

The rock star who met Christ on a jog



Dion DiMucci tells Rory Fitzgerald that a ‘sudden and brilliant’ encounter inspired him to give up heroin and embrace the faith.

Dion DiMucci, performing here in New York’s Mercury Lounge, describes John Lennon’s celebrated song Imagine as ‘an anthem for a self-centred wretch’ (Photo: PA)

Dion DiMucci was there at the creation of rock’n’roll. In the late 1950s, the Italian-American boy from the Bronx scored runaway hits with songs like “The Wanderer” and “Runaround Sue”. By the age of 20, the once-poor gang member had become a millionaire. In 1959, while touring with Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper, he fatefully chose not to get on the plane that killed them both. In the 1960s, although he had everything the world could offer, he felt profoundly empty. He struggled with heroin and alcohol addiction until one night in 1967 when he fell to his knees and prayed. Then everything changed.

Dion appears on the legendary cover of The Beatles’ Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band album and counts Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and Lou Reed as friends and admirers. Although now 72, he is still writing recording music and has just published a moving memoir of his journey back to his

Catholic roots: Dion: The Wanderer Talks Truth.

Speaking from his Florida home Dion told me of his deep love for the Catholic Church, which he says is far more than merely a natural organisation.

“It’s supernatural,” he says. “That’s why I love it. I love the Church. I love the teachings. I love the truth.

“A lot of people think [being Catholic] is about judging people, but it’s not. It helps you to accept everybody. A lot of people don’t understand that approval and love are two very different things. If you confuse them, you’ll be seeking approval all your life. I have three daughters; I brought them up making a distinction between the two.

“People have a strong desire to be approved of, but I tell them: ‘I’ve been married 49 years. I didn’t marry my wife because she agrees with me on everything.’”

He says that having different views on moral issues should be no bar to love: “It takes acceptance.”

In America, as in Britain, the debate rages as to whether civil marriage should be re-defined to allow for same-sex marriage. Dion says: “Of course, I believe in marriage between a man and a woman. But I’ve got gay people in my family that I love dearly. God knows, some of the gay people in my family are some of the brightest, nicest people that I’ve ever met, and that I look up to.”

Whether he approves of everything they do or believe, he says, “has nothing to do with my love for them”.

“I love them completely, and look up to them,” he says. “I just go with God’s definition [of marriage but] I have to love people. I’m not perfect. Who’s perfect? I accept them.”

On issues such as this he feels the real intolerance is coming from the liberal side. “In this country the liberals tolerate anything – except conservatives. I say, well I’m liberal with my love, but I’m conservative in my thinking.”

Some might think that a conservative rocker is an oxymoron, but Dion sees no contradiction, and cites other examples, like Ted Nugent, Alice Cooper and Johnny Ramone.

He agrees that in the western world today Catholicism has become counter-cultural. Starting out in rock’n’roll in the 1950s he was going against the cultural grain, so he’s comfortable with that.

“Rockers truly believe in freedom and truth,” he says. “But sometimes they don’t know what either one of them means. I see myself as a true rocker. Because freedom isn’t doing anything you want, it’s having the freedom to choose God’s very best. It’s not being in bondage, politically or spiritually. When you’re in bondage to drugs or anything, you can’t choose the best you don’t have the ability; the drugs come first. A lot of rockers are naïve, they don’t think deep enough. They think they’re thinking, but they’re not... They confuse freedom with licence. They think freedom is doing anything you want.

“When I grew up, people had a belief system. They had a blueprint for life.

And a lot of it came from the Church and the teachings and the Commandments. They actually had the Commandments hanging on the blackboards in the schools.

“My grandparents came over here from Italy. My grandfather used to say ‘See the Statue of Liberty? They should erect the Statue of Responsibility on the west coast’, because with great power and freedom comes great responsibility.”

There are things Dion misses about the era in which he grew up.

“There was a lot of beautiful things about [1950s America]: There was a love of country, there was a love of God. When I grew up, on Sundays you could really tell that it was Sunday. People got dressed up. The church bells would ring. You could smell the baked goods in the air. People had the newspapers wrapped under their arms. They didn’t work. It was a special day of rest and enjoying family, and God had a place in the world. Now it’s a blur.”

By 1967, after a decade of fame and fortune, Dion was in a bad place. He was heavily addicted to heroin and alcohol, and his career was suffering. He was moved to see his tough-guy father-in-law praying on his knees.

He recalls saying to him: “Pray for me.” The wry reply came: “Pray for yourself, God loves to hear from strangers.”

Eventually, one night he tried it. He got down on his knees and asked God to free him from his addictions.

He says: “It’s been 44 years since I said that prayer, and I haven’t taken a drug or a drink.”

He also now counsels other addicts. As to whether that was his very first prayer, he says: “You know, nobody’s ever asked me that question. I would say it was my first conscious prayer, when I got down on my knees and prayed from my heart. You could call it my first prayer.”

That prayer, which freed him from alcohol and drugs, began his deep embrace of Christianity. It also changed his musical direction. Just months after saying the prayer, he had a hit with a gentle, contemplative song, “Abraham, Martin and John”, which sold over a million copies in America.

Yet he was to have another profound spiritual experience. While out jogging in 1979, Dion says: “I had this experience, it was very sudden and brilliant and profound. Christ appeared to me, and I’ve never been the same. It truly set me free.

“By the time I was 20, I had 12 gold records on the wall, and I’d made a couple of million dollars, but I was empty. Something was missing. But when Christ came in to my life, I understood who he was – that God stepped in to history for a reason. When you open up to the wonder and awe and mystery of life, and find out that God is a reality, it fills you. It filled my heart, my mind and my spirit. I’ve never looked back. I thank God for what he did for me.”

In his book he makes an articulate arguments against moral relativism, using John Lennon's secular hymn "Imagine" to deconstruct the idea. Dion notes that the song, which contains the lines "Imagine there's no heaven, above us only sky" was released at a time when much of the world was in the grip of atheistic Communism.

Dion says: "For me it's an anthem for a self-centred wretch, and in the same breath, I gotta tell you, I love John Lennon... that song just doesn't go deep enough... you're talking to a guy who couldn't even get along with his bandmates. My imagination's not that big, only God's is, and he knew how to do it, but we're throwing out the solution. We're overestimating what we can do, and underestimating what he can do."

He says that nowadays "anybody who stands for anything is under attack. You can't make a stand for anything, because they say: 'That's intolerant.'"

On tackling moral relativism, he says: "I don't know if you can break through that thinking with a sledgehammer or an axe, but God can. The truth of your life is a witness, in a sense.

I think people respect when you take a stand... but you have to do it. You know Jesus said: 'They're not going to like you – but it's not you, it's me.' If he was politically correct they would never have hung him and put nails in his hands.

"My little way of making stand is writing that book... I didn't want to write a 500-page book on 'here's all the girls I screwed, here's all the drugs I did, and here's how popular I am'.

"What kind of legacy is that for my grandchildren? What's the deal with that? It's nothing."

He says that Catholics nowadays need to try to "infiltrate the culture".

"That's our job, I think, to infiltrate the culture." Not, he explains, to impose, but to expose "what's important in life and give people an opportunity to see the truth."

Dion: The Wanderer Talks Truth is available from Amazon.co.uk, priced £9.76

Rory Fitzgerald - Catholic Herald