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Keep It Dusty Observer Article 2005

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Many have read this before, but thought some have not, and would be good to post.....

Keep it Dusty

A shy yet bolshy perfectionist who loved a good food fight; an anti-apartheid champion; and a conundrum even to herself. Novelist Ali Smith sings the praises of Dusty Springfield, the star who couldn't stand to hear her own voice

Sunday June 19, 2005
The Observer

It was late at night about seven years ago and I was on my own, an insomniac, lying on the couch flicking channel after channel and knowing I should go to bed, when I came across an old music show. It was fronted by Ed Sullivan, the American music host who always looked drunk, like he couldn't quite remember who it was he was meant to be introducing next. And there was what's her name, you know, from the Sixties, Dusty Springfield, who, with her hip little waistcoat and her blouse with its long frills like antimacassars coming off the sleeves, and her pure white-blond perfectly coiffed wig, right now, 30 years after she sang this song on TV the first time, was singing 'Son of a Preacher Man', live, and smiling the most charismatic smile. The whole performance seemed effortless, almost self-dismissive, yet she was building up the song with a skill so consummate that I sat bolt upright on the couch.

Article continues

Look at that, I thought to myself, I just saw the real thing; because it was as if I'd just seen something completely afresh that I'd thought I'd known off by heart - the incidental soundtrack to my own life via the BBC or the radio or the record player, something I associated with home and my older sisters shouting up and down the stairs about how to dye hair, and my mother calling through as she lit a cigarette in the kitchen; a particular female postwar voice, a combination of energised, exhilarated, sure and insecure. You can hear this combination in Springfield's first album early in the Sixties; a mix of pre-feminist feist and pre-feminist winsomeness. Her speaking voice compared to her singing voice is feist up against the slight-seeming middle-class English convent girl shyness, self-deprecatory, someone rounding her vowels beautifully out of a kind of personality-less politeness.

She was a vocal perfectionist, only satisfied with the sound of 'You Don't Have to Say You Love Me' after they'd recorded it into a microphone hung over the echoing stairwell in her studio. She hated the sound of her own singing voice so much that she demanded the volume on the playback in

her headphones be turned up so loud that it reached pain threshold. When legendary producer Jerry Wexler made her hear her own voice, stripped back, on Dusty in Memphis, it must have been a different kind of pain threshold.

Springfield was a conundrum; so shy on film that she could hardly speak and often so traumatised before performance that her throat would seize up, but bold enough to throw a bread roll at a head waiter in the Post Office Tower restaurant after she saw him being mean to one of his own staff, notorious for loving a good food fight, and especially for smashing whole dinner services, which she loved to do by dropping them down huge flights of stairs. Bolshy enough to insist, too, when she got to South Africa on tour in 1964, that she'd only perform to mixed audiences. Under segregation laws she was arrested then thrown out of the country.

She made black American music visible in the UK; she promoted the Motown Revue tour in Britain in 1965, the first time acts like Martha and the Vandellas, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson, were heard here. And then, double-voiced as she was, shy and bold as she was, she was also brave enough in the liberal, tolerant, profoundly repressed 1960s to admit to a journalist that she was 'as perfectly capable of being swayed by a girl as by a boy', the consequences of which statement were huge.

You'll have your favourite song of hers. I've got mine. A couple of years ago when I was writing a play about her I asked a lot of people what their favourite was, and was interested that almost nobody mentioned the same songs. But you can bet that somewhere in the performance of your favourite there's a little existential battle happening in what the voice does with the song.

Big ridiculous notions to hold in the one hand, pop song and existential survival. But Mary Isobel Catherine Bernadette O'Brien, or as she's better known, Dusty Springfield, could do a lot with something as trivial as a pop song. She was what you might call an expert in brevity. 'It is marvellous to be popular,' she said two weeks after her first hit single, 'but foolish to think it will last.' And what did she say at the end, when she knew she was dying? 'I'm going out blonde.' And all through a turbulent and pretty existential career, fighting all those demons? 'I don't really care about the kudos,' she said. 'I just want to get it right.' Wanting to get the song right - that's good enough for me.

**misty**  
I'll try anything  
★★

Posted - 23/11/2007 : 20:30:52



And get it right is what she did. Time after time. nice article Nancy. So glad you keep posting these articles. I have never seen most of them. Also, how could someone name just one 'favorite' by Dusty? 😊

misty 😊



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