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From The History of Rock Magazine, 1982

FROM FOLK TO SOUL

Was Dusty Springfield Britain's best-ever singer?

by Chris North

Born Mary O'Brien in Hampstead, London, on 16 April 1940, Dusty Springfield is arguably the greatest white soul singer ever to emerge from the United Kingdom. During the Sixties she achieved worldwide success, but later chose to turn her back on both her country and her career in pursuit of more personal fulfillment.

Her father was a tax consultant and she was educated at convent schools, St Bernard's in High Wycombe and St Anne's, Ealing; Dusty Springfield's background was comfortably Home County and middle-class. After leaving school she took jobs, behind the counters of music shops and general stores and, in her spare time, appeared as an amateur folk-singer in the coffee shops of London. She performed either alone with her guitar or, more often, sitting-in with elder brother Tom in the bands for which he drummed.

The first real move into show-business came at the age of 17, when she joined two other girls to form the Lana Sisters in 1958, her first professional appearance being at the Savoy Cinema in Lincoln. Although that show was marred by first night nerves, which resulted in Dusty tumbling down the dressing-room stairs, the Lana Sisters went on to achieve minor success and even made an appearance on BBC's "6.5 Special" television programme.

Wishin' And Hopin'

In 1960, Dusty decided to leave the Lana Sisters and join her brother Tom and a friend, Tim Field, to form the Springfields. They made their recording debut the following year with Dear John on the Philips label. Although this sold but modestly, the group entered the charts for the first time in August 1961 with Breakaway, which reached Number 31 in the UK. The Springfields personnel changed when Tim Field left and was replaced by Mike Hurst, but their sound remained consistent -- a kind of happy, good-to-be-alive country pop based on Dusty's lead vocal. As Dusty herself put it later: "We were successful because there was nobody else around like us then. We were jolly and we looked cheerful and that was it."

Further chart success came in 1962 with Island of Dreams and in 1963 with Say I Won't Be There, both written by Tom Springfield and both of which reached Number 5 in Britain. In 1962 the group achieved an American break-through when Island of Dreams made Billboard's Top Twenty. This stateside success led to recording work in Nashville -- but the Springfields' introduction to the American music business came as quite a shock, as Dusty later recalled: "We had to learn new songs in the morning and record them in the afternoon. I realized we were a bit out of our depth. We were in Tennessee, singing country music that the people there were born to. But it wasn't born to us. We had to work out every note."

In September 1963, at the height of their success, the Springfields disbanded after a farewell appearance on television's Sunday Night At The London Palladium. Although the split surprised and saddened many, it was understandable. Individually they had become bored, feeling that they had achieved everything they could together, so they separated and went their own ways: Tom to concentrate on writing, Mike Hurst to become a folk-club manager and later a record producer, and Dusty to become a solo singer.

With her very first solo single, Dusty came up with an all-time classic hit -- I Only Want To Be With You. Written by Mike Hawker and Ivor Raymonde, it reached Number 4 in the UK and Number 12 in the USA. Between 1964 and 1969 there followed 14 further Top Thirty hits in the UK alone, including Hal David and Burt Bacharach's 'Wishin' And Hopin'' and I Just Don't Know What To Do With Myself', Gerry Goffin and Carole King's 'Some of Your Lovin' and Goin' Back'. The singer's greatest success, however, came with 'You Don't Have to Say You Love Me', which got to Number 1 in the UK and Number 4 in the US in the spring of 1966. (The song was an Italian number, 'Io Che Non Vivo Senza Te', with English lyrics by Vicki Wickham and Yardbirds producer Simon Napier-Bell.)

The white Negress

In style Dusty had made an immediate transition from her country girl days to become the first and best white soul singer to emerge in the UK. Cliff Richard had early dubbed her 'the white Negress', a phrase which later became the 'white Aretha Franklin'. Most of her mid-sixties output, produced by Johnny Franz, featured smooth, lush string and horn arrangements far removed from the sound of hard-core American soul but Dusty's choice of material, her fine broad torchy voice and no-holds-barred delivery left nobody in any doubt that the music came from the depths of her soul. She quoted Baby Washington and Aretha Franklin as major influences, but Latin American rhythms and the Motown sound also played a part.

Comparing the US music scene with that of her own country in 1966 Dusty was quoted as saying: "The indiscriminate choice of singers here [in the UK] is going to spoil the music. The so-called 'in thing' is killing soul. Watch the kids cheering at a concert and a lot of them don't know the good from the bad.' For her, the initial creative action was the choice of first-class material--but it proved to be a struggle to find sufficient songs of quality.

The care demonstrated in her choice of material was extended by Dusty to her recorded product and live performances. A self-confessed perfectionist, she requested repeated takes of the same song or section in the studio, and live performances were intensively rehearsed and meticulously staged. From 1964 onwards she employed a full-time lighting technician, Fred Perry, for all her shows, well before many Seventies bands made lighting a cornerstone of their theatrics. But perfectionism on stage has its drawbacks. Live performance is by its very nature as open to disaster as it is to magical highs: the more tightly rehearsed a show the less it gains from spontaneity. Dusty, always an intensely close and introverted person, found it difficult to project well in intersong audience chat and took refuge in a tightly-structured show.

During the Sixties she toured most major countries, and reached the pinnacles of London's Talk of the Town and New York's Plaza Hotel Persian Room on the club circuit. She played the 1965 Royal Command Performance before the Queen and did numerous television shows, but the strain of live performing was there throughout. From the early days, Dusty had a notorious short and violent temper which was liable to surface at the slightest mistake or perceived error, whether in a show, during an interview, in a hotel or restaurant. So while she was consistently charting two or three times a year and touring throughout the Sixties she was also displaying the darker side of her character. She won the New Musical Express and Melody Maker polls for best UK and world female vocalist year after year, but was also parting acrimoniously with her personal manager, Vic Billings.

Memphis magic

This was the situation when, in late 1968, she changed record label to Atlantic in the US and travelled to Memphis to record a new album. Although immense in the UK, Dusty had never really achieved more than medium-scale success in the States, and this was an attempt to harness the singer's talents with American musicians and technique. The 1968 Dusty in Memphis album is now regarded as one of the classics of the Sixties., Atlantic certainly spared no effort or expense on their new signing; they used the cream of Memphis session men and put the project in the hands of Jerry Wexler, Tom Dowd and Arif Mardin, one of their top production teams.

Dusty took some time to get over initial nervousness but, with production values that demanded perfection, she was able to demonstrate her abilities as an interpreter of soul. "The sessions were all taken very easily," she

recalled. "I was very inhibited at first, but the thing is that they spent such a long time on the rhythm tracks that you got time to unwind."

Atlantic were keen to show the versatility of Dusty's voice, for the material included four Goffin-King tracks, Michel Legrand's Windmills of Your Mind and a Barry Mann-Cynthia Weil number, Just a Little Lovin', was also included. Critically the album was well received but sales were disappointing. Although the first single lifted from the album--a somewhat stilted take from early in the sessions of Son Of A Preacher Man--made the Top Ten on both sides of the Atlantic, subsequent releases fared less well. The failure to gain really big sales in the US had a far-reaching effect on the singer.

With the sales of her records dwindling during 1969 and 1970, Dusty retreated into herself, increasingly confused and questioning. She eventually decided to cut free from her flagging career, refuse any more live dates and spend her time travelling the world. At the time she described herself as tired of the constant touring of clubs and the general strain of live performance. "I don't really want to pursue a night-club career, although it would be very easy," she said. "I don't think I have got the mental or physical stamina to stand it for long."

But her anxiety was deeper-rooted and more personal than the mere exhaustion of life on the road. "I'm not sure what I do want. I've not found it yet. I suppose it's about time I started looking for what I want rather than waiting for it to come to me, but I'm rather lazy." She visited hypnotists and California-style personal development gurus but apparently gained little beyond help in relaxing. Ultimately she blamed, "totally inhibiting middle-class morality" for her dissatisfaction and restlessness.

The singer was not helped by the state her private life was in either, for she had no publicly known partner from whom to draw strength and support. Naturally journalists were interested in the romantic attachments of a stunning young superstar, but Dusty had always been careful to keep her private life separate from her professional persona--and totally secret. She has never married nor had any publicised affairs and has always rejected enquiries into her personal life.

Death-rattle and roll

During the seventies Dusty made various attempted come-backs. In 1972, after a two year lay-off, she took on some night-club dates, most notably at the New York Persian Room, but these were not a success. "I floundered miserably. After several nightclub dates I sensed the death-rattle of both the night-clubs and me, and I really sat sulking for a long time." In fact, following the release of the unsuccessful Cameo album in 1973, she retreated for another five years, spending the time in California and, occasionally, in London.

In 1978 she made her biggest attempt at a major come-back with the album It Begins Again, produced by Roy Thomas Baker, the man who made his name with Queen. Baker's grandiose production techniques coupled with Dusty's perfectionism resulted in a long-drawn-out extravaganza which cost an astronomical 420,000 dollars to produce. Much of the material, by Barry Manilow, Carole Bayer Sager, Nona Hendryx and the like was somewhat middle-of-the-road in comparison with her Sixties output and the album, despite interviews and media hype, was a failure.

In 1982, Dusty Springfield has settled in Toronto, Canada, and although she was still making the occasional effort to record, it seemed unlikely that she would once again attain those superlative heights of power singing which had been the staple of her success in the Sixties.

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daydreamer
Moderator
★★★★

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I have that article Nancy but I'm pleased to say that I bought it later in the 80's when Dusty had made those 'superlative heights' yet again! What did they know!



Carole x



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