



Slow burners are rare in the cut-throat chase for a hit song. Most popular songs that survive beyond their own initial flush of glory and achieve standard status depend on the kind of launch pad that is usually only provided by an interpretation by a major star or act of the day.

Occasionally, though, a song's trajectory into classic territory is more measured than stratospheric. It gradually finds itself a niche in the repertoires of top-quality performers and becomes part of the fabric of popular music. Then someone comes along and shakes it up with a new style and they, rather than any of their illustrious predecessors, become eternally identified with it and a dominant influence on subsequent versions.

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'Dream a Little Dream of Me' is the perfect example. Originating as a 1931 dance tune, it was first recorded by Wayne King and his Orchestra with vocals by one Ernie Birchill. Legendary lyricist Gus Kahn wrote the words to a melody by Fabian Andre and Wilbur Schwandt.

Nat King Cole, Frankie Laine, Dinah Shore, Doris Day, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, and Bing Crosby all found a place for it on various albums during the next three decades. Occasionally, they'd take it away from its mid-tempo roots with some superlative jazz flourishes – Ella and Louis are effortlessly cool – but for the most part it remained a jaunty, gossamer-light song that didn't make too many demands on the listener: the quintessence of easy listening!

Then, in 1968, Cass Elliot recorded it as a solo number for The Mamas and The Papas' fourth album. The groundbreaking American folk/rock group was already in the throes of terminal interpersonal and contractual meltdown, and Elliot had technically quit the band when 'Dream a Little Dream' was released as a single and became their biggest UK hit. It couldn't have been a more dynamic platform from which to launch a solo career.

#### THREE OF THE BEST:

**Cass Elliot** *Dream a Little Dream of Me*: The Music of Mama Cass Elliot Commercial Marketing

'Dream a Little Dream of Me' is still the jewel in the repertoire of a performer whose work merits serious exploration by anyone who truly cares about the gift of pop singing.

**Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong** *The Complete Studio Recorded Duets* Avid Jazz

In her recording, 'Mama' Cass takes the tempo right down to a gentle, bluesy swing and the song becomes a playground for the range and mellow tones of a voice that is criminally overlooked in discussions of the 20th-century greats. Intimacy and tenderness gradually give way to some assured phrasing and daring swoops that betray her acute musical sensibilities. The group's backing is restrained and supportive and 'Dream a Little Dream' becomes a sublime cross between a lullaby and a poignant, intensely atmospheric love song.

Elliot's solo career was sadly short-lived and she died from a heart attack in London in 1974, following a sell-out run at the Palladium. But even allowing for her vital contribution to the success of The Mamas and The Papas and her brief but glorious stint as a top-flight Vegas-style entertainer, if 'Dream a Little Dream' had been her only recording, it would still have been enough to mark her unique vocal sound.

In the wake of her success with it, 'Dream a Little Dream' has become one of the most covered songs of all time, enthusiastically recorded by new generations of singers. Most of them, regardless of the language they sing in, have paid homage to the understated, almost erotic, lilt that Elliot brought to the number. Norwegian soprano Sissel Kyrkjebø brought the beauty of her crystalline diction to a 1992 rendition for her album, *Gift of Love*. And France's Enzo Enzo sang it with real charm as 'Les Yeux Ouverts'.

Other recent interpretations have arrived courtesy of those Parkinson-friendly suspects Diana Krall and Michael Bublé. But it took the Beautiful South and then-lead vocalist Jacqui Abbott to produce something fresh for a version that appeared on the soundtrack of 1995 rom-com *French Kiss* and eventually on their 2001 greatest hits package *Solid Bronze*. Abbott is in glorious, resonant form, singing with a liberated ease and authority that come closer than anyone else to touching Elliot. ■

PIERS FORD



'Mama' Cass Elliot: The song becomes a playground for the range and mellow tones of a voice that is criminally overlooked in discussions of the 20th-century greats'

Recorded for Decca in 1950, this still sounds fresh and mellow nearly six decades on with Fitzgerald at the top of her swinging game.

**Beautiful South** *Solid Bronze*: Great Hits Polygram  
A somewhat reluctant star she may have been, but Jacqui Abbott's time with Beautiful South proved her to be a singer of striking ability. Her lead vocal on 'Dream a Little Dream' is a wonder.