

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 CHES RECORDS (1951–1956; 1959–1971). Rising from accompanist 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 pre-eminent 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.

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later modernized GOSPEL music as composer Thomas Dorsey. Although Hunter, Broonzy, 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 \$60,000. 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 Memphis Minnie (Douglas), Lil Green, Memphis Slim (Peter Chatman), and Sonny Boy (John Lee) Williamson. With the wartime



Blues musicians on Maxwell Street, ca. 1950–51. Photographer: Jerome Joseph. Source: Chicago Historical Society.

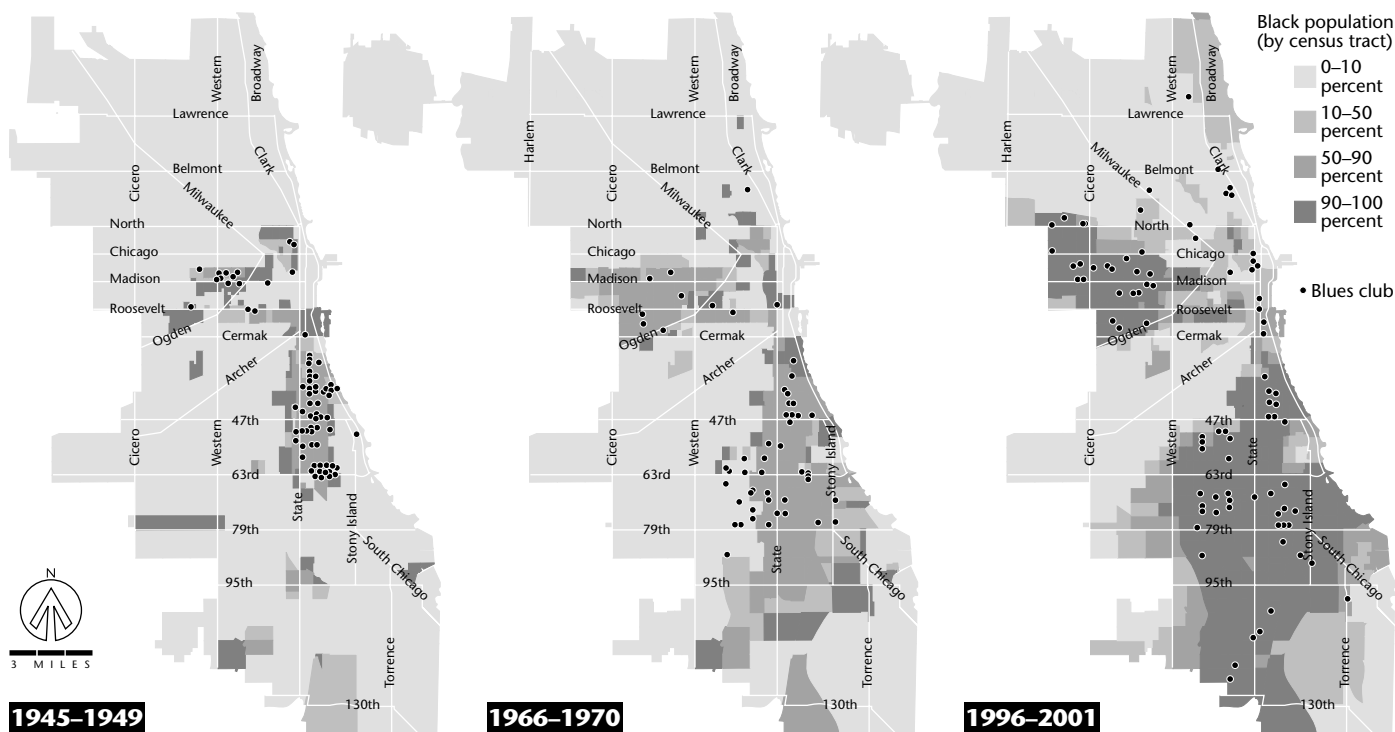
emergence of local labels such as Bluebird, Chicago became the national center for blues recording—hits like Lil Green's “Romance in the Dark” (1940), Minnie's “Me and My Chauffeur Blues” (1941), and Williamson's “Elevator Woman” (1945) exemplified post-Depression popular music for blacks, North and South. As the community of artists and entrepreneurs grew, blues culture revised the geography of black Chicago. Legendary clubs such as Silvio's, Gatewood's Tavern, the Flame Club, and the 708 opened along Indiana Avenue on the South Side and Lake Street on the West Side, serving as community centers for migrants arriving in ever greater numbers during the 1940s. Blues music also moved beyond studio and stage. The outdoor market on MAXWELL STREET became a regular weekend venue, and newly arrived musicians found work playing “rent parties” across the South and West Sides.

During the 1950s, Chicago blues flourished, developing the signatures—use of rhythm sections and amplification; reliance on guitar and harmonica leads; and routine reference to Mississippi Delta styles of playing and singing—that identify it today. Consolidation of blues recording continued, with new labels CHES,

Vee-Jay, and Cobra all signing and producing large numbers of artists. Of these, the most prominent was Chess, whose first generation of artists—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” (1950) and “Hootchie Cootchie Man” (1954) 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-1950s.

A key catalyst to the blues' postwar popularization were “black-appeal” DISC JOCKEYS, such as Al Benson and Big 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)

Blues Clubs in Chicago



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Though one could hear the blues in 1920s Chicago, the club scene was not well developed until the 1940s. Blues musicians performed regularly at bars and other entertainment venues in African American communities on both the South and West Sides in the '40s, but rarely outside these areas. Blues clubs spread out as the city's black population grew and the genre's popularity rose, but most remained in or close to African American neighborhoods. By the 1990s, the blues had become widely fashionable, and while the historic pattern largely held, some clubs, especially those downtown and on the North Side, catered to largely non-African American audiences.

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 1963, maintained a healthy blues playlist, augmenting programming from other local stations. Blues NIGHTCLUBS continued to shape black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides; Roosevelt 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. Chess went out of business in 1975, by which time most older clubs were closing down.

While Chicago blues did not recapture its centrality to the civic life of the African American community, a renaissance has been building since the late 1960s, when blues found a new audience drawn from followers of ROCK MUSIC searching out roots artists. Such local labels as Delmark, which recorded Junior Wells (Amos Blakemore) and Magic Sam (Sam Maghett), and Alligator, which recorded Koko Taylor and Lonnie Brooks (Lee Baker, Jr.), built a new national audience for Chicago blues. Old-line clubs (notably the Checkerboard) on the South and West Sides have been joined by new venues on the South, West, and North Sides (notably Kingston Mines) serving the tourist industry and predominantly white fans of blues. In 1984 Chicago inaugurated an annual blues festival. Continued participation in Chicago blues culture underscores that, as in earlier times, the music serves as "living history," shaping both memories of and hopes for urban social life.

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See also: Entertaining Chicagoans; Ethnic Music; Multicentered Chicago; Music Publishing; Outdoor Concerts; Record Publishing; Rhythm and Blues

Further reading: Keil, Charles. *Urban Blues*. 1966, 1991. • Palmer, Robert. *Deep Blues*. 1981.

Board of Trade. See Commodities Markets

Boardinghouses. Residential boarding arrangements in the Chicago metropolitan area are at least as old as the taverns of the FORT DEARBORN trading settlement. During Chicago's early boom years, when housing facilities lagged behind population growth, many visitors and newcomers found lodging and meals in the households of private citizens.

By the 1880s, boarding was an established way of life. Private boardinghouses typically consisted of a married couple (with or without children) who kept several boarders, generally single, unrelated individuals. While married couples occasionally boarded, families with children rarely lived in boardinghouses.

Women usually took primary responsibility for boarders. For many women, keeping boarders and lodgers was a readily available way to earn money that permitted a flexible schedule and was compatible with caring for children. A married woman's income from boarding was often more reliable than her husband's income,