

There Are Many Roy Orbisons

In 1960 rock 'n' roll and pop music were quite rightly perceived as diminished by two watershed events: Elvis Presley's enlistment in the army and Buddy Holly's death. I was fifteen years old at the time and, like many others, I felt a void that it seemed would never be filled. No one was positioned to carry on what those greats had begun, or so it seemed. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Roy Orbison appeared—a man who, unbeknownst to most rock 'n' roll fans (myself included), had close personal ties with both Presley and Holly. Yet one would not have guessed this listening to “Only the Lonely,” Orbison's first smash hit in 1960. Where had this rich voice, with its startling falsetto, come from? Who was this mysterious figure who sang such a strange song—which sounded more like two songs than one—so beautifully?

Orbison not only seemed to come from nowhere; he seemed to stay there. As much as I loved his music (and I loved it more than any other music I had known), I knew virtually nothing about him. I did not know what he looked like, how old he was, whether he was married—and I didn't care. Although I bought all his records and listened to the radio in rapt anticipation of the next one, it was years before I learned anything about him beyond what his music told me. When I finally saw his picture, it meant nothing to me—he looked like a grown man to whom I could not relate in any way. And once again, I did not care. When I went to dances

where local bands or records played, Orbison's music was rarely included because amateur teen bands could not cover him, and his songs were difficult to dance to, anyway. This too meant nothing to me.

Finally, during my first year in college (1963–64), I heard Roy Orbison live. Nothing could prepare me for the experience; it caught me as much by surprise, and had as strong an effect on me, as first hearing “Only the Lonely” had done nearly four years earlier. I was startled by his appearance; he was dressed all in black and wore dark glasses, though it was a nighttime concert. I was prepared to be disappointed in his singing, aware of the cliché that rock ‘n’ roll singers were the product of studio magic and couldn’t really sing. But Orbison sang in such a magnificent, powerful voice that I couldn’t believe my ears. And those were the days before sound boards and elaborate mixing systems; basically the microphone was turned on and that was it. The speaker system was nothing to brag about, nor was the venue, the “Youth Building” of the Dane County fairgrounds in Madison, Wisconsin. We sat on folding chairs!

The musical success of this odd figure continued for four years, for all practical purposes ending in 1964 with “Oh, Pretty Woman” as quickly as it had begun in 1960 with “Only the Lonely.” Since it was never clear where he had come from, no one seemed to pay much attention to where he had gone; he was just gone. He continued to make music but no one seemed to care, or even know. I was living in New York between 1968 and 1971, and even in Manhattan I could not find a record store that bothered to stock one copy of a newly released Orbison album; I had to special order them. There was never an Orbison section; many of the clerks did not even know who he was. When I told people about his music, the ones who recognized his name often thought he was dead.

He was totally forgotten, or so it seemed. When he died unexpectedly in 1988, Bono, the lead singer of the immensely popular band U2, proclaimed him the greatest singer of his time. How could that be? Why was he dismissed as just another cog in the pop music industry teen-machine during his lifetime, but acclaimed as a great artist in his death? What had happened between 1964 and 1988? This book will attempt to answer that question, bringing to bear much of what film

studies has taught us about authorship as well as formal and ideological analysis of media within popular culture. Although popular music is different from movies, there are obvious parallels between the film studios and the record companies, between film directors and music producers, between movie stars and rock stars, between form and narrative in popular film and music, and between the representation of gender and sexuality in both art forms. Unlike popular music, film studies has a longstanding tradition of analyzing in detail both individual films and complete *oeuvres* of important directors. I hope that this book will mark the beginning of such work in rock 'n' roll.

Had Roy Orbison died in the 1970s, his death would have received minor attention in the media, perhaps a one-paragraph obituary in the larger city newspapers. It is unlikely that network radio or television would have paid attention. In 1988, however, his death was a media event. A major network radio news program began with an excerpt from one of his songs; *USA Today* featured a cover story on him in the entertainment section; the talk shows, including *Good Morning America*, featured segments about him; the covers of *People Magazine* and various tabloids advertised the stories within; and *Rolling Stone* put him on the cover and published his first *Rolling Stone* interview. Within a short period two biographies appeared, *Only the Lonely*, by Alan Clayson, and *Dark Star: The Roy Orbison Story*, by Ellis Amburn. Orbison's star power in death eclipsed anything he had ever experienced in life. Yet Orbison had released little new music in the final years before his death. Indeed, "Not Alone Anymore," his one solo song on *The Traveling Wilburys, Vol. 1*, was the most significant addition to his *oeuvre*. Despite the success of the supergroup, much of the sudden attention he was getting was based not on his recent work (his CD *Mystery Girl* would not be released for a few months), but on the rediscovery and reassessment of his past accomplishments. He could have, and should have, received much of this attention years earlier. The origins of this book lie in those years of neglect, when it was beyond my wildest dream that by the time I wrote this book, Orbison would be widely recognized, both popularly and critically, as a major figure of rock 'n' roll.

In his *Newsweek* obituary, David Gates claimed that, along with Elvis Presley, "Orbison . . . elevated a bastard form of regional music into

something approaching art song" (Gates 1988, 73). This assessment is at once boldly perceptive and deeply troubling. Gates is undoubtedly right that Orbison was worthy of the sort of praise reserved for serious artists. But the reference to "a bastard form of regional music" smacks of class and racial assumptions that identify the music of poor, uneducated, rural whites, and the blacks from whom they appropriated it, as illegitimate and of little value.

In his history of Sun Records and the birth of rock 'n' roll, Colin Escott similarly claims that "Hillbilly and rockabilly were essentially southern musics; the hits Orbison scored in the 1960s were timeless and placeless. Like Elvis Presley, but unlike Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison transcended his roots" (Escott 2001, 145). Like Escott, I have long been struck by the timeless quality of Orbison's music. With a few trivial exceptions, most of his Monument hits between 1960 and 1964 in no way sound like early sixties pop or rock. It is precisely because he was never really of his time that Orbison's music sounds as fresh today as when it was recorded. Orbison's songs do not invoke nostalgia for a bygone era, and therefore they stand out when played on oldies stations. But Escott also emphasizes place, and he is right: the "placelessness" of Orbison's music has some connection with Gates's sense of its transcending regional music. Strangely enough, Orbison's music has no regional roots or character, a point of great significance when considering it in the context of race.

Finally, Gates and Escott point to a paradox in critical discourse on Orbison: on the one hand, he is treated as a unique and sometimes even bizarrely eccentric figure in rock 'n' roll, while on the other hand he is linked to Elvis Presley, the figure who best epitomizes rock 'n' roll in terms of masculinity and sexuality. Both Presley and Orbison contributed to this perception through public statements about their friendship and their high regard for each other's music.

But if Orbison transcended the norm and was somehow exceptional, how do we resolve the question raised by Gates's judgment? Isn't popular music, by definition, tied to place and time? Isn't that essential to its popularity? Standard histories of rock 'n' roll certainly presume this as they jump from Presley as a figure of fifties rebellion to the Beatles as figures of sixties countercultural revolution. And if pop music is of

its time, why should a “test” of timelessness be applied to it? Doesn’t that reek of “high art” criticism and of the misapplication of the criteria of classical music to popular music? Much academic criticism—influenced by cultural studies, a desire to rid the academy of a canon, and anti-*auteurist* sentiment—avoids this question by approaching popular culture in a way that examines how different works or genres become meaningful to different audiences in different places at different times; claims for the greatness of individuals are studiously avoided.

Yet this is also a serious error. If Gates makes the mistake of unintentionally insulting and devaluing an entire class of music, cultural studies makes the mistake of devaluing the accomplishments of particular works and *oeuvres*. Nearly everything is of some value to someone at some point in time (for example, teenage boys and heavy metal, or the relationship of rock ’n’ roll to dancing and romance), and while it is important to respect and understand that value, it is also incumbent upon students of popular culture to make value judgments. The idea of a canon is both inevitable and desirable. What is important is that we constantly revise our canons and include as many voices as possible in their creation.

In their effort to transcend the traditional high art/low art dichotomy, practitioners of cultural studies have been guilty of a serious omission. It was and remains important to understand the function of popular art in relation to age (for example, teenagers and rock), class (for example, working class and country), race (for example, rap and African Americans), and gender (for example, Madonna and women).

But this is only part of our obligation. For lovers of all kinds of music, it is particularly offensive when classical music is referred to as “serious” music, as it commonly is. What could be more serious to certain working-class whites in the late sixties and early seventies than the music of Merle Haggard? In this usage, “serious” connotes the privileges of economic class and higher education. But even within the world of classical music, not everyone is a Beethoven or a Mozart. Indeed, many of the contemporaries of these two composers have long since been forgotten and many, for good reason, will never be rediscovered. Just as it has been important for classical musicians and scholars to understand the accomplishments of a Beethoven or a Mozart, it is

equally important for scholars of popular culture to understand the accomplishments of a Merle Haggard or a Roy Orbison. We cannot simply assert that rock and country music are worthy of serious attention as genres without making the case for the accomplishments of the figures working within those forms. Yet that is close to what is currently happening.

Gaining respect for popular culture is not enough. It is easy to argue that there is no significant aesthetic distinction between what can be accomplished in popular fiction and what in “literature,” but such claims are useless without careful analysis of individual works and *oeuvres* that supply convincing evidence. I have argued that the treatment of the theme of sexuality and war wounds in *The Nothing Man*, a pulp novel by Jim Thompson, is important and daring in a manner that makes it impressive when considered alongside the work of Ernest Hemingway, a “serious” writer (Lehman 1993). It is precisely because film studies analyzes specific Westerns, such as those of John Ford, that Westerns can be regarded as a “serious” art form. Not all pulp novels are artistic accomplishments worthy of inclusion in a canon, nor are all Westerns—but some of them are.

While it is certainly true that we can learn something by studying the value of country music in general to many working-class whites, it is also true that we can learn something by studying how the works of the greatest country musicians—Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, George Jones, Johnny Cash, to name a few—rise above that their peers and achieve distinction. To argue this is not to devalue country music as a whole any more than to argue for Beethoven’s greatness over his peers devalues classical music. The old-fashioned notion of the timeless genius who transcends his place, culture, and history to discover universal truths is, thank heavens, long gone. But there are other ways to recognize the importance of individual artists within history, culture, and ideology and to study both what distinguishes their work from that of others and why it has outlasted that of their peers.

In any generation there are a handful of musicians, whether they make classical or popular music, who achieve that status, and it is important for us to know why. Roy Orbison was one of those artists and, with full appreciation and respect for the rock ’n’ roll of his time, I will never-

theless argue that Orbison did indeed reach far above and beyond it in something of the way Gates indicates. The analogy with the art song, however, to which I shall return in the next chapter, presents a problem. Arguing by analogy is notoriously difficult since we must keep in mind the differences as well as the similarities. The *auteurs* of the art song were the composers, and their compositions can be separated from the various performers of those songs in a way that is not the case with Orbison. Precisely because of the manner in which rock 'n' roll is inextricably tied to *recorded* music, Orbison is part of a different tradition. He may be a great composer, but that does not mean he is analogous to Schubert. And this remains true even if Orbison's songs become standards that will be reinterpreted by others for years to come. If his aesthetic accomplishment approaches that of someone like Schubert, it does so in a different way.

A project like mine is limited because the unique quality of the voice, "the grain of the voice," in Roland Barthes's memorable phrase, escapes the language of analysis. It is so much easier to talk about the aesthetics and ideology of lyrics than to characterize the accomplishments of the voice. We have critical tools with which to trace formal features such as motif and narrative style (though we must avoid falling into the trap of evaluating them on a literary or poetic model). When, in a song like "Windsurfer," we hear the language in which a young woman rejects her lover's plea to go away with him ("No, no, never no"), it achieves a heightened, somewhat poetic function, though it would not have such a function in a Shakespeare play or sonnet. Similarly, it is easier to trace the patterns of masochism in the Orbison persona's sexual behavior than it is to characterize the moaning, groaning sounds of pain/pleasure in which Orbison sings of those behaviors.

Nevertheless, it is important to attempt to capture these things in words. In Chapter 3 and the Appendix I will at least sketch in the features of the voice and the music that everything else in this book circles around. And although most of this book analyzes the aesthetics and ideology of Orbison's lyrics; his image, persona, and performance style; the use of his music in film narratives; the cultural discourses of race and gender that have sprung up around him; and the discourses of critics and musicians who have written and spoken about Orbison, none of these

things, nor all of them taken together, make the music worthwhile. It is the music as sung and recorded or performed by Orbison that makes all the other forms of analysis worthwhile. And it is only the beauty of the music that makes it important to understand, for example, its unusual embodiment of gender and sexuality. That Orbison did not adhere to the norms of masculinity of his time does not make his hits important; that he sang in an eerie falsetto in songs that defied all expectations is what makes the gender and sexual components of his music and persona so important. If this book succeeds, it will do so by giving the reader a guide by which to hear the recordings in a new and richer context.

Some artists achieve greatness by mastering the norms of their form and some by departing from those norms. Orbison belongs to the latter group. For that reason, probably, he receives no attention in James Miller's *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947–1977*. As an intellectual and cultural historian, Miller is interested in tracing the important moments that determined the shape and evolution of rock 'n' roll. That story can quite rightly be told without mention of Orbison. Miller notes, "By the Spring of 1957, rock and roll in many respects had achieved its definitive form . . . the key cultural values, glorifying rebellion, delinquency, youthful disorder" (Miller 1999, 138). A little later he observes, "the music and its idols offered a focus for fantasies of youthful revolt and sexual mastery—a ritual representation of potentially unruly impulses" (143). Orbison's music and persona are not really about any of these things. Indeed, much of his music revels in the opposite of sexual mastery. Even the "driving beat" and "teen-oriented lyrics" Miller describes as characteristic of rock 'n' roll are absent from many of Orbison's greatest hits.

Apart from the running time of his songs, which strictly followed the AM radio Top 40 format, virtually nothing about Orbison's music conformed to the norms of his time. The songs he wrote, the way he sang them, the manner in which they were produced, the style of his live concert performances, the development of and circulation of his persona in the media—all departed drastically from the norm. Though Orbison's accomplishment lies in understanding that departure, this is not, of course, to say that there weren't many important rock singers from the period who embody those norms.

This points to yet another paradox about Orbison—his relationship to many of the recognized giants who do embody the rock 'n' roll norm. Again, Miller's book sheds light on this point in two ways. He mentions Orbison only twice, both times in relation to the oft-mentioned fact that the Beatles intended "Please Please Me" as a tribute to Orbison. The Beatles, of course, are central to the mainstream rock 'n' roll tradition that Miller traces, and he devotes chapters to them. In his preface, he notes some highlights of his career as a professional music critic, among them seeing Bruce Springsteen in concert as he was poised for fame, and having "the chance to meet and talk with a great many of my musical heroes, old and new, from Sam Phillips and Paul McCartney to David Bowie and Elvis Costello and Bono of U2" (Miller 1999, 17). All of these musicians have gone on record about their extraordinary respect for Orbison. How is it that Orbison quite rightly has no place in Miller's history and yet is a hero to so many of his musical heroes?

This book is about one of the strangest, oddest figures in the history of rock 'n' roll. In the late 1980s, *Playboy* magazine ran a picture of Orbison and Frank Zappa. It caught my attention not only because I thought the accompanying article would be in part about Orbison, but because I wondered what connection the writer would make between these two figures. The answer was an aesthetic of "weirdness." The article mentioned only one other singer: Tiny Tim. The writer's observation about the shared "weirdness" of these figures indicated that by the late eighties Orbison's strangeness was becoming more widely recognized. The inclusion of Tiny Tim served another very valuable function: it showed that however much one departs from the norms of one's time, there is no necessary connection between that departure and artistic accomplishment. Frank Zappa, like Orbison, is a figure for whom a serious case for artistic greatness can be made; Tiny Tim is not. Just as there are great artists who embody norms, there are very bad artists who depart from them. Like it or not, such value judgments are vital to understanding our field. In this book I will make the case not just for Orbison's uniqueness, but also for his greatness.

Although my parallel work in film studies led me in the 1990s to develop the view of popular culture I have described above, in 1996 Simon Frith similarly argued that cultural studies had avoided what he

called the “value problem.” In the effort to collapse the high art/low art distinction, Frith noted that many defenders of popular culture “draw the wrong conclusion from this: what needs challenging is not the notion of the superior, but the claim that it is the exclusive property of the ‘high’” (Frith 1996, 16). Unfortunately, in the years since Frith made this perceptive observation, no significant change has occurred.

Like lovers of any art form, Frith notes that fans of popular music make judgments and assess differences: “There is no reason to believe a priori that such judgments work differently in different cultural spheres. There are obvious differences between operas and soap operas, between classical and country music, but the fact that the objects of judgment are different doesn’t mean that the processes of judgment are” (17). Frith’s insight here is crucial to understanding why it is possible to experience no serious disjunction between loving Orbison’s music and loving Mozart’s. Although such pluralism sometimes bewilders people, the love of radically different genres of music involves the exact same processes of judgment and discrimination in each case. Listening to Orbison is not a form of “slumming,” a lapse in taste, or a case of arrested adolescent development; it is much like listening to Mozart.

Orbison is, as I have noted, best known for a string of hits he recorded for Monument Records between 1960 (“Only the Lonely”) and 1964 (“Oh, Pretty Woman”). As amazing as his accomplishments were during those four years, they comprise only a small part of his total output. He began in the 1950s with Sam Phillips at Sun Records. Although he had only one minor hit with “Ooby Dooby,” he recorded sixteen songs, including the somewhat bizarre “Chicken Hearted,” the earliest work to question conventional notions of masculinity, which became such a prominent theme in Orbison’s work.

This first phase of Orbison’s career includes a series of recordings he made at the Jim Beck Studio in Dallas and at Norman Petty’s studio in Clovis, New Mexico. Orbison in fact first recorded “Ooby Dooby” in 1955 at the Beck Studio and then in 1956 in Clovis, and then again later in 1956 he rerecorded it in Memphis at Sun Records after signing with that label.¹ Orbison was dissatisfied with Sam Phillips’s strong control at Sun, however, and he recorded a number of other songs at Clovis while under contract to Sun.² In the mid-fifties, the Teen Kings, the group to

which Orbison belonged, performed weekly on live television in Odessa, Texas. Orbison sang lead vocals, played lead guitar, and cowrote the original songs with the other members of the group. Most of the group's material was never recorded for or released on Sun Records.

After leaving Sun, Orbison's career took a little-known turn. He did not go directly to Monument but instead, following the lead of Elvis Presley, signed with RCA, recording six songs produced by Chet Atkins.³ These songs supply an important link between Orbison's rockabilly period and the later Monument ballads. Once again, none of the songs is major but some, such as "Paper Boy," reveal a growing poetic awareness in the lyrics and introduce motifs Orbison would later develop much more fully. Orbison sings in a somewhat delicate, fragile style that is far removed from the powerful voice he would develop at Monument. As with the switch from Clovis to Sun, however, the move from RCA to Monument was bridged by a common song: the first song Orbison released at Monument was the previously unreleased "Paper Boy" from the RCA sessions.

Shortly thereafter, "Only the Lonely" (1960) marked Orbison's first major breakthrough in both vocal style and songwriting. He sang in a richly nuanced voice with a startling range, while the song itself had a complex structure, perhaps the result of its combining what had been two separate songs. The following year, with "Running Scared," he added an equally startling new dimension to his vocal style, this time revealing a vocal power, in the song's conclusion, not heard before. Structurally, "Running Scared" abandoned the verse-chorus-verse sequence typical of the time. All the major elements of Orbison's style were now in place, and they would provide him with a stunning succession of hits, culminating with "Oh, Pretty Woman" in 1964. Then his fortunes were reversed.

Orbison signed with MGM in 1965, and over the next nine years the studio released eleven albums of new material. The MGM period has been almost entirely overlooked, usually considered one big wasteland in Orbison's career. And while there is no question that the general quality of his work fell off dramatically, the picture is more complex than that. Orbison recorded some very good songs, and even some experimental numbers, during this period. But he lost control over the

production style he had developed with Fred Foster at Monument Records, a small, independent label. MGM was a major label at the time, and Orbison's music moved stylistically more into the mainstream. His hits ceased in the United States, though they continued in England and Australia.

The way critics generally respond to Orbison's MGM period bears an interesting analogy to a common perception of Elvis Presley's career. Daniel Wolff criticizes the manner in which Peter Guralnick's two-volume biography of Presley opposes the pre-1960 Presley to the Presley who resumed recording after his stint in the army. The first volume celebrates "'a sense of daring, high-flying good times almost in defiance of societal norms' while the second traces the sad decline into 'pop' rather than rock & roll music." Wolff objects to this view on three grounds. First, such a simple dichotomy overlooks the very real accomplishments of Presley's post-1960 work. Second, it essentializes rock 'n' roll as one thing. Third, it demonizes Colonel Parker, Presley's manager, as the major if not sole cause of the downfall.

All three points relate also to Orbison's career. Of Guralnick's distinction between Presley's pre- and post-1960s recordings, Wolff observes:

That definition only makes sense if you're willing to exclude from the rock pantheon Roy Orbison, Sam Cooke, the Platters, Roy Hamilton, the Everly Brothers, Jackie Wilson, and a number of other artists who produced melodic, sophisticated hits in the early Sixties, after the music "died." Their songs were not only good for slow dancing (as essential to the rock & roll phenomenon as the rip-'em-up sound), but they had a bravura emotional quality that could, indeed, be traced back to Jolson by way of Bing Crosby, Sinatra, Billy Eckstein, and—one of Presley's favorites—Dean Martin. For a purist, this doesn't count as rock history. What's it got to do after all, with leather jackets and shaking up the staid Eisenhower years? (Wolff 1999)

Wolff points out that such an essentialist notion of rock 'n' roll is inadequate to understanding the complexities of Presley's career. He quite rightly calls "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" a "great record," even though it is not a rip-'em-up rocker full of threatening rebellion.

Colonel Parker, Presley's infamous manager, is implicated in this scenario. Writing of "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" Wolff observes: "It's a ridiculously old-fashioned and inappropriate ballad, which had first been a hit for Al Jolson (!?) more than thirty years earlier. Supposedly, Pres-

ley agreed to record it only because it was one of Colonel Parker's favorites. If you buy the thesis put forward in *Careless Love*, here's a beginning to the downward side slide; Elvis as the Colonel's puppet, the wild boy tamed" (Wolff 1999).

The parallels between this view of Presley and common perceptions of Orbison's career are uncanny. The main difference is the time shift. The standard critical view of Orbison is that he was never a good rocker and that his only real claim to fame are the 1960–64 Fred Foster–Monument–produced ballads, with “Oh, Pretty Woman” the notable exception. Then, the story goes, the move to MGM marks Orbison's pathetic decline into pop mediocrity. Furthermore, Wesley Rose, Orbison's manager, is the villain who ruined Orbison in order to get a million-dollar, multi-film contract with MGM. Rose even took over producing Orbison's records. That Orbison did an album of Hank Williams songs and one of Don Gibson songs at MGM is offered as further proof of Rose's selfishness, since both songwriters were published by Acuff–Rose, a company in which Wesley Rose, son of Fred Rose, had a major interest.

Rick Kennedy and Randy McNutt, for example, call the move from Monument to MGM “disastrous” and attribute it to the fact that although Foster was willing to match the MGM dollar figure, he had no resources to match the movie deal:

Orbison ultimately signed his first million-dollar contract with MGM. He owed Monument four more sides, but Rose attempted to dictate to Foster what songs would be released when. “So I said, ‘Then *you* do it [produce the records],’” said Foster. “So we went from selling seven million copies of ‘Oh, Pretty Woman’ to less than 200,000 on the follow-up. It broke my heart. The next one didn't even break 100,000. That should have been the writing on the wall. I mean, a million dollars is nice, but if you can stay where you are and keep rolling, a million dollars is nothing. You can make more than that anyway. But that's the way it came down.” (Kennedy and McNutt 1999, 147)

If Foster's recollection is accurate, it contradicts the credits on the *Orbisons* album (1966) and all later albums, which list Fred Foster as the producer on both “Goodnight” and “(Say) You're My Girl. Here, however, Foster himself contributes to the myth. The problem is that “Goodnight” (the follow-up to “Oh, Pretty Woman”) is a great song. In

fact, it is a much better song than “Oh, Pretty Woman” and one of Orbison’s crowning achievements at Monument. The production is superb. What happened between “Oh, Pretty Woman” and “Goodnight” was the solidification of the British invasion, something that would intensify even more between “Goodnight” and “(Say) You’re My Girl,” Orbison’s next Monument release. Foster’s claim that Orbison could have stayed where he was, turning out million-dollar hits, is unsupported by anything but sheer sentiment. Had Orbison stayed at Monument with Fred Foster producing, it is highly unlikely that the hits would have kept on coming; and it is this, rather than the loss of any “magic,” that explains why, when the two re-teamed at Monument in 1978, their *Regeneration* album was a total failure.

Kennedy and McNutt, perpetuating Foster’s account, conclude:

Some critics contend Orbison never found another producer with Foster’s touch. Foster believes that they had a special collaborative spirit together that could not be recaptured. Perhaps Foster’s dual roles of producer and label president enabled the team to excel. Because he controlled session budgets, for example, he allowed Orbison an incredible 36 takes on “It’s Over.” By the time Rose produced Orbison’s final Monument singles, “Goodnight” and “(Say) You’re My Girl,” the spark was gone. (Kennedy and McNutt 1999, 148–49)

In fact, a careful listen to the music reveals that the spark was not gone. What were gone were the audience and the reception context for such songs; they were neglected, forgotten, by an upheaval in popular culture so swift and dramatic that within a year the world had become a different place. In every way—the lyrics, the complex melodic shifts, the orchestration, the vocals—“Goodnight” sounded like a beautiful continuation of the Orbison-Foster collaboration, and in fact, until I learned that Rose actually produced the song, I always presumed that Foster had. “(Say) You’re My Girl,” while something of a departure for Orbison, is also a very good, well-produced record. It is energetic and fresh, perhaps a needed departure from the more typical orchestrated dramatic ballads.

In this book I will resist such narratives as Wolff’s and Kennedy and McNutt’s, with their pre- and post-army Presley dichotomy and Monument/MGM Orbison dichotomy, appealing as they may be. Artists

like Presley and Orbison are too complex to be dealt with in simple terms of unblemished success and irreversible decline. Several of Orbison's MGM songs, for example, share profound connections with those of the Monument period.

This is not to say that these writers are entirely wrong. Their argument about the importance of producers and record companies is valid, and there was indeed a special bond between Orbison and Foster. Moreover, the daringly innovative music they created together at Monument was possible because Monument was a small, independent label, and Foster had total control. A major label probably would not have provided the creative freedom necessary for such an accomplishment. And the fact that MGM was a corporate giant, and that Rose and other MGM producers were not Foster's equals, surely accounted in part for the decline in quality and the move toward a more mainstream ballad sound. But one can grant these things without resorting to oversimplifications about dramatic career ruptures. That Fred Rose produced "Goodnight" (if he did in fact produce it) does not signal a dramatic shift in Orbison's fortunes.

During the MGM years, two tragedies struck Orbison's life. In 1966 his wife, Claudette, whom he had recently remarried, died in a motorcycle accident, and in 1968 two of his sons died in a fire at his home while he was touring in England. While these personal tragedies, combined with sinking fortunes, characterize the MGM period, it is not fair to say that they caused Orbison's decline. While the almost unimaginable horror of two such tragedies in quick succession would clearly have a devastating effect on anyone, their impact on Orbison's career is far from clear. Indeed, one of the MGM songs, a cover of Don Gibson's "Too Soon to Know," was a huge hit in England, and the song's emphasis on the uncertainty of forgetting a lost love was widely interpreted as referring to Claudette's death. That this song was a hit in England demonstrates that simplistic hypotheses cannot explain complex phenomena. If "Too Soon to Know" failed to become a hit in the United States because it represented a decline in quality (whether because of Fred Rose, MGM, or personal tragedy), then why was it a hit in England? The success of this song in England and of "Penny Arcade" in Australia show that the story is more complicated, that complex historical and

cultural forces are at work here. Ironically, in the wake of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, and the entire shift to band-based rock 'n' roll, the British remained more receptive to the American tradition of single male performers than did Americans themselves! Orbison enjoyed huge success in England and Australia at this time, even while he experienced near total eclipse in the United States.⁴ So the simple narrative of rise and fall simply will not wash. Paradoxically, it was during the MGM period that what has come to be thought of as Orbison's image was solidified. It was not until 1963, for example, after nearly all of his Monument hits, that Orbison's ever-present sunglasses appeared. And although Orbison's persona is widely perceived as one fixed thing, it has in fact undergone numerous changes. In the late sixties he changed his hairstyle from a fifties pompadour to a post-Beatles "mod" style. With such MGM songs as "Southbound Jericho Parkway" and "Communication Breakdown," he also attempted, though in vain, to create hits that had a "contemporary" sound. Orbison's first MGM album was titled *There Is Only One Roy Orbison*, but in one sense there have been many Roy Orbisons.

After MGM Orbison recorded three albums, each for a different label: *I'm Still in Love with You* (Mercury, 1975), *Regeneration* (Monument, 1977) and *Laminar Flow* (Asylum, 1979). All were commercial and critical failures and involved production conflicts, and it would be ten more years before Orbison would do another solo studio album of original material. Although he did not have a recording contract, important new directions emerged in his work in the eighties. In 1980 he had a country hit with "That Lovin' You Feeling Again," a duet with Emmylou Harris. From that time until his death, Orbison was involved with duets and group projects with well-known singers, including the 1986 album *The Class of '55*, with Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins, as well as the 1988 hit *The Traveling Wilburys, Vol. 1*, with Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Tom Petty, and Jeff Lynne. This period also saw the Cinemax special *Roy Orbison and Friends: A Black and White Night*, a live concert with backup by Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Tom Waits, and k. d. lang, to name just a few. Other duets of the period included "Indian Summer" with Larry Gatlin, "Leah" with Bertie Higgins, and "Crying" with k. d. lang. After a virtual absence of more than

a decade, Orbison also toured the United States extensively throughout the 1980s.

It was not until the end of the decade, with the posthumous release of *Mystery Girl* (Virgin, 1989), that Orbison had another solo studio album of new material—a major album equaling the best of his Monument work and, significantly, showing a mature late-period style—that was a critical and commercial success. Songs like “In the Real World” make strong reference to the sixties hit “In Dreams.” The album self-consciously develops, in a restrained and reflective mode, many motifs both in the music and lyrics that have run throughout his *oeuvre*. Orbison’s work has moved through a full range of stylistic periods—the Sun, RCA, and very early Monument recordings are characterized by the search for a personal style; the Monument, MGM, and various seventies albums constitute a mature middle-period that elaborates and develops that style; and some of the mid-eighties work, such as “Comin’ Home” (from *The Class of ’55*), “Life Fades Away” (from the *Less Than Zero* soundtrack, 1987), and *Mystery Girl* are typically late-period songs preoccupied with death, self-conscious reference to the *oeuvre*, and stylistic restraint bordering at times on a deceptive simplicity. Never once on *Mystery Girl*, for example, does Orbison use the full power of his voice, pulling out all the stops and building to the crashing climaxes that characterized his middle-period.

In 1992 another posthumous album, *King of Hearts*, was released. It contained half a dozen songs that had been left as demos when Orbison died and finished by various producers and mixers, including Don Was, Jeff Lynne, Robbie Robertson, and k. d. lang. The album also includes a few of the various eighties songs released on other labels and the demo version of “Careless Heart,” which appeared on *Mystery Girl*. At least one of the new songs, “Love in Time,” is a major addition to the Orbison *oeuvre*, and the alternative version of “Careless Heart” includes a more unrestrained use of the powerful voice than the release version. The later version that Orbison chose for *Mystery Girl* highlights the late-period tendency to hold back on the fuller development of the middle period.

As this brief survey indicates, Orbison’s *oeuvre* is extensive. Although I will concentrate on his major works and achievements, they will be

placed within the entire career context, without which much would be missed and distorted. Orbison's work includes many contradictions and many aborted and forgotten attempts to move in new directions. During the MGM period alone, in addition to the songs of late sixties "relevance," he attempted a movie career (*The Fastest Guitar Alive*, 1967); recorded a "middle-of-the-road" album (*Roy Orbison's Many Moods*, 1969), and recorded two albums of country music (*Roy Orbison Sings Don Gibson*, 1967, and *Hank Williams the Roy Orbison Way*, 1970).

Over the course of his recording career and since his death, a bewildering number of cultural discourses have arisen about Orbison and his music. It is difficult to recall now that during his string of hits between 1960 and 1964, Orbison did not hire a publicist and was virtually unrepresented in U.S. fan magazines. Indeed, *Life* magazine called him an "anonymous celebrity." Even his most successful albums (*Greatest Hits, Vols. 1 and 2*) included no photos of him; and the photos that appeared on *Lonely and Blue*, *In Dreams*, and *Early Orbison* were not at all typical of what was to become and remain his dominant image—that of a mysterious man in black.

After all of Orbison's sixties hits had been written and recorded, a series of events occurred that was constructed into a discourse of tragedy that dominated Orbison's life story in the media and the public mind. As I have noted, this discourse was based primarily on the death in 1966 of his first wife, Claudette, in a motorcycle accident that occurred as she rode by Orbison's side, and the death of two of his three children in a 1968 fire that destroyed his Nashville home. Orbison's emergency heart surgery in 1978—a triple bypass—also became part of it. Orbison's obituaries confirmed just how widespread and pervasive this tragic image had become. *People* magazine ran a front-cover headline, "The Haunted Life of Rock Legend Roy Orbison," and the *Star* declared his death the final tragedy of a tragic life.

Orbison's ubiquitous black clothes and dark glasses, adopted in 1963, only reinforced his image as a dark, tragic figure. Indeed, careless commentators later attributed the pain and anguish of his sixties hits to his "tragic life," though the loss of his wife and sons occurred after all of his greatest hits had been produced. The title of Ellis Amburn's biography, *Dark Star*, underscored the dominant image of Orbi-

son, and the discourse of tragedy has remained central to the reception of Orbison's music.

A clichéd view of rock history paints the early 1960s as a bland wasteland; Buddy Holly was dead and Elvis Presley was in uniform. This version of history has the Beatles stepping in, in 1964, to rescue rock 'n' roll from mediocrity. In the words of Daniel Wolff:

For some, Presley's military induction did, indeed, mark the end of an era. "Elvis died the day he went into the army," John Lennon would declare. According to this mythic version of rock & roll, the music was born in a blinding flash in July 1954, when country-western, blues, and gospel music mutated in the body of a truck driver from Memphis. The resulting strain lasted four years. Then Elvis was drafted, Jerry Lee Lewis gutted his career by marrying his fourteen-year-old cousin, and Buddy Holly went down in a plane crash in early 1959: "the day the music died." This legend goes on to claim a resurrection, four years later, when the Beatles released "I Want to Hold Your Hand." (Wolff 1999)

Part of the reason why Orbison was underrated and overlooked is that his biggest hits occurred in the period between the alleged death and resurrection of rock 'n' roll. This was also the period of successful girl groups like the Shirelles, the Ronettes, and the Crystals, the latter two produced by Phil Spector. The manner in which this music has been marginalized suggests that the dominant death-and-resurrection narrative has a gender bias at its center. But these girl groups may share more in common with Orbison than being overlooked during the early sixties. Michael Jarrett has pointed out that there is a strong strain of masochism in the songs of the girl groups, and masochism is a central component of Orbison's aesthetic. Conventional wisdom has it, then, that there was no major figure during those years, even if implicitly that meant no major *male* figure. Yet there was a world of difference between Orbison and such "Bobbys" as Bobby Vinton, Bobby Vee, and Bobby Rydell.

Thanks to David Lynch and Bruce Springsteen, Orbison was later repositioned as a major figure in the history of rock 'n' roll, on a scale with Presley and the Beatles; and his music was seen as much darker and more sexually troubled than that of the teen idols who were his contemporaries. Orbison has gone from being a forgotten bad joke to perhaps the most revered "musician's musician" in the history of rock 'n'

roll. An astonishing number of the greatest names in rock and country music played with him, contributed to his final albums, were planning future projects with him, and paid tribute to him at and after the time of his death.

A number of other discourses are closely related to that of the “musician’s musician.” Near the end of Orbison’s life an *auteurist* discourse sprang up around this music that so many considered somehow “classical.” In a 1987 article on Orbison’s music, occasioned by the release of *In Dreams: Greatest Hits*, Dave Marsh hailed Orbison as one of the greatest singers of all time, a view he reiterated the following year, after Orbison’s death, when he called him “more than just the owner of the greatest white pop voice in the last 30 years” (Marsh 1989b, 28). Marsh’s comments in many ways paralleled those of the *auteurist* film critics. He claimed that Orbison created a complex personal and interconnected world in his songs: “These songs define a world unto themselves more completely than any other body of work in pop music” (Marsh 1987a, 7). After Orbison’s final performance in New York, *New York Times* reviewer Peter Watrous contributed to this *auteurist* account of Orbison’s music, calling him “a genuine American eccentric” and observing that “he has perfected an odd vision of popular music, one in which eccentricity and imagination beat back all the pressures toward conformity” (Watrous, 44).

There is indeed an unusually rich interconnection between the songs that prompted these remarks by Marsh and Watrous. In fact, the world of Orbison’s music is so rich and self-contained that many of the well-known songs of which he recorded cover versions (“Danny Boy,” “I Fought the Law,” “Drift Away,” “It’s Too Soon to Know”) take on unique personal dimensions within his *oeuvre*. Orbison’s private world of loneliness and dreams contains an important, pervasive element of sexual masochism that has gone totally unnoticed. Watrous’s assessment of Orbison as a “genuine American eccentric” who was able in the end to commit himself with integrity to his unorthodox music and personal style is accurate enough, but unfortunately Orbison was not always successful in “beating back the pressures of conformity.” There were times in his career when Orbison in fact capitulated to those pressures, both musically and otherwise.