



Dion

By Michael Hill

DION DIMUCCI was born in the Bronx in 1939 and was raised there in the borough's own Little Italy. He showed a gift for singing at an early age, much to the delight of his parents, who encouraged him to perform. His first love was Hank Williams, the artist who lured him into a Fordham Road record store, where he discovered more than just country & western. As he recalls in *The Wanderer*, which he published last year, "I was picking up influences from all over the place, mixing in early R&B with doo-wop. Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bo Diddley and, of course, Elvis. In other words, like every other teenager in America, I was discovering rock 'n' roll."

Dion and the Belmonts — Angelo D'Aleo, Fred Milano and Carlo Mastrangelo — discovered rock & roll together, as well as an affinity for four-part harmonies. Dion, a tenor, became the lead singer. They were at first just a neighborhood thing; they had taken their name from nearby Belmont Avenue. But they set their sights on more than street-corner singing. Dion's father, eager to help his son break into the big time, arranged for him to meet a neighborhood man with alleged music-business connections.

Dion soon found himself at the Manhattan offices of Mohawk Records, a shoestring operation run by two accountant brothers, Bob and Gene Schwartz. Dion auditioned by singing the Five Satins' "Wonderful Girl"; the Schwartzes made Dion the second artist on their roster. The Belmonts, however, weren't part of the package at first; the Schwartz brothers wanted Dion to sing over a track prerecorded by a vocal group called the Timberlanes. His debut, "The Chosen Few," actually caused a little stir in Boston. That was enough encouragement for Dion to quit school and plunge into his career full time. He told the Schwartz brothers, however, that the Timberlanes had to go and brought in the Belmonts for an audition.

In early 1958, Dion and the Belmonts recorded "I Wonder Why," an appealingly adolescent evocation of the mysteries of love. By then, the Schwartz brothers had discarded Mohawk for a more mellifluous name, Laurie, and found themselves with their first hit. "I Wonder Why" reached Number Twenty-two on the pop chart, and Dion and the Belmonts became the closest thing in real life to an overnight sensation. Among their first public appearances was a spot on *American Bandstand*. From there, they embarked on a rigorous tour.

Their subsequent singles, "No One Knows" and "Don't Pity Me," made it into the Top Forty, but Dion and the Belmonts didn't enjoy Top Ten success until the following year, when Laurie released a Doc Pomus-Mort Shuman number called "A Teenager in Love." In the winter of 1959, as "A Teenager in Love" was moving up the charts, Dion and the Belmonts joined a package tour called the Winter Dance Party, which featured Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper. When Buddy Holly became fed up with sleeping on the frigid tour bus and decided to rent a small plane to take him to the next gig, he asked Dion if he'd like to join him. Dion, who was only nineteen, balked at paying thirty-five dollars, a month's rent in the Bronx. It wasn't until the next morning, when he arrived in Fargo, North Dakota, that Dion learned of the fatal plane crash that took the lives of his fellow tour members.

Dion and the Belmonts' elegant version of the Rodgers and Hart standard "Where or When," released in 1960, brought them to Number Three on the pop chart, but it was the beginning of the end for the

group. The Schwartz brothers pushed Dion and the Belmonts in a supper-club direction. Their album *When You Wish upon a Star* contained only standards. The group had lost its momentum, and Dion, eager to return to rock & roll, launched a solo career.

"Lonely Teenager," Dion's first solo hit, went Top Twenty, but his first album, *Alone with Dion*, still bore traces of the Belmonts' Tin Pan Alley side. It wasn't until 1961, when he co-wrote "Runaround Sue" with songwriter Ernie Maresca, that Dion happened upon a sound and a style he could truly call his own. "Runaround Sue" had a loose, sing-along feel; Dion himself is hardly the plaintive teenager but a confident belter who buddies up to the microphone as if he were swapping stories with his pals at the local bar. "Runaround Sue" reached Number One on the pop charts and was followed by the song that would become Dion's signature, "The Wanderer," written by Maresca.

Dion made a brief foray to Hollywood to try his hand at the movies, but he spent most of his time touring. He enjoyed three Top Ten hits in 1962: "Lovers Who Wander," "Little Diane" and "Love Came to Me." By 1963, he had been wooed away from Laurie by Columbia Records, which offered him a lucrative five-year contract. Dion made his debut on Columbia with "Ruby Baby," a remake of a Drifters' song, with the same spontaneous feeling as his best work. As he recalls, "It was all funky acoustic guitar, hand claps, foot stomps and a strolling bass line that broke into syncopated skips as the tune came round for the finish."

"Donna the Prima Donna," his next entry into the Top Ten, was a good-natured sendup of a local girl with a serious attitude problem. The album of the same name, Dion feels, is a tribute to the music of the streets, to "the charge I got from that glorious Crotona Avenue noise." It was also a climax of sorts, the close of a chapter in Dion's career. With the onset of the British Invasion, Dion, like many of his peers, faded from the spotlight. When he reemerged in 1968, after overcoming a series of personal setbacks, he embraced a more introspective, folk-based style. He accompanied himself on acoustic guitar and sang in a mellowed voice that still had that vulnerable edge.

He went back to where he had started, Laurie Records, after staff producer Phil Gernhard asked him to do a song he'd found, "Abraham, Martin and John." The single reached Number Four on the pop charts, Dion's tenth Top Ten song.

Dion released a folkish version of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" and recorded an album that included covers of Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan tunes. He began to tour a different circuit, from the Troubadour, in L.A., to the Bitter End, in New York City. By 1969, he had signed with Warner Bros., recording *Sit Down, Old Friend, You're Not Alone* and *Sanctuary*. In late 1973, he reunited with the Belmonts for a single performance at Madison Square Garden — "no rehearsals, no nothing, just me, the guys, the old songs, and a house packed with fans" — that was preserved on Warner Bros.' *Reunion*.

Despite the stylistic twists and turns of Dion's ongoing career, he has always sung what he calls "the Bronx blues," the sound of a guy who sings with a swagger and harbors his heartbreak inside. You can hear the Bronx blues in Bruce Springsteen's hit-the-road dramas, in Lou Reed's street scenes, in the boasting of today's rappers and in the voice of every artist, regardless of age, who just has to sing about what it feels like to be a teenager in love.

