

# This Day in History... May 13, 1941

## Birth of Ritchie Valens

Richard Steven Valenzuela, known as Richie Valens, was born on May 13, 1941, in Pacoima, Los Angeles, California. Valens was a pioneer of Chicano rock and Latin rock, and is often considered the first Latino performer to successfully crossover to mainstream rock 'n' roll.

Valenzuela grew up in a home filled with music – Mexican mariachi, flamenco, rhythm and blues, and jump blues. By the time he was five he knew he wanted to create music and spent time with his uncles and cousins at family gatherings learning to play the guitar. Even though he was left-handed, he worked hard to learn to play right-handed from his family members. Valenzuela also played trumpet and drums.

When Valenzuela was 15 years old, two planes collided and crashed in his school yard. Though he wasn't there that day, the incident gave him a fear of flying. When he was at school, Valens brought his guitar and would sing and play songs with his friends on the bleachers. When he was 16, Valenzuela joined a band, The Silhouettes, as a guitarist. When the band's singer left the group, he stepped in and made his debut with the band on October 19, 1957.

Valenzuela was quickly acknowledged for his skills. He would make up lyrics and add his own riffs to popular songs while on stage. In May 1958, a fellow student approached the owner of Del-Fi Records, Bob Keane. He told Keane that there was a local musician he needed to see, who everyone called "the Little Richard of San Fernando." This piqued Keane's interest and went to see Valenzuela play. Keane was immediately impressed and invited Valenzuela to audition for his label.



*Valens booklet stamp*

Keane signed Valenzuela after his first audition on May 27, 1958. Keane encouraged him to change his name. They chose "Ritchie" because there were a lot of "Richards" already performing, and his last name was shortened to "Valens" to widen his appeal. Valens and his new band had their first recording session that July. During the session, they recorded Valens's original song, "Come On, Let's Go," as well as the song "Framed."

Keane's label pressed and released Valens's recording within a few days. "Come On Let's Go" quickly became a regional hit and gained him a teen audience in other parts of the country. Valens returned to the studio to record another original song, "Donna," written about his high school sweetheart, Donna Ludwig. That song was accompanied by Valens's rock 'n' roll adaptation of the classic Mexican folk song, "La Bamba." "Donna" quickly climbed the 1958 charts to become a top-10 hit, and "La Bamba" earned a gold record for over one million copies sold.

With his star quickly rising, Valens was encouraged to drop out of school so he could perform around the country. That December he appeared on *American Bandstand*, bringing his music to a national audience. He also performed on Alan Freed's Christmas Show. Then in January 1959, he joined the Winter Dance Party Tour with Buddy Holly, Dion and Belmonts, and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson. They were set to perform 24 shows over three weeks throughout the Midwest.

After performing in Clear Lake Iowa on February 2, the musicians were slated to play in Moorhead, Minnesota the next day. There were issues with their tour bus, so Buddy Holly chartered a plane. Valens reportedly flipped a coin with a member of Holly's band for his seat, and won. The plane took off in a mild snow storm, but something went wrong, and it crashed just five miles away. Everyone aboard – Valens, Holly, Richardson, and the pilot – was killed. At just 17 years old, Valens was the youngest of those killed in the crash.

Shortly after the crash, a tribute song, "Three Stars" was released. Then in 1971, Don McLean released "American Pie," which became a number one hit and memorialized the event as "the day the music died." There have been many tributes and memorials to stars who died in the crash. A park in Pacoima was named for Valens in the 1990s, as well as a section of highway in the San Fernando Valley. Valens's story was retold on the big screen in 1987 in the hit film, *La Bamba*.



*From the 1993 Legends of American Music issue*



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