

Methods and memories: Willie Dixon looks back on his life in the blues

By Dan McCue

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The late 1980's have been something of second act for Willie Dixon, the blues legend.

After years of being largely under the record buying public's radar, the past several months have seen the release of *Willie Dixon: The Chess Box* by MCA and *Hidden Charms*, a Capitol Records' release of some of the lesser-known nuggets in the Dixon canon.

And the latter just netted him his very first Grammy, for best traditional blues recording.

Reputations are fragile and egos weak, but Willie Dixon it seems, is finally getting his due.

Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi some seventy-four years ago, Dixon was taught spirituals by his mother, while the secular side of his musical education came from ditching school and following the musicians who pass through Vicksburg in dusty roadside traveling shows.

His first formal training came from a local carpenter, Theo Phelps, who drilled him in the principles of harmony singing.

I press the record button on my tape recorder and suddenly it's the Chicago of the 1930s and Dixon has already begun his career as a studio musician with the likes of such traditional blues artists as Lester Mills, Tampa Red, Son House, and Memphis Benny.

"When I first started out I had a tin can bass that a fellow named Baby Doo Caston made for me after he found out that I could sing bass pretty good — a talent I developed singing spirituals as a youngster — and after I had given up boxing."

For a time, Dixon was Illinois State Golden Gloves Heavyweight Champion; he was also a sparring partner for Joe Louis.

"[Caston] made me a bass out of a tin can and you'd have to tune the string to the key you wanted to sing in. The open string would be the root tone and I'd play up and down that one string," Dixon said. "When I got to the point where I could slap and play around with it, I added another string, and from there I set my sights on getting a proper bass. Within a few months, I had one."

Although his early equipment was primitive, his innate talent, particularly in the area of recognizing and arranging harmony patterns, did not escape the attention of Lester Melrose, a prominent St. Louis song publisher who organized recording sessions for blues artists willing to make their way to Chicago.

"Melrose found out I had the ability to get some of those old blues artists to sing in harmony with their instruments. A lot of them didn't!" Dixon said with a chuckle. "Often they'd be going in one direction and their music would be going in another. As you can imagine, that would often lead to a lot of complications. It always turned out better if I turned one or the other around and had them both going the same way."

“Lester Melrose detected this ability in me and began asking me for ideas every time he came to town. All this gave me more experience in the things I learned as a boy about spiritual harmony. That, I think I can honestly say, is when I started to become a producer.”

This experience, along with the gigs he played on Chicago’s South Side with a group called the Big Three Trio, paved the way for his involvement with Chess Records.

Founded in 1947 by brothers Phil and Leonard Chess, Chess’ Records’ tiny studio would become one of the most important rooms in the post-war rhythm and blues movement.

In its heyday, its roster would include Muddy waters, John Lee Hooker, Howlin’ Wolf, and Little Walter. The addition of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley brought the label forward into the rock ‘n’ roll era. Willie Dixon would oversee sessions for all of them.

As the backbone of the Chess operation almost from its inception and to its very end, Dixon played a multifaceted role: songwriter, house bassist, studio bandleader and producer/arranger on virtually all of the label’s major blues hits.

“My band was working around the corner from the El Mocambo Club, a tavern owned by Phil and Leonard Chess, at a place called the El Casino Club, and after our sets I would go over and jam with the guys they had playing,” Dixon said.

“Now, Leonard Chess was always telling me, ‘Once I start recording, I’m going to call you.’ I just thought it was a yarn, y’know, from a stranger, but after I had been out on the road a couple of times, he began to call me up to play bass on different sessions. I’d be in Omaha or something, come back, do the session, and then go back out [on tour].”

Dixon’s full-scale involvement with the label began in 1951 after the marital problems of one of his bandmates forced the Big Three Trio to break up.

Except for a short time at Cobra Records, across town, in the late 1950s, he would be with Chess for the bulk of his career, leaving only when they finally boarded up the doors to the place in the early 1970s. He was already a potent songwriter by the time he took up residence, having written “My Babe,” his first number one R&B chart hit, for Little Walter, “Seventh So” for Willie Mabon, and “Pain In My Heart” for himself.

These tracks revealed that as early as 1951 he was no stranger to the subtle use of horn and piano parts to fill out sparse arrangements.

Dixon became a producing force to be reckoned with the night he gave Muddy Waters the song, “I’m Your Hoochie Coochie Man” and then supervised the session during which it was recorded. In its initial release it sold 75,000 copies: Suddenly everyone on the Chess Roster wanted the songwriting producer to work on their session or, to put it more accurately, wanted a Willie Dixon song that the author intended for somebody else.

“The singers were always afraid the other guy was getting the better song, so a lot of times I would have to tell them that the song was written for somebody else,” Dixon said. “Howlin’ Wolf in particular could

be pretty rough to deal with. He never wanted to do any of the songs I wrote expressly for him until he got a talking to from Leonard Chess.”

In general though, Dixon’s approach to recording material, particularly material provided by other writers or the artists themselves, was never so heavy handed.

“[As a producer] I’ve always believed in giving the other guy’s idea the first chance to see if it goes over well. It’s only if I think I can improve on the idea, one way or the other, that I’ll ask them to sit down and discuss it,” Dixon said.

“Of course, there are some people who’d rather fall out than agree, and in that case I’ll just quit and go along with them. I’m not a hard guy to get along with musically because I feel everybody has his own valid idea.”

Diplomacy and talent brought bountiful awards. Between 1955 and 1964 Dixon wrote and produced “Mellow Down Easy,” “I Just Want To Make Love To You,” “Spoonful,” “Back Door Man,” and “Little Red Rooster,” among others.

“Wang Dang Doodle,” the last major blues hit he produced and the song that was used to introduce President George H.W. Bush at the Inaugural Concert for the Young Americans, was recorded by Koko Taylor in 1965.

In the studio, Dixon would abandon formulas others considered set in stone and substitute an organ for a guitar to bring a different feel. Such was the case with Muddy Waters’ “You Need Love” (later Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love”).

Another of Dixon’s departures was dropping the use of the harmonica for punctuating guitar riffs. His philosophy is, “It’s not just the instrument that takes the part, but the part it takes.”

The results, judging from the numerous cover versions of his songs that exist and his impact on such British Invasion acts as The Animals, The Yardbirds and The Rolling Stones, may be timeless.

“The thing you’ve got to do, naturally, is capture the mood of the music,” Dixon said.

“Whether you’re a musician on a session or the producer, you’ve got to hear the mood that’s going to sink into the listener’s system and make them feel it. It all depended on what the singers wanted themselves, you see.

“I would always try to have a song with me when I arrived for a session that I thought would fit the artist, something that they’d feel was good enough and they could empathize with, because that’s the idea,” he continued.

“We’d talk and I’d hear them sing. You know everybody is weak in certain things and my first job would be to find out what their weakness was. I’d listen for certain phrases that they liked to use, certain expressions, and I’d try to have those things together in such a way that they could use them in a song.”

Because many of the artists he produced never learned to read a proper chart, Dixon would sing them their parts, many times actually whispering the lines into Howlin’ Wolf’s ear while cutting a record.

According to Dixon, many a take was ruined when Wolf interrupted a verse with, “What? I didn’t hear what you just said.”

Having to deal with Howlin’ Wolf’s eccentricities isn’t the only thing that Dixon looks back on with humor today.

“There were always little things that happened, but y’know, a lot of people give little things a great big build-up, making people think it was a great big thing when it wasn’t,” Dixon said. “I can remember Sonny Boy Williamson recording this song in the studio that required the drummer to come in at one point and make this big crashing sound.

“The drummer was behind this baffling, y’know, that keeps the sound of one instrument from bleeding into the sound of another, and just as he got to this break, the whole thing fell down. Wham!

“It made a great big crashing sound and believe it or not, we kept that on the record. It came in right on time. The drummer fell down, but he was able to keep playing somehow. A lot of guys on the session still talk about that one occasionally.”

After relocating to Southern California in 1983, Dixon began to dabble in movie soundtrack work: he performs on the soundtrack of *The Color of Money* and also teamed up with his old Chess label mate Bo Diddley as producer of Diddley’s new version of “Who Do You Love” in *La Bamba*.

“I’d have to say that my working method hasn’t changed a whole lot, only my knowledge of some of the technical aspects of recording,” Dixon said.

“For example, I always enter the studio with my intentions and go from there. Often you can’t get it exactly like you want. When you can’t, you get it the best you can under whatever circumstance you have to deal with.”

“When we went in to do *Hidden Charms*, [producer] T-Bone Burnett had his own ideas along with mine and, of course, we reached mutual terms. I think that’s always been the key to successful recording ... the fact that you realize that nobody has all the good ideas there are. What I’ve done with just about everybody is listen to their idea, make my suggestions, and then try to reach a compromise.”

Today Dixon spends much of his time working on behalf of his own Blues Heaven Foundation, an organization working dedicated to the preservation of the blues heritage and that part of the Afro-American culture entwined with it.

He is also helping to educate the next generation of blues musicians through his stewardship of the Muddy Waters Scholarship Fund and through the donation of band instruments to elementary and secondary schools.

“I always did like music, but then I guess everybody does to a certain extent,” Dixon said. “What I think actually drew me to make music was the discovery that certain types of music allow you to express yourself in a way you might not be able to verbally.”

“Everybody has something they want to say,” he continued. “Often times, you want to say it to yourself. Often times you want to say it to the public. The best thing of all is to feel it with the inspiration that an audience gives you.”