

“Oh, Pretty Woman”—Roy Orbison (1964)

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Essay by Alan Clayson (guest post)*



Roy Orbison

Four months after its 45 rpm predecessor, the near-suicidal “It’s Over,” singing composer Roy Orbison released the intrinsically dissimilar “Oh, Pretty Woman” in September 1964. While “It’s Over” had been predominantly Roy’s creation, it was with “Oh, Pretty Woman” that his then-songwriting collaborator, Bill Dees, came into his own: “We’d just begun work about six in the evening.” Orbison recalled, “and Claudette, my wife, wanted to go to town to get something. I enquired, ‘Do you need any money?’, and Bill remarked, ‘Pretty woman never needs any money.’ Then he suggested it would make a great song title. I replied, ‘No, it wouldn’t, but “Pretty Woman” would.’ So I started playing guitar as he slapped the table for drums. That was the conception--and, by the time Claudette returned after about forty-five minutes, we had the song!”

Subject to producer Fred Foster’s quality control, the coda—“*She’s gone and walked away from me/But there’s other fish in the sea*”—was thought “too negative.” Revised, the vision of loveliness parading past lonesome Roy not only proffers him a teasing second glance, but also sashays seductively in his direction. Perhaps disillusion will result. Is she his long-lost sister or a transvestite? Yet for one round-eyed moment at least, our wishful hero is ahead when the number ends. He’s actually picking up a girl with seemingly no strings attached--contrasting with, say, 1961’s “Running Scared” (in which Roy had cast himself as the “other man” in an eternal triangle) or the “(They Call You) Gigolette” album track in which he was a beguiled victim in the arms of a wanton.

There were, however, twinges of desperation in the doleful “bridge” section of “Oh, Pretty Woman”—Bill’s idea--but the re-entry of a swaggering eight-note fretboard riff revived the narrator’s confidence--and fuelled further a lust expressed earlier via the unfurling of the throaty gurgle--“grrrrr”--born after a teenage Orbison had been so taken by Bob Hope doing the same in the 1952 comedy western “Son Of Paleface” that he sickened the family for weeks on end with his efforts to mimic it. Otherwise, the opus was delivered with the expected rich, supple purity that, without plumminess, grafted a *bel canto* eloquence onto it. In parenthesis, so interchangeable were Dees’ and Orbison’s voices that Bill took the lead in the chorus of the “Ye Te Amo Maria,” the gauche love refrain on the disc’s B-side.

Both items were taped in Nashville with four guitarists--among them Orbison himself--plus a pianist, two saxophonists, a double-bass player, a drummer, and an extra percussionist, all with close knowledge of each other's capabilities through playing together on countless daily studio dates--some making records in their own right. Among the brightest stars in this inward-looking firmament were Floyd "Mr. Piano" Cramer and Boots "Mr. Saxophone" Randolph--both heard on "Oh, Pretty Woman," the only Orbison single to top charts across North America, Australasia and Europe--even spending a fortnight at number one in the United Kingdom at the height of the "British Invasion" of Orbison's native USA.

Every silver lining has a cloud, however and, during the hiatus between the final date of a British tour and a slot before television cameras on ITV's "Sunday Night At The London Palladium"--which included "Oh, Pretty Woman" with Dees at a microphone at the side of the stage duplicating the dual-tracking on the record--Orbison confirmed rumours that he and Claudette, the song's very inspiration, were in the throes of a divorce (though they were to remarry, for a time, in 1966). Moreover, the unseating of "Oh, Pretty Woman" from pole position by The Animals' "House Of The Rising Sun" would precipitate a restless farewell from the international hit parades before the decade was out.

Yet, like Caius Marius, the Ancient Roman general, "Oh, Pretty Woman" returned from exile for one last top 20 "consulship" when a 1982 revival by Van Halen peaked at number 12 on the "Billboard" Hot 100, (and at the very top in the periodical's Mainstream Rock list). Moreover, five years later, it served as the finale of "Roy Orbison and Friends: A Black and White Night," a star-studded television spectacular--as it would be at the Big O's final show, in Akron, Ohio, two days before his death on the 6th of December 1988.

From 1975 to 1985, Alan Clayson led England's legendary Clayson and the Argonauts (who reformed in 2005). He has written many books on music. His best sellers include "Backbeat" (tie-in to the Oscar-nominated film), "Beat Merchants" plus an authorized history of "The Yardbirds." Among his other subjects are Roy Orbison, Jacques Brel, and The Troggs. Further information is obtainable from: www.alanclayson.com.

*The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not be the views of the Library of Congress.