something that you disliked about his vision?

SHELDON

Yeah—the fact that it didn't come from Dion! Beauty and the beast were in the same body, and that was rare and wonderful, except that I loathed every word that he spoke. He was a visionary, so my hate for him went far beyond the bounds of decency and into a realm that shocked even me.

RICARDO

I don't get it.

SHELDON

He was out to replace us! I thought so many times, mud man, you're not going to replace Dion or me. You can try. Dream on and record as many hits as you want, but we're here to stay. We deserve our success, and I'll do whatever it takes to hold you back.

RICARDO

I guess you worked hard as a back up, and so much came to him without much effort. Is that it?

SHELDON

Yes! That's it!

RICARDO

How many times did you fill in for one of the Belmonts?

SHELDON

Um—I don't know. Lots.

RICARDO

Do you remember some especially big gigs when you filled in?

SHELDON

I'm sure I could, but it all blurs over after a while. You know. . . .

RICARDO

I ran into Dion at an awards show when we were planning this interview, and he didn't seem to remember your name.

SHELDON

He sees me on every tour, but I guess we don't always talk.

RICARDO

Is your status a formal arrangement or just your way of being helpful to people you admire?

SHELDON

Probably a little of both.

RICARDO

So do you know any more about what happened in the event room the day before the plane crash?

SHELDON

Oh yeah, lots.

[2.2]

RITCHIE

(Lights go down DSR as Ricardo and Sheldon exit. The light comes up USC where Ritchie slowly cracks open the back door and then runs and slides into the room for a grand entrance. He begins singing to the tune of the U.S. National Anthem.)

Oh, say can you sing by the spotlight on stage,

Songs we so proudly share,

Songs of the modern age.

We laud rich and poor,

Those in youth and old age,

Honor all Americans,

Of every origin or praise,

Whose rich cultures and hearts

Build on our national stage.

(He looks around as the three rouse and focus.) What do you think, guys? A hit?

DION

Catchy, but I'm not sure that you can dance to it.

BUDDY

I like the beat. Did you ever get to the bridge and the chorus? Seems like you didn't.

RITCHIE

(He jumps up on one of the tables, pulls a hairbrush from his back pocket. and begins to speak into it.) Yes, Mr. Murrow. I did see that we were headed for the big time. It was my vision from the beginning.

(He sneezes.)

We were destined for success, but the others were hard to bring along. They fought me. Fought me. Fought me. They were frightened. (In the loud manner of a hell-fire and brimstone preacher.)

They feared change! (He gets down from the table.)

BIG BOPPER

Okay, okay, Mr. Visionary Big-Time Change. Glad that you are here.

RITCHIE

So are you guys ready to make plans for the future?

DION

Oh, yeah. We're all set! (He does a military salute in mock fashion.) It launches next week, sir! We're calling it The Project Most Spectacular and Yet Mysterious in the History of the Known World, sir!

RITCHIE

Eh, shorten it!

BIG BOPPER

We're ready to go back to our rooms to get warm and sleep.

DION

Okay, so I'll ask--what's the big project? And how am I involved in it?

RITCHIE

The big project is. . . .

DION

(He mimics a drum roll.) Wait. We need to set this up. (He guides Ritchie and helps him up onto one of the tables. Buddy, Dion, and Big Bopper take seats on the couch next to each other in an exaggeration of being attentive.)

RITCHIE

We are going to join together to bring the country the music of all of America. (All three on the couch applaud politely.)

We will help people to appreciate black music, native music, immigrant music from China and the middle east, Hillbilly folk music, and so much more!

(All three applaud politely.)

We will promote popular music that reflects the experience of the whole country—some already known, some not.

(Polite applause.)

Okay, questions? (All three look at each other for questions, shrug, and then applaud again. He comes down from the table.) Do you understand what I'm saying?

BIG BOPPER

Nope. Not a word.

RITCHIE

Dion?

DION

Something about playing different kinds of music. I'm not sure.

BIG BOPPER

What are you saying?

DION

Can you start over and talk a little more slowly?

RITCHIE

Take me. I have Mexican parents, and I want to hear Mexican music in the U.S.

BIG BOPPER

So what?

RITCHIE

So I want to use rock 'n roll as a way to deliver Mexican songs that I love. Isn't that what America is all about—mixing cultures and making room for new people?

BIG BOPPER

I guess so.

RITCHIE

We'll be opening up America to the richness of the country.

BIG BOPPER

So that's what you were talking about just now?

RITCHIE

I'm already doing what I've described. Just look at my music.

DION

Tell me again. What does any of this have to do with us?

RITCHIE

You can combine lots of traditional music with rock 'n roll.

BIG BOPPER

(Dryly.) This is really interesting. So this is your big idea?

RITCHIE

My “big idea” is that we are going to let real American music be heard!

DION

You’re kidding. We’re already on tour, we’re sick and tired of this place, and we are singing our own music while we’re down with colds.

RITCHIE

I know, and I’m as guilty as the next guy. My music has been, well, not about all of America.

BIG BOPPER

What’s wrong with that?

RITCHIE

I grew up listening to gospel, the blues, country music, Native-American, and rhythm and blues. That’s America!

DION

You play rock ‘n roll. That’s who you are!

RITCHIE

But shouldn’t we know about Robert Johnson, Big Mama Thornton, ranchera music, and Native American music? I love it all.

BIG BOPPER

But why are we talking about this now?

RITCHIE

Exactly the right question! I’m forming the Ritchie Valens Booking Agency, and I want you guys to sign with me as your agent.

(He waits for a response and doesn’t get one.)

Look, together we’re going to change popular music forever—and America, too.

DION

Come on. How are we going to do that?

RITCHIE

With jazz, indigenous, and country singers for gigs all around the country. We'll use your fame to touch everyone who lives here.

BIG BOPPER

Who would you pair me with?

RITCHIE

Probably with some jazz and blues singers, gospel, rhythm and blues.

BIG BOPPER

Why shouldn't we just go on doing what is already working for us? I don't want to do this gig forever.

BUDDY

He's really serious about change.

RITCHIE

I am an example of what I'm talking about, and we are all rock 'n rollers who could change everything if we want to. That's what the Ritchie Valens Booking Agency will be about.

[SCENE GOES DARK]

[END OF SCENE]

Scene 32.3

SETTING: Paradise Motel event room in Clear Lake, Iowa. The scene opens to a dark stage and only Ritchie sitting at a folding table with his head down. Gradually a spotlight intensifies on him, and then lights come on for the whole scene. Ritchie suddenly stands as if something has startled him. This is his dream.

TIME: 2 February 1959. It is 11:00 am.

RITCHIE

(He stands abruptly and looks around.) Whoa! I must have fallen asleep. Where is everyone?

CONCEPCIÓN

(She enters from stage right.) Como estas, m'hijo?

RITCHIE

Mamá! I thought that you were back home. How did you get here?

CONCEPCIÓN

I need to talk to you.

RITCHIE

(He embraces her.) I was coming home early to see you. Can you stay for the show?

CONCEPCIÓN

I only need a minute.

RITCHIE

Si, mamá. What's on your mind?

CONCEPCIÓN

I want you to be okay with what you are going through.

RITCHIE

What do you mean?

CONCEPCIÓN

I think that you are going through something big that will change how people see you.

RITCHIE

I'm having the time of my life being Ritchie Valens and playing rock 'n roll for my fans.

CONCEPCIÓN

I know, m'hijo, and I think that everything happening now is testing you to be something more. . . even bigger.

RITCHIE

Right now I have a cold, and touring is not glamorous. It's frozen buses, cheap-ass motel rooms, and bad food.

CONCEPCIÓN

There are times when you have to get things right, or too much is lost.

RITCHIE

Don't worry, mamá. I'm learning every day.

CONCEPCIÓN

I know that you blame yourself for what happened to Abraham, and you worry that your dad blamed you, too. Your father was a man of high integrity, but he didn't always understand other people very well. He was rigid and unforgiving.

RITCHIE

I should have talked to him more before he died. He slipped away, and then we were all stuck with no apologies.

CONCEPCIÓN

You are at the center of a big wheel, m'hijo. It all turns at the same time, including the part that carried away Abraham and your father. You are going to mean a lot to many people.

RITCHIE

My records make people happy.

CONCEPCIÓN

Changing their lives is even bigger.

RITCHIE

We can change pop music to be about the whole of America.

CONCEPCIÓN

Sí, and you've already become my little Ritchie the rock 'n roll star.

RITCHIE

Did you come all this way to tell me that?

CONCEPCIÓN

I came because I felt that you needed to know some things right away.

RITCHIE

What's the main thing, mamá?

CONCEPCIÓN

You weren't responsible for what happened to Abraham or your father. You were a child both times, and you didn't cause anyone's death. You need to let go and be ready for whatever happens, m'hijo, whenever it happens. Sabes?

RITCHIE

Te quiero, mamá! You're always there for me.

CONCEPCIÓN

I want to be.

RITCHIE

Can you stay for the show?

CONCEPCIÓN

I came here kind of suddenly, and now I need to go back.

RITCHIE

Then I'm going home today, for sure.

CONCEPCIÓN

Are you still working on the new song that you played for me?

RITCHIE

I finished it and made a couple of copies. I've put everything I have into it.

CONCEPCIÓN

Give a copy to Dion or one of the Belmonts. They may be the perfect ones to record it. Just my opinion.

RITCHIE

I might sing it myself, too, but I see what you mean. I don't want it to be a lost song that never gets recorded, and they may record it before I can.

CONCEPCIÓN

How will you get back?

RITCHIE

By bus. That's all I have.

CONCEPCIÓN

Good. You'll be safe.

RITCHIE

(He hugs her.) Mamá, please. You can't go like this.

CONCEPCIÓN

I'm glad that I could spend this precious time with you, m'hijo.

RITCHIE

Te quiero.

CONCEPCIÓN

(She takes him by the shoulders.) Here, let me help.(She guides him back to the table and gently pushes him into his chair and positions his head on the table to sleep.) Good-bye, Ritchie.

[SCENE GOES BLACK]

[END OF SCENE]

Scene 42.4

SETTING: Paradise Motel event room in Clear Lake, Iowa. The lights come up on the four asleep—Buddy on a table, Dion on a table, Ritchie on a couch, and Big Bopper on the other couch.

TIME: 2 February 1959. It is 11:05 am.

BUDDY

(The phone rings, and Buddy awakens to answer it.) Hello. This is Buddy. (He listens to the caller.) Yes, the price works, and thanks for letting the driver go straight through. We have one day only to get there. (He listens again.) All of that sounds good.

(He listens again.)

Fine. Fine. Wait. Wait a second! (He listens again.) No, no. Tomorrow night is too late. I asked for the bus tonight at 12:30 am! (He listens briefly.) Yes, there was definitely a misunderstanding! No, this is not going to work in any way!

(He listens briefly.)

What? (He listens again.) You figure it out. We'll be ready to board tonight at 12:30 am. (He slams the phone down.)

BIG BOPPER

(He and the others are awake and focusing on Buddy's call.) So there's no new bus for tonight, just the same old piece of shit.

BUDDY

Yes, same old. It's their problem to figure out. (He speaks in an exasperated tone.) We . . . are . . . customers! It . . . is . . . their job to figure out how to serve US!

RITCHIE

That's it. I'm heading home.

BUDDY

What are you talking about? We go on tonight at 8 pm!

RITCHIE

I'm sick. I can't stop sneezing. I have a headache, and no one is going to mind if they see more of you instead of me.

BUDDY

Mind? This *can't* happen. You skip out on me, pal, and you can forget ever touring again! You're a potential headliner, and I'm not going. . . .

RITCHIE

I'm not getting back on the crap bus! I can't do it.

DION

Count me out, too. No way am I going on that frozen piece of

BIG BOPPER

Same here. I've got the flu, and that bus is a frozen death trap! I don't get on death traps.

BUDDY

Okay, okay! We've got a few hours, and they'll work it out. I'll make some calls from my room to our travel guy—buses, planes, trains. I'll see what we can get. (He exits through the back door.)

RITCHIE

I just don't believe that we are put here for one-night stands in the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, fucking Iowa. We're better than that.

BIG BOPPER

I thought we were trying to be musicians and attract fans—and make some money.

RITCHIE

We can help America appreciate music from across the country and rediscover who we are. We--right here in this room--have the power to do that.

DION

(He claps slowly in a mocking style.) Since when are we do-gooders trying to change the world? I also thought we were musicians trying to have careers.

RITCHIE

We can have an impact. And why not? Who knows how long any of us have?

BIG BOPPER

So I should feel bad if I'm trying to make some money and get out of this racket?

RITCHIE

You could try for a bigger view of the world and see what happens.

DION

I'll be the one to say it. You and Buddy are so damn high and mighty with your talk about expanding American music. So what have you actually done?

RITCHIE

I'm doing something right now. We're planning.

DION

Is that what we're doing? And the Buddy I know is no visionary, rebel musician. He writes ten-word lyrics like. . .

(He takes up an exaggerated stance of a singer facing an audience and sings the following.)

"Pretty, pretty, pretty Peggy Sue. I love you. Peggy, my Peggy Sue—who—who—who, who. Oh, I love you, gal. . . ." Come on, man! Who are you kidding?

BIG BOPPER

Yeah, Buddy is the headliner on this tour, for now, man, but who is going to remember "pretty, pretty, pretty" down the road? (He gestures with his finger in his mouth as if to throw up.)

DION

He's got a point.

RITCHIE

I never said I had all of the answers. I just want to make a difference.

BIG BOPPER

I think that we've got some hypocrisy going here.

RITCHIE

I know you guys think that.

DION

Okay, you listen to Lead Belly, Robert Johnson, Ray Charles, Big Mama Thornton, and whoever, and you want to showcase a lot of American music. Where is all of this coming from?

RITCHIE

It's what I grew up hearing, man. I listened to all of that music as a kid, including gospel and the blues. I was lucky.

DION

You're not better than we are, and Buddy is obsessed with you. What's the story there?

RITCHIE

I don't know. I just. . . . (He sneezes.) I had an unusual childhood, and Buddy did, too.

DION

Come on. Give us something. What's your story, man? Where's all of this coming from?

RITCHIE

You guys are pissing me off. I don't have a story to tell! I don't want to talk about it.

BIG BOPPER

Hey, man. You opened this up. Speak, brother, or get off your fucking high horse!

DION

You are going to explain yourself, or you need to shut up real fast about "America's music"!

RITCHIE

Fuck you. I don't have to tell you anything.

BIG BOPPER

Come on, man! Give us something!

RITCHIE

What do you care?

BIG BOPPER

I care. I care.

DION

Look, man, if you have a story that explains your weird ideas, it's time to share. Time's up.

SHELDON

(He enters DSR with Ricardo and moves toward DSC). Hold it. Hold it. Let's stop here (all on stage freeze in place). I don't want to tell Ritchie's childhood story afterall.

RICARDO

Why? We're finally getting a look at what drove him.

SHELDON

Of course, we are, but I get annoyed telling so much about Ritchie and how he was *so wonderful*.

RICARDO

This is all your version of what happened. . . .

SHELDON

Sure it is, but I don't have to like it, and I want to stop here. We've heard enough about Ritchie for a lifetime.

RICARDO

Where does all of your hatred of Ritchie come from? Did you already hate him before the tour, or did something happen once it got started?

SHELDON

I just know a fake and a pretender when I see one.

RICARDO

Okay, I'll go with that. So why do you see through fakes when others can't? Where did you get this special talent?

SHELDON

Just look at them (he motions toward the actors frozen in place.) They are hanging on every word that Ritchie uttered. Come on! He was just a kid—and a Mexican!

RICARDO

But people really liked his music. Don't be a foe of the facts.

SHELDON

Look. Ritchie was trying to steal away Dion's success and stardom, and they were all falling for it. He was lucky to die young, and it made him a saint (pause). It was as plain as day!

RICARDO

Where did you get this ability to see through fakes? From your father?

SHELDON

I didn't have a father. My mother raised me by herself, and we were close, so close, until. . . well, I was sixteen.

RICARDO

Did she die, or did you go out on your own. . . ?

SHELDON

She didn't die, but she might as well have.

RICARDO

What do you mean? Did she abandon you?

SHELDON

Yeah, that's exactly what happened. She stopped being there for me.

RICARDO

Did she get married and start a new family?

SHELDON

Worse. She got a boyfriend and forgot about me—the son she was so close to.

RICARDO

What happened?

SHELDON

I've never told this before, but she met an older man, a Mexican guy who had already raised his family. Now he wanted some excitement and romance—**with my white mother!**

RICARDO

So it bothered you that he was a Mexican?

SHELDON

No, not at first. I went to dinner with them a few times, and then their relationship got more serious.

RICARDO

Did he move in with you and your mom?

SHELDON

No, but once he was around she never had any time for me, and then there was that one night when I could hear them having sex.

RICARDO

They had sex with you there. . . .?

SHELDON

Yes. Okay, one night the three of us had dinner at our house, and then she asked me to go out for ice cream. I was feeling good about our little family. (Pause.) I was gone for a while but came back faster than they expected, and there was no one in the kitchen.

RICARDO

Did they leave without you?

SHELDON

At first, I thought they had, and then I heard voices in my mom's bedroom. (Pause). I was going to walk in and surprise them with three bowls of ice cream.

RICARDO

How old were you, sixteen?

SHELDON

Yes, and, okay, maybe I was a little naïve. She and I had been close for as long as I could remember. I was her little man.

RICARDO

Didn't you think that, well, maybe, they wanted to be alone?

SHELDON

No, at that exact moment I thought the opposite. I thought we were the three Musketeers having a great night together, and we needed to hang out and be a happy family.

RICARDO

Did you barge in with the three bowls?

SHELDON

I got to the door juggling the bowls (he mimics these actions at the door on stage), and then suddenly I heard her saying things that made no sense to me.

RICARDO

Let me guess—sex sounds. . . .

SHELDON

Yeah, sex sounds. (He coughs.) I guess it was S & M sex sounds.

(He coughs.)

I heard my mom moaning and panting. (The sound of a woman making these sounds gradually comes up on the sound system in the theater.) I then heard her saying, “Tighter! Tighter! I’ve been a bad girl!” I just didn’t know why she would be saying that.

(He coughs again.)

I didn’t know what to do—go in and rescue her or go back outside and ride my bike around the neighborhood. (Pause.) I wanted to do both!

RICARDO

Did you let them know you were back?

SHELDON

I called out, “mom,” but I just heard her moaning and saying the same thing again and again. (The sex sounds get louder in the theater).

RICARDO

This is too weird. . . . What did you do?

SHELDON

I knew where she was, but I screamed out, “mom, are you in there?” (Pause.) Suddenly, everything got way too quiet. So I yelled again, “mom, are you okay?”

(Pause.)

I heard some shuffling sounds, and then Juan, the guy, answered for her—“your mom is fine, Sheldon. Go back into the kitchen *now*, and we’ll be out there in a few minutes.”

RICARDO

But you were still clueless. . . .

SHELDON

Yeah, yeah. Sort of, sort of not. I went back into the kitchen and put my bowl in the sink. I then went to my mom's bedroom and dumped their ice cream on the floor in front of the door. It was a little mound like white dog poop.

RICARDO

Did that make them mad?

SHELDON

Probably. Who knows? I went to my bedroom, got in bed, and pulled the blanket over my head.

RICARDO

Did you talk to your mom that night?

SHELDON

No, but I left my light on so that she could see that I was up but not trying to see her.

RICARDO

Did you and your mom talk about what happened?

SHELDON

No. She didn't always come home at night, and I knew that she was staying over with Juan.

RICARDO

Was that it? She just stopped paying attention to you?

SHELDON

Yeah, that's about it. I lost her to Juan.

RICARDO

That's hard. So what did you do?

SHELDON

I started staying out late and got into the music scene on street corners in the Bronx. That was big, and the music was everywhere. It was easy to get lost in it.

RICARDO

And that's where you met Dion. . . .

SHELDON

Not right away. I got into the music and wrote down the names of singers and groups. I kept tabs on the streets where they sang. I even created a map on my bedroom wall that showed the spots where a dozen groups sang in the afternoons and evenings. Belmont Avenue was the most important.

RICARDO

But I thought Dion got his start in the Bronx music scene.

SHELDON

He did, but there were so many groups to follow and keep track of. It became my life.

RICARDO

But you met him there, right?

SHELDON

Oh, yeah. The word went around that one of the groups was getting a record deal. I started going to Belmont Avenue, Dion's street, to hear him and the Belmonts—at least until they moved out of the neighborhood to tour. They were magical.

RICARDO

What was so special about them?

SHELDON

Their harmonies were perfect. They could all sing together and sound like one luscious voice, or Dion could soar above the rest with his special phrasing and timing. The Belmonts were always there framing what he sang perfectly. They were. . .they were. . .really something special.

RICARDO

How did you get hooked up with them?

SHELDON

I practiced all of their songs and in some ways knew their music better than they did. So when the call went out to hire local folks to be roadies and guitar tech people for a tour, I wowed their manager with what I knew about every one of their songs. I was a shoe-in.

RICARDO

So they became your new family.

SHELDON

In a way, yes. I was almost seventeen and ready to drop out of school. My mother married Juan, and they moved to Nebraska or Texas or Oklahoma. . . . I can't remember which it was. They came to a couple of Dion's shows, but I wasn't subbing for the Belmonts those nights, so it was weird when they came backstage, and I was just packing up gear.

RICARDO

That's not weird. You had a job.

SHELDON

But I wanted them to see that I had my own family now and didn't need them. They asked me to move west with them, but I acted as though I didn't hear the offer. I wanted them to see that I wasn't my mother's son anymore. I got jobs teaching guitar and piano, and I was a Belmont!

RICARDO

So you were an early part of the success of Dion and the Belmonts.

SHELDON

Yes, I was, and I'm still the person they go to when one of the Belmonts gets sick or can't travel. We are a family!

RICARDO

And the problem with Ritchie was that he took the attention away from your family.

SHELDON

Yes! That's right! The little creep stole Dion's moment when he should have been the star of the Winter Dance Party tour. I hated him for that.

RICARDO

But if my story is going to put Dion back in the limelight where he belongs, I need to show the whole picture of what happened--for all of the big names on the tour.

SHELDON

I know. I know. That's why I've been helping you.

RICARDO

Then finish telling me Ritchie's story, and we'll be good to go. The sooner you can do that, the sooner I will be appreciating Dion and giving him the recognition he deserves in what I write.

SHELDON

(He puts his hands over his face and leans back.) Yeah, yeah. I know.(Pause.) Okay,

they were pressuring Ritchie to tell the big story from his childhood. (As he says this, he and Ricardo back out of the scene and exit DSL. The actors unfreeze and continue with the scene.)

RITCHIE

Okay. Okay.

(He coughs.)

When I was ten one summer. . . . Maybe I was twelve, maybe that's right, a guy used to show up in the back by our house every week.

(He pauses, unsure about going forward.)

He was the husband of Aunt Georgia, a lady who helped the older couple next door with house cleaning and laundry three times a week.

(He coughs.)

I was alone that summer while my mom and dad worked, so I started watching for him.

BIG BOPPER

You just went up and got to know him?

RITCHIE

Eventually, yeah, but I wasn't supposed to. He was an old self-taught guitar player who sang the blues in bars, and he knew anything, and absolutely everything, you wanted to sing.

DION

So was he taking care of you?

RITCHIE

No, no. Listen. My mom said to leave him alone, His name was George or Thomas or something. I can't remember, but I always called him Abraham because he seemed old.

(He coughs and blows his nose.)

He was blind, and he rode along with Aunt Georgia. One day, I noticed him sitting out back smoking. I went out and asked what he needed, and he asked me to sing with him.

(He takes a moment to wipe his eyes.)

Soon we started singing together every week when Aunt Georgia was at the house. I loved

it. (As he speaks, the lights come up DSR to reveal an old Black man sitting in a chair with a guitar. Ritchie walks to DSR and sits in a chair opposite Abraham.)

ABRAHAM

Hey, white boy, what song do you want to sing today?

RITCHIE

The one about the railroad that we learned last week.

ABRAHAM

Coming up. One, two, and you know what to do. . . .

ABRAHAM AND RITCHIE

(They sing together as Abraham plays the guitar. They sway sideways in opposite directions as Ray Charles did on his piano stool.)

Look on, Jesus, my song is coming down the track.

Hey, hey, sweet Jesus, my song is coming to where I'm at.

Hey, hey, sweet Jesus, don't take me now 'cause my song is coming to town.

Hey, hey, sweet Jesus, my song is coming down the track. (Abraham continues silently to sway from side to side.)

RITCHIE

(He remains in the chair.) We just sat out back in rickety chairs in view of the whole neighborhood as we sang and sang.

(Pause.)

You name it. We sang it--folk music, hymns, ethnic music from all over the country. If I mentioned a song he didn't know, he would somehow sing it anyway. I don't know how he did that. He always came back to the blues, though.

DION

So all you did was sit out there and sing?

RITCHIE

Well, one day he brought out a bag of marbles—clearies, solid colors, weird rough ones dating back to the Civil War. There were rare ones that had whole miniature galaxies inside of them. He had collected them over many years.

(Pause.)

He would put some marbles on a little tray for me to look at in the sun. (He sits for a

moment staring ahead.)

ABRAHAM

(He holds out a small tray with marbles on it. He singles one out one for Ritchie.)
Hey, white boy, hold this one up to the Sun and tell me what you see.

RITCHIE

(He holds up a marble to the Sun.) I see a whole world inside this one. Here's a little galaxy with a sun at its middle, and there are stars that fan out across the inside. The Sun light brings everything to life, and the galaxy seems to rotate as I look at it.

(Pause)

So why did a blind guy have marbles? I don't know, but he had an incredible collection, and somehow he knew all of them by feel. He would pick them out one by one and say, (Abraham mouths these words as Ritchie speaks them) "white boy, hold up another marble for me." (Light goes dark DSR. Abraham exits, and Ritchie returns to DSC.)

(Pause.)

His songs and marbles were what he had to share.

DION

What happened to him?

RITCHIE

What happened to him? You're asking me what happened to him?

DION

Yeah, come on, what happened?

RITCHIE

(He blows his nose.) You're not going to like this. I don't, and you may not like me anymore when you hear it.

(Pause.)

Well, on one of the days when Abraham and I were singing, an old guy raped a ten-year old white girl down the block.

(Pause.)

It was bad, and a witness gave a general description of the old guy. The police thought it

was a black guy and figured that Abraham might fit and wanted to talk to him.

(Pause.)

They came to our house one night after my mom and dad got home, and I stood in the hallway behind my parents as the cops described the guy. They said the crime was committed at noon on Monday, which was the last time that Abraham and I sang together.

(Pause.)

So, I was his alibi if he needed one.

DION

So you told the cops what you knew. . . .

RITCHIE

No. These were cops, and in our world we didn't tell things to the cops.

BIG BOPPER

They were just police—the good guys!

RITCHIE

Yeah, Mr. White Guy, but not for us.

(Pause.)

So while the police were there I froze and feared trouble for lying about singing with him.

BIG BOPPER

You just lied?

RITCHIE

I didn't say anything. That's the way we talked to the police.

DION

I'm not sure that I'm following.

RITCHIE

I stood there quiet and scared, and then they left. (Pause.) Get it now?

DION

Okay. I see.

RITCHIE

I actually thought of running after them, but I was bolted to the floor, afraid of what I still might do.

(Pause.)

I was shaking all over. They actually found the real attacker the next day. He was an older black guy, and he confessed to this rape and several others.

(He blows his nose and wipes his eyes.)

But not everyone knew about the arrest, and some people in the valley waited for Abraham to come back.

(Pause)

No one I knew had heard about the arrest. And then Abraham and Georgia didn't show the next day.

BIG BOPPER

They were probably afraid to come back.

RITCHIE

No. My mom found out later that they actually *did* come back.

BIG BOPPER

What?

RITCHIE

On the way in, they stopped at a red light near our house, and four young guys from the neighborhood pulled him out of the car and worked him over pretty good.

(Pause)

They stomped him against the curb until he was unconscious. They did it right in front of Aunt Georgia.

(Pause.)

They even threw him back in the car before the light changed. People told us that she screamed all the way to the hospital, and we never saw them again.

(Pause.)

I knew they would be afraid to call or get in touch, but my mom eventually heard that Aunt Georgia got a cleaning job closer to their house so that she could look after him.

BIG BOPPER

So what happened to him?

RITCHIE

His left arm was useless after that, and he wasn't right in the head. He couldn't remember song lyrics. All gone.

DION

So what did you do?

RITCHIE

Do? What did I do? I cried a lot for about six months. I sleep with the light on every night and wanted to tell my mom what I did so badly that it hurt my stomach.

DION

Didn't you talk to the police at some point?

RITCHIE

You'd think I would have, right? But nope. I thought about doing that every day, but I also knew that the damage to Abraham was done, and I feared admitting to all of my lies. When you're a kid, you can think like that.

(Pause.)

I didn't even have the guts to go see him. I finally heard that he died.

BIG BOPPER

You owe him.

RITCHIE

That's. . . . Yeah, of course, I do! I heard a lot of music with him, searched out more on my own, and I know that Abraham shaped what I care about in music to this day.

(He blows his nose.)

After he died, a lot of things changed. I started high school, began playing in local bands, got famous in the valley, met Donna.

(He coughs and collects himself.)

I also became a little less trusting of anybody's natural inclinations. (He sneezes.) I, I don't know what else to say. (All sit silent for several seconds.)

SHELDON

(He knocks rapidly on the door upstage and then quickly enters.) They're still working on the heater—no word there. We're also sold out for tonight, so I guess the cold isn't keeping anyone away.

(He waits for a response that doesn't come.)

Oh, I guess that's not big news when you sell out a lot. (He waits again for a response but gets no one's attention.) A sellout crowd is. . .just. . .what's supposed to happen, I guess?

BIG BOPPER

Well, shit! Pretty intense. I need a drink and some food. Who wants to go out?

DION

You guys make a food run! (Sheldon and Big Bopper exit through the door as Buddy reenters. Dion stays in the background adjusting his guitar.)

SHELDON

I'll come along. We can go to a steak place that I saw three blocks from here.

BUDDY

Did you tell your story? (He moves downstage with Ritchie while they talk.)

RITCHIE

For Christ's sake. I can't save anyone. What the hell do I care about? Maybe I don't care about anything that counts.

BUDDY

You were a kid when they died, and what you're doing now takes guts.

RITCHIE

Sometimes you're not there for the people you love. You can't make this stuff up, right?

(Pause.)

Sometimes I feel like my dad. I'm scrambling to wear two identities at once.

BUDDY

No one gets it right, Ritchie. Every disease creates its own medicine, and you just have to keep doing the right thing.

RITCHIE

I know. I can't go back.

BUDDY

(They hug.) Look. Let's finish this tour and then work together to kick some musical butt!

[LIGHTS GO BLACK]
[END OF SCENE]

Scene 5

2.5

SETTING:

Sheldon Fox's music room in his house. Ricardo is holding his tape recorder in a cardboard box on his lap. There is a phone and a piano. A guitar leans against the wall.

TIME:

2 February 1972, thirteen years after the plane crash and death of Buddy, Ritchie, and Big Bopper. It is early afternoon.

RICARDO

I think we've covered it all, but I still want to know about the lost song.

SHELDON

Good, shoot.

RICARDO

You've made yourself available big time today. Has all of this been leading up to the lost song?

SHELDON

Something like that. Also, I've put in a lot of money traveling with Dion and the Belmonts all over the U.S., and I'd like a little recognition.

RICARDO

You paid for your own travel? Why did you do that?

SHELDON

I wasn't always working for them, and sometimes I just wanted to pay.

RICARDO

So there is a lost song?

SHELDON

Yes, there is. Ritchie wrote one last song that he considered the culmination of his career to that point.

RICARDO

You're kidding! Where is it?

SHELDON

I have the sheet music for it right over there on the table.

RICARDO

Oh, my god! How did you get it?

SHELDON

Ritchie wanted a full production, but with his busy career he wasn't getting around to it.

RICARDO

So he gave it to you on the tour?

SHELDON

He went to the Belmonts's dressing room, and I was waiting outside, as I always did, and he asked me to hand an envelope to the Belmonts when they came out. He said he would talk to Dion about it later.

RICARDO

Has Dion performed it? Will it be released soon?

SHELDON

The song has never been heard outside of this room. I've done different versions of it—ballad versions, calypso versions, blues, rock 'n roll, and ranchera versions. The song is one of those instant, enduring classics that sounds good no matter how you play it.

RICARDO

Are you going to make it available so that people can hear it?

SHELDON

Hmm. . .not going to happen.

RICARDO

Is there some reason for holding it back?

SHELDON

None whatsoever. It is a luscious, haunting melody that, if it were released now, would cement Ritchie's fame and bring him even more adoring fans.

RICARDO

Are you holding it back on purpose?

SHELDON

Am I doing that on *purpose*? Hmm. Let me think. Would I do that on purpose?

(Pause.)

Yes! The answer is *yes*! With pleasure and delight, I am doing it on purpose. I only wish that I could do it *on purpose* several more times!

RICARDO

Oh, oh, my god! Aren't you afraid to be telling me all of this?

SHELDON

Why not? This is fun. In any case, if you tell someone that there is a lost song that isn't getting published, you would need to prove it. Wouldn't you?

(Pause—and he stands to be emphatic.)

And I would feel *so bad* that your love for your precious Ritchie was making you see lost songs where there are none. By any chance, was Elvis holding the sheet music when you saw the lost song? Was he? Such a poor lost fan!

RICARDO

Why should I believe you? You could be lying to me.

SHELDON

I could, no doubt, but you believe me. I can tell. And thanks for being predictable when you asked that question. What's the fun of this if there isn't someone who knows about the song and values it?

RICARDO

This isn't about whether I believe you or not. At least call Ritchie's lawyer and let him know that you have it.

SHELDON

Make one call just as a gesture of good faith? (He reaches for the phone on his desk.)
Sure, why not? One phone call can't hurt anything, right? (He dials.)

(He coughs.)

Hey, Brian. Sheldon Fox here. Yeah, yeah. Fine.

(Pause.)

Guess what? I have that lost song by Ritchie Valens that everyone talks about. I've got it right here.

(Pause.)

No, I'm not kidding. People would want to hear it, right?

(He listens for a second.)

Yeah, I'm serious, and it's really good.

(He listens for a second.)

Right. This could be important.

(He listens for a second.)

Exactly, an important lost song!

(He listens for a second.)

That's what I think, too. Let's get in the studio, or somebody should. We can meet about it next week.

(He listens for a second.)

Yeah, it's true. Ritchie is still alive through his music. Let's talk on Monday. Bye.

RICARDO

Did you just do what I think you did?

SHELDON

Did I just do. . . what you think I did? Hmm. That's a brilliant question. I'll let you answer that for yourself. (He reaches with the phone handset over toward Ricardo, and the following can be heard): "The time is one forty pm!"

(He laughs a hearty laugh.)

I guess I didn't have a sudden, soul-saving change of heart after all, did I? Hmm. Shame. No, I still hate the guy.

(Pause.)

Now Ritchie Valens the rock 'n roll wannabe will never replace Dion or me—ever!

RICARDO

I don't know what to say!

SHELDON

(He laughs loudly again.) You've said enough, dear Ricardo. Thank you for being a witness to Ritchie Valens' fall. Thank you for caring about the lost song. Your response makes it all worth it! Do you still want to hear it?

RICARDO

(Somewhat confused.) Yeah, sure. . . .

SHELDON

(He reaches for a guitar near-by and begins to sing.)

I used to feel divided.

My heart felt like two.

I lived in separate places.

Neither one feeling true.

Failing with all my faces,

I spent my nights alone.

Crying to be me,

I felt the pain of

Longing to be free.

(Ritchie comes on stage, sits at the piano, and begins to play accompaniment to Sheldon's singing.)

Oh, Aztlan! My heart breaks for you! Breaks for you!
Breaks for you! Oh, Aztlan, my heart breaks for you and longs to be free!

(He stops playing and singing.)

What the hell? Where's that coming from?

RICARDO

Where's what coming from?

SHELDON

You heard it, too, right—the piano?

(He starts playing and singing again.)

I will find that place again.

I'd love to take you there.

My map will be my gift to you,

We'll dance in the open air.

We'll sing for the morning sun,

We'll be ready to run so fast.

The power of our love will make the moment last.

(As he sings these last lines, Abraham, Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper, and Ritchie's mother come on stage and stand behind Ritchie at the piano. They join Ritchie in singing the chorus below. Ricardo cannot hear them.)

Oh, Aztlan! My heart breaks for you! Breaks for you!

Breaks for you! Oh, Aztlan, my heart breaks for you and longs to be free!

(Sheldon puts his guitar down but continues to sing. He moves over to the group at the piano. While still singing, he tries to lift Ritchie's hands from the keyboard but can't. In frantic fashion, he tries putting his hands over the mouths of those singing, but they continue singing anyway.)

I hope to get there soon.

By nightfall, we'll see it true

Shimmering satin sheets under the silver moon.

This song will be our key.

The doors will open wide.

We'll always live there so happily

that no one can doubt

our special, loving pride!

Oh, Aztlan! My heart breaks for you! Breaks for you!

Breaks for you! Oh, Aztlan, my heart breaks for you and longs to be free!

(Instrumental bridge comes here as Sheldon returns to Ricardo and takes up his guitar again. The group at the piano sings the following lines to end the song.)

I will find that place again.

I'd love to take you there.

My map will be my gift to you,

We'll dance in the open air.

We'll sing for the morning sun,

We'll be ready to run so fast.

The power of our love will make the moment last.

Oh, Aztlan! My heart breaks for you! Breaks for you!

Breaks for you! Oh, Aztlan, my heart breaks for you and longs to be free!

For so long I felt divided, but

now I feel like one.

I am so happy that you've joined me,

And we'll live for what we've done.

Oh, Aztlan! My heart breaks for you! Breaks for you!

Breaks for you! Oh, Aztlan, my heart breaks for you and longs to be free!

Oh, Aztlan! My heart breaks for you! Breaks for you!

Breaks for you! Oh, Aztlan, my heart breaks for you and longs to be free!

(While the group is singing these last lines, Sheldon tries to drown them out with his loud singing of the following lines from Dion's "The Wanderer." However, through amplification in the theater, their singing gets louder and thwarts his attempt to quiet them.)

Oh, well, I'm the type of guy who will never settle down

Where pretty girls are, well, you know that I'm around

I kiss 'em and I love 'em 'cause to me they're all the same

I hug 'em and I squeeze 'em they don't even know my name

They call me the wanderer

Yeah, the wanderer

I roam around, around, around, around.

(The singing group at the piano exits. Sheldon turns back to Ricardo.)

Okay, I want you out of here—now. I'll walk you out!

Come on, come on! (Sheldon quickly exits.)

RICARDO

Coming. Just getting my stuff together. (He opens the cardboard box and reaches in to play back a recording. The recording is Sheldon singing the following lines.)

Oh, Aztlan! My heart breaks for you! Breaks for you!

(Ricardo does a fist pump.) Yes!

(He shouts). I'm coming! (As he leaves the room with the box, he stops to do a little happy jig and then exits.) On my way!

[LIGHTS GO TO BLACK]

[END OF SCENE]

[END OF ACT]

[END OF PLAY]

(Buddy Holly's "True Love Ways" plays in the theater after the actors take a bow and as the audience leaves.)