

Wisdom of the Blues

Willie Dixon

Compiled from an interview with Worth Long

Willie Dixon, born in Mississippi the same year as Robert Jr. Lockwood, is a poet-philosopher and blues activist. He did not know Robert Johnson, but like Johnson, Dixon created a conceptually rich repertoire of blues songs that candidly offer his deep thoughts and feelings about critical social and cultural issues.

In this interview, Willie Dixon shares some of his insight on African American secular and sacred musics. He also provides an autobiographical framework that deepens our comprehension of the genius and complexities of African American music. His observations on issues of segregation, the industrialization of community musical forms and the impact of corporate manipulation of Black people's culture are trenchant and insightful.

Worth Long
Ralph Rinzler

My name is Willie Dixon and I was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, July 1, 1915. My whole family was from that area. I went to school there for a while. I lived around there as long as I possibly could under starving conditions, until I had to get the hell out, so somebody else could eat.

Ain't but one part of Vicksburg, and that's Vicksburg. I lived on the outskirts of town. I was about one, two blocks from the bus. At that time, we had a street car. You got on the trolley car and went straight to the back. That's where you'd sit until you got off. And if a white person came over and needed your seat, you had to get up and let him in there — that's all.

They had just about the same conditions all over, you know. But the thing was, that some were well enough brainwashed, so that they thought this was the best. And others knew it wasn't the best. Now, there were others that knew it wasn't the best and were afraid to say different, afraid to act different. Anytime you're born and raised in Mississippi . . . in those days, it was the experience that happened to anybody that moved.



Willie Dixon at the 1989 Handy Awards, Memphis, Tennessee. Photo by Lauri Lawson, © 1989 Lauri Lawson

My father used to say, "If you don't learn nothing, you have nothing, you know nothing, and you do nothing"; but Little Brother Montgomery used to say that everybody was born naked. When I first met him as a youngster, I used to ask him, "Why do you say that everybody was born naked all the time?" When I was older, and he and I were getting around together, he said that meant we all started the same way — you can gain if you want to, or lose if you please, but ain't nobody came in here with nothing, and ain't nobody going to take nothing away. So get what

you can while you're here. And be the best you can. And try to make arrangements for somebody else while you're here.

I knew Little Brother Montgomery since I was quite young. I used to play hooky from school just to hear those guys playing on the street corner. He was little, and I thought then — because he was a little short guy — that he was a boy. But he was grown. At that particular time, he played all the different styles, all the styles other people never heard of. He did a song called the "Vicksburg Blues," which was real popular in Vicksburg, and then Roosevelt Sykes changed it into the "Forty-Four Blues." It was the same music. Little Brother had to sit down at different times and show me how they first started to play it, and then how they added a little bit here and there, and how different people who had died long before they got a chance to record, how they played. He knew all of them.

They all start from the original stuff because the blues — the rearrangement of the blues — created all these other styles, and it's really very easy to see. It's like "Dudlow" out of Dudlow, Mississippi. He was one of the guys that inspired that left hand to the original 12-bar blues. When I was a kid they used to call it "Dudlow" — all the real old-timers, they called it that name. But after the people decided they were going to commercialize it, record it, they started to call it "boogie-woogie." And by calling it boogie-woogie, then everybody could get into the act, and everybody did get in the act. Everybody come up with a boogie of his own. But it was all 12-bar blues.

You learn a lot of things when you are young, and a lot of things you can tell people about. And then, some things you can't tell people. Especially in the South, where people didn't know too much at that time and weren't allowed to learn very much. They thought every time you brought up a conversation about something, it was something to argue about. But afterwards, you learned they were playing the same identical music, the same identical tunes.

One was called a spiritual, and the other was called the blues. And the only difference was: one of them was dedicated to the earth and the facts of life, which was the blues; and the spiritual things were dedicated to heaven and after death, you know. So that was the difference between the spirituals and the blues. And the experience you receive on earth was the only thing you had to go on because nobody had the experience of heaven. And I don't think they have had it yet.

You see, I had a chance for two sides of

things because my mother was definitely a Christian all of the way around, and my father was sometimes a Christian and sometimes anything he wanted to be. But he thought of the difference. Christianity and his thing were two different things. He thought the Christian thing was just psychologizing people so they could be under control. And after I got older, I could make my own decision either way I'd feel.

My father always said, "You got to live before you die. And don't get ready to die before you get ready to live." So that was kind of my philosophy, that I have to live before I died. I figured getting ready to live was better than getting ready to die. When I'd get old enough, then I'd start getting ready to die. This organization I have, the Blues Heaven Foundation¹ helps you get a little heaven before you die. Then, if you happen to miss, you have a little taste of it anyway.

The reason I have the Blues Heaven Foundation is so the blues will be properly advertised, publicized, emphasized, talked about and understood. Once you understand the blues, it will give everybody a better life because you'll have a better life with each other. That's what Blues Heaven is all about.

I always had great expectations in the singing field. I sung my first song — I must have been about four or five years old — in the Spring Hill Baptist Church in Vicksburg. My mother always used to tell us to learn how to sing in harmony. And there was a fellow down there in Vicksburg called Phelps — he was a jubilee singer. He taught harmony singing. Well, I was with him at that particular time he started singing. The group was called the Union Jubilee Singers in Vicksburg.

Then after that, I was singing spirituals. Once in a while the kids would move on to other things, by singing other songs that weren't spirituals. And at that particular time, when you didn't sing spirituals, they called the other songs "reels." And the reels weren't considered as good music for all the spiritual-minded people then.

We used to broadcast at WQBC radio station, down there in Vicksburg, once a week, mostly on Friday. We rehearsed just about every day or so. Let me see now, that goes back to 1934... '35.

When Theo Phelps was teaching us harmony, I began to learn quite a bit about it, and I loved it. I

¹ The Blues Heaven Foundation, a not-for-profit organization, was founded by Willie Dixon for the purpose of garnering proper recognition and broader acknowledgement of the blues. It provides an annual scholarship, The Muddy Waters Scholarship, and, with matching grants, has donated a selection of band instruments to high schools around the country.

still love it. I found out things done in harmony are always better than things done without harmony, don't care what it is.

You know all kids always play all kinds of instruments, but one that I actually tried to play on was a bass. Then I did play the guitar for a little while, mostly in Europe, when Memphis Slim and I went over there.

I didn't get interested in the bass until I came to Chicago. After I came to Chicago, I won the Golden Gloves as a novice fighter . . . that's in 1937. At the same time I was in the gymnasium, guys would be singing and playing around there. And I'd get in there harmonizing a little bit because I knew most of the bass lines for all the things. In those days the Ink Spots were just starting, and the Mills Brothers. And everybody was imitating the Mills Brothers because they imitated instruments. I used to imitate the bass instrument all the time because I knew most of the bass lines.

Things got rough for me in the fight game. I decided to hang around with Baby Doo Castin, a piano player, and he insisted on making me a homemade bass out of a big oil can. And that's the way I started playing the bass. We put a stick on the oil can. That oil can had an open bottom to it, and we put this stick on the back of it and made it like an African instrument. Then he made another thing like a fingerboard and put this one bass string on it, attached to the center of the oil can and on top of the stick. And the stick had a little adjusting thing that he could wind up and down to play into whatever key we were playing in. Well, I just called it a tin can bass. I didn't make any other instruments, but Baby Doo did. He came from Natchez, and he made his own guitar. He always told me about it, and then he made one when he was in Chicago. He made it out of something like a cigar box. But he would make the box, you know, so that it was strong enough to hold the strings. He died last year in Minneapolis.

I got together with two or three groups before we got together with Baby Doo. One of them was with a guy called Bernard Dennis. He used to play with me and Little Brother and Brother Radcliff, and we'd name a different group a different thing every two or three weeks. But we never got a chance to record with him. And first thing I ever actually recorded was this thing called the "Bumping Boys." That was with me and my brother and my nephew and another fellow and Baby Doo. We always got together and did some things on Decca for J. Mayo Williams. After that we had the Five Breezes, and

after that we had a group called the Four Jumps of Jive. Most of the time we consisted of some of the same guys, and then we cut it on down to the Big Three Trio. We began making a little noise for Columbia, doing background for people like Big Bill and also Rosetta Howard . . . folks like that.

My mother used to write all types of poems and things, and I'd always tell her that I was going to sing them when I got older. She made a lot of little old poem books when I was a kid. They were consisting of nothing but spiritual ideas and things out of the Bible. Some of them I remember. Then I had a whole book of poems that I wrote as a kid.

I never was good at art, but I always did like poems. Poems of everything, of anything. There's room enough in the world for everything, and there's more ideas in the world than your head can hold. Get these ideas together and make them into verses so people are interested. My mother always tried to put the verses in a poetic form.

Many people have something that they would like to say to the world and would like the world to know about. But most people never get a chance to say these things. And then, you're going to try to make them see something in a song that an individual can't see for themselves. Like the average man has his own feeling about women or love or whatever — what's in his heart or what's in his mind. All of a sudden, here comes somebody that's singing it out right. You know good and well what he's talking about, and he knows what you're talking about. Then that gives you an inspiration because here's a guy who's saying just what you wanted to say. That's what makes hit songs. Things that are common to any individual — and it's not a complicated thing. It makes it easier for life, easy to express, easy to say. Blues songs are facts of life, whether it's our life or somebody else's.

The songs that I like the best are generally the ones that I am writing on as of now. I try to keep my songs up to the condition where they can be educational and provide understanding to the audience that's listening. I feel like the audience today doesn't know the value of peace. I made two different songs on peace. "You Can't Make Peace" speaks for itself:

You take one man's heart
And make another man live.
You go to the moon
And come back thrilled.
You can crush any country
In a matter of weeks,

But it don't make sense
When you can't make peace.

Most of the songs I write offer wisdom, and this is why I say most of them are considered as wisdom of the blues. I made this song up about "Evil, Ignorance and Stupidity." When I say "evil, ignorance and stupidity," I mean that everything that's been done wrong on the face of the earth *happens* because of:

Evil, ignorance and stupidity
The three worst things in the world.
It ain't no good for no man or woman,
Neither no boy or girl.

'Cause if you're evil, you're ignorant,
And if you're stupid, you're wrong.
And there's no way in the world
You can ever get along.

If you're evil, ignorant and stupid,
You create prejudice and hate.
If it don't be tomorrow,
It will be sooner or late.

I try to say it in the facts of life — one way or the other, whether it's the fact of my life or somebody else's. That's why I make these particular types of songs. The blues are the true facts of life expressed in words and songs and inspirations with feeling and understanding. The people, regardless of what condition an individual is in, they want to be in better shape. They believe in letting somebody know what condition they're in, in order to help themselves. Whether it's good, whether it's bad. Right or wrong.

The world has woken up to the facts of life, and blues are about the facts of life, have been since the beginning. The blues have been around a long time. Even before Robert Johnson there were many people singing the blues. At that time, people hadn't been taught that the blues was wrong. When I was a youngster, a lot of people used to talk about Robert Johnson. I never did actually meet him, but I saw him and I ran into Robert Jr., who he partly raised, and also Johnny Shines. Johnson looked very much like the original picture that he had there. I was a youngster singing spirituals. I always did like any kind of music. I was in Mississippi in one of those little Delta towns, and I saw Robert Jr. and was excited to see him.

In that day, there weren't very many recordings out there, and anybody that could get a recording made was somebody that you had to hear. And there were very few Black ones out there at all. Records were played in places downtown, and people would be playing them out in

stores. And everybody would stop and listen. I remember we finally got an old record player. You'd fool around and wind it up too tight — the spring jumped loose, and nobody knew how to fix it.

Folks played everything; they didn't have radio. I remember my brother, he was working where they made the little crystal radio, and he brought one home. We had earphones, and you could hardly hear anything, only about two or three stations on the line. But at the same time they played most of what they wanted to. Most was country-western. They had so many different kinds of songs . . . and dances, too. Nobody in the world could keep up with all the different dances: the two-step, the black bottom, the snake hip. Everybody that could do anything, they done it and named it that dance.

When I write a song, I hope that people like it well enough to dance to it. Because most of the time if people dance to something — ten to one — they learn something about the words of it that gives them a certain education they wouldn't learn otherwise. They learn because they like it. But they don't have to be listening directly to the words. As you know, rhythm is the thing. Everything moves to rhythm. Everything that's under the sun, that crawls, flies or swims, likes music.

But blues is the greatest, because blues is the only one that, along with the rhythm and the music, brings wisdom. When youngsters get a chance to hear the wisdom along with the music — it gives them a chance to get a better education and have a better understanding.

Most people never have looked at it like that. This is why I say the youngsters today are brighter and wiser than they were yesterday. Because old folks told you something, you believed it like that — you couldn't believe the old folks lied. But we found out the old folks lied so long [that now] you can't get the young folks to trust anybody.

I made a poem that was made out of clichés of the world. Clichés are always made to the facts of life. They say them all over the world in different languages. I began to take all these different clichés from various parts of the world and put them together. And I call it "Good Advice." One of the poems I put together:

People strain at a gnat,
But they swallow a camel.
A wise man bets
And a fool gambles.

The difference between a better and a gambler: a gambler is going to stay there to win it all.

But the better bets this and bets that, and says, "If I lose, I'm through."

Barking dogs
Seldom bite.

A barking dog always warns the people, and there's nobody going to look for him to bite them. Everytime somebody gets bit by a dog — ten to one — he didn't see him coming or didn't hear him.

What's done in the dark,
Will come to the light.

That's a fact. Because many things done in the dark, take a long time to get here. Some of them take nine months or more. Most of the time it's done in the dark.

You can't tell a farmer
From a lover.
You can't tell a book
By its cover.

So these are the facts of life.
Repeat each one as above.
Then add, "That's good advice."
You keep on going
When you're sure you're right.

A weak brain
And a narrow mind
Cause many a man
To be left behind.

A heap of people see
But a very few know.
Many a one start,
But a mighty few go.

The darkest part of night
Is just before day.
And when the cat is gone
The mice gonna play.

All these things
Is good advice, you know.

You can't get blood from a turnip.
All glitter ain't gold.
You can get good music
When you play with soul.

'Cause everything that's started
Has to have an end.
And if you keep on betting,
Sooner or later you'll win.

A still tongue
Makes a wise head.
These are the things
That the wise folks said.

Now all this is good advice.

When I go to the source, the roots of all American music, I find out it was the blues to begin with. All American music comes from the blues. We put the roots down. It was like discovering America.

Willie Dixon, musician, composer and founder of Blues Heaven Foundation, Inc., is often referred to as "the poet laureate of the blues." For more than 50 years, Willie Dixon has shaped the course of this musical genre and has campaigned for the recognition of the blues and its artists as the cornerstone of American popular music.

Further Readings

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