

Bronx-born Dion DiMucci is still making music almost seven decades on from his first hit



The King Of New York

One of the few major artists from the golden age of rock'n'roll still releasing new records, Dion DiMucci returns with an album that injects the old classics with a new lease of life, while adding to his catalogue with some fresh material

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

There are many stars of the 1960s still making records today, but from the 50s? That's a different matter. Of course, many of those first-generation rock'n'rollers have passed, while others have long since hung up the mic, which makes the man born Dion DiMucci

(whose first hit with Dion And The Belmonts, *I Wonder Why*, dates from 1958) something of an outlier. And it's not even as if this is an artist whose advanced age – he turns 87 later this year – has led him down a more mellow musical path. **There's more muscle, gristle and attitude on his latest album than you hear in singers a third his age.**

"I just love rock'n'roll," the singer enthuses to *Vintage Rock* via Zoom from his home in Florida. "I love the whole vibe, it keeps you young! I was talking to Stevie Van Zandt yesterday, and we were saying that it changes the molecular structure of your DNA, of your brain. Man, I'm 86, but I feel like I'm 16 – what's that all about?"

That he references The E Street Band's bandana-rocking guitarist seems only right. Van Zandt also found fame as Mafia enforcer Silvio Dante in cult mob drama *The Sopranos* and listening to Dion's soupy Bronx accent, it seems surprising that HBO never hit the singer up for a cameo. That world of wise guys and braggarts is certainly one he knows well – it was there in his 1961 hit *The Wanderer* and it's present in a track off his new album, *I'm Your Gangster Of Love*,





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► a tough, blues-rock banger that he road-tested on a class of 14-year-olds.

“I was talking to these middle-school children, and when I sang *I’m Your Gangster Of Love*, they went nuts,” he says proudly. “So I thought, I gotta start the album with this. If it’s good enough for these kids, it must be good enough for everybody!”

“I grew up with these gangsters,” he explains of his early life, being born into a poor Italian-American family in what was then one of the Big Apple’s toughest districts. “And I love writing songs about bragging. There’s a genre in blues and rock’n’roll called bragging rights – I’m your hoochie coochie man, I’m the wanderer, I’m king of the New York streets... I mean, it’s satire, you know?”

This opening track off his latest album *The Rock’n’Roll Philosopher* (a record made up of songs from the past couple of decades, along with new recordings and a smattering of oldies), then, brings Dion full circle. It’s 65 years since the then-22-year-old doo-wopper had a hit – his third as a solo artist after the dissolution of Dion And The Belmonts – with the No.2-charting *The Wanderer*. It’s a song that’s followed him around ever since. It’s lent its name to his autobiography (*The Wanderer: Dion’s Story*), a 70s LP (*Return Of The Wanderer*) and a musical based on his life. There’s even a re-recording of it on the new LP, one that hews closely to the original because, well, why mess with perfection?

“You can’t get as good as the originals,” he admits about these 21st century re-dos of *The Wanderer* and *Runaround Sue* on

the album. “Those records are perfect, you know. I mean, I could do them a lot of different ways, but I thought, let’s stay on track with ‘em.”

One vintage number that is given a modest facelift, however, is the profoundly poignant *Abraham, Martin And John*, a 1968 hit for Dion that plays as an elegy for the slain political leaders Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr and John F Kennedy. It’s an almost spiritual folk-rock number, made even more relevant by the current political turmoil in America.

“The old version I wanted to be very quiet,” he says about the No.4-charting original. “I was walking through Central Park in New York, and I got this idea to produce the song like it’s over the hill, like you hear this music, and you want to walk up the hill to see who’s playing it.

“He is the perfect example of how you can do what you love to do and still be available to the lives of others”

ERIC CLAPTON



Dion's latest album contains a mix of new and old hits

So I wanted to do it in a very introspective way. And with this one, I'm singing out to people as a cry for help.”

It's one of a number of tracks off the album that Dion has made a video for, telling us in its introduction that he prays “that this song gives you a glimpse of a state of love that does exist.”

“I recorded the song 57 years ago, and I thought there are kids that don't know who Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King and John Kennedy are,” he points out. “So I thought it would be interesting to do a new version and get it out to kids. It might encourage them to look into some of this.”

Dion is at pains to stress, however, that *Abraham, Martin And John* isn't a political song, should some of our more belligerent culture warriors try to pin it down ideologically.

“It's actually written about Democrats and Republicans,” Dion explains, referencing the parties of JFK and Lincoln respectively. “It's a song about a state of love that does exist, but there's a lot of people who keep themselves from it. I think maybe it's easier just to be angry. But you know, I was like that too. I met a guy in 1968, and he said to me, ‘Dion, you're confusing thinking with rearranging your prejudices.’ And I thought about that and he was right. He taught me to let go of a lot of my old pet theories and revise a lot of them.”

It wasn't just his political ideas that underwent a transformation in '68, but his entire lifestyle when, after the drug-induced death of his friend Frankie Lymon, he finally kicked the heroin habit that had plagued him for over a decade.

“I've been clean and sober 57 years now,” he says proudly, before acknowledging one of his collaborators, someone else who survived heroin addiction, on the new album. “That's something Eric Clapton and I bond on, that spiritual quest, trying to reach out and heal someone that had the same problem we had.”

Slowhand is one of several megawatt names on the record, lending his bluesy guitar hooks to the track *If You Wanna Rock'n'Roll*, as well as contributing a foreword to the album, where he hails Dion as “one of a kind, unparalleled in his achievement and stature” and that “he is the perfect example of how you can do what you love to do and still be available to the lives of others.”

If You Wanna Rock'n'Roll debuted on Dion's 2021 album *Stomping Ground*, as did the Mark Knopfler-guesting *Dancing Girl*, collabs that followed on from 2020's A-list-heavy *Blues With Friends* album, which featured such luminaries as Jeff Beck, Bruce Springsteen, Billy Gibbons, Van Morrison, Paul Simon and Joe Bonamassa.

“I was recording these songs in 2020,” Dion says, “and Joe was the first guy to hear one of them, which was *Blues Comin' On*, and he was like, ‘I'd like to play on that!’ He did something so unexpected that I thought it would be great to ask different artists to play on my songs and let them contribute, not me telling them what to do. So as I started recording these songs, I'm driving home in my truck and I'm listening to them and thinking, wow, Mark Knopfler would sound great on *Dancing Girl* and wow, if I could get Eric Clapton to play on



SOMETHIN' ELSE

When *Vintage Rock* tells Dion that we're based in Bath, near the location where Eddie Cochran was killed, it prompts him to tell us a story about when he met the ill-fated singer.

“I was working at 46th Street and Broadway with Eddie,” Dion remembers. “He always reminded me of Alan Ladd from *Shane* – he had a great sense of humour in his songs, you know, like *Summertime Blues* – the lyrics are just really something else. So, what I just said there – ‘something else’, well during the intermission, we went up to the Brill Building, which was a couple of blocks away and we were talking to Leiber and Stoller. When we came out, we were going down the elevator, and Sharon Sheeley and Jackie DeShannon, who were friends, were also there. Then they both walked out, Jackie first and then Sharon, and I said to Eddie, ‘Man, she's something else!’ He'd never heard the expression. I mean, we used it in the Bronx a lot – ‘wow, she's something else.’ Then he went and recorded a song with that title!”

If You Wanna Rock'n'Roll he would sound great on this. It just kept going like that.”

If all you know of Dion are those 50s and 60s evergreens, you may be surprised how his sound has morphed in the past decades. This latest record, then, is meant to give more casual fans a taste of the many flavours of Dion. Yes, many of those early hits are present and correct, and there are newer numbers that recall his doo-wop past (*New York Minute* would fit snugly ➤

“I still want to write a song to take someone on a trip and really touch their soul, you know”

DION DIMUCCI



Fred Milano, Dion DiMucci and Angelo D'Aleo of Dion And The Belmonts

► into any Dion And The Belmonts set list), but much of the album reflects Dion's love of blues-rock, giving the album a much punchier identity than anyone who only knows him from his *Runaround Sue* days might expect.

In fact, Dion has recorded so many records in so many different genres, he's lost count what number album *The Rock'n'Roll Philosopher* is. We have worked it out as his 38th, but he really has no clue if that's correct or not (and no, this isn't down to him having a senior moment, Dion's way too switched on for that).

"I don't have the slightest idea," he laughs about the exact number of albums in his discography. "But that's an interesting thing. Maybe I'll try to count them after this Zoom!"

Whether it's his 38th, 39th or 40th long-player, it hardly matters – what is remarkable is Dion's eye-popping productivity. He has released six albums in the last 10 years alone, and clearly isn't content to simply belt out the hits to nostalgia-hungry audiences. Dion is a contemporary artist, as affixed to the world of 2026 as any current Grammy favourite.

"I was doing an interview with Dave Marsh from the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame, and he said I'm the only first generation rock'n'roller who's still relevant and creative," he tells us. "And I started arguing with him, and he said, 'Don't argue with me, you're going to lose!' So I think I am still relevant. I'm the only one of the first generation rock and rollers who stayed consistent over the years creating. I can't help it, these songs get downloaded into my head, and it's a gift. I always say it comes from God, because if you have a gift, there must be a gift giver. So I have to get the songs out, otherwise you feel creatively constipated. You have to get them out to move on, to keep the vessel empty and be ready to receive."

All this is not typical talk from your average 86-year-old. We tend to think of a typical day for your normal octogenarian as involving a comfy armchair, a crossword and maybe an episode of *Diagnosis: Murder*. But that's way off the mark for Dion DiMucci.

"I go to the gym maybe three times a week," he says about his daily routine. "Then on Sundays I have a tradition of going to 11 o'clock Mass, and then I'll come home and watch a game or something. But a lot of the time I'm involved in a project, so I'll be in the studio most of the week with my producer, Wayne Hood, who I like hanging out with. I do like working with men. I spend a lot of time working with men in the recovery field, because I just like sharing my experience, strength and hope with them."

This love of sharing his experiences, of finding God and kicking addiction, are one of the reasons why his 2024 book *The Rock'n'Roll Philosopher* is such a must-read. Whereas many music

memoirs are self-indulgent and self-mythologising, Dion's book is as much self-help as autobiography.

"There are like 60 stories in it, and those stories are reflecting on events, and they come out as a life lesson," he says, before explaining how the book came about.

"After one recovery meeting, I was talking to my friend Adam and he said, 'Dion, these stories are so good, we should document some of these!' So we started documenting them and after five years, we had a book. I've gotten so much help over the years, and wanted to pass it on."

Clearly, Dion is a man for whom retirement – even semi-retirement – is a dirty word. But he's keen for us to know that, despite his work ethic, work doesn't come at the expense of his personal life.

"I have a family," he smiles. "I have three daughters, so I'm here as a father and grandfather and great-grandfather now. I like to balance out my life – work, pleasure, family and time for myself, like growing spiritually. But I still want to write a song to take someone on a trip and really touch their soul, you know?"

Almost 70 years on from first forming Dion And The Belmonts, Dion DiMucci is not just one of the great rock'n'roll survivors, but one of current music's most treasured and vital artists. As he sings on one of the new album's standout tracks: "I'm a rhythm king, baby/ I can groove all night long/ If you wanna rock'n'roll/ I won't do you wrong."

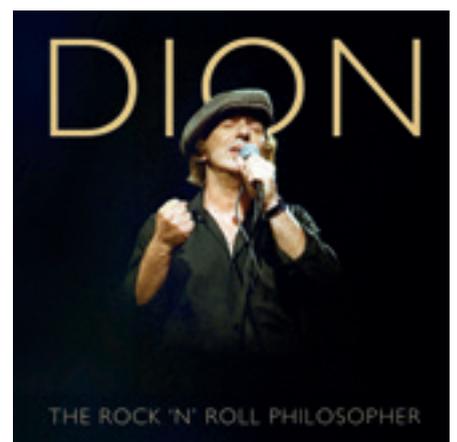
Amen to that. ★



DION & THE BELMONTS

Dion first found fame with the band Dion And The Belmonts, a four-piece doo-wop outfit formed in 1955. The name came from Belmont, the Bronx street on which founding member Carlo Mastrangelo lived. Musically, Mastrangelo sang the bass parts while Fred Milano was the second tenor, Angelo D'Aleo the falsetto and Dion performed lead vocals. The group released their first single, *I Wonder Why* in 1958, but scored their biggest hit with *A Teenager In Love* in 1959.

Dion left in 1960 and the group trundled on as a trio, now named simply The Belmonts, with Mastrangelo singing lead. They had a few successes without their original leader, notably 1961's *Tell Me Why*, but generally they struggled commercially in the 60s. As a live act, they continued into the 70s and beyond, but the deaths of first Milano in 2012, then Mastrangelo in 2016 and finally Warren Gradus (who'd joined in 1962) in 2023, put a final full stop on one of the great doo-wop bands.



Dion's new album *The Rock'n'Roll Philosopher* is released by KTBA Records and is available from diondimucci.com