



**Rock audiences who reveled in the blues-rock of such groups as the Stones and Cream were often unaware of the man responsible for the songs and the sound.**



# WILLIE DIXON

**The Poet Laureate of the Blues, he championed the blues and took the first live blues music to Europe.**

**T**here never was anybody quite like Willie Dixon. The first thing you saw when you met him was that huge grin atop the larger-than-life body; his enormous personal warmth, combined with an inexhaustible fund of street-smart music business wisdom and a tireless devotion to promoting awareness of the blues, won him friends and admirers everywhere he went.

Born in 1915 in Vicksburg, Mississippi, his early career included a stint with a gospel group; he was already writing songs by age sixteen, and would continue to do so until at the end of his life he had over 500 compositions to his credit. He moved to Chicago in 1936 to pursue a boxing career, but turned to music after a disagreement with his manager. He refused induction into the army during World War II, and was jailed briefly as conscientious objector. His first work on the Chicago scene included the formation of the Four Jumps of Jive, and later the Big Three Trio, with whom he recorded for Okeh during the late forties and early fifties.

But it was his long association with Chicago's seminal Chess Records label throughout the fifties and sixties that brought him to the forefront of the blues world. He was Chess' staff producer, arranger, bass player, songwriter, A&R man and cheerleader; a towering figure in the history and creation of Chicago blues, he helped Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter and Sonny Boy Williamson forge a sound that would change the world of rock & roll forever through the influence of those magic little 45s when they made their way across the Atlantic to England.

Willie, already being called the Poet Laureate of the Blues, championed the landmark American Folk Blues Festival tours with Memphis Slim, which first took live blues music to Europe; there, it was heard by young white English musicians who were in the formative stages of their own careers. Rock festival audiences who reveled in the blues-rock of such groups as the Rolling Stones, Cream, the Yardbirds, the Animals, and more (Led Zeppelin's mega-hit "Whole Lotta Love" was simply an "adaptation" of Willie's "You Need Love") were often unaware of the man responsible for the songs and the sound. A self-described catalyst, it was Dixon's music that forged the direct link between blues and rock & roll. These young

musicians listened to the Chess recordings, adapted the songs to their own high-powered sensibilities, and so began the blues revival.

A short list of Willie Dixon's compositions, and a few of the artists who covered them, demonstrates the depth and breadth of his musical influence. As a rule the chain of discovery was: first the song would be recorded by an American blues artist; then, perhaps, an English rock group would cover that, and then other American blues or pop artists, hearing the English cover version, would jump behind it. "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man" was written in 1953 for Muddy Waters, whose version remains the definitive one.

Other songs such as "Little Red Rooster," "I'm Ready," "You Can't Judge a Book by Its Cover," "Wang Dang Doodle," "Spoonful" and "I Just Want to Make Love to You," were recorded by Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Koko Taylor and later covered by the Rolling Stones, Cream, the Yardbirds, and the Grateful Dead. And the legendary "I Can't Quit You Baby," the original of which helped put Otis Rush on the Chicago blues map, was one of Jimmy Page's greatest influences; years later, Led Zeppelin and Savoy Brown would both wax individualistic covers. But Willie's own favorite among his many compositions was "It Don't Make Sense, You Can't Make Peace," a stirring protest song that points out the absurdity of continued warfare in a world that has found so many ways to do positive things. He mailed copies of his own recording of this song to every senator and congressman in the United States; hopefully the message is getting through.

When he died in January of 1992 in Glendale, CA, after a long illness, he was surrounded by his loving family of children and grandchildren and had reaped at least some of the rewards so often denied to his fellow blues musicians.

His wife, Marie Dixon, continues Willie's work; earlier this year she bought the historic old Chess Records building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue and is renovating it to become the headquarters of Willie's long-cherished dream, the Blues Heaven Foundation. It will be open by summer as an educational center, blues museum and retail gallery. The man known as the Master Storyteller would have found it a fitting memorial.

— Mary Katherine Aldin