

## On Roy Rogers is Riding Tonight

Robert S. Griffin

[www.robertsgriffin.com](http://www.robertsgriffin.com)

Here I am on the wrong side of eighty living alone and sitting all day on this old leather couch that has collapsed on the right side where I always sit. I bought a cushion at Amazon and put a pillow on top of it and actually it's very comfortable now, especially with the addition of pillows I propped up against the armrest. It's cozy being nestled in the corner of the couch like I am at this very moment typing this up. When I wake up in the morning, I make a cup of coffee and nestle into my station, I guess you'd call it, and check out the sports scores and news of the day on my Mac sitting atop this fat couch pillow now on my lap. A lot of pillows. Good set-up.

Good as it is, though, it's temporary. I bought a new sleeper a couple of months ago to replace the leather couch. Slow delivery time with furniture, I get it next month, or so they tell me. I got the sleeper in case someone visits me in this two-room rented apartment I live in, though offhand I don't know who that'd be, but you never know, life could change; or no it won't, not from here on. The sleeper will be the first new furniture in twenty-five years, so it's good for that alone, breaks the notion I've accepted without thinking about it that it's not my place to get anything new or nice. Maybe it will be the start of something, but maybe is maybe, though maybe is better than no-doubt never, or is it, I don't know.

This is a lead-in--took too long with it, but so what--to writing about Roy Rogers. I don't know how much people these days know about Roy Rogers, but he was big when I was growing up in the '40s and '50s, a singing cowboy in movies, and then he had a half hour TV show. At six and seven, nine, in there, I'd go by myself to the Lyceum theater in downtown Saint Paul, Minnesota and watch triple features one of which was with Roy. I'd sit through all three of them. It's not as bad as it sounds, those old "B" movies were around an hour.

I had to reach way up high over my head to put my twelve

cents--I'm serious, twelve cents--on the ticket booth counter for the ticket-taker who tore a ticket in half and gave me a half. I had a dime to buy popcorn and then I'd go into the semi-dark theater which was always just about empty in the late afternoons when I went and found a seat about half way back, not too close to the screen. The only thing I had to watch out for was not to get behind a post--the Lyceum had posts, which is odd thinking back on it now.

I remember how settled and safe I felt sitting there in the dark after they turned the lights all the way down when Roy's movie started--like how it is on this couch I'm sitting on but even better--and watching Roy and Gabby Hayes, his crusty bearded old sidekick, go through their adventures.

Though as I think about it now, there may have been dangers lurking that I didn't realize were there. Somebody from the movie theatre would come down the aisle every now and then and look down the row at me and then go back up the aisle and out the door leaving a brief crack of light from the lobby when he did that. I mentioned it to Mother--she was Mother, not Mom. "Why'd he do that? I asked. "I don't know, maybe he was checking on you," which didn't help. Now, I suppose he was seeing that this little seven-year-old sitting all by himself was OK, which was very nice of him to do. I wish I could thank him, but he'd be long dead by now. Everybody, including Roy, who died in 1998, is dead, as I soon will be.

The movies were the '40s. The '50s were Roy's half hour, once-a-week TV show, "The Roy Rogers Show." Besides Roy was his real-life wife Dale Evans, his comic-relief sidekick à la Gabby Hayes in the movies, Pat Brady, his golden palomino horse Trigger, and his German Shepard dog Bullet. It was set in contemporary times, so Pat had a jeep he called Nellie Bell, but everything else was as if it were the old west, everybody rode horses. I never missed a show. I was eleven-thirteen, in there. I'd be sprawled out on a couch, no shoes, in my yellowed-from-innumerable-washings sweat socks, alone, always alone, in front of the seventeen-inch black-and-

white Zenith TV that looked like a small refrigerator. A grainy image, but I could make it out OK.

This week, I don't know where it came from, it just popped into my head, I thought about Roy Rogers. I checked his Wikipedia site. Born Leonard Slye in 1911, grew up in the Cincinnati area. Dropped out of high school. Worked with his father in a shoe factory. The factory closed down and Leonard responded to an invitation from his sister who had moved to California to visit and drove out there and stayed. The Slye family soon followed.

Leonard worked odd jobs in California including picking strawberries. He had played the guitar and sang since his earliest days and his California sister suggested he audition for a western band and he got the job. He went through various bands barely scraping by—this was in the depth of the depression. He and a musician friend, Tim Spencer, decided to form their own group. They put an ad in a Los Angeles newspaper for a bandmate and a Canadian by the name of Bob Nolan who was life-guarding in the area answered it. It turned out that Nolan was a supremely talented musician and songwriter—his compositions include the western classic, “Tumbling Tumbleweeds”—and they became the very successful Sons of the Pioneers.

During those years, Roy—he was in his early- to mid-twenties—married twice. First, to Lucile Ascolese in 1933, which ended in divorce after three years, and then, that same year, 1936, to Grace Arline Wilkins, a marriage that tragically ended with her death giving birth to their son in 1946. Roy married Dale in 1947. Counting those adopted, Roy had nine children.

In 1938, Roy auditioned for Republic Pictures, who were looking for a singing cowboy to replace Gene Autry, who was demanding more money. Republic changed his name to Roy Rogers (Dick Weston was an option) and the rest is history. He was one of the top box office draws in the movies for over a decade, up there with John Wayne as a western star.

Looking into Roy this week, I watched one of his movies and a television show—they are online. What particularly struck me this

time around is that back then I didn't bother to follow the story lines at all. For me, the movies weren't about the particulars of Roy's adventures. Rather, they were a chance to be with Roy and those close to him. It was good to be in the presence--albeit artificial, images on a screen--of politeness and gentility and kindness and decency and interest in and concern for others. I was safe. I wasn't afraid. I wouldn't be hurt when I was with Roy. It gave me a glimmer of hope that someday I could be where people treated each other, treated me, like that. I could never become a hero like Roy. I wasn't graced with his innate specialness, but I could belong somewhere and feel at home in the world like Roy and those around him did. I didn't have words for all that back then, I wasn't consciously aware of what was so appealing to me about being in Roy's presence, but I felt it in total, organic way, I guess you could say, and got near him, as it were, whenever I could, first in the movies and then on TV.

This week, I went through the lyrics of a song, "Roy Rogers," by Bernie Taupin, which Elton John put music to and recorded. "Roy Rogers" isn't about a kid watching Roy but rather an adult.

Sometimes you dream  
Sometimes it seems  
There's nothing there at all  
You just seem older than yesterday  
And you're waiting for tomorrow to call

You draw the curtains  
And one thing's for certain  
You're cozy in your little room  
The carpet's all paid for and god bless the TV  
Let them shoot a hole in the moon

Roy Rogers is riding tonight  
Returning to our silver screen  
Comic book characters never grow old  
Evergreen heroes whose stories are told

The great sequined cowboy  
Who sings of the plains  
Of round-ups and rustlers and home on the range  
Turn on the TV  
Shut out the lights  
Roy Rogers is riding tonight

Nine o'clock mornings, five o'clock evenings  
I'd liven the pace if I could  
Oh, I'd rather have ham in my sandwich than cheese  
But complaining wouldn't do any good

Lay back in my armchair  
Close my eyes and think clear  
I can hear hoof beats ahead  
Roy and Trigger have just hit the hilltop  
While the wife and the kids are in bed

Roy Rogers is riding tonight  
Returning to our silver screen  
Comic book characters never grow old  
Evergreen heroes whose stories are told

The great sequined cowboy  
Who sings of the plains  
Of round-ups and rustlers and home on the range  
Turn on the TV  
Shut off the lights  
Roy Rogers is riding tonight

Bernie Taupin is a superb lyricist, an artist. Good art is evocative, and it is metaphorical, it transcends the specific and literal. It prompts reflection and brings us closer to the reality of our lives. In very old age, I can relate to having nothing that seems to be there except being older than yesterday and waiting for tomorrow, which deep down you know will be just like today, no better, no different.

Yes, nine o'clock mornings and five o'clock evenings, I'd liven the pace if I could, but I can't. And I'd rather have ham in my sandwich—a rich, active life, with caring people--than cheese, but I

don't, and complaining about it is not going to do me any good.

I'm cozy and safe in this little room, even peaceful. Right here for the rest of my days, that'd be fine. I can finally stop chasing, let it all go. I can draw the curtains and be with my books and films and stories and heroes that never grow old. Roy Rogers is riding tonight.