

May 5, 2004---

Bo Diddley is a gunslinger.

His rat-a-tat-tat guitar licks defined rock chestnuts like Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away," the Who's "Magic Bus" and Bruce Springsteen's "She's the One." Diddley is in the midst of a year-long 75th birthday tour and he is in a typically bodacious yet occasionally reflective mood.

"I got my beat when I heard Gene Autry's '(I Got Spurs That) Jingle Jangle Jingle,' " Diddley said Monday from his home outside of Gainesville, Fla. "I heard that on the radio on the South Side of Chicago. I was 7 years old."

Diddley returns north to appear in a rare club gig Saturday at FitzGerald's in Berwyn. The beloved Moreells from Springfield, Mo., will serve as his backing band. The Moreells used to cover Diddley's "Pills" and they recorded Johnny Otis' "Crazy Country Hop," where the jungle beat is reminiscent of Diddley's.

"I've been laying dead," Diddley said. "Just waiting for a spot to jump back in there. I ain't gone yet. I'm going to show people what grandpas can do." Diddley has 22 grandchildren. He has been married for the past 11 years to Sylvia Diddley.

"Right now we're not together. She's taking a vacation," he said, crackin' up.

A phone call to Diddley doesn't result in an interview as much as it does a lecture.

Diddley was recently ranked 20th in the Rolling Stone Immortals (The 50 Greatest Artists of All Time) issue. Iggy Pop wrote how he was influenced by Diddley's primitive songs: "They weren't florid. He never bothered to change the chord, for one thing -- which is very heavy metal! And, of course, there's the attitude, a chin-up, chest-out sort of thing."

Of course, Diddley wanted to be placed higher on the list.

He was behind the Velvet Underground and Marvin Gaye, but ahead of Bruce Springsteen and Jerry Lee Lewis (who also deserved better).

"I don't understand it," Diddley said. "I'm glad to be there, but they still don't have it right. Me and Chuck Berry were first. These people don't know what they're researching. Elvis didn't start rock 'n' roll. He was three years behind me." Rolling Stone voters included Lenny Kaye, Keith Richards, Rick Rubin, Bruce Springsteen -- and Bo Diddley.

Diddley was born Ellas Bates McDaniel in McComb, Miss., just north of the Louisiana border. His family moved to 4746 S. Langley in Chicago when he was 7.

Diddley learned to play classical violin and trombone at Ebenezer Baptist Church. He also made his own box-shaped guitars while attending Foster Vocational School, 720 W. O'Brien, where his classmate was future blues legend Earl Hooker. The school site is now a vacant lot.

McDaniel conjured up his name "Bo Diddley" as a teenager when he boxed around Chicago.

Diddley landed at Chess Records in 1955 at the same time as Chuck Berry, but few people realize he was already rejected by Vee-Jay Records, which was located at 1449 S. Michigan. Diddley was packing a demo with the jingle-jangle beat he titled "Uncle John."

"Ewart Abner Jr., label executive told me, 'We don't know what the hell that is you are doing,' " Diddley said. "So I went across the street to Chess Records. Phil Chess said, 'This is different. Let's give it a try.' " Diddley reworked the "Uncle John" lyrics and retitled the song "Bo Diddley." Chess added maracas to underscore the hypnotic beat, and after 35 takes Diddley walked out of Chess with a double-sided smash: "Bo Diddley"/ "I'm a Man."

Diddley hasn't made a record since 1996's "The Man Amongst Men" (Code Blue/ Atlantic), which featured guests Keith Richards and Billy Boy Arnold. He's thinking of writing new material that might appear on an upcoming Web site. "I don't want any more record companies," he said. "They haven't treated me right. I've never seen a royalty check."

Actually, Diddley received his first Chess Records royalty check in 1990 when "Bo Diddley: The Chess Box" was released on MCA Records, featuring Diddley's tracks from 1955 to 1968. MCA bought the Chess catalog in 1987.

Morells bassist Lou Whitney, 60; guitarist D. Clinton Thompson; keyboardist Joe Terry, and drummer Ron Gemp have backed Diddley twice within the last several years at the Blue Note in Columbia, Mo. They've also been Chuck Berry's band as well as the support group for Bobby ("Tossin' and Turnin' ") Lewis.

"Bo is a dreamboat," Whitney said from his studio in Springfield. "He's dealt with every kind of band you can imagine."

Whitney learned Diddley's 1961 hit "Pills." Whitney said, "When I was in high school in East Tennessee, I listened to WLAC in Nashville. I'd listen to the jivin' Hossman Allen. He played the same songs every night. Bo Diddley had 'Pills,' and I had a guitar."

But Diddley attributes his healthy 75 years to the absence of pills and drugs.

"I don't even drink Grand Marnier anymore," Diddley said. "I got sugar. I used to take a sip to help my throat when I was singing. But you never saw me drunk. Now I eat sweets I ain't got no business eating. But I never got involved in drugs."

"I used to be a policeman in Los Lunas New Mexico, and I still have that mind-set. I don't want to be around people who do drugs. They can test me all they want, and all they'e gonna find is some buttermilk, orange juice and Coca-Cola."

And spice and vinegar that shaped rock 'n' roll.