

Review

The Traveling Wilburys Collection

Wilburys travel back from oblivion

A new set offers both albums, a DVD, liner notes, four bonus tracks and a lot of fun.

BY SEAN DALY
Times Pop Music Critic

You remember how the Wilburys game worked, right?

Back in 1988, five music legends casually formed a supergroup, sitting around a kitchen table and shouting out silly ditties that, upon closer inspection, were pop masterpieces. It was a lark, a one-off among musical brothers, and they took up jokey familial aliases: George Harrison was Nelson Wilbury, Bob Dylan was Lucky, Tom Petty was Charlie T. Jr., Roy Orbison was Lefty and Jeff Lynne was Otis.

Their first album, *Traveling Wilburys Vol. I*, sold more than 5-million copies; it was the sublimely breezy result of each man's famous gifts (Harrison's woozy guitar, Orbison's high-lonesome croon, Dylan's word-smithery, etc.). In 1990, they released the winkingly titled, rather uneven *Vol. III*, which was made sans Orbison, who had died two years earlier. Not long after that, both Wilburys albums inexplicably went out of print for more than a decade, which lent even more mystery to the curious project.

It's been a long time coming, but finally, the boys are back. This week, Rhino Records re-released both Wilburys albums, complete with full remastering, four bonus tracks, a DVD, plus liner notes that explain how it all happened. *The Traveling Wilburys Collection* is extensive and tons of fun, but it's also poignant, as Harrison, the head Wilbury, has since passed away as well.

Were the Wilburys a significant musical movement? Not really. Were they more fun than most pop acts? Absolutely. In fact, I can't think of a better Father's Day gift.

Almost 20 years after they formed, the Wilburys are finally explained in full: Way back when, Harrison had to come up with a B-side for a single from his album *Cloud Nine*, which was being produced by Lynne. At the same time, Lynne was working on new albums by Petty (*Full Moon Fever*) and Orbison (*Mystery Girl*). Petty had just finished touring with Dylan. Dylan and Harrison were friends. One phone call led to another and another.

Handle With Care, the strummy, chummy result of five guys fooling around, was considered too good for just a B side. Everyone was up for forming a quickie supergroup, but they didn't want to use their real names. That would be too serious, too corporate.

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Know any dads who love the Wilburys?

Lynne and Harrison had taken to calling certain studio gadgets "wilburys" — as in, these fancy studio gadgets "wilbury" any mistakes. Lynne suggested the band name the Trembling Wilburys (which would later get referenced in the song *Dirty World*); Harrison countered with the Traveling Wilburys.

It was never meant to be more than good fun, and that's what it remains. Although it was recorded in lightning time, *Vol. I* is flawless, with Lynne, the brain trust behind ELO, producing the 10 tracks with cheeky wit and full sonic bounce. He often plays Dylan's craggy vocal against Orbison's seamless one, sibling rivalry at its best.

Written as a group, the songs (usually about tough guys with broken hearts) are meant for sing-alongs, especially the Petty-led dustup *Last Night* and the comically hang dog *Congratulations*. The shining light, however, is *Tweeter and the Monkey Man*, Dylan's gently teasing parody of the Springsteen canon ("They knew that they found freedom just across the Jersey line / So they hopped into a stolen car, took Highway 99").

Although it has its share of sweet moments, *Vol. III* often sounds too polished, too careful, which totally misses the point. The first disc was built solely on whimsy, but the follow-up often gets political, especially such environmental scolds as *Inside Out* and *The Devil's Been Busy*. And yet, there's great stuff here too, especially ragged rock

rumblers *She's My Baby* (with a guitar solo by Thin Lizzy's Gary Moore) and the gleefully frantic *Wilbury Twist*, which teaches the steps to a mythical dance ("Hop around the room in your underpants"). Beatlemania, Dylanheads et al. will drool over the four bonus tracks, and with good reason. *Vol. I* includes two previously unissued gems: The mariachi-esque *Maxine* features a Harrison lead vocal and robust harmonizing, and the cranky *Like a Ship* ("Go away, let me be") gets a particularly froggy vocal from a heartsick Dylan.



Associated Press

Former Beatle George Harrison was Nelson Wilbury.



Associated Press

Bob Dylan lent his lyrical chops as Lucky Wilbury.



Associated Press

Charlie T. Wilbury Jr. is also known as Tom Petty.

» CD REVIEW

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Traveling Wilburys (Rhino)
Grade: A

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Vol. III is souped up with



Times files

Roy Orbison was the smooth-voiced Lefty Wilbury.



Times files

Producer Jeff Lynne, of ELO fame, was Otis Wilbury.

the comically woe-is-us gallop *Nobody's Child*, which hints that the Wilburys actually might have been a band of orphans, and a ramshackle cover of Del Shannon's *Runaway*, in which the guys sit around, bang on their guitars

and just have a good ol' time. And why not? After all, that was the Wilbury way.

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