

Sounds/Elizabeth Wurtzel

A GOOD TIME WAS HAD BY ALL

“...The Wilburys are back with *Volume 3*, their second record. Simon's *Rhythm of the Saints* has great sounds, not great songs. . .”

EVEN ROCK STARS NEED A BREAK SOMETIMES. And indeed, more and more albums seem to be the rock-and-roll equivalents of bowling night. Two years ago, Roy Orbison, Tom Petty, Bob Dylan, Jeff Lynne, and George Harrison were just goofing around in the studio together when—*presto!*—there appeared the **Traveling Wilburys'** first album, one of 1988's most critically acclaimed hits.

Since then, Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits has used his vacation time to gather Brendan Croker and some other less-renowned friends to form the Notting Hillbillies. The band's 1989 debut album had the lazy, laid-back, guys-just-hanging-out title *Missing . . . Presumed Having a Good Time*. And now Warren Zevon and some members of R.E.M. have gotten together as the Hindu Love Gods—yet another case of the boys just being boys and having a good time.

Despite Roy Orbison's death, in December 1988, the Traveling Wilburys have returned—even though the group was most likely conceived as a one-shot deal, not a multi-album one. Titled *Volume 3* (Wilbury/Warner Bros.), this second record is deliberately misnamed, probably because the Wilburys are just being weird. After all, the members identify themselves only as brothers with the surname Wilbury, claiming in the liner notes to be descendants of some lost tribe of Neanderthals who somehow landed in a recording studio in Los Angeles. But the real joke was on the critics who fell in love with *Volume 1*, an album that was supposed to free these artists from the constraints of doing the serious work that pleases the music press.

But the Traveling Wilburys needn't worry about that kind of reception this time around, because *Volume 3* simply does not match *Volume 1*. Then again, how could it? The debut album was loaded with upbeat, irresistible songs like “Handle With Care” that unified the rock audience. *Volume 1* presented these aging rock stars to the teenybopper contingent as a new act, while, for obvious reasons, the Traveling Wilburys appealed to the baby-boomers at the other end of the market spectrum.

Volume 3 is a fine album, also full of catchy, bait-heavy hooks that are bound to make it a big hit, but something



THE BOYS IN THE WILBURY BAND: Jeff Lynne, Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, George Harrison.

is missing. Obviously, that “something” is Orbison. But it's hard to believe he had that much of an impact on the Wilburys' sound, since by the time he joined the group, he had been more or less out of the studio for twenty years and could hardly have had as much sway as a producer like Lynne or the other, more active musicians onboard. Certainly, though, the lack of Orbison's voice—the voice that Bruce Springsteen said he'd most like to emulate when he inducted his hero into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the voice that carried the desperate sorrow of “Only the Lonely” and naughty flirtation of “Oh, Pretty Woman”—is a loss for the Traveling Wilburys. *Volume 3* sounds very much like its predecessor, but it's not as good.

The Wilburys deserve praise for delivering songs about the environment (“Inside Out”) and other issues with a fun, doo-wop tone that is never preachy but also never downplays the seriousness of the subject matter. This has been the strength of the Traveling Wilburys all along. Somehow, the combination of talent has allowed them to come up with songs that can be heartbreaking and frightening. But in the spirit of old-fashioned, early-sixties rock and roll, these tunes can also dance in the face of adversity. “You took my breath away,” Tom Petty sings mourn-

fully—and then, giving the cliché an ironic twist, he adds, “I want it back again.”

One of the best things about the Traveling Wilburys' projects is that they provide Dylan with a band he can get lost in, one that enables him to forget for a while that he's Bob Dylan. He sounds as if he is having fun on both volumes, something that is not reflected on this year's *Under a Red Sky*, which mostly showed him straining to recapture past glory.

Dylan and Petty do most of the lead vocal work on *Volume 3*, and one song that Dylan sings, “If You Belonged to Me,” resembles some of the brief, tender, harmonica-drenched love ballads that he used to write, full of characters and sly observations (“You say let's go to the rodeo and see some cowboy fall/ Sometimes it seems to me you've got no sympathy at all/ You keep on going on and on about how you're so free/ You'd be happy as you could be/ If you belonged to me”).

For years, Neil Young made whatever strange—and, frankly, awful—albums he wanted to with no regard for his audience or the critics, and now everyone loves his new album; some people think it's his best ever. Maybe Dylan needs to spend a few years having a good time with the Wilburys, recording what he feels like recording when he feels like it. The fun he's having may just stay with him one day.