

THE EVERLY BROTHERS

Nashville finally found an inroad to the rock market with the Everly Brothers. Don and Phil Everly's sweet harmonies were a calming and reassuring alternative to the frenzied rhythms coming out of Memphis. Their music was a break from country & western tradition, but not the screaming repudiation of it that rockabilly seemed to be. The Everly Brothers updated the country duo harmonies of acts like the Delmore Brothers, Louvin Brothers and Blue Sky Boys, then integrated them with rock and pop arrangements and lyrics clearly aimed at the young rock audience. Their best records brought a soft, melodic beauty to rock & roll while remaining true to rock's direct and unadorned appeal. Like the best country music, their songs seemed *real*: they sang of young love and high school heartaches with a genuine longing and hurt that any young person could relate to. Their safe sound and image helped broaden their appeal, but the Everly's wistful melodies and sublime harmonies could always melt the heart of the most hardened rocker.

In an era dominated by solo stars and vocal groups that always featured a single lead singer, the Everly Brothers' two-part harmonies were a refreshing novelty to pop listeners. Their influence on later generations can be clearly heard in the close John/Paul harmonies of early Beatle songs and the melodic harmonies of the Byrds and the Beach Boys, as well as in the music of direct descendants like Simon & Garfunkel, Peter & Gordon and Chad & Jeremy. Along with Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers were also the ancestors of the California "country rock" sound of Linda Ronstadt, the Eagles and other seventies superstars.

The Road to Nashville

Don Everly was born on February 1, 1937, his brother Phil on January 19, 1939. Like Ricky Nelson, though on a much smaller scale, the Everly Brothers grew up in a show business family. Their parents, country singers Ike and Margaret Everly, worked Don and Phil into their act as soon as they could carry a tune. (Ike Everly was also a fairly well-known and influential guitarist from the Kentucky "picking school" that included Merle Travis and mandolinist Bill Monroe.) The boys grew up in front of a microphone, singing together on live radio broadcasts, at barn dances and anywhere else the Everly Family could get a booking. In the early fifties, after several years in Shenandoah, Iowa, the family settled in Knoxville, Tennessee, and the brothers set their sights on Nashville—coming, appropriately, from the opposite direction of Memphis.

With the help of family friend Chet Atkins, young Don landed a job as a songwriter for the Hill & Range publishing house in 1955. The following year, both Don and Phil were hired as songwriters for the other Nashville giant, the Acuff-Rose publishing house, headed by Wesley Rose. Rose became the Everly Brothers' manager and negotiated a recording contract with Cadence Records, a New York label headed by Archie Bleyer. He also hooked them up with two other Acuff-Rose songwriters, the husband and wife team who would write most of their Cadence hits, **Boudleaux and Felice Bryant**. In March, 1957, the Everly Brothers recorded the Bryant's "Bye Bye Love," after the song had been turned down by 29 other acts. "Bye Bye Love" was the first of 26 Top Forty hits for the Everly Brothers, including fourteen Top Ten's and four #1's.

“Bye Bye Love”

"Bye Bye Love" introduced all of the distinctive elements of the Everly Brothers' sound. The song is sung in close, parallel harmony—the two voices separated by the interval of a third, moving up and down together—with slightly nasal country accents, supported by the twin attack of the two jumbo acoustic guitars that became the Everly's instrumental and visual trademark. The twin acoustics underline the rock feel of the song, while the rest of the backing remains tastefully understated, with the drummer using brushes and nothing competing with the voices for attention.

"Bye Bye Love" captures the End-of-the-World feeling of losing your love and reason for living. (20-year-old Don, the older and wiser of the pair, takes the lead on the lovelorn verses: "I'm through with romance, I'm through with love...") It was an appropriate opening sentiment for their career: nearly all of the Everly Brothers' songs are about young love, either the innocent dream of an idyllic love or the crushing disappointment and hurt of a love lost. In either case, the Everly Brother's image of love was never of the suggestive "behind the barn" variety that the wilder rockabillies hungered for. The decorous morality of the C&W tradition was kept intact in the Everly's songs, which helped them appeal to the kids without offending the parents.

"Bye Bye Love" was recorded in the Nashville RCA studios, where the Everly Brothers were backed by a pool of Nashville "super-sessionmen," including Chet Atkins and Hank Garland on guitars, Floyd Cramer on piano and Buddy Harmon on drums. With such all-star talent behind them, the Everly Brothers' Cadence recordings had a tight and polished sound with at least a hint of country flavor, though great care was always taken to see that Don and Phil's voices and guitars were never overshadowed and, with the pop audience in mind, to make sure that overtly country elements were avoided. With Wesley Rose and Archie Bleyer overseeing their career and Boudleaux and Felice Bryant supplying most of their hits, the Everly Brothers were the center of a thoroughly professional team effort that kept them near the top of the charts throughout their three-year association with Cadence.

When "Bye Bye Love" was released, however, the Everly Brothers still considered themselves country artists and viewed an appearance on the Grand Ole Opry as the very pinnacle of success (and they did, in fact, make frequent appearances on the Grand Ole Opry for about a year after "Bye Bye Love" hit). They toured in 1957 as part of Bill Monroe's troupe, performing at "tent shows" throughout the South and alternating straight country sets with rock & roll shows for the younger crowd. While on tour they received the awful news that country superstar Webb Pierce had covered "Bye Bye Love," a potentially fatal blow for the struggling newcomers. Don Everly: "Disaster! I almost fainted. I called Archie Bleyer up in New York. I said, 'Something terrible's happened.' He said, 'What?' I said, 'Webb Pierce has covered our record.' And he said—I never will forget this—he said, 'Webb who?' He didn't even know who Webb Pierce was! He said 'Forget about that—the record's hitting pop.' I didn't have a clue what he was talking about."¹

The Cadence Years: 1957-1960

The Everly Brothers became country *and* rock & roll stars in one fell swoop. "Bye Bye Love" climbed to #2 by May of 1957, denied the #1 spot by Elvis' "All Shook Up." Their next release did make it all the way to #1 in September, 1957, though not before causing some unexpected controversy along the way. "**Wake Up Little Susie**," written by the Bryants, tells the tale of a young couple who innocently fall asleep at a drive-in movie, only to wake to the horrifying realization that it's four in the morning(!) They know, too well, that their parents will be furious and that, even worse, their friends won't believe that it really *was* all very innocent: "Our goose is cooked, our reputation is shot!" Now Jerry Lee Lewis would have worried about his reputation if he ever brought a girl home *before* four in the morning, and the moral values expressed in "Wake Up Little Susie" are certainly of the highest order. Nonetheless, the suggestion that a boy and girl had been sleeping together in *any* circumstances caused the song to be banned by many radio stations—which, needless to say, increased its sales.

The music of "Wake Up Little Susie" follows the pattern set by "Bye Bye Love." Don again takes the lead on the brief solo sections; otherwise the song is sung in close parallel harmony. The background arrangement carries the song along unobtrusively, with the Everly's jumbo acoustics again up front in the mix and given an integral part in the structure of the song. Boudleaux Bryant: "After 'Bye Bye Love' was a hit, we realized that the [guitar] intro... was a valuable piece of business. So on "Wake Up Little Susie" we wrote all these little riffs into the song. The holes were left for the guitars to be featured. It was similar to "Bye Bye Love," but at the same time a modification."ⁱⁱ

The remainder of the Everly Brothers' uptempo hits at Cadence used similar vocal and instrumental arrangements. In 1958, the Bryants supplied the light-hearted "Bird Dog" and "Problems," two of their most specifically "teenage" songs, while Roy Orbison contributed "Claudette," a good example of the Everly Brothers as "choir boy rockabillies." Don and Phil wrote their own hits as well, including Don's "Till I Kissed You" (backed by Buddy Holly's band, the Crickets, shortly after Holly's death in 1959) and Phil's "When Will I Be Loved," a particularly superb effort with soaring harmonies and elegantly crafted lyrics. (A laconic 1975 cover of "When Will I Be Loved" helped launch Linda Ronstadt's career.) While convincing in uptempo songs written by or especially for them, the Everly Brothers' natural charm and restraint made their attempts at straight rock & roll seem a bit tentative. Their honky-tonk version of Gene Vincent's "Be-Bop-A-Lula" and their several Little Richard covers lack the excitement and bold sexuality of the original versions.

On the other hand, the Everly Brothers were the greatest teen ballad singers of the 1950's. Their sad, yearning slow songs were the best vehicles for their voices and keen melodic sense. The Bryants' "**All I Have to Do Is Dream**" hit #1 in 1958 and went a long way toward erasing any ethical doubts still lingering from the "Wake Up Little Susie" controversy. It is a beautiful, longing teenage love song—the melodies are gorgeous, the harmonies impeccable, Chet Atkins plays a wonderfully understated tremolo guitar accompaniment and the lyrics capture both the dream of idyllic love and the shattering of the illusion in the most tender and uncontrived manner. The equally and achingly beautiful "**Let It Be Me**" was recorded in New York in 1960, near the end of their tenure with Cadence, and was their first recording outside of Nashville. The syrupy strings were a sign of things to come, but the beautiful singing and sentiment more than made up for the Hollywood-ish production.

The Everly Brother's own ballads were just as convincing: the country-waltz "I Wonder If I Care As Much" and the beautifully written "Oh What a Feeling," for example, were ample proof of their songwriting talents and delivered a more personal message than the songs written for them by others. As always, though, the sentiments were shared and the messages were delivered by a set of identical musical twins, with an unearthly tightness that can only come from a lifetime of playing and singing together. As Philip Norman put it, they sang "as one voice, one guitar, suitors for the hand of one girl..."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

The Everly Brothers on Warner Brothers

The Everly Brothers left Cadence in 1960 after disputes with Archie Bleyer and Wesley Rose over royalty payments, moved to California and signed with Warner Brothers Records for a guarantee of \$1,000,000 over ten years. In the process, they lost the songwriting services of the Bryants, who were still under contract to Acuff-Rose, and had to abandon their recording base and superstar sessionmen. Their voices remained as sweet as ever, but the inspired Nashville team that had created their best records was history.

Nonetheless, their first Warner Brothers release proved to be the biggest hit of their career, holding the #1 spot for five weeks in the Spring of 1960. "**Cathy's Clown**," written together by Don and Phil, finds the singer(s) despairing at being such a sucker for a girl ("I gotta stand tall, you know a man can't crawl") but still longing for her return. As if to reflect his (their) ambivalence, the rhythm of the song alternates between a swing feel for the verses and a quasi-march for the choruses, which also feature a clever twist in the harmonies, with Phil—the Everly's high voice—holding a single note while Don descends with the melody. (A similar high held-note harmony shapes the Beatles' "Please Please Me"; the Beatles used the relative complexity of "Cathy's Clown" to test prospective drummers as well.)

The Everly Brothers followed "Cathy's Clown" with another original, the beautiful ballad "So Sad (To Watch Good Love Go Bad)." While off to a great start at their new label, Don and Phil were not prolific songwriters and soon had to search out songs by other writers. Given a good song they could still make a great record, such as 1962's eloquent "**Crying in the Rain**," written by Brill Building writers Carole King and Howie Greenfield. Here the wounded lover cries in the rain so no one will see his tears: "I've got my pride and I know how to hide all my sorrow and pain—I'll do my cryin' in the rain."

Unfortunately, most of their Warner Brothers material lacked the inspired lyricism of "Crying in the Rain," and leaned instead toward bland pop that took them further away from their country and rock roots. Their uptempo material lost much of its transparent buoyancy and was often bogged down by novelty productions, as in the vaudevillian arrangement of "Walk Right Back" and the overblown settings of "Temptation" and "Muskrat," while their ballads, such as "Ebony Eyes" and "Don't Blame Me," fell victim to the musical and sentimental excesses they had managed to avoid at Cadence.

Thicker than Water

The Everly Brother's last big hit was 1962's "That's Old Fashioned," appropriately enough. To avoid being drafted, the brothers enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserves that same year and spent six months on active duty. They had barely resurfaced when the Beatles, with all their echoes of the Everly's style, signaled the end of their chart-topping days. The Everly Brothers limped along rootlessly through the sixties with a disorienting schedule of nightclub, Las Vegas, country & western, hippie and "oldies" shows. As adults, they remained trapped in the world of their teenage songs, and their musical identity crisis was mirrored by drug, marital and other personal problems.

After a lifetime of doing everything *together*, the Everly Brothers finally snapped in 1973. As with everything else in their lives and careers, their breakup took place in public and onstage, during the second of three performances at Knott's Berry Farm near Los Angeles. In the midst of their ever-sweet harmonies, Phil slammed his guitar to the ground and stormed offstage, leaving Don to finish the shows solo, explaining only that "the Everly Brothers died ten years ago."

The next ten years were barren times for the two brothers. Both released solo albums with little success and seemed to spend most of their energy on avoiding each other and any associations with their past. (They only met once—at their father's funeral.) The ice was finally broken in 1983 with an emotional reunion concert in London that was filmed for TV and released as an album. Old fan Paul McCartney wrote "On the Wings of a Nightingale" for their comeback single in 1984, and the Everly Brothers have remained on good terms since then, recording periodically, touring often and still sounding as pure and harmonious as ever. There is a reassuring sense of completeness to the Everly Brothers' saga: their reunion, renewed career and brotherly reconciliation are as heartwarming as the best of their music.

ⁱMay 8, 1986 *Rolling Stone* magazine, issue #473, p. 86.

ⁱⁱ*ibid.*, pg. 56.

ⁱⁱⁱPhilip Norman, "The Road Goes On Forever," (New York: Fireside, 1982).