

## On Roy Rogers Riding Tonight

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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 now 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 be getting 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 remember having to reach way up high 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 down, 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 was odd thinking back on it now.

I remember how cozy 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. I remember somebody from the movie theatre coming down the aisle every now and looking down the row at me and then going 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 I didn't understand. Now, I suppose he was seeing that this seven-year-old all by himself was OK, which was very nice of him to do. I wish I could thank him, but he'd be long-time 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 ala-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 called Nellie Bell, but everything else was as if it were the old west, everybody rode horses. I never missed a show. I was 11-13, in there. I'd be sprawled out on a couch, no shoes, in my yellowed-from-innumerable-washings sweat socks, all

alone, always alone, in front of the 17-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 he and his father responded to an invitation from his sister who had moved to California to visit and the two of them drove out there and stayed. It didn't say in the Wiki, but I suppose his mother came out there later, and I don't know about his two other sisters.

Roy, still Leonard, worked odd jobs in California including picking strawberries. He had played the guitar and sang since his earliest days and his 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, now life guarding in the area, answered it. Nolan, it turned out, 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 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, which tragically ended in her death giving birth to their son in 1946. Roy married Dale in 1947. Counting 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 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 really 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 for a time. It was good for me to be in the presence--albeit artificial, images on a screen—of politeness and gentility and kindness and decency and interest 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 to the curtains and one thing's for certain

You're cozy in your little room

The carpet's all paid for, God bless the TV

Let's go shoot a hole in the moon

Oh, and Roy Rogers is riding tonight

Returning to our silver screens

Comic book characters never grow old  
Evergreen heroes whose stories were told  
Oh the great sequin cowboy who sings of the plains  
Of roundups 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 a ham in my sandwich than cheese  
But complaining wouldn't do any good

Lay back in my armchair, close 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

Oh, and Roy Rogers is riding tonight  
Returning to our silver screens  
Comic book characters never grow old  
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Oh the great sequin cowboy who sings of the plains  
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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 supportive people--than cheese, but I don't, and complaining about that is not going to do me any good.

I'm cozy in this little room. I can, finally, stop chasing after it, after them. I can let it all go except for the incredibly special person in the next room. I can pull the curtains and be with stories and heroes of the past that never grow old, in books and films. In my solitary existence, I can shoot a hole in the moon. Roy Rogers is riding tonight.