

Remembering musicians Charlie Watts (1941–2021) and Don Everly (1937–2021)

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Two significant musicians who first made names for themselves in the rock ‘n’ roll scene of the late 1950s and early 1960s died in late August. Rolling Stones drummer Charlie Watts died on August 24 at the age of 80. He had announced earlier in the month that he would not join the Stones on their upcoming tour because of the recovery time needed following a recent heart procedure. Just days before Watts passed away, Don Everly, the surviving member of the famed Everly Brothers singing duo, died on August 21 at the age of 84.

It almost goes without saying that the Rolling Stones was one of the really great bands to emerge from Britain in the 1960s. In the middle of this “rock and roll circus” sat Charlie Watts with a straight face, looking very much like Buster Keaton. His playing was as straightforward and unpretentious as he himself appeared to be. If you were to see one of his performances written out in notation, it would not appear as though much were happening. But the feel of Watts’ playing, which is hard to describe, was second to none.

Great drummers do not merely keep time, as is often said of them. That is the job of a metronome. The great ones manipulate time, mold and shape it, speed it up or slow it down to suit the needs of the song. They delight in seeing how long they can delay a beat and still make it count or in surprising an audience when they skip a beat entirely. Watts could make the listener’s heart race by playing up in front of the beat on songs such as “Let’s Spend the Night Together” or “Paint it Black.” He could also make you feel the drunken desperation of the singer on “Time is On My Side,” playing far behind the beat and leaving a question mark hanging over the confidence projected by the lyrics.

During his nearly 60-year career, as the Rolling Stones experimented with different styles of music, Watts was called upon to play everything from rock ‘n’ roll to blues to country to reggae. His feel was always there, no matter

the form. He could add the subtlest shades and textures in performances that never demanded attention but would have been missed should they be removed from a song. He was somehow entirely present and entirely invisible on a cover of reggae singer Eric Donaldson’s “Cherry Oh Baby.” Then again, he could also steal the show from Mick Jagger, as on the Stones classic “Get Off of My Cloud.”

In addition to his playing, Watts was beloved by many because he did not appear to suffer from the same self-involvement and egoism that plague many rock stars. A popular story that circulated online once again after his death had Watts dressing up in his sharpest clothes in the middle of the night just to punch Jagger, who had dared to refer to him as “my drummer.” Whether the anecdote is true or not, Watts appeared indifferent to, or even annoyed by, the more flamboyant and excessive features of stardom, even when displayed by his own bandmates.

While he was a member of one of the world’s most famous rock ‘n’ roll bands, it was the vocation of jazz musician that was closest to Watts’ heart. In addition to his efforts with the Rolling Stones, Watts performed regularly with his own small jazz groups, with a repertoire that included the works of bebop legend Charlie Parker.

Like Watts’ drumming, Don Everly’s singing was also straightforward and unpretentious. Performing along with his brother Phil as The Everly Brothers, the duo carried on the tradition of country music brother acts singing in close harmony—the Delmore Brothers, the Blue Sky Boys and so on—updating it for the rock ‘n’ roll era.

We reviewed the Everly Brothers’ career more extensively at the time of Phil Everly’s death in 2014, but it’s worth returning to them again. While they were most famous for their harmonies, the Everly Brothers also featured Don as lead vocalist. He performed the brief solo sections on hits like “Bye Bye Love” and “Cathy’s Clown.” Don also played the distinctive guitar intro heard on

“Bye Bye Love” and the catchy guitar breaks on “Wake Up Little Susie.”

Some may dismiss this music as bubble gum pop devoted to the ups and downs of teenage romance, but there’s something to them. “Not only the heroic poem,” wrote Trotsky in *Culture and Socialism*, “but the fairy-tale, song, proverb and popular ditty give us cognition in images; they illuminate the past, generalize our experience, widen our horizons, and only in this connection are capable of inspiring certain ‘feelings.’” An Everly Brothers song like “Cathy’s Clown,” in which a young man refuses to go on being humiliated, resonates well beyond the immediate concerns of Cathy or her “clown.”

The Everly Brothers gave voice to some of the interests and sensitivities of the new teenage culture of the rock ‘n’ roll era. The listener could hear in their voices the sound of a young person, a young generation, raising their voices in the world for the first time, not yet confident but still honest and open.

This music, and these teenagers, coincided with the postwar boom and the better living standards it made possible for a section of the population. Phil Everly once told the BBC that their father’s guitar playing had gotten them out of the coal mines in Kentucky, and “the guitar he gave us got us all the way to London.” That was an all-too brief moment in time when a young generation really could have better lives than their parents had. How far away all that seems today! The new level of comfort and independence they achieved was accompanied by new moods and the need for new forms of expression. Some of this found its way into the Everly Brothers’ sound. Those harmonies, the emotional openness and vulnerability, the shaky voice taking a stand for the first time—all these things continue to move us today.

Charlie Watts and Don Everly were serious musicians. Their work lives on.



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