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**memphisinlondon**

Where am I going?



Posted - 10/06/2008 : 18:27:50



*We probably don't need another biography (unless it's definitive). Just a collection of Dusty's own words would do. She was so truthful. Excerpts from this interview have been included elsewhere. Here's the full version. It's quite a long read...*

The New York Times Magazine  
October 29, 1995

United Kingdom  
3565 Posts

DUSTY RIDES AGAIN - Rob Hoerburger

Sidestepping cancer, armed with a new album, Dusty Springfield suddenly finds her life and her career in remission.

She darts around her Manhattan hotel suite waving a can of Lysol, which she carries in her purse for occasions like this. Dusty Springfield, the 56-year-old pop legend and former convent-school girl, has been caught sneaking a smoke.

"It's so impolite of me," she says, still attacking the offending odor, gesticulating the way she used to when she sang "You Don't Have To Say You Love Me," the spasmodic ballad that was her biggest hit. Well, not impolite really, just a little . . . impossible. She's a singer, after all, the finest pop vocalist Britain has ever produced. What is she doing despoiling her voice with nicotine clouds, especially when she's just released her first album in the United States in 13 years, *A Very Fine Love*?

"Oh, I only started smoking eight years ago," she says, sweetly dismissive. "And I had vocal problems long before that." If she's unconcerned about her voice--the husky-breathy, scratchy-tickly honey glaze of AM radio classics like "The Look of Love"--then what about the ordeal she went through last year fighting breast cancer? Surely, with both her career and her life in remission, she must realize the premium on each puff.

"I know it's stupid, and it will go," she says. "But a bit at a time. I've already had to give up so much."

For most of her life, Dusty Springfield has blown smoke in the face of people's expectations. She grew up in postwar Protestant London as Mary Isobel Catherine Bernadette O'Brien, a plain, bespectacled Irish Catholic redhead who glamorized herself into an exaggerated blonde and sounded like an American Southern black when she sang about sons of preacher-men. Even her earliest hits, such giddy contagion as "I Only Want To Be With You" and "Wishin' And Hopin'," were infused with a buoyancy and ripe eroticism that made them outlast the puppy love listeners felt for the week's Top 10.

Then just when she was at the top of her game, she vanished. In the last two and a half decades she has made a few records, but more often ducked down the side streets of alcoholism, drugs and bad career advice, eventually settling into a Garbo-like exile, in no particular hurry to sing. More than the booze and the drugs, however, it was her intractable insecurity that led to the long silences in her career--that, and the music industry's willingness to let her talent rust in an armor of self-loathing.

Now, willed back by her own legacy--"Son of a Preacher Man," a track from her epochal 1969 album, *Dusty in Memphis*, was featured in *Pulp Fiction* and made the MTV generation sit up and notice--she wastes no time debunking the myth. She will no longer be the diva who often rode the roar of kettle drums and crushing cymbals, the tempestuous terror who hurled food around some of London's best restaurants, who smashed mountains of cups and saucers to let off steam before a concert, who knocked the toupee off an impudent Buddy Rich. "People expect to get drama from me," she says. "I just get tired." After a long week in New York to promote *A Very Fine Love*, she has to summon a little something extra just to light up another cigarette. The tea service appears safe.

"I said I would only do this again if I could be allowed to act my age, to be comfortable in my own skin," she says. "I'd been listening to a lot of the stuff coming out of Nashville, the K.T. Oslins and Mary Chapin Carpenters, and thought maybe I could do that." So she went to Nashville herself, and came back with mostly relaxed, country-tinged pop just a shade grayer and wiser than the 90's Bonnie Raitt. The album's showpiece is "Where Is A Woman To Go," a barroom blues tune with a lived-in feeling that's been missing from the airwaves since her heyday. (Oslin and Carpenter are even on hand to sing back-up.) Let youngsters like Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey sing with bravado. Dusty Springfield, with a mere vocal wink, can still go places that aren't in the repertory of their imaginations.

"I really like this album, and that's a first for me," she says. The question is whether she has started liking herself in time to make enough other people like her again. At her age, she isn't likely to get many more chances.

"I used so much hair spray that I feel personally responsible for global warming," she says. The look--hair teased into a tornado, eyes seemingly paint-rolled with mascara--was part Italian cinema minx and part West End drag queen. The sound was strictly New World. "America was the place I'd always dreamed of as a girl, the vastness of it," she says. "It was where the music came from."

That music wasn't just rock-and-roll, it was the sizzle of girl groups like the Crystals and the Exciters. After a stint in an ersatz-folk trio called the Springfields, she went solo in 1963 and started browbeating British studio musicians to create an uninhibited, unabashedly American sound. She connected on the first try, "I Only Want To Be With You," 2 minutes and 32 seconds of boastful ebullience that mistakenly convinced Martha Reeves, the Motown belter, that Springfield must also be a Motown artist. It wasn't long before she and Reeves were going beehive-to-beehive on a BBC special with "Nowhere To Run," a soul anthem that most white singers can only admire from afar.

"I Only Want To Be With You" also helped establish her "difficult reputation" as a brash perfectionist: here was a 24-year-old woman telling a bunch of veteran British musicians that they weren't quite hip enough. "They'd never played anything electric before, never heard a Phil Spector record," she says. But sometimes she'd tell herself to remember her place: Mary O'Brien the convent-school girl would peek through Dusty's pancake--often at the most inopportune times, like before an appearance at the Brooklyn Fox in 1964, when she came down with laryngitis. "Paul of the Temptations gave me a full glass of vodka," she says. "I was naive. I'd never really had a drink up to then, so I gulped it all down. The laryngitis didn't go away, but I felt great, like, 'This is the way to live.'"

The drinking never got too out of control while her records were still selling, though even then she was convinced she'd never be quite as good as her idols. The stakes suddenly got higher in 1968, when the producer Jerry Wexler, impressed with the inherent soulfulness of Springfield's voice, signed her to Atlantic Records. Wexler had produced legendary sessions for Ray Charles and was flush from his first successes with Aretha Franklin. "I always wanted to be Aretha," Springfield says. Now Wexler was going to bring her as close to her

musical dream as she would get, though the album they concocted ultimately made more promises than it would ever be able to keep.

"Tell me something," says Arif Mardin, a co-producer of *Dusty In Memphis*, "Does Dusty like this album? For years, we've heard that she didn't." He's speaking of an album that, 26 years after its release, remains a kind of holy grail of pop singing. Except, perhaps, to the singer.

"Honestly, to this day I have no idea why this album is so well regarded," Springfield says. "I guess it's the quality of the songs. It's hard to get material that strong these days."

True enough, the songs came from a dream team of pop auteurs like Carole King and Randy Newman. But it took Springfield's voice to turn them into a moment of pop transfiguration. She rippled over and curled around the songs of carnality, of love's psychosis (the hypnotic "Windmills of Your Mind") and, mostly, of love's memory, love in exile, love as asymptote. It was some of the most emotionally literate music ever put to vinyl; while other pop singers were still wondering who wrote the book of love, Springfield was teaching a course in comparative literature.

Maybe *Dusty In Memphis* should have been sold in book shops, because record buyers ignored it. The rock press was begrudging, too, unwilling at first to admit that a woman in a bouffant could produce an album that critics now place on par with, say, Jimi Hendrix's *Are You Experienced?* By the time a rave review ran in *Rolling Stone*, 10 months had passed since the album's release, and it had died at an ignominious No. 99 on the charts. To this day, *Dusty In Memphis* is a classic that more people have heard of than have heard.

"Jann Wenner once asked me if I could get a copy for Michael Douglas," Wexler recalls, "because they were going for \$100 in collectors' shops. I wish I'd invested in a few hundred."

Wexler and Springfield never made another album together. "The bloody thing didn't sell, and I wasn't the easiest person to get along with," she says. Wexler remembers her flinging an ashtray at him and being so nervous standing in the same Memphis studio where soul legends like Wilson Pickett had stood that she ended up doing most of her vocals in New York. "It's not that she was contrary or obstreperous," Wexler says. "She just had a gigantic inferiority complex." The fault, in her ears only, was that even with Aretha's producers and record company, she still wasn't Aretha.

Though Springfield enriched Atlantic's coffers into the millennium by tipping off Wexler to a struggling new band called Led Zeppelin, she was gone from the label by 1971. No less than Barbra Streisand and Linda Ronstadt raced up the charts in the 70's by using Memphis as a template--poaching Springfield's adult-rock style, and even, in Streisand's case, some of the songs--while Springfield herself was cast adrift. "As usual," she says, "I was saying things about five years ahead of everyone else."

There was a comment Springfield made in 1970, not long after the commercial disappointment of *Dusty In Memphis*, that was at least 20 years ahead of its time. "I'm as perfectly capable," she told *The Evening Standard* in London, "of being swayed by a girl as by a boy." At that time, Melissa Etheridge, the openly gay rock singer, was 9 years old and Martina Navratilova hadn't yet set foot on Wimbledon grass. When the subject comes up now, it's as if Springfield--who has never married or had children--suddenly finds herself driving through a dangerous neighborhood, and rushes to lock all the doors. She won't use the words "gay," "lesbian" or "bisexual." Eventually, though, she opens her window a crack.

"My relationships have been pretty mixed," she says. "And I'm fine with that. Who's to say what you are? Right now I'm not in any relationship by choice, not because I'm afraid I'd be that or that. Yet I don't feel celibate, either. So what am I? It's other people who want you to be something or other--this or that. I'm none of the above. I've never used my relationships or illnesses to be fashionable, and I don't intend to start now."

She dropped the bomb to The Evening Standard just after what would be her last appearance in the British and American Top 40's for some 18 years. Yet it's hard to pin her decline on any sexuality scandal. She had had a high profile for more than five years; even the biggest pop phenomena, from singers to sitcoms, rarely go that long before the public calls in the loan on its affection and demands some renegotiation of style and substance. For Springfield that meant plunging into even more of an American sound by moving to America itself, conveniently putting distance between herself and the British tabloids.

But she was too good at getting lost. She signed up with a succession of managers who, she says, tried to turn her into a cabaret act, who sabotaged sure things like a production deal with Elton John, who got her contracts with middle-shelf labels. The few albums she did make in the 70's garnered copious praise for her voice, but the reviewers inevitably concluded, "It's no Dusty In Memphis." Then the albums would get swallowed in the corporate maw. "I would make a record, go down and meet all the promotion people, then the label would be bought and the next day they'd be gone," she says. "One label switched overnight and told me my entire promotion budget had been given over to Yoko Ono. So I said, 'Excuse me, fine, goodbye.'"

So she drank, partied, did cocaine for about six months, lived off her 60's earnings. Though there was no blinding light on the Road to Damascus, she says little messages started to get through to her "reptilian brain."

"I was at the Hyatt Sunset after a night of partying, and I called down to get a bottle of Champagne, and the room-service waiter said, 'Haven't you had enough already, lady?' I was outraged, and said, 'How dare you.' And then I thought, How does he know? Does everyone know?"

She had her last drink on August 23, 1983, shortly after the failure of her last American album, White Heat. "Luckily, I had people around me who were honest, who weren't afraid to tell me I had spinach in my teeth. I had no life. I had to get one. For a while, singing just wasn't a part of it."

Teatime on the Thames. We're in Marlow, a hamlet that's a short drive west of London. Dusty Springfield moved back to England seven years ago, following the success of her collaborations with those postmodern popsters the Pet Shop Boys. The chart renaissance was brief, but it made her believe she had a place in her home country again. She lives just up the road with her cat, and she's been house hunting, wanting to get even closer to the river. It has a calming influence on her, but one that's dangerous to her fans because it can put singing out of her mind for years at a time. "Ah, here comes the regatta," she says wistfully, espying a line of geese.

Gray wisps dangle from inside her straw hat; she let the air out of her hair long ago, and any vestigial puffs of her beehive were flattened by the chemotherapy she underwent for breast cancer. Though in her official public appearances her face still looks a bit mummified, she wears surprisingly little makeup today, and her eyes, liberated from their mascal burden, have a yearning, we'll-always-have-Paris look. Despite her zaftig delusions, she looks trim and spry in her light denim, a rock-and-roll version of Auntie Mame. A country churchyard that lies a stone's throw across the river brings the poet Thomas Gray to Springfield's mind. But she's not ready for an elegy.

"I know if I die, I'll sell a lot of records," she says. "I could be the female Roy Orbison. Of course, then I wouldn't get the royalties. I'd probably leave them to a cat charity."

Her breast cancer was discovered last year just as she was finishing A Very Fine Love. It seemed to fill in the details of a sad inevitability, now that so many of her contemporaries--four of the five original Temptations, a Shirelle and a Marvelette, at least one Shangri-La--had made their final big headlines. These stars died, for the most part, not from some spectacular tragedy but rather the way ordinary people do:

heart attack, cancer, stroke, if not 40 years too early then perhaps 20. Many collapsed while on the nostalgia circuit, hustling to make the rent. Some like Orbison, enjoyed one final blaze of glory; more common was the case of Mary

Wells, the first queen of Motown, who had no health insurance when she died of throat cancer in 1992, her greatest hits 30 years behind her.

"At first it was as if it wasn't happening to me, it was happening to that person over there," Springfield says. "I was numb, and I had a record to finish. Then I was sitting at home and my cat was sleeping and I thought, Who will look after you?"

She completed the album and then submitted to chemotherapy. "There were medieval syringes with colored liquids to kill off the baddies," she says. "And kill a lot of other stuff, too. Apparently my body still likes poison. It was saying, 'Yes! Give me some poison.'" A lumpectomy and six months of radiation therapy followed. The prognosis is good. "I was determined not to become a statistic. I mean, you can't think cancer away, but the mind can help."

The success, so far, of the cancer treatment has helped Springfield keep the slow start of *A Very Fine Love* in perspective. This wasn't a surprise in America, where Linda Ronstadt's latest album has sold only 150,000 copies and Aretha Franklin was last heard singing commercials for *Wheel of Fortune*. But it's a puzzlement in Britain, where just last year a compilation of Springfield's hits zoomed into the Top Five. "I get the kind of respect reserved for the royal family," she says. "But that doesn't make them plop down money for the CD. Except they like the old ones."

Kip Krones, the managing director of Columbia Records in Britain and Springfield's champion at the label, says: "It's hard to convince 30-year-old program directors who never heard of her to play it. Of course, she hasn't been too visible, played too many live dates for almost 20 years."

Krones promises that Columbia will stay with the album for the long haul. But there's just so far the music business's altruism will go. If it doesn't take off after a few more months, it's hard to believe Columbia--or anyone--will give her another try. *A Very Fine Love* could very well be the last Dusty Springfield album.

"Well, no matter," she says. "I shall still have my house on the river."

In June, three days after *A Very Fine Love* was released, there was a party for Springfield at the Sony Club, an oak-paneled hideaway at the top of the Manhattan skyline. Sprinkled among the junior executives, most of whom knew "the name, but not the face, or any of the songs," were some die-hard Springfield fans--journalists, disc jockeys and other assorted music-biz hangers-on--waiting for the comet like appearance of their muse, toting their copies of *Dusty In Memphis*, which was finally reissued on CD in 1992, for her to sign. It was a fairly low-wattage crowd until Paul Shaffer, the elfin leader of the band on *Late Show with David Letterman*, arrived in his double-breasted best, having rushed over after that evening's taping.

Springfield had tried to get on Letterman, which would surely have registered some numbers for the album, but even the clout of Columbia couldn't secure a spot. Shaffer, a fan, appeared seemingly as a consolation prize, and after meeting Springfield he wandered over to the grand piano in the corner. As any Letterman watcher knows, he has an encyclopedia of 60's pop in his fingertips, and yet his selection was still astonishing: "Some Of Your Lovin'," an obscure Carole King-Gerry Goffin song that was a 1965 hit for Springfield in England and that just happens to be the only one of her recordings with which she can find no fault. As Shaffer plunked out the chords, Springfield was caught in the moment, and soon her lambent tones were encircling the crowd like a giant embrace.

After about 40 seconds, when she realized that no one was talking anymore, she suddenly stopped, claiming she couldn't remember the rest of the song but really wilting, one more time, from the attention.

The neophytes egged her on for more, but the true Dusty Springfield fans knew better. They looked content, relieved, enthralled simply to be, however fleetingly, still within the sound of her voice."

Memphis

Ever since we met...

Posted - 10/06/2008 : 20:20:14

**ErgoFergo**  
I'll try anything  
★★



United Kingdom  
1047 Posts

Thanks, Memphis - I'm loving your work! I think I've read this before somewhere, but I really enjoyed reading it again.

Vicky  
x

*If I had a quarter, for doing things I shouldn't ought'a*



Posted - 10/06/2008 : 20:37:38

**Hampson**  
I've got a good thing  
★★★★



United Kingdom  
4703 Posts

Thanks again Memphis

Wendy



Posted - 10/06/2008 : 22:20:31

**daydreamer**  
Moderator  
★★★★



United Kingdom  
5404 Posts

You may have read it on Woman of Repute Vicky. If you didn't read it there, you should check out his site anyway, as he has many interviews and articles, all worth reading.

Carole x  
"The days have come and gone since you were here..."

Edited by - daydreamer on 10/06/2008 22:21:30



Posted - 10/06/2008 : 22:56:57

**memphisinlondon**  
Where am I going?  
★★★



United Kingdom  
3565 Posts

Yes, (oops) I've just checked. Back in 2000 I must have cut and pasted this and the Blues and Soul piece from Michael Bayley's site which is the best biography and resource out there. Check it out and please treat these posts as an advert (I included this link a while back in the new books section).

<http://www.cpinternet.com/mbayly/>

Here's the link for the articles:

<http://www.cpinternet.com/mbayly/articles.htm>

Memphis

Ever since we met...

Edited by - memphisinlondon on 11/06/2008 00:06:23



Posted - 11/06/2008 : 18:39:46

**ErgoFergo**  
I'll try anything  
★★



"You may have read it on Woman of Repute Vicky."



I think I did, Carole. Thanks for the tip!

Vicky  
x

*If I had a quarter, for doing things I shouldn't ought'a*



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