

ROY ORBISON



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1956-1988</i>	<i>Pop rock</i>	<i><u>Crying</u> (1961)</i>

Only Solitaire

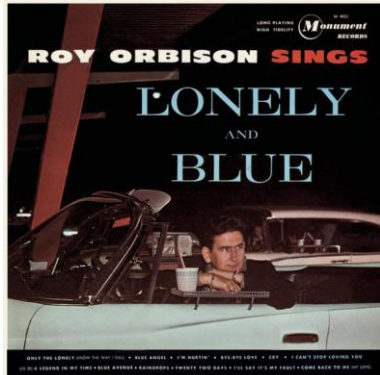
Artist: *Roy Orbison*

Years: *1959-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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SINGS LONELY AND BLUE

Album released:

V A L U E

January 1961

2 4 4 3 5

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Only The Lonely (Know The Way I Feel)*; 2) *Bye-Bye Love*; 3) *Cry*; 4) *Blue Avenue*; 5) *I Can't Stop Loving You*; 6) *Come Back To Me (My Love)*; 7) *Blue Angel*; 8) *Raindrops*; 9) *(I'd Be) A Legend In My Time*; 10) *I'm Hurtin'*; 11) *Twenty-Two Days*; 12) *I'll Say It's My Fault*; 13*) *Uptown*; 14*) *Pretty One*; 15*) *Here Comes That Song Again*; 16*) *Today's Teardrops*.

REVIEW

Although Roy Orbison's professional career properly begins as early as 1956, with the recording of 'Ooby Dooby' for Sam Phillips' Sun Records, it would not be until late 1961 — already after Roy had become a rising star at Monument Records — that Sun would bother putting some of those early, rockabilly-era recordings onto an actual LP. Thus, technically, **Roy Orbison Sings Lonely And Blue** became the singer's first album, even if stylistically it already represents the *second* stage of Roy's career, in which, after his only semi-successful stint as a rockabilly artist, he reinvented himself as a pop troubadour — and never ever went back. Roy's rockabilly-era Sun output will be covered later, in the review of **At The Rock House**; for now, we shall skip it, as well as Roy's two formative singles during his even shorter stay at RCA, and proceed straight to the beginning of a new life.



That new life, for all purposes, begins with 'Paper Boy', released as a single on September 28, 1959 — from a certain point of view, the single most important song in Roy Orbison's history. RCA did not let Roy issue it, for reasons that seem rather unclear to me: it would have been one thing if the label truly wanted their new acquisition to go on putting out «rocking» material, but they did not — by late 1959, the emphasis on rock'n'roll was already fading away, and solid, catchy pop songs

were all the rage, so I am not exactly sure what it was that they found so wrong about 'Paper Boy'. In the end, Roy took it with him to the Monument label, and although the song did not chart (so maybe RCA were right about it all along?), it still heralded the arrival of «Troubadour Roy», with typically symptomatic lyrics: "*I walk down to the blue side of town / Where there's no happiness, no joy*". Prepare yourself for some tight bonding with the word 'blue', which, judging by the frequency of its appearance in Roy's lyrics, must have been his favorite color (I can almost picture the man dressing in it from head to toe one day and dubbing himself "The Man In Blue", then going on a joint tour with his former Sun Records partner as *The Man In Blue And The Man In Black*).

Although 'Paper Boy' already featured the basics of Roy's musical aesthetics and was recorded with the Nashville A-Team that would become his standard vehicle for everything, it is not yet fully typical of the early Roy Orbison sound. For one thing, there are no strings, which would soon become an essential component. For another, The Voice is not quite there yet; Roy still sounds like a human being rather than a supernatural force, not having quite found those registers and frequencies that Mother Nature granted him at birth, but with the stipulation that he'd have to eventually discover them by himself. (Ironically, Jack Clement at Sun Records allegedly told Roy that he would never succeed as a ballad singer — and given his data at the time, he was probably correct about it). But the direction indicated by 'Paper Boy' is already quite promising: write a song that merges together the pop styles of the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly, give it a relatively tasteful guitar and brass arrangement, soak it in romantic melancholy, and there you have it — a pop music Schubert is born for the upcoming decade of teenage entertainment. (Curiously, the B-side 'With The Bug' still remains an umbilical cord tying Roy down to his rockabilly roots — it's a fun enough dance number, but neither too original melodically nor bringing out the best in Orbison's voice).

After 'Paper Boy' failed to make the grade, Roy decided to try out a slightly more optimistic vibe with 'Uptown', his first significant collaboration with future long-time partner Joe Melson. The song is usually quoted as more or less inventing the classic Roy Orbison sound — with its heavily prominent emphasis on both lead and backing vocals (due to engineer Bill Porter's strategy of building the song up starting with voices rather than instruments) and its clever use of orchestration; by «clever» I mean not having the strings carry the entire melody, as Snuff Garrett did with Johnny Burnette, but rather engaging in occasional dialog with the singer, playing short, hook-like phrases with a bit of a «shocking» effect. The only problem was that for an upbeat, positive-energy-loaded song like 'Uptown', whose lowly-boy-dreams-big lyrics sounded as if they were tailor-made for Eddie Cochran ("*It won't be long, just wait and see / I'll have a big car, fine clothes / And then I'll be / Uptown, in penthouse number three*"), Roy's vocals were hardly the best fit, even if he *did* live in a tiny apartment

with his wife and son at the time and "*one of these days, I'm gonna have money*" was far from a meaningless line for the man. Still, the vibe properly requires a stinging, aggressive, hungry vocal delivery, and Roy... well, Roy was just too much of a gentleman in a suit to provide.

He's far more indispensable on the largely — and totally unjustly — forgotten B-side, 'Pretty One', a slow ballad that sort of fell through the cracks but is actually the very first proper showcase of Roy's vocal range and his classic technique of emotional build-up from the lower to the higher octaves. It's a smooth, but tremendously dynamic journey from the bottom grim a cappella accusation of "*Hey there, pretty one / Take a look at what you've done*" to the crowning broken-hearted falsetto of "*Remember I still love you*", and even if similar and technically more stunning journeys would be waiting in the future, I am a little puzzled about why nobody ever talks about 'Pretty One' as the starting point of Roy's impeccably Apollonic «multi-storied vocal towers». Give the lowly B-side a break!

It is, in fact, the very same strategy that he employs for 'Pretty One' which would soon be followed on the far more successful 'Only The Lonely' — there, too, Roy makes you wait for the final verse to unleash his full potential. "*Maybe tomorrow — a new romance — no more sorrow — but that's the chance — YOU GOTTA TAKE*": these are the twenty seconds of singing that finally sold Mr. Orbison to audiences across both sides of the Atlantic. It's funny, but I seem to detect just a tiny bit of vocal cracking at the beginning of the *cha-a-a-a-nce* bit, as if Roy was overstretching his natural range (or simply not yet having it fully trained); but even if it's my brain playing tricks on me, there's no denying that the quasi-operatic style that Roy demonstrates on 'Only The Lonely' has a much rawer, «homebrewn» feel to it than, for instance, the glossy polish of Elvis on 'It's Now Or Never'. Ironically, 'Only The Lonely' is said to have been initially offered to the King and rejected; I'm sure that it is only a matter of time now, in our advancing age of artificial pseudo-intelligence, before we hear how the song could have sounded in Elvis' version, but, you know, Elvis doesn't really do the broken-hearted vibe too well.

Actually, even more ironic are the obvious musical similarities between 'It's Now Or Never' and 'Only The Lonely', set to pretty much the same rhythm; in fact, once the melody stops for the first time you almost expect Roy to pick up "*it's now or never...*". Inevitably, there's a bit of that Neapolitan romantic corniness attached, and I am also not a big fan of the *dum-dum-dum-dumdy-doo-wah oh-yay-yay-yay* backing vocals which sound as if they are uninvited guests from some Jan & Dean baby-talk universe rather than natural shadows of Roy's broken-hearted delivery; on the other hand, it is hard to suggest any proper alternatives, because the song's mood sort of requires Roy to have a conversation with a bunch of shadows on the wall, and if the Anita Kerr Singers could not find any more, uhm, *respectable* syllables to vocalize, then so

be it. But maybe they should have gotten The Jordanaires instead. In any case, it's 'Only The Fuckin' Lonely', right? One of those songs where critique is useless even if you hate it, which I certainly don't.

Predictably, the sequel to 'Only The Lonely' followed the same formula and, consequently, was quite a bit inferior. The most notable thing about 'Blue Angel' is that it marks the first appearance of the word *blue* in the title. Other than that, it has the same *cha-cha-boom* rhythm as 'Only The Lonely' (and, by extension, 'It's Now Or Never'), the same interplay between Roy's lead and corny-and-even-cornier backing vocals (instead of *dum-dum-dum-dumdy-doo-wah*, we now have *sha-la-la-dooby-wah*, *dum-dum-dum-yeh-yeh-um*, which is definitely more sophisticated but not necessarily «transcendentally progressive», if you get my meaning), and the same «sit-tight-until-the-end!» trick where Roy unleashes his full power on you in the final bars. The most important shift is that the mood here changes from broken-hearted to courteously suave (Roy is now playing the outsider consoling the broken-hearted partner), and this puts the song into a slightly sleazy mode, playing up the smooth operator angle rather than the tragedy. In a strange display of adequate taste, the buyers were less enthusiastic about 'Blue Angel' than its predecessor, though it still made the Top 10.

Even less successful was 'I'm Hurtin'', Roy's third and last single from the same year — it corrected the potential mistake of 'Blue Angel', returning the man to pure broken-hearted mode, but it was simply *way* too close to the original formula of 'Only The Lonely'. All they did was slightly speed up the tempo and make the arrangement a little fussier, with the big bass drum pounding out Roy's heart rhythm and the swirling strings tickling our emotional centers right off the bat and all through the song. It was really one of those «if you loved 'Only The Lonely', you'll also love...» moments, but sequels are just sequels, and even lyrically, the song does not pretend to be anything but a sequel: "*Time goes by / Right on by / And I'm still hurtin'*". Yep, and Peggy Sue got married not long ago. #27 on the US charts and no chart position at all in the UK — and I couldn't really protest.

Even so, the smash success of 'Only The Lonely' and the slightly less smashing success of 'Blue Angel' earned Roy the right to finally put out an entire LP of material — an LP which would, almost algorithmically so, entitled **Roy Orbison Sings Lonely And Blue**, although, admittedly, it's not really a bad title because Roy *does* mostly sing lonely and blue, no doubts about it. All of the three singles would be included, but it would also give the man a chance to branch out and try something riskier (well, *faintly* riskier) and not straightforwardly directed at generating sales. Since the Melson-Orbison songwriting plant still claimed to put quality over quantity, this would also mean having to rely on outside songwriters and covers, but with their brand new individual sound, that would not necessarily be a problem.

In any case, out of the three additional original numbers only one, 'Come Back To Me (My Love)', is a rather shameless and inferior (though still pretty-sounding) rewrite of 'Only The Lonely'. 'Blue Avenue', on the other hand, while it could also be accused of being just a rewrite of 'Uptown', improves on that upbeat vibe in every respect — particularly in its inspired use of strings, which, in the bridge section ("*oh, Blue Avenue, yeah I'm feeling so bad*") play up a veritable «thundercloud» pursuing the singer. This is basically a downer version of 'Uptown', retaining the former's toe-tappiness and catchiness but adding extra drama, and *that* is precisely the way you do formula if you think you have to do formula. In my own best-of collection, 'Blue Avenue' easily replaces 'Blue Angel', unless I screw up and mess up the two titles.

Also not to be overlooked is 'Raindrops', a song credited exclusively to Melson — it is utterly different from every other original on here, sort of a country-waltz turned art-pop with the addition of «raindrop-like» chimes (I'm not sure why, but somehow chimes and vibraphones always give an «ennobling» rather than «cornifying» aura to whatever song they're in, unlike strings, who *really* have to work hard to prove their highbrow pedigree). No Olympic feats from Orbison's voice on here, but the stylistical difference from everything else feels refreshing, and the song's babylike cuteness is so fragile and vulnerable, you feel like you want to cuddle with the tune rather than brush it off.

The covers, as befits a pop artist recording in Nashville, are mainly pulled off from the country circuit, with Roy sometimes reaching over to decade-old hits like 'Cry' (well, any song with the line "*and your blues keep getting bluer*" is sure to tickle our hero's fancy), but also showing a real affection for more recent country hitmakers such as Don Gibson. I'm not really sure if there is such a big need for Roy's cover of 'I Can't Stop Loving You', but I do have a soft spot for his take on the appropriately gloomy '(I'd Be) A Legend In My Time', on which he really feels himself like a fish in water, giving it extra depth and power, particularly on the final line of the chorus, where he dips into an almost sardonic barytone (like an "*oh yeah, you thought Don Gibson wrote a song for himself? well, you ain't heard nothing yet, make way for me, the true king of feeling lonely and blue!*").

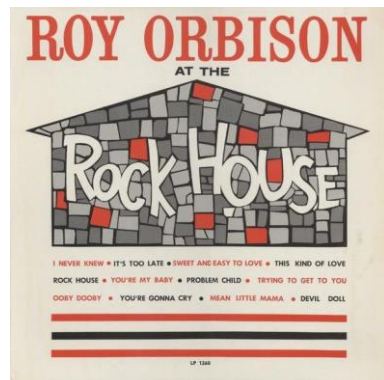
Ultimately, there is just one big thing that is wrong with **Sings Lonely And Blue**, and it is already symbolized by its title: despite all of his innovative approaches to the essence and image of a pop artist, the one thing that Orbison still shares with the Fifties' generation is his willingness to lock himself into and firmly confine himself to that one particular image. If we take up — you knew this was coming, didn't you? — the inevitable comparison with the Beatles' debut across the Atlantic two years later, there is no denying that Orbison already comes across as an accomplished professional on this record, while the Fab Four are just juvenile amateurs by his side (and I'm pretty sure that they correlated more or less in the same way on

their famous joint tour of the UK in 1963). More than that, he's got a strong, individual artistic identity, writing his own songs and recreating most of those covers in his own image — something the Beatles also tried to do from the beginning, but it's much harder, really, to believe that Lennon and McCartney really *lived out* the emotions in songs like 'P.S. I Love You' or 'Ask Me Why' the same way Roy sounds fully sincere and convincing on 'Only The Lonely' or 'Blue Avenue'.

And yet, the way I feel it, there is one big difference between **Sings Lonely And Blue** and **Please Please Me** that is responsible for the fact that Roy Orbison would remain Roy Orbison, and the Beatles would go on to become the most symbolic band of the new decade. Roughly speaking, **Sings Lonely And Blue** is a *closed system*. It gives you a self-sustained, accomplished artistic portrayal to which, in the future, many new details and depth-enhancing improvements would be added, but the essence of which would never truly evolve or expand. This *is* Roy Orbison, so much so that you shall always know what to expect of him in the future: moody, beautiful, sophisticated broken-hearted pop music with that wonderfully lilting Voice on top. **Please Please Me**, on the other hand, is the very epitome of an *open system* — a band that tries out a half-dozen different formulae at once, some of which naturally work better than others but all of which, taken together, send out an inspiring message that — to paraphrase and invert the line we all know — *there's nothing you CAN'T do that CAN be done*. In other words, you could probably build an AI that would, more or less correctly, predict post-1960 Roy Orbison if you fed **Sings Lonely And Blue** into it, but you certainly couldn't do the same for the Beatles if you only fed it **Please Please Me** and its surrounding singles.

Even so, there are formulae and formulae, and at least Roy's included such parameters as «diligent songwriting» and «trying out new musical ideas» as one of its foundations. As we can already see, he was not completely above rewriting his own hits or occasionally falling into a rut, but (a) his guilt here is far less than that of many others and (b) his sense of taste and understanding of the concept of beauty is pretty much infallible, so that even the most obvious self-repeats still sound wonderful, at least on a purely formal level. And if you love The Voice — as in, really *love love love* it — do not limit yourself to best-of compilations; settle for nothing less than the entire catalog, starting with this perfectly fine sample.





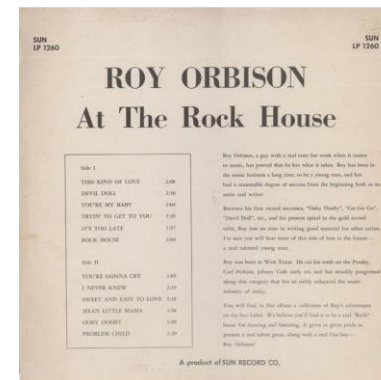
AT THE ROCK HOUSE

Album released:

December 1961

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) This Kind Of Love; 2) Devil Doll; 3) You're My Baby; 4) Tryin' To Get To You; 5) It's Too Late; 6) Rock House; 7) You're Gonna Cry; 8) I Never Knew; 9) Sweet And Easy To Love; 10) Mean Little Mama; 11) **Ooby Dooby**; 12) Problem Child; 13*) Go! Go! Go!; 14*) **Chicken Hearted**; 15*) I Like Love.

REVIEW

I suppose that prior to December 1961, only the most knowledgeable and musically hungry teens in America knew that Roy Orbison's original occupation was to make certified rockabilly records for the Sun label. Between 1956 and 1957, as lead singer and guitar player for his own little band (formerly The Wink Westerners, later renamed to The Teen Kings once Elvis became a thing), he cut four singles for Sam Phillips, only the first one of which made any visible impact on the charts ('Ooby-Dooby'); the rest were pretty much ignored both by the public and Sam himself — actually, Sam's attitude toward most of the artists he'd worked with after Elvis' defection to RCA can be more or less summarized as going through three stages: [a] «could he be the next Elvis?», [b] «nah, he couldn't be the next Elvis», [c] «what's this guy still doing in my studio?». Some of those artists, after they'd left Sun and became big stars on their own, merited a Stage D: «oh, they made it big with somebody else, well, they have plenty of stuff left in our vaults, so let's get it out *now*». Such was the fate of Johnny Cash, for instance, and the same happened to Roy Orbison, with a 12-song LP — more than half of which came from the archives — released in late 1961, by which time Roy had been a steady hitmaker for Monument Records for more than a year. *Now* all those new fans of America's hip young modern artist could hear what he'd been up to five years earlier — except, of course, most of them weren't really interested, and not even Roy himself could probably blame them.



Much like Cash, Roy would not completely renege on his rockabilly roots throughout his career — as late in his life as 1988, he would quite joyfully perform ‘Ooby-Dooby’ and ‘Go! Go! Go!’ live on stage (as captured on the excellent [Black & White Night Live](#) DVD), rather than wipe that stage out from his memory. Yet it probably goes without saying that, of all the young rockabilly artists trying to make their mark on the world in the wake of ‘Rock Around The Clock’ and ‘Heartbreak Hotel’, Roy Orbison must have been one of the oddest cases. Never a particularly great guitar player, never the kind of singer to be able to raise hell with his vocal chords, never a pelvis-thrustin’ sex symbol on the stage, the young Roy Orbison was a humble, bashful kid who could certainly *love* this kind of music — heck, *I* love AC/DC and I’m probably farther removed from the average stereotype of an AC/DC fan than from the Sun — but who was tremendously underequipped to perform it, and that’s putting it mildly. Blaming Sam Phillips for failing to promote those flops is pointless; there was not a chance in hell anyway that they’d be able to withstand competition with the likes of Gene Vincent or Sun’s own Jerry Lee Lewis. Even Bob Dylan, with his Golden Chords from his teen days at Hibbing, might have had a better stab with this while his primary idol was still Elvis rather than Woody Guthrie.

Even so, Roy’s short and commercially disastrous rockabilly period was not completely pointless. It did leave us with ‘Ooby Dooby’, a song originally written by aspiring Texan songwriters Dick Penner and Wade Moore that somehow fell into the hands of Roy Orbison and his «Wink Westerners» as early as 1955. The song itself is nothing special — it clearly models itself after ‘Tutti Frutti’, toning down the sex aspect of the latter and making it a little safer for general consumption — but Roy’s merit here is the brilliantly constructed lead guitar break, showing how much, perhaps on a subconscious level, he was already craving for Apollonian harmonic perfection even while playing supposedly «wild» rock’n’roll. He probably took Carl Perkins as his role model, but the guitar breaks on ‘Ooby Dooby’ are cleaner, more precise and thought-out than just about anything I’ve heard from Carl, even if it does not make them automatically superior. Years later, John Fogerty would recognize Roy’s goals and, with the aid of more modern production and a slightly better technique, take them even further on his [tributary cover of the song](#) — but do take note that John essentially just copied Orbison’s solos almost note-for-note, something he’d be rarely interested in doing when taking on other artists’ songs.

(Somewhat off-topic, if you want to hear a somewhat *different* take on ‘Ooby Dooby’, it’s a good pretext to get acquainted with a little bit of [Janis Martin](#), who was, for a short while, promoted by RCA as the «Female Elvis» — before she eloped with her boyfriend, got pregnant, and forever ruined her prospects of a successful American career, leaving Wanda Jackson and Brenda Lee to reap the seeds she’d sown. I think that might be Grady Martin backing her on lead guitar on this recording, and he devises his own solos rather than copying Orbison’s — pretty sweet, but mainly just going to show how

perfect the original ones were in the first place. Unfortunately, Janis never made it big because most of her songs were straightforward rewrites of popular rockabilly hits with new sets of lyrics — but she does deserve some recognition due to her pioneering effort).

Anyway, ‘Ooby Dooby’ was cutesy-cool, and, arguably, its B-side, ‘Go! Go! Go!’, may have been even better, with the Teen Kings really putting on the speed and Roy making the first triumphant demonstration of his vocal range, moving up an octave in the chorus to raise the level of rock’n’roll hysteria as high as possible. It was also his first proper songwriting credit, though, honestly, the song is more or less just a variation on Hank Snow’s ‘I’m Movin’ On’ — it’s not the compositional genius that matters here but the level of stomping energy, unusually impressive for a timid guy like Roy. (The song would later be covered by Jerry Lee Lewis as ‘[Down The Line](#)’, but the Killer would just convert it to his usual Killer style like he did with everything else).

And that was it. ‘Ooby Dooby’ charted — a little bit — and sold — enough to let Roy keep his contract with Sun and continue cutting records with the label — but nothing that followed made any impact. ‘Rockhouse’, from September 1956, feels less like an attempt to repeat the alluring primitivism of ‘Ooby Dooby’ and more like a conscious mimicking of Elvis’ last singles for Sun, such as ‘Baby Let’s Play House’, which does not work for Roy because his voice simply refuses to provide the same effects that Elvis’ does — as energetic and danceable as the song is, Orbison sounds like a struggling imitator here, and even the guitar breaks feel like a poor man’s replacements of Scotty Moore’s talents. The B-side, ‘You’re My Baby’, was even speedier, and I really dig the fast chuggin’ interplay between rhythm and lead guitars, but the vocals just don’t work.

With the ‘Rockhouse’ single flopping, Roy tried to go for something different on his next release and came up with ‘Sweet And Easy To Love’, a comparatively gentle pop-rock song more reminiscent of Buddy Holly than Elvis — although, to be accurate, the single came out in March 1957, by which time ‘That’ll Be The Day’ had not yet been released and nobody really knew of Buddy Holly... well, come to think of it, ‘Sweet And Easy To Love’ sounds more like a Carl Perkins country number with comparatively croonier, Buddy Holly-esque vocals. The old-fashioned doo-wop harmonies surrounding Roy’s lead vocal sound positively moronic, though. The B-side, ‘Devil Doll’, slows things even further, for the first time ever placing 100% emphasis on vocals, both backing and lead — and perhaps it could have really been something with better production, but the usual Sun limitations apply here rather painfully, so that the song ultimately becomes a muffled mess, sounding like Roy was singing it from down in the cellar, separated from the mikes by a thick layer of concrete. (Somehow this approach sometimes worked in the case of Elvis, but Roy Orbison’s voice is just not powerful enough to get such rough treatment).

The shift of approach did not help; the record became another flop, prompting Roy to briefly return back to the classic rockabilly format and outside songwriters. His last single for Sun (December 1957) was one of the oddest records in his «archaic» catalog: ‘Chicken Hearted’, driven forward by laconic, lashing-out electric guitar bursts and occasional patches of lead sax that take their cues from Little Richard’s ‘Keep-A-Knockin’ and ‘Slippin’ And Slidin’, is close to being a fully instrumental blues-rock groove — and the lead guitar break sounds like Roy Orbison inventing Neil Young lead guitar à la ‘Down By The River’ twelve years before the occasion. Most interesting is the fact that the original song, credited to Bill Justis (best known as the composer of ‘Raunchy’, the instrumental that famously got George Harrison accepted into the Beatles), apparently featured a complete set of «anti-hero» lyrics ("*My girlfriend slipped and fell / Now she’s hanging from a cliff / I can’t come to her rescue / But these flowers I must sniff*"), and there is even a [rare outtake version](#) of the song featuring Roy mumble them out incomprehensibly — but on the final cut, he decided to throw them out and just go with the absolute minimum. Possibly because the lyrics were quite biting for their time: "*Mama’s in the workshop / Daddy’s in the jail / I seem to be afraid / To go to work and make their bail*" — just a short step from here to something like ‘Tombstone Blues’, but young Mr. Roy Orbison was apparently too chicken-hearted to pioneer it.

In any case, the final result is quite quirky and, perhaps, the closest Orbison ever came — accidentally — to patenting his own brand of rockabilly; but this very oddness made the song ineligible for any potential chart success even if Sam Phillips were to heavily promote it, which, of course, he did not. The B-side, ‘I Like Love’, written by Jerry Lee Lewis’ main songwriter Jack Clement, was much more stereotypical and would have made decent fodder for the Killer, but sounds expectedly unconvincing when delivered by Roy; ‘Chicken Hearted’ would be much closer to his true heart than having to sleazily bark out "*I LIKE IT!*" when it’s simply not the man’s natural style.

And that was all she wrote, that is, until Roy’s career at Monument Records started picking up and Sam Phillips suddenly woke up from his slumber and remembered he still had a bunch of unreleased stuff from Roy Orbison and the Teen Kings lying around in Sun’s inexhaustible vaults. The resulting album, **At The Rock House**, included most of the aforelisted A- and B-sides (though, inexplicably, *not* ‘Chicken Hearted’), plus seven more songs, most of which are conspicuously softer and more melodic than the energetic rockabilly stuff Sam wanted Roy to release officially — except for ‘Mean Little Mama’, which sounds inspired by Elvis’ ‘Got A Lot O’ Living To Do’, and ‘Problem Child’, which tries to marry the guitar style of Chuck Berry to the vocal style of Elvis. Both songs are fun, if you are able to look past the usual dreadful standards of tinny production on Sun Records — vocals and instruments all sound as if they were wrapped in half a dozen blankets.

As for the softer material, direct competition with Elvis on a cover of 'Trying To Get To You' does not quite work in Roy's favor (although he does give the song a predictably more subtle and nuanced reading); 'It's Too Late' is sweet, but rather unnecessary in light of the already existing Chuck Willis and Buddy Holly versions; and the other three songs are early stabs at original pop-rock songwriting, marred by a little too much recycling of pre-existing ideas and the usual low production standards — perhaps an important step forward in Roy's personal history, but too much of this stuff feels as if there was always this constant pressure on Roy to become the ersatz Elvis for the label, and it's not highly likely that he ever felt comfortable about this. On the other hand, he did later remember that there was a considerable amount of freedom during his years with Sun — at least, freedom to write and record, if not freedom to publish.

In the end, though, Roy's rockabilly years are still bound to remain a charming footnote in his personal history. Roy was never a genuine rocker by his true nature, even if he undeniably loved rock'n'roll («loving» something and «being a part of it» are two completely different things, though), and it is only through his overall talent and professionalism that 'Ooby Dooby', 'Problem Child', 'Chicken Hearted' and the other highlights on here remain listenable and enjoyable after all these years, provided you can look past the production muck. Admittedly, **At The Rock House** is still a pretty good place to assess Roy's talents as a team player in a rock'n'roll band: The Teen Kings at their best put up a hell of a tight groove, and, ironically, there are few spots in Roy's discography where you can hear him play a meaner, leaner, speedier guitar than he does on some of these cuts (that's one advantage he sure holds over *both* Elvis and Johnny Cash, his chief rockabilly competitors on the label). But heroes of early rock'n'roll are rarely judged by the amount of discipline and practice in their guitar playing — more often than not, they're judged by the intensity of the fire in their spirit, and although Roy had plenty of intensity, it just wasn't the kind of intensity that made you want to smash your chair over your neighbor's head, which is the kind of noble goal that every noble rock'n'roller typically aspires to reach.

For the sake of completionism, it is also necessary to mention Roy's very brief stint with RCA Records, which signed him up after he'd left Sun — perhaps somewhat mechanistically, hoping that they were making the same kind of right move when they lured Elvis away from his original makers. Roy only put out two singles for the label, both of which flopped and got him quickly canned, but both represent an important chunk of progress for the man: 'Seems To Me' and 'Sweet And Innocent' are smooth pop songs with heavy emphasis on Roy's soothing vocals, and although the hooks are weak, the style is already much more close to his Monument era than to the Sun rockabilly one. 'Almost Eighteen', released in January 1959, has a bit more rock'n'roll energy, and the Felix & Boudleaux Bryant-penned 'Jolie' is a cutesy French-tinged pop ditty that is hard to take seriously but even harder to get offended about. Most importantly, though, all four of these sides were

personally produced by Chet Atkins, and this means that they sound *awesome* next to the muddy waters of Sun's production — crystal clear guitars, perfectly audible vocals with every overtone registering ideally in your mind. Nothing against Monument's Fred Foster, who did a fine job helping people properly discern the uniqueness of Roy's voice, but I sure wish that partnership with Chet could have gone on for at least a little longer.

It's still a bit of a scholarly question — just exactly how much had the «Sam Phillips School For Beginning Artists» helped shape and nurture Roy's artistic persona for the big things to come in the future. I do suspect that, career-wise, had Roy stuck from the very beginning to writing melodic pop songs, he might have ended up as Carole King — peddling his services to other artists for a decade or so before gathering the courage and grabbing the opportunity to launch his own artistic career. The rockabilly market, being far more of a D.I.Y. sort of thing back in the Fifties, gave artists a better chance to speak up for themselves than the already far more corporate-controlled pop business, so that, by the time Roy decided to make a decisive shift to pop, he had already established a sort of reputation as a singer and player, not just a composer. In other words, it may be so that without 'Ooby Dooby' we would not have ourselves an 'Oh! Pretty Woman' — at least, not as it was recorded in 1964 by Roy Orbison, rather than somebody else at some other time. Then again, (a) this is just educated speculation on my part, and (b) this has nothing to do with the far more important question of whether there is still a reason to listen to, or a possibility of enjoying an album like this in the 21st century... and ultimately, it probably all depends on just exactly how chicken-hearted you feel in this day and age, dear reader.

