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## Music

### The Life of a Song: 'Johnny Remember Me'

John Leyton's hit about a cowboy haunted by his dead girl was born out of a séance and left behind a trail of tears

## Life of a Song



DECEMBER 4, 2015 by: Cathi Unsworth

Early in the 1960s, a morbid craze seized hitsville. The charts were haunted by songs such as Ray Peterson's "Tell Laura I Love Her" (1960), the Everly Brothers' "Ebony Eyes" (1961), Twinkle's "Terry" and the Shangri-Las' "Leader of the Pack" (both 1964) — all eerie evocations of teenage hot-rodders revving up and riding straight to hell. British movies such as *Beat Girl* and *The Leather Boys* were portraying juveniles playing for kicks in car races and bike burn-ups, too — so our moral guardians had to act. Attempting to suppress further fetishisation of the "live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse" credo, the BBC banned these so-called "death discs".



*Singer John Leyton*

But Auntie Beeb could do nothing to stop the creepiest of all these fatal 45s: John Leyton's "[Johnny Remember Me \(http://podcast.ft.com/2015/12/04/the-life-of-a-song-johnny-remember-me/\)](http://podcast.ft.com/2015/12/04/the-life-of-a-song-johnny-remember-me/)", which, despite the BBC censor, went to number 1 in July 1961, stayed there for six weeks, then left behind its own trail of tears.

The song was born out of a séance held by two of music's most unworldly characters, producer Joe Meek and songwriter Geoff Goddard. The tale of a lonely cowboy haunted by the ghost of his girl "Who I loved and lost a year ago", the recording was drenched in echo and the disembodied voice of backing singer Lissa Gray, who sounded as if she really was performing from beyond the grave — she was actually standing in Meek's toilet. Leyton was an actor who played a rock star in the series *Harpers West One*, and when he performed the song on the show, its rise was unstoppable.

Both Meek and Goddard were obsessed with the occult. Meek claimed to have received a message from "the other side" about the impending death of his idol Buddy Holly, who died on February 3 1959. Meanwhile, Goddard was training to become a medium. Their partnership would create a pre-Beatles hit factory for Meek's unconventional recording methods.



*Producer Joe Meek*

Like a walking microcosm of the 1960s, Meek, a working-class outsider, set a collision course for infamy. He rose to the greatest of heights with his 1962 transatlantic smash “Telstar”, performed by the Tornados, which earned him both an Ivor Novello Award and a writ for plagiarism from a French composer that resulted in Meek’s royalties being frozen. It wasn’t his only misfortune: amphetamine addiction, obsession with his protégé Heinz Burt and an incident in a public toilet that led to his being blackmailed for his then illegal homosexuality fermented his fate. Goddard left in 1965, accusing his collaborator of stealing material. Burt followed soon after, suing for missing royalties. In 1967 Meek took a shotgun to his landlady, Violet Shenton, and then himself. Again the date was February 3.

The multiple untimely deaths of those surrounding him became known as “the curse of Joe Meek”. Burt and Goddard died within a month of each other in 2000, aged only 57 and 62 respectively. Meek’s greatest rival Phil Spector, whom Meek imagined to have bugged his studios to copy his techniques, murdered actress Lana Clarkson at his Los Angeles mansion in 2003. The date was February 3.

Yet Johnny’s ghostly girl continues to call. The song has been covered by many who share Meek’s aesthetics, including The Meteors in 1983, Bronski Beat and Marc Almond in 1985, Dave Vanian’s Phantom Chords in 1990 and Spell (Rose McDowall and Boyd Rice) in 1993. Nick Moran retold the Meek-Goddard séance in his 2008 movie *Telstar*, with *Leather Boys* star Rita Tushingham as the medium.

They tried to ban her, they tried to bury her, but no one, it seems, can forget her.

To listen to podcasts with clips of the songs, go to [ft.com/life-of-a-song](http://www.ft.com/intl/life-arts/life-of-a-song) (<http://www.ft.com/intl/life-arts/life-of-a-song>)

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BY **Capgemini**

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