

Bo Diddley, the first innovator of rock and roll

By Dan McCue

When Bo Diddley was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987, Dusty Hill, who along with his band mates in ZZ Top, presented Bo with his plaque, gave all the credit for their career to the man that took a standard shave-and-a-haircuts-two-bits rhythm and recast it in his own image.

Using the alias “Bo Diddley,” a childhood nickname, Elias McDaniel began his career at Chess Records in 1955, recording in the same studio as Chuck Berry, and such blues greats as Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf.

But there was something different about this guitar-slinger, the most obvious thing being his preference in guitars. From the very beginning, they had to be square; the other thing was the way he was always poking around the fretboard, looking for a new, distinctive and totally original sound.

While Chuck Berry was giving rock its most recognizable riffs, Diddley was fast becoming the music’s first psychedelic guitarist, a dull decade before anyone had ever heard of Jimi Hendrix.

In his heyday he churned out a string of songs, “Bo Diddley,” “I’m a Man,” “Mona” and “Who Do You Love” that would later become staples in the sets of such blues-based British Invasion bands as the Yardbirds, the Animals, and, of course, the Rolling Stones.

In the early 1980s George Thorogood paid tribute to Bo with the song “Bad to the Bone” – and even included him in the video

And the good news for fans is that at 60, the man shows no signs of slowing down.

In recent years he’s been sandwiching television and movie appearances between lengthy strings of concert dates both here and abroad; and an album of new material – his first in several years – is soon to be released by the Triple X label in Los Angeles.

In the past six months alone, he’s completed a six-country tour of Europe, filmed an appearance in the movie Rocula in Los Angeles, flown back to Europe to tape a segment of the “Giants of Rock” television show in Italy, played several more dates in Germany and Greece, and capped it all with an appearance in the Celebration for Young Americans: Tribute to Rhythm and Blues concert that closed the recent inauguration of President George H.W. Bush.

We spoke on one of his rare days off, between concert dates, in Canada.

*Who do you see as being Bo Diddley’s public?*

I’m getting a lot of youngsters now, which is weird; this is what I’ve been getting all these years and it’s kept me going through generation after generation of music. I’m getting a lot of youngsters and it really feels good.

I don't get to many Yuppies though (laughs), because when you get to a certain age, you usually begin to slack off; you start working and you have kids and when you come home in the evening, you fall into a chair, drink a beer and fall asleep. You don't go nowhere.

That's not to say that there aren't a lot of people in their forties who are still sneaking around a little bit, only now they've got their teenagers with them, bringing the kids out to hear what they listened to; and I'm very glad and happy to be one of the people that is still here, playing the music, so the kids don't have to read about it in some damn book. They can observe the person in real-life form. That's a good feeling to me, man.

*Do you find that you have a lot of young guitar players asking you to teach them your style?*

Yeah, every now and then. You know, I'll get a couple of kids who'll walk up after trying to figure out what I was doing, how I execute my sound, and ask a few questions. Usually, I can't explain it to them, I have to take time and show them.

*You were self-taught, weren't you?*

Yes I was – that's why I don't sound like anybody else.

*Do you still practice much?*

No, I hate to practice. I do a lot of my practicing on stage. See, that way, I don't waste any time. You know, I might get a song that I think is good and if I play it and it don't move the audience, I'll leave it alone.

Now, if I had spent a whole lot of time practicing it before I took it to the audience, I would've wasted a lot of time. It might be a good tune too, but it might not be the right tune at the time you're doing it. Six months down the line you might come back with the same song and knock 'em dead, because people are really weird.

Like, some times of the year, you can walk by a rattlesnake and he'll just lay there and look at you and won't even rattle or try to bite you, you understand? But come back six weeks later and walk by the same snake and he'll get all excited and freak out and bite your booty if he can (laughs). People are something like that, you never know what they are going to like, what they are going to accept.

*Now my sense is that you've always been as much a showman as a musician...*

That's what I call myself. I don't really call myself a musician.

*How did your stage persona develop?*

Did it on the street corners, man. You see, I came up the hard way. I learned everything that you see me do on the street corners of Chicago, dancing, jumping, acting the fool... and this is what the people like.

*I saw you with Chuck Berry years ago at Belmont Park in New York and one of the things you did was this robot walk... and it seems like these days so many people are doing similar moves that it's a cliché...*

That's right. I've forgotten a lot of things that they're just beginning to discover, which is new to them. This is why it doesn't excite me. I've already done it. Rock and Roll is a music that'll stay here, I think, for a lot of days and years and centuries to come. Now, it might change in sound, but real rock and roll will last.

*Why do you think it will endure?*

Because it's reality music. Because if you listen to the lyrics, there's honesty there... and it's a music that once you get a taste for it, you can't shake it. It's like with a baby, if you never give him a lollipop, he might never crave one; but once he tastes it, and he likes it, "Oh boy." It's good. People are the same way about music.

*From it's earliest days rock and roll has leaped boundaries, whether they be boundaries between races, or even age – I mean, Bill Haley was in his thirties before he had a hit with "Rock Around The Clock" -- How did that happen?*

Well, first of all, in the beginning of the whole thing, white kids were not fooling with rock and roll; they were doing the country and western and pop thing. They'd hear things from their parents like, "I want you to be a great piano player like your Uncle Louie," and then they'd turn on the radio one morning hear Chuck Berry or Bo Diddley or Fats Domino, somebody like that and say, "Wow, I like that," and shove the Steinway down the damn stairway. Then parents went up against it. I was told the same thing: "Don't go bringing no guitar into this house..." I heard it.

*One of the less pleasant aspects of your career has been your fight to finally get back royalties that you have been owed you, to some extent, for decades...*

People ask me if I'm bitter, Of course I'm bitter. I had a lot of good records. I just never got paid for them. I got tricked into selling my material by my publisher.

I remember went to them one day to borrow some money because I hadn't been working all that much at the time, and I needed \$1,500 for a payment on a house. Gene Goodman, at Arc Music told me, "Boy, I don't know. Your stuff ain't selling and I don't know if I can do this."

Never once did he tell me I should go to Leonard Chess, that Leonard Chess was responsible for paying Bo Diddley – now this is word for word – just as they were spoken that day. I said, "What can we do. I don't have anyplace else to go for a loan."

Now, you have to remember also that I had been with these same people for years and I had never seen any, what you'd call, big money. I never got a check for twenty or thirty thousand dollars, or even ten thousand or even two thousand. And meanwhile, you'd get a statement with advances on it and these names on it and you'd be asking, "Who is this guy?" and "Who are these people?" Names showed up on statements that I had never seen in my life.

*Geez...*

Guys claimed they produced the albums I put out and I'd say, "Produced? Who is this dude? He wasn't in there when I was recording. HE didn't put any money up for me to do anything. Nobody told me what to play. I wrote and arranged all these song."

Anyway Goodman said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll buy half of them from you." I said to myself, "I need money. My family's hungry. And I haven't gotten any money from them in the first place." So I figured I better do it, figuring that I wasn't through writing and that I'd be able to write other tunes and needed to make that payment.

*That probably one of the worst stories I've heard first hand from a recording artist.*

At the time they said they had paid everything they owed me. I don't know who they paid, but they didn't pay Bo Diddley. In all honesty, out of 34 years of recording, the money I am looking for is the money they owe me from before I sold Arc Music my material. After I sold that stuff... well, a deal, in effect, is a deal. But in hindsight, I think the deal was a bad deal, because of a lack of knowledge on my part.

The man grabbed my stuff at a very low price and then turned around and patted me on the back and said, Bo Diddley, we love you." I see albums all over the world, everywhere I've been, where's all this money? I think the attitude was, take advantage of him and don't pay him. For years I wouldn't talk about it. I guess because I didn't want to believe it really happened.

I was waiting on somebody to come along and play Santa Claus and I found out that Santa Claus ain't coming. I've got to go shake him out of his snow hut. The Santa Claus I was waiting for was Chess Records and Arc Music.

*Given all that, what about your career has brought you the most happiness?*

Well, I've been all over the world, and had I not been who I am, I don't think I would've gotten out of Chicago. I'm in good health. I feel good.

And I'd like to say this straight up before we end this; I want to say this to all the kids, the youngsters, the old folks, the middle-aged, whatever: Stay away from these drugs, cause it's a bad trip.

You may think you're cool now, but one day you *will* be cool if you fool with it if you fool with it, if you know what I mean. It's like going to Vegas. You can't beat it. It's like gambling. It's a gamble, and it might not get you tomorrow and it might not get you next year, but if you fool with it, it will get you. That's why I say, take it from the mighty Diddley, "Don't do it."