Willie Dixon and the Blues

Willie Dixon—blues artist, songwriter, and studio producer—was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1915. During a Depression youth spent alternately as a laborer, prison inmate, and train hobo, Dixon first displayed the talent that later established his fame, writing songs for diverse Vicksburg musicians. His first motivation for coming to Chicago in 1936 was boxing: Dixon won a Golden Gloves title and sparred with world champion Joe Louis, before shoddy management ended his prizefighting career. Dixon retooled himself as a musician, playing bass through the 1940s with several groups and becoming involved with the emerging blues recording industry in Chicago. Dixon’s best work came during his years at Chess Records (1951–1962; 1959–1977). Rising from accountant to studio manager, Dixon worked with countless artists, including Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Chuck Berry, and Koko Taylor. During an intermediate stint with Cobra Records (1956–1959), Dixon worked with many in the “second generation” of blues talent—Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, Magic Sam—cementing his reputation as preeminent impresario within the postwar blues scene. In spite of Chess’s collapse in 1971 and the decline of the blues’ commercial appeal, Dixon maintained an active professional life, continuing his festival work and organizing the Chicago Blues All-Stars touring group. In 1982, he started the Blues Heaven Foundation, a group promoting awareness about blues among urban youth and helping musicians regain royalty rights, a struggle Dixon waged until his death in 1992.

Adam Green


Later modernized GOSPEL music as composer Thomas Dorsey, although Hattie, Bromby, and others performed across the SOUTH SIDE, and despite an abundant audience of migrants, there was not yet the extensive network of blues clubs that emerged in later years.

Like the rest of the economy, music production suffered during the GREAT DEPRESSION. Between 1926 and 1932, annual sales of phonograph records in the United States plummeted from $126 to $6 million; sales for black performers decreased from $5 million to only $66,000. The decline slowed the migration of blues artists, whose motivation for coming to Chicago, like other black southerners, included economic opportunity. Still, the city continued to serve as incubator of blues music, as musicians awaited the resurgence of the record industry. Tampa Red and Bill Broonzy were joined by such talents as Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield), Little Walter (Jacobs), Willie Dixon, Howlin’ Wolf (Chester Burnett)—were exemplars of Chicago blues style. The distinctive sound of these artists restructured popular music, providing fundamental elements for subsequent genres like soul and rock and roll. Indeed, the work of Waters on songs like “Rollin’ Stone” (1949) and “Howlin’ For You” (1950) had international influence, subsequently inspiring the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other British bands. Dixon was also a figure of special note—in addition to playing bass and writing for artists ranging from Waters to Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, he supervised most of the studio sessions at Chess beginning in the mid-1940s.

A key catalyst to the blues’ postwar popularity were “black appeal” R&B ROCKS, such as Al Bowlly and Bill Hill, who ensured that records released by Chess, Vee-Jay, and other labels received public exposure. By the late 1950s and early 1960s a new generation of West Side artists, including Otis Rush, Magic Sam (Maghett), and Buddy (George)
Guy, carried the work of Waters, Dixon, and other Chess artists even further. Chicago blues soon attracted substantially broader audiences. In 1959, Dixon and Memphis Slim toured England and the Middle East; they would return to Europe in 1962 with a full roster of artists to perform in the first of many annual American Folk Blues Festivals.

The history of Chicago blues since the 1960s has been a contradictory one, combining periods of recession and renewal. By the end of the 1960s, blues had infrastructural as well as aesthetic presence. WVON, the all-day radio station opened by Chess owners Leonard and Phil Chess in 1958, maintained a healthy blues playlist, augmenting programming from other stations. Blues NIGHTCLUBS continued to shape black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides, Rosswell Road, Madison Street, and 43rd Street became blues thoroughfares. With the failure of Cobra Records in 1959 and Vee-Jay in 1966, Chess stood as the only remaining major label and, under the supervision of Willie Dixon, consolidated the remaining talent. Old rivals such as Buddy Guy and Otis Rush were signed, along with newcomers Etta James, Little Milton (Campbell), and Koko Taylor. Yet blues music found itself at a disadvantage commercially next to soul, gospel,

and other new genres of black popular music. Chicago went out of business as in 1975, by which time most older clubs were closing down.

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