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Photo: Tony Gale

Rock

Roy Orbison

The MGM Years

Roy's Boys/Universal B0023556-01

One Of the Lonely Ones

Roy's Boys/Universal 006002547233042

Roy Orbison's "VOICE could jar a corpse," wrote Bob Dylan in his autobiography *Chronicles*. Dylan wanted to call the Traveling Wilburys' "Roy and The Boys." Elvis Presley called Roy "the greatest singer in the world." The Beatles opened for Orbison, not vice versa, when they toured the U.K. in 1963. Bruce Springsteen listened to Roy Orbison's *Greatest Hits* nightly to psyche himself up to record his masterpiece *Born to Run*.

Besides rock's pantheon, anyone who has heard Orbison sing never forgets his rich tenor tone. He is arguably popular music's greatest pure vocalist. His voice sounded like no one else before or since his untimely death from a heart attack after visiting his mom.

At the time, his comeback was well underway. In April 1988, he became "Lefty" in the Wilburys super group (whose second *Vol. 3* album suffers greatly from Orbison's absence). Orbison received accolades for his Sept. 30, 1987 concert in Los Angeles backed by an all-star band, including Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Jackson Browne, Tom Waits and Bonnie Raitt, among others.

The concert was televised by pay TV network Cinemax after Orbison's death on Dec. 6, 1988, at the age of 52, as *A Black and White Night*, and released the next month on video and CD. His brilliant posthumous solo album *Mystery Girl*, released on the following Valentine's Day, was a bittersweet swansong that made his demise all the more tragic a loss.

What happened to Orbison after that early 1960s period so full of his hits ("Only the Lonely," "Running Scared," "In Dreams," "Oh, Pretty Woman," etc.) for indie Monument Records? As it turned out, Orbison was every bit as prolific recording for MGM (then a major label), which he joined in 1965 with the lure of a \$1-million contract and also becoming a film star (like Elvis). But the hits stopped, in the U.S., at least. That nearly decade-long demotion from the hit parade is the subject of this voluminous boxed set *The MGM Years* (13 CDs or 14 LPs; digital downloads also available), and a companion previously unreleased album, *One of the Lonely Ones*, recorded in 1969 that is oddly not included in the boxed set, which may be purchased at www.royorbison.com and other online outlets. (The first



Most of the original albums on *The MGM Years* have been out of print for decades. The boxed set was compiled by Orbison's three surviving sons, who are credited as executive producers, in tribute to their father and his second wife Barbara, who died in December 2011, 23 years to the day after Roy's death (you can't make this stuff up).

What to listen to first when tackling a behemoth set like *The MGM Years*? I guess chronologically is as good

An informative LP-sized booklet tells Orbison's often tragic life story with extensive liner notes written by Alex Orbison, Roy's youngest son, and provides never-before- seen photos. Each album comes with its fully restored original artwork.

We learn such tidbits as the MGM contract gave him complete artistic control, but also called for Orbison to record 42 tracks per year. By 1970, the terms were reduced for him to produce 18 songs a year; both sides mutually terminated the agreement in 1973, although Orbison was due \$25,000 a year for the 20 years after the deal commenced. The deal also called for Orbison to make five motion pictures, although *The Fastest Guitar Alive*, a 1966 Western featuring Orbison as an offbeat confederate spy during the Civil War, was the only movie actually made. (The obligatory soundtrack album is included in the boxed set.)

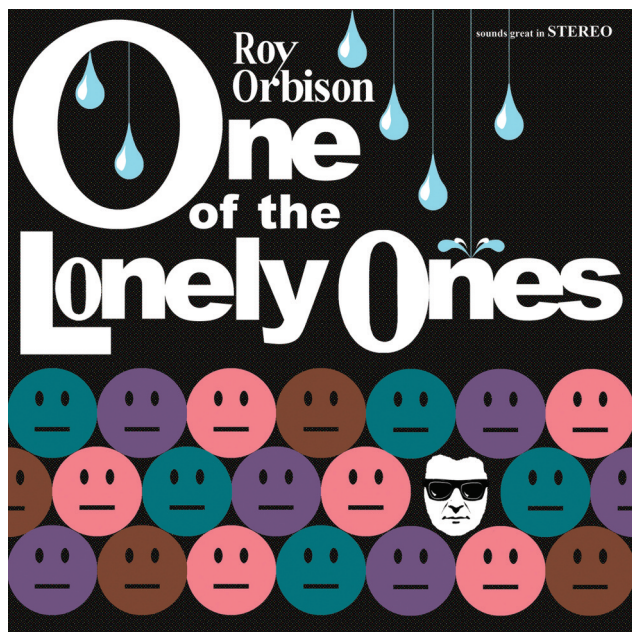
Maybe Orbison wasn't the box-office gold that MGM banked on or they mutually agreed he should concentrate on what he did best: write, sing and record songs.

Each of the boxed set's 152 tracks were re-mastered by Grammy-winning engineer Richard Dodd and re-EO'ed and balanced by Roy's son Alex and Grammy-

as any place, and the top of the record spine thankfully provides the year of each album's release. The aptly titled *There Is Only One Roy Orbison* (1965) opens with the promising "Ride Away," and the rest of the 11 tracks on the first album for his new label don't steer afar from his trademark sound. Yet none of the songs replicated the hit single formula that marked his numerous Monument-era chart toppers.

It's a perfectly valid response that the cultural sea change ushered in by the British Invasion, Dylan going electric, Motown still going strong, and the Summer of Love, all of which permanently changed what could be in vogue. The syrupy MOR strings and Orbison ballads didn't have a chance to compete commercially (neither did Presley for that matter, with the exception of a few radio hits). They were relegated to the "oldies" circuit before they hit the age of 30, as were other immensely talented and worthy artists such as Del Shannon, the Everly Brothers, and Johnny Rivers.

We must also note that two years into Orbison's deal with MGM, the label was putting out groundbreaking avant-garde LPs including the *Velvet Underground & Nico* and Frank Zappa and the Mothers' *Freak Out!*, as



well as British soulster-cum-Flower Power hippie Eric Burdon's psychedelic new "Animals." Imagine how square Orbison, despite his trademark Ray-Ban sunglasses, appeared among that crowd.

Roy emerged from the same Sam Phillips and Sun Records incubator which hatched Elvis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis. (In fact, Orbison

One of the reasons why Orbison was initially interested in taking the MGM challenge of producing so much work in the studio was that he was himself a prolific songwriter. But he also saw it as an opportunity to record works by some of his favorite songwriters, which is why there are dedicated albums here of Hank Williams and Bob Gibson tunes, the latter sounding very much like a product of Nashville. The Williams album is marred by strange Lawrence Welk-like rearrangements of classics like "Hey, Good Lookin'," "Jambalaya," "You Win Again," "Your Cheatin' Heart," and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," all much different from Hank's stripped down originals, many of which first appeared on MGM. *Hank Williams The Roy Orbison Way* is a curio at best.

Scattered across several of the albums, *The MGM Years* also features more than a dozen Orbison cover versions of big hits by other artists. These include the *Big O* album's corny "Help Me Rhonda" (he toured with the Beach Boys), The Platters' "Only You" (done better later on by Ringo Starr), "Money" (a cover of a Beatles cover?), Wilson Pickett's "Land of 1,000 Dances," and "Unchained Melody," a huge hit in 1965 for the Righteous Brothers. Orbison matches Bobby Hatfield's vocal prowess on one of those songs you never get tired of hearing.

The *Memphis* album includes Orbison's take on Chuck Berry's "Memphis, Tennessee," "I Can't Stop

If you were ever a fan of Roy Orbison, then you should make plans to buy these wonderful collections.

joined his former Sun label colleagues sans Elvis – who died nine years earlier – for a forgettable reunion album, *Class of '55*, issued by Polygram in 1986. Perhaps only diehard fans or musicologists paid attention, although it hit No. 15 on the country album charts.)

On Orbison's first album for MGM, the opening song on Side 2 is "Claudette," no doubt a love song for his wife that was actually written and cut as a demo during his Sun years. (The Everly Bros. scored a hit with it.) In 1966, Roy and Claudette divorced and then remarried. But it wasn't meant to last; Claudette was killed when her motorcycle crashed into a truck. Roy was riding his own motorcycle and witnessed the accident. Personal tragedy struck Orbison again in 1968 when a fire at his Nashville home killed two of his sons, while he was on tour in the U.K.

The true revelatory, must-hear track on *The MGM Years* is the seven-minute single "Southbound Jericho Parkway," which perfectly captures why Orbison's music is sometimes described as melancholy. The song, on the collection's newly compiled double album, *B-Sides & Singles*, is described as a "psychedelic rock opera" in the liner notes. A multipart suite, "Southbound" tells the story of a divorced man named Henry Johnson who laments the loss of his family (estranged from his daughter and son). Its protagonist commits suicide by driving into a wall on the aforementioned expressway. It ends at Henry's funeral with his ex-wife holding the check from his life insurance policy.

Loving You" (made famous by Ray Charles), and "I Fought The Law" (made famous by Bobby Fuller), and the standard "Danny Boy." On his 1973 album *Milestones*, Orbison tackles Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," Otis Redding's "I've Been Loving You Too Long," and Dobie Gray's "Drift Away."

With a title that references one of his biggest Monument hits ("Only the Lonely"), it's not clear from the liner notes why MGM didn't release in 1969 the newly discovered full album, *One of the Lonely Ones*, whose master tapes Orbison's sons found when preparing the boxed set. The album's opening track, "You'll Never Walk Alone," features the same staccato strumming of "Running Scared." (Orbison even does his trademark growl from "Oh, Pretty Woman" at the end of *The Big O's* "Loving Touch.")

Lonely One's next song, "Say No More," is good enough to be a *James Bond* movie theme, and the type of ironic track that *The Sopranos'* music supervisor regularly resurrected for the HBO series' soundtrack.

Hindsight is the great equalizer, and these days nostalgia always seems to be in.

This reviewer takes great pride in sharing the same birthday (April 23) as Orbison. One of my musical regrets is passing up seeing him perform at a Bay Shore, Long Island nightclub in the summer of 1983 for reasons I can't remember.

Orbison fans who appreciate his best known work will find plenty to savor in this sweet collection that weighs more than 7½ pounds.