



## **Triumph, Tragedy, and Triumph Again: Roy Orbison (Part One)**

by **Scott Sosebee**

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(May 1, 2023) This will be the first of a two-part series on Roy Orbison and also the first of another series on Texas musicians.

Texas has had more than its share of prominent and popular musicians. They have ranged from classical pianists such as Van Cliburn, to iconic and award-winning pop acts such as Beyoncé, jazz stylists such as Ornette Coleman, and all the way to country legends like Willie Nelson, with diverse artists such as Stevie Ray Vaughn, George Strait, and Nelly in between. Certainly, a big part of the state's fortune to have so many and such variety among its musical luminaries is its sheer population size, but that does not explain it all as the state's rural regions have seemed to produce just as many notable performers as have its cities. One of those who rose from one of Texas' dusty country locales is Roy Orbison, an entertainer whose star shone brightly during the early rock-and-roll era, faded when he experienced a personal tragedy, and then underwent a renaissance in the 1980s shortly before his untimely death at the age of 52 in 1988.

\Roy Kelton Orbison was born in the northwest Texas town of Vernon in April 1936. His father, Orbie, moved the family to Fort Worth in 1942 at the outbreak of World War II when he went to work in the Vultee Consolidated Aircraft factory, but a polio scare in the city led Roy and his brothers to return to Vernon to live with their maternal grandmother in early 1944. Orbie Orbison was an amateur guitarist, so he gave his second son his first guitar for his sixth birthday. Roy quickly took to the instrument and, reflecting his family's musical preferences of the time, he began to play and sing the music of Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb. The family reunited and moved once again in 1946 when Orbie found work in the oil patch near Wink, a town born when oil was discovered in the vast Permian Basin.

Wink suited young Roy and he found friends that shared his love of music, and it led him to form his first band, the Wink Westerners when he was 13. With Roy on lead vocals and playing rhythm guitar, the band played mostly country music but also a few arrangements of big band and pop standards at school assemblies, and local service club meetings, as well as performing on KERB, the local radio station. The experience sharpened Orbison's performing skills and also made him begin to contemplate making music his profession. He left Wink to enroll at North Texas State College (now UNT) when he graduated from Wink High. He had vague intentions of becoming a music teacher, but Orbison felt somewhat out of place in Denton and he grew homesick. He returned to Wink and reformed the Westerners with his local band. Orbison moved to Odessa and enrolled at nearby Odessa College. He and the Westerners once again played local dances, but also at the "Saturday Night Jamboree" in Jal, New Mexico and even on a Friday night show created just for them by television station KMID out of Midland.

Roy Orbison had begun his musical odyssey as a predominantly country performer, but like so many young musicians of the era, such as fellow Texan Buddy Holly, the rock-and-roll "revolution" began to grab the young entertainer. On their TV show, they began to mix in numbers such as Elvis Presley's "That's All Right Mama" and Bill Haley and the Comets "Rock Around the Clock." Orbison and the Westerners began to gain regional notoriety and with it came an invitation from two Odessa businessmen, Weldon Rogers and C.C. Oliver. The pair had established the Je-Wel record label and they wanted Roy and the Westerners to become their first recording. They arranged for the group, which they would bill as "Roy and the Teen Kings," to record a session at Norman Petty's studio in Clovis, who was also the first to record Buddy Holly. They recorded two singles, a cover of The Clover's "Trying to Get To You," and "Ooby Dooby," a song written by two of Orbison's friends at North Texas State. Je-Wel released the songs as singles, which allowed fate to strike.

Through a connection, Sam Phillips of Sun Records, who had discovered Elvis, heard "Ooby-Dooby" and he immediately began to find the group in order to record them. He invited "Roy and the Teens" to come to Memphis, where they re-recorded "Ooby-Dooby," along with three other singles. Sun Records released "Ooby-Dooby" and it made the charts but peaked at just #59. Its showing, however, led Bob Neal, a prominent agent, to sign the group to a performance contract. Roy and the Teens joined a touring show that featured acts such as Carl Perkins, Faron Young, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash. However, despite the growing visibility of the group, the members of the Teen Kings began to grow homesick and also have "creative differences." Orbison, the band's leader and vocalist, wanted to become solely a rock-and-roll act, while the other members preferred to stay with a country sound. The disagreement led to full dissension and in 1956 the band broke up.

Roy Orbison thus became a solo act and returned to record more songs with Sun Records using studio musicians. Sam Phillips was convinced he had a new star, but the new Sun singles did not make the charts and Roy Orbison moved to Nashville to play on some sessions as well as in local bars and outlets. Primarily, the young Texan found a new outlet—writing songs. It was something that he had dabbled in before, but he began to concentrate his talent in such a direction, a path that would eventually lead to stardom.

Next week: Roy Orbison becomes a national hit, but a personal tragedy sends him into a spiral.

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