

Dion, Winter Dance Party, Dylan

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On the cool scale, the ultimate is in sight from Dion, Bronx born in 1939. He recorded hits "I Wonder Why" and "A Teenager In Love" in his teens; was a headliner on the Winter Dance Party tour through the upper Midwest in January and February 1959 that led to the deaths of Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and The Big Bopper; recorded "Runaround Sue" and "The Wanderer" in his early twenties; had the same producer—Tom Wilson—as Bob Dylan at Capitol Records; is one of the figures pictured on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*; and had another hit with "Abraham, Martin, and John" in 1968.

His unusual name, according to nameberry.com's "From the experts" means: "In ancient Greece, a student of Plato; in modern America, a cool guy."¹ (See what I mean?)

Its etymology might stretch back to Dionysus, reported by Wikipedia to be, "...the god of the grape-harvest, winemaking, and wine, of fertility, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, and theater in ancient Greek myth."²

However, in his book, *Dion The Wanderer Talks Truth*, he says his father, vaudevillian Pasquale DiMucci, who named him, "...had no idea" where it came from.³ But it's a great moniker and puts him in the ranks of people like Hildegard, Liberace, Cher, Madonna, Prince, Beyoncé, etc. who are known by one word.

Beginning with "Runaround Sue" and "The Wanderer," both of which received a great deal of airplay on Chicago's WLS-AM 890 in the '60s, I heard a lot of Dion and liked his music and rock-n'-roll attitude. Later I and many others felt "Abraham, Martin, and John," written by Dick Holler,⁴ summarized the senseless waste of American assassinations.

Other than his songs, I knew virtually nothing about Dion, but last summer I came upon a 2009 video he appeared in and produced titled *The True Buddy Holly Story*.⁵ I vaguely knew that he and his band, the Belmonts (named after a street in the neighborhood he grew up in⁶) were on Holly's last tour, but that was about it. I heard about the crash in a roundabout way when older brother Forry, who loved "Chantilly Lace" and turned up the car radio whenever it came on, mentioned The Big Bopper was dead. I was eight and liked the song, too, along with "Purple People Eater," "Ghost Riders In The Sky," "They Call The Wind Maria" among others. Another favorite, coincidentally, was Richie Valens' "Donna." It hit home because one of my grade school crushes was on a blonde with that name.

I highly recommend *The True Buddy Holly Story* to anyone who wants a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the disaster. There are many surprises. For example, it was news to me that the Winter Dance Tour started in Milwaukee on January 23, 1959. Dion says those in the fairly

The Milwaukee Sentinel
January 20, 1959
Page 6

DEVINE'S
MILLION DOLLAR BALLROOM
On Wisconsin Ave. at 24th St.
TONIGHT and every
Tues. and Thurs.
Dancing for These
"OVER 30"
MEET AND DANCE WITH OLD FRIENDS
and
MAKE NEW ACQUAINTANCES
Lots of Waltzes, Minors, Two-Steps,
Waltz Quadrille, Fox Trot, Polkas
ALSO ON THURSDAYS ONLY
SQUARE DANCING
Thursday Come in
COSTUME
or
Street Clothes
All Those in Costume or Members
of the Veterans Square Dance
Club Will Be Admitted
ABSOLUTELY FREE
THURS. ALL EVENING
ELMER HAMANN, CALLER
MARGE MERHOFF'S MUSIC
TONIGHT, RUS ROLAND
Milwaukee's Favorite Dance Band
TONIGHT, REGULAR ADM. The
See With Your Membership Card
Friday
JAN. 23 THIS WEEK
--- 6 ---
★ STAR ★
ATTRACTIONS
These Top Recording and TV Stars
It's a Date at the ...
WINTER DANCE PARTY
BUDDY HOLLY
THE BIG BOPPER
RITCHIE VALENS
DION & THE BELMONTS
FRANKIE SARDO
Plus! For Your Dancing Pleasure
LARRY LADD'S ENTERTAINING BAND

¹ <https://nameberry.com/babynames/Dion>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus>

³ *Dion The Wanderer Talks Truth*, Dion DiMucci with Mike Aquilina, Servant Books, Cincinnati, 2011, page 53.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham,_Martin_and_John

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HixwW3NbAx4>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dion_DiMucci

13-Inch Snow Buries Area



HEAVY SNOW ON W. KILBOURN AV. NEAR THE SARETY BUILDING CAUSED THIS TRAFFIC TIE-UP WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON.

Schools Closed; Get Off Roads, Drivers Urged

The worst snowstorm since the paralyzing blizzard of Jan. 20, 1947, had swathed Wisconsin in the grip of dry Wednesday, dumping about 13 inches on the Milwaukee area before it stopped Wednesday night.

Schools were closed early in many parts of the state, including Milwaukee. Many businesses followed suit, and Milwaukee City Hall employees were advised to get home as soon as possible.

"There was no real danger of snow on the ground during the day, but the snow piled up on the roofs of buildings and on the cars which had been parked out in the open," said a city official.

THE PLAINS GO BY
 They have been hit by the snow on the plains, too. In fact, the snow piled up on the roofs of buildings and on the cars which had been parked out in the open.

Chicago and other U.S. highways in Milwaukee County were given a complete cleanup in 30 minutes. Snow which started on these county highways accumulated on the highways as they were closed to traffic on Wednesday afternoon.

The Milwaukee office of the general aviation service has issued an advisory to pilots to land at area airports.

large line-up met in Chicago on January 22 to rehearse. Then they boarded what he describes as a "little yellow church school bus" and "were off to Milwaukee."

I viewed the 1978 film *The Buddy Holly Story* based on a novel by John Goldrosen⁷ but was quickly reminded that Hollywood cares little for veracity. The bus in the movie looks like a '50s era Greyhound that's far more luxurious than the one Dion describes.

Dairylanders know that if numbingly cold temperatures or deep snowfalls

are in the forecast, most likely the month is January or February. And '59 was that kind of year. When the performers arrived in Milwaukee on the afternoon of the Friday night appearance, the city was processing 13 inches that fell the day before, and temperatures were below zero. Texans Buddy Holly and The Big Bopper and Californian Richie Valens weren't used to these extremes, and neither were most of their band members.

The first show went well, but *The Milwaukee Sentinel's* review typifies press attitudes in the '50s and '60s that the music of Dion, Holly, their peers and successors The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, et al. was "kid" stuff, hardly up to the dignified pages of intellectual-cultural newspapers such as *The Milwaukee Sentinel*.

Writer Botsford loaded his piece with sarcasm including "crazy, daddy," "you haven't lived, man," "raucous guitars," "loud," "itchy-twitched," "stomped and shuffled," etc. But he does capture the rapture of the 6,000 fans who came out on a subzero night to experience a major event in the history of Rock, though nobody knew it at the time.

Despite his rude approach, the review includes descriptions such as Holly's "red coat" and The Big Bopper's "white bucks" that are windows into the era.

It also contains unintended glimpses into the future such as, "Electric guitars boomed through two loudspeakers with the force of two symphony orchestras in full sway," and his description of Holly that includes his "little guitar," actually a Fender Stratocaster. Though small compared to the archtop models that were standard equipment in swing bands, no one today would consider it compact. Fairly new at the time, like the Les Paul, the Stratocaster would become standard in Rock bands.

Rock 'n' Roll Show Proves Cool, Crazy for 6,000 Here

By JOE BOTSFORD

It was crazy, daddy — the goings-on Friday night at George Devine's Million Dollar Ballroom.

Nearly 6,000 young people turned out to hear such rock-'n' roll stars as Buddy Holly and the Crickets, Big Bopper, Dion and the Belmonts and Ritchie Valens. If you haven't heard them, you haven't lived, man.

The show was billed as a "winter dance party." But there was little room to dance once the show got underway. The youngsters jammed the front of the huge stage—about 50 in a row and 20 to 25 rows deep. Others threatened to fall out of the crowded balconies.

SCREAMS MELT SNOW

It's obvious the Big Beat still has a hold on the kids, and it takes steady nerves to withstand the sound. Electric guitars boomed through two loudspeakers with the force of two symphony orchestras in full sway, and the twitching rock 'n' rollers invoked screams that surely melted the snow on the roof of the ballroom.

two young guitarists and a drummer—Buddy Holly rocked at his beanpole figure on stage, clutched his little guitar against his loud, red coat and jerked his way through "Peggy Sue." His voice was scarcely audible over the raucous guitars, but he itchy-twitched in grand style, and that's what the kids wanted.

TRIO ALMOST MOBBED

Dion and the Belmonts, three handsome lads who barely escaped the clutches of the girls reaching over the stage to grab their legs, offered their recording hit, "I Wonder Why," a big beat ballad.

The liveliest performer was Big Bopper, a chubby crew-cut cat, who sported a leopard skin coat and white bucks. He stomped and shuffled his weight around with ease and—surprisingly enough—he had the voice to match his bulk. Everybody demanded and got his hit version of "Chantilly Lace."

A comparative newcomer was the 17-year-old, Spanish lad, Ritchie Valens. Only the squares don't know that Ritchie's hit "Donna" is now among the top 10 tunes in the country. When he sang it here, his audience swayed back and

forth as if hypnotized by the slow love song.

The crowd ranged from Great Lakes sailors and couples in their 20's down to sharp-as-a-tack and well-coiffured boys and girls looking scarcely more than 10 or 12 years old. All had one thing in common—they turned up their noses at a swing band which filled in the time prior to the rock 'n' roll acts.

George Devine beamed broadly, reporting it was his most successful rock 'n' roll show to date.

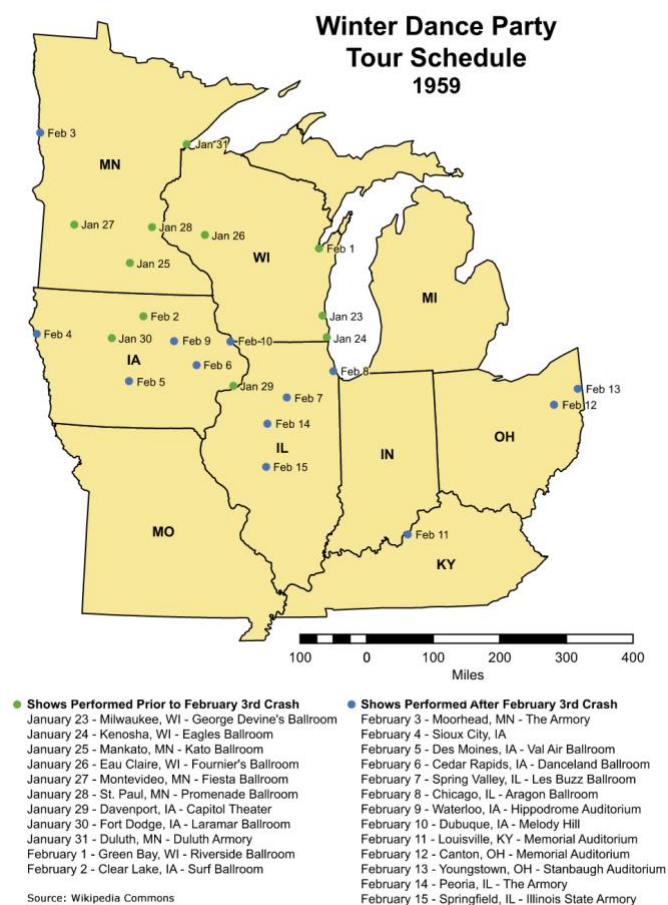
Yes, George. It was a fine bias!

The Milwaukee Sentinel
 January 24, 1959
 page 6.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Buddy_Holly_Story

From Milwaukee the tour headed south to Kenosha for the next night's concert and then northwest to Mankato, Minnesota, then to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, one small city after another, *freezing all the way*. It was a grueling schedule in challenging conditions but Dion says there was great comraderie among musicians on the bus and rockin' good times at the concerts. Tickets to the shows, he remembers, were "\$1.00 in advance, \$1.25 at the door" (\$8.55 and \$10.69 in 2018 adjusted for inflation).⁸ The 6,000 who attended the Milwaukee show paid a total of more than \$50,000 in today's dollars.

Hailing from northern-latitude New York, Dion and The Belmonts were more used to cold, snow, and wind, but evidently the bus wasn't because it kept breaking down, including once while rolling south out of Ironwood, Wisconsin, on Highway 51 toward Green Bay. Even today that's a lonely stretch, and it must have been far more desolate 60 years ago, especially on a sub-zero and snowy, wee-hours January morning.



About midway through the 23-city tour Holly, who Dion relates was taking flying lessons, had enough and decided to charter an airplane. As a headliner, Dion was part of the coin toss that determined which two of Holly's fellow stars would be offered one of the available seats. (Frankie Sardo was the tour's opening act and not part of the flip.⁹) Dion won but turned the seat down because he says the \$37 price reminded him of what his parents' apartment cost per month, and he couldn't bring himself to spend that much on a relatively short flight. Instead, he gave his seat to Richie Valens. An inflation calculator reports \$37 in 1959 is equivalent to just over \$300 today.¹⁰ Dion's frugality saved his life.

But it was *ironic* in light of another major surprise: his addiction to heroin which he states in his book *Dion The Wanderer Talks Truth* began at age 14.¹¹ This means when he recorded "A Teenager In Love" in March, 1959,¹² he was a junkie. His much grittier songs, "Runaround Sue" and "The Wanderer," written by Ernie Maresca,¹³ were recorded in 1961, while he was still an addict.¹⁴

The street was like a church, with its own sacraments, rites of passage, and obligations. I started getting drunk when I was twelve, smoking pot when I was thirteen, and shooting heroin when I was fourteen.

Dion The Wanderer Talks Truth, Dion DiMucci with Mike Aquilina, Servant Books, Cincinnati, 2011, page 53.

⁸ <https://westegg.com/inflation/>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankie_Sardo

¹⁰ <https://westegg.com/inflation/>

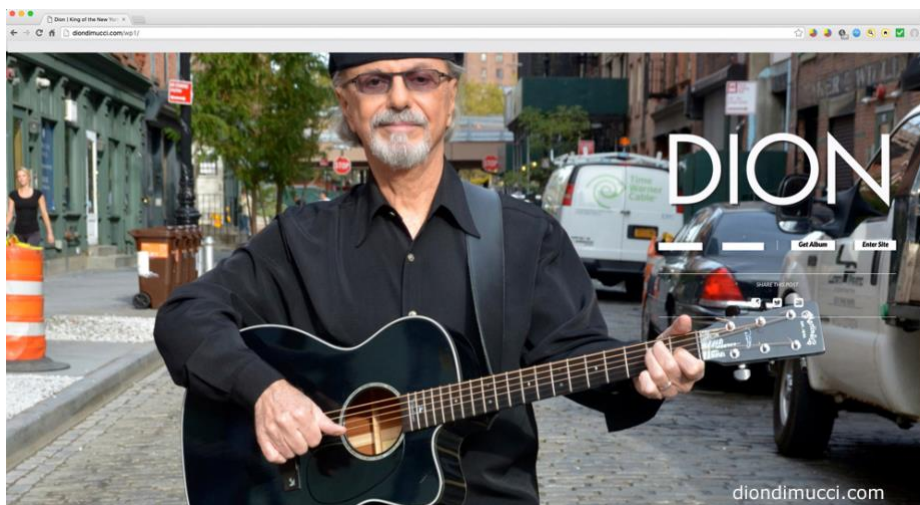
¹¹ Dion DiMucci with Mike Aquilina, *Dion The Wanderer Talks Truth* Servant Books, 2011 page 15.

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Teenager_in_Love

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernie_Maresca

¹⁴ Dion DiMucci with Mike Aquilina, *Dion The Wanderer Talks Truth* Servant Books, 2011 page 68.

In the video, Dion talks lovingly about playing guitar and the artistry of Hank Williams. He picked up the git-fiddle early and says he knew “40 to 50” Hank Williams songs by the time he was 16. Dion plays and sings superbly in the program, including excellent impressions of Holly and Valens. He’s a major talent and was a natural to succeed.



His love for the instrument infuses an anecdote he tells about Holly asking him “to take care of my guitar” on the bus while he took the flight. Before the tour, Dion says, he, Holly, and Valens bought new Fender Stratocasters which they “cherished.” In telling the tale, he recalls how he didn’t like seeing The Who’s Pete Townsend smash guitars. I’m right there with him and didn’t like Hendrix or other musicians destroying them either.

Guitars are precious and wonderful and everything musical about them is aboard before a naked ape picks a string. *They deserve respect.* Anyway, if you’re big and fancy enough a star to afford wrecking one for “entertainment” or “drama”—knowing a replacement can be easily had given your fortune—what about someone less fortunate who doesn’t have the money? I don’t believe in karma but ruining a guitar has to attract the worst that doesn’t exist.

Dion creates a mystery on page 66 of his book when he writes his appreciation of Delta Blues, encouraged by John Hammond, another legend, wasn’t exactly what executives at Columbia Records had in mind: “Columbia didn’t quite warm to it, but they humored me. And I certainly wasn’t the last ‘alternative’ act they signed. Soon after me came Bob Dylan, who was new to the label but not new to me.”¹⁵ He describes meeting Dylan on the Winter Dance Tour when Dylan was a member of Bobby Vee’s band which joined the tour after the February 3 plane crash. But Dylan, born on May 24, 1941,¹⁶ was 17 at the time and still in High School; he graduated later that year,¹⁷ so Dion appears to be misremembering this.

Another indication of Dion’s faulty memory is strong evidence Dylan didn’t meet Vee until the *summer* of 1959, after he graduated from high school, as recalled by Vee in a 2009 interview with *Goldmine* magazine:

“...he [Dylan] played piano, but he didn’t play very well, and we didn’t have a piano. He talks about playing in a church basement, and that’s true. The piano was horribly out of tune. He could play ‘Whole Lot Of Shakin’ Going On.’ He played really well in the key of C, but that was about it. He had this amazing energy even at that time, and when he wasn’t playing he’d come up, and we did Gene Vincent

Columbia didn’t quite warm to it, but they humored me. And I certainly wasn’t the last “alternative” act they signed. Soon after me came Bob Dylan, who was new to the label but not new to me. I had actually met him on the fateful Winter Dance Party Tour. Back then he went by the stage name Elston Gunn. He played keyboards for Buddy Holly’s replacement, Bobby Vee. Dylan was another regular in John Hammond’s office and another devotee of Robert Johnson. We shared the same producer at Columbia, Tom Wilson.

Dion DiMucci with Mike Aquilina *Dion The Wanderer Talks Truth*
Servant Books, 2011 page 66.

¹⁵ Dion DiMucci with Mike Aquilina, *Dion The Wanderer Talks Truth* Servant Books, 2011 page 66.

¹⁶ https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Dylan

¹⁷ <http://ultimateclassicrock.com/bob-dylan-high-school-reunion/>

songs and Ronnie Hawkins and all kinds of stuff—I remember doing ‘Lotta Lovin’ and all of a sudden hearing handclaps next to my ear, and he was singing harmony on ‘Lotta Lovin’ and I thought, ‘Wow, this guy, he’s a wild card.’ He was great-spirited, had an amazing sense of humor and just wonderful energy. This was summer of ‘59.”¹⁸

Dylan performed with Vee for a short while before moving to Minneapolis to begin college, but months after the Winter Dance Party ended. In any case, he never forgot the first truly professional group he played with as Vee recalls in an excerpt from the 2009 *Goldmine* article:

“My wife and I had dinner with our daughter and her husband in Minneapolis a while back, and her husband came in with the Bob Dylan book *Chronicles*, and there’s about a page and a half about his early days in Fargo when he played in my band for a while. He was Bob Zimmerman at the time. He talks about that time period, and it blew my mind that he would remember that. He played in Fargo in 1991, and I sent him a letter welcoming him back to Fargo, ‘cause he spent time there when he was 17 or something and played in our band a short time. And I brought it up and gave it to one of the technicians that I knew working that show, and said, ‘If you see Dylan, give him this note.’ So my wife and I and daughter Jennifer, and our oldest son, Jeff, we were all at the show, and on the break after the opening act. We got a page to come backstage. We went backstage, and he and the guitar player on that tour, G.E. Smith, were the only people backstage up in this little dressing room.”¹⁹

“I had also sent along a cassette of The Vees, and when we walked in, he was playing The Vees cassette, and we chatted and I was amazed at how much he remembered from that time period. He talked about my brother Bill, asked how he was doin’ and Bill had obviously made an impression on him. And the Red Apple Café where he had worked as a busboy, and Del Shannon...that was the last show Del played, at the Fargo Civic. Just about 10 minutes, and that was it—gave him a hug and left the room.”²⁰

Dylan probably has warm places in his heart for those like Vee who, early on, when he was completely unknown, a rank beginner, showed an interest in him. The following recollection is from an article at Heavy.com titled, “Entertainment Bobby Vee & Bob Dylan: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know”:

“When Dylan performed in St. Paul, Minnesota on July 10, 2013, he decided to perform a cover of ‘Suzie Baby,’ the song Vee had a regional hit with when he was still performing with The Shadows. (The song was recorded before Dylan’s brief stint with the band.) Vee, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease two years before that show, was in attendance. Before Dylan performed ‘Suzie Baby,’ Dylan said that of all the people he had ever been on stage with, Vee was ‘the most meaningful person.’ He asked the crowd to give Vee a round of applause. [Vee] performed his last show that year and also recorded his final album, *The Adobe Sessions*. The album featured a cover of Dylan’s ‘The Man in Me.’”²¹

This presents a massively likable side of Dylan and indicates he never lost sight of his hopeful, early days.

¹⁸ <https://www.goldminemag.com/articles/bobby-vee-wouldnt-change-a-thing-part-3>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ <https://heavy.com/entertainment/2016/10/bobby-vee-bob-dylan-velline-influences-nobel-prize-dead-alive-tribute-to-suzie-baby-music-chronicles-volume-one/>



Several times during *The True Buddy Holly Story* Dion points out the music “didn’t die” that snowy night but instead what Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, and Richie Valens accomplished in their brief careers helped shape what was to come in the world of Rock.

[Click to watch Dion’s *The True Buddy Holly Story*.](#)



tswrites.com