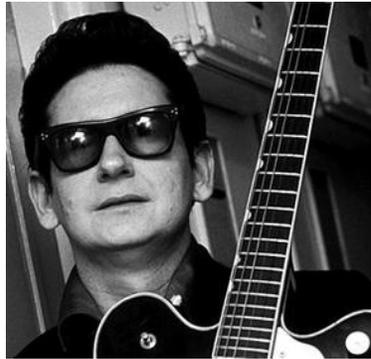


“Oh, Pretty Woman”—Roy Orbison (1964)

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Roy Orbison



Original label

Roy Orbison’s “Oh, Pretty Woman” (often erroneously referred to as just “Pretty Woman”) was recorded in 1964 and was added to the National Registry in 2007.

It was written by Orbison and his long-time co-writer Bill Dees. (Previously, the duo had partnered on Orbison’s hit “It’s Over.”) Orbison would recall about the song’s formation:

We’d just begun about six in the evening. What you do is play anything that comes to mind, and my wife wanted to go to town to get something. I said, “Do you need any money?” And Bill Dees said, “Pretty woman never needs any money.” Then he said, “Would that make a great song title?” I said, “No, but ‘Petty Woman’ would.” So I started playing the guitar and he was slapping the table for drums. That was the conception, and by the time she got back—which was about 40 minutes—we had the song.

“The song,” released on the Monument label, would become one of the most enduring and timeless hits in rock and popular music. Its melody is immediately recognizable, its bass line and driving drum beat completely infectious. A bone fide classic, “Oh, Pretty Woman” has enjoyed the legacy of a classic song—it has been covered, parodied, saluted and sampled.

Still, nothing quite compares to the original. The musicianship of the first recording—featuring guitar players Billy Sanford, Jerry Kennedy and Wayne Moss—is flawless, polished to a fine sheen. And Orbison’s singing (always his ace in the hole) is at its deep, melodious best. Unlike most rock singers, there is nothing “rough” about Orbison’s tone. As he displayed on “Cryin’” and “Only the Lonely,” his vocals are always unrushed and unforced. More than once Orbison’s voice has been described as operatic; he could so seamlessly transition from low tones to a piercing falsetto.

Orbison was born in 1936 in Vernon, Texas. While still in his teens, he formed his first band and helmed his own radio show. After attending North Texas State University (where he counted Pat Boone as a classmate), Orbison fell in with many other then emerging country-rock acts including Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash. With the assistance of Presley, Orbison would eventually sign with Sun records. A gifted writer as well as singer, some of Orbison’s early songs were sung by the likes of Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis and the Everly Brothers. In 1959, Orbison signed with Monument Records and scored his first hit, “Only the Lonely.” It would go on to sell over two million copies. Later hits included “Blue Angel,” “Running Scared,” and “Mean Woman Blues.”

His biggest hit however was his 1964 “Oh, Pretty Woman.”

At first, it seems “Oh, Pretty Woman” tells a story that is straightforward enough: it is the objectification of an attractive woman while out in the public sphere. Is this the song that gave birth to the “male gaze”? But a closer examination of its lyrics evidences a more complex tale at the song’s heart. While, obviously, a woman is being observed, it is the song’s almost dejected narrator whose life we are drawn into. Rather than being a creepy, leering stranger, he is unfailingly friendly and polite (“Pretty woman, won’t you pardon me?”). And he concedes to us his solitude, wondering about the object of his affections, “Are you lonely just like me?”

As the song continues, his questions slowly turn to internal pleas: “Pretty woman, stop a while”; “Pretty woman, look my way”; “Pretty woman, say you’ll stay with me.” And in the narrator’s fully-developed inner life, his heart is already on the verge of breaking, “Pretty woman, don’t make me cry.” He then resigns himself to defeat, “I guess I’ll go home.”

All in all, despite its upbeat melody, its growl and proclamation of “Mercy!,” “Oh, Pretty Woman” is a pretty melancholy affair. That is until its final verse when hope presents itself: “But, wait, what do I see?/Is she walking back to me?/Yeah, she walking back to me.”

Though it’s known as one of rock’s most rocking numbers, “Oh, Pretty Woman” has, as noted above, a rather sad and wistful soul. In that regard, it does fit in smoothly with much of Roy Orbison’s other work. It even mirrors his show biz persona and on-stage appearance. Seldom was Orbison ever seen not clad in black or not sporting his trademark shades. His look would later be co-opted by a whole group of goth-y male rockers such as Lou Reed.

Ironically, for the achievement it was (selling seven million copies), “Oh, Pretty Woman” would be Roy Orbison’s last trip to the top ten for many, many years. Later efforts like 1965’s “Ride Away” (for MGM’s record label) just couldn’t match “Woman” or any of his other earlier 15-plus hits including “Dream Baby” and “Blue Bayou.”

Though Orbison would continue to have success in Europe (where the Rolling Stones were honored to have him tour with them in mid-1960s), a series of personal tragedies greatly affected his output. His wife Collette, the inspiration behind “Pretty Woman,” died in a car accident in 1966. Two years later, two of his three children died in a house fire in Nashville. Leaving America behind, Orbison concentrated on the continent throughout the 1970s; he enjoyed some chart success in England and toured extensively overseas.

Even while in career eclipse, however, Orbison continued to be celebrated by other musicians, both contemporaries and those he influenced. Elvis Presley once called Orbison “the greatest singer in the world.” Those who have acknowledged Orbison as an inspiration include Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Bob Dylan and Chris Isaak.

In the late 1970s and early ‘80s, Orbison began to enjoy a US renaissance. Linda Ronstadt and Don McLean each scored hits with covers on his old songs, “Blue Bayou” and “Crying,” respectively. David Lynch utilized his song “In Dreams” to disturbing effect in his 1986 film “Blue Velvet.”

Orbison’s later years were good ones. He was part of the Traveling Wilburys super group alongside Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, George Harrison, and Jeff Lynne. He enjoyed a hit duet with k.d. lang with a remake of his song “Crying,” and in 1987, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He died in December of 1988. Posthumously, his album “Mystery Girl” was released as was a single, “You Got It.” “You Got It” rose to number nine on the US chart in 1989. It was Orbison’s first time in the top 10 since “Oh, Pretty Woman” 25 years prior.

Even without the stunning success of his “Oh, Pretty Woman,” Roy Orbison would still be recognized as one of the kings of rock. But this rockin’ tale of lust and loneliness remains his

most recognized achievement. Van Halen (during their David Lee Roth incarnation) covered it and hit big with it in 1982. Cowboy crooner Ricky Van Shelton scored a hit with it on the country charts in 1990, the same year that the box office smash “Pretty Woman,” with Richard Gere and Julia Roberts, utilized the song for its theme. “Oh, Pretty” has also found itself used in a million TV commercials and its powerful, legendary opening has been widely sampled for other recordings, often controversially (see: Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc. from 1994).

Still, despite it all, nothing has matched the hand-clapping, toe-tapping, slightly restrained passion of the original. In 1999, “Oh, Pretty Woman” was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame and was named by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as one of the “500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll.” In 2004, it was ranked #222 in their “500 Greatest Songs.”

“Oh, Pretty Woman” is, without question, one of rock’s timeless, seminal recordings.

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