

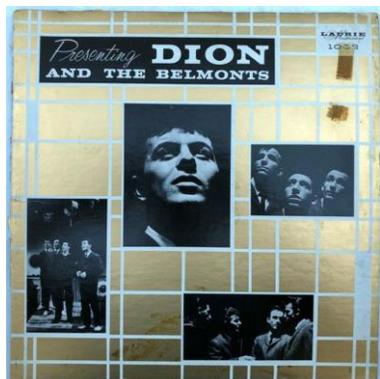
DION



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1957-2021</i>	<i>Pop rock</i>	<i><u>A Teenager In Love</u> (1959)</i>

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PRESENTING DION & THE BELMONTS

Album released:

October 1959

V A L U E
3 3 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) I Wonder Why; 2) Where Or When; 3) You Better Not Do That; 4) Just You; 5) I Got The Blues; 6) Don't Pity Me; 7) A Teenager In Love; 8) Wonderful Girl; 9) A Funny Feeling; 10) I've Cried Before; 11) That's My Desire; 12) No One Knows.

REVIEW

It should take you exactly 15 seconds – more precisely, the 15 opening seconds of ‘I Wonder Why’ – to define your general attitude to Dion & The Belmonts. If you feel «amazed» or, at the very least, charmed by the way the rhythmically perfect, whipper-snappishly confident *dun-dun-dun-du-dun-dun* baritone of the opening is complemented by the high-pitched vocal ladder of the three auxiliary singers, then you’re all set for a romantic nostalgic trip into the First Age of Boy Bands, when haircuts were shorter, outfits were longer, lyrics were dumber, and vocal arrangements were smarter. If, on the contrary, this sound makes you either wanna barf, or roll over with laughter, it is unlikely that anything else from the classic hit-making days of Dion DiMucci will make you take this guy as anything other than nostalgic fodder for Grandpa and Grandma.



It does go without saying, I suppose, that without Dion & The Belmonts, there would have been no Beach Boys — or, more accurately, that this here is the no-longer-missing link between the sweet vocal wonders of old school crooners, barbershop quartets, and doo-wop squads, on one hand, and the soon-to-appear vocal-oriented American pop bands of the rock'n'roll generation, everybody from the Beach Boys to the Mamas & Papas and beyond. Dion DiMucci did not invent any new styles of music, but he was among the first and best white boys from the late 1950s / early 1960s to realize how to squeeze those old values — sentimentality, romance, chirpiness, and, above all, technical bravado — inside a contemporary musical wrapping. For sure, there were plenty of young white rock'n'rollers to whom good old-fashioned crooning was actually a second nature, all the way from Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran (whose internal wild beasts had a surprisingly tender side to them) to Elvis himself. But most of them, one way or another, still valued energy, spontaneity, and a certain degree of rawness over immaculate perfectionism — the one thing true rock'n'roll was never about.

Dion DiMucci did like rock'n'roll, but unlike all those guys, Dion DiMucci didn't much care about its aggressive, rebellious, DIY side that took such a lenient stance towards occasionally flubbed vocal notes or out-of-tune instruments. It is hardly accidental that his family (as well as most of the families in his particular Bronx neighborhood from which he culled the rest of the Belmonts) was of Italian origins — the music Dion would go on to perform would rarely be connected to Italian pop as such, but it is certainly influenced by the classic Italian attitude: open-hearted, in-yer-face emotional, and chiseled to the utmost technical perfection. I don't know if anybody ever called Dion «the Puccini of teen-pop», but it would seem like a fairly accurate moniker to me in any case.

As a respectful admirer, but not really a heartfelt lover of Puccini (I'm more of a Wagnerian when it comes to opera), I think that I extend more or less the same feelings to Dion and his boys. They did not write their own songs — the earliest ones came from their producers on the Mohawk and Laurie labels, then from contemporary songwriters like Ernie Maresca — and the songs they did perform hardly ever broke any serious musical ground, by and large being variations on existing doo-wop, country, and rock'n'roll formulae (although props must be given to Dion's readiness to experiment with such multiple genres, rather than decisively locking himself into just one pattern). The instrumental backings on those records all but define cold-hearted professionalism, usually impeccable from a tonal perspective but rarely surprising or inspiring from an emotional angle. The only thing that makes them truly special are the vocals — and here, it all depends on whether you're willing to lend your support to a Dion-ruled universe.

At least back in 1958, it was a fresh, moderately exciting universe. You can clearly feel the difference if you start the journey

with Dion's very first single (not included on this record, since it was still recorded for Mohawk, Dion's first label) where he does not even have the Belmonts yet — rather, he is paired by his record label bosses with a bunch of people he'd never met as «the Timberlanes». There's a syncopated romantic doo-wop ballad, 'The Chosen Few', on one of the sides, and a sort of vaudeville-Western number, 'Out In Colorado', on the other — everything smothered in cheap Vegas brass and wrapped in a quasi-big-band «epic» feel which all but eliminates Dion's main advantage, that of sounding like the quintessential «teenager in love».

Then, a few months later, Dion recruits his young Italian buddies Carlo, Fred, and Angelo as the Belmonts, and with their very first single, in October 1957, the classic Belmonts sound is born. Crystal-clear doo-wop guitar that dominates the instrumental background and keeps it so quiet as to never ever overshadow the vocals; perfect separation between lead vocal and the harmonies; and no attempts whatsoever on Dion's part to sound any older than he is (18 at the time). That's 'We Went Away', a song that went unnoticed upon release but already has all the trademarks; and the B-side, 'Tag Along', for sheer contrast is a fast-paced pop-rock number that could be good enough for Ricky Nelson, except that Dion, with his explosive Italian heart, always jumps out at you from the speakers, whereas shy little Ricky always keeps to corners.

With the switch to Bob and Gene Schwartz's newly-founded Laurie Records label comes 'I Wonder Why', starting off Dion's short-lived, but well-remembered rule as one of the kings of the early teen idol era. The perfect combination of catchiness, hard-working professionalism, old-school doo-wop values and new-school rock'n'roll bounciness, for me it works like a museum piece worthy of admiration, an impressive achievement of human creativity without the slightest trace of God-granted genius, so to speak; but then again, maybe you really have to live on Belmont Avenue in order to have a different perspective on this kind of thing. The best I can say on this matter is that the song is significantly less cringeworthy than, say, the likes of Sha Na Na and other such «revivalists» who were bent on recreating the spirit of a deceased era in a completely different environment. For the *tempora* and *mores* of 1959, 'I Wonder Why' was just perfect.

Somewhat more human-sounding is the band's second single, 'No One Knows', on which the Belmonts take a small step back, relegated to strictly backing vocals, and Dion sings in a slightly gloomier and more melancholic mode; there is also a cute little minimalistic piano riff engaged in an active dialog with the singer rather than just providing a steady foundation, which might be the single most memorable «purely musical» moment on the entire record. However, its follow-up, the completely ballad-oriented A-and-B-side combination of 'Don't Pity Me' and 'Just You', is a step back from «human values», both songs being seriously more maudlin than 'No One Knows' and also spoiled by completely unnecessary brass

backing — each time these saxes come in, it's like somebody stepped into the wrong studio for a few seconds.

Then, of course, in comes 'A Teenager In Love', one of Dion's best-remembered hits whose title itself perfectly captures the essence of the Dion vibe. With just a few chord changes, it could easily pass for one of those classic Hank Williams laments, except that the overall vibe here is decidedly urban rather than country. The chorus, of course, is its main selling point: the lines "Each night I ask the stars up above / Why must I be a teenager in love?" probably spoke volumes to the average American kid back in 1959, almost explicitly stating that painfully obvious problem of the onset of one's sexual urges prior to emotional maturity and financial stability. It doesn't hurt, either, that the song was commissioned from the songwriting team of Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, who had only just begun to achieve notoriety. You can definitely feel that pop-era Elvis vibe in the "I cried a tear... for nobody but you..." middle section, which would later be reworked into the «manly tears» feel of 'His Latest Flame' and some other songs the Pomus-Shuman team wrote for the King.

The Belmonts' first LP, in addition to all those singles, threw on some album-only tracks as well, which help form a better perspective on Dion's genre-hopping. Thus, 'You Better Not Do That' is a playful country hop, not unlike something like Hank Williams' 'Pan-American', but musically reworked as a teen-pop number; and 'I Got The Blues' hardly constitutes any serious competition to the Chicago masters, yet it is still a relatively original take on the genre, exploiting its comedic potential above all else. A little later, this endeavor would be taken to its pinnacle with 'The Wanderer', which would complete the transformation of somber Chicago blues into uplifting teen-pop; 'I Got The Blues' is not quite there yet, but it's still more fun — if nowhere near as «authentic» — than the average Jimmy Reed number. On the down side, 'That's My Desire' has always been an awful song no matter who sang it, and the Belmonts' falsetto harmonies can only worsen the deal, as the final effort is so corny, you could probably slip it unnoticed into the middle of Zappa's **Cruising With Ruben & The Jets** or something of that level of parody.

In the end, I am still surprised at myself for giving the album such a high rating — but it *does* have an impressive level of variety and originality, cannot be accused of a lack of emotion, is perfectly listenable and catchy, *and* could, with certain reservations, be called «adequate» in that Dion and his pals never really try to bite off more than they can chew. In a song-by-song album battle with, say, the Beach Boys' debut of **Surfin' Safari** it would have won hands down (admittedly, it wouldn't be a fair competition, since the Belmonts' album is mostly a compilation of their hit singles, whereas the Beach Boys' debut was a handful of filler thrown around *one* hit single, and far from their best at that). And yet, from a certain point of view, I still think there's more «life» and «fun» on **Surfin' Safari** than on any of the Belmonts' records. The odd

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Dion*

Album: *Presenting Dion & The Belmonts (1959)*

George Starostin's Reviews

difference is that the Beach Boys reached their own brand of perfection through experimenting with various brands of imperfections over a period of several years; Dion & The Belmonts, on the other hand, did away with imperfections as soon as possible, which makes this collection as utterly sterile as it is formally immaculate.





WISH UPON A STAR (1960)

Album released:

June 1960

V A L U E
2 2 2 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) When You Wish Upon A Star; 2) In The Still Of The Night; 3) A Lover's Prayer; 4) **My Private Joy**; 5) My Day; 6) Swinging On A Star; 7) All The Things You Are; 8) It's Only A Paper Moon; 9) In Other Words; 10) I'm Through With Love; 11) When The Red Red Robbin Comes Bob Bob Bobbin' Along; 12) September Song.

REVIEW

As much as I would like to mellow out and say something nice about this album, I have a lingering suspicion that it is really a subtly laid out infernal trap — say something nice about Dion & The Belmonts covering sentimental American standards in 1960, and the next day you wake up with a craving to buy up every single Christmas album released from 1950 to 2020, selling off your entire record collection to raise the appropriate funds. Were I twenty years younger, this entire review would probably consist of nothing but a mix of sarcasm with expletives; these days, my writing (like everybody else's) tends to be more polite — but at least I am happy to say that my gut reaction toward an LP like this has not changed at all. (The gut reaction being: "If I ever catch myself becoming a fan of this kind of music, please put me out of my misery".)



Admittedly, Dion himself does not seem to recall the record with much fondness, insisting that he was under pressure from both the record label *and* The Belmonts themselves — which is easily understood, because it is precisely on sappy romantic ballads like these that the boys could really showcase the strength of their vocal harmonies; meanwhile, Dion wanted to do

more upbeat, more modern-sounding material which left them in a somewhat diminished role. Given that he was beset by his own personal problems in early 1960 (including the need to check into a hospital to battle his heroin addiction), he was probably in no position to fight at the time, which explains the existence of **Wish Upon A Star**; but as soon as he was properly back on his feet, the situation changed drastically and we went from 'When The Red Red Robbin Comes Bob Bob Bobbin' Along' to 'Runaround Sue' and 'The Wanderer' pretty quickly, thank God (and the struggling, but at least partially efficient American medical system) for that.

There is exactly *one* song on this album that I wouldn't mind hearing again in the future: 'My Private Joy', a fairly fresh composition by the famous duo of Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, which sounds just like all those fun pop-rock numbers they wrote for Elvis — catchy, life-asserting, New Orleanian all over, with an ecstatic sax solo and a relatively raucous performance from Mr. DiMuccio himself. *That said*, the earlier version of the song, recorded by the 13-year old Bobby Pedrick Jr. (later to be known as Robert John of 1979's 'Sad Eyes' fame), actually rocks even harder and has a lot more grit to the singing and the arrangement ([check it out](#) to hear a really cool growl on a 13-year old, and while you're at it, might as well check out '[White Bucks And Saddle Shoes](#)', Bobby's first hit recorded when he was just 12... what the hell am I doing reviewing a Grandma-oriented Belmonts record instead, anyway?).

As for everything else, well, we have Sinatra for that. Sure, 'In The Still Of The Night' sounds way different with the Belmonts' harmonies from when Frank did it — but the true challenge for a clever interpreter of an American standard is to make it sound *less* rather than *more* corny, and the Belmonts' harmonies here, while not exactly emulating the crooning and cooing stylistics of the 1930s, are their precise equivalents for 1960. The only saving grace is that at least the arrangements are not overtly saturated with strings; instead, the preferred romantic instruments of choice are chimes, ringing electric guitars, saxes, and an occasional harpsichord or two. But the basic intent behind the songs consistently remains the same, and there is no depth whatsoever to the performances. Well, at least no *original* depth, if you happen to love those old rusty ballads by themselves, or the way they were sung by the likes of Bing or Frank.

I suppose that Dion must have had a bit of fun doing the upbeat, danceable, modernized version of 'Swinging On A Star', which has an actual bass-heavy electric guitar riff egging it on (at least he *sort of* looked happy [on the Dick Clark show](#) while mugging along to it with the other boys); but, along with 'My Private Joy', it is the only non-ballad on the album, and the rest is strictly for a poor man's Romeo to sing under the balcony of a poor woman's Juliet. Naturally, we cannot impeach the record on grounds of technical quality — all of the harmonizing here is a vocal teacher's absolute delight, and regardless of

what Dion himself thought about his ability to leave a mark on these standards, he invests enough professionalism in his delivery to show his utmost respect for them. But nothing can obscure the fact that, with a few minor reservations, **Wish Upon A Star** is a case of the past extending its iron grip over the present, rather than the present recasting the past in a new light — and just one more example of how the record industry was trying to subvert the musical revolution of the youth by subtly seducing said youth with the benefits of «maturity», «adulthood», and «seriousness». You know — *if that sort of life is what you wish, you may grow up to be a fish* and all that. The sad news, in the end, is that this record just ain't no bunch of moonbeams carried home in a jar.





ALONE WITH DION (1961)

Album released:

March 1961

V A L U E
2 2 3 1 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Lonely Teenager*; 2) *After The Dance*; 3) *P.S. I Love You*; 4) *Save The Last Dance For Me*; 5) *Little Miss Blue*; 6) *Havin' Fun*; 7) *Close Your Eyes*; 8) *Fools Rush In*; 9) *My One And Only Love*; 10) *North East End Of The Corner*; 11) *One For My Baby*; 12) *Then I'll Be Tired Of You*.

REVIEW

Now *that's* an album cover that could give little kids nightmares. I actually admire the symbolism — there's like a dozen different interpretations one could come up with, given the combination of that point-blank stare and the lack of a head or torso in conjunction with the gloved hands. A little swag, a little glamor, a touch of horror, shaken, not stirred. It's almost a pity that the contents of the record never live up to the genius cheesiness of the front sleeve. Alas, though, even the genius cheesiness was not enough to convince the public that a record like that is an absolute must for their collection. Not only did it flop, but it was so deeply forgotten that even the current edition of Wikipedia does not have a separate page for it, going on to claim, on the **Runaround Sue** page, that **Runaround Sue** was actually the first solo Dion album, when it was very clearly the second. Guess the author of the page was probably one of those little kids, still haunted by the terrifying image of red-gloved arms dragging a dashing young man down into the depths of hell and devoting the rest of his life to wiping out any memories of that image from history.



Which is kind of funny, really, given the usual reasoning behind Dion splitting from The Belmonts, a decision officially announced on October 16, 1960, and confirmed by the release of his first solo single, 'Lonely Teenager', within the same month. Both Dion himself and his former bandmates went on record saying that the split was due to musical differences: Dion allegedly wanted to get into grittier rock'n'roll, blues, and country, which left less legroom for the doo-wop harmonies of Carlo, Fred, and Angelo. Yet the real picture is a little more complicated, because neither 'Lonely Teenager' nor, in fact, much of anything else on **Alone With Dion** could seriously qualify as «gritty rock'n'roll» — nor does it make a lot of sense for the proverbially angelic voices of the backing ladies to replace the trusty support of the Belmonts. Honestly, it feels more like a typical struggle-for-power conflict, in which the frontman feels himself constricted by the very fact of having the name of his band always attached to him like a ball and a chain. Besides, when you have a choice to be depicted on the front sleeve of your next album with two or three more attractive guys that look like you, *or* with a pair of lady arms reaching out for your bosom, which one would *you* prefer?

Anyway, for his solo debut the producers decided to split Dion's artistic personality in two halves, dedicating the entirety of Side A to contemporary pop and Side B to old-fashioned Tin Pan Alley. Because of that decision, my summary of **Alone With Dion** will be shorter than it could have been — in light of the fact that all of Side B sucks Harold Arlen's and Johnny Mercer's asses, *big time*. It's basically Dion trying to be the next Frank Sinatra, and I have a hard enough time lodging the *first* Frank Sinatra in the spare backrooms of my brain. Pretty much the only thing Dion DiMucci could have on Frank in 1960-61 is his younger age, but even that works against him when he tries 'One For My Baby' on for size — a song that, in order to be sung efficiently, requires at least a couple of decades of trials and tribulations. There is simply no use anywhere in the universe for those six covers, with their unimaginative orchestral arrangements and flowery vocal performances that do not even try to add depth or subtlety. Technically, of course, it's all quite impeccable, but «semantically» — throw this crap on the pile, please.

The first side of the album is a bit more acceptable: featuring comparatively more sparse arrangements, usually based on acoustic guitar rhythms accompanied by occasional pianos, horns, and/or backup vocals, and showcasing contemporary professional songwriting, it does a better job of conveying Dion's «humanity». 'Lonely Teenager' is the standout track, of course, though mostly because of its lyrical subject — with a title like that, you'd think it would be another broken-hearted ballad about the inability to find true love, but in reality it's a tune that questions the consequences of adolescent rebellion: "*Now I'm seventeen, still alone / Wondering if I should go home / Or maybe stay out on my own / I'm a lonely teenager*". Written by three little-known Italian songwriters from Brooklyn who may well have known what they were talking about,

it's a good vehicle for demonstrating the more vulnerable side of Dion's voice, culminating in the almost «cowardly» inflection on the bridge: "*I know I'll be alright / If I stay out of sight*". Add to this the delicate frailty of the acoustic rhythm, and the song becomes a shy little puppy of a tune which I could easily envisage as, say, a Paul Simon acoustic ballad. Now *this* is something for which Dion most certainly had the advantage on Frank Sinatra.

Of the two Doc Pomus – Mort Shuman numbers, 'Save The Last Dance For Me' is the more expendable one, simply because it does not improve on the classic Drifters version; but 'Havin' Fun', written specifically for Dion and once again putting him into «my life is so wretched» mode, works better, and I particularly appreciate those little trombone overlays emphasizing the song's melancholy – the use of brass here follows essentially the same purposes as it would in some of the classic Kinks tracks. Together with 'Lonely Teenager', these two songs make Dion into a viable alternative for Ricky Nelson to those who would like their broken-heartedness a little more lively and a little less icy: the difference is that Dion, as befits a proper red-blooded Italian, still wants to shout about his pain in the market square, while Ricky always seems more comfortable quietly picking his sores in the darkest corner of his bedroom. Personally, I prefer Ricky's modesty, but I also appreciate that Dion is at least not pulling an all-out «teenage Pavarotti» on us, either.

The happier songs are also pretty much OK: 'After The Dance' (from the songwriting team of Joseph Meyer and Robert Allen) is spoiled a little by overloud and over-annoying backing vocals, but it's difficult not to tap your foot to the infectious beat – and Ronnie Isle's 'Little Miss Blue' is just pretty, bouncy pop fluff, hard to remember but equally hard to despise while it's on. Which leaves space for but one slow-burning ballad, the old chestnut of 'P.S. I Love You' (*not* the Beatles song, of course, which had not even been written yet – the slow "*dear, I thought I'd drop a line...*" ballad previously covered by just about every vocal jazz artist of note). This one should probably have made it onto Side B, but since it does not feature any orchestration, instead placing its trust into jazzy guitar arpeggios, midnight piano tinkling, and haunting faraway backing vocals, it's a bit more preferable. I don't have much use for it, but I can easily see people who would – there's a definite charm to Dion's shaky, near-crying vibrato as he desperately tries to get into the right mood.

On the whole, after all, it's easy to understand why **Alone With Dion** is pretty much forgotten next to **Runaround Sue** – the album cover alone is something that each of us would probably want to unsee – but if Dion is a hero of yours in the first place, Side A should definitely not be ignored. Its few songs do provide a better opportunity to evaluate the man's capacity as a solo performer, and they also form a stark contrast with the soon-to-come image of the man as a macho womanizer ('The Wanderer', etc.); here, he is as sensitive, romantic, and even downright shy as they come, even belying that

piercing "I-know-what-you-really-need-darling" stare on the album cover. Admittedly, this is not a whole lot of material to be overjoyed about, but then there's no denying, either, that Dion was and would always be a singles artist rather than a «long-playing» one. On the other hand, most of the standard compilations only include 'Lonely Teenager', when 'Havin' Fun' is at least almost as good, and those happy-poppy dance tunes do not lag too far behind. Do stay away from all that awful lounge jazz on Side B, though, unless you've already got your top hat out and polished.





RUNAROUND SUE (1961)

Album released:

November 1961

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Runaround Sue*; 2) *Somebody Nobody Wants*; 3) *Dreamlover*; 4) *Life Is But A Dream*; 5) *The Wanderer*; 6) *Runaway Girl*; 7) *The Majestic*; 8) *Little Star*; 9) *Lonely World*; 10) *In The Still Of The Night*; 11) *Kansas City*; 12) *Take Good Care Of My Baby*; 13*) *Could Somebody Take My Place Tonight*; 14*) *I'm Gonna Make It Somehow*.

REVIEW

After the relative success of 'Lonely Teenager' came just as relative a lull in Dion's career: his next three singles all charted, but progressively lower and lower until the third one, 'Somebody Nobody Wants', did not even manage to crack the top 100. (Then again, what exactly does one expect to get from the public with a single bearing that kind of title?) And I can sort of understand why — a song like 'Kissin' Game' does not emphasize any particular aspect of itself, sounding close to the contemporary Latin-flavored material by Ben E. King but not outstanding in terms of hooks, arrangements, or vocal effort. As good a singer as Dion is, he was unable to get by on the strength of vocal charisma alone; to let the world know his worth, the song had to make some kind of point, or else get ready to dissipate as soon as it hit the ground.



Well, we seem to finally be in luck because this here LP got *two* such songs — both 'Runaround Sue' and 'The Wanderer', inarguably the most recognizable stars inside Dion's relatively obscure constellation, are here, and each of them represents one of Dion's quintessentially-controversial sides. One thing they have in common is that, aesthetically, they fall somewhere

in between rock'n'roll and doo-wop, borrowing vocal stylistics from the latter and rhythmic energy from the former: Dion had no intention whatsoever to properly keep up the flame of a genre that, by 1961, seemed to no longer offer viability in its «wildest» forms, but neither did he want to completely dissolve in the crowd of teen idols, which his previous album had actually put him in serious danger of. In short, just the kind of stuff to get him into the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame without riling up the parents too much back in 1961 — that is, provided they don't pay too much attention to the lyrics.

'Runaround Sue', co-written by Dion with his pal Ernie Maresca and released in September 1961, became Dion's first #1 hit, so it must have apparently struck some subtle gold vein — and, honestly, I don't think that this was even due so much to Dion himself as to the Del-Satins, an obscure doo-wop group whose general reputation would remain forever based on their providing backing vocals to most of Dion's hit singles. Let's be frank, the *one* thing that is sure to stay in your head after even one solitary playthrough of 'Runaround Sue' is "*hep-hep bum-da-hey-di-hey-di hep-hep*", which the Del-Satins somehow manage to feel joyful and melancholic at the same time — then again, the same goes for Dion's wordless vocalizing, weaving in and out of the backing vocals in a state caught somewhere between depression and euphoria.

If the intention of the song was to capture and convey the protagonist's desperate Don José-like state of mind in light of the permanently defiant unfaithfulness of modern day Carmen «Runaround Sue», then that intention fails completely and utterly: Dion is no Del Shannon when it comes to parading one's broken heart, and the average listener, particularly in the context of plunking a nickel down the jukebox, will be far more inclined to just dance his or her head off to all the *hey-di hep-heps* than shedding a tear of empathy for the unfortunate protagonist whose girl "*ran around with every single guy in town*". The lyrics of the song, on their own, might seem almost disgustingly male-chauvinistic, particularly from the 21st century point of view — *who is this guy to pronounce moral judgement on whatever a girl desires to do with her own body?* — but if we put ourselves into a 1961 frame of view, there's clearly a touch of admiration for «runaround Sue», who ultimately comes out as the alpha figure while her ex-lover admits to being the defeated underdog. I can imagine quite a few potential «runaround Sues» dancing their own heads off to this celebration of freedom from the masculine yoke in those pre-Beatles days. And that wild sax playing from Buddy Lucas, echoing the ecstasy in Dion's vocals all through the song, sure must have been a big help.

Interestingly, the forgotten B-side to the single, a soft, piano-driven rhythmic pop ballad commissioned from a bunch of outside songwriters, is 'Runaway Girl', hardly coincidentally sharing its first root with 'Runaround Sue' while also dropping a friendly nod to Del Shannon's 'Runaway' — as one can see, long before the Beatles came along to assist the league of

parents' daughters with their liberation issues, the idea of *running, running away, running around* was all over the air back in 1961. The funny thing is that 'Runaway Girl' literally tackles the exact same subject as 'Runaround Sue', only slower and more sentimentally this time, as well as with a little actual hope for the future: "*each night and day I'll pray that someday maybe she'll come through and then... I'll be more than just a toy for my runaway girl*" — ooh, that must really hurt. But here even more so than in 'Runaround Sue', the entire atmosphere of the song is never about moral judgement or misogyny, but only about smooth tenderness, expressed perfectly in the classy combination of sax, piano, backing vocals, and Dion's gorgeous lead.

Actually, if you listen real closely, you'll find the melody of the opening part of the verse — "*I fell in love with a runaway, a little runaway girl / Each night she's all that I dream about, my little runaway girl*" — almost identical to Bowie and Iggy Pop's 'China Girl', a connection hardly ever mentioned but so obvious to me that it must have been at least a subconscious influence (unless there is another missing link I am unaware of). Apparently, there is something in that particular construction of the chords and the repetitive vocal phrasing that helps reinforce this idea of a strongly obsessive mental connection with an ideal out of one's reach... or something to that effect, anyway. Whatever be the truth, 'Runaway Girl' is one of those little overlooked, unassuming gems that, every once in a while, rewards the true completist.

For Dion's next single, Laurie Records decided to concentrate more heavily on the sing-and-dance aspect of their new star's identity rather than any emotional traumas, so they gave him 'The Majestic', a bit of a novelty tune that promises to introduce "*the greatest dance you ever saw*" but clearly fails to deliver upon the promise with its fairly generic beat and slow tempo. The Del-Satins do a good job as usual, and Dion tries to deliver a get-up-on-your-seat-and-dance message as hard as he can, but the overall effect of the song is in the range of passable (if you don't give it any thought) to awful, if you compare it with something like 'Twistin' The Night Away' or 'Rock Around The Clock'. Speaking of those, [Dion presented the song](#) "quasi-live" with his appearance in the aptly titled movie *Twist Around The Clock*, and, honestly, watching the audience react is the farthest thing from an impression of "the greatest dance you ever saw". Also, what's up with that squeaky falsetto whine on the "*people get in a big boss line*" bit? No, that's definitely *not* how you introduce a brand new dance that's supposed to make the kids in Philly forget the slop because "*there's no more shimmy and no more bop*".

No surprise, then, that the infuriated DJs simply dumped the A-side and turned all of their attention instead to the B-side, 'The Wanderer', which was another Dion / Maresca collaboration and certainly more meaningful to the writers. If you only listened to the opening bars, you might have thought it was Dion's brave take on Elvis' 'Stuck On You' — same swaggery,

steady, rhythmic mid-tempo — but while both songs share a level of cocky self-assertion, ‘Stuck On You’ propagates concentrating on one goal ("*a team of wild horses couldn't tear us apart*" and so on) where ‘The Wanderer’ offers a, let’s say, more *dissipated* approach to fulfilling one’s purpose in life.

Somewhat ironically, when, more than 50 years later, Bethesda licensed ‘The Wanderer’ for one of the trailers of *Fallout 4*, the next chapter in their sprawling post-apocalyptic survival saga, Dion filed a suit against the company, indignant that his music was accompanying "*repugnant and morally indefensible images designed to appeal to young consumers*". Had I been a Bethesda representative, I would certainly suggest retorting that there are few songs out there presenting a more repugnant and morally indefensible set of images designed to appeal to young consumers than ‘The Wanderer’ — one must admit that "*I kiss 'em and I love 'em cause to me they're all the same*" is a difficult line to morally defend, as are most other lines in the song.

Later in his life, Dion would cling on to the line "*with my two fists of iron, but I'm going nowhere*" as his defense (implying that the protagonist is really a tragic character whose attitude toward women is determined by the overall aimlessness and bleakness of his life, etc. etc.) but the really amusing thing is that Maresca’s [original demo from 1957](#) has "*my two fists of iron and a bottle of beer*" which was changed at the request of the record label because, apparently, they thought that singing about beer could be perceived as immoral (and nothing else in the song would), so it’s a bit of an odd cop-out. If there really is any «darkness» to the song, or even any irony, then all of it is strictly implied, or, rather, just depends on what *you* want to read into it. To some people, it will be a shameless glorification of the ultimate objectifying womanizer; to others, it might be a mocking-condescending, tongue-in-cheek portrait of one.

It does feel hilarious — and quite a bit hypocritical — to have ‘Runaround Sue’, condemning the proverbial slut, and ‘The Wanderer’, praising the proverbial man-whore, on the same record, but whaddaya know, it all comes from that time when men were men and... oh, never mind. There was, after all, a good reason, that when The Beach Boys later covered the song live in concert, they gave it to Dennis Wilson to sing — easily the most appropriate candidature among the Wilson brothers for this tune, who was able to put even more passion into the vocals than Dion himself, singing it all from such a deep bottom of his heart as even his most loyal fans at the time probably wouldn’t have guessed.

Yet in the song’s defense, in addition to it coming from a time-honored tradition of «ramblin-man’» ballads that place more emphasis on the freedom of moving around than Don Juan-style womanizing, it is not even particularly «sexy». It’s really all about that relentless beat and about filling each bar of the verse with that never-ending stream of cocky-but-nervous

singing and about the swirling *wander 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round* refrain that does, if I may say so, add a little drop of that caught-up-in-the-whirlwind-of-fate attitude. (That *round and round* bit, by the way, was the result of Dion expanding on Maresca's original conception; Ernie just sang "*I'm the wanderer, yeah I'm the wanderer, I wander round*", leaving the last line of the chorus exposed and hanging — Dion gave it some actual meaning).

Not that I'm a huge fan or anything: I actually prefer 'Runaround Sue' as the more melodically interesting of the two hits, and The Del-Satins make their presence more justified there than on 'The Wanderer', whose vibe can get annoying by the time the second verse gets around. But for at least one verse and one chorus, the song is cool as heck, and it is not at all difficult to understand how it smashed both the US and UK charts (though it still failed to hit the #1 spot like 'Runaround Sue' did). The double-punch of these two bulls-eyes was enough to make Dion into a major force on the pop scene, ensuring at least two more years of steady success before the British Invasion put a dent in his fortunes; for now, though, the most important task was to secure his newfound popularity with a brand new LP — called **Runaround Sue** for the bigger of the two hits, though certainly **The Wanderer** would have been a more fitting title.

About half of the LP consisted of A- and B-sides that we have already discussed, but the rest of material is quite worth hearing; well, at least *some* of the rest — I do not imagine my typical reader as a potential fan of this cuddly version of 'Little Star' (hmm... are there even any *non*-cuddly versions of 'Little Star'?), nor of generic mid-Fifties doo-wop like 'In The Still Of The Night' (confused note: this is *not* the Cole Porter song of the same title that appears on Dion & The Belmonts' **Wish Upon A Star** — this is Fred Parris' song that was originally recorded by The Five Satins in 1956). But one more original Dion / Maresca collaboration, the romantic pop-rocker 'Lonely World', is a great showcase for Dion's sliding vocal rainbows on which he comes across as a slightly burlier version of Roy Orbison; and his cover of Bobby Darin's 'Dream Lover' is far superior to the original — more rock'n'rollish, with a denser bass, deeper and darker vocal harmonies, and a wilder, much more desperate lead delivery that shows you exactly *how much* the poor guy needs someone beside him at night.

Unfortunately, our guy was unable to «tighten up» Bobby Vee's 'Take Good Care Of My Baby' in the same way he did it with 'Dream Lover' — maybe it's the debilitating influence of all those strings, but overall it's comparable in meekness to the original. It's still a Goffin-King song, which precludes total melodic rot, but back in 1961 this was kinda symbolic of rock attitudes giving way to the teen idol stuff, and in this particular case, Dion does nothing to shatter that symbolism. Instead, he tries to remind us in a different way of his passion for rock'n'roll — by covering 'Kansas City' in a version that is fairly close to Wanda Jackson's. It's okay, I guess, but it's 'Kansas City'. Do you really need to add Dion, specifically, to the list of

all those people that went to Kansas City to get themselves a pretty little woman? I'm not so certain, what with Kansas City already most likely suffering from a serious demographic problem.

Overall, **Runaround Sue** is a significant improvement over **Alone With Dion**, and not just because of its highest points, but because it's a record that tries to be a little more honest with its listener, and to carve its own path rather than humbly conform to the contemporary stereotype of the quintessential «teen idol». But its problem is that it still fails to give Dion his own distinct identity — unlike Roy Orbison or Del Shannon, he is happy enough to act out these songs in whatever manner seems more fit. The Dion of 'Runaround Sue' is not at all the same Dion as the Dion of 'The Wanderer', and in between the philandering, the broken-hearted, and the starry-eyed avatars you have a hard time discerning the individual. In the end, all he does is just wander 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round in a hit-and-miss fashion, which makes me wonder just how many people in this world have the sounds of 'Runaround Sue' and 'The Wanderer' ingrained in their memories without properly recalling who sang them in the first place. Ironically, a big part of those songs' magic, too, is due to The Del-Satins — no matter how much effort Dion took to establish himself as a solo artist, he still sounded best with a well-tailored doo-wop entourage rather than completely on his own.

