

Only the lonely have no music

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

I was out for my morning stroll one recent morning when a greatly gifted man started singing for me. And he had been dead for 25 years.

His heart had quit on him, but that didn't mean there was no heart left in his music. Roy Orbison sang ballads directly from the heart, and many of them were as sad as his untimely death.

He was a genius with a tender lyrical voice who gave the world songs like "Only the Lonely," "Crying" and "Oh, Pretty Woman." That is not the kind of guy who denies his fans the melancholy heartstrings of life.

I was glad to hear him as I walked along the spring streets of a city bursting into bulb bloom. I was in a velvety mood created by the combination of oxygen and a brisk walk. I am usually listening to the news when I walk or to smartphone podcasts of everything under the sun.

But on that day, for a change of pace, I spotted the listing of music loaded into my phone and there was Roy Orbison crooning "Only the Lonely," a ballad that is sad, profound and beautiful at the same time. In an emotional sense, you wouldn't ordinarily expect a sad song to be so beautiful. What's beautiful about sadness?

Maybe it's the knowledge that a person can recover from sorrow and go on from there, healing from what seemed like endless grief when it happened - and especially if the regret involved a lost love.

The combination of moods on that spring day made sorrow sound tolerable and even enjoyable as the sun was shining and winter lawns turned green before your eyes.

So I was happy to hear Roy Orbison sing for me once again. And it dawned on me how the song I listened to seemed exactly like Orbison, alive and well. Modern recordings are not rough approximations of a singer's voice. They are electronic twins of the real person, dead or not. We who have lived our lives with such electronic precision forget that portable music is a recent gift to humankind.

Orbison was totally tuneful singing his songs the way he would sing them if he were walking at my side, keeping pace, taking his rhythm from a strong, healthy heart.

Of course, that wasn't possible. Outside my imagination, he died years ago at age 52 of a heart attack. But not only was he still alive in virtual song the other day, but it was almost like he joined me on my daily walk, because my own heart had stopped nearly four years ago. The medics restarted my ticker and a clogged artery was quickly cleared, no damage done.

The extraordinary thing about my spring Orbison concert was that no such thing had been possible for my grandfather who also enjoyed walking. If my grandfather had been out for a walk and a man he could not see seemed to be singing inside his head, he probably would have freaked out.

Such a thing was impossible when he was a young man. His generation was the first in history to experience the mechanized voices of dead people, especially when the dead people were singing. When he was young, there was no such thing as the phrase "a live concert." All concerts were live then or they didn't exist.

Recorded sound did develop a few years after my grandfather's life began, but any chance of reproducing canned music while strolling along a street at the same time was impossible and it was ludicrous to think otherwise.

Today, every kid and most adults live their lives like a movie with their own personal sound track playing inside their headphones.

For most of his life, my grandfather couldn't have gone for a walk with music unless he was willing to hold an 80-pound, waist-high vintage radio to one ear.

That thought underscores once more the remarkable fact that recorded music was impossible in the world until little more than 100 years ago. None of the endless generations of humans prior to that ever experienced a Roy Orbison moment.

And most of them didn't have to go for a stroll to get any exercise. Their exercise was called backbreaking work.

Their only portable music was the music they made themselves, singing with their work mates and whistling away their cares.

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