

Roy Orbison

April 23, 1936 - December 6 1988

American singer-songwriter Roy Orbison "the Big O" was, Born on this day in 1936 Orbison had a 1964 UK & US No.1 single with 'Pretty Woman' plus over 20 US & 30 UK Top 40 singles including 'Only the Lonely' (1960), 'Running Scared' (1961) and 'Crying'. With the Traveling Wilburys he had a 1988 UK hit single 'Handle With Care'. Orbison died of a heart attack on 6 December 1988.



Roy Orbison was living proof that you don't have to be an extravert to be a vocal superstar and vocally you can be enormously courageous yet sweet and vulnerable at the same time.

Orbison was, by all accounts, a gentleman with a kind nature. He was softly spoken, well read and quietly funny in person and he will always be associated with tragedy.

His life was blighted with loss; his first wife, childhood sweetheart Claudette died in a motorcycling accident and their two eldest sons died

soon after in a fire. His songwriting seemed strangely to predict and depict the enormous pain he lived through. Songs like 'Crying' and 'In Dreams' spoke of separation and loss in an epic way; his fearless yet unforced singing suggested depths of loss with unworldly proportions; and these were written and recorded years before tragedy had entered his life.

He also had a haunting performance style, reminiscent of jazz torch singers like Julie London; he sang with that kind of emotional numbness that suggests deep buried pain or trauma. His dark glasses and far away stare were in stark contrast to the heartfelt lyrics and brilliantly abandoned singing. He would hit really high notes effortlessly, without any facial contortions to suggest any extra muscular work.

From personal experience I can say that when I write a song, I connect with a part of my psyche which is not of this world; not of the everyday. I release

thoughts, themes, visions which don't come from the part of my mind which reasons and takes care of every day life. I have also written songs and not known why they've come to me, until years later. I predicted the end of my marriage for example before I had any sense that it might happen. Part of me seemed to know that I would hunger for freedom and leave even before those thoughts entered my conscious mind. I've also written a song which seems to be about someone else's life, someone from a time gone by. The images which I describe in the song feel so personal, so vivid that I'm spooked by it because I know I didn't ever see them yet I can describe them, and the accompanying emotions, in great detail.

I'm not going to proclaim this all to be 'the hand of god', former lives, premonitions, or bunkum. I simply don't know! I just know that it's true for me and I have a sense that it was true for Roy Orbison. And he has left us with a beautifully crafted and completely genuine soundtrack to love and loss which will soothe people for generations; give them a release valve, a way to express their tears; give them hope in their darkest hours. In his voice we hear something greater than this world, something ethereal. The voice which loves through pain, which ignores mortality, a love strong enough to reach from this world to the next.

Country singer Dwight Yoakham describes Orbison's voice lyrically as "the cry of an angel falling backwards through an open window". Orbison's range was legendary and he exploited its outer limits in many of his compositions. Most of his songs were pitched somewhere around the join between the speaking or 'chest' range and the higher register (sometimes called 'head' voice). Rather than avoid the troublesome 'join' between those registers or exploit the difference between the two registers in the country 'yodel', Orbison would just move effortlessly upwards, downwards, then up, up and up causing Bob Dylan to remark "he was now singing his compositions in three or four octaves that made you want to drive your car over a cliff. He sang like a professional criminal ... His voice could jar a corpse, always leave you muttering to yourself something like, 'Man, I don't believe it'.

The word that comes to my mind when I think of Roy Orbison is 'other-worldly'. He was definitely 'different' but not in a rebellious way. In a world of rock and roll 'formula' song-writing he wrote songs with constantly changing and rule-defying structures, in the showbiz world of 'larger than life' characters he was quiet, gentle and mysterious.

EXERCISE

Do some ‘sirening’ up and down through your whole range. Take the word SING now remove the SI and you’re left with NG. Make a ‘ng’ sound. And be a police siren. Go up and down. Put your arm out in front and move it up and down. Make it swoop up high in front of you and let your voice follow... then back down... how low can you go? Imagine you’re on a ‘big dipper’ and you’re about to reach the highest point... then swoop down and as you hit that water at the bottom let out a big ‘wooh’ as you experience a surge of power from below and your stomach ‘lands’.

Notice how, when you’re sirening, you move from high to low, low to high with one long sweep. We all have different ‘registers’ just like a car has different gears. We can enjoy and exploit the differences between them. But they are all connected up to the same engine, the same mechanism and you are driving that car!

Singers like Roy Orbison seem blissfully unaware of reasons why they shouldn’t soar up to notes a choirboy might envy. He was a shy man who suffered terribly with stage fright yet he was apparently without fear when it came to his vocal range. Sing along with him on his hit ‘crying’, it’s a great vocal exercise for just letting go. Sing along with Roy. Let him fearlessly guide you. Close your eyes and join him in that heavenly place!