

“Bo Diddley” and “I’m a Man” (1955)

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Essay by Ed Komara (guest post)*



Bo Diddley

While waiting in Bo Diddley’s house to conduct an interview for the February 12, 1987 issue of “Rolling Stone,” journalist Kurt Loder noticed a poster. “If You Think Rock and Roll Started With Elvis,” it proclaimed, “You Don’t Know Diddley.” This statement seems exaggerated, but upon listening to Diddley’s April 1955 debut 78 on Checker 814, “Bo Diddley” backed with “I’m A Man,” it becomes apt, perhaps even understated.

Bo Diddley (1928-2008) described his own place in music history to Loder. “People wouldn’t even bother with no stuff like ‘Bo Diddley’ and ‘I’m A Man’ and stuff like that ten years earlier [circa 1945] or even a year earlier [1954]. Then Leonard and Phil Chess decided to take a chance, and suddenly a whole different scene, a different kind of music, came in. And that was the beginning of rock and roll.”

The composer credit for Checker 814 reads “E. McDaniel,” and there begins the tale. Bo Diddley was born Ellas Otha Bates in McComb, Mississippi on December 30, 1928 to a teenage mother and her local boyfriend. He was raised, however, by his maternal first cousin, Gussie McDaniel, to whom he was taken to Chicago, and given her surname McDaniel. He grew up on the South Side of the city, where he learned violin, trombone and, at age 12, the guitar. Before long, he was playing for change on the local streets. By 1955, he was a ten-year veteran busker, playing an electric guitar with his self-made tremolo, often with the assistance of another guitar player, Jody Williams, or of a harmonica player, Billy Boy Arnold.

It is through interviews with Arnold (conducted individually by Mary Katherine Aldin, Lincoln T. Beauchamp, Jr., and Richie Unterberger) that we have an inside story of how Checker 814 was recorded. McDaniel and Arnold had made a home recording of “I’m A Man,” and they were taking it to the various blues labels in Chicago. After dismissals from United/States and Vee Jay labels, they went to Chess Records where, after a cursory brush-off from Little Walter, they met up with Phil Chess. Liking the home disc, Chess asked them to return with their instruments the next day so that his brother Leonard could hear them. That subsequent audition went well enough for Leonard Chess to set up a formal recording session on March 2, 1955 with Arnold, McDaniel, maracas shaker Jerome Green, pianist Otis Spann, bassist Willie Dixon, and a drummer, either Frank Kirkland or Clifton James.

“I’m A Man” is a simple chant-blues, its words sung to the recitative verse phrases of Muddy Waters’ 1954 Chess hit “Hoochie Coochie Man.” But the distinctive part of the song is the spelling out of “M-A-N” at the end of each chorus, to emphasize that the singer is a full-grown

man. McDaniel later told Loder that some 30 takes were needed, mostly to get the pace of the spelling right. Upon its release, the song became influential enough to lead Waters to record an answer song in late May 1955, “Mannish Boy,” which became a signature song for Waters. “I’m A Man” also became a standard in rock and roll, chiefly through the Yardbirds’ studio and live versions (September 1965 and March 1964, respectively). (This is not to be confused with “I’m A Man” recorded in 1967 by the Spencer Davis Group with Steve Winwood and by Chicago in 1968, as that was written by Winwood and Jimmy Miller.)

“Bo Diddley,” on the other hand, was looser, funkier, and louder. As a song, it was (as Smithsonian writer Ned Sublette put it in 2008) “a rhythm and a rhyme.” The rhythm was traditionally known as either “hambone,” “patting juba” or “shave and a haircut, two bits.” Long exercised in African American folklore, this rhythm was well known enough in many cultures to be invoked or imitated. The English operetta creators Gilbert and Sullivan mentioned it in their 1888 success “The Yeoman of the Guard.” It was embedded in such songs as “At a Darktown Cakewalk” (composed by Charles Hale, 1899) and “Jesus Got His Arms All Around Me” (as heard in the performance recorded by the Delta Big Four for Paramount Records in 1930). Claims for relevance to the Cuban claves and the Latin rhumba have also been made. If none of these uses is the origin of that rhythm, at least they show how widespread the rhythm had spread across America. When the guitarist Bo Diddley brought that rhythm from the background to the front and center, he was going to have a massive hit.

What words to sing was a matter decided in the presence of Leonard Chess. Many of the lyrics that McDaniel and Arnold were singing initially were, as the guitarist remembered later for Loder, “a little rough. It had lyrics like ‘Bowlegged rooster told a cocklegged duck./Say, you aint’t good lookin’, but you sure can... crow.’” Arnold remembered for Beauchamp that he and McDaniel were trying out a call and response format, with McDaniel singing “Dirty Mother For Yuh...” and Arnold responding with “Hey, Noxzema.” There was a 1951 recording by Red Saunders titled “Hambone” on which a group of kids chant, “Papa gonna buy his babe a diamond ring” and other lyrics. It is very likely that McDaniel and Arnold took up the words from that record for their song, and if they had, Arnold then supplied additional verses to make the performance last two and a half minutes.

As for the title “Bo Diddley,” McDaniel claimed to Loder that he had been called that name as a kid, but Arnold remembered it was the name of a local character seen in the black neighborhoods in Chicago. However and whoever had the name first, Arnold suggested to McDaniel to drop the word “Papa” from the lyrics, singing instead “Bo Diddley gonna buy a diamond ring.” But at the Chess building, owner Leonard Chess thought “Bo Diddley” was a demeaning or derogatory name, and Arnold remembered explaining to him that the name was for “a comical, bow-legged type of a guy.” Perhaps Arnold explained it too well, as Chess released the single with “Bo Diddley” as the title, as by “Bo Diddley” and not by McDaniels, and so Bo Diddley became McDaniels’ new stage name.

The resulting single, “Bo Diddley,” backed with “I’m a Man,” reached no. 1 on the Billboard R&B chart. Its appearance predated Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene” (also a Chess release) by three months, giving Diddley a slight edge in recording what was then nascent rock and roll. This success enabled Diddley to make follow-up singles with Chess, the first few of which were collected towards Diddley’s first LP, “Bo Diddley” (Chess LP 1431, 1958). The song “Bo Diddley” was popular long enough to earn its performer a television appearance on November 20, 1955 on Ed Sullivan’s popular Sunday night TV show (where he reportedly enraged his host by playing his hit song instead of Sullivan’s request, “Sixteen Tons”). The song’s rhythm also established his musical persona, with which he performed his other signature hits including “Mona” (covered in 1964 by The Rolling Stones on their first album) and “Who Do You Love” (best known today to rock audiences through George Thorogood’s 1978 version with the homage

lyric, “Snakeskin shoes baby put 'em on your feet, got the good time music with a Bo Diddley beat”).

Over time, the “Bo Diddley beat” gradually took on a life of its own by appearing in new songs by other artists for both white and mixed audiences. Buddy Holly was an early Diddley enthusiast, and one of his hits during his brief career was “Not Fade Away” (1957) which the Rolling Stones covered in 1964. Johnny Otis, leading a bi-racial rhythm and blues band in Los Angeles, had a big hit in 1958 for Capitol Records with “Willie and the Hand Jive.” For 1965 teenagers, the Strangeloves worked up the rhythm as “I Want Candy,” which Bow Wow Wow revived for 1982 teenagers. One of the very best of the rock applications of the beat was done by The Who for their song “Magic Bus,” which served as their concert closer during their late 1960s tours.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.