

A black and white portrait of country music artist Shelby Lynne. She has short, wavy blonde hair and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top with a light-colored, lace-trimmed collar and cuffs. Her hands are clasped in front of her.

Dusty Springfield
danced with personal
demons all her life.
Now Shelby Lynne
is channeling Dusty's
music for a new
generation.
Is she channeling
Dusty's demons too?

Shelby, Dusty, Demons, and Dreams

BY MICHELE KORT

SHELBY LYNNE PHOTOGRAPHED
BY AUTUMN DE WILDE
EXCLUSIVELY FOR THE ADVOCATE ON LOCATION
AT THE PARKER HOTEL IN PALM SPRINGS, CALIF.



**DANGEROUS
DIVAS**

*Dusty Springfield
(opposite, in 1969)
and Shelby Lynne:
two big talents with
a taste for trouble*

Shelby Lynne is contrite. "I'm sorry for that little foray over there," she says, on the phone from her Palm Springs, Calif., home. "I had a little too much to drink that evening." She's talking about our first attempt at this interview, five days earlier, at the desert's '50s-hipster Parker hotel. Things had not gone according to plan. "Hey, what can I say?" she continues in her melting Alabama drawl. "I ain't much on photo shoots. I'm a fuckin' musician. I like to be a mole; I like people looking at me when I'm doing a show, and that's all."

Doing press is "kind of a nightmare" for Lynne, and when *The Advocate* ventured out to take some pictures and talk about her new CD, *Just a Little Lovin'*—on which she covers songs recorded by the timeless gay icon Dusty Springfield—Shelby self-medicated, shall we say. Throughout the long afternoon and into the evening her emotions ebbed and flowed, from insecurity to confidence, petulance to intimacy. One moment she was hugging me, the next walking off in a huff with my tape recorder. "Don't worry," said Lynne's manager and friend, Elizabeth "Betty" Jordan, "she'll bring it back."

And she did. Through all the drama, it was impossible not to like Shelby and even feel protective toward her. For one thing, the 39-year-old singer-songwriter is a profound talent. A musician's musician, she jams with the likes of Willie Nelson and Lucinda Williams and records with music's most sought-after producers. Over a 20-year career she's followed her own quirky muse, recording country and post-country albums yet never breaking out into stardom on the level of, say, Brad Paisley—whom she beat out for 2001's Best New Artist Grammy award. Lynne's fans—and I'm one—can't help but love how artfully she expresses the most heartbreaking emotions in song. And how could anyone, woman or man, not warm to this salty, beautiful, grown-up tomboy with the piercing blue eyes?

Today on the phone, Shelby's all pro. We resume our talk about her music—and about Dusty. While Lynne has composed almost all the material on her last four albums, this time she took a break from songwriting to pay tribute to the taste and talent of the legendary British singer, who died in 1999.

"It gives credit where credit is due, to one of the greatest, coolest singers and interpret-

ers ever," says Shelby. "It's not that I'm trying to ever, ever fill any shoes—it's a step into a shadow that's pretty big. I had a couple of people ask me, 'Why you?' And I said, 'Why not?' I think Dusty would be happy that I'm bringing her songs, and her, to the forefront again—which is where she should be."

Actually, Shelby and Dusty make a great couple. Lynne's breakthrough 2000 album, *I Am Shelby Lynne*, has often been name-checked with *Dusty in Memphis*, Springfield's masterpiece of 30 years before. Could it be the lush strings on both albums? Could it be that, while their voices are quite different, both singers take your breath away as they glide from a whisper to a keening wail? Could it be their willingness to venture into the most profound emotional depths? "Well, it can't be anything but a compliment for me," says Shelby.

But she also lets me know that she *hates* comparisons. During the Palm Springs interview she bristled over any attempt to connect the two albums. "It's lazy!" she said, no doubt anticipating an equation along the lines of Dusty+Memphis = Shelby+Alabama. "South and South! Give me a break!"

On our later call she's less prickly. "This is the thing," she says. "Dusty and I don't have anything in common except an aching soul."

Ah, the aching soul. The Irish-English Springfield (née Mary Isobel Catherine Bernadette O'Brien) showcased hers in nearly 300 tunes recorded over a three-decade-plus career. She sang everything from bombastic Italian-style ballads to tasty pop trifles to the most soulful American R&B, all in her inimitable smoky timbre and with spot-on phrasing, and frequently produced herself as well, in an era when female artists just didn't do those things. To this day, recordings like Dusty's "The Look of Love" are so iconic, so

deeply planted in the culture, we feel they've always existed exactly as she sang them.

From the start, Dusty was especially important to gay culture. Gay boys loved her extravagant drag-queen persona and all-around diva-ness; gay girls loved how ballsy she was behind the makeup and glitter. And everybody melted for That Voice.

After she died, fans gained deeper perspective as to where Dusty's soulful ache may have come from, as we learned about her struggles with drugs, alcohol, and a troubled psyche. We also learned that throughout her life, Dusty loved women, even though she remained essentially closeted until she died.

Shelby's as familiar with the posthumous Dusty bio *Dancing With Demons* as I am. "Lord knows we all have our demons," Shelby says, "and when I was doing my reading on Dusty and sadly realized things about her kind of damaging herself with drinking and drugs—hell, who doesn't! You've got to be able to get through it, and we do the best we can, you know."

SHELBY LYNNE (née Shelby Lynne Moorer) may have been born with that soulful ache herself, but she also earned it. Her family tragedy has been recounted so often now that it feels like scratching a wound even to mention it. Simply, her alcoholic and abusive father, estranged from the family, came back one night to try to reconcile with his wife and ended up killing her and himself. Shelby was 17, her sister Allison Moorer—a terrific, alto-voiced singer-songwriter herself—just 14.

Shelby doesn't want to rehash her childhood history in small-town Alabama, but check out other interviews she and Allison have done and you'll find there was plenty of music around their house—country, bluegrass, old-timey, Everly Brothers, Beatles. Their father was a frustrated musician himself, and their mother had a great voice. Early on, Shelby and her "sissy" sang skintight harmonies together, and even performed as a singing duo in some local fiddle contests.

Lynne seems always to have been the rebel. Obviously a smart woman, she hated school. "It was the biggest waste of my time in my life," she says. "I feel if I had not had to go to school, I probably could have been making records now for 30 years! In fact, I guaran-fuckin'-tee it." As for her early musical education, she considers it "limited." She didn't even discover Dusty (through, no surprise, *Dusty in Memphis*) until she was 28. Shelby was familiar with Dusty's huge 1966 hit song "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me," but only in its 1970 version by Elvis.

By then, Shelby was a Nashville recording artist. She'd moved to country's Music



LYNNE PHOTOGRAPHED BY AUTUMN DE WILDE ON LOCATION AT THE PARKER HOTEL IN PALM SPRINGS, CALIF. HAIREY CRAIG GANGI, MAKEUP BY KARAN MITCHELL

City not long after her parents died, had been briefly married, and was discovered at 18. Soon she was dueting with George Jones and being produced by the legendary Billy Sherrill ("Stand by Your Man"), and she was quickly voted best emerging artist by the Country Music Association.

But 10 years and five eclectic country albums later—she mixed in blues and big-band western swing, among other elements—she'd become, as she said in an XM radio interview with her sister, the "Antichrist of country." So Shelby figured it was time to leave Nashville. She made a clean break, moving to the sand-and-succulents landscape of Palm Springs—a far cry from the rivers and sweet pines of Alabama, let alone the rolling green hills of Tennessee. But she loved the silence of the desert, the bright light of the full moon, and the fact that there's no "scene" there.

She decided that the person to help her fly from the Nashville cage was producer Bill Bottrell, who had helmed Sheryl Crow's career kickoff, *Tuesday Night Music Club*. So she sent him a tape. His then-wife and manager—the aforementioned Elizabeth Jordan—discovered it first and insisted that he listen. Bottrell ended up not only producing but cowriting all the songs on what would become *I Am Shelby Lynne*, the album that won Shelby that Best New Artist Grammy despite the fact that she was already a dozen years into her career.

In Elizabeth, Shelby found a manager, executive producer, and best friend. "It's very important. Very personal," Lynne says of their relationship. "I guess we were just there at the right time for each other. My life at that time was completely uprooted; all I had was that record that I was making. We've depended on each other now for eight years, for everything in life. And that's all there is to that."

I suggest that however Shelby describes it, the partnership seems primary. She agrees. "*Primary* is a good word, actually. Things that are that important you keep close as you can. You're so lucky if you ever get something that important."

I Am Shelby Lynne introduced her to a whole new group of listeners, many of whom had never heard her country albums. Her polished follow-up, *Love, Shelby*, was made with hit-maker Glen Ballard (Alanis Morissette) and remains a favorite of hers. But since then, she's stripped away layer after layer from her productions, recording *Identity Crisis* (2003) primarily in her home studio, and *Suit Yourself* (2005) at home and in a Nashville studio. She's even stripped her voice down to its ever more basic essence.

"When I first started out I sang with everything I had because that's all I knew how to do," Shelby says in our phone conversation. "My voice was loud and really big, so I

figured, well, *hell*, use it all. And it took me a lot of years and learning how to.... Well, you don't have to give it all away."

Which brings us back to Dusty—who also learned to modulate her voice without losing an ounce of its expressive power. The idea of doing Dusty covers wasn't originally Shelby's—it came from Barry Manilow. While it's no surprise that Barry would love Dusty, it's a bit of a shock to hear that a rootsy gal like Shelby is friends with the slickest of pop performers. "I admire him so much," she counters. "I love Barry. We just met casually at a function somewhere, and hung out a couple times. But I think we understood each other's passion about music."

And could Manilow have understood that Shelby would have a built-in audience for her Dusty tribute? Because if there's one other asset Shelby stands to inherit from Dusty, it's a devoted gay following. The boys get Shelby's soulfulness, that hint of the diva, the feeling that this gal might cause *trouble*. And the girls.... Well, we can't help but notice that her tear-your-guts-out voice sure comes in a sexy, tough but tender package.

"Absolutely!" says Shelby, chuckling when asked if she's aware of the gay fans she's already cultivated. "I believe that I'm lucky. I don't understand how to describe that; it's just there. Men and women, period. I think the goal in life for all of us is to have something attractive in ourselves →



for everyone. There's no one I want to turn off. Because I love it all."

But talking about *whom* she loves, even in the most generic terms, turns out to be off-limits, despite *The Advocate's* understanding going into the interview. In Palm Springs, Lynne got downright combative when I gingerly approached personal territory. "What's the question?" she asked several times. But when I asked, "Are you in a relationship?" she immediately interrupted with "I don't talk about my personal life." It was confusing: Shelby seemed to be demanding that The

Question be asked even as she fended it off.

So now, on the phone, I bring it up again. She still stonewalls, but more gently. "I just don't think I want to ever be a part of a group of people who want to make announcements about their personal life," she says. "Because, you know, that's all you have."

"Do you hate labels?" I ask, because I'm sensing what may underlie her reluctance.

"Tell me, do I? You already know the answer."

When I call her a few days later for some follow-up questions, I ask one last time, in

the gentlest way I can imagine, whether Shelby could subscribe to the sentiment Dusty famously expressed in a 1970 interview: "I know that I'm as perfectly capable of being swayed by a girl as by a boy."

Shelby's just not having any. "It's fine that you keep wanting to go there, but I just don't believe I need to," she says firmly. "I give away so much in the songs, man."

"But did you not think *The Advocate* would ask such a question when you agreed to do the interview?" I finally ask.

"But it's not anybody's business who I sleep with or who I fuck!" she says, as frustrated as I am. "I don't give a shit what the magazine is. People are going to come up with whatever they want to come up with on their own; I don't have to make announcements. Come on!"

So it's a draw. We return to the music, which is the only place where she's willing and ready for us to know all of her. And on Shelby Lynne's Dusty album, the music is as brave as it's beautiful. Not only does she tackle a legend's repertoire, she performs the songs in such spare, sensual arrangements—not a Memphis string or horn in earshot—that her voice seems naked. Everything was cut live, no overdubs; on one cut you can even hear her call out to Junior, her Italian greyhound.

"I get to work with quite a few really talented people, but she's top of the list," says an effusive Phil Ramone, the album's producer. And Ramone has quite a pool of clients to compare her with, among them Barbra Streisand, Elton John, Paul McCartney, Phoebe Snow, and even Dusty, whose original recording of "The Look of Love" he engineered. "One of the great voices of all time," he says of Lynne. "And she's a nutcase about how much she loves music. An ingratiating, wonderful person."

Besides the nine Dusty covers, the album also includes one of Shelby's originals, the dark and moving "Pretend," in which she asks a rejecting lover to "hurt me one more night / just pretend you love me." It sounds perfectly Dusty, similar in sentiment to both "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me" and the irresistible "Breakfast in Bed," songs in which the singer essentially begs for a lover's crumbs.

"It's the only song that would even come close to being something emotionally fitting with the rest of the songs and Dusty," says Shelby of "Pretend," which she wrote years ago. "It was the only song I had that could be something she'd dig."

Actually I think Dusty would love Shelby's music. And I wonder if she has envisioned *Just a Little Lovin'* reaching Dusty's ears in rock 'n' roll heaven.

"Well, I think she has heard it," Shelby says softly and seriously, and though we're on the phone I picture a sweet look lighting up her face. "And I think she likes it." ❀