

Dion – Return of the Wanderer



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BY JOHN ESPOSITO

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Dion Francis DiMucci, best known to rock and roll fans worldwide simply as Dion, will be appearing at the Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown on Thursday, July 9. Honing his craft in the mid-1950s on the stoops and rough street corners of 187th Street and Crotona Avenue in Bronx, NY, the legendary singer-songwriter has remained one of the most extraordinarily versatile and popular performers of his generation.

At age 15, the rebel king, street corner poet, and local gang member went about recruiting the three best doo-wop singers in his neighborhood, naming themselves, Dion and the Belmonts. They lifted their name from nearby Belmont Avenue, located in the heart of the 'Little Italy' section of

the Bronx. By 1957 Dion and the Belmonts were bona fide teen idols, scoring with the rock and roll classics, "I Wonder Why," "A Teenager in Love," and "Where or When." Appearances on Dick Clark's American Bandstand and local dance shows followed, catapulting the group to the top of the music charts. Dion has described their ethnic sound as "Black music filtered through an Italian neighborhood, coming out with an attitude."

Dion is forever linked to the most tragic event in rock and roll history which occurred on February 3, 1959. The then 19-year old was a featured performer along with Buddy Holly – age 22, Ritchie Valens – age 17, and 'The Big Bopper,' – age 28 headlining the 'Winter Dance Party' tour throughout the Midwest. The tour was set to cover 24 Midwestern cities in as many days. The amount of travel soon became a logistical problem as the distance between venues had not been properly considered. Adding to the disarray, the tour bus they were using was not equipped for the severe winter weather. Its heating system broke down shortly after the tour began, and several of the performers became ill with the flu and frostbite. They replaced the bus with a school bus and kept traveling. Frustrated by travel conditions following their February 2 show in Clear Lake, Iowa, Buddy Holly decided to charter a single-engine plane after the concert rather than face another all-night freeze on the ride to the next evening's show in Fargo, North Dakota.

Dion has since publically stated that since there were four headliners and the plane would seat only three passengers, plus the pilot, they would flip a coin. Dion won the toss, but elected to let Ritchie Valens take his plane seat and he would continue to ride the bus. Dion's reasoning for not flying was that he couldn't justify paying \$36.00 for a 45 minute plane ride. The fare was the same amount as the monthly rent for his childhood Bronx apartment, and reminded him of how often his parents would have arguments over finances. As fate would have it, Ritchie joined Buddy and The Big Bopper on the flight.

Soon after take-off in the wintry early morning hours of February 3, the pilot lost control of the airplane, which subsequently crashed into a cornfield, leaving no survivors. The memory has continued to haunt Dion through the years, as he vividly remembers the bus making its way into Moorhead, Minnesota and then standing in the lobby of the hotel, and hearing the news – "no survivors" – and seeing Buddy's guitar there among the band's luggage that he left behind on the bus.

Despondent upon returning home to the Bronx after the tour, Dion was attempting to make sense of his life, the surreal tragedy, and the trappings that accompany early success. He was also dealing with an increased dependency on alcohol and heroin addiction dating back to the age of fourteen. There were also disagreements within the group which ultimately resulted in Dion leaving the Belmonts in 1960 to pursue a solo artist career. Nonetheless, from 1960 through 1964, he recorded eight best-selling singles, including the classics, "Runaround Sue," "The Wanderer," "Lovers Who Wander," "Little Diane," "Love Came to Me," "Ruby Baby," "Donna the Prima Donna," and "Drip Drop."

Church bells intervened in 1963. Dion married his high school sweetheart, Susan Butterfield, who had moved to New York from Vermont. Dion credits her with much wisdom and tolerance in dealing with his erratic behavior. Susan knew when best to soak through his fantasy with a dose of reality, while the neighborhood only saw James Dean. Smitten from the start by the charm of this lovely woman, they have been together for 52 years, and blessed with three grown daughters.

The gravy train of pop hit records came to an abrupt halt for Dion and most American pop singers and groups by the mid-1960s. With the advent of the Beatles and the 'British Invasion,' the new long haired music dismissed rock and roll artists from the 1950s and early 1960s, including Elvis, as passé, or stated more bluntly, as has-beens. Ironically, this was the case even though many of the singers and groups from the earlier era had not yet reached the ripe old age of 25.



Refusing to remain static as a performer during this period, this is where Dion showed his resilience. He switched record companies and started recording folk music and the rhythm and blues music he always loved as a child. He started playing gigs in Greenwich Village and wrote more adult lyrics. Dion matured as a musician and seamlessly reinvented himself, going from teen pop idol, to soloist, to rock and blues guitar player, while still remaining faithful to his rock and roll roots. This was clearly evident in his not-so-kind remarks about the 1970's rock and roll revivalist group, Sha Na Na, a number of years ago. He said they were a bunch of great guys, but the music he grew up was quite personal to him and "I don't mind making fun at myself, but not the music."

In 1967 Dion and Bob Dylan became the only two music artists featured on the elaborate album cover of the Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Rock superstars, including the likes of Paul Simon, Lou Reed, Bruce Springsteen and Billy Joel, have cited Dion as a primary source of influence in their careers. Springsteen once remarked that in his opinion, Dion's Bronx Italian attitude was the link between Frank Sinatra and rock and roll. With the adulation and esteem that was being reaped upon him, the most dramatic change in his personal and professional life was yet to come.

Despite all his success, Dion was at an all-time low both mentally and spiritually. He and Susan moved to Florida seeking a fresh start. Then on April 1, 1968, Dion received the surprise of his life. Through the intervention and guidance of his father-in-law, Jack, he learned about the importance of prayer. Dion asked God to help him and "was delivered from the obsession to drink and drug; it was just lifted off me like a weight." Dion has said that unforgettable date is when he first became aware of God's power.

Within six months of getting himself clean again from heroin addiction, Dion, at the age of 28, embarked upon a new musical path that both surprised and pleased the public. Unlike the ethnic rock that people associated with the Bronx legend, he released a gentle, folk rock recording in the late summer of 1968 that included an electric organ, violin, and harp arrangement with Dion playing classical guitar. The song, "Abraham, Martin and John," was a tribute to the memory of four assassinated Americans, all icons of social change. The record went gold, sold a million copies and became one of the biggest records of his career.

Then on morning of December 14, 1979, Dion underwent a life-altering religious experience. Alone in his thoughts, he went for his regular morning jog. Dion started thinking about the past, thinking of the future, and with emotions running everywhere. In the middle of his confusion, all he could do was pray, "God, it would be nice to be closer to you." And that was all it took. He was flooded with a white light and at that moment, things became different between him and God. Ahead of him, he saw a man with His arms outstretched. "I love you," He said. "Don't you know that? I'm your friend. I laid down My life for you. I'm here for you now." Dion firmly believes that God changed his life that morning, and things have never been the same.

Confused by his mild Catholic upbringing, he drifted from the Church and became a born-again Christian. Over a period of eighteen years, he moved throughout Florida and participated in memberships of a number of Protestant denominations where he met many wonderful people and learned much about scripture.

It was also during this period that Dion's musical odyssey took him in yet another direction. From 1979 through 1986 he recorded contemporary Christian music which Dion referred to as his gospel albums. He made a number of appearances at local Church gatherings during this period to proclaim his newfound religious experience. One such recording during this period was a poignant, beautiful song, "The Truth Will Set You Free." It is a haunting look back over his life as a "boy Caruso" and the importance of Christ in his life. It is one of his best songs.

But throughout this Protestant period, he felt there was always something incomplete in his new faith. He realized that 2,000 years of family history and the rich tradition of the Catholic Church were missing in his life. As a Protestant, the final authority was "the faith and practice of the early, undivided Church." It was there he believed was the problem. He saw no living voice of authority to really settle and resolve disputes or controversies in the church he was in. And with new churches opening for what seemed like every other week, each with slightly different doctrines, it became increasingly difficult and confusing for Dion to know what the truth really was. Through much reading and discussions with others, he found that St. Paul called the Church the "pillar and foundation of truth," and it should hold to the traditions passed on by the early Fathers of the Church, who recognized the Bishop of Rome as the earthly head. Dion concluded after more years of intense religious studies and truth searching, that the Catholic Church is guided by the Holy Spirit to make decisions without error, and this promise given by Jesus – this infallible divine guidance – gave us the Bible.



The next part of Dion's continuing journey occurred in the early 1990s. He took a plane from his Boca Raton home to the old neighborhood in Bronx, NY. He went to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, at the corner of 187th Street and Belmont Avenue. It was here that he was baptized and confirmed. He met with Father Frank, went to confession and let it all out to the priest. When he finished, Father Frank stood up, stretched his arms out and said, "Dion, welcome home." With those words, he tried to control his emotions, but broke down. Dion has said that he had met a Father who took the wanderer in his arms and led him home.

With his return to Catholicism, Dion's odyssey has taken him full circle. The newly invigorated superstar has returned to secular music and now performs regularly to sell-out audiences, providing considerable joy to old and new fans alike. His repertoire includes a perfect mix of his 1950s

hits with the Belmonts; classic songs from his early 1960s solo career; occasional gospel tunes; and the hard driving rock and blues music he records today.

There have previously been two attempts to bring Dion's inspirational life story to the screen, and more recently a local New York playwright, Charles Messina, has been intent on weaving his songs through a plot centered on the singer's life from 1957 through the late 1960s, a time that brought him his greatest success and biggest tragedies. In a 2011 interview with the New York Times, Messina stated that he chose Dion's story as a subject because "The conflict was irresistible to me as a dramatist...But what's interesting about Dion is that he lived. In my other plays, you don't have that ending where the guy overcame. Dion overcame."

The one constant that remains is the street-wise swagger and attitude. Dion's voice is better than ever. It carries a richer, more layered, intense quality. The soon to be 76-year old icon (born July 18, 1939), is more relevant and energized today. Spirituality has brought him inner peace and public acceptance as true rock and roll royalty.

Dion was elected into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989. Longtime admirer, the singer – songwriter Lou Reed, delivered a touching induction speech, marveling at those perfect rock and roll chops: "...Dion, whose voice was unlike any other I had heard before. Dion could do all the turns, stretch those syllables so effortlessly, soar so high he could reach the sky and dance among the stars forever. What a voice...After all, who could be hipper than Dion."

If you are fortunate to see Dion in-person when he comes to town, savor the moment. The likes of this rock and roll giant will not come again. As the "King of the New York Streets," likes to say, "Rock on!"

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John Esposito is a freelance writer who lives in New Providence, NJ with his wife and two children. Mr. Esposito's additional publications and Blog page are available on his website: www.PieceworkJournals.com.

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Dion Discography: (selected Dion CDs in no particular order)

- * Dion and the Belmonts Greatest Hits
- * Dion – The Best of the Gospel Years
- * Return of the Wanderer
- * Dion and Friends – Live in New York City
- * Yo Frankie
- * Dion – Rock N' Roll Christmas
- * Dion – New Masters
- * Heroes: Giants of Early Guitar Rock
- * Bronx in Blue

Dion Biographies:

- * The Wanderer: Dion's Story – by Dion DiMucci and Davin Seay (1989)
- * Dion – The Wanderer Talks Truth – by Dion DiMucci and Mike Aquilina (2011)

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