



Springfield, Dusty (1939-1999)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Dusty Springfield in 1969.
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Dusty Springfield became the most popular British female rock star of the 1960s, one of the most prominent white soul singers ever, and a major influence on subsequent generations of singers. Now widely acclaimed as one of the greatest voices of popular music, she was long an icon of gay and lesbian culture.

Born Mary Isobel Catherine Bernadette O'Brien in London on April 16, 1939, she was educated in Roman Catholic convent schools. As an adolescent, Springfield was a bespectacled "ugly duckling."

She joined her brother Tom in a folk combo, the Springfields. They became the most popular group in England prior to the advent of the Beatles. In 1962, with "Silver Threads and Golden Needles," the Springfields became the first British group to have a Top 20 hit in the United States.

In 1963, inspired by the music of American girl groups, Dusty left the Springfields and embarked on a solo career. She changed from the "wholesome" Springfields style to a more trendy "Queen of the Mods" image, with fashionable clothing, excessive bouffant hairstyles, and heavy black mascara.

In 1964, her first solo recording, "I Only Want to Be with You," made her the first "British Invasion" artist to enter the American charts in the wake of the Beatles.

Springfield gained a wider audience by mixing American soul and British standards on her second album, *Ev'rything's Coming Up Dusty* (1965).

Her biggest hit, the melodramatic "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me" (1966), was a major success on both sides of the Atlantic. But by this time she was shifting from Queen of the Mods to female drag queen. She claimed she learned her make-up techniques from female impersonators--as her hair and dresses became increasingly over-the-top.

While her campy image and emotionally overwrought recordings of Italian ballads (refitted with English lyrics) made her a cult figure among gay fans, Springfield seemed adrift stylistically until she issued her 1968 album *Dusty in Memphis*, recorded with the Atlantic Records session musicians who played on many of the soul music hits of the decade.

Although it featured the hit single "Son of a Preacher Man" and has long been considered her masterpiece, this sophisticated and finely-wrought recording was ahead of its time and was, at the time of its release, a commercial failure.

In 1971, frustrated and depressed by the direction of her career and hounded by the press, Springfield took the amazingly courageous if self-destructive step of coming out publicly as "bisexual," although, as recent biographies have detailed, she was in fact a lesbian.

She moved to Los Angeles and basically dropped out of sight, her career and personal life in shambles. She performed little over the next fifteen years.

In 1986, at the insistence of the Pet Shop Boys, she resumed recording, teaming with them on their world-wide hit "What Have I Done to Deserve This?"

With her comeback she returned to England, where she was venerated as a pop heroine, and made a moderately successful album, *Reputation* (1990), produced by the Pet Shop Boys.

In 1995, while recording what would be her final album, *A Very Fine Love*, she was stricken with breast cancer.

Shortly before her death on March 2, 1999, Dusty Springfield was inducted, however belatedly, into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and awarded the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II.

At her funeral, Pet Shop Boy Neil Tennant summed up her life and career aptly: "She was fab and, because of her music, she always will be."

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