

An appreciation of Phil Everly and the Everly Brothers

By Hiram Lee
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Phil Everly, one half of the influential singing duo The Everly Brothers, died January 3 at the age of 74. Everly passed away in a Burbank, California hospital, suffering complications from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Famous for their beautiful, close harmony singing, the Everly Brothers—Phil and Don—released a series of remarkable singles during the early years of rock ‘n’ roll, including “Bye Bye Love,” “Wake Up Little Susie,” “All I Have to Do is Dream” and “Cathy’s Clown.”

Phil Everly was born January 19, 1939 in Chicago, Illinois, though his family had its roots in western Kentucky. His father, Ike Everly (1908-1975), a coal miner from Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, was an innovative guitarist whose playing had a significant influence on country music legend Merle Travis, another Muhlenberg native.

After years of gigging around Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois, and seeking to escape a life in the mines, Ike relocated his family to Shenandoah, Iowa in the late 1940s. The senior Everly had secured a job as a staff musician on Iowa’s KMA Radio. The whole family soon got in on the act and Ike was joined on the air by his wife Margaret and his two young sons. Phil was only ten years old when he began performing with his family.

In Iowa, just as in Muhlenberg, where the family spent its summers, the young Everly Brothers were immersed in a lively, predominately working-class community of musicians, comedians and other characters. It was fertile ground in which to develop as performers.

When the brothers reached their teenage years, the family relocated to Tennessee. Continuing to perform while attending high school, the Everly Brothers

attracted the attention of country music star Chet Atkins. He championed the young duo and helped to get them their first record deal. Their first hit was the million-selling 1957 single “Bye Bye Love.”

The Everly Brothers had by this time evolved into something very special. The sound of their voices blending together was magic. Phil provided the high tenor harmonies and his brother Don the low baritone.

The brothers were rather young when they achieved their first big success and their music dealt with the feelings and concerns of young people emerging from adolescence. The Everly Brothers were part of that generation of postwar youth who would find their living standards improving and new opportunities becoming available to them. Conditions were certainly better than what their parents would have found at the same age. As Phil once told the BBC, while remembering his father, “His guitar got him out of the coal mines of Kentucky, and the guitar he gave us got us all the way to London.”

All of this found expression in the duo’s music. They had hit on a new sound, which at times seemed to anticipate the Beatles, and that sound was capable of expressing the new moods that were then taking hold among young people. There was something very genuine and even very sweet about their work. It was the music of young people having new experiences and getting a chance to really live for the first time.

“Cathy’s Clown,” with its swaying march beat and outstanding chorus, was about a young man deciding what he could and could not put up with in a relationship. The love-struck “All I Have to Do is Dream,” was among the most achingly beautiful pop songs to come out of that period. “Wake Up Little Susie” with its snappy guitar strumming, was about a young couple out past their curfew. The tone of the

song was more amused and excited about the trouble they were in than anything. Some may consider this music “bubble gum,” but there’s something of real life in it. It holds up remarkably well today.

With the onset of the “British Invasion” in the mid-1960s, the Everly Brothers struggled to find their footing in the new musical landscape. Their best music was undoubtedly that recorded from the late 1950s through the very early 1960s. While there were interesting things later on, very little matched those wonderful early singles. (Their 1968 album *Roots*, however, should not be ignored).

In the early 1970s, the brothers had a falling-out and the act broke up. They spent a full decade working as solo artists, with varying results both artistically and commercially. They would reunite in 1983 for a well-received performance in London and would continue to work together in the decades that followed. In their performances in recent decades, their voices and music continued to have a remarkable impact. Their stage presence, the result of decades of effort, was riveting.

To their credit, the Everly Brothers did not forget where they were from and the working-class communities in which they grew up.

A memorable 1984 BBC documentary, *The Everly Brothers: Songs of Innocence and Experience*, followed the newly reunited brothers as they traveled back to Kentucky and spent time with some of the older generation of miners and musicians in the area. The warmth and appreciation evident in their meetings with old friends from home is moving. That the Everly Brothers never walled themselves off from real-life experiences or the struggles of ordinary working people is also entirely to their credit and their art was only the better for it.

More than half a century after they first sang together, the Everly Brothers’ music continues to inspire audiences and musicians today. In November 2013, Norah Jones and Billie Joe Armstrong released *Foreverly*, a rerecording of the Everly Brothers’ 1958 album *Songs Our Daddy Taught Us*. Earlier in 2013, Bonnie “Prince” Billy and Dawn McCarthy released *What the Brothers Sang*, their own album of songs associated with the duo.

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