



HOORAY FOR TOMMY ROE

A YEAR AFTER MAJOR SURGERY, THE SINGER LOOKS BACK AND SHARES PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

BY CHRIS M. JUNIOR

Retirement hasn't been able to stick with Tommy Roe, who by his own count has stepped away from the concert spotlight at least five times. What makes the pending return from his February 2018 retirement different from the others is that this time he's coming back from the quadruple bypass surgery he underwent in July 2018.

"I was in Atlanta, and I got off the airplane, and I couldn't walk to baggage claim without sitting down," the singer-guitarist recalls. "I was so out of breath, and I had this terrible pain in my chest."

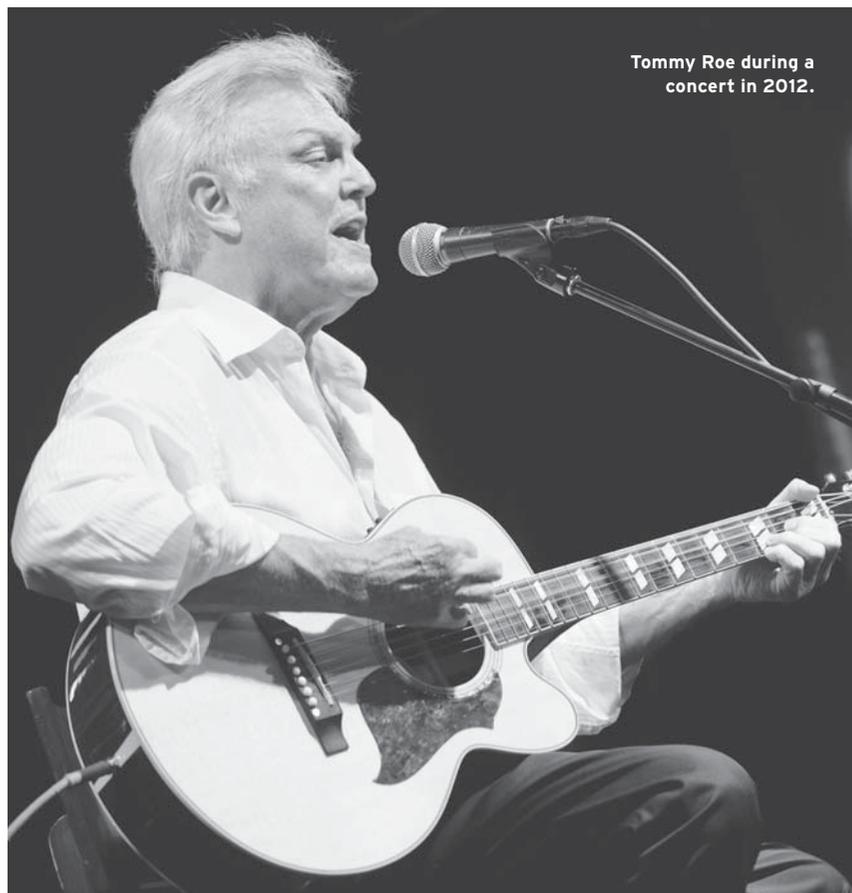
Roe visited his cardiologist and had an angiogram. Although he was given anesthesia, Roe says he wasn't "completely out" and could "watch the thing happen on video."

"And all of a sudden I see this black spot, and I say, 'What is that black spot?'" Roe adds. "And my cardiologist said, 'That's your problem: 90 percent blockage of the main artery.' I said, 'Maybe we can do a stent.' She said, 'We can't do a stent because it's right before the two veins fork off.' So she put me right in the hospital, and three days later, I had quadruple bypass surgery."

More than a year later, Roe says he feels better than he did before the surgery, and since the operation, he's exercised regularly and altered his diet.

"I eat more fish (now) than I ever have in my life," he says with a laugh.

In good health and good spirits this summer, Roe checked in from California to revisit some career highlights and turning points, as well as to confirm he's well on his way to ending his most recent retirement.



Tommy Roe during a concert in 2012.

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF TOMMY ROE

Buddy and the blues

Growing up in Georgia during the 1950s, Roe gravitated to rock and roll's early hitmakers, but one in particular stood out. He also found inspiration from listening to R&B radio stations late at night on his Silvertone radio.

Tommy Roe: Buddy Holly was a big influence on me. When I started performing, I did all of Holly's songs — all of those original hits. I loved the idea that he was a singer-songwriter as well.

He was in the rockabilly vein, and I was a big fan of rockabilly as a teenager.

Believe it or not, I tried to emulate John Lee Hooker, if you can imagine that with my high voice. When I had my high school band, we used to play fraternity parties. Well, they wanted to hear all the R&B stuff: Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker. They did (the dance) the Shag to those songs, so I learned them and performed them and tried the best I could to sound as much like them. It was always a work in progress for me.



Tommy Roe (third from right) with Chris Montez (third from left) and The Beatles in 1963.

The Beatles, the Army and the Big Idea

In 1963, Roe reached the U.S. pop Top 10 with “Everybody,” and that March, he and singer Chris Montez (who had a big hit in 1962 with “Let’s Dance”) toured England with the on-the-rise Beatles as an opening act. A lot would change for Roe and The Beatles over the next 12 months.

Roe: After opening for The Beatles at their first U.S. concert, in Wash-

ington, D.C., on Feb. 11, 1964, I joined the Army Reserves. While I was in the service, the British Invasion happened, and I was panicking. I was thinking, “What the hell am I going to do when I get out of here to compete with these guys? They’re making great music, and I’ve got to do something different.” So that’s when I came up with the idea I called soft rock. I wrote “Sweet Pea” while I was in the service, and when I got out, I went into the studio and we cut it. That kind of set me on a path for the middle part of the 1960s through the end of the decade. I called it soft rock, but DJs called it bubblegum music. That kind of ticked me off at first because it had a negative tone to it, but one hit after another, I started to embrace it.

Spotlighting the drums

After a 17-month absence from the Billboard Hot 100, Roe returned in June 1966 with “Sweet Pea,” which peaked at No. 8. Just like his first hit, “Sweet Pea” was melodic and efficient, clocking in at just a shade more than two minutes. There are moments in both when the

From “Frieda” to “Sheila” and from Judd to ABC

By his early teens, Roe was coming up with his own songs. Around age 14, he was inspired to write one called “Frieda,” which Roe says started as a poem about a girl he used to chase around the playground.

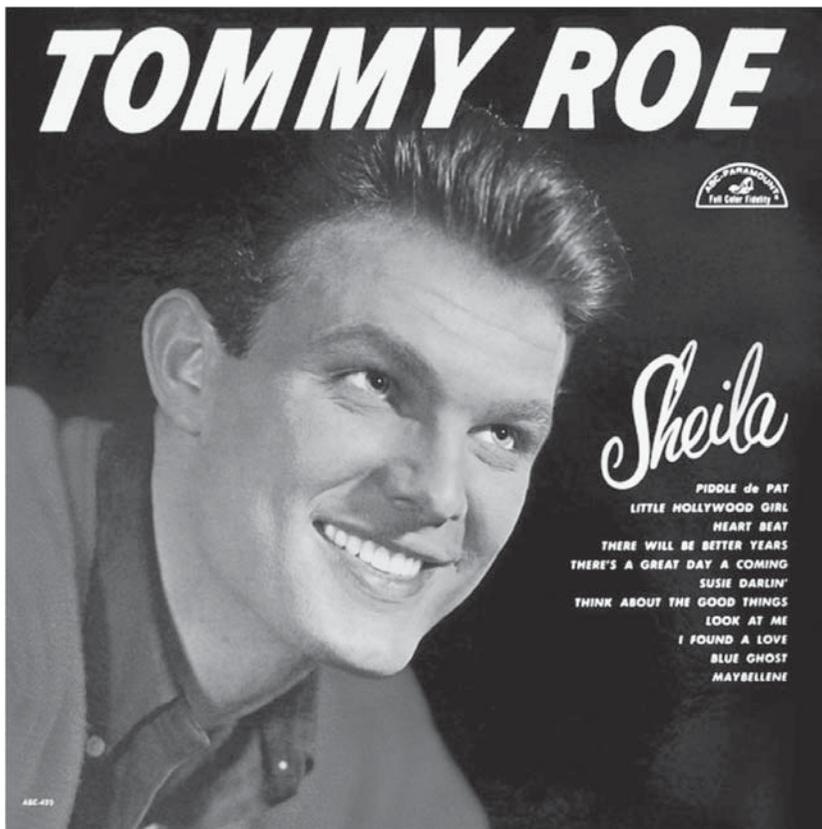
Roe: I carried “Frieda” around in my backpocket for a couple of years until I met this record producer. He wanted to hear my songs, so I sang “Frieda” for him. He said, “Man, I love that song, but I’m not crazy about the title.” So we changed it to ‘Sheila.’

Backed by his band, The Satins, Roe recorded the song for Judd Records, which released it as a single with the odd spelling “Shelia” in 1960 to marginal success in the southeast, he recalls. Two years later, a reworked version for ABC-Paramount — this time titled “Sheila,” with Roe doing Holly’s vocal hiccup and featuring “Peggy Sue”-style drums — would hit No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100, almost by accident.

Roe: I met Felton Jarvis, and he knew that I was doing the Buddy Holly thing in my concerts performing around Atlanta. Felton wanted to record me, but he didn’t want to use The Satins. He wanted to take me to Nashville by myself and have musicians there play on the session. It was Felton’s idea to put the Buddy Holly drums in there.

There was another artist on the three-hour session (at RCA Studio B). His name was Marvin Benefield; he recorded under the name Vince Everett. Marvin took two hours and 45 minutes to cut his two sides, and I was left with 15 minutes to cut my two sides. We cut “Save Your Kisses” first, which was supposed to be the A-side. We had (about five minutes) left for “Sheila.”

I left the studio thinking it was a terrible recording. I didn’t like it at all. I was saying to myself, “I’m glad it’s the B-side. Nobody will ever hear it.” ... (The label) promoted “Save Your Kisses” for a while, and it didn’t do anything. Buddy Deane, a big DJ in Baltimore at the time, I guess he remembered the original version of “Sheila,” so he flipped the record over and played “Sheila.” Well, it became an instant hit in Baltimore, and that’s how the record broke.



on the set, but when we actually started filming, it went very smoothly. I think we did two or three takes. It was a lot of fun, and I was very happy to meet my favorite folks on TV.

I was a regular on *Where the Action Is*, Dick Clark's show. Vox (was a sponsor), so he got all that equipment for me, the guitars and the amps. When we did the Dick Clark Caravan of Stars, we used Vox equipment. It was cool, but those amps were so huge. They were as big as an armoire. You needed a lot of helping carrying those things around.

Recognition and recent recording

After "Jam Up Jelly Tight," Roe would score six more Hot 100 entries through 1973, the most successful being a cover of "Stagger Lee" that reached No. 25 in 1971. In the ensuing decades, Roe's biggest hits have remained on the radio airwaves and in the public consciousness. The music rights organization BMI in 2014 recognized "Sheila" and "Dizzy" for each achieving 2 million broadcast performances. And this year, 24/7 Wall St. ranked "Dizzy" at No. 91 on its

only instrument is the drums, and that characteristic would appear on future hits such as "Hooray for Hazel" (No. 6, 1966).

Roe: Back in those days, the executives at the record companies, if you had a hit, they wanted to follow it up with something that sounded very similar. They were going to milk it as much as they could. So the next few records I recorded all had these drum breaks in them. It's just something that carried through. Every time I would get with a new producer, they'd say, "Well, we've got to have a drum break." It became a signature.

1969: Another No. 1, visiting Green Acres

As the 1960s came to a close, Roe had the best chart year of his career, placing four songs on the Hot 100 in 1969. The biggest was "Dizzy," which he co-wrote with singer-guitarist Freddy Weller, who at the time was a member of Paul Revere and the Raiders. Featuring strings by arranger Jimmie Haskell, "Dizzy" entered the Hot 100 in early February and hit No. 1 in mid-March, staying in the top spot for four weeks.

In November 1969, about a week before "Jam Up Jelly Tight" entered the pop chart (reaching No. 8 the following year), Roe made a guest appearance on TV's *Green Acres* as musician Tadpole Talbot, playing a striking Vox guitar in the episode titled "Four of Spades."

Roe: The biggest kick I got out of being offered that gig was getting the opportunity to meet Eva Gabor and Eddie Albert. And Pat Buttram — he was the sidekick in so many Western movies when I was kid. There's always a lot of waiting around as an actor

100 Absolute Best Songs in History list, as determined by sales figures from the Recording Industry Association of America, Billboard Hot 100 chart performance, the number of cover versions and recognition by music fans on Ranker.com.

It hasn't been all nostalgia lately for Roe; very quietly, he released some new music in early 2019. The four-song EP *Tommy Roe Meets Barefoot Jerry* was made with Wayne Moss, who played guitar on the hit version of "Sheila," and recorded at Moss' Cinderella Sound Studio facility in Nashville.

Roe: There's one song on there that Wayne wrote back in the 1980s or 1990s called "Tokin' Ticket." It's about the legalization of marijuana; it falls right into what's going on today. And I took a song Freddy Weller and I wrote called "Birmingham" and changed it to "Cabbagetown," which is a little of section of Atlanta where I lived until I was about six years old.

(Making this EP) was fantastic for me after my surgery because it got me back into my element psychologically. Working with Wayne, he's such a talented guy, and he was excited to be doing it as well.

What lies ahead

Roe says he plans to return to Cinderella Sound Studio to remake some of his signature hits. He's also eyeing a return to the concert stage.

Roe: I'll gradually get back into performing. It'll probably be the end of this year or early next year. Chris Montez and I are working on a project right now; it'll tie in to the relationship we have with The Beatles. ●