Author Topic

allherfaces
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USA
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Posted - 19/11/2007 : 15:13:07

Apologies if this has been posted before; ran across it in my research and thought I'd share it.

The Boston Phoenix
November 26 - December 4, 1997

Mission impossible
The perfectionist rock and soul of Dusty Springfield
by Charles Taylor

There's an elevation to popular music that is the sound of a summer spilling out of someone's car and the moment you break up with somebody and the moment you first got sex, and it is as impenetrable a memory in someone's brain as a great still from Gone with the Wind.
-- Courtney Love

"Unprecedented." That was the word used over and over again during the coverage of Diana's death to describe the reaction of the British. And as it was repeated by news anchors and the commentators pressed into service, you could hear that what they really meant by "unprecedented" was "unthinkable." Which only showed how out of touch they were with the culture -- the pop culture, that is -- of the people whose response they were marveling at. Because during the last four decades, the pop charts have shown that the idea of British emotion is anything but unthinkable.

Especially in the persistent strain of British pop that's always been in love with the emotionalism of American soul, and determined to speak its direct, full-hearted language. When you hear Boy George or the Bryan Ferry of Siren or almost anything on the new three-CD career retrospective The Dusty Springfield Anthology (Mercury Chronicles), it's easy to imagine that these performers have taken on the responsibility of expressing the emotions that buttoned-up official British culture looks on disapprovingly, even nervously.

At its best, pop music can be so potent that the notion of the "simple pop song" becomes an oxymoron. Great pop songs offer up scenarios of happiness or heartbreak so lush and accessible they can make us want more from life than we have, and then question why we don't have it. That's why songs as seemingly innocuous as "Heartbreak Hotel" and "I Want To Hold Your Hand" can set off deep and lasting tremors, why pop has always been regarded warily by those in power. The message of great pop might be one of the slogans that appeared on walls in Paris during May of 1968: demand the impossible.

Perhaps the overriding irony of Dusty Springfield's career is that though she's offered her listeners the lushest pop scenarios, she has always demanded the impossible from herself. Among the producers and songwriters and musicians she's worked with, her mixture of perfectionism and insecurity is legendary. Jerry Wexler, who produced nearly all of Aretha Franklin's great work at Atlantic as well as the seminal 1969 album Dusty in Memphis, called her the most insecure person he'd ever worked with. That album is now commonly regarded as one of the greatest of the '60s. In Rob Hoerburger's liner notes to the new Anthology, we find out that for a year after it was released, Dusty couldn't bear to listen to it. And when Neil Tennant and

Chris Lowe of Pet Shop Boys approached her to sing on their 1987 hit "What Have I Done To Deserve This?" (number two on both sides of the Atlantic) her response was, "What could you possibly want from me?"

Dusty's long, reclusive absences from the pop scene may have as much to do with her refusal -- perhaps inability -- to be satisfied with her work as it does with the matters of changing musical styles and the declining quality of pop tunesmiths. (On Dusty in Memphis, she recorded songs by Randy Newman, Burt Bacharach and Hal David, Gerry Goffin and Carole King, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil; on her last album, 1995's A Very Fine Love, she had two numbers by Diane "Wind Beneath My Wings" Warren.) One of the many paradoxes of the career of the former Mary Isabel Catherine Bernadette O'Brien is that such dissatisfaction could exist in a singer who, Hoerburger writes, has the "ability to remove distance, from herself and a melody, a lyric, a listener."

Certainly there's no distance in her first solo hit, 1964's "I Only Want To Be with You" (she had previously scored hits as one-third of the pop-folk trio the Springfields, which included her older brother, Tom). The producer on that track is listed as Johnny Franz, the head of A&R at Phillips, though the production credit is now claimed by Dusty. It's a dense, dramatic record, echoing both Phil Spector's "wall of sound" mini-extravaganzas and the work producer George Goldner did with the Chantels. The vocal goes toe to toe with the rest of the mix, as if Dusty had to fight to be heard amid the clamor of her emotions. The string section suggests the rapture in the middle of longing and chaos, the slightly masochistic appeal of pop music, the open secret that heartbreak is glorious. There's a similar girl-group drama and exuberance in other hits from 1964 and '65 like "Stay Awhile" and "He's Got Something." Ronnie Spector wouldn't have sounded out of place singing them.

Although in the emotional gap that separated the Ronettes from Aretha Franklin there was no question what side of the line Dusty was on. "Anyone who ever loved/Could look at me/And know that I love you," she sang, and if you were a teenager listening to that low, brandied alto in the mid '60s, I can't imagine you wouldn't have known Dusty was expressing something deeper and more mature than the school-kid romances and break-ups you'd already been through. On numbers like "Anyone Who Had a Heart" and "I Just Don't Know What To Do with Myself," "All Cried Out" and Losing You," "All I See Is You" (a surrender to a fantasy, and an even fiercer determination to hang onto it when it becomes clear that it isn't real) and "Just One Smile," "You Don't Have To Say You Love Me" and -- especially -- "The Look of Love," with their plush orchestral arrangements and the utter emotional commitment of the vocals, Dusty was forging a brand of pop that was as steeped in the grown-up sophistication of singers like Sinatra and Peggy Lee (her idol) as it was in love with the energy and vitality of rock and roll and soul. The result is a purveyor of young music who doesn't sound young, a devastating chronicler of heartache who, in some essential way, knows how to protect herself.

To some people -- the American fans, who, hearing Dusty, assumed she was black; the British pop idol Cliff Richard who called her the "White Negress" -- this was decidedly black music. To others, it was too sophisticated, too polished, too self-possessed to be called "soul." By that measure, soul music means essentially shouting, and you don't have to go too far beyond that reductive definition to encounter the notion that soul music is necessarily unsophisticated, rough-spoken, hysterical -- jungle music. It's a narrow vision of what soul can be that makes no room for soul singers like Al Green, as understated as Otis Redding was unleashed, and Charlie Rich, who, like Ray Charles, understood that country was white soul music.

The truest measure of soul must surely be the ability of the singer to convey emotions with an unprotected depth. Although she could sing as big and as loud as the best of them, Dusty understood that soul could convey emotion quietly without sacrificing bigness or immediacy. That's why Dusty in Memphis (five tracks from which are included in the Anthology) must be counted as much a soul album as Aretha's I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You. Often she seems to be singing about events whose outcome is a foregone conclusion. She is the most perfectly named of pop singers (it's as impossible to call her Springfield as it is to refer to Aretha as Franklin) because her voice seems to be leaving a dusting on the words she sings. She sings with a lingering quality, reluctant to let go of the lyric as if each song were a remembrance, and yet more than half knowing that it's time to put the past away and move on.

Even in the midst of "The Look of Love," a song about desire fulfilled, with its impossibly soft sax solo echoing the drugged languorous afterglow of the vocal, there's a hint of fatalism in the way Dusty draws out the lyric "Don't ever go," as if what we're hearing could be a rehearsal for some solitary future reverie. Just beneath the surface of the erotic vulnerability that characterizes her music lies a non-stoic acceptance of things gone wrong. That's why she often seems to be singing less to her beloved than directly to us, as potential commiseratees. And that's why (even if we couldn't see her blond bouffant and thick black Cleopatra eyeliner) she has always seemed so much more sophisticated than other pop singers.

In just about every way, The Dusty Springfield Anthology is a model of what a boxed set should be. I can quibble with certain exclusions ("My Colouring Book," "Twenty-Four Hours to Tulsa") and inclusions (every bad movie themesong she ever recorded), but the hits are all here, as are the hits that should have been, notably the Gamble & Huff number "Silly, Silly Fool" and the 1973 "Mama's Little Girl," a near-masterpiece that didn't even crack Billboard's Top 100. There are cover versions rescued from forgotten albums and B-sides: a pair of pop trifles that erase your memories of the originals (versions of the Classics IV's "Spooky" and the Rascals' "How Can I Be Sure?"), and a version of "Tupelo Honey" that -- beyond all reasonable expectation -- can stand with Van Morrison's. And there are the recent triumphs, her work with Pet Shop Boys, and the bluesy K.T. Oslin cover "Where Is a Woman To Go" (from A Very Fine Love), which suggests she has another Dusty in Memphis in her (Dusty in Nashville?). All of it put into context by Rob Hoerburger's superb essay. Hoerburger hears every song he writes about as part of a story, and he never forgets that the people listening to those songs, who have the ability to transform the songs' meanings, are part of that story.

It's a story you miss if you pay attention only to official culture, which usually dismisses pop as silly or insubstantial. But the elevation of pop music, to use Courtney Love's phrase -- the way it offers a distilled and transcendent version of experience that can seem both shared and startlingly personal -- can make official culture seem stuffy and remote. Maybe, finally, it can make the assumptions that underlie that culture seem worth questioning. That was the questioning we saw back in September when people took to the streets to mourn a princess who, like them, had spent her life listening to pop music. It was an event that had the scent of real change about it. And all it took to get started was anyone who had a heart.

http://bostonphoenix.com/archive/music/97/11/26/DUSTY_SPRINGFIELD.html

boztiggs
Where am I going?

Posted - 19/11/2007 : 17:34:54

United Kingdom
3367 Posts

Wow, good review. I particularly liked this bit

"She is the most perfectly named of pop singers (it's as impossible to call her Springfield as it is to refer to Aretha as Franklin) because her voice seems to be leaving a dusting on the words she sings. She sings with a lingering quality, reluctant to let go of the lyric as if each song were a remembrance, and yet more than half knowing that it's time to put the past away and move on."

Neil

" Here in the gloom, of my lonely room, i hold his photograph and pray ill see him soon oh-oh"

daydreamer
Moderator

Posted - 20/11/2007 : 20:30:08

I do have that review but I hadn't read it in a while. It's an excellent piece, as are the Rob Hoerburger liner notes from the Anthology. It was good to read it again, thanks for the reminder Nancy.

Carole x
"Since you went away, I've been hanging around...."

United Kingdom
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paula
Moderator

Posted - 20/11/2007 : 23:25:04

enjoyed reading that...especially from a local rag. thanks Nancy
paula x

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allherfaces
Administrator

Posted - 20/11/2007 : 23:51:16

I'm just referencing it in a paper.

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misty
I'll try anything

Posted - 21/11/2007 : 19:28:51

Wonderful review! Love the way with words that the author has. So many quotable snippets. He really has Dusty pegged. Gets the emotion that we all feel in her songs. Thanks for posting.

misty

USA
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Tim
Where am I going?

Posted - 01/12/2007 : 00:54:00

Just caught up with this - love the dusting the words imagery too.

'I'd like to retouch my whole life!'

United Kingdom
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