Mysterious Deaths:

Bobby Fuller, Rock Icon

By Rubi Luna, Isabel Hernandez and Ruth Vise

Over the years, the public has seen numerous deaths of those in their prime in the music industry. Artists and musicians are no strangers to addiction, suicide or murder. It has happened to hundreds like Janis Joplin who overdosed on heroin and John Lennon who was shot to death by a crazed fan.

But there is one among other famous individuals whose death has proved enigmatic. Bobby Fuller was a young El Paso musician whose life and career were cut short. Whether it was suicide or murder, the cause of Bobby Fuller's death remains a mystery.

Robert Gaston Fuller was born on Oct. 22, 1942, in Goose Creek, Texas, according to the *Handbook of Texas Online*. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Utah. His parents, Lawson and Loraine Fuller, had a younger son named Randy and Loraine's son from her previous marriage, Jack Leflar. During his childhood, Bobby Fuller learned to play the drums, piano and the trumpet while his brother Randy learned the guitar and trombone.

When Bobby was 14, his father was offered a job with the El Paso Natural Gas Company. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the family moved to El Paso and lived on 9509 Album Street. After graduating from Burges High School, Fuller enrolled in college. Randy was sent to military school, "in an attempt to steer him away from the path taken by brother Jack" who had some criminal history, according to a detailed web article on Bobby Fuller by writer and musician Aaron Poehler.

Dave Marsh, a music critic, notes that Bobby Fuller wished to major in music; however, he realized that "school wasn't for him and stopped going to his classes before mid-terms." According to Marsh, Bobby's parents attempted to persuade their son to continue his education, but Fuller was determined to succeed with his music.

Poehler wrote that Bobby's half-brother, Jack Leflar, was murdered. His body was found on Feb. 22, 1961. It is believed his death was due to the criminal connections he had.

The death of his half-brother hit Bobby hard; however, this is what led Bobby to pursue his musical career with greater intensity. "He had already attracted attention around El Paso as a drummer, but was working diligently on his songwriting, striking up a collaborative partnership with lyricist Mary Stone, a friend's mother," wrote Poehler.

Fuller decided he wanted to start recording music and with his family's financial support, he was able to start his own record label, Exeter Records. In addition, he started a local club for all ages to hang out called "Bobby Fuller's Teen Rendezvous" on Dyer Street, according to Bernadette Self in a 1996 *El Paso Times* article.

With Randy gone, Bobby taught himself to play the guitar in order to increase his musicality. When his brother Randy came back from military school, he was impressed with Bobby's work. With Randy back, the brothers were able to record two tracks which aired on local radio on Thanksgiving 1961.

The all-ages club increased activity with his record label. In 1964, Exeter Records recorded three singles including "I Fought the Law," first recorded by the Crickets, the late Buddy Holly's band (Holly died in February 1959) and written by Cricket Sonny Curtis. Although the Crickets' own version was not a hit and was rarely, if ever, played in public, the cover by Bobby Fuller and his band established Fuller as a regional star.

The Bobby Fuller Four released its second album in 1966. *(File image)*

Acccording to Poehler's article "The Strange Case of Bobby Fuller," Bobby was never satisfied and on one of his tours to California to promote his music, he met Bob Keane of Del-Fi Records. Keane was famous for discovering Ritchie Valens in the late 1950s (Valens, whose real name was Richard Steven Valenzuela, died in the same plane crash as Holly). Fuller made an impression on Bob Keane at the time, but he did not feel the group was ready for the big time.

In 1964, the Teen Rendezvous in El Paso burned down, according to the *Handbook of Texas Online*, and the band decided to move to Los Angeles in November. The Bobby Fuller Four, as the band was now known, consisted of Jim Reese as the rhythm guitarist, Dewayne Quirico on drums (replacing Dalton Powell), Randy Fuller playing the bass guitar and Bobby as the lead singer and guitarist.

This time, Bob Keane signed the group, and they were soon playing in clubs around Southern California. Rapidly, the band became known by young people who frequented the clubs and music scouts like Phil Spector.

The Bobby Fuller Four began recording tracks which established them as more than a regional success. The first hit was "Let Her Dance" in 1965. Then the group re-recorded "I Fought the Law" also in 1965 for Mustang

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Tom Ogle, Inventor

By Cynthia Cuevas, Isabel Hernandez and Ruth Vise

Technology used in the automobile has advanced tremendously over the century, allowing vehicles not only to provide a comfortable and relaxing drive but also to save on gasoline. Today, many automobiles are run by electricity or other alternative fuel sources.

About 40 years ago, a young El Pasoan developed an astounding system for fuel efficiency to be used in any automobile. Even though Tom Ogle was not the first to think of the basic idea, his device did have unique differences that simplified his invention. Tom Ogle created a vaporized fuel system which allowed a car to travel over 200 miles on two gallons of gas. He decided to follow through with his invention, even though it led to many conflicts, and perhaps even his untimely death.

Thomas Venor Wolfgang Peter Dinglestaedt Ogle, like many other inventors, started his invention by being curious. According to the article "Auto Gas Fume Invention May Save US" in *The El Paso Journal* by William C. McGaw, Ogle was born in Pirmasens, Germany. His parents, Hans and Helga Venor Dinglestaedt, had three children: Tom, Kurt and Ralph. Hans, an electronics engineer who was described as "a brilliant, inventive man — a near genius" by his mother-in-law, left Helga while the boys were still young and the couple divorced.

According to McGaw, Helga met Lieutenant Clarence Ogle, an American soldier stationed in Pirmasens. Clarence proposed and Helga agreed to marry the soldier only if he adopted her children, which he did. Returning to the United States, the military family was stationed in Oklahoma and then El Paso.

Ogle earned a graduate equivalency degree at Irving High School, according to *El Paso Times* article "Tom Ogle Wants His Invention to Help People" by Gregory Jones, who wrote extensively on the inventor for the *Times*. Ogle explained to Jones that he had constantly been repairing home appliances, fiddling with combustion engines and even fixing a truck at the age of 10. He also attended an automotive trade school for three years in Morgantown, W. Va., according to McGaw.

In the *El Paso Times* article "EP Fuel Systems Inventor Claims 160 Miles a Gallon," Jones reported that Ogle had attempted to replace windshield wipers with pressurized air but failed. In 1971, Ogle moved on to a four stroke lawn mower. That is when he discovered something incredible. Ogle stated in the article that while working with the mower, he accidently punctured the fuel tank.

According to Jones, Ogle removed the carburetor from the mower, out of curiosity, and placed a hose that connected the fuel tank to the carburetor intake jet, allowing the mower to run off gasoline vapors. He claimed that the mower ran for 96 hours.

Ogle began to experiment with the same process in a car, failing in several attempts to convert the basic idea into a device that would work in ordinary cars. Jones wrote that Ogle finally succeeded in converting one of his own cars, a 1972 Thunderbird, and racked

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Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, Elie Wiesel and Nicholas Winton.

The museum that now stands with pride on the corner of Oregon and Yandell Streets has daily visitors, from local students to tourists to soldiers and serious researchers of the Holocaust. As the museum continues to grow, changes and updates are always in progress.

In 2009, Mayor John Cook of El Paso awarded Kellen the Conquistador Award, the city's highest achievement award, an honor given only to those who have made great contributions and dedications to the city.

Kellen outlived two wives, Julia, who died more than 30 years ago and Regina Reisel Kellen, who died almost six years ago on Sept. 18, 2008. After Julia's death, Regina Reisel was there for Kellen, just as he was there for her when her husband, Emil Reisel, passed away. They eventually married. Gladstein, his stepdaughter, said in the interview with Hernandez, "Henry Kellen was a wonderful husband. He took great care of her; they had great times together."

The El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center has made an impact on the El Paso community. It has presented many programs and events that have drawn thousands of visitors to further educate them on the Holocaust. Activities such as "The Memory Project," a multimedia art installation at the museum, have presented the historic event from many different perspectives. The museum held its sixth annual summer camp for children June 16-20, 2014. "Tales of Courage" was the theme for the educational camp created for children ages 8 to 12. The museum's Tour de Tolerance, now in its eighth year, offers bicycle races as well as a 5K walk/run. The museum also sponsors a book club and hosted an educators' conference on "Teaching the Holocaust" in May. Admission to the museum and parking are free, but donations are encouraged. It is open Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. and closed Mondays.

As one of only 13 freestanding Holocaust Museums in our country, the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center continues to expand to further educate the public. Said Gladstein: "El Paso is very fortunate that a man of Henry's vision and commitment has brought into being this historical treasure for our community. The museum's key mission is to preach against prejudice and discrimination."

In the final gallery hang tablets with words of wisdom. One of them is inscribed with Elie Wiesel's teaching: "Not to remember means to side with the executioners against its victims; Not to remember means to kill the victims a second time; Not to remember means to become an accomplice of the enemy. On the other hand, to remember means to feel compassion for the victims of all persecutions."

Henry Kellen died on July 3, 2014, two days short of his 99th birthday as this article was being written. He had remained active in the museum he founded, participating in making decisions about its activities. He was remembered at a reception at the museum, attended by many who loved and respected this man who was determined that our world know the truth about the Holocaust and set about making it a reality. He is survived by his two stepdaughters, Mimi Gladstein and Holli Berry, his adopted son Shaul Yannai and an immeasurable legacy of compassion, education and activism.✡

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Records, a Del-Fi label, and the song hit Billboard's Top 10 music chart soon after its release.

In 1965, the group recorded their first album entitled *KRLA King of the Wheels*. Poehler wrote, "1966 finally saw the release of a solid Bobby Fuller Four album" called *I Fought the Law*. Del-Fi picked the best songs they thought the group had recorded, and the result was a bombshell with back-to-back songs that surprised and pleased fans and Keane.

According to writer, rock music historian and former *Spin* magazine editor, Legs McNeil, Nancy Sinatra and Sally Field were often seen at the Bobby Fuller Four's concerts. The band was even in a movie in 1966 called the *Ghost in the Invisible Bikini* according to the *Handbook of Texas Online*.

The success and new music was such a gold mine that Bob Keane booked six weeks of concerts for the band. Not everything went smoothly, however. Poehler quoted Randy Fuller who said, "It was a roller coaster ride . . . one minute we'd be playing a really great show where everyone loved us and loved our music, and the next show would be a total disaster."

Despite the recognition and popularity being achieved by the young El Pasoans, the tour set up by Bob Keane was not the most pleasant. According to road manager Rick Stone, Bobby had thoughts of breaking up the band to launch a solo career. After the tour, the band flew back to their apartments in Los Angeles. On July 10, 1966, the Bobby Fuller Four played what would be their last show together, a gig at Casy Kasem's teen dance show.

On July 18, 1966, the band was to have a meeting, but Bobby never showed up. Dan Epstein wrote in liner notes for the CD entitled *The Bobby Fuller Four: Never To Be Forgotten* that his brother Randy recalled that Bobby had received a phone call around one or two in the morning. "He still had on his lounging clothes. Always a sharp dresser, Bobby would simply not have headed out without sprucing himself up a bit."

Nobody knew where the young singer went or whom he had gone to see. The only thing the band and his mother Loraine knew was that Bobby was not home.

About 5 p.m. on July 18, Loraine went outside to collect the mail and saw something peculiar. She spotted the vehicle Bobby had used when he left at 3 a.m. When she approached the car, she found her son dead lying across the seat. "Gasoline was boiling up and out of an open 2.5 gallon can in the front seat. A gas hose was nearby. She knew he was dead," wrote McNeil.

Bobby's death shocked everyone, not just his mother. In spite of such a tragedy, the family and the public demanded an answer, a person accountable for the situation.

Los Angeles Police concluded that Fuller had committed suicide by asphyxiation. However, close friends and family knew Bobby too well to believe it was suicide.

Fuller's body was in full rigor mortis, indicating he had been dead for hours. However, no one had seen the car until it was discovered by Fuller's mother. The official autopsy report read, "deceased, found lying face down in front seat of car—a gas can, 1/3 full, windows rolled up and doors shut, not locked—keys in ignition." Strangely, Fuller's skin, hair and clothes were all drenched in gasoline. The body had excessive bruising on the chest and shoulders and the right index finger was broken. Yet the Los Angeles police report read "no evidence of foul play."

Bobby Fuller was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Hollywood Hills on July 22, 1966. He was only 23.

There are different theories of Fuller's cause of death. The theory of alleged murder arose when "a Hollywood police officer had, for some inconceivable reason, destroyed crucial evidence at the scene such as the gasoline canister" stated Jeremy Simmons in *The Encyclopedia of Dead Rockstars*. Brother Randy Fuller also said that the police did not check the crime scene for fingerprints.

Another theory regarding Fuller's death involves the drug LSD. In the 1960s, many people experimented with the popular drug. The theory is that Fuller had gone to a nearby LSD party and had fallen. Bob Keane told music critic Dan Epstein that someone might have wanted to cover up Fuller's death so "they poured gasoline down his throat, saturated his hair, and made it look like suicide."

Dalton Powell, original drummer of Fuller's band, said in an article in the *El Paso Times* that the young singer "really didn't use drugs. He got high on his music." Road manager Rick Stone agreed and said, "Bobby was pretty damn straight. Two beers were too much for him."

There were yet other theories regarding Bobby Fuller's death. According to Epstein, "thugs" were sent to kill Fuller by a mobster who was an investor in Bob Keane's label. The mobster would benefit from life insurance the label had on Fuller and with the singer planning to disband the group, the only way to receive the money was having Fuller killed.

The next theory involves a mysterious woman named Melody. It is said that Melody was dating a low-level gangster and had a side thing going on with Bobby Fuller. According to this theory, her boyfriend found out that she and Fuller were more than friends and sent people to kill Fuller.

Although the cause of death was later changed to "accidental," questions immediately arise. Why would someone just experiencing breakout success accidentally swallow gasoline and beat himself up? How could he have driven home by himself in his condition? Why would he commit suicide when he had planned a meeting to meet with his band the next day? And on and on.

George Reynoso, El Paso music store owner and a Bobby Fuller Four memorabilia collector, seemed genuinely distraught when speaking about Fuller's death. "His death was an incredible loss of talent that barely scratched the surface of what he could have become," stated Reynoso in an interview.

Bobby Fuller will always be remembered thanks to people like Reynoso. An exhibit was held in 2008 at the El Paso Museum of History featuring belongings of local musicians including the Bobby Fuller Four. In addition, Randy Fuller performed at the Border Legends III concert in 2010 in memory of his brother. Bobby has been inducted into the Rockabilly Hall of Fame and the West Texas Music Hall of Fame,

The Bobby Fuller Four's version of "I Fought the Law" has been covered by the Clash, the British punk rock band, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers and numerous others. Ironically, if Fuller's version had never been recorded or had not become popular, the song might never have been discovered in the Crickets' recordings. Fuller's song "Let Her Dance" is played at the end of the movie *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Another one of Bobby Fuller's songs called "A New Shade of Blue" was used in the 1999 movie *Boys Don't Cry* featuring Hilary Swank. Several albums of Fuller's music have been released over the years following his death and are available in various forms, including vinyl, at Amazon and other sites.

Whether Bobby Fuller's death was suicide, murder or an accident, no one probably will ever know since the case is sealed under California law. His mother Loraine died not knowing what really happened to her son, while his brother Randy has lived for nearly 50 years wondering about the death of his younger brother.