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Photo: Bill Bush

Dion and Bo Diddley

Blues

Dion *Bronx In Blue*
DMR DMR062

IN 2000, CAPITOL Records' imprint The Right Stuff released *King of the New York Streets*, which it deemed the "Ultimate Dion Collection," comprising 65 tracks on three CDs. The boxed set hit nearly every phase of his wide and varied secular career. (During the 1980s, he took a break to record a series of gospel albums.)

In the liner notes penned by Dave Marsh, Dion speaks of his love of the blues, and how he was thinking of the blues even when he was helping The Belmonts craft doo-wop vocal stylings like "A Teenager In Love" and "I Wonder Why." Mesmerized by the "twilight-time" signals his radio could pick up during the 1950s from stations sometimes thousands of miles south of the Bronx, Dion kept the beat and lyrical pain from these songs embedded in his brain and heart while crafting his own brand of pop music over the next five decades.

Towards the end of the boxed set's first CD there's a rock band version of "Spoonful" (much different from what Cream would do with the Willie Dixon standard a few years later) that suggests Dion's affinity for the idiom. But for reasons unexplained, Dion's take on his favorite blues standards hadn't surfaced until now with his new all-acoustic *Bronx in Blue*, out on DMR (Dimensional Music Recordings), a label owned by indie music distributor The Orchard, known for finding digital MP3 audiences for independent musicians.

The thing that grabs a listener from the beginning of *Bronx in Blue* is that unmistakable, powerful voice, one which could be from none other than Dion. The swaggered self-assuredness of "The Wanderer" and "Runaround Sue" spills out in the opening track, Robert

Johnson's "Walkin' Blues," coming from the same place Dion's owned since his late 1950s and early 1960s AM radio heyday.

For the next hour or so on 14 tracks, the unplugged Dion shows the infinite possibilities that abound with a guitar played by someone who knows what he's doing all the way up and down the neck, has a compelling voice, and owns a songbook that has stood the test of time.

With the exception of occasional accompaniment by a percussionist, the album is all Dion, accompanying himself on his Taylor or Martin acoustic axe.

Highlights include Bo Diddley's "Who Do You Love," three more Robert Johnson covers ("Terraplane Blues," "Crossroads" and "Travelin' Riverside Blues"), and Willie Dixon's "Built for Comfort." "Crossroads" is much slower than the Cream version, but if Eric Clapton played the tune during his late 1980's "Unplugged" performance on MTV, it would have sounded something like this, which is testament to Dion's guitar prowess.

Dion also picks up on the natural link between Hank Williams' brand of country music and the blues in "Honky Tonk Blues."

The mix is clean, as if Dion is sitting there in the listener's living room for an intimate performance.

On *Bronx in Blue's* liner notes, Dion explains, "Though I've been carrying these blues and country gems around in my head the last 50 years, I recorded this CD in two days." (Obviously, maybe, he's spent a couple of decades woodshedding on them.) The next time a label wants to release the definitive Dion compilation, it will have to contain more than a few tracks from *Bronx in Blue*.