

Jeff Lynne, remembering Orbison and more

By Dan McCue

Roy Orbison died about a week before I expected to hear when he could make time for an interview.

Years after I first found his “Greatest hits’ among my parents recording albums, Orbison had experienced a tremendous upswing in his career in the late 1980s.

What turned out to be his final ascent began in 1987, a year that began with his receiving a raft of professional honors and culminated with a collaboration with Electric Light Orchestra frontman and self-taught producer Jeff Lynne.

Lynne was working on George Harrison’s Cloud Nine at the time, and the three got together for a lunch, during which Harrison invited Orbison to sing on the album.

Casting about for a studio, the three called Bob Dylan, who said they could use the recording studio in his home, and then made their way to Tom Petty’s house, where Harrison had left a guitar. By nightfall, the Traveling Wilburys, an off-the-cull “super group” was born.

By the fall, Orbison’s first substantial album in years, the Lynne-produced Mystery Girl, was barreling its way up the charts, as was Traveling Wilburys Vol. 1. At the same time a concert film, Roy Orbison and Friends, A Black and White Night, was in heavy rotation on Cinemax.

It seemed like an auspicious time to finally catch up with the man whose dark sunglasses masked both a musical genius and a life strewn with tragedy.

“I’m sure he’ll be happy to speak with you, but first he needs to take a few days off,” his publicist said shortly before Thanksgiving, 1988. “In the meantime, let me send you his latest press kit.”

Orbison returned to his home in Hendersonville, Tenn., where on Dec. 6, 1988, after a day of flying model airplanes with his sons, he died of a heart attack while having dinner with his mother.

A short time later I ran into Lynne, and had to ask about those months – and what it was like to write and record with Orbison.

“I have to keep reminding myself what I was actually doing, because, you know, it was something I’d never dream of doing,” Lynne said.

“Well, maybe in my wildest dreams, perhaps,” he added. “But... the best way to describe it is as one of those really brilliant experiences.”

Lynne, who co-wrote Orbison’s last hit single, “You Got it,” and “Look So Beautiful,” another notable song on Mystery Girl, described the process of creating the album as one typified by an almost preternatural calm.

“I’d just kind of sit there with him, strumming along as wrote, and he’d just sing real soft,” he recalled. “He never really sang out while we were writing.”

In fact, Orbison didn’t give full voice to the songs until fairly late in the process, after Lynne had recorded the backing tracks for the album.

“When he actually came into the studio, I’d play him the tracks and he’d sort of mumble along a little bit to get used to the phrasing and then suddenly he’d say, ‘Okay, I’ll have a go,’” Lynne said. “And then, suddenly, there’d be this great big voice, booming, filling the whole room with this beautiful tone.

“In moments like that, you just go, ‘Oh wow, this is it,’” the producer said. “It’s like, ‘This is what I’ve always been waiting for, this very moment.’”

Although he was already old hand in the music business by that time, Lynne seemed very much a man on the prowl for such moments by the time he rolled up his sleeves to work with Orbison, Harrison, and Petty’s triple-platinum Full Moon Fever.

Born in Birmingham, England in December, 1947, Lynne formed his earliest bands in the mid-to-late 1960s and found fame while being something of a jack-of-all-trades for ELO, serving as eclectic band’s songwriter, composer, arranger, lead vocalist, guitarist, and record producer.

The band’s run in the 1970’s and early 1980s included a string of Lynne-penned hits, including “Do Ya,” “Evil Woman,” “Sweet Talkin’ Woman,” “Mr. Blue Sky,” and “Don’t Bring Me Down.” But even before the band officially called it quits, Lynne was looking beyond its confines.

In 1983, he collaborated with British rock guitar legend Dave Edmunds on “Slipping Away,” a top-40 hit, and co-produced Edmunds follow-up album.

Always quite obviously influenced by The Beatles, Lynne next turned up as producer of Harrison’s “When We Was Fab,” the ex-Beatle’s tribute to the later John Lennon, and then launched into work on Cloud 9, which many consider Harrison’s “comeback” album.

The already noted Traveling Wilburys came next, releasing two Lynne-produced albums, entitled Vol. 1 and Vol. 3, and those project were followed by producing and co-writing stints with Del Shannon, Brian Wilson, Duane Eddy, and Randy Newman.

Unlike the his work with ELO, which in addition to melding rock with classical flavors, was also technically “dense,” Lynne’s work outside the band’s framework tended to have a lighter feel and a sound that owed more to the sparse sound of the originators of rock and roll, than their 60’s counterparts.

“My favorite producer is a guy called Joe Meek, an English producer, whose dead now,” Lynne said. “He produced a lot of fantastic records, real rough around the edges, and while I don’t actually make records like him, I really get off on his style.

"I've got a lot of his old records. I collect him, and it's all jumbled up and distorted, but it's a great exciting sound," he said.

Lynne said he first dabbled in production while a member of a pre-ELO group called Idelrace.

"How it started was, I got this little Danish tape recorder, a Bang & Olufson," he said. "It was only a two-track machine, but you could bounce back and forth between track one and track two, and add instruments as you went.

"You could this forever, though at the end of the day, you'd probably have to re-dub the first guitar you did because you'd lost it in all the sound transfer," Lynne continued. "The bottom line though is that this is how I taught myself to be a producer, using a stool and a chair for drums and things like that."

By the time the Orbison album came out, in November 1988, the Los Angeles Times had already declared Lynne to be the industry's "most in demand producer." *

Lynne saw things differently in the midst of all the work. While he was undoubtedly busy with his famous friends and a solo album that would come on the heels of their success, mainly he saw himself as "totally free" during this period.

"I was no longer within the constraints of anything I was supposed to be doing," he said.

"Finally, it wasn't like, 'Is this supposed to be ELO?' And I think working with Tom and George and Roy gave me a different perspective on making records... they allowed me to step away from being the performer, as I had been in ELO, and simply take on that producer's role – because doing both can drive you a bit crackers."

Lynne admitted to a surprising amount of self-consciousness, talking about how hard it was to let go of a vocal performance.

"Because when you sing for yourself, it's much more personal," he said. "You want to keep at it until you get it as good as you can, as good as you can get it at that time.

"I did learn a lot from doing the others," Lynne continued. "I made them have their voices really loud and dry, and I used no reverb on it so that you could really hear every word they sang. And as a result, when it came to recording my own album [Armchair Theater], I had to take the same approach with myself.

"I could have gotten into real trouble if I'd made a record smothered in reverb," he laughed. "They would've said, 'You bastard! You wouldn't let us have any [reverb] on our vocals, but you've got it.' Of course, I much prefer to listen to an upfront vocal any way; I don't particularly like to hear people singing down a tunnel."

This begged the question of how one establishes a line between embellishing a vocal or arrangement and stepping all over it.

“Ah, that’s a leading question! But I suppose it’s a question of personal taste” Lynne said. “For me, when I hear one of my pieces, it’s still like, ‘Oh, that’s one of mine,’ and then I immediately pick out bits where I think, not that they’re bad, but that there are things that maybe I could have done better or tried a bit harder on.

“It’s really hard to say where you draw that line. For instance, I might have a mix already done and think, ‘I wish I’d tried a guitar riff on that.’ I might even go so far as getting a guitar out and trying something, just to see what it sounds like,” he said. “In those cases, it can be very liberating to discover the guitar part in your head doesn’t sound good with the finished work, because then you can say, ‘Oh great. I am finished.’”

“It’s all trial and error,” he added. “And it feels finished when it is.”

To illustrate, Lynne pointed to the Traveling Wilburys.

“With the Wilburys it wasn’t like, ‘Let’s see if we can do this’ – we already knew everybody can do it,” he said. “The only question was where they’d do it.

“The great thing about it was we had all these songwriters in the group, sitting around with acoustic guitars, and there was never a moment of hard work involved,” Lynne continued. “There was always someone there -- if you’re stuck on a chord or can only get so far in a song -- to come up and say, ‘What about a B minor there?’

“That’s the way it worked. Then we’d go on to the next part,” he said. “We didn’t sort of sit around for days. We’d do a song in the afternoon, laying down the backing track, and then we’d bring Jim Keltner in to play drums. Afterwards, we’d put on the rough vocal afterwards, and it was sort of done. What the Wilburys were about is making records without it being a big, laborious thing.”

In fact, it sounded like a methodology that one Wilbury in particular had been employing for years by that point – Bob Dylan.

Lynne shook his head in agreement.

“It was amazing, really, because Bobby is so instant,” he said. “He goes in and does his vocal and he doesn’t come out and try to guess what he should have done. He just says, ‘Yep, that’s it.’ And I think that’s brilliant; to have that confidence to walk in and just do it once and then listen back and go, ‘Yeah, that’s the way it goes.’ I couldn’t do that myself.”

**In 2008, The Washington Times named him the fourth greatest record producer in music.*