

Let's Talk Dusty!

The Ultimate Forum for Dusty Springfield Fans

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Tracey Thorn on Dusty's voice.

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Tracey Thorn on Dusty's voice. (#p170023)

by [daydreamer](#) » Sun Apr 12, 2015 11:14 am

A wonderful read from an article in the Guardian.

Who is my favourite singer? It's a question I'm often asked, not surprisingly, and my answer is usually the same: Dusty Springfield. I remember clearly the first time I heard her. Elvis Costello was presenting a radio show, playing a selection of his favourite records, and as was usually the case with anything like that on the radio, I was taping it on to cassette. This was 1980, or maybe 1981. He played I Don't Want to Hear It Any More from Dusty in Memphis, and there was her voice - that smoky, husky, breathy, vulnerable, bruised, resigned, deliberate, sensual voice.

Thorn's favourite singer, Dusty Springfield. Thorn says: 'I've always thought if Dusty's voice was a colour, it was silver.' Photograph: Ian Berry

Ugh, all the same old words, and they won't do, will they? Roland Barthes in his 1972 essay *The Grain of the Voice* touched on this basic problem of music criticism, remarking snidely that "the work (or its performance) is invariably translated into the poorest linguistic category: the adjective". Words are of course limited and so we all reach for the same ones, and they wear thin from overuse. But where to find better ones, truer ones? If you'd never heard her voice, what words could summon it up in your imagination?

In her biography, Dusty, Lucy O'Brien quotes Jerry Wexler, who produced Dusty in Memphis along with Arif Mardin, talking about the uniqueness of her sound: "There were no traces of black in her singing, she's not mimetic... She has a pure silvery stream." Silvery, I like that. I've always thought if Dusty's voice was a colour, it was silver. There is so much air in every note, and although the sound is rich, it has none of the chocolatey-brown of, say, Karen Carpenter's. It seems to exist higher up, almost suspended above our heads, literally transcendent. You look up to Dusty's voice, in every sense.

Neil Tennant pointed to the emotional tension in her singing, saying there's "an intensity and desperation to her voice that's fantastically sensual". Desperation: that's very observant. It's easy enough to hear the sensuality, of course, but to spot the undercurrent that makes her pierce you as much as soothe and seduce you, that's getting more to the heart of her. Of course, although she could be melodramatic, particularly on the mid-1960s pop recordings, she was never a belter, and she was a singer who made use of the microphone. When she did project, there would be a fragility to it, and a feeling that she was covering it up with an element of bravado. There was a possibility that the voice might fail her, a note might break, although it never did. The slight huskiness is often commented on, the sound of being on the edge of laryngitis, which she suffered from

recurrently.

But here's the terrible thing; the terrible, true thing that she thought, that maybe lots of singers think, which runs counter to all that we imagine it must feel like to be in possession of a unique and gorgeous voice that people love. This is what she once said: "All I know is that I have a distinctive voice I don't particularly like listening to."

In the recording studio, Dusty would be demanding and perfectionist, both admirable qualities, essential for the making of good music, but when it came to the moment of recording the vocals she would turn those thoughts on herself like knives. She would have the volume in her headphones turned up as loud as possible, to the point where it was almost painful, and the effect would be overwhelming. That way she could disappear inside a wall of sound, and so, just as she hid her physical appearance behind the mask of hair and makeup, she would hide even her voice.

Singing in a choir, your voice can vanish among all the others, you are part of one big communal sound and no one is listening to you in particular. But as a solo singer, especially a famous and loved solo singer, this luxury is usually denied. You must be heard, and you must hear yourself. Dusty tried to escape hearing herself as a way of escaping confrontation with that which disappointed her, but I wonder also whether she suffered from that confusion between her voice and her person, whether she perceived doubts about her voice as in fact doubts about her value as a person, even about her existence as a real, authentic person.

As her career moved on, and she left behind the glory of the British pop hits and the magnificence of albums like *Dusty in Memphis*, she really did begin to get lost, wandering a path with no obvious musical or career signposts to follow. She had matured as an artist, and at the very point when she should have been reaching a pinnacle in terms of success, her audience began to dwindle. *Dusty in Memphis*, released in 1969 and one of the greatest albums ever made, sold relatively poorly and was fairly soon deleted. *Cameo*, released in 1973, was a complete flop. It's one of my favourite records. I sing along with it and wish I had her voice. I fantasise that this is my new album, that all those musicians and backing singers are there for me, and that I am the voice at the centre of it all. I don't have Dusty's range, and I wish I did. If I could sing those songs the way she sang them, I'd be so proud, is what I think. I'd be fulfilled. I know it isn't true; I know it isn't as simple as that, and yet I fall into the same trap as every deluded listener. It's what singing does to us. It makes us so happy that we imagine it must come from happiness, mustn't it? Otherwise, it just doesn't seem fair. That we should be having all the fun.

© Tracey Thorn 2015. The above is an edited extract from *Naked at the Albert Hall*, published by Virago, £16.99, 30 April. To pre-order it for £13.59 [click here](#)

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Re: Tracey Thorn on Dusty's voice. (#p170048)

by **dusty nut** » Sun Apr 12, 2015 4:20 pm

Thank you so much for posting that wonderful article. It is always great when somebody shares our love for Dusty and that amazing voice. 🌟

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Re: Tracey Thorn on Dusty's voice. (#p170057)

by **trek007** » Sun Apr 12, 2015 7:11 pm

Some very interesting comments in that article.

Most of which we would probably all agree with.

Thank you for posting it Carole

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Re: Tracey Thorn on Dusty's voice. (#p170070)

by **daydreamer** » Sun Apr 12, 2015 10:02 pm

I hadn't spotted Clive's earlier post under Don't Forget About Me when I posted this, sorry for the duplication. 🙄

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Re: Tracey Thorn on Dusty's voice. (#p170071)

by **FionaJ** » Sun Apr 12, 2015 10:08 pm

Carole, better to have it duplicated than not at all 😊 Really great article, and so well written - thanks so much for posting 🙌

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Re: Tracey Thorn on Dusty's voice. (#p170182)

by **Lucy** » Wed Apr 15, 2015 5:29 am

What a great article Carole 🙌

Our sentiments exactly !!! There will never be another Dusty!!!!

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