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POP MUSIC REVIEWS : Don McLean Recalls Buddy Holly in Songs

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Don McLean sounded so caught up with the day the music died--the reference to Buddy Holly's death in 1959 that is the center of McLean's 1971 iconic hit "American Pie"--that he was unable to make his music seem alive Thursday at the Palace.

Accompanied by electric guitarist John Platania (a veteran of Van Morrison's band), McLean set the tone early in the 90-minute show with a distracted-sounding medley of two Holly songs that segued into his own darkly despairing "Chain Lightning." By the time he sang "I'm an old man now with nothing left to say" in a song about a faded cowboy star, it sounded all too appropriate for himself.

When he finally got to the predictable closing of "American Pie," preceded by yet *another* Holly song (we got the point the first time, Don), all it got was a perfunctory run-through. Along the way McLean did prove generally in good voice and was at times genially playful, drawing enthusiastic responses from the largely middle-aged audience. But the applause must have been for memories--it *couldn't* have been for this ragged and lifeless show, could it?

On the other hand, opening band Tin Star showed that you can be tied to the past without seeming out of date. The local country-rock quintet centers on the vocal trade-offs between big-voiced Cheryl Jewell and Kerry Hansen, echoing the classic duets of Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner or George Jones and Tammy Wynette, but given a modern kick thanks to the tight instrumental work, eclectic country and rock influences and, especially, Hansen's first-rate songwriting.

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