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### Dixon's Hidden Charms reveal secrets of the blues

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**H**is songs mean more to most people than his name.

Yet bluesman Willie Dixon knows that his place in the history of music is well marked.

His signature is attached to hundreds of songs, among them, "I Just Want To Make Love to You," "Bring It On Home," "Little Red Rooster" and "Back Door Man." Pop artists as diverse as Sam Cooke, the Rolling Stones, Megadeth, Peggy Lee, Hank Williams Jr. and the Doors have recorded his tunes.

And now, *Hidden Charms*, an album of fresh material, has just been released on Bug Music/Capitol Records.

All those reasons contribute to why Dixon is among the honored songwriters performing at the fourth annual National Academy of Songwriters concert at Hollywood's Wiltern Theatre (3790 Wilshire Blvd., 213-388-1400) on Saturday. At the all-star event, he will perform two songs backed by rock band Los Lobos.

Dixon knows *he'll* be remembered. But he also wants to ensure that the blues — the music he's lived and breathed for more than 40 years — isn't forgotten either.

"With me, it's not only a career, it's a heritage," said Dixon at his Spanish-styled home in Glendale, in which live not only he and his wife Marie, but also some children and grandchildren.

Seated in a small living room with gold records on the wall and a piano among the furnishings, Dixon spoke about the blues music that has been his life.

"People are beginning to recognize that the blues is one of the true musics of the world. Most all American music is rearranged blues anyway," said the 73-year-old vocalist/guitarist/songwriter/producer so often credited for the genesis of rock 'n' roll.

"When I was a kid, they used to sing what they'd call work songs and field songs — just a 12-bar blues system that had the punchline at the end of each verse. But as time changed, a fellow put the left hand to it on the piano and the bass and they began to call it boogie woogie. And then other guys began putting hot licks in it and calling it jazz. And making it in phrases of rap, they called it rap.

"And when you get three or four songs that hit a certain groove that the majority likes, then the people begin to call it that and that's what (record companies) cater to."

On *Hidden Charms*, a variety of blues styles are represented, ranging from the African rhythms in "Jungle Swing" to the gospel-oriented "Study War No More," a collaboration with his 13-year-old grandson Alex.

"I was never the type of guy that believes in a 12-bar straight blues song," he said. "But some people wanted to keep blues music like they had done the slaves, keeping it in one place until it broke itself out."

Produced by T-Bone Burnett (who also plays guitar on the LP), Dixon is joined by his long-time associates Cash McCall on guitar and Lafayette Leake on piano, both of whom worked with him at Chess Records in Chicago. Also featured is veteran jazz bassist Red Callendar and harmonica player Sugar Blue.

**'People are beginning to recognize that the blues is one of the true musics of the world. Most all American music is rearranged blues anyway'**



**WILLIE DIXON**, the 73-year-old bluesman often named as one of the founders of rock 'n' roll, goes on the record with his new LP *Hidden Charms* and will be among the songwriters honored at the fourth annual National Academy of Songwriters concert set for 7 p.m. Saturday at the Wiltern Theater in Hollywood.

The result is a collection of spirited, new material, with an emphasis on new.

"Naturally you have a change of musical ideas," he said. "The blues are like everything else — they move with the times."

Over the years, however, it's been that process of change that's left those artists and musicians who had created the music in the first place without a claim on it — or on the royalties that went with it, said Dixon.

That's why he created the Blues Heaven Foundation. See **DIXON** on 6

### Dixon

**From 2** non-profit corporation not only preserves the history of the blues and offers scholarships to aspiring musicians, but also educates artists on the necessity of copyright protection.

"So you wouldn't have to die and go to heaven to get all you deserve," said Dixon with a laugh. "A heaven on earth."

It's a concept Dixon understands well.

Back in the '50s, in his efforts to promote the blues throughout the world, he often ended up with a raw deal.

"I was peddling songs around in Europe long before they were recorded and I used to put my songs on many tapes for many people," he said. "I'd tell them, when they record it to put my name on it."

"Some of them did and some of them didn't."

While rock 'n' rollers such as Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones were always careful to credit the authors of the blues songs they recorded. Other groups had fewer scruples. Led Zeppelin eventually had to make an out-of-court settlement with Dixon for a copyright infringement of "Whole Lotta Love."

Dixon is no longer bitter over the songs stolen from him, since the copyright laws were re-

vamped several years ago, making it easier for artists or their families to prove ownership of a written work.

"It used to bother me, but it caused me to know how other people feel," he said. "It's discouraging when you're working a long time and think that your share is coming out of that and it don't show up."

"Now, if an individual wrote something and he can prove it, then he can get the money."

The whole idea of Blues Heaven fits in with beliefs Dixon has held from the very beginning.

While his mother Daisy McKenzie was "devoted to spiritual ideas," his father Charlie Dixon was "what they call an outlaw," he said. "He sung everything anyway he wanted to make it up."

"The only difference in the music was the words. One was dedicated to heaven and the other one was dedicated to the fact of life on earth."

"Earth and life and the blues is the one that I took to the most."

After relocating from Mississippi to Chicago in the '20s, Dixon became involved in the burgeoning blues scene there. He sold many of his compositions to traveling country blues groups in the '30s at the flat rate of \$15 to

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**From 6** \$20 each.

In the '40s, he performed in several groups, including the Big Three Trio (composed of Dixon, Leonard Caston and Bernardo Dennis), one of the first bands to put a three-part harmony to a blues song.

And while he made an especially lasting impression on early rockers, his songs continue to be recorded by new bands, including Timbuk 3 and the Fabulous Thunderbirds.

But Dixon's concerns extend further than the musical world. And his influence may have been felt all the way to the White House.

It began with a song called "It Don't Make Sense We Can't Make Peace."

"I recorded it as a special record for the president of the United States and I also sent it to all of the congressmen," he said, adding "The president sent me some cuff links."