

# Let's Talk Dusty!

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## A tale about Mary O'Brien

<http://www.dustyspringfield.org.uk/forum/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=7181>

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### A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **donellac**

Posted: **Fri Mar 20, 2015 9:45 am**

Hello all you fans of Dusty - star, fantastic singer and amazing musician. Now I am ready to share this on the forum. It is a little piece I wrote based around the 'St Louis Blues' episode (from St Anne's) that is mentioned in several of the biographies.

This my story:

Her father Gerard was a radio ham. The kitchen table was overtaken by the radio receiver and transmitter. Soldering irons, wiring, sockets, switches, tubes, bulbs and lamps were strewn across it; he was forever tinkering and they never could sit down to eat at the table.

Amateur radio seemed almost magical then. There was no internet and few could afford international phone calls. Air travel was only for the very rich. But radio hams could make contact with one another in every corner of the world. Hams were seen as glamorous and exciting. During disasters they kept up communications and they had been called on to serve with the military during the Second World War.

If 'ham radio' was one of his passions, another was music. Her father was a classical nut; he worshipped Beethoven. In the O'Brien house the 'wireless' played an important role. Evenings, after school, this was tuned to the Home Service or the Third Programme. With her father and mother she listened to classical music, but also to Jazz and Blues - they loved Ella Fitzgerald and Peggy Lee and Jelly Roll Morton.

Her parents gave music to her. Her father would set quizzes; he would play a piece on the piano and ask her to name the composer. Other times he would tap out notations on the back of her hand. She felt his fingers on her hand and would have to guess the piece from the rhythm.

With her mother Kathleen there were trips to the local cinema. They saw Hollywood musicals; Judy Garland in 'A Star is Born', Doris Day in Calamity Jane, Debbie Reynolds in 'Singing in the Rain' and dozens more.

Kathleen taught her the music of Kerry and told her that when she was young, her mother would play the piano at home and on Sundays she played the organ at St John's Church.

She couldn't imagine her life without music; from when she was a small child she'd had a big voice and she was always singing. Her father set up a studio in the kitchen - with a mike, amongst his ham radio equipment - so that she and her brother could broadcast performances to the neighbours in the next room. 'Sing up' mother would say. 'Sing up'. They beat out rhythms with objects they found around the house; a cigar box filled with marbles, a cracked pair of maracas. They even recorded their songs on an old tape recorder.

Her school, in Ealing, was private and fee-paying. Mostly the pupils were the daughters of well to do middle class families. The girls were given a good basic education and their elocution lessons taught them a very proper way of speaking. The school was housed in a 17th Century mansion, set in its own grounds and with high metal gates. The chapel had cherubs on the ceiling and there was a marble staircase. The upstairs rooms, used as classrooms and the library, had the most amazing ceiling mouldings. The house had a magnificent drawing room 62 feet in length, a large hall and some fine carved bookcases.

Often seen around the school with her two friends, she was the leader, she was the one you noticed first. Outgoing and fun loving with green eyes, auburn hair and a ready grin, she was hard to miss. It was well known that she was musical, she always had her guitar with her. She performed at every opportunity, and there were many opportunities. With her friends she formed a trio and they played and sang at the annual concerts and end of term activities.

She was oppressed by the strict school rules, by the shapeless regulation gym slips, the sensible shoes and the school hat that must always be worn when travelling to and from school. Along with the pale blue rimmed National Health glasses she wore for her short sight, she felt drab and unattractive. Her school reports show she was a good pupil, but not outstanding. Strangely there is no mention of music. Now was time for her to leave and find her way in the world. She would be an entertainer, that much she knew. Outside of that she had no idea where life would take her.

Before she left though there was one last concert to perform at school. But what to sing? There must be something better than their usual corny repertoire. And then she knew it, it had to be 'St Louis Blues'.

'St Louis Blues' was one of the first blues songs to succeed as a pop song. It was written in a bar in Memphis, in 1914, by WC Handy. He had had a chance meeting with a woman on the streets of St. Louis distraught over her husband's absence. She lamented, "Ma man's got a heart like a rock cast in de sea".

This song was everywhere. She must have heard it on the radio; was it Bessie Smith singing tortured blues?

Could it have been the Hall Johnson Gospel Choir singing a capella? Its complex backing; the chanting chorus, the call and response all set a rich tapestry that enveloped the emerging solo voice. Had she, at the cinema, seen a very young Liberace on piano accompanying Gilda Gray while she danced the 'Shimmy' and gave a cheeky performance of 'St Louis Blues'?

Loving the song, she had messed with it on her guitar over and over. She picked out the chords, she learned the words and she practised, practised, practised. Finally she had it right. This then was to be their final song. School rules were strictly applied; hanging around the cloakrooms was forbidden. In spite of this the three friends were seen there often in the weeks before the concert. Did the teachers turn a blind eye to this rule breaking to give them time for their preparations? For her the performance could never be just 'good enough'. Learning the chords, working on the arrangement, creating the harmonies took too much hard work for that. She wanted it to be perfect and she demanded the same commitment from her friends as she gave herself. At the dress rehearsal the geography mistress came in to watch the trio - to vet their performance. She listened to them singing. So much effort had gone in to get this right. The tight harmony, the solo voice, the guitar all blended together. And they sounded good!

But the mistress was not happy. She saw the purple lighting used to create atmosphere, she heard the lyrics 'St Louis woman, with all her diamond rings, stole that man of mine by her apron strings'. 'Oh no, this won't do at all' she said. 'This is most unsuitable, it is just too raunchy.' And there was an end. The performance was cancelled.

Was she naive, was it innocent of her to believe that this song would be acceptable? 'St Louis Blues' was said to be a favourite of Queen Elizabeth II. The school had sent a 'Spiritual Bouquet' on her coronation day. But the stern moral code of St Anne's Convent and its teaching staff could not countenance the singing of this song at the concert. But she later said the nuns loved it!

I hope you like it!

Dx

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **Lucy**

Posted: **Fri Mar 20, 2015 12:11 pm**

What a great story Donella and well written. It certainly gets the imagination going. : 🍷👍

She really was a great singer and musical artist and as its been said in many interviews by people that she could take the phone book and make it heart rendering 🍷

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **pat.dunham**

Posted: **Fri Mar 20, 2015 1:16 pm**

Thanks Donella, a great read. Nice to hear more about her schooldays. I also went to a fee paying convent school with a very strict uniform regime, so I empathize very much with Dusty. It's amazing what you can do with a Panama hat to make it look different!

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **darren2722**

Posted: **Fri Mar 20, 2015 3:02 pm**

Very nicely done Donella. 🍷 You've set the scenes of Dusty's Childhood and Musical upbringing very well. Can nearly picture it 🍷 Could be the opening pages from a script/screenplay for a film based on Dusty's life. Hmmmmm? 🍷

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **RenegadesEPC**

Posted: **Fri Mar 20, 2015 3:10 pm**

Wow, Donella, that was spectacular! I much enjoyed reading it. I, too, have messed around with writing about Dusty as a child, or should I say Mary 🍷 If you'd like to give it a read any time, just let me know! I'd be more than happy to oblige!

I like the way you went into such detail about the school - I felt as though I was standing right there, staring up at the beautiful chapel ceiling! And you portrayed Mary's want to be a performer very well. Thank you for sharing. You should post some more, as it was VERY enjoyable! 🍷

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by donellac

Posted: Fri Mar 20, 2015 4:27 pm

Thank you Lucy, Pat, Darren and (is it?) Claudia. 🙏🙏🙏

I am glad you enjoyed this piece about Mary.

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by FionaJ

Posted: Fri Mar 20, 2015 4:32 pm

Wonderfully written and full of vivid details and descriptions. 🍷

Thanks so much Donella 🙏

Will there be any more like it? 🙏

(Claudia, I would absolutely love to read anything you've written 😊 )

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by donellac

Posted: Sat Mar 21, 2015 12:09 am

Thank you Fiona! 🙏🙏🙏🙏

The answer to your question is yes, there will be more like it! 🙏

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by RenegadesEPC

Posted: Sat Mar 21, 2015 12:57 am

Yes Donella, it is indeed Claudia! 😊 I just loved your writing and im looking forward to more, especially if there is more in the future! It's so vivid and imaginative. Excellent! ❤️ And Fiona, I'll PM you! 🙏

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by donellac

Posted: Sat Mar 21, 2015 1:30 am

Thanks Claudia. The aim was to make the story come alive. I am really pleased if you find that is the case. Darren, I wanted it to be cinematic (but I don't plan to write a screenplay).

And It is all factual. 🙏🙏

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by Lucy

Posted: Sat Mar 21, 2015 3:38 am

Yes. Donella you really did bring the story alive. It's good to read about Dustys early childhood life and what a great musical start she had. I wonder if her Mum and Dad ever realised what a star she would become?? 🌟  
Whatever they taught her in those informative years in regards to music, really made a big impact on her life. And in turn it made an impact on our lives as a result.

We are the beneficiaries of that wonderful legacy 🌹

Hope you write more in the future. It appears we have quite a few writers amongst us 🌟🌟 Maybe you could get together??????

## Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by FionaJ

Posted: Sat Mar 21, 2015 3:50 pm

*pat.dunham wrote:*

Thanks Donella, a great read. Nice to hear more about her schooldays. I also went to a fee paying convent school with a very strict uniform regime, so I empathize very much with Dusty. It's amazing what you can do with a Panama hat to make it look different!

This is me in my convent school uniform sometime around 1967 (I'm about 4 or 5). Maybe a slight improvement on Dusty's? We had a different hat for Winter - grey felt with a blue band 🙄



### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **RenegadesEPC**

Posted: **Sat Mar 21, 2015 3:59 pm**

Oh Fiona, how adorable you are! 🙄🙄 I love the hat! I used to go to a Catholic school, though I switched to public from second grade onward, but I had to wear a blue plaid jumper. Wasn't very attractive! 😊

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **dig123**

Posted: **Sat Mar 21, 2015 7:35 pm**

Enjoyed reading your story Donella!

Can relate to the Catholic school days. Didn't have to wear a hat like you have on Fiona. (cute pic) Dark blue jumper with blue bowtie and white blouse. That was our uniform. We sort of resembled the nuns! lol!

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **donellac**

Posted: **Sat Mar 21, 2015 7:46 pm**

Hey there, thank you all for your positive feedback.



### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **Lucy**

Posted: **Sat Mar 21, 2015 11:30 pm**

Fiona.

What a cutie you were!!! 🙄

Very smart uniform too. I can't relate to convent schools myself but,my Mum went to one and she told me lots of stories!!!!

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **FionaJ**

Posted: **Sat Mar 21, 2015 11:36 pm**

Haha thanks Linda 😊 I have absolutely no idea why I'm smiling....it was fairly horrific to be honest 😬 Yes, I've got stories too!! 🙌

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **Lucy**

Posted: **Sun Mar 22, 2015 12:05 am**

Have you changed much Fiona????

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **FionaJ**

Posted: **Sun Mar 22, 2015 12:40 am**

Linda I'll PM you an up- to- date one.....I'm not putting it here!! 🙌🙌

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **Michael Muccino**

Posted: **Sun Mar 22, 2015 6:15 am**

Really marvelous piece, Donella!

Fiona- I have a photo somewhere of me leaving my house for my first day of first grade in Catholic school - September, 1957. Think I was crying. If I can find it I'll try to scan and send it. 😬

**Michael**

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **darren2722**

Posted: **Sun Mar 22, 2015 7:48 am**

Really looking forward to some more pieces from you Donella. 🌟

What a Cutie-Pie Fiona. 😊

I should imagine School was 'horrific' for most of us be it Catholic, Public, State or whichever. 😊

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **donellac**

Posted: **Sun Mar 22, 2015 9:22 am**

Darren,

If you'll only give me time ..... 🎵 🎵 🎵

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **karen**

Posted: **Sun Mar 22, 2015 12:36 pm**

Yes good luck with all this Donella.. and of course we will "give you time" 😊🙌

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **Cardiff Bluesgirl**

Posted: **Sun Mar 22, 2015 12:53 pm**

Good luck in your endeavors. 😊

i loved school, mine was called a Church in Wales school.

happy days. 😊



### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **trek007**

Well done Donella. A nice piece of writing.

I too loved school both as a pupil and teacher.

Posted: **Sun Mar 22, 2015 1:10 pm**

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **Michael Muccino**

**Nice picture, Liz - Was the school Anglican?** 🤔

Posted: **Mon Mar 23, 2015 5:53 am**

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **Lucy**

Great picture Liz how cute we look when we're young!!!, 🌟

Posted: **Mon Mar 23, 2015 6:32 am**

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **Hampson**

Excellent work Donella.

Wend

Posted: **Tue Mar 24, 2015 7:12 am**

### Re: A tale about Mary O'Brien

by **donellac**

Thank you for your positive comments and support Michael, Liz, Trek and Wend.

Posted: **Tue Mar 24, 2015 8:55 am**

