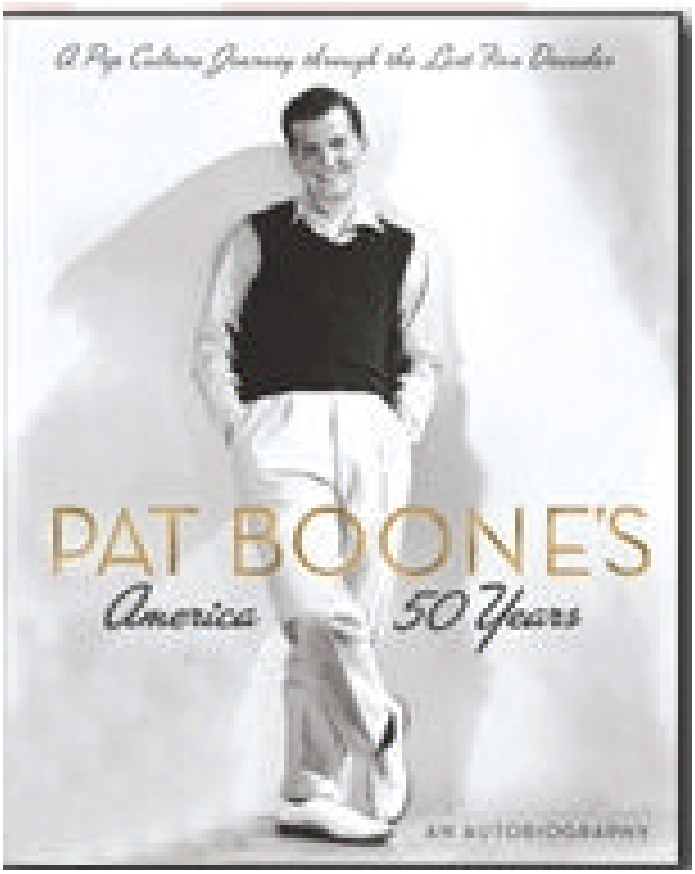
Pat Boone's new career memoir:

An old rock n' roll star sizes up his native land

article by Donny York
of ShaNaNa



For me, getting this gig was a case of "Wait until the folks back home find out about *this!"* It was like the gig of a lifetime—even measured against the great gigs I've already stumbled into in places like Woodstock or in cinematic majesties like *Grease.* I appeared in them, along with other worthy young talents by the dozen. But I'm the *only* guy who assisted Pat Boone in the preparation of his definitive autobiographical career memoir. Back home they'll be more impressed about my affiliation with Boone than they were about Woodstock or *Grease*, and they'll probably have gotten it just about right. (Think effect on history, as opposed reflection *of* it.)

Although I had met Pat Boone in passing, as being a lifelong member of ShaNaNa would bring about naturally enough, I never got acquainted with him until after I'd spent a memorable day in his office store room going through photographs and artifacts, only a portion of which have now gained their way into his new book. Some days later, he and I sat and talked, and I could tell he knew I was being merely truthful telling him that combing through his store-room had been an experience I would never forget.

What I *had* forgotten, even though I'd known, was that during the early rock n' roll years of 1955 through 1959 Pat Boone and Elvis Presley had only each other as serious competitors in record sales. They were by every objective measure the world's biggest rock n' roll stars. Nobody else was even in the same league.

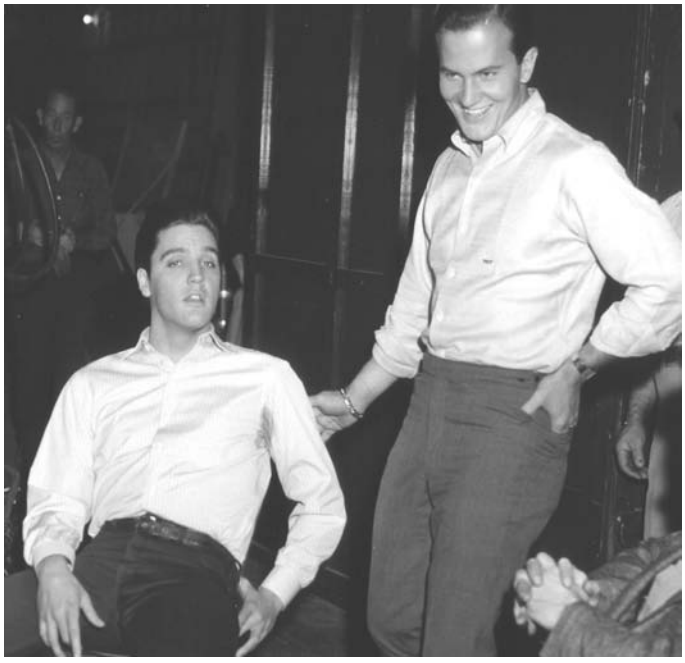
Pat Boone's real pre-eminence in that seminal period has largely been forgotten, and this needs some explaining. Explaining it will be among my intentions here, because even though I'm *into* this stuff, for all intents and purposes I too had forgotten!

I'm not sure why Pat agreed to sign me on as his editor or "expert commentator" to help round his photo collection and narrative into a coherent volume, but I think he looked past my having no professional track record as a writer and took special note of a couple of things: First, he seemed to like the idea that I actually got an "A" on my American Social History thesis *The Role of Rock n' Roll Music in the Development of Today's Generation Gap* back in 1971 at Columbia (our mutual alma mater, and the birthplace of ShaNaNa) in New York City. And second, he seemed to like that I'd spent my adult professional life portraying a late-1950's rock n' roll fan's worldview as the true one worth holding.

Well, on some level, that *is* the worldview worth holding, or at least holding onto. The truth is, I found myself wanting the fifty-year Boone career scrapbook editing job from the moment I knew it might exist and, I must admit, ahead of Pat offering it to me. My enthusiasm for early rock n' roll culture may not be 100% rational, but I would scream while they dragged me away straightjacketed that its richness has been worth my lifelong investment in it.

As it turned out, the publisher's bean counters and editors clashed about the number of trees they would kill and pages they would commit to previously unpublished photographs, at the expense of text, in the Boone memoir. In the end, they re-affirmed that a picture is worth a thousand words. So, thousands of mine—contributed as "side bar" historical

commentary to run throughout the book—were left on the editing room floor. Some of them survive right here; I swear they were all really good. It's just that the pictures *were better!*



Boone in 1959 visiting with Elvis Presley on the set of *G.I. Blues* while starring in *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, which was under production on the same lot.

A good reason to get into Pat Boone's new book is nostalgia, but nostalgia is neither the book's purpose nor the best reason for getting into it. The new book really is a surprising photo scrapbook and memoir of a unique entertainer's one-of-a-kind career. And it spans a time of such extraordinary societal change that a Rip Van Winkle from the early days of that career might not recognize the America he would awaken to now. Boone's life and times in photographs makes for an adventurous biographical study of both him and his country. And that is the best reason for most of us to get into his new book.

That also explains his having titled it *Pat Boone's America*. We should not fail to note how extraordinary it really is—that a guy as self-consciously "square" as Boone was, was an American super-star in a realm as self-consciously "hip" as the recording industry during the rock n' roll music era. His story is one of such vivid contrasts that we can't help but reflect on where we've been and where we're headed. As we partake of this memoir, we who have the normal reflexes of citizens will find ourselves thinking repeatedly about the hierarchical arrangement of our core values.

Of course, this country never was Pat Boone's America. Nor was it ever Walt Whitman's America (just one of the number from whom or about whom an equivalent title came) or Elvis's, or Roosevelt's, or Reagan's. But "Pat Boone's America" signifies something that so many people now living can identify (whether or not they identify *with*), that a demographer's broadest brushstrokes actually are appropriate. If they don't work for you personally, then they do for many of the people you have known or depended on. As a singing star at first, and as a film star and television personality later, Pat was as mainstream American as it got.

Living in a golden age never even crossed our minds

Today's standard imagery of the "happy days" of the 1950's and the first rock n' roll is so insistently romantic that we forget how much has been distorted. During what *later* came to be called the golden age of rock n' roll, it never even crossed our minds that we were living in what could be called the good old days. To us younger people living them, they were the days of on-rushing modernity, even frightening modernity, and nothing about them felt settled, sentimental, or simple.

In truth, few of us were really jumping into the backs of convertibles and cruising around with loud rock n' roll, ever. That '57 Chevy wasn't "a classic" then, and anyway it was our pop's property, if we were even that lucky. More likely, we felt okay just having the keys to some old pickup truck, if it made the difference between being stuck on foot and actually getting around. And, guess what else?—Rock n' roll wasn't even common on the radio; you had to work hard to find any at certain hours of the broadcast day.

The truth is, there was a tendency for a lot of us to be worried a lot. What was going to happen if Russia's Khrushchev went another step too bold over there in East Germany, or the Red Chinese made their move on Formosa, or the communists really went for broke in what was called Indo-China? We learned the word "crisis" in the news broadcasts and tried not to think too much about each new one. No generation before ours had a nightly television review of the very latest possibilities worldwide that might lead to thermo- nuclear annihilation.

The new seriousness of the nuclear arms race with the Soviets, whose top leadership openly said "Your grandchildren will live under communism," was awful to contemplate, considering that our parents had already known more than one war in their lifetimes, and another in ours was spoken about as inevitable. The idea was prevalent that both sides would have to throw everything they had at each other once anyone anywhere used a nuke. So gloom was simply appropriate. Whatever else we think about those good old days, we do know that stopping to smell the roses then meant risking confrontation with that constant backdrop of deep gloom about humankind's likely doom.

So—a fertile time in which to plant seeds of faith, a fertile time for seeds of abandon. There was a robust statistical growth in religiosity among Americans in the 1950's, and the year "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance, 1954, is the same year generally held to be the birth year of that most abandon-friendly music, rock n' roll.

I remember adults seeming exasperated at our un-seriousness a lot of the time. I remember earnest conversations among my more serious-minded acquaintances for that matter, about the irresponsible character of our age-mates who just carried on with their happy hoodlum ways and showed no awareness of the weighty seriousness of life in such an age as ours.

This is where the goofy greaser types cartooned later in the likes of *Grease* and *Happy Days* actually found a way around our dilemma: We can't figure it out, and we can't do anything about it, so if doom is at hand, say a prayer maybe, but let's not study too hard. Let's not stop and smell the roses and risk the gloom. No. Let the good times roll. *Rock n' roll !*

Many of us worked hard, and actually very few of us worked hard on our image. Most of us had some worries that were like those of adults: As youngsters, how could we make any money? And after graduation, how would we make a living? What school subjects might we master enough to bring us advantages in the technological tomorrows we kept hearing about?

And, let's not forget, we confronted serious questions in our personal lives that the young hardly trifle with nowadays: What would we do about (per the terminology of the time) our "military obligation?" And worth at least some worry, there was the looming question of who we would marry. (It was *marry*, not live with, so we mostly worried about *who*, not whether!)

Yes, our times were different from these of today's kids. But simpler? Not really.

Responsibility and the rock n' roll star

In speaking of my own obsession with early rock n' roll culture, I'm not talking the 'fifties, and I'm not even talking rock n' roll music by itself. I'm an avid fan of 1950's rock n' roll, and it's been a sweet gift for me to make a career of celebrating it in ShaNaNa, but I'm no music or history professor trying to lay out all the significance of the 1950's.

No, what I am is a fan, one who's held a prolonged gaze on the early rock n' roll *culture*, had chances to see most of the places where its beginnings are enshrined, and even gotten acquainted with some of its pioneers and heroes. That's why I've gotten a kick out of pointing out things that are remarkable in the historical settings of Pat's photographs and mementos. It's especially rewarding sometimes just to ponder the familiar as though we're seeing it for the first time. Pondering the obvious can start right here: The early rock n' roll culture was something quite unlike anything before or since, and something Pat Boone was an absolute part of.

Rock n' roll's coming was sudden enough to be mistaken for a fad. While it eventually became woven into the adult mainstream, it started as a youth sub-culture. A new generation as a distinct class possessing their own music was previously unknown in human history. Such a thing became possible in post-World War II America because of rising spending power across the whole spectrum of the population. The young were able to be a distinct sector of consumers in the marketplace, and they made rock n' roll the first music ever to be distinctly their own and not something shared from their parents. Driven by all the newly erupting technology and wealth, great changes were at hand throughout society, and for popular culture to be facing its own big changes was inevitable.

Nov. 1957 on *American Bandstand*

Okay then, how important was Pat Boone in this new rock n' roll culture? Well, let's take a step back and ponder another obvious: If you find yourself to have become a big star, the only correct response is to recognize that most of what you do will still go un-noticed. Even as a top name entertainer—what today would be called a superstar—within the expanding universe of advanced civilization all around you, your imprint will be almost insignificant. (My own humble example of *ShaNaNa* having been a thriving presence for more than four years on national television—when TV channels were few by comparison to today—serves as a good example when you recognize that there are oceans of people who don't even know or never did know we *had* a TV series.) There is no singular, all-encompassing mass culture, and if you seem to be recognized by everyone on the street this week, a dwindling number will even recognize your likeness some week in the future! In the larger scheme of things, that's the truth for the biggest of stars this side of maybe Shakespeare or Beethoven.

It's a mistake to think too seriously of mass-market entertainment careers as making an imprint upon society, because there *is* no "society" or even mass culture that all individuals partake of in quite the way we usually speak of. The "society" that even the biggest entertainers imprint is, by any honest definition, just their large *audience*. It's thus an illusion for stars to imagine themselves imprinting society, because they are only imprinting audiences, how ever large, and their audiences' representations of society are always changing and always limited.

Now, that said, there's imprint, and then there's impact. We can speak seriously of teachers or even merchants having an impact on society, because we witness that their lives generate ripples into all of society that are real, even if hard to measure. We can also speak seriously, I suppose, of stars leaving their imprint but not having an impact. (Who will you pick on? The Dave Clark Five? Art Garfunkel?) But Pat Boone's career comes as close as any other star's we can bear witness to, to having made its imprint upon a mass audience in a serious enough way—and a well-timed enough way—to have its impact on all of society.

In saying this I am not backing away from the truth that if you're anything short of Elvis or the Beatles *(And you turned out not to be as, er… "leading edge" as they did, Mr. Boone… Sir!)*, the significance of your stardom will probably fade much sooner than you suppose, whatever the time/space cubbyhole in which your career happens.

Ah, but *what if your rise to great stardom were to happen in the late 1950's?* If your rise to great stardom were to happen within the time/space cubbyhole of late 1950's America, then you would seem at times to be presiding over the first generation defining itself without the aid of its parents and predecessors as adequate role models! This would be because parents then had no experience to draw from about being young in times of instantaneous mass communications everywhere and the day-to-day hair trigger possibility of global thermonuclear war! If you rose to great stardom in this timeframe, you would have the attention of a generation making its way for the first time in history without any available role models from previous generations who had been where and done what their young were now! No generation that came later faced so total a lack of useful adult role models, because young parents did come to include those who knew what being young amidst such revolutionary conditions was like. So this first rock n' roll generation sailed in uncharted and scary waters, and yet it was their task to determine just what the post-war generation of Americans would be like. Having been among the defining entertainment personalities for that special generation in that special time period, and having done it with care, makes the significance of Pat Boone's stardom sure to fade slowly. It means he not only made his imprint, he did have his impact.

The scholarly anthropology department types make the argument that the new mass communication and the new threat of sudden mass annihilation meant that a very different culture for the coming generation was very much inevitable, simply inherent with those times. They seem to have this correct, considering that we no longer hear about a "generation gap" the way we did back then! Without our Elvis Presley or our Pat Boone, the new mass communication technologies of TV sets and vastly more radio receivers were in place for us to have someone else like them, and we probably would have.

"America's new boy friend" poster for Pat's first movie

Yet even without someone else like Elvis or Pat, performers like Fats Domino, Bill Haley, and Chuck Berry would have given rock n' roll its predominance eventually. What did happen was that late 1950's America became the critical cubbyhole in time/space where Pat Boone's career imprinted nearly all of us who paid attention to the music on the radio. The way he handled being such a big star in times like those made a difference in his imprint that did add up to real impact. It could just as easily have been otherwise, but Pat happened to take seriously the idea of modeling personal responsibility and propriety, and the ripples it sent through all of society are still benefiting us—to this day.

Pioneers and culture heroes

Pat Boone has been credited with clearing the way for black rock n' roll performers to get into the mainstream in a way they never had before. (The credit comes from, among others, Little Richard himself.) This usually silences those who profess pain with how Pat came along and ripped off the black rhythm & blues artists because he knew they'd never be allowed onto the playing field and he found their merchandise ripe for the plucking. (Why Elvis Presley didn't get the same heat for this as Pat needs some explaining. And why "cover" recordings of popular records aren't acknowledged as the standard operating procedure for the recording business of that day—as they were, much more than any time since then—needs some too.)

Okay, he opened doors to mainstream popularity for rhythm & blues talents, and they and we all benefited. All very fine and all very good. But that's not what mattered most to the literally millions of kids like me who were going through the natural ordeal of adolescence during the early rock n' roll years.

It should never have been a great surprise: The rowdy new sound of rock n' roll found the younger and the more rebellious its first natural audience. Chuck Berry sang "Hail hail rock n' roll, Deliver me from the days of old," and social changes were indeed at hand that were felt to be threatening enough to draw active resistance from some of the more traditionally oriented grown-ups. "Rock n' roll riot" was the phrase in a good many newspaper headlines, and rock n' roll was routinely called the music of juvenile delinquents! Yet, here was an authentically new kind of music, with such easy foot-stomping infectiousness and lyrics so often about young love that it was bound to win over even the "good" kids!

Life "MILLION-DOLLAR IDOL OF U.S. TEEN-AGERS" cover Feb. 2, 1959

With rock n' roll's increasing popularity, we adolescents (hard-wired for conformity amongst ourselves as throughout history) were actually facing an either-or choice between being "square" or joining with the "juvenile delinquent" forces, or so it actually seemed for a time. For large numbers of us, there might have been no answer we could invent quickly enough, if not for the presence of a singer who would rock n' roll with confidence and ease but do it without appearing to want to be somehow outrageous or indecent. Before some of us had even grasped how much we needed to, we found a way to be up-to-date and even "cool" without having to be rebellious. We'd gotten lucky. We'd discovered a one-of-a-kind rock n' roll star named Pat Boone.

Sure, some of those "more traditionally oriented grown-ups" could still protest that making rock n' roll okay for even the good kids only hastened its power to degenerate all kids. But Pat Boone's great popularity had permanently torpedoed the idea that it necessarily represented excess or degeneracy. Two years after Boone's *Tutti Frutti* peaked at #10 on the Billboard charts and Little Richard's original version peaked at #17, a Danny & the Juniors hit record told the truth that's remained true for all of our lives

so far: *Rock n' Roll Is Here To Stay!* But already this was looking way less dangerous to society than the alarmists would have said when it was getting started.

Instances of misguidedness to be found within rock n' roll had become subject to objection simply on their specifics. For sincere moralists, post-Pat Boone, the burdensome and nearly impossible chore of discrediting an irresistible musical genre had become unnecessary. What a relief for them! And all of *us!*

How ever else we define culture, we're pondering the obvious when we include surviving and preserving the established way of life among its essential components. These are things cultures do, and without the ability to maintain a mainstream instead of fragmenting into competing streams, a culture will become weaker, by definition. Embracing and absorbing new streams into a mainstream instead of letting fragmentation handicap us has been pointed out as a delicate alchemy America has so far managed to perform enough that we are more present-day dynamo than collapsing empire.

The critical value of a Pat Boone to America in the early rock n' roll era is thus un-arguable. When we speak of "culture heroes," while leading edge artists and visionaries come to mind, the sort who help us find a mainstream and guide us through turbulence with our culture intact are heroes too. Some (the ideologues who infest even free-spirited realms such as rock music) may dismiss his artistic importance, but you want to talk about your culture heroes? Pat Boone stands irreplaceably as one of modern America's authentic ones.

The Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame's shame

When our depicting and celebrating the first rock n' roll as we do in ShaNaNa was still being called a "fad," the public's unanticipated enthusiasm for it gave me the inspiration to write a song with the chorus lyrics "Yeah, some new names came around with a new kind of sound, and now things have never been the same, So let's take 'em all down and save 'em for our children in a rock n' roll hall of fame." That was in 1970. Millions of viewers (some record industry executives among them, I do believe) eventually saw us do my "Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame" on our TV series in 1978. Out of the efforts of a coalition of record industry people and competing civic officials, an actual Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame came to be a reality at last in 1983. If the idea was for us to take 'em all down and save 'em for our children, it has turned out that the "us" who are doing it are music biz heavies and not the actual star-making music-buying fans I pictured in my song.

I believe this has something to do with Pat Boone being among the missing in the inductees list. To the intensely hip who actually have opposed his induction into the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame or who would argue with me as to whether Pat Boone would qualify as a rock star, I say get down off your perch. Did we miss the mystical ceremony when you were anointed protectors of the sacred flame? Under your robes are you safeguarding some tablets bearing the definition of true rock n' roll we're obliged to honor?

Let's see—it had a strong backbeat, it had lots of images of young love in its lyrics… But wait a minute, exceptions to any definitions like that were on rock n' roll radio and on the Billboard charts. The most significant part of any definition of rock n' roll when it was new—the thing that actually was unprecedented—was that it was the music bought not by adults but by youngsters.

Rock n' roll flourished back then not by conforming to a definition but by nothing so complicated as the kids taking notice of it and maybe dancing to it and, most importantly of all, paying money for it. Rock n' roll music stars were nothing more than performers who were willing to take their chances with audiences of raucous youngsters. And if many were called, the few who were chosen were chosen by youngsters.

Pat Boone was one of those they chose. His first hit record happened before Elvis Presley's first. In the new *Pat Boone's America* you'll find photos of near mob scenes where it's just youngsters jostling to get closer to him. So get over it, ye keepers of the flame. Pat Boone was a rock n' roll star.

A wop boppa loo bop, a lop bam boom!

The coming of the counter-culture

In the new memoir Pat's narrative is about his post-rock n' roll star years more than some old fans might prefer. But quite obviously, such years constitute the majority of his long public career.

Looking upon youth culture while no longer having any real influence on it has probably contributed to Pat's observations seeming Jeremiah-like about America at times. "But Jeremiah was *right*," you do hear thoughtful individuals say, so Pat isn't really bothered by the comparison. My being active in the great rock culture that evolved a decade and more after Pat's heyday has made me ponder a lot about his perspectives on American culture in general.

The popular culture of a historical period seems to get more lasting remembrance than the political events. (Quickly now, who ruled Austria in Mozart's day?) Just as "the 'fifties" came to mean the late 1950s and early 1960s because of rock n' roll, "the 'sixties" came to mean the late 1960s and early 1970s because of the anti-war/youth/music counterculture. Things like the economic boom or the cold war, not to mention the Korean or Vietnam wars during the corresponding periods, will never be as universally familiar to younger people.

We mistook it at the time for a landmark and forerunner of things yet to come, but the high water mark for that 'sixties counterculture was Woodstock. It came near the very end of the calendar-demarcated 'sixties, but it's now strangely seen as the decade's central cultural moment, and it did reverberate into the 'seventies. Scorn me as a sloppy historian if I over-use the term "Woodstock era" here, but there was one. I was one of its inhabitants.

Boone's second movie, released November 27, 1957

All that far removed from the mainstream culture?

As I've noted earlier, Pat Boone was already on the adult side of any generation gap that might have existed by the time the escalating American military commitment in Vietnam was starting to define the 1960s. In the final actual calendar months of that decade, when the Woodstock rock festival was being mopped up, preproduction was underway for *The Cross and the Switchblade*, a movie starring Pat that would be released the following year to disappointing box office returns. The "Jesus freaks" phenomenon, a vibrant Christian recording industry, the rise of Christian broadcasting and such things would come later, but as far as attention in the mass culture was concerned during this period, things Christian were eclipsed like most everything else by things anti-war and things counterculture.

The rock music culture fused easily with the anti-war counterculture of course, because appeal to the individual's rebellious streak had always been part of rock n' roll's allure, and if *mass* rebelliousness could bring a military pull-back, the appeal of avoiding *individual* combat duty (not to mention death in battle) as a fringe benefit was so obvious that nobody had to mention it. When we consider that adolescence never stopped being a time of natural conformism, and that rock music purveyors and consumers joined (in lyrics, in advertising, in public events) in taking it all as a moral consciousness thing, it's easy for us to imagine how every youthful American male would take a greater interest in the rock culture then.

Something else that stoked the counterculture, not too obvious for repeating here, was a communications technology factor: Much of the second half of the 20th century turns out to be unique. Communications media were unlike those before or since. Before then, we had no TV; since then, we have internet, cell phones, cheap long distance, and so many competing broadcasts, pod-casts, blogs, and web-casts that financial people speak of market competition in "narrowcasting." In the 1960s for the first time, nightly TV news broadcasts were bringing vivid reality—fresh deaths our side was suffering from actual gun-toting enemy forces—unlike any citizens back home ever got so routinely in any previous war. Never before had all the folks accessed all the images and stories so similarly and so simultaneously; never again will all the images and stories come from so few sources and so synchronized. News about the Vietnam war and domestic debate about it was so similarly digested in the late 'sixties, individuals inclined toward counterculture participation were staying "on the same page" together quite effortlessly.

History, as they say, gets to be "written by the winners." The anti-war movement of the late '60s and early '70s eventually won congressional de-funding of the American military effort in Vietnam. So younger Americans since then have tended to get the winners' view that the enlightened counter-culture tamed our over-reaching military adventurism and finally allowed an end to the Vietnam war. High school textbooks show the old street protests in a favorable light, often mentioning the youth music culture as having a role, while ignoring the greater human tragedy that befell distant populations after America's dissenters got things their way. Today's kids are often dismissive of the "old hippies" so numerous on school faculties, but they seem to quite buy into the view that it was the Woodstock era, and the Woodstock era alone, that made the world safe for alternative lifestyles.

Considering all this, thorough historians should not neglect to look at the Woodstock era from the "losers'" point of view. It seems not unfair to say that the trek through the rock n' roll years had brought America by 1969 to the worst of the older generation's original fears about what the music would do to the young. Except for certain instances of dignified oratory or procession, the anti-war youth culture had enough excess, license, and exuberance to embody what the early rock n' roll detractors had seen as "mindless rebellion" on the part of its fans. The Woodstock era young were seen as self-absorbed and insular from adults, they were no longer looking responsibly toward the future, they were more promiscuous than any previous generation, their hygiene wasn't so good, and they were rather prone to rioting!

But, the next thing we knew, an abiding truth both historical and anthropological came into play: Parents almost never give up on their kids, not even if their kids reach adulthood and run amuck. Those on the adult side of the much-noted generation gap (whether believers in or dissenters against the Vietnam war) exhibited a gradual acceptance of how the young were turning out. No matter how creepy some of the young were seeming, the adults of Pat's generation found ways to keep a positive regard for my own generation that followed. Some of us were surprised how even older Americans warmed to the leftie-hippie young, and we heard how a lot of them identified with our ferment on campuses and in the streets, because in their own youth they had experienced some social upheaval in the 1930s depression era.

By the mid-1970s, the "counterculture" was seeming ever the more *mainstream*. Americans everywhere seemed to have broadened their definitions of socially acceptable styles and behavior. And—post-Vietnam War—an almost sappy, I'd-like-to-teach-the-world-to-sing, post-hippie mainstream took shape for long enough to allow disco and Jimmy Carter their turns on center stage.

The coming undone of the counter-culture

Many of those "losers" with a negative regard for the Woodstock era culture went to bed at nights in the 1970s despairing about America's future, because the quasi-hippie, anti-capitalist mood in the land seemed to be bearing awful fruits like the military forfeiting of Vietnam to communism, price controls (abandoned once their harmfulness was obvious), a successful move to force a Republican president out of office, and a decline in military preparedness. In 1974 the Watergate scandal hugely benefited the electoral results and future prospects for the left side of the Congressional aisle, and doubts about capitalism even being allowed to function helped take the stock market to a historic low. For the sector of grown-ups like Pat Boone who never had found the counterculture all that charming, there was a reluctant acceptance of the youth culture having turned out badly indeed. But for Pat the *only proper* response to it was the patient embrace of the afflicted young in the hope of bringing them back into the fold of traditional Americanism.

That post-hippie, smiley-face mainstream did take shape, but there was a tentative feel about it. I remember the Vietnam years and their clamorous counterculture having so *rattled* Americans that, in all my road touring with ShaNaNa, I sensed that we all got a bit wary of each other in the mid-to-late-'seventies aftermath. Many a younger adult's identity seemed to have been radically changed forever, and we weren't all sure whether we "could relate" to each other any more. It was starting to be called "The Me Decade." There came to be a lot of tentative posturing between people—especially old acquaintances or relatives who'd been little in touch and were unsure where each other's "heads were at" by now—on the war, on capitalism versus socialism, on matters spiritual, on an array of lifestyle issues. The war years and the counterculture had subjected *everything*—even continuing the United States as a democratic capitalist republic—to challenge.

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It was in the context of that aftermath that my channel-surfing eyes would happen upon Pat Boone on his prime time TV specials, with longish but very clean hair and sort of Partridge Family-style cleaned up hippie wardrobe, uttering lines like "You young whippersnappers get on now and… whip your snaps!" to his daughters. The same societal leadership function I describe in my introduction about Pat's crucial role in the early rock n' roll years—that of charting an accommodative middle ground—was still in play. It was much needed in the post-Vietnam years, and Pat fortunately was not as lonely in trying to provide it as he'd been back in the 'fifties.

In our present day, the tension for guys like Boone comes from the fact that traditional Americanism itself is so constantly targeted for re-definition that it's in danger of losing its substance. In Pat's view, the idea of there being a

definite mainstream based on Judeo-Christian values and decency is too often overlooked. Because overlooking that idea is a necessary precondition for redefining Americanism, Pat is branded "backward" by the hyper hipsters among us. In portions of the new book, his outrage over the decline of standards and decency does make him seem like a present-day Jeremiah prophesying doom. But it's not a role a guy like Boone would invite or welcome, just a role that he feels is forced upon him by our propriety-deficient times.

Pat discusses with understandable relish the success of those late 1970s prime time TV specials he did with his family. During the same timeframe, the *Sha Na Na* TV series came into being, not on a major network, but widely syndicated, beginning in September 1977. We enjoyed strong ratings and expanding numbers of stations through 1981—time slotted usually around 7:30 PM—with never a self-conscious thought about purpose. The notable fact was that the once-intimidating specter of rock n' roll had now become harmless and family-friendly. Once notorious rock n' rollers, we were now transformed into harmless cartoon characters for the young and old. Our concert audiences came to include kids accompanied by parents and even grandparents. Rather than being central to a generation gap as it had been circa 1970, rock n' roll was now a generation bridge. Each Pat Boone prime time TV special consisted of a former rock n' roll superstar showcasing and celebrating his family, and the ratings showed that America drank it in.

Our *ShaNaNa* episodes were musically true to the first rock n' roll—we tried to capture the "feel" and never to change a note from the original hit records—but our series was altogether self-deprecating, if not downright silly. The big summer 1978 hit movie *Grease* had us portraying the dance band at the Rydell High School prom. If there was a message to the screenplay, it seemed to be that a girl could find fulfillment in the rock n' roll age by becoming more sexually provocative and freeing herself from all that traditional "nice girl" propriety. The closing theme song that went "We'll always be together" rang true for but a relative handful of the actual generation the movie portrayed.

Reflecting on all this, I guess there may be two things us aging baby-boomers are coming to believe by now with near unanimity. (The one-liners about us always went toward "sex, drugs, and rock n' roll," but it's really more like…) One: It really would be nice if rock n' roll were here to stay. And, two: It really would be awful if family weren't. If that mindset should turn out to be our only particular legacy at the end of our run, at least we will be secure in the knowledge that we could have done worse. What we're sticking with in the end has more in common with the Pat Boone years of our earlier memories than with the more hippy, trippy years where we sojourned later along the way.

The risk in romanticizing your rock

For early rock n' roll era youth, there was a price for having rock n' roll (as hailed in Chuck Berry's hit *School Days*) "deliver me from the days of old," and it included some loss of clarity about norms to guide how adulthood ought to be approached. The renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead pronounced post-World War II baby boomers "pioneers—not in space but in time." As much as Daniel Boone had been in his day, Pat Boone in his turned out to be a guide for many of these pioneers. For most of them, rock n' roll was assured of posing little of the danger people had feared. Pat, by example and in print and in spoken interview, was big on clarity about how adulthood ought to be approached.

But take note! Nobody's going to say (except maybe just once, right here) "*Wow, that man Pat Boone… Now he really helped things stay the same!"* People get noticed in history when they make things *different*. School kids don't say of Lincoln "He kept the United States together," they say "He freed the slaves." For some people, an Elvis Presley is important, because he changed certain things; for others, perhaps less conscious about it, a Pat Boone is even more important, because he kept certain things the same. But, because he made things different, Elvis will get all the notice. History notices people when they make things different, but when they keep things the same (even with great effort and against impossible odds) it usually—sorry, Pat—goes unnoticed.

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At Woodstock the biggest common denominator among attendees was their barely adult age and the central place that they gave rock music in their lives. From the perspective of the "losers" in that moment of history, the Woodstock young were in danger and/or represented danger. Their excessive attachment to rock music and the counterculture seemed to have worked some ill for them and their world. Whether or not rock deserved blame for America's failing traditional robust optimism, it took some years and some luck to remedy much of it. After Watergate and the 1975 military forfeiture of Vietnam to communism, Ronald Reagan's election, coming as soon as 1980, felt to Woodstock era "losers" like waking up from a bad dream, and the obvious demise of most if not quite all of world communism by the end of the 'eighties felt like a flat out miracle.

I'm far from alone among history's "winners" in the Woodstock era if I now look back with a degree of embarrassment. I did buy into the socialist ideal myself—would bore innocent bystanders advocating it. But I found time for further study and further reflection as I matured; and by the time Saigon fell, I had real trouble rejoicing. From time to time nowadays, into my humble fan mail box will arrive a request. This one is typical:

I was very impressed that my daughter would choose Woodstock for a project on an event that changed the world. Their teacher has asked that they attempt to contact persons who were actually there, especially any who performed there. Knowing ShaNaNa was part of it, we would like to know what your ideas of Woodstock are and how you think that it changed the world at the time.

I wrote right back:

It hardly did at all. Only its mythologizing had all that much impact. The myth was that we "freaks" (maybe "hippies" in your terms) had demonstrated how we could peaceably share and take care of each other, awash in brotherly love (along with the mud from the rainstorms) in some sort of socialist utopia model. The fact was, we were quite dependent on the life support systems offered by the "straight" capitalist world outside the festival. They literally rescued us and provided for us to the degree necessary. The idealistic equality yearnings of our generation ignored the fact that wealth has to be created before anyone can bother with redistributing it; and profit-motivated free market capitalism works better at that than any other system. Woodstock was much mythologized as "proof" that the young had found a more humanizing societal model, but it demonstrated nothing of the sort. I don't have time to be more expansive now, but we can do this as an on-going Q&A exchange if you like.

I never heard another peep in reply to this one. I suspect myths die hard for some folks. To disillusion the young would trouble me; but, with the parents on board—hey, no problem!

What I *do* want to log in here about my experience of Woodstock itself (apart from having savored my own little slice of immortality when repeat footage of me combing my ShaNaNa hairdo accompanied the credits rolling at the end of the hit movie) is that, for reasons having nothing to do with a drug high, there was just a goofy feeling of magic in the air there.

A performer, but not recognizably famous, I could wander in the crowd or backstage. In terms of life support—much less, creature comfort—in a poorly planned muddy sea of too many people, there was an obvious disaster underway. But *nobody got hurt!* Walking around, I encountered nothing but cheerful human warmth, and individuals taking good care of each other. It seemed a time of no competitiveness, and constant volunteerism, and sharing resources. It wasn't socialism at all; there was no people's committee directing anything in top-down fashion; there was just one-on-one caring and patience while we waited for the music to go on despite delays. It amounted to a love-in indeed—not sexualized, just very brotherly. *And it felt like heaven*. The lesson for the ages *wasn't* that "socialism works" (as some of us would later read in those urban leftie rags prevalent at the time); it was that brotherly love really does have its magic power.

Rock n' roll n' politics less a natural than we thought

The June 8th, 1972, cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine consisted only of a caricature of the very liberal Democratic presidential aspirant George McGovern and the quotation "I stake my hopes in 1972 in large part on the energy, the wisdom, and the conscience of young Americans." After McGovern secured the Democrats' nomination in July, those and similar words were repeated often. The voting age had been lowered from 21 to 18 in 1970, and the young did support McGovern in much higher proportions than older voters did; still, he lost the November election badly. The "youth culture" was never again taken as seriously in mainstream American politics.

In December, 1972 also became the year when the United States took its last draftee into the military; it was all volunteer from then on, and the political idealism of youth faded noticeably for my rock n' roll-steeped generation. By the time it had reached the "if it feels good do it" point—some time after the 1967 "summer of love"—the rock culture had already begun to lose some of its former usefulness for protesting injustices or advancing causes that would require self-sacrifice or a belief in duty.

Since then, it's been very good for occasional "We Are the World" and "Band Aid" style fundraising, but not better than conventional efforts like the United Way or the Red Cross have been, year in, year out. Except possibly for libertine advocacy of personal "lifestyle" choices for government to legitimize, there turns out to be no political agenda that springs naturally from being a fan of hard-edged music. The self-anointed intelligentsia of rock may posture otherwise in places like *Rolling Stone*, but their opinions mostly go unnoticed by the mass music audience, which remains politically undefinable.

We did reach a point in the advanced Woodstock era where you were deemed as yet un-evolved, not quite hip, if the music had not changed you. In this climate, audiences at open-air rock music events came to have their standard component of entranced-looking free form dancers, taken to be a norm. Some outward sign that the music was big for you—the length of your hair, an article of jewelry or clothing—was not to be omitted in your daily life. It was understood that you were not fully human if listening to rock music had not transformed who you were.

I bought into that myself some, but even after publishing the idea in song that after rock n' roll "Things'll never be the same," I can not honestly neglect to ponder the obvious: For the majority of Americans, whether young or old, rock n' roll was always more of a side show than the focus of their lives. It wasn't so "cool" of Pat Boone to treat it as a form to dabble in instead of a force to give in to, but treating rock n' roll that way reflected the mainstream American attitude more than did the cute allegiance postured by the likes of the Grateful Dead and certain *Rolling Stone* writers to the music's supposed transmutative power.

Even though their political feelings have more in common with Pat Boone than with, say, Mick Jagger, mainstream Americans who listen to popular music from the more edgy, rugged end of the spectrum tend to *assume* that their political feelings must be unlike those of conservative "squares" like Boone. Thus the professing liberals behind things like MTV's "Rock the Vote" seem hopeful of moving election outcomes in their favor essentially by enlisting music fans to vote reflexively *against* things square.

No wonder the trendy-haired, ear-studded Hollywood types who decide about "induction" to the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame *(It's no grass roots process, kids!)* prefer to keep a known conservative like Pat Boone strangely out of it—so that his political views can also seem to be!

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The grown-ups quit calling rock n' roll a fad some time in the late 1950s and accepted that it was part of the mainstream setting in which their children's adolescence would take place. From the late 1950s right up until maybe sometime in the '90s, there actually was a rock music culture to speak of.

Today, I'm not sure there is one to speak of. There's hardly one to speak of the way we did, as though it's the natural epicenter in all societal tectonic plate motion. In our present day, the mass culture many of us thought we inhabited is no more. The "generation gap" ain't what it used to be; today rock music is as often a generation *bridge* as the mainstay of any gap.

A willing singer's first head shot
age 14 in his native Nashville

Instead of a single, obvious youth culture, today we have stratification. We may still identify rock music as youth music, but too much other entertainment (e.g., video games, hip-hop) successfully lays claims to the youth market any more. Nowadays, not all boys, but many, are wearing their caps backwards; not all young men, but many, are wearing cowboy hats.

But hey… (said the aging co-founder of ShaNaNa) Rock n' roll is here to stay!

Let the record show…

Most observers' wisdom on Pat Boone's career is that he was a conventional ballad singer who tried his hand at songs from the rhythm & blues and rock n' roll side of the tracks, because—young, white singing star that he was—he could pile up sales to a white record buying public that wouldn't even learn of the original recordings by black artists in that day and age. Them he in effect "ripped off." (And somehow in a more guilt-deserving way than Elvis or other early white rockers did!)

The more I've looked into this conventional wisdom, the more sense of mission I've felt about setting the record straight. For its own *legitimacy*, the industry self-promotional establishment that calls itself the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame needs Pat Boone's induction—a whole lot more than he needs it for *his* legitimacy. Early in the history of rock n' roll—doubters, get used to it—he was one of the revolutionary warriors. It's altogether shameful for the RRHF historical revisionists (who've inducted the *Sex Pistols* …who've inducted *Miles Davis!)* that they've held off this long in acknowledging him.

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Of course, Pat's image never seemed that of a warrior. And anyway, he'd moved on, and already been simply a founding father, before we'd gotten around to noticing the revolution for what it was, enough to be writing any histories of it. Pat wasn't much interested in "pushing the envelope." And "reinventing himself" (*a la* Madonna or David Bowie) in the hope of somehow staying "on top" he was never neurotic enough to obsess on. He was doing some movie roles, was becoming a familiar television guest or guest host, and had become just *one of the grown-ups* by the time rock n' roll had become "rock" and the symbolic locus of a much-noted "generation gap."

Still, portraying Pat as a sort of Benedict Arnold turncoat is a labored attempt to sound hip, and doing it makes some denizens of the supposedly free and open rock music world seem ridiculous. Even after his career was centered on Christian music, Pat never discarded his interest in rock n' roll. (At the drop of a hat, he sang *Tutti Frutti* on ShaNaNa's microphones when we did an Easter Seals telethon he was hosting, and he quite put his heart in it, even if he sounded strangely "clean" compared to the sweet raunch of Little Richard or the more recent vocal commerciality of a Bruce Springsteen or Steven Tyler!) He may not be a *turncoat*, but portraying Pat as a pioneering *revolutionary* is a labored attempt to be charitable, some rock music buffs will insist. Well… They haven't adequately considered Pat's very first hit record.

I can tell you Pat has. His eyes twinkle when you ask him about *Two Hearts, Two Kisses.* The story that's fun for him to tell is about hitting the highway under Dot Records' owner Randy Wood's capable wing and promoting the release to local radio stations around the Tennessee region… And finding the receptionists and DJs who'd already listened to the record were expecting it was (in their terminology then) "a colored singer" they'd be greeting! Having spent his professional life caricatured as the "white bread" icon, as he rolls off the details here you do notice that Pat savors this taste of validation.

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Sam Phillips famously discovered in Elvis Presley a white boy who somehow sounded black, like some of those R&B platters a white adult in those days could hear if he just took the trouble. Randy Wood less famously but quite consciously discovered an R&B song and sought from Pat Boone a black sounding vocal on it. It's human nature for us to be all interested in judging who's deserving scorn, but the far more important point of this story is the interbreeding of America's black and white communities' creative talents, well before interbreeding of their girls and boys gained its respectability.

Amazingly, from the standpoint of Pat's mourning within his new book over the death of some of our standards, some "respectable" folks wouldn't get caught leaving a porn shop nowadays with as much embarrassment or shame as they would have caught leaving a "race record" shop back then. "Race records" of course were mostly rhythm and blues records—"R&B "—starting in the late 1940's, and they were so infectious and danceable that some "respectability" roadblock was just about the only reason a casual listener wouldn't want to hear more. If I can get away with quoting my own first line from the best song I ever managed to write for ShaNaNa, "It was rhythm and blues that was makin' the news back in 1954."

When you comb through the morgue copies of *Billboard* and other such publications of the time, that R&B phenomenon is obvious. Anybody ambitious to compete in the record business had to have taken notice. "Then some songsters from the country said 'That's real nice and funky, still we'd like to add a little more'," the second line in my song, was about the likes of Scotty Moore (the artful twanger behind Elvis on *That's All Right, Mama* and a legendary body of later work) who grew up cultivating their chops in the fields of country music where the models were pickers like Merle Travis and Chet Atkins. Business thinking "outside the box" was soon going to pay off nicely for those who translated the relatively underground danceability of R&B with some influence from the relatively regional appeal of country music and hooked the booming population of mainstream American young on the resulting sound.

Randy Wood's R&B discovery *Two Hearts, Two Kisses (Make One Love)* reached the *Billboard* charts on March 23, 1955 and peaked at #16, becoming Pat Boone's first hit. It was almost a year before Elvis Presley's first *Billboard* chart arrival with *Heartbreak Hotel* on February 22, 1956. After snaring Pat in the afterglow of his big win on Ted Mack's Ametuer Hour TV show (the "American Idol" of its day), the gifted and ambitious Wood called on him to stretch into a tune that was more raucous than anything he'd ever tried before. Television was still in relative infancy, so Pat was still just an aspiring prospect, by no means widely known. (This torpedoes the aforementioned idea that he was a white star who could just steal black music and easily pile up sales.) What mattered was that he got the vocal job done.

Borrowing from no one in particular, Pat sounded like a rambunctious and cutely predatory character in his recording of *Two Hearts, Two Kisses.* He sort of falsetto yodels the word "two" and naughtily hiccups "Par-huh-ruh-dice" when the "Two kisses put you in Paradise" line comes around; he bends notes quite blue like "I" on "I've got plenty of lovin'," and his voice fattens out like a gospel soloist on "make one love." Through most of the track there's a piano pounding out exactly the tonal pattern that Chuck Berry later made a signature rock guitar sound. The rhythm is a shuffle—very danceable—and the blue notes are frequent. This definitely is R&B , and young Pat Boone—*pioneer in the rock*

music revolution—has got to be resigned to the prospect that some of the church ladies back home who've known him since he was a child will not approve!

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Okay then, at this moment maybe you're wondering if you've ever even heard of *Two Hearts, Two Kisses.* Awfully good question… because I wondered too, when I first really got to studying Pat's career. (And I've had a life-long interest in this stuff.) And my friends all seemed to wonder too!

This time I'm not going to argue anyone's been repressing Pat's legacy, not going to say that it's anything conspiratorial or any sort of reflection on today's music industry Masters of Darkness. That wouldn't explain why I never heard the song on the radio even when I was a kid. (And, having had the sublime luck to be born so that *Rock Around the Clock* hit the charts when I hit the first grade and *Sgt. Pepper's* when I graduated high school, I remember well what I did hear.) My stab at the explanation would be that within a short time this platter came to sound dated, and it was eclipsed by even more novel sounds that really got people talking about rock n' roll. You could say, while the sound in *Two Hearts* was a close relative, it wasn't exactly a rock n' roll track. There was no guitar at all; there was a swing era texture about it. Habitual radio listeners heard the charted hits from the era recycling on the air from time to time, even on "Top 40" stations, whether they were rock n' roll or not. But that was more the case for novelties like *Davy Crockett* or evocative changes of pace like *Autumn Leaves*, so Pat's not-quite-groundbreaking, not-quite-smash first hit record managed to escape my own and most of my age-mates' notice.

Not that it mattered for Pat. Just months later his cover of Fats Domino's *Ain't That a Shame* was smash hit indeed, hitting #1 on the Billboard charts in September 1955. Fats Domino himself has pointed out that it was more blessing than curse for him, as his own original of the song climbed higher on the charts after Boone released it! This was an important historical moment, when free market competition was about to overwhelm bigoted compartmentalization, and a designation like "race music" would depart the Land of the Free.

History can go any number of different ways at any point along the way

So many pictures, so many stories, so few pages. Boone's new memoir is too short (and his career too long) for us to get a good look into every interesting question that comes up. Tasked with giving things extra historical perspective, I was given free rein to focus on whatever seemed most compelling. I expected to have one of Pat's or the publishers' people looking over my shoulder, but there never was anybody on me. Pat didn't even know what I was writing, and he never gave me suggestions. (If he even cares about not being inducted into the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame, he never let me in on it.) Here in this article I am filling in many of the details that survived only in broad brushstrokes, if that, after so many of Pat's photographs beat out so much of my commentary in the publisher's competition for space in the final print version of the book.

1953: Backstage at a Nashville Concert in the Park, Minnie Pearl congratulates local boy for winning on TV's Amateur Hour

Just being a history buff doesn't qualify anybody to be a historian. It's easy to enjoy the characters and the stories you uncover in a historical setting—it's a lot like just being a fan, really—but you can still miss the significance of things that actually shaped the contours taken for granted by the later inhabitants of the landscape. Big time *real* historian David McCullough advises us to remember that nothing ever "had to happen the way" it did. History can

always go “any number of different ways at any point along the way, just as your own life can. You never know. One thing leads to another. Nothing happens in a vacuum.”

Yup! Like, how about this one? Only with the just-in-time ending of British military conscription in November 1960 was it possible for a certain John, Paul, and George to struggle on uninterrupted by military obligations and keep hoping for less sleazy venues for their little guitar band. (Well--probably *that* did have to happen the way it did! But…) Usually, God seems to let us rely on each other’s direct help and keeps His camouflaged.

Okay, if I’m no “big time” historian, at least I won’t equivocate about what I do think I’ve discovered. Among my most confident handful of perspectives, let me offer a few paragraphs just telling how the star got born.

The guy was never struggling to become a singer. Pat Boone was just singing, as best he could, when he could, the way he had since he was a kid. He wasn’t shy about it, because people said he was so *good*, and he just loved to sing.

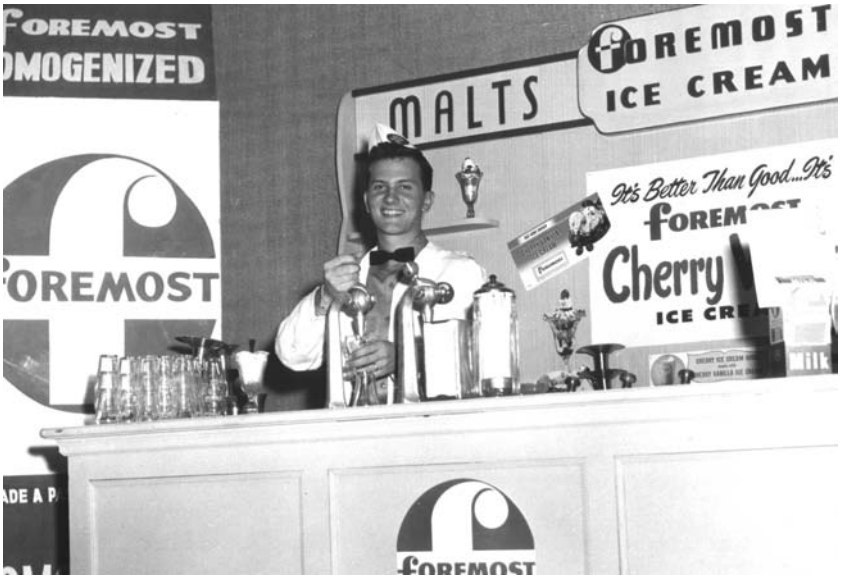
For him, love and marriage really did go together like a horse and carriage, and starting at age nineteen years five months he couldn’t have one without the other. For him the concrete plan was already starting to set: He’d work his way through college and become a teacher and probably preacher.

Then, less like “American Idol” than just winning big on some game show (There was no wall-to-wall celebrity-obsessed media culture like now), he won locally and then took top honors in New York City on Ted Mack’s Original Amateur Hour TV series. He took a shot at Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts TV Show while in New York and won that too, accepted an invitation to meet with a record company guy on his way back home to North Texas State College, and resumed his life without bothering to wonder very much if he’d ever hear from that record guy who probably “promised” people things just as a routine business habit.

High school student body president Pat and homecoming queen Shirley, the future Mr & Mrs Boone

When it happened that he did hear back, the guy only wanted to record one of these “rhythm and blues” songs—not the stuff of Pat’s fantasies, really—but he took to the guy’s personality, and the plan to record it in Chicago seemed exciting enough to take seriously, so Pat did. And, darned if the thing didn’t turn out to be a hit record! He had become, at least for the moment, a recording artist in this new style people were starting to call “rock and roll.” It wasn’t his favorite, because (reason enough) his supreme Excellency Bing Crosby probably wouldn’t have gone near it, but hey, a hit was a hit. Whatever the case, you do what promotion you can, but you don’t dropkick teachers college when your wife is expecting your second baby.

The remarkable thing to point out in this story is tied to Pat’s famously easy-going nature. Because, though he would later be known for taking “moralistic” stands, he *wasn’t arrogant about his own musical taste.* As continued to be the case with even his late-’nineties “heavy metal” album release, unless there was indecency, he regarded public appetite for a musical style as a sufficient reason for a singer to sing some of it. His recording career has had (with wildly varying degrees of market success) some of just about every widely popular style.



Doing "some local TV to get through school" as the host of the "Foremost Teen Times" WBAP TV in Fort Worth, 1954

Here was one of those "what if" instants in history, where the small difference in a particular moment makes a big difference later. That record, *Two Hearts, Two Kisses* charted in March 1955 and peaked at #16 nationally on the Billboard Pop chart, and it was the first instance of a solo white singer charting anything of a rock n' roll hit! (I know… *That's All Right, Mama*,1954; but Sam Phillips' Sun Records was very small, and it only put Elvis on *Billboard's* regional Country & Western chart. And *Shake Rattle & Roll* charted earlier. But, come on—Haley and the Comets was a *group!*)

Boone's fondest dreams were of being another Crosby or Como or Sinatra. So let me ask, "what if..." Since the "class act" Sinatra did his career no harm denouncing rock n' roll as nothing but "the martial music of every side-burned juvenile delinquent" and refusing to go near it, what if a clever handler in Pat's discussions with the record label had pointed to his star quality chatting with the host and then singing on those several Ted Mack and Arthur Godfrey TV appearances, and negotiated to his best advantage? What if he had reminded the record company that America had already proven it would eat right out of Pat's hand, and he had advised they be back in touch after somebody had found new songs as strong as the big hit "Secret Love" or "Three Coins in a Fountain" to do credit to Pat's launch as a recording star on their label?

Taking it back just a notch, to the actual reality at the time, if Pat himself had refused a rhythm & blues song as just a "novelty" he'd prefer to bypass, the record company would have taken it in stride, they'd no doubt have accommodated him with "mainstream" song styles, and he'd still have had a career. But rock n' roll would have lurched on in its infancy without a performer that more conservative mainstream Americans couldn't dismiss as just one of those *others*—meaning either "colored" like Fats or Chuck, or "hillbilly" like Haley or the Everlies, or "misfit" like Jerry Lee or Elvis.

New York, July 1953 : Ted Mack and new Amateur Hour contestant from Tennessee

If not for young Pat's easy-going nature, and his lack of arrogance about his own musical taste, he might not have "descended" to being taken for a rock n' roll guy. For the *non*-delinquent mainstream young of the time, that would have turned out to mean rock n' roll remaining a bit more and a bit longer in the realm of *forbidden fruit*. We can only guess about the way the next few years would have been different.

My own guess would be that they'd have been more fractious. "Jocks" and "straight arrows" and "hoodlums" and "greasers" would have bothered each other a little more in school yards, and little things like "school spirit" and big things like progress in the emerging civil rights movement would not have come easier.

Pat Boone brought a calming effect upon the waters of the new "juvenile delinquent's" music. His persona has been made fun of because it was so blatantly unlike the rest of the early rock n' roll stars. It was also unlike such standard-bearers as Sinatra, and that's what has turned out to matter. For making rock n' roll less alarming to teachers and preachers and parents, and even for letting "square" kids in on the fact that you could tap a toe to this stuff and still not become a delinquent, there was

a crucial little while there when a surpassingly capable young singer, lacking in arrogance about his own taste, turned out to be the indispensable man.

It actually helped the cause of rock n' roll if Pat Boone did it too "white bread" (in today's knowing terminology), because the more somebody resembled your father or uncle singing "A wop boppa loo bop, a lop bam boom," the less scary it was to your mom. If that guy was on the radio play list, you had a better chance of getting to hear Little Richard scream "have some fun tonight" without your dad changing the station.

Recording artists "covering" other artists releases already on the charts was in fact standard record business practice throughout much of the 1940s and 50s, as enough of today's rock fans have learned by now that we hear less attack on Pat Boone for having "ripped off" black artists than we used to. Once he'd proved he could get them on the charts, it would have been worse for them and for us if, like Sinatra, he'd have *refused* to touch the songs from Little Richard's and Fats Domino's side of the tracks.

A real rock n' roller will shoot from the hip

If there was a master scheme (as it's been cartooned by agenda-driven "researchers") to create a thoroughly palatable white star, and then get him recording the biggest selling releases from black stars, (to exploit them monetarily while obscuring their identities) it sure didn't track that way in practice. Coming from the early to mid-1950s record business model, when more than ever before or since, recording your own "covers" of other people's charted releases was simply standard operating procedure, his *first* three hits on the Billboard chart were covers of black artists' up tempo releases. After first *attaining* stardom via that route, his releases after 1955 went more toward romantic ballads like *Friendly Persuasion* in 1956 and the spring/summer 1957 mega-hit *Love Letters in the Sand.*

In answer to whether they ever chose to "take his career a new direction" Pat says that "shoot from the hip" was always the approach with recordings, and it never stopped being the approach. "From now on you should…" wasn't part of the thought process.

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Elvis got a certain respect over the years for openly crediting black R&B artists (some of whose songs *he* of course "ripped off") as influences. Pat didn't exactly spend his youth with a white cloak and hood in the closet, and he gave many a black artist precious national exposure on his highly rated 1957-60 TV show, but—probably because he did sound "whiter"—he has always gotten worse blame than Elvis for "stealing their music."

When we started making celebration of 'fifties rock n' roll our reason for being ShaNaNa in March 1969, we could do the early hits all day without needing to think about looking like the original artists. The 1950s never had today's kind of celebrity-gazing media, so basically the music was known by its *sound only.* (Come to think of it, of any early rock n' roll stars whose look was widely known enough to matter, we did do the Everly Brothers with a slight effort to look like them, and of course we did Elvis, our version having exactly enough curling lip and exactly enough balding head to be wickedly funny—which at the time was just fine, with the real Elvis turning his career toward the worshipful blue-haired in Las Vegas.) But in ShaNaNa we never did Pat Boone because (1) people did know what he looked like, and (2) of the ten of us very capable singers, no one could sound much like him.

Slidell, Texas, Church of Christ -- Pat's first pulpit

The Un-rock star

In some pop stars' biographies we hear how the star—a Little Richard or a Joe Tex or an Al Green—has done a surprise career change, and gone from stage to pulpit, from singing to preaching. In Pat Boone's biography there's an underappreciated turn that went the opposite: The not-yet-Reverend Boone, when winning those big talent competitions started to matter, made a turn from the career path of preaching to that of singing.

It seems that singers called to preach always do come back and never quite abandon their old musical calling. In Pat's case, the singer never quite abandoned the calling of ministry. Despite its probable disadvantages, he brought his dedication to God along with him into show business.

Although he meant to represent nothing exceptional, meant just to exemplify Bible-heeding young Americans as mainstream, that "straight arrow" quality helped solidify his ascension to the throne where he now has reigned, the un-rock star for life.

Maybe Jerry Lee Lewis was onto something in calling rock n' roll "the Devil's music." If it was, then somebody for its fans to hate to love and love to hate—the type the bright boys at *Rolling Stone* had in mind when they named their empire "Straight Arrow Publishing"—would be a useful part of the plan to foster pride (number one on the "Cardinal Sins" hit parade) enough for rock n' roll to become "rock" and start taking itself very seriously, with renegade "from the streets" posing, distrust of the "establishment," and… (** yawn * ... z-z-z-z*)

Sorry. I must've dosed off. Let's see…

In reply to my direct questioning whether his religious conviction began from any moment of personal decision or represented simply what he grew up with, Pat told me it truly started with an old-fashioned public confession of faith in Jesus when he was teenaged. While always known to those around him as easy-going, and respected even in Hollywood as one who does not pester the unwary about religion, Pat could never be said to have "lightened up" about that decision. "I prayed that God would help me make my life decisions, and use me somehow for good. I wanted my one life to really count."

As years passed, he led the congregational singing for a number of churches, worked as a summer counselor at Christian camps, and generally was "preparing myself, I thought, for a life as a teacher/preacher." After marrying Shirley and starting college, Pat was able to do "some local TV to get through school," but he was aiming for that teacher's degree while he "was the student preacher at a little one-room church."

It was that guy, with that mindset and priorities, who became—remarkably soon—a bona fide teenage idol. With each new career opportunity, he tells me, he would ask himself the same questions: "Is it right? Can I do this honorably? Will it help, or hurt, somebody? Will it please, or offend, the Lord?"

But, full disclosure, kids.—If you're converting a room as a shrine to Pat Boone as your personal pop patriarch, be informed that he laughs at some bawdy jokes, and he lacks a halo. Never that tightly wound, when Pat made his "square" artistic choices, it *wasn't* personal squeamishness. It was a deliberate thought process.

He never opposed or disparaged rock n' roll the way Frank Sinatra (the "king" to the previous generation) and some other stars did, but his musical approach was obviously more "sanitizing" than that of Elvis; and he always chose error on the side of caution where suggestiveness versus old fashioned modesty between the sexes was concerned. With choices like singing *Tutti Frutti* on his TV show wearing a knit sweater instead of something more "rebellious" looking, he signaled that a "straight arrow" could rock n' roll, but only up to a certain point.

June 1958, graduation from Columbia

It's hard to envision any hardcore leather jacket types like the ones caricatured in *Grease* (or, for that matter, performing in ShaNaNa) warming to Pat Boone in 1957 upon reading in his *This Week Magazine* interview:

> "…performers have a moral obligation to their fans? Well, I do. I have had considerable success in the rock-and-roll field, but… I don't think anything excuses the suggestive gyrations… I like rhythm, too. But the human body consists of about 200 separate bones, and I don't think it's necessary to call all of them into play… I belong to the finger-snapping school myself. That, and a little tapping of the feet, is enough to satisfy my soul. And it seems to satisfy my audiences, too."

Once he'd decided *Tutti Frutti's* "Boy, you don't know what she do to me" was inappropriate and substituted "Pretty Little Susie is the gal for me," it was forever harder for him to claim 100% respect for everything of the original artistry! And, quite seriously, he must have annoyed some potential fans.

Pat did think about it. He accepted the cost.

What a drag it is bearing witness

After learning that I was working with Pat Boone on his memoir, acquaintances rather often asked if he was the "hardcore evangelical" they'd heard. I told one of my ShaNaNa bandsmen, once assured that he was ready to listen for a minute, "Hey, I'll give you one better—or will you say 'worse'?—Pat's a *charismatic.* I think that's behind any air of religious controversy you associate with him." So the next question was "…as in *handling serpents*—that sort of stuff?" And we were off to the races about things like whether all snake handlers are charismatics but not all charismatics are snake handlers!

While living in England during the filming of *The Main Attraction*

Actually, Pat gave a full airing of his most personal religious experiences and beliefs in his remarkable best-seller *A New Song*, published in 1988 and subsequently translated into over a dozen foreign editions. The guy in there isn't merely holding on to the old time religion of his boyhood; instead, he's exercising a scholar's curiosity with the actual substance of its scriptures, and he's daring to be instructed by his own experience. When he experienced things that, while consistent with the book of Acts in the New Testament, were "paranormal" in modern, everyday terms, he took the trouble to bare witness to them. (It was in the timeframe covered by the book that he did get "on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*" along with the sneering tag line "God is everywhere, but especially at Pat Boone's house, where a miracle a day keeps the devil, and bankruptcy, away.")

Years after all that dust has settled, Pat belongs not to a church denomination he's conformed to, mama's boy style since boyhood, but to his adult choice of an openly Pentecostal one. He's willing to see himself as a practicing minority among today's professing Christians, but he's unwilling to see Christians as a practicing minority within a godless American mainstream. We've forgotten, to an amazing degree anymore, that most Americans *generally* were "evangelicals" within living memory. They believed in the Bible as God's word. It's only with the sort of "post-modern" questioning of that premise that the instruction "Go ye unto all the world and preach the Gospel" has been met with hesitancy instead of taken at face value.

So, it turns out that even Mr. white buck goodie two shoes did disappoint his parents for a while, when some rough and tumble personal encounters with both his own demons and the reality of the Holy Spirit seemed to have his train wobbling off the tracks—or so it must have seemed to his mother's eyes. (Things turned out cool with mom and dad though. Like Pat and Shirley, they too were impacted eventually by the excitement in "charismatic" experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives.)

When public figures, especially the rock star sort, get caught confronting their demons in the form of substance abuse or bizarre forms of public indiscretion, America treats them so well that their publicists order pricier wine with dinner. But Pat's demons were too private, personal, and wrapped up with getting right with the God of the Bible (as opposed to the abstraction that is "God" in today's popular vernacular). And America treated him not as well.—The mass media would have preferred that he'd have just been intoxicated in the gutter in some circus-grade act of sexual indiscretion. Ah, the movie and record offers he'd have been turning down!

For Pat it's got to have felt unfair, or maybe just stupid. Theological debates aside, personal experience matters. In his writing he holds that it's actually rather puzzling and odd when Christians *don't* do the kind of worship partaking in gifts of the spirit including miracle healings, "speaking in tongues," or the like, because—look, it's *not* like it's some "New Age" thing concocted with the latest flavored incense from the mystical East—it's just there in writing in the Bible, very plain and ancient. We who haven't experienced these things, believers or skeptics, I suppose might consider what we'd do if we did have our direct experience—say, witnessing E.T. and his posse stepping from a UFO—and nothing to gain and much to lose by going public with it. Going to bear witness to it? Or do you keep it hidden for the sake of your self-

interested private ease? How many of us are quite sure? The choice a guy made would say a lot about his willingness to have faith in—and to love—his neighbor.

Musicianship, mastery

In the new book, comprehensive memoir or not, we can't find a picture of Pat Boone playing guitar. There's a reason for this: Pat Boone didn't play guitar! Back in high school the ukulele was Pat's way to accompany himself mostly among friends. But guitar playing never did become one of his professional tools.

I ask him about his not picking up guitar, as just a normal part of a professional's tools of the trade, when he was a young rock n' roll star, the pre-eminent one of his day in lots of kids' eyes. And Pat says "Yeah, I really should have played the guitar," and I shake my head thinking Elvis was no real guitar player, but it didn't matter!

A high percentage of guys in my generation found out that it doesn't take much work. Just as soon as you build some strength in certain finger muscles, you can play enough bar chord rhythm chops on guitar to do lots of songs. Should you have enough other gifts to turn pro, put some real guitar players on stage with you, and you'll be fine even if your guitar is turned down too low to be heard. Pat was an athletic and especially bright guy; he should have learned four or five chords and put a guitar on!

But after this thought comes another one, and it's about Pat's real mastery. Take a look at clips of him crooning on the 1957-1960 TV series that consistently held one of the biggest audience shares of its day: What you see is sheer *mastery*. We're talking a Tiger Woods or a Mikhail Baryshnikov or a Lance Armstrong kind of mastery representing the difference between being big-time competitive and being--at least on your good days--*the best there is.* If the exquisite stand-up song renderings knock you out when you look at those TV clips, you're noticing nothing not noticed by many before you: For on-camera solo crooning Pat's mastery was at the genius level. He didn't train the sort of hours a Lance Armstrong might, but he appreciated his gifts and cultivated them. He obsessively studied the reigning masters of his teen years like Bing Crosby and Perry Como, and he found within himself eventually a real world-class crooner. And, yes (with sufficient luck from the handsome face gene pool) live on camera, he got to be--at least on his good days--*the best there was.*

The same Pat Boone who tells me he should have played guitar volunteers that he did "work very hard taking voice lessons and everything to try to be good at each opportunity that came." This he points out as part and parcel of the subject of musicianship, without any sort of "on the other hand" introducing the thought. He knew guys gifted with great guitar talent, and he knew himself to be gifted with great vocal talent. His voice was the instrument he practiced.

He admits to being amazed himself now looking back at how easy he made it look. "Of course my idol then was Bing Crosby and so there were times when I actually moved my eyebrows and made little sort of faces to let people know I really was emotionally involved and not just a cigar store Indian whose mouth moved!" Pat knew of the difference between the good and the great, and for a rock n' roller perhaps thought about it too carefully. He concedes "Yes, I should have played the guitar," but, you know, he never did! He studied guitar some, he practiced guitar some, he bought and sold guitars some, but he played guitar in his professional career *none*.

He was from Music City, USA, where (as the Lovin' Spoonful later recorded) "Nashville cats play clean as country water, play wild as mountain dew." For Pat Boone it was something about playing to your strengths, something about respecting your public and your peers. He wouldn't have put on a guitar unless he could do with a guitar what world class players did.

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Joe DiMaggio was underpaid too

The guy was just a very big music star—not to mention just a very big TV star, and just a very big movie star—in his time. His share of a year's total movie industry revenue was bigger than most of today's biggest stars' have ever known; his show's share of total weekly television revenue was bigger than mega-hits like *Friends* or *Seinfeld* have ever known; and his share of the total music sales market was bigger than Garth Brooks or Michael Jackson or Mariah Carey have ever known.

So, Pat Boone now has a great big house in a sweet part of Beverly Hills, has majority interest in a television broadcasting company, and has a good many other fine holdings that I'm too polite to ask about in his portfolio. Nonetheless, one fact is simple, and stunning: Certain music stars today could buy out his entire accumulated estate with maybe six months of their income, easy.

These are stars with their sales and their notoriety, but nothing approaching Pat's share of it back then. They aren't even names or faces all of us can recognize. The music biz is just that much bigger now.

Our mass culture is much more fragmented today, of course; America really is more multi-cultural than anyone quite grasps. Generally, today's personal headset wearers are probably more clueless about hit songs in other segments of the music marketplace than fans were back when just a few music charts existed.

Billboard today keeps the following weekly charts: Hot/Pop ("The Hot 100"), R&B/Hip-Hop, Country, Latin, Rock, Adult Contemporary, Christian/Gospel, Dance/Electronic, New Age Albums, Comedy Albums, and—the most recent addition—Hot Ringtones!

Even if you're unknown to most Americans, if you command a relative "cult" market today, you'll still roll in money that Colonel Tom Parker could only have dreamed of back when Elvis reigned on the charts. The mass culture, in terms of its consumption of leisure products like music and movies, is just that much bigger than back then.

Despite all of this, you and I probably don't pity Pat Boone. (Yeah, well… *Joe DiMaggio was underpaid too!*) As you'll discover in his new book, neither does Pat.

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Free to comment on whatever seems most compelling in Boone's years in the public eye, I can't leave out an admiring glance at another historical moment when Pat's personal nature just possibly made a difference for the ages. I approach this with David McCullough's previously-cited principle that history can always go "any number of different ways at any point along the way" in mind:

On one of those cable TV news channel interviews with authors of "significant" new books, Professor Paul Kengor began his discussion of his best-selling 2004 release *God and Ronald Reagan* by telling how frequently Reagan retold the story of hearing "a well-known actor" make a startling declaration. If Pat is easy-going by nature, he is also uninhibited speaking his mind about public affairs. Shirley Boone had thought it ill-advised for her husband, but Pat was that "well-known actor," speaking to a crowd at the Los Angeles Sports Arena in the early 1960s.

As President Reagan affirmed in a speech to the National Religious Broadcasters convention on January 30th, 1984, "Pat Boone stood up, and… said, 'I would rather that [my daughters] die now believing in God than live to grow up under communism and die one day no longer believing in God.' There was a hushed moment, and then 16,000 people, all those thousands of young people came to their feet with a roar that you just -- it thrills you through and through."

Future President Reagan was in that crowd, and to suppose that, after witnessing Pat's declaration and the response to it, he felt a permanently increased sense of possibility about the chance of mustering the political will to beat back communism… Well, it just is not completely unreasonable.

At the 1976 Republican national convention among delegates for Reagan -- before being for Reagan was cool

"Better red than dead" was a well known phrase of nuclear disarmament campaigners back in the 1950s, and Pat simply gave voice to the converse idea. As a way of looking at things ultimate, the implications of declaring "better dead than red" for things temporal were scary. But (it's so much easier to say in hindsight) they were also empowering.

If modern thinkers can take seriously the "chaos theory" idea that, if a butterfly flaps its wings on one side of the world, the ripple effect may result in a tempest on the other side, we can seriously wonder at the difference that may have resulted from Pat's uninhibited speaking his mind, coming at that particular historical moment. Remember that history can go "any number of different ways at any point along the way." As Professor McCullough points out, "You never know."

His wealth and his humanity

If you get into *Pat Boone's America* and don't find an all-inclusive account of Boone's fifty-years-and-counting public career, temper any disappointment with a decent regard for the impossibility of such a task. What won't disappoint

you is the sense you get of what those years in the public eye actually felt like for America's quintessential un-rock star, the guy who sold more records in the late 1950s than anyone except Elvis.

While Elvis ended up "the king," Pat has ended up almost in Rodney Dangerfield territory as far as some people's respect is concerned. Let's not be so dumb as to suppose that Pat just bumbled into this. His own self-aware choices played their part. Pat chose not to play into trends he thought harmful, and he accepted part of his decreasing popularity as the price you pay for staying true to your values. He avoided excess, put his faith and his family ahead of all else, kept himself fit and healthy, and said what he meant. He came to be not the king, but—more than any American you can name today—the *king of square.*

Because Pat has performed or hosted in so many events in so many places, you may think you'll be able to page through the book and find one you attended yourself, but don't be disappointed if you fail at this. The temptation to offer a complete scrapbook that would need its own accompanying piece of furniture was resisted; instead, Pat just recalled the adventures and attachments that turn out to be the ones he's remembered all through his life. Just as your own choosing of your life's highlights might surprise your acquaintances, some of Pat's will surprise you.

This unplanned encounter at the Memphis airport, in July of 1977, just a month before Elvis died, was the last time the two American icons spent together. (Between them here is Presley's musical sideman Charlie Hodge.)

One of the constants of being a "name" entertainer is the challenge of having hundreds of personal friends. As you might imagine (even as just one member of the group ShaNaNa, I can tell you) having hundreds of friends can sometimes seem a burden. Ah, but what if you trust a religious teaching as Pat does, that says that the always-valid reason for loving another is that God does and He's brought you in contact? What if the teaching points out that your purpose and reward lies in loving all the human individuals you come in contact with? If the hours in your days aren't unlimited or you're anything of a private person by nature, it's hard to maintain, but once you act on your faith and accept the teaching as doable, pay-offs simple and great do happen *all the time.*

Now, the value of this big name performer's pay-off is strictly intrinsic; it cannot be exchanged elsewhere, only collected in the now. You don't get the pay-off if you don't go out and collect it. It's remained a valuable enough pay-off for Pat Boone to want to go out on the road, to appear publicly even though "needing the money" isn't a motivation.

I heard from a good many individuals after letting it be known that I'd be working with Pat on his book, and they'd tell fun stories about meeting Pat personally, and the stories sometimes included the fact that, some time later on, Pat didn't seem to remember their previous meeting. I would tell them that Pat's been "living in the moment" since before it was cool. "He's been senile since he was twenty-five" according to some of those longest acquainted with him. But happily, for the new book, he's proved himself capable of remembering details from both the recent and distant past.

In my insertions of historical commentary "side bars" in the book, I couldn't resist taking a stab at "what Pat Boone has meant to America," because that's such a rich topic. However, the new book really is mostly about—it's an amazing topic—what America has meant to Pat Boone.

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