

Handout 1 - Ritchie Valens Biography



Richard Steven Valenzuela was born into a Mexican-American family in Los Angeles, California, in May 1941. His parents struggled to make a living, though they were able to find temporary work in a nearby arms factory during World War II. While the Pacoima section of Los Angeles in which Valenzuela was raised had a strong Latinx community, it was also one of the few communities in Southern California that had an integrated population of whites, blacks, and Asian-Americans. Though Valenzuela spoke some Spanish, by most accounts English was his primary language.

Valenzuela took up the guitar at a young age, and by the time he was a teenager had gained a local following, performing at parties and in local clubs. At 16, he joined a band called the Silhouettes, and caught the attention of a Hollywood music producer, Bob Keene, who owned a small label called Del-Fi Records. Valenzuela signed a recording contract with Keene shortly after his 17th birthday, and soon began recording under the name Ritchie Valens.

Valens released only two singles during his lifetime. The first, “Come On, Let’s Go,” was a modest hit. His second single, the love ballad “Donna,” reached No. 2 on the Billboard pop chart. The B-side of the single was “La Bamba,” whose lyrics were entirely in Spanish. “La Bamba” reached No. 22.

On February 3, 1959, a few months before his 18th birthday, Valens was killed in the notorious plane crash that also took the lives of Rock and Roll star Buddy Holly and singer/disc jockey J.P. Richardson, a.k.a. the Big Bopper. One newspaper account of the accident referred to Valens as “a recording star billed as the next Elvis Presley” and noted that “Valens, a young sensation from Pacoima, Calif., was rapidly becoming one of the hottest singing talents in the country.” A Hollywood film about his life, *La Bamba*, was released in 1987, and in 2001, Ritchie Valens was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.