

RICKY & THE BALLOONS (official bio)

Ricky & The Balloons (brothers Riccardo, Dominic, Lorenzo and Tomasso Baluone) were an American rock band in the 1950's and 60's, hailing from a Northwest suburb of Chicago, Illinois where their parents, Eduardo and Priscilla Baluone, ran a successful Italian restaurant and Banquet Facility.

The brothers were all graduates of *Sacred Heart Technical Academy* in Norridge, Illinois where Lorenzo, the oldest, was a star athlete in Track, Football and Bowling. Dominic and Tomasso excelled in music at an early age, playing in the school's orchestra and marching band as well as in the *Loungaires*, a popular Wedding Combo. Riccardo, the group's lead singer, was held back in school due to severe dyslexia and graduated several years after his younger siblings who, by then, had all moved on.

Lorenzo joined the Army and while stationed in Germany had a lucrative (unofficial) side business bottling and selling his mother's award-winning spaghetti sauce at local fairs and markets which eventually led to his discharge from the Army for "misappropriating" military food supplies.

Dominic and Tomasso expanded their high school combo, *The Loungaires*, into a successful Midwest musical booking agency. By 1958 there were no less than seventeen officially sanctioned "Loungaires" performing in the Illinois/Wisconsin/Michigan area.

Upon returning from Germany, Lorenzo convinced his brothers that they should pool their individual talents and form a rock and roll band. They started playing weekends at their parents' restaurant, Baluone's, and within a few short months had developed a large following which led to their being signed by local recording company, *Scuzzi Records*.



Official Press photo, mid-1960's

Their first release inadvertently took advantage of lead singer Riccardo's vocal disability. The two songs on the single were co-authored by the brothers, *Please Don't Hurt Me* and *One Night Alone With You*. In the recording session, however, Riccardo was unable to overcome his dyslexia, resulting in the songs being sung and released as *Please Don't Ruth Me* and *One Thing Alone With You*. The single became an instant two-sided hit on Chicago radio stations after one local DJ claimed that the lyrics were "suggestive" and refused to play the record.



Official Press Photo, mid-1950's



Lorenzo Baluone in Germany, circa 1955

Sources & Bibliography:

The Del Vino: From Supper Club to Gentlemen's Club; Merle Newgraine; 1986, Prairie Press

Chicago Lounge Bands: 1946-1966; Evelyn Grist; 1992, Henscrapple Books

Pardon My Attitude: The Unauthorized History of Ricky & The Balloons; Chet Lundgren; 2008, Bowling Green Press

MORE:

Series of bad investments: *Wang Dang Noodle* (Chinese restaurant/BluesClub);

The Balloons' somewhat misguided LP, *Sergeant Leper*, with its infamous serial killer jacket sleeve, was released much in advance of the fab four's similar concept LP. (see below)

From the Unauthorized History: There was a time when the Del Vino and The Balloons were synonymous. But it was this relationship that eventually led to the band's downfall. The owner of the club had invested heavily in a 'pharmaceutical' firm that produced a number of spurious over-the-counter medications claiming to cure everything from acne to cancer. He convinced The Balloons to record a series of ads for such products as '*Mouth Jive*' and '*Amputastic*'; *Mouth Jive* claimed to "remove unwanted hair and cure herpes"; *Amputastic* made the unbelievably outrageous promise to regrow limbs. The FDA quickly closed down the company, resulting in the Del Vino's owner filing bankruptcy and moving to Costa Rica, leaving The Balloon's reputation in tatters.



(left) The Baluone family restaurant



Dominic (front row, far right) and Tomasso Baluone
(to his left); Sacred Heart Technical Academy Orchestra



The Original Loungaires



The Del Vino Lounge. 1936



Riccardo Baluone, age 8



The Del Vino Lounge, 1946



The Del Vino Lounge, 1986

The Balloons' somewhat misguided LP, *Sergeant Leper*, with its infamous serial killer album cover, was released much in advance of the fab four's similar concept LP. It came about in this way.

Lorenzo returned from his Army stint in Germany with stories of barracks life under their commanding officer, one Sergeant Lekker. According to Lorenzo, Lekker's only pleasure in life was mentally torturing his troops. He would routinely get them up at 3:30 in the morning, march them to the mess hall in their underwear, force them to drink three cups of coffee and then return to the barracks knowing, of course, that none of the men would be able to get back to sleep.

Lorenzo and his fellow soldiers referred to Lekker as Sergeant *Leper*. The brothers elaborated on the stories, eventually coming up with what would become one of the first 'concept' albums in history, *Sergeant Leper and the Barracks of Pain*. It was the group's first attempt at a fusion of jazz, Native American myths, Minstrel songs and Nihilism. Predictably, perhaps, the album garnered such criticism as "grim and needlessly malicious", "mentally harmful" and "unlistenable". One memorable review read, in part, "I don't care if stories of alien anal probings are currently in the news, they have *no business in pop music*".

Part of the band's incredible local popularity came from their love, and spot-on performances, of songs by Black artists like Little Richard, Lloyd Price, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke, Bobby Lewis and Frankie Lymon. In Chicago's Northwest suburbs no Black bands were ever hired at any music venues and The Balloons' renditions of classics like "*Tossing and Turning*", "*Rip It Up*" and "*Lawdy Miss Clawdy*" were legendary. (One night when the band was playing The Del Vino Lounge, a group of passersby heard the music, called the police and threatened to have the club shut down for miscegenation.) Legendary, too, were stories of the Balloons' numerous reputed affairs with Black female singers, musicians and realtors. In fact, the title of Chet Lundgren's biography of the band: *Pardon My Attitude*, supposedly came from the brothers' local Church record-breaking number of combined weekly Confessional appearances. The boys had planned to title their first album *Forgive Me Father*, but were convinced to call it instead *Forty Fingers of Love*.



(l to r) Harry Moscone, owner of The Del Vino Lounge, Priscilla Baluone and Eduardo Baluone.



Police raid on The Del Vino Lounge, 1944.

According to Leonard Krebnitz's 1957 "Chicago and Suburban Jewish Temple Defilement", the original structure of The Del Vino was built in 1887 as Temple Avgah L'Monoh and used as a synagogue for three decades (*Chapter 7, pp.153-158, "From Jews to Booze to Blues"*). In the 1920's it became the first silent motion picture theater in the area.



The guitar that nearly killed
Balloon's guitarist, Lorenzo
Baluone.

During their 1957 tour of Utah, sponsored by the state's newly formed *Utah State Parks Commission*, the band performed at the inauguration of four new parks: *Sugar House* (site of the old state prison, in which the band appeared on a live television broadcast), *This Is The Place Monument* in Salt Lake City (where the Mormon Church attempted to have the band arrested for vagrancy), the *Territorial Statehouse* in Fillmore and *Camp Floyd* in Utah County. Tomasello was absent from the *Statehouse* performance, fearing that an old Illinois warrant for car theft might still be in effect.

In Ogden, Utah, Dominic was arrested for attempting to marry two sisters, Malvina and Paulina Smith. In his defense, he claimed he had converted to Mormonism and was exercising his legal right to polygamy. Dominic denies the story. "This report was in error" he said in a phone interview. "I only wish it were true".

Back in the early 1950's, Lorenzo would shout from the stage, "We fought in Korea so we'd never have to go back to Southeast Asia again! Next time you see a Vet, buy him a cup of coffee and tell him 'Thanks for the good work'." So it was more than a little ironic that years later not only did his brother Dominic serve in Viet Nam, but that in 2000 the band agreed to participate, along with other acts from the Fifties, in the *Arms Across The Ocean 'Comeback Tour'* of Cambodia, the Philippines and North and South Korea, which was marred by North Korea's test firing of nuclear rockets during one of their sets.

ALBUM DISCOGRAPHY:

Forty Fingers of Love
Put Your Head In the Bag and Turn Up the Radio
Sergeant Leper's Barracks of Pain
Laborers of Love
Dance With the One Who Brung You
Live from The Del Vino Lounge