

# 1972

## THE STORIES BEHIND THE SONGS

Sex, love, feminism, retro jive, Clint Eastwood, human rights, reggae, an enduring riddle, smoke and ashes—we have the scoop on the most memorable groundbreaking music of 50 years ago. *By Jim Farber*

The pop charts sang some different tunes in 1972. New points of view arrived on the radio to serenade the blossoming feminist movement (Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman"), the emerging world of gay rights (Mott the Hoople's "All the Young Dudes") and fresh global perspectives (with the breakthrough of reggae artists, including Johnny Nash with his No. 1 smash "I Can See Clearly Now"). Other new stars went on to become cultural touchstones, including Bette Midler, Roberta Flack, Al Green and Jackson Browne. We go behind the scenes of some of our favorite 1972 tunes.

### "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face"

#### ROBERTA FLACK

Flack's recording of "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" from her 1969 debut initially floundered. All that changed after she got a call from actor Clint Eastwood, who said he wanted to use "First Time" in the 1971 film that would mark his directing debut, *Play Misty for Me*. "He called me at home," Flack told *The Guardian*.

"I almost passed out. He wanted to use my song only in a part of the movie where there was pure and absolute love. I told him OK, but that I wanted to re-record it because I thought it was too slow. He said, 'No, it's not.'" Clearly, Eastwood was right, because the song became *Billboard's* top song for 1972. It also took the prizes for both Song and Record of the year at the Grammys.



Few lyrics have inspired more speculation than "American Pie." It's as much a pop quiz as a pop song, a rhyming riddle bursting with veiled references to kings (Elvis?), queens and court jesters (Bob Dylan?), as well as possible allusions to bands of the era (the Byrds and the Rolling Stones). The song's refrain—"the day the music died"—points to the 1959 plane crash that took the lives of entertainers Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper. McLean kicks off the song alluding to his time working as a paperboy at 13 when he delivered headlines that reported Holly's death to his local community. The song wound up making its own headlines for its length: a whopping 8 minutes and 42 seconds. For nearly half a century, it held the record as the longest cut to hit No. 1, until Taylor Swift broke it in 2021 with her 10-minute-plus remake of her song "All Too Well." Over the years, McLean confirmed some of the identities of the stars alluded to in the song, but not all. He said that his lyrics are "beyond analysis. They're poetry."

### "American Pie"

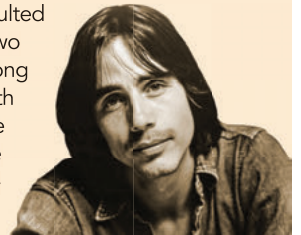
#### DON MCLEAN



### "Doctor, My Eyes"

#### JACKSON BROWNE

Like "American Pie," Browne's breakthrough song used a buoyant beat and a fetching melody to soften a tough message. The singer notes that his sight needs healing after all the harshness he's witnessed in his life. To contrast the gloom, Browne hired guitarist Jesse Ed Davis to create the song's barreling solo, which he recorded in one take. He also paired his own voice with the harmonies of friends David Crosby and Graham Nash. The latter suggested the song serve as the single from Browne's debut album, which resulted in a Top 10 hit. Two months later, a song Browne wrote with Glenn Frey, "Take It Easy," gave the Eagles their inaugural hit.



### "Go All the Way"

#### RASPBERRIES

Raspberries' leader **Eric Carmen** knew he wanted to write a song about sex when he penned "Go All the Way." But he gave the



tune an uncommon point of view, with a girl begging her guy to "go all the way," a twist in those sexist, male-dominated times. Among the first "power pop" songs—a genre that mixes sweet melodies with hard-driving rhythms—the

Top 5 hit also boasted an unusual structure: a chorus that lasts far longer than the verse. And the album cover featured scratch-and-sniff raspberries.

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## "I Am Woman"

HELEN REDDY

The same year that Gloria Steinem launched her groundbreaking *Ms.* magazine, a song arrived that could have served as its soundtrack. "I Am Woman," first released on Reddy's debut album in 1971, had a rebirth the next year when it was featured in a feminist film titled *Stand Up and Be Counted*, starring Jacqueline Bisset. Though the film bombed, Reddy's record company felt the song could be a hit, given the nascent women's movement. In 2003, Reddy told Australia's *Sunday Magazine* that she was inspired to write the lyrics by the "strong women in my family who had gotten through the Depression and world wars and drunken, abusive husbands." Song co-writer Ray Burton matched Reddy's words to rousing music, helping it bound up the charts to Billboard's No. 1 spot, making Reddy the first Down Under artist to achieve that feat. In a memorable moment at the next year's Grammys, she accepted the prize for Best Female Performance by thanking "God, because she makes everything possible."

## "Love Train"

THE O'JAYS

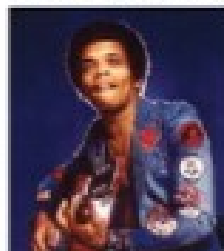
Released in the last weeks of 1972, "Love Train" broke into the Top 40 the same day that the Paris peace agreement was signed. The timing couldn't have been more apt, as the song called for every nation to get on board with its message of getting in the groove of love. The music, driven by the sound of Philadelphia soul with rich strings, a danceable beat and soulful vocals, matched its strong message. As the group's **Walter Williams** told *The Guardian*, "Vietnam was rumbling on, the rich were getting richer... so it was the perfect time to sing about social issues." The result gave the O'Jays their most successful single ever, crowning Billboard's Hot 100.



## "I Can See Clearly Now"

JOHNNY NASH

Reggae broke big in the U.S., thanks in part to Johnny Nash. He wasn't the first star to have a major island-style hit here, but 1972 greatly expanded the reach of reggae, beginning in September when the very American group Three Dog Night went No. 1 with a cover of the Maytones' reggae hit "Black and White." Two months later, Nash (one of the first non-Jamaican artists to record reggae music in Kingston, Jamaica) topped the charts with a song that stands as one of pop's most optimistic anthems. "The rain is gone," Nash sings. "All of the bad feelings have disappeared / Here is that rainbow I've been praying for." The same year, Jimmy Cliff released the song "The Harder They Come," which doubled as the title track to the seminal reggae film starring the singer. And all this took place three years before Bob Marley's global breakthrough.



## "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy"

BETTE MIDLER

A strange thing happened in the early '70s: Stars began scoring hits with songs from the 1940s. The Pointer Sisters had "Salt Peanuts," based on a 1942 riff from Dizzy Gillespie, and Bette Midler found her first smash with a jivvy cover of a song made popular in 1941 by the Andrews Sisters. Midler says two oldies compilation albums, given to her by her parents as a child, introduced her to vintage music. Her record company initially intended "Bugle Boy" as the B-side of another song, "Delta Dawn." But when Helen Reddy released her version of "Delta Dawn," they flipped the sides, resulting in a Top 10 hit.



## "Smoke on the Water"

DEEP PURPLE

The lyrics to Deep Purple's monster hit couldn't have been more literal. They tell the true story of "some stupid with a flare gun" whose reckless act reduced to ashes the casino in Montreux, Switzerland, where the band was supposed to record their new album. Instead, they recorded in a mobile recording unit used by the Rolling Stones, writing "Smoke" at the last minute as filler to complete the album. Later, guitarist **Ritchie Blackmore** admitted that he based his iconic recurring riff—one of the most famous in rock history—on the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

## "All the Young Dudes"

MOTT THE HOOPLE

When David Bowie got word that Mott the Hoople—a struggling British cult band at the time—was about to breakup, he offered a song to keep them together. First, he suggested the supercharged "Suffragette City," a song meant for his own upcoming album. But the band rejected that in favor of another tune, "All the Young Dudes," an unrecorded ballad Bowie performed for them. "I knew that one was special," Mott's lead singer, **Ian Hunter**, told *Billboard*. Bowie even offered to produce the single, which cracked the U.S. Top 40. More than a hit, "Dudes" became an anthem for the era's glam-rock style and the emerging gay rights movement, inspired by a same-gender sexual relationship in the lyric. That same year, Lou Reed scored a hit with the equally edgy "Walk on the Wild Side," which name-checked Andy Warhol's cast of underground stars. Together, those two songs made 1972 a watershed year for pop's new sexual expressiveness.



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