

“Dusty in Memphis”—Dusty Springfield (1969)

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Essay by Karen Bartlett (guest post)*



Dusty Springfield

Dusty Springfield landed in Memphis in September 1968 ready to record the album of her career. The enormous success of Atlantic Records, and its offshoot Stax, had helped turned the sleepy, run-down Southern city into a musical moneyspinner, worth an estimated 30 million dollars a year.

Stax had stiff competition, not the least from their local rivals Hi Records, who worked with Al Green and Tina Turner, but Atlantic was riding high that year as well, with 23 gold discs and a massive upsurge in profits. The small band of musicians and producers working at the unprepossessing American studios had developed a new way of recording, layering sound upon sound, that had made soul artists--like the new and mighty Aretha Franklin--as great a force as the Motown hit machine in Detroit. The sound was “hotter than a pistol,” but cleverly packaged for crossover to a white audience--and it spoke to America’s need to hear something real.

Moving to Atlantic as her US partner was a brave new start for Dusty, who had spent a decade as a leading UK artist, but had left the US music scene relatively untouched. Atlantic had been set up in 1947 by jazz aficionado Herb Abramson and the 24-year-old son of the Turkish ambassador to the United States, Ahmet Ertegun. Luckily, Ertegun and Abramson met the brilliant young recording engineer Tommy Dowd in their first year of operation and Dowd would go on to anchor all of Atlantic’s output for more than 25 years. Dowd gave Atlantic a “clarity of pitch, trueness of recording, and [an] engineering balance” without compare to other independents. He was a “broader engineer than any of us,” says Dan Penn, a guitarist who ended up at American Studios in Memphis after working for Muscle Shoals. “We were mono men when he was two track. We were two track when he was eight track.”

Ertegun was responsible for signing Dusty, and Dowd would work closely with her in the studio--but at the helm of her output was Atlantic’s vice-president, Jerry Wexler, whose style of work would have immense consequences for Dusty and her album. After hearing what they were doing with Otis Redding, Wexler had gone to Memphis to meet Stax in 1965 and was “blown away” by what he found and was introduced to a new way of recording that involved putting a session together one step at a time—“rhythm section, horns, the whole thing,” according to sideman Jim Dickinson. “Memphis was a real departure,” Wexler said, “because Memphis was a return to head arrangements, to the set rhythm section, away from

the arranger. It was a symbiosis between the producer and the rhythm section, and it was really something new.”

It would prove to be something new for Dusty too, who was now used to coming into the studio after the track had been laid down, and adding her vocal on top. Memphis did not work that way, at least not at American Studios, where the musicians liked to work with the singer, sometimes taking a few days to get to “a lick” or a sense of direction. And Memphis had attitude too--when reporter Stanley Booth questioned Dan Penn at American Studios in 1968, he asked what was behind Memphis’s sudden success: “It ain’t Memphis,” Penn said, “it’s the South.”

“Well, what is it about the South?”

“People down here don’t let nobody tell them what to do.”

For Dusty, Aretha Franklin’s recent success at the studios also added an extra layer of pressure, at least in her mind. Franklin had also arrived at Atlantic needing a new sense of direction. Like Dusty, she was a music veteran, with more than a dozen years in gospel behind her, but it had been five years since her last R&B hit and her recent recordings were “a peculiar mix of show tunes and schmaltz.” Everyone was watching Wexler, and Aretha, in the spring of 1967 and, working together, great things had been revealed--the real Aretha, soaring on inspired vocals that transformed “Respect” from a song about conjugal rights into a cry for freedom everywhere. In the autumn of 1968, the question was--could Wexler do that with Dusty?

The first signs were not promising. Before Dusty arrived in Memphis, she had spent time at Wexler’s house in Great Neck, New York, listening to demos of what Wexler believed were wonderful song choices. Hours passed, with Dusty rejecting each demo in turn until the pile of records was waist deep, and more than 80 potential hits lay rejected on the floor. She did not like any of them, and Wexler was briefly at a loss about what to do next. But after Dusty left, Wexler took his time and pulled together 15 or so of what he believed were the best songs from the pile, and later played them again to her, not mentioning that she had previously heard them. Dusty loved all of them. Wexler now had his material for “Dusty in Memphis.”

American Studios was tucked away behind a restaurant in a bad part of town. Rats ran rampant in the roof, but, defying her surroundings, Dusty still arrived every day looking like a “magazine lady.” With her blond beehive, and signature mascara-eyes, Dusty looked like the epitome of a white Southern madam. But unlike all the other matrons, cruising around town in their convertibles, when Dusty opened her mouth she either spoke in beautiful, clipped, English tones--or sang with intonation as good as any other soul star in the business.

Those musicians who were keen to hear that voice in action were soon disappointed, however--for Dusty didn’t sing. At first, Wexler recalled, Dusty would flit about the studio, saying things like “Aren’t all these boys good at playing!” while he would tell her, in exasperation, “Dusty, we need you at the microphone!”

Always prone to nerves and intense insecurity, Dusty was overwhelmed with Wexler’s style of recording, and the idea that so many soul legends had stood in the same spot. “I hated it because I couldn’t be Aretha Franklin. If only people like Jerry Wexler could realise what a

deflating thing it is to say ‘Otis Redding stood there’ or ‘That’s where Aretha sang.’ Whatever you do, it’s not going to be good enough. Added to the natural critic in me, it was a paralysing experience,” Dusty said.

In the studio, the tension grew: Dusty seemed unable to produce any vocals. “One time she shoved an ashtray at me in the control room,” said Jerry Wexler. “She had a terrible argument with Tom Dowd and called him a prima donna,” something that made Wexler very angry indeed: “There’s only one prima donna in the room at the moment!” he yelled back. Dowd laughed off the incident, but later said that Dusty was a “tough, tough, tough taskmaster on her own vocals” who would drive them all to the limit in her search for perfection.

For once, Dusty couldn’t complain that she had little input into the creative process, Wexler’s whole set-up was designed to give the artist full interaction with the musicians. Nor was Dowd a play-by-numbers engineer--instead he had spent a great deal of time studying Dusty’s range, and appreciated her for the great jazz artist she was. “I recognised in her a deep jazz root,” he said. “When she told me that Blossom Dearie was one of her heroines, I realised that she had an obscure avant-garde genius as her goal.... It disturbed her that she was popular for less.” Yet none of this prevented Dusty from wondering, “What am I doing on this label?” and she later said she was consumed with the question of “Why are they recording me?”

Crippled with an insecurity that eventually left her voiceless, Dusty left Memphis with a rhythm track laid down but no vocals. A few weeks later, she reconvened in New York with Jerry Wexler, who had added horns and a backing track from the Sweet Inspirations, led by Cissy Houston. Dusty went into the booth, laid aside all the troubles she’d encountered in Tennessee, cranked up the volume to ear-splitting level, and produced the most beautiful work of her career.

Arif Mardin, who arranged the strings and woodwinds for “Dusty in Memphis,” said that whatever difficulties they had encountered, and however many late nights they had spent getting it right, the project had an unmistakable “aura” about it, “like a blessing from above.” The song “In the Land of Make Believe” was as complicated and delicate as a Ravel string quartet.

Critics were torn as to which song was the highlight. Was it the Goffin/King number “I Can’t Make It Alone,” with Dusty sounding low and chilling on “There’s something in my soul...” or the fragile rendition of Randy Newman’s “I Don’t Want to Hear It Anymore”? What about her defiant interpretation of “Windmills of My Mind” where she threw out the cyclical intention of the writers, and steered the song with her own interpretation (she hated the lyrics, but admitted she’d done her best work on the vocals)? Or was the best song “Breakfast in Bed,” written by Muscle Shoals guitarist Eddie Hinton and Donnie Fritts, who were ecstatic at Dusty’s sexy, haunting delivery? Dusty’s own favourite was “Just One Smile,” her second song on the album by Randy Newman and a former top ten hit for Gene Pitney in 1966.

To hear just how well the combination of Dusty and Jerry Wexler worked, it was only necessary to compare Dusty’s version earlier of “Don’t Forget About Me,” recorded a year earlier in London, with the Memphis track. While the London version slides along nicely, making for a pleasant but forgettable song, Wexler’s Memphis recording begins with a startling guitar intro, before bringing in Dusty’s husky, emotional vocals and Memphis horns

--building to a thrilling climax.

Reviewers loved it: Bill Buckley in "Blues & Soul" cooed that "rarely in recording does everything come together so magnificently." Yet, "Dusty in Memphis" did not sell. "Everybody loved it except the damn public," Wexler said, frustrated about a masterpiece that epitomised an almost perfect album that encourages a listener to drop the stylus onto the first track, and not stop until the end of the final song on the other side.

"Windmills of My Mind" was both an Academy Award winner and a US hit single, but only "Son of a Preacher Man" made it in Britain, and even that took its time to make its way up the chart. Dusty later said her great work of art was a "rather overrated classic," as if she was still burned by the emotional events of the summer of 1968.

Yet, Dusty had "never hit a wrong note" on "Dusty in Memphis," Jerry Wexler concluded. The process had been torturous--but the music was a dream. Dusty had created something fragile, beautiful, complicated, and classic.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not be those of the Library of Congress.