

Roy Orbison
By Dave Hoekstra
May 10, 1987----

MALIBU, Calif. We were unsure about ingenues in the front row of the class and goals in the back seat of the car.

But we were certain about Roy Orbison.

The first time I contacted a case of the Orbies was upon the demise of my first relationship in junior high school. She implied it was over by taking a pair of pliers to a dime-store ring with a design of a knight in shining armor. I would sleep with the transistor radio under the pillow; that night WLS played "Only the Lonely." The message was clear.

I was not alone.

At the second annual induction dinner for the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in January, Bruce Springsteen introduced Orbison by explaining, "In '74, just prior to going in the studio to make 'Born To Run,' I was looking at Duane Eddy for his guitar sound and I was listening to a collection of Phil Spector records and I was listening to 'Roy Orbison's All-Time Greatest Hits.' I'd lay in bed at night with just the lights of my stereo on and I'd hear 'Crying,' 'Love Hurts,' 'Running Scared,' 'Only the Lonely' and 'It's Over' fillin' the room.

"Some rock 'n' roll reinforces friendship and community, but for me, Roy's ballads were always best when you were alone and in the dark."

I read that quote to Orbison during a recent conversation we had at his home here and asked him where he reached for a style that is isolated yet so personal. "I was thinking about that a couple of days ago - those weren't really the kind of songs you were supposed to write in the late '50s and early '60s," Orbison replied. "It was sort of a macho era. I don't know, maybe my (shy) personality lent itself to being very personal in a song. Maybe that's how I reached down inside and got close to deeper feelings and more important feelings.

"Also, I wasn't new to the business, but I was new to recording and writing. I didn't know you weren't supposed to tell it all. I wasn't just writing a song, I was sort of singing as I wrote the song. That probably lent something to it as well. If you just sit down and write a lyric and put music to it, sometimes it comes out to be a perfect combination. But in my case, me and my co-writers would write words and music at the same time. So you would get one not only influencing the other, but maybe lifting it some.

"But I don't know what possessed me to write a song like 'Crying' in 1961," Orbison said with a grin. "Because men weren't supposed to cry. The songs just all came from inside. They were blessings and they were gifts and they came sort of all at once. I didn't have to labor over the good ones. With pre-planning, I wrote most of the hits under 30 minutes."

Then there is the voice.

Skipping over three octaves like a smooth stone over a dark lake, it is one of the most expansive in rock 'n' roll history. A well-placed growl and purr further the feeling. The extended delivery is so effectively dramatic that it spawns a similar wide-open writing style.

"What my voice allowed me to do was not be restrictive when I wrote," Orbison said in agreement. "I didn't know because it was innocence. I didn't know you were supposed to jump up and sing a certain note because most people's voices go within a certain range. I didn't know that I had an exceptional range for a baritone. When I'd write a song and get a melody, I'd just go where it seemed to want to go. There were no restrictions. If you knew enough, you'd say, 'I'm not supposed to go there because that's out of range.' So, yeah, that probably did help a lot."

When Orbison recorded "Running Scared" in 1961, it marked the first time he learned to displace reservation through rage. "The ending of that song always was in falsetto, but my falsetto is not a powerful thing," Orbison explained. "You can't get the power that you can in your natural voice. Anyway, the musicians couldn't pick it up. We had about 30 musicians in this little Victor studio, and I sang it through softly two or three times. Normally, the producer (Fred Foster, who produced all of Orbison's Monument Records) would come out and whisper advice in my ear. This time he shouted, 'Roy, we can't hear you on that last note and we're going to lose the record if you can't give us some more.' So I got p.o.'d and embarrassed and angry. So I said, 'Run that dude one more time.' So he ran it back and I hit the note. Everybody looked around because I was singing louder than all 30 of them. (Legend has it the musicians were so stunned, they stopped playing.) I didn't know what my range was. Luckily I hit it."

These are reflective times for Roy Orbison, who celebrated his 51st birthday on April 23. A notoriously staid subject, Orbison appeared to be at unusual ease in his spacious Spanish tile-roofed home atop Serra Retreat in the hills near Malibu where he lives with his German-born wife, Barbara; Roy Jr., 17, and Alexandria, 13. From the back patio a visitor can see the Pacific Ocean peacefully enclosed by red-petaled rose bushes that border a blue swimming pool and Jacuzzi. From the front living room is a view of downtown Los Angeles that Barbara said Roy loves at night when the view is painted by sparkling city lights. The only action this day came from a

monarch butterfly bouncing around the outside patio and Orbison's large green parrot Raven, who mimicked him at several points during our conversation.

There are three reasons for the cultural re-entry of Roy Orbison - the induction into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, the tributes from Springsteen, and the eerie employment of "In Dreams" in the David Lynch film "Blue Velvet." Looking like an embalmed Monte Rock III, actor Dean Stockwell lip-synchs "In Dreams" in a sexually confused roadhouse called the Slo Club. The Orbison vocal histrionics accents the jagged perversion of the film's plot.

How did Orbison like his role in the film?

"It was startling at first," he said, somewhat nervously. "It was so close to me. If it had been another song that I had been identified with, I could give you a totally honest answer. But I can't. It was startling to see the guy mime to the thing. I mean, that's me singing. But the film was very riveting, startling and strange to see."

It was so startling that Orbison is re-recording the song under the guidance of Lynch and T Bone Burnett, who are co-producing the new single. Lynch will direct a "In Dreams" video featuring snippets of the "Blue Velvet" film. "As a writer-singer-arranger-producer sort of fellow myself, it's hard to do everything," Orbison said of Lynch's musical involvement. "So while I might have been worried about arrangement or sound, he kept my mind on the performance. So it was a good experience, kind of like directing an actor."

On the heels of the "In Dreams" single is the "In Dreams: The Greatest Hits," a simultaneous release of Orbison's greatest hits on CD and on a double album, released by Virgin Records. Orbison and Burnett are also working on an album of new material for Virgin, featuring songwriting collaborations with Burnett, Steve Cropper, Billy ("Like a Virgin") Steinberg and even Steve Jones - the Sex Pistol meets the Sob Pistol.

"He rode up here on his motorcycle one day, and it was great," Orbison said. "He played me a couple things, then we went upstairs and started working on some tunes. You know, for all the reputations and for all the images that one gets, when you sit down to write a song - it just sounded right. We were both shy, we both like motorcycles - we're just people people." Orbison described his work with Jones as ballads with a beat.

Although there are new songwriting partners of the '80s, Orbison still looks like the '60s. During our conversation he wore a baggy untucked black shirt, which was in accord with white loafers featuring embroidered figures of steers on the uppers. The hair was still in a matted-down Beatle cut, and of

course, there were the shades.

"I was flying down to Alabama to play a show in 1963, and I put my clear (prescription) glasses to the side," Orbison said. "I had to go on that night with prescription sunglasses. And I was very embarrassed. I had to fly to New York the next day to get to London for the Beatles tour. The sunglasses were the only glasses I had. I was too worried about my reception on opening night in London to worry about the sunglasses much. When I went on, everybody was there. Entrepreneurs, agents, artists, and they took all kinds of pictures.

"So when news of the tour hit Australia and America, the pictures showed me with my glasses," Orbison said. "An image was born."

What the rediscovery of that image has done is reaffirm Orbison's niche in rock 'n' roll history - something he was previously unsure of. "I never knew where I would fit in," Orbison said. "In the early '70s, people would ask the question, 'How do you want to be remembered?' And I'd say, 'I just want to be remembered.' The Hall of Fame thing sort of put a stamp on everything. It's sort of reassuring.

"I wasn't too sure about getting in," Orbison said. "I was not prepared to get excited about it until I saw how serious everybody else was. As far as Bruce (Springsteen) went, all I thought he was going to do was present the award. When he started talking, I got kind of nervous because he had a lot of great things to say. If you know Bruce, he tells the truth and he's a straight-ahead guy. There were no flowery comments or no 'a man who needs no introduction' and all that jazz."

The Sun didn't always shine on Orbison. The worst thing to happen for Orbison was when Sun Records founder Sam Phillips heard the primitive rockabilly of "Ooby Dooby," which was Orbison's first hit.

Orbison was basically a balladeer.

"Sam wanted everybody to rock out," Orbison said with chuckle. "I remember how he used to pull out '78s like "That's All Right" by Arthur Crudup, and the reason I remember that so vividly is those records were thick and my '78s were thin. He'd put it on the turntable and say, 'Sing like this.' And that wasn't exactly what Sam meant. I think what he meant was to sing with soul and to sing with feeling."

It was through his work at Sun that Orbison met Elvis Presley. Biographers of the King consistently say that Orbison was one of Presley's favorites. "We were quite close," Orbison said. "I met him my first time through on Memphis when 'Ooby Dooby' was No. 1. We talked backstage and would get

together quite a bit before he went into the Army. I remember spending lots of time at his house drinking Pepsi-Colas, eating potato chips and playing bumper pool.

"We went all over Memphis singing and playing," Orbison said. "One of his favorite songs of mine was 'Down the Line.' I'd play drums, slapping the guitar case and he'd sing that. Then he'd get me to sing, and he'd play the drums. He then went into the Army, and I stopped by almost the day he got out, trying to sell him 'Only the Lonely.' But it was too early in the morning and I went on. But we were real close. I heard he had 'Running Scared' and 'Crying' on his jukebox.

"And when we both got to Nashville, we were recording with the same people at the same studio," Orbison continued. "We'd send word to each other. If he missed a note he'd say, 'Somebody go get Orbison to sing that note for me.' We admired each other's work. We always knew what each other was doing. The last time I saw him in December of 1976 in Las Vegas, it was driven home that we really did care for each other. We were sort of kindred souls."

That deep soul is an everlasting part of the Orbison psyche.

"My mom and dad gave me a guitar for my sixth birthday when we were in Fort Worth, Texas," Orbison said, carefully choosing his words. "The soldier boys would come by - usually they were uncles and cousins of mine - what they always wound up doing was playing music at night. I played a little bit myself so I got to stay up late when all the other kids had to go to bed. The atmosphere was supercharged because all the boys were going off one theater of war or the other, and they didn't know if they'd ever be back. So they ate, drank and made merry. I was very aware of the situation and very aware of music.

"You didn't just sing a song just for the hell of it," Orbison said. "You really sang a song because those were the times. And those were the times that sort of stuck with me."