

(Chapter submission for book on Texas music, compiled by editor Vicki Ayo. Publication date to be determined.)

Bobby Fuller Four – Impact and Influence

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A promise unfulfilled, intertwined with a small, but potent body of work is the legacy of the Bobby Fuller Four. To the casual listener, the BF4 may simply be one of the many one-hit wonders to blaze across the airwaves in the musically bountiful mid-'60s, only to vanish just as quickly. But for those who dig a little deeper, and certainly for countless musicians who bear the stamp of his influence, Bobby Fuller's impact is as great as that of more celebrated Rock & Roll heroes, blessed with the good fortune of longer lives and more extensive catalogs.

The plains of West Texas in the late-1950s and early-'60s was a tremendous incubator for a kid with a transistor radio and a guitar. Clear channel, 50,000 watt, AM radio stations from nearby Mexico –and as distant as Los Angeles, Chicago and Nashville—could be picked up at night when the conditions were right. Aside from the pop hit parade that was promulgated by emerging Top 40 radio, Bobby Fuller's own simmering musical stew was flavored by elements of West Coast surf music, Rhythm & Blues, country music, the local Tex-Mex sound and, perhaps most significantly, fellow West Texan, Buddy Holly.

For artists like Tommy Roe and Bobby Vee, their early Holly imitations proved limiting, and they soon veered off into a more contemporary pop direction. But Bobby Fuller, who could execute a dead-on Holly impression with the best of 'em, instinctively forged a unique path of his own by eschewing Holly's distinctive vocal

tics while maintaining the lean, yet powerful energy of the two-guitar, bass and drum combination pioneered by the Crickets' original four-man line-up.

Of course, as Bobby Fuller was perfecting his sound, accompanied by his brother Randy and a rotating cast of El Paso-area musicians, another four-man group in distant Liverpool, England was transmutating Buddy Holly & the Crickets' influence into their own unique musical signature. After achieving some measure of fame of their own, Bobby and his bandmates were fond of saying that the Beatles were attempting to do much the same thing as the Fuller Four, but fell short, as they were not from West Texas. While this, most likely, was a bit of tongue-in-cheek bravado on their part, in hindsight, it's a fairly astute assessment of the gulf between the respective styles of the Fab Four and the Bobby Fuller Four. With the exception of the Beach Boys, arguably no other significant, self-contained rock band to emerge to prominence in the mid-'60s is as free of a Beatles-sonic influence as the BF4.

Relocation to Los Angeles in 1964, as well as production techniques and heavy reverb added a sheen to the West Texas sound that Bobby and the group frequently resisted. But it was hard to argue with results, and the Fuller Four was soon rewarded with its sole national Top Ten hit, "I Fought the Law." The tune, appropriately, was an obscure cut found on a latter-day Crickets album. In a year that heard the airwaves dominated by the Brits, Motown and 12-string folk-rockers, "I Fought the Law" was one of the most dynamic singles to scale the charts. Echoing the lyrical content of the song, the drums, bass and guitars conjured up the sound of an outlaw gang, galloping across the Texas prairie.

On the heels of this success, the only two LPs released during Bobby's lifetime were issued in rapid succession. A combination of previously issued singles, covers and originals, surf instrumentals, ballads and rockers, the albums might be perceived as slap-dash affairs. But amidst the tracks are now-acknowledged classics, including "Let Her Dance," (previously a minor hit), "A New Shade of Blue," "Another Sad and Lonely Night," "You Kiss Me," and the haunting "Never to Be Forgotten." Each, in its own way, a promise of greater things to come...but never to be.

Bobby Fuller's strange death –and presumed murder—in July 1966 not only consigned his work to a singular era, it threatened to overshadow his legacy under a veil of mystery and tragedy. Just one year later, new sounds were emerging and popular music would experience a paradigm shift, as illustrated by the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper," the Beach Boys' fabled "Smile" project, Frank Zappa, the Who, Pink Floyd and the psychedelic scene. *Five years'* passage witnessed the singer-songwriter boom and, amazingly, just ten years after Bobby Fuller's death, America and Europe were in the midst of the Disco Era.

Where would Bobby have fit in? He certainly had the right mix of talent, ambition and business savvy, having recorded and released his own records –even operating his own nightclub—as a teen. Surely he would have gone on to create some cohesive bodies of work on LP, as that format began to overshadow the 45 as the

chief form of musical artistic expression. Some have opined that he might have set up camp in Nashville, where the song has remained paramount in the business of record-making.

But despite the changing trends and revolving cast of characters in the world of music, echoes of the Bobby Fuller Four continued to ring out. “Let Her Dance” and “I Fought the Law” became hits in the ‘80s for Phil Seymour and the Clash, respectively. And BF4 tunes were regular staples in the sets of Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers, Marshall Crenshaw, Bruce Springsteen and countless other bands rooted in the classic drums, bass and guitar blueprint for Rock & Roll. Fuller had been a defining influence on them, just as Buddy Holly had been for him.

Gone now for nearly 50 years, in many ways, Bobby Fuller is more contemporary today than he has been since his heyday. Besides those aforementioned covers, comprehensive reissues of his recordings and the licensing of BF4 tracks for television and film have, arguably, raised his profile higher than it’s ever been. A scan of YouTube reveals countless covers of Fuller Four material by young bands that, in one manner or another, resemble a young man and his band from West Texas, a half-century ago. Like a great two-sided single, a small, but indelible catalog of music and a lasting influence and source of inspiration will certainly be Bobby Fuller’s ultimate legacy.