

## Triumph, Tragedy, and Triumph Again: Roy Orbison (Part 2)

by Scott Sosebee

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Roy Orbison, by 1958 and still just 22, began to settle into life as a sometimes performer and a songwriter. He remained a part of Sam Phillips' stable at Sun Records, but he only occasionally ventured out to perform, and while under contract he did not record more music with Sun. Roy Orbison may have been content to make a life as a minor talent who occasionally filled became a part of a touring show as an opening act or a last-minute "space filler." His agent Bob Neal arranged for him to take just such a role in Hammond, Indiana in March 1958 when he booked him for a small spot on an Everly Brothers show. Phil and Don Everly were enjoying a wave of success at the time, but they were looking for material for their next album. When they heard Orbison sing some of his songs they liked his sound and asked him if he had anything that might fit with them. Roy began to sing a bit of a song he was working on that was about his wife Claudette Fredy. They loved it and asked him if he had it written down. According to Don Everly, in a 1985 interview, he told them that he had just begun to formulate it so he "grabbed the nearest thing to him, which was the top of a show box, and wrote the complete song in less than fifteen minutes." The three of them then played a hummed melody and bars and the Everly Brothers would record and release "Claudette" on their next album and also as the "B" side of their hit single "All I Have to Do Is Dream." It was a bona fide hit, reaching #9 on the U.S. charts (Billboard) and sat at #1 for four weeks in the United Kingdom. "Claudette's" success also led Nashville powerhouse publishing company Acuff-Rose to sign Orbison to a contract. Orbison's songs he wrote with Acuff-Rose were recorded by artists such as Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Rick Nelson.

Roy Orbison had found some success, but he still wanted to "make it" as a performer. Wesley Rose, of Acuff-Rose, had arranged for RCA-Victor to sign Orbison in 1958 to a recording contract, but his music and ideas did not fully mesh with what RCA—who had signed Elvis Presley in 1955—had in mind for their lineup

of rock and roll stars. Orbison wanted to use full string arrangements and his styling, while still somewhat country rockabilly, also contained elements of jazz. Roy's voice, with its three or four-octave range that he often sang as falsetto, was almost operatic. RCA producer Chet Atkins could just not find how to "classify" Orbison, and his contract with RCA expired in 1959 without the company releasing any of his music.

Disillusioned with the music business in Nashville, Roy Orbison returned to Texas. There he began a collaboration with Joe Melson and together they worked to develop unique arrangements that would fit Orbison's equally distinctive voice. Wesley Rose, still convinced that Orbison was a star, convinced Monument Records to give the young Texan a recording contract. Orbison went into a studio and recorded eight of his and Melson's songs for Monument in the summer of 1959. The first release, "Uptown" peaked on the charts at #45, a mild success, but his third release for Monument, "Only the Lonely," shot up the charts to #2 in the U.S. and topped the charts in the UK.

Orbison was now on his way. His next single, "Running Scared" went to #1, and it was followed by an amazing four-year string of #1 hits such as "Crying," "Candy Man," "Dream Baby," "Working for the Man," "Leah," "In Dreams," "Pretty Paper," "Blue Bayou, and "Mean Woman Blues." By 1963, Roy Orbison had become the top-selling American musical artist and a worldwide star. He traveled to England that year and toured with equal billing as The Beatles. During a show in Birmingham, the audience responded with such fervor that Orbison had to give fourteen encores before The Beatles even took the stage. It did not seem as if Orbison could get any bigger, but in August 1964 he recorded "Pretty Woman," co-written with Bill Dees. Released in late fall, it became Orbison's biggest hit, hitting #1 in not only the U.S. but in every country in Western Europe as well as Canada, Australia, and Japan. Roy Orbison, the denizen of a little oil town in West Texas, was reaching heights that even Elvis Presley had never gained.

Then it all came crashing down. Roy Orbison and Claudette Fredy had met in 1956 and married in 1957 and then had three children. When he hit success, he and Claudette built a grand house in Hendersonville, Tennessee. But their marriage was rocky as Roy was away quite often trying to establish his career and Claudette had a series of affairs. Her infidelities led the couple to divorce in early 1964, but they reconciled a few months later and remarried in December 1965. Both Roy and Claudette were motorcycle aficionados, and both loved to ride them on the thin roads and hills around their home. They were riding together in June 1966 when a pick-up pulled out in front of Claudette, and she struck it at a high-rate of speed. She was killed instantly. Devastated, Orbison threw himself into writing songs and toured occasionally as he was now a single parent to three children. Then, in 1968, a fire swept through Orbison's home in Hendersonville and took the lives of two of his three kids.

Heartbroken, Orbison sold his house lot to Johnny Cash and went into a shell. He was unable to write and barely performed, and when he did it was usually in Europe. While in Germany he met Barbara Wilhonen Jacobs and they married in August 1968. He built another house just a block away from his former one and while he still recorded and toured occasionally, his star was gone. His last charted record in the U.S. had come in 1967.

That could have been the final chapter for Roy Orbison, a “has-been” when he was under forty. It still would have been an amazing career. But Roy Orbison would have a second act. He had influenced a number of young stars that began to rise in the 1970s and 1980s. Linda Ronstadt had a huge hit with his ‘Blue Bayou,’ rock group Van Halen did the same with “Pretty Woman.” The big spark, though, came in 1980 when country-folk artist Emmylou Harris asked Orbison to team with her for a duet. Their “That Lovin’ You Feelin’ Again” won a Grammy for best country record. The eclectic 1985 film “Blue Velvet” used his “In Dreams” for a key sequence, and then in 1988, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. That in turn led former Beatle George Harrison to recruit Roy to be a part of a group that would be Harrison, Jeff Lynne, Tom Petty, Bob Dylan, and Orbison. He christened them “The Travelling Wilburys,” and they became a worldwide phenomenon.

Orbison’s second act also would not last long. He had always been a heavy smoker, a habit that took its toll. Years of touring, dealing with tragedy, and other complications of life also weighed heavily on the Texas singer. He performed a concert in Ohio in December 1988 and, complaining of exhaustion, canceled another show and went home to Hendersonville. On December 6, 1988, he collapsed and died of a heart attack at his mother’s home at the age of 52. A short life, but what a life he packed into those years.

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