

Willie Dixon: Sept. 30, 1990

LOS ANGELES The old fighter sleeps in his favorite chair in the corner ring of his living room. It is a sticky September afternoon in suburban Glendale - mellow down easy, as Little Walter once sang. It is a good day for respite.

Across the way from the peaceful fighter is an empty coat stand that looks like a tree in winter. Atop the tree rests a snow white derby. You connect the crown with the old champion.

That's Willie Dixon.

The 75-year-old Dixon is the heavyweight champion of the blues. He comes home as the king of the Benson & Hedges Blues Festival, which will run from Oct. 7-13 at Chicago area locations. Some call Muddy Waters the father of the blues, but no one could bob and weave between ribald rhythms like Dixon.

Consider the output on the Willie Dixon box set from Chess-MCA Records. Dixon wrote "(I'm Your) Hoochie Coochie Man" for Waters. Dixon wrote "Mellow Down Easy" for Little Walter & His Jukes. Dixon wrote "Spoonful" for Howlin' Wolf. Dixon wrote "Wang Dang Doodle" for Koko Taylor. Dixon wrote "You Need Love" for Muddy, and Led Zeppelin "reinterpreted" it as "Whole Lotta Love" (in 1987, Dixon's copyright was settled suit out of court).

Long before Dixon was a songwriter, house bassist and arranger-producer at Chess Records, he was a very good boxer, the winner of the Illinois State Golden Gloves heavyweight championship (he fought at 230 pounds in the novice division) in 1937.

Dixon wakes up from his gentle nap and begins to bask in stories of elemental boxing and the summertime blues. He spends more than three hours talking about the blues, periodically telling his grandchildren in a nearby kitchen to keep it down. "They get all excited when I do interviews," he says.

To understand Dixon's blues, it helps to understand boxing.

"Timing is a very good thing for both," Dixon says. "My mother used to say, 'The more you know about anything, the better off you are about everything, and one thing helps the other thing all the time, anyway.' Unconsciously, I did relate boxing with music. I learned to time things pretty well (in boxing). That was great for counterpointing (in music). I timed a guy's

(musical) licks the same way I would counterpunch. (Counterpunching is a punch thrown in response to an opponent's lead.)

"Come to think of it, my best efforts were counterpointing," he said. "When I fought, I could hit right- or left-handed. If I had to hit someone, he had to pull his hand back - unless he's extremely fast with the one-two." Dixon laughs and says, "But you check out those things before you get in the ring with a guy."

Dixon built up his boxer's strength as a manchild near his hometown of Vicksburg, Miss. He used to haul logs to help build cabins, and he worked in levee camps. "I used to be young and strong," Dixon says with a sigh. "When I was young, I thought no one could hurt me, no way."

Besides the Golden Gloves win, Dixon's most notable boxing accomplishment was to serve as a feisty sparring partner to heavyweight champion Joe Louis. He used to shoot the jab with Louis in the basement of Eddie Nichols' gym at 15th and Indiana.

"I held up real well against Joe Louis," Dixon proudly says. "My manager and his manager had a grudge against each other. My manager (ex-fighter Tiger Williams) would tell me to knock the hell out of him. Louis always had the idea to get the best lick in or don't trade licks. My manager would say, 'Beat him to the punch and knock him out if you can.' Hell, the managers would almost come to fight themselves."

The choppy bravado that later defined Dixon's music surfaced in 1938 when the young fighter and his fly-by-night manager, Jab Burton, got into a brawl of their own in the boxing commissioner's office. "I thought I should be making more money than I was," Dixon says. "He and I had quite a tussle up there. They expelled me and him from the ring for six months.

"I never did get back."

However, an itinerant musician named Leonard "Baby Doo" Caston was hanging around Eddie Nichols' gym. Baby Doo always had a guitar in hand and Dixon remembered them harmonizing ringside.

"I could sing pretty good, because I had been around spiritual things in the South," Dixon recalls. "And I knew all the bass lines because we used to imitate the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers. So Baby Doo made me a tin can with one string tied to a stick. He showed me how to play bass on that. Well, the people got a kick out me playing this tin can and slapping it. You could make some pretty good rhythms on it."

By 1939, Baby Doo and Dixon had formed a group called the Five Breezes. The

lead singer was named Cool Breeze (Freddie Walker) and they began gigging around Chicago.

"We got a job working on Jim Martin's on the West Side of Chicago," Dixon says. "He was a politician, and he had a little casino in the club. Everybody liked us over there. He asked me if I wanted to buy a real bass, but then he said, 'You're having so much fun with this thing you got here, a real bass might take the show away.' He finally bought one for me and I paid him back, little by little. I learned to do the same thing on that that I was doing on tin-can bass."

He sure did.

Dixon became heavyweight champion of the blues because of the prolific work he did at Chess Records. Dixon was recently honored by BMI publishing, which draped him with a printout of more than 500 of his songs, mostly written for Chess artists. The blues wreath fell from his neck to the floor.

Dixon began work at Chess in 1948 as a studio player on a Robert Nighthawk track. He became a full-time employee in 1951. He took a hiatus to competing Cobra Records in 1956, returning to Chess in 1959. As the electric bass moved into the blues, there was less tolerance for Dixon's loyalty to the upright bass. He left Chess Records in 1969 to form the Chicago All-Stars touring band.

"The Chess brothers (Leonard and Phil) were pretty smart people," Dixon says. "They didn't know the business, but they always hired people who knew what they were doing. Frankly, the Chess brothers had no idea about backbeat and rhythm. We got a good studio band that understood these things."

Besides Dixon, the catalyst for many sessions was the late pianist Lafayette Leake, whose expanse stretched all the way to the first cut of Chuck Berry's "Maybelline." Dixon removed Berry's regular pianist in favor of Leake. That's also Dixon playing bass on legendary tracks like Berry's "Johnny B. Goode," Bo Diddley's "Hey, Bo Diddley" and even the Moonglows' "Sincerely."

Before playing at this summer's Chicago Blues Festival, former Checker Records (part of Chess Records) guitarist Lowell Fulson told me how little freedom the Chess brothers allowed him. The saucy horns that filled out Fulson's Texas blues didn't match the stark musical agenda of producer Leonard Chess.

"Some of the guys didn't get freedom," Dixon says. "A new artist always thought they had to think like the old artist to be good. But if you sound too much like somebody else, it really ain't no good."

"That was my job - to restyle people into a different feeling."

That was how Dixon arrived at his multipatterned approach of writing and arranging. Dixon knew exactly how to write for the rough, ruminating vocals of Howlin' Wolf ("Back Door Man"), yet he also had instinct for Muddy Waters' bawdy aggressiveness ("I'm Ready," "I Just Want To Make Love to You").

"Most people don't realize all the different styles of American music were created from blues, one way or the other by rearrangement," he says. "They had to rename them to get people interested. Even today, people don't know what blues are. The blues have rhythm - which everything has - it has music - which everything in the world likes. And the blues have wisdom - which is the only music in the world that actually teaches wisdom in all forms. And wisdom tells the true facts of life."

That is why Dixon is somewhat satisfied with this summer's re-emergence of the Chess studios at 2120 S. Michigan. Before the Chicago Blues Festival in June, the building was given landmark status. The building is owned by former Chess studio musician Gerald Sims, who plans to turn it into a "living museum where artists can record."

Dixon says, "I think it's a good idea - if they do anything with it. I thought it would be a good spot to have the Blues Heaven Foundation (which Dixon and manager Scott Cameron created in 1982). I would have never left Chicago, but I got pretty sick (in 1977, he lost a foot to diabetes and he suffers from arthritis and rheumatism), and I had to come out here. I like Chess, but frankly, I think it's a little too small for what I had in mind (using the building as a base for the Blues Heaven Foundation)."

The Blues Heaven Foundation had approached Sims about purchasing the building, but Sims would not sell.

There are three major objectives of the Blues Heaven Foundation. The organization assists young students with its Muddy Waters Scholarship Fund. It helps older blues artists track down royalties through an extensive resource library. The foundation eventually plans to establish a legal referral service and program for royalty investigations. Finally, the foundation has donated \$12,000 worth of band instruments to high schools in Chicago, Memphis, Los Angeles and Vicksburg, Miss. The gifts were made in memory of Memphis Slim, Little Brother Montgomery (Dixon's early hero), Howlin' Wolf and Big Joe Turner. Supporters of Blues Heaven include John Mellencamp, Dan Aykroyd and George Thorogood.

Dixon sees the blues as the foundation for common sense.

At the postscript of Dixon's comprehensive oral history *The Willie Dixon Story - I Am the Blues*, co-written with care by Los Angeles journalist Don Snowden Dixon suggests the favorite song in his dazzling catalog is an obscure 1984 composition, "It Don't Make Sense (You Can't Make Peace)."

"When I first made that little '45, I sent it to President Reagan and Congress," Dixon says. "They sent me some cufflinks. See, the blues have been neglected so long until people automatically neglect them. People think the blues are always sad. The blues are the true facts - good, bad, right or wrong. So, 'It Don't Make Sense,' like all other blues songs, is making a statement of the fact. And the fact is it don't make sense if you can't make peace."

Dixon sits up in his chair and gives an impromptu reading:

"You have made great planes to scan the skies, you gave sight to the blind with other men's eyes. You even made submarines stay submerged for weeks, but it don't make sense you can't make peace. You take one man's heart to make another man live, you even go to the moon and come back thrilled. You can crush any country in a matter of weeks, but it don't make sense you can't make peace."

Everything falls silent - including the commotion in the kitchen.

"See, everybody can live and have peace right here on Earth as it was intended to be in the first place," Dixon says, shadowboxing with his grand ideals. "Just suppose - for a minute - the world spent half as (much) money trying to make peace as it has spent on making war. Don't you know it would be a beautiful world?"

The minute has impact.

Old fighters know how to punch out wise words.