

**BOOKS**

**W**hen I first heard of the legendary Dusty Springfield it was 1987, I was 11, and her comeback-making collaboration with gay synth-pop smarties the Pet Shop Boys on their hit single "What Have I Done to Deserve This?" was ubiquitous.

What I didn't know about her could've filled a book: She was one of Austin Powers-era England's most successful singers, she went on from a string of smash hits in the '60s to be acclaimed as an exemplary *artiste* of the pop/soul vocal, she is a Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame inductee, and she was revered by the masses and in-the-know hipster rock critics alike. Fortunately, that book has now been written, and it goes well beyond her remarkable career to give the reader a complete portrait of a woman who, like so many public personalities, had the alluring combination of extroversion and self-destructiveness until her death in March 1999.

*Dancing with Demons: The Authorized Biography of Dusty Springfield* (St. Martin's Press, 2001; \$24.95 hardcover) is, like its subject, contradictory. Despite the trashy hyperbole on the dust jacket ("What were the demons that plagued Dusty with the highest highs and lowest lows?" it asks breathlessly—an imaginary *Behind the Music: Dusty Springfield*), it's written with such empathy that most readers wouldn't even consider approaching the triumphs and travails of this talented, tortured woman with the kind of voyeuristic, envious superiority often reserved for celebrities.

The work is by turns startlingly honest and irksomely apologetic, which we can chalk up to the authors. The pair were trusted longtime Springfield confidants with real involvement in her life—Penny Valentine as a music journal-

## A dusty road

Friends offer a candid biography of lesbian pop star Dusty Springfield

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

ist, Vicki Wickham as producer of the English television program on which the singer launched her career.

The story they tell is of a mousy Catholic schoolgirl from a strict but eccentric family who, driven by a desire for the attention of her unflappable, detached parents, eventually rose to fame and acclaim with her gorgeous voice steeped in American pop and R & B. She deployed her gift with a self-flagellating perfectionism, causing major delays in recording studios and at live performances and creating the popular misconception that she was "difficult."

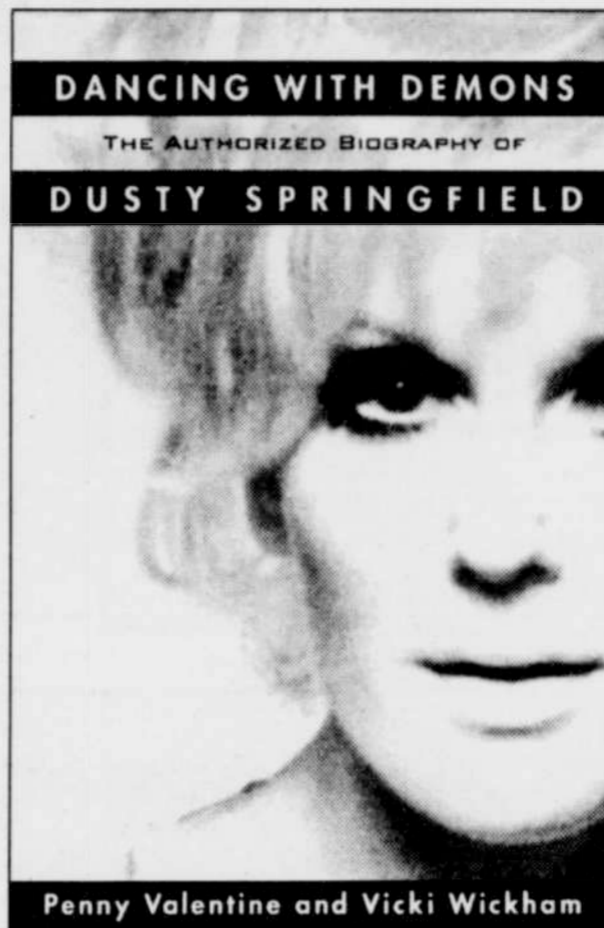
Springfield's biggest PR concern and the most anxiously concealed facet of her life—what was, according to the biographers, her exclusive homosexuality—is discussed here much more thoroughly and confidently than it ever has before, suggesting Valentine and Wickham had her permission to speak frankly of the matter once she was safely beyond the reach of the tabloids.

All of her long-term committed relationships—and a few minor flings—are described candidly and expansively. Always a presence in the gay community (she enjoyed the friendship of gay men and loved to see drag queens "do" Dusty), Springfield lived with female lovers all over the world throughout her career: an American artist in the '60s, a film journalist in the '70s, a Canadian rock singer in the '80s.

An avid tennis fan, she was close to Billie Jean King, maintaining a warm friendship with the controversial lesbian tennis player. Springfield admired King's fortitude and openness after a divorce proceeding revealed her orientation to a hostile public, but the singer had a horror of appearing "unfeminine" to her own fan base.

Her closeted state didn't pose a threat to her relationships, most of which took place during a time when hiding one's homosexuality was the socially enforced norm. Her mood swings and erratic behavior, however, eventually caused irreparable rifts with even the most patient of her partners.

The authors explain Springfield's troublesome attributes, from the fairly benign (she was fond of throwing things, especially food)



to the horrifying (her bouts of self-mutilation, her unfailing ability to develop an addiction to virtually any substance), by repeatedly reminding us that she was insecure, that she had lifelong difficulties with anxiety, that she suffered from bipolar disorder.

What feels like the authors' constant vacillation between cozy armchair psychology and blind defensiveness is the book's only real flaw. It's the downside of having a biography written by friends: Laudably attempting more than a puff piece, they offer so many excuses on Springfield's behalf that one wonders whether the brassy, irreverent woman we meet in the book wouldn't have been exasperated with so many pat, tidy answers.

But there's no question Springfield would have been pleased finally to have someone introduce the world to the real Dusty: a very human star who fought to sidestep showbiz victimization, a recovering substance abuser, a flamboyant gay icon and friend of the community who felt burdened by her own sexuality, an animal lover, a restless nomad, a kind and generous friend.

The authors have succeeded at that, interestingly and effectively recasting a pop music icon and thereby doing Springfield and her (until now incomplete) legend an invaluable service. **J**

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