

DICK D'AGOSTIN AND THE SWINGERS

This group, known only to a few record collectors for their recording of "Nancy Lynne" on the DOT label in the 1950's, was one of the premier groups of the time, both in their own name and as a back-up group for many of the top recording artists in the 1950's. During a series of interviews conducted with two of the members of the group, including Dick D'Agostin himself, I have been given an insight into the music scene as it really was during the early days of Rock and Roll. What follows is the first of the two interviews, beginning with Dick D'Agostin, then followed by the second interview with Gene Riggio.

The initial reason for my wishing to contact Dick was through my interest in the recordings and career of the late Eddie Cochran, and I knew that Dick had been on a number of tours with Eddie. It was through this interest that I contacted Dick, but soon realized that he and the rest of the group were not just ANY run-of-the-mill "unknown" band from the '50's.

As I mentioned before, they recorded just one hit record, backed-up many of the top performers on tours and club dates, and appeared in the Rock and Roll movie "hot Rod Gang".

Who were the Swingers?

Who was and is Dick D'Agostin?

I will start with an introduction to the group and its members.

Dick D'Agostin	-	Vocals, Piano, Guitar and Bass)
Larry D'Agostin	-	Guitar)
Gene Riggio	-	Drums Vocal Background)
Wayne Messick	-	Bass)
Dave Oster	-	Guitar and Bass)
Paul Coffman	-	Tenor Sax)

INTERVIEW

TONY: Dick, let's start at the beginning, when and where were you born?

DICK: Both my brother, Larry, and I were born in a City called Beloit, Wisconsin, which is on the Wisconsin/Illinois Border. Approximately, 100 miles northwest of Chicago. I was born in 1936, while Larry was born in 1938.

My parents are Arthur and Marjorie D'Agostin. My mother is deceased, my father lives in Rockford, Illinois, is retired, we maintain close contact.

TONY: When and why did you move to California?

DICK: My father was hired by Lockheed Aircraft and we moved to Burbank, California in 1952. He was a design engineer in aircraft.

TONY: What musical training have you had?

DICK: First of all, my father's family are all musical. My father was a gifted horn player. In fact, still is, and played professionally. All of my family added very much to my understanding about music. I learned opera from my maternal grandfather and, from my father, I learned a lot of traditional blues from an old black man just down the hill from our house in Beloit.

I was trained in classical piano, taking lessons at Goodenough's Music Store and studied with a Mrs. Gardner, who was a classical pianist. She had quite a good reputation in the area. My maternal grandmother was an accomplished pianist of concert calibre, but a stroke left her right hand incapable of playing. Because of this I learned a lot of left hand piano moves. In fact, I think that my piano teacher thought that I was left handed during the early part of my training with her.

TONY: What happened after your move to California. Did you continue with your music ?

DICK: California was very different from what I was used to in the mid west. We didn't bring the old piano with us, which had been my grandmothers and for a couple of years I didn't play music, except for a harmonica that I had.

It sounds corny, but I've always had one, have one today ,in fact. I carry one with me. It's like a piano in your pocket, although I've been more guitar oriented for years now. I learned some basic "Blues-Harp" from Sonny Terry & others in L.A.

TONY: When did you start playing in a group?

DICK: After I had been in Burbank for a year or so, I met two guys at the Verdugo Recreation Centre, which is in Burbank. They were Gene Riggio and Dave Oster. We became life-long friends and with my brother Larry, we eventually became Dick D'Agostin and the Swingers.

TONY: Were you a professional musician at this time, or did you have another job ?

DICK: No. Although I had begun playing piano again and had made a couple of records with ACCENT RECORDS, recording wasn't really foremost in my thinking at all. It was playing and having fun writing and singing songs. I became quite a prolific writer.

I found out that Gene Riggio had a set of drums and Dave Oster had a guitar, and my brother was interested in playing guitar as well. We then met Paul Coffman, who was in High School. He had a Clarinet, which he later traded for a Tenor Sax and we augmented with Wayne Messick, who played Bass. When I was 18 I took a job with the Burbank Recreation Department handling games and teen activities. The guys and I jammed on Saturday mornings, or whenever we could.

We began attracting numbers of kids to session type rehearsals. I began to write rock songs and the band became tighter and tighter. We began to attract attention, not just from the people we knew, but from people outside.

TONY: Was it at this time that you recorded "Nancy Lynne " and if so, how did you come to record it?

DICK: A local D.J. heard of us and asked us if we wanted to make a record, so we produced "Nancy Lynne" and "Afraid To Take A Chance ".

With regard to Nancy Lynne I wrote it on a paper napkin in a San Fernando drive - in, Burger joint . I wrote it for two friends - Nancy Aid and Lynne Tardiff. This was on a Friday night.

We recorded a working tape the next morning at the Olive Recreation Centre and then cut the Master at Gold Star Studio's the next week. The D.J., later to become my manager, was Earl McDaniel. I believe that "Nancy Lynne" was done in just one take. Most of our things were done on the first, second or third take, at most. as by this time we had become so tight that all we had to do was go into the studio and lay it down.

"Nancy Lynne" was in the TOP 40 briefly in the Los Angeles area, and before we knew it, we got fitted for Tux coats and we hit the road.

TONY: Just like that you had a hit record ! You mentioned tuxedo's, is this what you wore on stage ?

DICK: On the road, we wore Black tux pants, formal shirts and bow ties. Our main uniform was Red and Black coats for the band and a plain Red one for me. Our second change was the same outfit, but with Gold coats. We went to clip - on ties, because honestly, girls used to grab us for a tie or something, and personally, I didn't want to get dragged off a stage by my neck !

TONY: At this time, were you "Head Line" performers, or back-up musicians?

DICK: We were a working band and probably not given much individual notice in those times because we backed up everybody. but we could certainly turn a crowd on it's ear. Incidentally, we could turn a place around.

By that I mean that if a previous act was not that good, then we came on and did a couple of songs the crowd was up again and wanting more of us. A lot of different artists and acts liked to work with us, because they knew that we could back them up, and back them up well.

We could also do our own spots too. We developed a following and some acts tried not to follow us on shows. We'd play "Honky Tonk", "Johnny B Goode", "Boney Maroney", "Stagger Lee" etc. If anyone would throw a request at us that we didn't know, like "Blue Suede Shoes", we could go ahead and fake it. Sometimes we'd just ad lib, like an instrumental, just to give my throat a rest or something. There were times we'd go on stage and you could shoot a cannon through the place and not hit anybody ! Seven people. And other times there'd be thousands of people yelling and screaming and we got to the point where we wore breakaway ties, because I didn't want us to get choked for a few bucks, and having a good time, you know, that kinda deal. And I lost more than one article of clothing in those kind of deals.

TONY: Who were some of the artists that you worked with ?

DICK: Just briefly I'll run through some of the people the band and/or I performed with, tours included.

Eddie Cochran Jimmy Clanton Freddy Cannon

Jerry Wallace Skip and Flip Jan and Arnie

Jan and Dean Bobby Vee Sam Cooke
Johnny Otis Ed Townsend Jessie Belvin
Ritchie Valens The Teddy Bears Jack Scott
The Penguins Johnny Burnette Lou Rawls
P.J. Proby Big Jay McNeely The Champs
Trini Lopez and even The Harry James Orchestra.

DICK: On Johnny Burnette, He was at Liberty Records, at about the same time that Eddie Cochran and I were. I met him in Bakersfield, California and he hadn't rehearsed or anything and he just came on and said " Key of E, play anything you want ", so that's what we did.

TONY: That's amazing Dick. It seems that you played with just about all of the top performers of the late 1950's. Did you do any solo tours or appearances at this time ?

DICK: Yes. I went on a number of solo trips to promote my records and play shows, taking my red "les Paul " junior Gibson guitar, which I still have and it can still "cut glass at 100 yards " if need be ! I also have my original Bassman Amplifier. That's the same kind of amp. that Eddie Cochran and his bass player, Guybo Smith carried. so that we had three of those on stage, usually, at least.

TONY: I see that you were no longer playing piano, why was that ?

DICK: Yes, but I did play piano too. I had learned to play guitar by then. Piano's were really unreliable and that was before the days when you took your whole system with you. Sometimes you didn't know what you were getting into. The piano would maybe be in freezing temperatures and 1/4 tone sharp, which really played hell with any horn man and also with me, because I was doing just about all of the singing, so the guitar was sort of a self-defense item I got into.

Speaking of piano's, we really played some rare places, and also played some terrific ones. It was just a whole wide variety. In one part of the country one week and it would be freezing, and then be in another part of the country the next and it would be so warm, so there were a lot of changes.

A lot of differences in crowds, groups and what the local preferences were in terms of groups and songs.

TONY: Of all of the people that you worked with, who stands out in your mind as one you especially enjoyed working with?

DICK: I've got to say that the guy that I worked with most, and liked the best was Eddie. Eddie Cochran. I certainly wish he was still alive. It's a shame to see another really gifted guy slip away so soon in his time, ya. know. I really wonder what he'd be doing, or I would be doing if he were still alive, because part of the reason that I sort of drifted off from the business was when he died.

There are those who have told me that they do not feel that I was given enough credit for my contribution in Rock and Roll History. I don't know about that. I loved it. Always did. It was an

exciting time. Sometimes very up. Sometimes very lonely. In short, I loved every minute of it. My career came to a halt due to two major events. Actually it was a kind of build up.

The first was Eddie's death. After so many others. Like Ritchie Valens and Buddy Holly, and gosh, any number that you could name. Also, about that time I went into the U.S. army. I went in on a Sunday, after playing a Saturday night gig in California. It put me out of circulation. In fact, I heard of Eddie's death, on the radio while I was in basic training in the army at Fort Ord, in California and the whole thing ceased to be fun as I had known it and so I didn't go back on the road, or back into recording ,except to do session work with a number of bands.

I also worked on a number of concerts as back-up, and did a number of things that were fun, but without the 100 % drive that you had to put into doing a full show. I also did some producing.

Some writing. My brother Larry and I did some folk concerts, just the two of us with acoustic guitars that I have on tape.

TONY: As you got out of the music business, what have you been doing?

DICK: Well, during the time I was on the road, I was completing college, which was a little tough because there were a lot of times everybody's out having fun and I'm in the hotel room cracking the books. So I graduated from college and eventually what I did was work for Los Angeles County, dealing with juvenile offenders in detention. I did that for 23 years until I was medically retired due to an injury in the line of duty.

TONY: Besides music, were you involved with anything else ?

DICK: Yes, I was associate editor for DIG Magazine. The first national teen magazine, from about 1955 to 1957. I was also associate editor of MODERN TEEN. I wrote a dance column in DIG.

The reason for this was that I was Rock and Roll dance champion in California. This involved about 50,000 people and was covered on T.V. and got notice in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner and Life Magazine and about the same time a story was done on the guys, and me, in COSMOPOLITAN.

Just about every member of the band danced, and we'd incorporate that into our shows. We would pick a girl out of the audience and switch instruments and take turns dancing. This was a real show piece. I also did some movie and T.V. work, though didn't like it much. I should also mention that Gene Riggio was also involved with the dance championships.

TONY: How did you get a part in the movie "Hot Rod Gang" ?

DICK: It was through my association with DIG magazine that they asked me to appear in Hot Rod Gang. I did some dancing and so did Gene Riggio of the band. It was during the shooting of this movie that I first met Gene Vincent.

TONY: Do you have other memories of your days on the road ?

DICK: Yes I sure do. On the road we travelled in my black 1957 Chevy (sometimes jokingly called "The Swinger Mobile ") with a U - Haul trailer. When we travelled with Eddie Cochran, we went in his Ford Station Wagon with a U - Haul trailer. We played in a wide variety of settings. Like some pretty rare places.

The band and I played on flatbed trucks. One time on top of a snack bar at a drive - in movie. We also played in the finest auditoriums, on the pitchers mound of a baseball diamond in Texas, played in Quanset huts. On Indian reservations in the south - west. We also played a lot of armories and womens clubs and halls all over the U.S. Well, not all over, but quite the big loop through Dakota, over into the mid - west and down through Texas and Oklahoma.

TONY: Do you know what the other members of the band are doing now?

DICK: Larry, my brother lives in Las Vegas. He's a Black Jack pit boss, and has been in that business for about 20 years. Paul Coffman, who played sax, is a High School teacher in Thousand Oaks, California. I've been a guest speaker in his classes, on the juvenile justice system and drug information. He has also become a very accomplished pianist / singer. Dave Oster, who played guitar (and bass) in the original Swingers, works in the aero space industry and lives in Torrence, California. We also get together now and then. Gene Riggio, who played drums, also lives in Las Vegas. He works at the M.G.M. Grand, now Bally's, in the casino. I hadn't seen him in a long time, until recently. He's still the same. (As a result of my inquiries, Dick and Gene got together one weekend, with details to follow).

Wayne Messick, who played Bass, I lost track of Wayne a long time ago and over the years have tried to locate him. (since the first interview, both Dick and I have been trying to locate Wayne.. and will continue to try). Wayne was classically trained and did in fact play with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra.

One afterthought. As I mentioned I was classically trained and when I was 12, 13 and 14, I won top honours in classical rating at Whitewater College, in the mid west. I still play everyday.

TONY: Going back to Eddie Cochran, were you present on any of his recordings?

DICK: Yes. I was on his recording of "Boll Weevil". I played piano on that. While, I suppose it is possible that I could be on others, I don't know for sure. There was always something going on, especially at Goldstar in Hollywood. And lots of us were on many recordings. Sometimes you didn't know what the record was until you heard it on the radio, thought that it sounded familiar and then realized that you had done such and such.

I remember Eddie doing a Western T.V. show. We played "Nightwalk", while Eddie did a couple of Hank Williams songs.

I also remember during one of our many tours that Eddie had an appointment with one of the local radio stations, to do an interview. He told me that he didn't want to do the interview. I tried to talk him out of missing it as he had a commitment. Eddie said that if I felt that strongly about it, then I should go in his place, which I did. The D.J. did the interview, thinking that it was Eddie. Having been friendly with Eddie, I did know a little about his life and career and was able to respond accordingly. Following the interview, and during the show later that evening, the D.J. arrived with two girls and was obviously telling them that he had met Eddie earlier in the day etc.. Just at that time, I got up on the stage to announce "and now, the pride of Liberty Records - Eddie Cochran ". Of course, on comes Eddie and the d.j. suddenly realizes that it was not the same person that he had interviewed, and just stood there with his mouth open and these two girls on his arms.

The tours in the 1950's were very tiring, and also very exciting. Also, there were always practical jokes going on. The whole thing was a wonderful experience and I made some life-long friends in the process.

I also lost a few. Ritchie Valens, Eddie Cochran and Bobby Darin to name a few. Although Bobby was around longer than most.

DICK: As to recording studio's during those times. There weren't a lot of them really, and you were always on the move. Most work was live, on stage, radio or t.v. The local radio station was a frame house, just outside the city limits, where it was relatively quiet, because many operations were not acoustically sound. At these times I scared the hell out of some D.J.'s by climbing in a window and surprising them. I took over a few radio shows as well, all in fun. (These were basically of solo trips, when I was alone, d.j.'s I knew, but didn't expect me) Not much of that sort of business even came close to being recorded. There just weren't the facilities.

As to New York, the facilities were certainly there, but the drive to chronicle the times wasn't there. In my opinion, nobody knew that in a couple of decades, the stuff that was happening would take on the proportions which came about. Bear in mind, that in those days, Rock and Roll was looked upon as a passing fad, that many hoped would go away. Performing it in some regions of America tended to be a true test of courage, not to mention potential financial disaster.

One other thing with Eddie. I met Eddie when I signed to Liberty Records, after my time on Dot Records. We became "Stable Mates " and toured. As I mentioned before, I recorded piano on "Boll Weevil". It was after we came off the road from Oklahoma. I think the second time. Eddie had a very definite presence. Had that good combination of recording and musical sense. Stage presence. A sense of writing, and was one of the best guitar players I ever knew.

He was great to work with and he was my friend. His death hit me pretty hard. Although my band worked with literally everyone, Eddie was the most fun to work with. I liked his intensity, but he always had a good time. Did good work. Always something going on. Some joke brewing.... He'd be about 49 now. A true loss to all of us.

I've always admired an artist who could do it all, some write well, some others play or sing well, it's my own bias, I guess, but I appreciate and respect someone who does it all. My bias is that I think it should be that way and I admit it's a narrow view, but I respect that, and when I was working, I thought that was best.

An interpretation, so to speak. Eddie could do it all. He was good at 13. Ritchie Valens was like that too, but honestly not as good as Eddie.

TONY: Do you have any unreleased material, either on tape or disk ?

DICK: Yes I sure do. I have lots of tapes that I have done. I have produced some. Done some folk things. Done some writing for some artists. On some cuts that I produced, I played all of the parts, except drums.

TONY: Can you give me some details on your singles released.

DICK: All of my records I wrote, sang and played piano or guitar. We did all of the vocal backgrounds, except for "It's You " , which I think was done by The Eddie Beale Singers.

NANCY LYNNE.

I'm on vocal and piano. Gene on Drums, Wayne on Bass. Dave and Larry on Guitar, Paul on Tenor Sax. This was recorded at Goldstar, first take only.

Overdubbing was the hand-clapping by the Swingers.

AFRAID TO TAKE A CHANCE

Same as Nancy Lynne, plus Paul on Tenor Sax

NIGHT WALK

Same, Paul on Tenor Sax, Me on guitar.

GIVE ME YOU

Same. I'm on vocal & piano, vocal background by the Swingers.

I LET YOU GO

Same as above.

IT'S YOU

Same as above

TONY: Besides "Hot Rod Gang ", were you in any other movies ?

DICK: Yea. Hot Rod Gang - No oscar winning movie there. Like I said. I liked the dance sequences though. Gene was in the middle. There were three couples and we did a synchronized dance thing that I staged.

There is another real winner called " The Spider ". It was even worse than the Hot Rod thing. They found this gigantic prehistoric spider and put it in a gym and a Rock and Roll band comes in. Oh, I don't know, all sorts of things happen. As you can imagine !

One last thing that I just thought of. Going back to the Rainbow Roller Rink. We first backed - up Eddie there. I know the name sounds funny, but it was where many of the big acts came and, we were, along with the Champs, pretty much the " house " band. When in town, we backed - up Ritchie Valens, Sam Cooke and all the others that I have told you about before. That's not to say that there were people roller skating about during the shows. On the Friday or Saturday night, they had the big Dance/Show. It was all dancing and people crowding up against the stage. Big Place.

TONY: Now, getting back to you for a while, How many songs have you written ?

DICK: I have no idea, to be honest. I've got files and files of songs. I know that I've written well over 100 , and I still write. I enjoy writing, and keep a notebook and pen with me at all times.

TONY: Have you, or did you, record everything that you have written?

DICK: There's no way that I could have recorded everything that I wrote. Though did record quite a few demo's and reference things, some of which you have heard, though do have considerable more stuff around.

TONY: Has anyone else recorded any of your songs?

DICK: There was one male artists, a while back, that had a hit, who recorded one of my songs. I don't think it was ever released though. I must admit that I rather hoarded my songs, because I aimed towards doing an album and some movie thing and was reluctant to let any of my songs that I had, go to somebody else. I think that in retrospect. That I made a mistake.

Perhaps, if I had been more aggressive and had some people record them, it would have been a good thing. I was hired to write some songs. I don't know if you know who CAROL DODA is. She was the first, and foremost, topless dancer, who had a certain amount of publicity in San Francisco, at a night club called "THE CONDOR". (This was after the army, and the Swingers, and so forth. I was just doing the odd show every now and again. Just for the fun of it).

Anyway, I was hired to go up there and write some songs, and back her up. This was with Bill Holmes, the drummer for "SOUNDEFFECT", a group that I worked some casual gigs with. I played all of the instruments, except drums. I wrote two songs on the spot. One I wrote as soon as I got there, and Bill and I arranged it. I also worked with two guys who were called the "DEUCESWILD". I rewrote the lyrics on one song. I also produced a couple of things at that time as well.

I also wrote a number of songs with my brother, Larry. We recorded a Folk - Blues album in the late 1960's / early 70's. In addition to that we did some live Folk concerts. Just the two of us. The album had eight cuts on it, but was never released. We had a chance to release it on Capitol, but they wanted to add French Horns and things, which we didn't want. We just left it at that. We did press a few copies for friends.

TONY: You mentioned that you did record with Eddie Cochran once or twice, did you work with any other artists?

DICK: Yes, as I mentioned, I was on Boll Weevil. I played piano on that, and listening to it again, I can hear my voice in some of the random things released later. We did a lot of stuff over a few days.

Like I told you. Many times. we didn't know who you were with, or who you were working for. We'd do a session, then wind up backing people on stage. There were numerous times when I played on a session that I really didn't know what they were until I heard them on the radio. There were a lot of us that hung around GOLDSTAR, and someone would come out and say "Anyone play piano, or Drums. or something". All we would hear is perhaps a rhythm track, and we would add our part to it. It was like that so often.

I was on many other recordings and will never know exactly which ones.

TONY: How did you get to become Associate Editor for both "DIG" and "MODERN TEEN" magazines?

DICK: Out here in the mid 1950's, there was a big television dance program. Rock and Roll Dance Championship. All in a make - believe ballroom, in the channel 7 studio's. Daily winners would come back to compete for a weekly winner. Then monthly, and then at the end of the year, a grand elimination dance - off. About six months into that... I was approached by DIG magazine, which was just starting. (It was the first nationally syndicated teenage magazine). I was to write a dance column and one of the catch words we always had was "Party Time", so that was what I called my column. I was 17 at the time. Shortly afterwards, the same publishers started "Modern Teen", and I wrote a dance column for them also. This piece involved answering mail. An opinion thing on dancing and music. Rock and roll stuff. As well as a dance step each week. It sure was a lot of fun for me.

Anyway, at the end of the year I won the dance championships. From this my "FEET" were hired for some of the Rock and Roll movies of the time.

TONY: Thank you Dick for sharing your memories of your career which gives us an idea of what the Swingers, and the music industry was like during the 1950's.

Well there you have it. An indepth look at a most under rated group of musicians, possibly only known for it's recording of NANCY LYNN.

All of the individuals were young and dedicated to their profession. They worked with some of the very top performers of the day.

Richard died on February 19, 1993 at Kaiser Permanente Hospital, Van Nuys, California from complications from Hepatitis, he was 56 years old. He will be sadly missed by those that new him.

Richard D'Agostin November 5, 1936 - February 19,1993.

DICK D'AGOSTIN AND THE SWINGERS DISCOGRAPHY

Accent	1046	I'm You Daddy - O
		What Gave You The Idea
Accent		Mean Woman
		Come On
Dot	15867	Night Walk
		Give Me You
Dot	15773	Nancy Lynne
		Afraid To Take A Chance
Liberty	55218	It's You
		I Let You Go

DICK D'AGOSTIN AND THE SWINGERS PART TWO

As a result of my initial interview with Dick D'Agostin, I wrote to the other members of the band with a questionnaire for them to answer. The following is the first of possibly five interviews with the members of the band.

Gene Riggio

This second part was conducted in Las Vegas with Gene, Dick and Ballard Hodges, reminiscing about their times together. While Ballard was not a member of the band, but with a band of his own and close friends during those years. As a result of my contact with all of these musicians, they met for the first time in about twenty years. It was on the third evening.