

The Kingtones and the Battle for the Grand Rapids Crown

*"A long, long time ago
I can still remember how that music
Used to make me smile
And I knew if I had my chance
That I could make those people dance
And maybe they'd be happy for a while
But February made me shiver
With every paper I'd deliver
Bad news on the doorstep
I couldn't take one more step
I can't remember if I cried
When I read about his widowed bride
Something touched me deep inside
The day the music died" (SLIDE 1)*

On the wintry night of February 3, 1959, American rock and roll musicians Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson boarded a chartered Beechcraft Bonanza light aircraft at a small rural Iowan airport. The group had been playing on a tour named the "Winter Dance Party". Holly and his band, consisting of Waylon Jennings, Tommy Allsup, and Carl Bunch, had been promoted as the headliners. Joining the "Everyday" singer on the tour were rising star artists, Valens, Richardson, as well as the vocal group Dion and the Belmonts.

The lineup was set to perform in twenty-four cities in as many days. This tour had proven to be hard on the musicians, earning the nickname "the tour from hell." The journey between venues throughout the Midwest had been demanding. The booking agency, General Artists Corporation, had not considered the locations of shows when scheduling. Instead of booking venues in short proximity to each other, the route zigzagged all across the region. The bus with a malfunctioning heating system was cold and uncomfortable. Many days required ten to twelve hours of travel time in freezing mid-winter temperatures over rural, narrow two-lane highways. Since there were no off days, these conditions adversely affected the performers who had developed severe cases of the flu and even frostbite.

After performing their eleventh show in Clear Lake, Iowa, out of frustration, Holly chose to provide some relief to himself and his band by choosing to fly to their next venue in Moorhead, Minnesota. Waylon Jennings, who played bass in Holly's band, generously gave up his seat to the Big Bopper, who had been suffering from the flu. It has been said that when Holly learned of Jennings's skipping out on the flight, he jokingly said "Well, I hope your damned bus freezes up." Jennings quipped, "Well, I hope your ol' plane crashes," a response in jest that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Valens acquired his seat from Tommy Allsup by chance,

being victorious in a coin flip. Ritchie had a history of being fearful of flying, but eerily commented, "That's the first time I've ever won anything in my life" upon winning the toss. **(SLIDE 2)**

Shortly after take-off, due to poor visibility conditions and pilot error, the plane crashed in a cornfield outside of Grant Township, Iowa. The tragic event killed all four on board. The day lives in infamy, popularly nicknamed as "The Day the Music Died."

Don McLean first learned of the plane crash as a 13-year-old newspaper delivery boy in New Rochelle, New York. In his words, McLean shared that on the morning after the crash, he was carrying a bundle of local "Standard-Star" papers that were bound in twine. When he cut the stack open with a knife, the tragedy was the front-page headline. Thus, inspiring the verse:

*"But February made me shiver
With every paper I'd deliver
Bad news on the doorstep
I couldn't take one more step" (SLIDE 3)*

Don McLean released American Pie in 1971, the eight-minute and forty-two-second song topped the *US Billboard Chart* eight weeks after its debut and stood atop the music landscape for four weeks. The song repeatedly references the crash as signifying the end of the early era of rock and roll. The theme of the song extends beyond the mourning of the writer's childhood music heroes, but reflects on deep cultural shifts and the loss of innocence of his generation. The song's lyrics are speckled with impressionist references to the artists and events that symbolize the era between February 3, 1957, and the song's release. These symbols represent a period of dynamic change in music, culture, and politics that took place in the United States during the 1960s.

In an editorial published in 2009, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the crash, McLean wrote that writing the first verse of the song long-exorcised his grief over Holly's death, and he dedicated the album to his hero. That evening in 1957 serves as a symbolic marker of a change in the rock and roll genre. A change from the early original era of the 50s popularized by artists like Holly, Elvis, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis. A transition to the politically charged 60s, which included the creation of rock and roll subgenres, such as psychedelic, folk, pop, and beat music.

This period will be where tonight's story will take place. Mr. President, Mr. Secretary/Treasurer, fellow Presenter, and esteemed guests, tonight I will share a story of an era long past. A story of musicians whose journey is lined with success, quarrels, tragedy, and a competitive spirit to sit atop the throne of the early 60s West Michigan music scene. My paper this evening is titled "The Kingtones and the Battle for the Grand Rapids Crown." **(SLIDE 4)**

Grand Rapids is the second-largest city in Michigan, after Detroit, serving as the economic hub of the western part of the state. Although its metropolitan area includes a population of approximately 1.5 million people, the city is known for having a sleepy, small-town feel. It is best known for being the home of President Gerald Ford, a furniture manufacturing hub nicknamed the “Furniture City”, and is also famous for its beautiful churches. In the middle of the 19th century, when Dutch settlers arrived in southwest Michigan, they established the strict doctrines of the Christian Reformed Church, which frowned upon dancing and instruments. Very much so, a Footloose situation. Although Grand Rapids is considered a friendly city, it has a history of being very conservative. That started to change in 1957 when a group of Oakleigh Junior High students bucked norms by starting a rock and roll band. **(SLIDE 5)**

Over the course of the prior year, local AM radio stations WGRD and WMAX started to broadcast the sounds of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Gene Vincent, and Fats Domino. This caught the attention of the local teens, especially 7th grader Gil King. King, a cornet player in the school program, recruited some of his classmates to form a band. It didn’t take too much time convincing his soon-to-be bandmates because the boys couldn’t think of a better way to meet girls. He was joined by three sax players, Jim Hoenska, Bob Major, and Jim Coren, along with Jerry Gephart on piano, Tom Veenstra on trumpet, and Bob Green on drums. **(SLIDE 6)**

They rehearsed in the school's band lab and booked their first gig at an Oakleigh PTA meeting. Their second show at a YMCA dance was a big hit, where they got the kids dancing with lively instrumental numbers, such as “When The Saints Go Marching In,” their cover of “Rock Around the Clock”, and other hits of the popular artists of the day. Shortly thereafter, the band decided to modernize its sound.

Impressed by the “twangy” guitar sound of Duane Eddy’s Rebel Rouser, Gil King persuaded his parents to buy him an electric guitar. The band dropped the horn section, except Bob Major on sax. Chuck Snoop and his brother Bruce joined on bass and organ, respectively, and Earl Snyder joined on guitar. However, the most talented addition to the group was vocalist and frontman Pete Mervenne. He was an extremely talented singer who possessed a range from singing high-pitched falsetto down to bass. Not only was his voice magnificent, but he also had a stage presence that took the group's appeal to a new level. He was handsome, the quarterback of the football team, and the most popular boy in school.

In 1958, with a fresh lineup and momentum behind their sails, it was time for the six young musicians to find a name for their group. Gil King's father Ernie, held a contest for the employees of his local architectural firm to come up with the name. The person who submitted the winner would be gifted a magnum of champagne. The band considered a list of over fifty possible suggestions and ultimately chose “The Kingtones” as their moniker.

A few months later, the band added Phil Roberts, a talented guitar player from across town in East Grand Rapids who had been playing with another band, the Rocking Revels. In addition, Mike King, Gil's cousin, joined on drums. This solidified the core of the group for the next few years and were the members who started to find the Kingtones' sound. The boys practiced in the King family's garage off Parmalee Avenue. The conservative neighborhood parents became a little shaken when the sounds first emitted from that garage. They would keep the younger children in the house, as it was often reported that this style of music led to juvenile delinquency.

However, this was also around the time when Gil formed his first radio station, WKIN. At fourteen years old, he operated an FCC-licensed station where he would play rock and roll records, give weather reports, and local school updates. The wattage of his radio equipment was so small that it could only transmit signals out to the surrounding neighborhoods, but he started to gain a following of listeners. This started to ease the local parents' concerns regarding rock and roll, and now, when the band opened the garage door, they started to attract a crowd to watch them rehearse.

By 1960, the bandmates had started high school, and King secured the band its first high-end gig. He went to a local station, the aforementioned WGRD, and promoted the band, which led to an invitation to play dances sponsored by the station for \$15 a show. After the Kingtones started drawing large groups of local teens to the hops, the dances became a regular booking. This also inspired Phil Roberts to tell station management that the band wouldn't play anymore unless they gave the group a raise. In response, the station doubled their pay, and his successful gamble established Roberts as one of the band's leaders. **(SLIDE 7)**

Around this time, the band came under the tutelage of a show business veteran, organist Doc Jorne. A family friend of the King's, Doc was a professional musician who traveled with his show, titled Orgarama! The performance featured hundreds of sounds and effects that the organ could produce. As you could imagine, the eclectic artist had a penchant for flair, and he taught the boys how to promote themselves with photos and posters, use makeup, and also add comedic skits to their live acts. **(SLIDE 8)**

The band had started to mature from a junior high garage band to full-fledged artists and began to write their own music. They recorded their first recordings in Doc Jorne's basement and released two singles on his Musitone label. The 45 rpm featured the songs "Wish for an Angel" and "Don't Come Around". "Wish for an Angel" highlighted Mervenne's exceptional vocals and went on to chart on several West Michigan stations. The record even outsold Del Shannon's "Runaway" in the Grand Rapids market. **(Play "Wish for an Angel")**

After the release, the Kingtones had built up a groundswell of local support and were offered to sign a record deal with Globe Records, an affiliate of RCA. Doc had a connection with the label and helped broker an agreement. Unfortunately, it fell through. Since the band members were all still minors, the contract and promotional tour required parental permission. Not all of the parents would agree to sign, and the deal collapsed. This was a huge disappointment, but the band continued to push forward. In 1962, the band released their second single, "A Love I Had," on their own Kitoco label. The record was recorded in a downtown Grand Rapids studio located in McKay Tower. As with the first single, the charismatic Mervenne executed another masterful performance, but this is where the Kingtones first encountered trouble. **(SLIDE 9)**

Slightly before recording their second single, Phil Roberts suggested the band buy a van to travel to gigs. The band purchased a Ford Econoline that was customized to fit all of their equipment. Gil's father financed a large portion of the van, but titled it to the group. They hired local artist, the soon-to-be-famous Paul Collins, to paint the name on the van. Collins went on to be an award-winning multi-racial realist painter. One of his most famous works is a commissioned 18x8 ft. mural exhibited at Gerald R. Ford International Airport, depicting facets of the President's life. An interesting side note of this story. The only rule was that no one could use the van for personal use.

The Kingtones were very much so proud of their ride. The wheels served as a symbol of their professionalism, and they felt like one of the big hitmakers of the era. When they arrived to play a dance, the crowd knew the Kingtones had arrived, just like their idols Johnny and the Hurricanes. This van would also serve as the symbol of their break-up with their band leader and founder, Gil King.

In 1962, tensions between King and the other bandmates started to fester. He had suggested to the band that they add a female singer to their line-up. The other members were not too keen on the idea, but they put an ad in the newspaper, much to their chagrin. They held auditions and chose a younger singer from Grand Rapids High School, Sue Greiner. Sue and Gil hit it off at the audition and quickly became good friends, like "brother and sister," she recalled.

Soon thereafter, Greiner played with the Kingtones at a dance in Shelby, Michigan. Even though the gig went very well, Pete Mervenne was not thrilled with the idea of adding a female vocalist. King was insistent, which led to a clash of artistic vision between the Kingtones. This was only a moment in a series of events that culminated in a major dispute. Bruce Snoape had stated that the band was tired of how King was treating them. Gil was notorious for being difficult to get along with. He was stubborn, opinionated, and bipolar. He could be gentle and kind one moment, but then quick to exhibit erratic anger the next. His bandmates also found

out he had broken the golden rule; he was caught on several occasions using the van to visit his girlfriend.

The band called him out on it, which led to a blow-up. Since his father had put up most of the money to purchase the vehicle, Gil felt it was his right to use it as he pleased. The disagreement ended with Gil trying to keep all of their instruments and purposefully crashing the van in a parking lot so no one could have it. He quit the band he started. It was said he knew his place in the band, and it was as the number one. Since he served as the record plugger and promo man for the Kingtones, he acted out in revenge by calling WGRD, telling the station the Kingtones were no more. As a result, the station quit playing "A Love I Had," and the single quickly lost momentum before it could get off the ground.

The Kingtones continued to play, without King. In 1963, Pete booked the group a steady summer gig as the house band at Club Ponytail in the northern resort town of Harbor Springs, Michigan. During that summer, they served as backup for featured acts, such as Bobby Vee, Del Shannon, Bobby Vinton, and the Beach Boys. After just releasing their hit single "Surfer Girl", vocalist Mike Love took the time to jam with the Kingtones between sets. **(SLIDE 10)**

Following the break-up, Gil quickly joined a band named the Eschelons. This group was formed by brothers Dick and Ron Beatty who had been inspired by the Kingtones early success. They chose their moniker after an aircraft term for flying in formation, but misspelled it by adding an "s". Sue Greiner joined Gil in the new band. He added the keys to the band's repertoire and would have more artistic influence while performing with the Eschelons.

Family members recalled that this was one of the most peaceful times of his life. Gil had suffered from Crohn's disease from an early age in a time when treatment for the ailment was still experimental. The pain most likely contributed to much of his stress and ensuing temperamental behavior. Although he spent a portion of his time with the Eschelons in and out of the hospital, eventually requiring the removal of part of his stomach, some of his best musical work was displayed in recordings with them. Sue remembered Gil as a very interesting and talented man who preferred to write and produce songs rather than perform on stage." Even though he was a talented musician who had played horns, keys, guitar, bass, and drums in his previous band, Gil loved creating and promoting music more than performing it.

In 1962, he assumed both roles on the singles "Lonely Footsteps" and "My Lonely Senior Year." The former was a local hit, reaching #12 on the *WGRD's Fabulous "50" Chart*. The sounds on these songs are a little more subdued, exploring themes of heartache and loss. He would later explain that he had no regrets leaving the Kingtones, but you have to wonder, since both of these songs have "lonely" mentioned in the title, that Gil was experiencing some sort of deeper feelings of isolation after being shunned by his former bandmates. He played with and recorded

two more charting singles with the Eschelons until the band started to splinter due to high school graduation, marriage, and other factors. You can still find their music on YouTube and Spotify. **(Play “My Lonely Senior Year”) (SLIDE 11)**

In late 1963, the Kingtones attempted to release their third single, written by Phil Roberts, titled “Twins”. The first recording reached #7 on the local charts, which led to Cadet Distributing wanting to release the single nationally. The tune had an unusually slow section in the middle of the song. Fearing the change in tempo would confuse soc hop dancers, the record label suggested they re-record the track, releasing it nationally in early 1964. However, that year, the release of their single collided with a pivotal moment in musical history.

On February 9th, a quartet of slender brunette musicians from Liverpool, England, performed on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Nielsen Ratings estimated that 45% of the American public tuned in to watch the Beatles that evening. Approximately 73 million people watched Paul, John, George, and Ringo change rock and roll music forever. The Beatles had quickly been gaining traction in the States, but after that performance, they held the top 5 spots on the Billboard Hot 100 charts. The British had mounted a full-on invasion of America's radio waves and the ears of teens all over the country. One of the first casualties was the Kingtones “Twins,” as the single never gained any traction nationally once “Beatlemania” took hold.

The next year, the Kingtones released one more single, “The Girl I Love”, which happened to be their most commercially successful song, charting not only in Grand Rapids, but East Lansing, Flint, Detroit, Chicago, and Toledo. But as more popular Midwest stations shifted from the early doo wop era of rock and roll to the music that would define the '60s, the record fell flat. After two commercially unsuccessful releases, Cadet dropped the Kingtones.

From this point, the Kingtones would record infrequently, but enjoyed some success from playing in a variety of dance clubs and bars. The remaining members of the group were, at heart, performers. Recording and writing music came second to the thrill of moving a dance hall. Most of the band members married, and the band became more of a hobby. The early era of the original band ended in 1968 when frontman Pete Mervenne and the Kingtones parted ways. **(SLIDE 12)**

After leaving the Eschelons, Gil King accepted an internship in Jasper, Indiana, at WITZ. There, he would DJ for soc hops presented by the radio station. He met Evonne Oxley at one of these dances in the neighboring community of Birdseye. They soon married and moved back to Michigan so he could attend broadcasting school at Big Rapids Community College. In 1966, with his health declining, they soon returned to Jasper, where he worked as an announcer and Program Director. He convinced the head of the station to transition its symphonic sound, accustomed to the conservative German Catholic community, to rock and roll. He was a part of

the “quiet music movement” who worked behind the scenes to popularize “the devil's music” throughout the smaller communities of the Midwest. WITZ had a large broadcast area, and he was partly responsible for spreading the genre from Southern Indiana to Indianapolis. His signature sign-off was the two-word phrase “say bye”.

Gil was also a promoter, recruiting acts, such as the Profits and the Commodores, to play at the local armory. Previously, never one to drink, during his second stint in Indiana, he started to develop an alcohol addiction. By this time, Gil and Evonne had two children. After achieving moderate success in the broadcast business, he moved once again back to Grand Rapids to found his second music studio, Cinemasound, with his brother Craig, who was a photographer. The studio specialized in both music and film recordings. Mostly, recording Gospel songs for the Moody Bible Company, but also recorded with artists such as Charley Pride and Al Green.

During late-night recording sessions, is when Gil’s addiction issues started to take hold. Due to the pain of his lifelong battle with Crohn's, he was prescribed opioids and had developed a severe dependence on pills. His behavior became erratic and more intense. Evonne eventually divorced Gil and moved back to Indiana with their children. He took a job at a large market station in Tampa, closer to his retired parents, before ultimately ending his career in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He would only see his children once a year.

His health and addiction continued to spiral until his mid-40s, when he found sobriety. In his final years, he was able to make amends with his family and took ownership of his mistakes. However, the years of disease, surgery, and addiction had taken a toll on his health, and at the age of 48, he passed away. Surviving his death was his son, Scott King of St. Anthony, Indiana, his daughter Tonia Cannon of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and his grandchildren Chloe Cannon, Chase, and Cody Noffsinger, all of Hopkinsville. Yes, Gil King, the founder of the Kingtones, is my grandfather.

In 2002, an award-winning documentary was produced by the local Grand Rapids PBS station titled “The Kingtones: A Retro-Spective”. The film included interviews of the surviving bandmates and featured 8mm film footage of the band throughout their career. Bruce, Phil, and David reminisced on their joyous days of touring. They reflected on all the highs and lows, thanking their fans for the years of support. In 2007, they brought their 50-year career to an end by performing a 50th Anniversary Dance Party at the Lincoln Club and a New Year’s Eve event at the local VFW. **(SLIDE 13)**

The Kingtones were inducted into the Michigan Rock and Roll Legends Hall of Fame in 2010. The Eschelons would soon join them, being inducted in 2012. Later in life, during recovery, Gil spoke with family, fondly of his days with the Kingtones. During later interviews, the remaining members also didn’t seem to hold any hard feelings about the split. Although this

story includes several what-ifs, you can tell from both parties that they were proud of what the little band from Grand Rapids had accomplished. A band that began as a group of junior high students, who loved music and wanted to meet girls, rehearsing in the King family garage off Parmalee Avenue.

I was never able to have a relationship with my grandfather, as he passed when I was only three. I vaguely remember, as a kid, seeing him in old family videos, but now I choose to think of him with his guitar, silver suit, and black framed glasses playing on stage, living the dream with his bandmates. Kind of similar to Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper, just as they were on that fateful night of 1959. Maybe them, Pete, and Gil are in heaven reminiscing of the early era of rock and roll, maybe singing

*So, bye-bye, Miss American Pie
Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry
And them good ol' boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
Singin', "This'll be the day that I die
This'll be the day that I die"*