



DUSTY SPRINGFIELD

With her very first single as a solo artist, Dusty Springfield secured her glorified place in the pantheon of rock & roll history. The 1963 release of “I Only Want to Be With You” made her the second English artist – following the Beatles – to break through in America as part of the initial wave of the British Invasion, launching the international career of one of rock’s most distinctive, far-reaching and enduring female vocalists. ☞ Indeed, Springfield, virtually the only woman in that original rush of British artists to have any real staying power, was among the relatively small number of women rock artists to score more than a hit or two the entire decade. But her chart-busting output was hardly limited to the high-intensity rock of her first single and its followup, “Stay Awhile.” Next turning to the structural sophistication of Burt Bacharach and Hal David’s songs, Springfield, with “Wishin’ and Hopin’,” quickly established herself as a singer of singular versatility and boldness: In coming years she would embrace diverse popular-music genres, seeking out material by the finest songwriters representing each style. And as her career unfolded, she influenced succeeding generations of fellow artists, from Elton John to Elvis Costello, Annie Lennox and, of course, Pet Shop Boys, who would bring her back to prominence more than a quarter century after she won the hearts of her contemporaries. ☞ When it started, however, Springfield’s career was in folk music. Born in London on April 16, 1939, Mary Isabel Catherine Bernadette O’Brien was schooled in a convent but gained an extensive musical education through her parents’ eclectic tastes, which

Dusty Springfield
(née Mary Isabel
Catherine
Bernadette
O’Brien) in 1964,
after scoring her
first solo hit

B Y J I M B E S S M A N



included jazz and Brazilian samba as well as classical music and pop standards. She particularly loved Peggy Lee's effortless swing and, via her father's tabletop ham-radio setup in the kitchen, would broadcast her own developing pop-vocal style to her neighbors.

She began singing professionally with the Lana Sisters, a pop-vocal trio with whom she recorded and toured American air bases.



Meanwhile, her older brother, Dion, was writing songs that soon formed the foundation for the Springfields, a popular folk trio consisting of Dion, now calling himself Tom Springfield; his friend Tim Field; and his sister, Mary, who became Dusty Springfield. Akin in sound to Peter, Paul and Mary, the Springfields fit in

perfectly with the early-Sixties folk revival and in 1962 had a Top Twenty U.S. hit with the much-recorded country classic "Silver Threads and Golden Needles."

But on Dusty's way to Nashville for a Springfields recording session, a fateful stop in New York City changed her career direction. Hearing the Exciters' hit "Tell Him" blasting out of midtown Manhattan's Colony Records, she was blown away by the ferocious female vocal and realized that her own creative calling was closer to soul, R&B and the girl-group sound than folk. Soon the Springfields – Britain's best-selling group in 1961 – were no more.

"I Only Want to Be With You," then, was a far cry from "Silver Threads and Golden Needles" but was every bit as exciting and fresh as "I Want to Hold Your Hand" – and bursting with the same energy that was galvanizing the youth on both sides of the Atlantic. Springfield's singing seemed a study in contradictions: vulnerable but insistent, dark but bright, cool and warm at the same time. She could cover an enormous expanse of emotional territory with her voice, imbuing

Top right: Springfield and Tom Jones meet Queen Elizabeth before a concert, 1968; Right: With the Echos, 1963; Below: A 1970 TV appearance.



ing her first singles with a feverish passion as she climbed in pitch.

In person, she was equally striking: Petite but with a high-rising blond beehive hairdo, Springfield stood out onstage, and did so all the more thanks to her black panda-style eye shadow and grandly elaborate hand gestures. But it was her unerring choice of songs that carried her forward, beginning with "Stay Awhile" – a full-blown Spector-like Wall of Sound production worthy of the Ronettes – and "Wishin' and Hopin'." She would later score with other numerous and varied great songwriters as well, among them Jimmy Webb, Randy Newman, Jerry Ragavoy, Mort Shuman, Jacques Brel, Charles Aznavour, Van Morrison, Carole Bayer Sager, Ellie Greenwich, Jeff Barry, Gerry Goffin and Carole King. King, in fact, said that Springfield was the best of the many who had recorded King compositions – by far.

Singing with so much soul that fellow British pop star Cliff Richard admirably dubbed her the "White Negress," Springfield, who was evicted from South Africa for playing before racially mixed audiences,



championed America's black artists and introduced the top Motown stars to the United Kingdom in a TV special she hosted. She even covered Aretha Franklin's "Don't Let Me Lose This Dream," along with many other songs by such top soul and R&B writers as Smokey Robinson, Thom Bell, Linda Creed, Ken Gamble, Leon Huff and Jerry Butler. But her biggest hit, "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me," was a 1966 version of an Italian pop song, with a new lyric cowritten by Vicki Wickham, Springfield's friend and future manager.

Then, in 1968, came what stands as Springfield's career album. Produced by Jerry Wexler, Tom Dowd and Arif Mardin, *Dusty in Memphis* focused fully on her voice, which excelled on such great songs as the hits "Son-of-a Preacher Man" and "The Windmills of Your Mind." Again, Springfield was showing her facility for all kinds of music, though by now she was tending toward a more mature pop style. Although she would continue to record albums of customary high quality throughout the Seventies (including 1970's Philly soul-inflected *A Brand New Me*, which yielded the title-track hit single), times, of course, were changing, and her hold on the teen-oriented singles charts inevitably loosened.

By the Eighties, however, young artists who had grown up worshipping Springfield were positioned to bring new luster to their idol. Elvis Costello, who patterned his recordings' piano sound after Springfield's (he also learned Bacharach-David's "I Just Don't Know What to Do With Myself" from her 1964 British hit-single version and recorded it long before his current teaming with Bacharach), wrote a song for her 1982 album *White Heat*. And in 1987 Pet Shop Boys asked Springfield to sing the chorus of their song "What Have I Done to Deserve This?": It became a U.S. and U.K. Number Two hit, leading to additional collaborations, including another British hit, "Nothing Has Been Proved."

For her 1995 album, *A Very Fine Love*, Springfield returned to Nashville – more than thirty years after that career-changing trip there with the Springfields. Since then, she's been away from the spotlight for the most part, courageously battling cancer. Her music, however, remains anything but hidden. "Son-of-a Preacher Man," for instance,

Right: Just after the '72 U.K. release of *See All Her Faces*, tracks from which were just reissued on *Dusty in London*; brand-new solo artist, 1963.

gained new prominence on the *Pulp Fiction* movie soundtrack, and in 1997 *The Dusty Springfield Anthology* beautifully documented her career in three discs and seventy-seven tracks.

At the beginning of this year, Queen Elizabeth of England bestowed upon Dusty Springfield the prestigious Order of the British Empire honor, in recognition of her many years of cultural service. And now, of course, comes her most-deserved induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. One need only return to "I Only Want to Be With You" to hear how she captured the mood not only of her own material but of a musical moment in time full of wonder and hope. That her supreme voice still resonates with such commanding presence today is a testament to her permanent legacy. ✨

