BO DIDDLEY

The distinctive rhythmic pattern called the "Bo Diddley Beat" is an immediately recognizable element of rock's shared language and legacy. Simple, hypnotic, eminently danceable and endlessly adaptable, Bo's beat is the rhythmic equivalent of the 12-bar blues. Not that Bo Diddley actually "invented" the beat. In spirit, at least, its origins trace back to the "hambone" beats and frenzied, repetitive "ring shouts" of slavery days, and from there back to the rhythms of Africa (a lot of nervous white parents heard little else in Diddley's music). In the Big Band era, bandleaders summoned up variations of the rhythm by calling for the "shave and a haircut... two bits" beat. Diddley used the beat to its fullest and greatest effect, however, and made it his trademark. He defined himself and his music in terms its rhythm, and in doing so he proclaimed the primacy of rhythm to an extent unprecedented even in the beat crazy world of rock & roll.

Background: Mississippi to Chicago

Bo Diddley was born Otha Ellis Bates on December 30, 1928, to a farm family in McComb, Mississippi. After the death of his father, Otha was taken in by the McDaniel family and given the name Ellas McDaniel, the name that appears on most of his songwriting credits. His new father died soon afterwards, and in 1934 the family moved to Chicago, where his schoolmates playfully mocked Ellas' backwoods roots by dubbing him "Bo Diddley," after a homemade single-string instrument from the South called the "diddley bow." The family scratched their way through the Depression years and even managed to buy Bo his first musical instrument—a violin, which he used to surprising effect on a few of his Chess recordings. He also studied trombone with his church's musical director, but his heart was in a different type of music, much to his family's chagrin. Like many religious black families, Bo's relations considered the blues and R&B the "devil's music" and strongly disapproved of his interest in it (which, of course, made it all the more enticing).

Diddley picked up the guitar as a teenager and taught himself to play using an open-tuning that he would employ on most of his songs.[i] By the mid-fifties, Diddley was playing around the Maxwell Street market and in the clubs on Chicago's South Side with drummer Frank Kirkland and maraca player Jerome Green, who would remain his sidekick and alter ego over the next decade. (Green is given the spotlight in "Bring It To Jerome," and trades jive-talking mock insults with Diddley in "Say Man.") The trio developed a distinctive combination of Latin-tinged maracas, pounding tom-toms and a tremolo guitar sound that Diddley set in phase with the percussive rhythms. The overall effect was startlingly new, with no direct influences or antecedents.

"Bo Diddley"

Bo approached the Chess brothers in 1955 with a song called "Uncle John." They loved the sound and made plans to record the song, but felt that the words could use a bit of work... "They told me to rewrite it. The words was a little rough. It had lyrics like 'Bowlegged rooster told a cocklegged duck/Say, you ain't good-looking but you sure can... crow.'"[ii] "Uncle John" was cleaned-up and turned into "Bo Diddley," one of the first great rock & roll classics. While slightly sanitized, the song retained the slang

expressions, backwoods jargon and comic yarn-spinning quality that characterized most of Diddley's lyrics.

The beat and sound, on the other hand, didn't have to be changed at all: the "Bo Diddley Beat" is there in all its savage glory from the opening note of "Bo Diddley." In fact, the entire record is really one big rhythm section, with vocal incantations and scattered guitar interludes set against a rhythmic juggernaut created by the entire band. The vocals have a chanting singsong feel, with no real "tune"; the "verses," such as they are, are chopped up and asymmetrical and seem almost a stream of consciousness; the band accompaniment never changes—there aren't even any *chord* changes; there's no flashy lead break and no catchy refrain or "hook" beyond the rhythm itself and the sheer, amazing SOUND. A record with no tune, chord changes or rhythmic variety ought rank as one of the most boring records ever made; instead, it is one of the most exciting.

Rhythm and *sound* are the focus of "Bo Diddley," as they are on all of Diddley's recordings. Even the short "solos" in "Bo Diddley" are really just a change in sound and register, but with nothing else changing or moving, the mere shift to a higher range and a single hint at a chord change—which the rest of the band ignores—become dramatic events. The sound is intensified by the reverb added to the voice and percussion and by the tremolo of Diddley's guitar, which vibrates in time with the voodoo spell of the tom-toms. There are no cymbals to brighten the sound or snare drum accents to pull a beat out of the rolling hypnotic pulse. "Bo Diddley" sounds both huge and powerful and strangely empty and spacious, and certainly unlike anything else coming out of the radio in 1955.

"Bo Diddley" alone would have secured Diddley's place in the history of rock & roll. It's flipside was the equally famous "**I'm a Man**," a single-riff blues mantra similar to "Bo Diddley" in its relentless and trance-inducing pursuit of self-glorification.[iii] Diddley's signature beat, one-chord trances, strange guitar sounds and humorous jive lyrics appear in various permutations throughout his work, from the playfully sinister "Who Do You Love" to the haunting "Mona" and the Willie Dixon-penned "You Can't Judge a Book By Its Cover." Other Bo Diddley highlights include the comic calypso send-up "Cracking Up," the riff-heavy "Road Runner" and the nursery rhyme call-and-response of "Hey Bo Diddley" (a return to his favorite subject).

Diddley's records were consistent hits on the R&B charts but seldom made a dent in the pop charts. In fact, 1959's "Say Man" was the *only* Bo Diddley record to crack the pop Top Forty. His spectacular showmanship kept him in great demand on the live circuit and his records were favorites at dance parties and on jukeboxes, but his music was simply "too black" for the majority of the pop audience, or at least too black to risk buying and playing at home. He was also one of the first artists to concentrate on albums as well as singles, though teen-oriented album titles like *Bo Diddley Is a Gunslinger*, *Bo Diddley is a Twister* and *Surfin' with Bo Diddley* didn't do much to improve his sales (though they did inspire some bizarre album covers). Diddley toured and recorded steadily through the fifties and into the sixties, but his music never reached the wide audience or gained the respect it deserved.

Bo Knows: The Beat Goes On

Bo Diddley was a true original. His sound and style owed relatively little to anything that preceded him, and nearly everything that has followed has been touched,

directly or indirectly, by his commitment to the primal force of rhythm in rock & roll. His approach to the guitar was equally original and ahead of its time: he was a pioneer in recognizing and taking advantage of the expanded possibilities of the *electric* guitar, experimenting with odd-shaped, custom-built guitars and new sounds and special effects long before such things were commonplace. (Diddley was a revelation to the late-sixties audiences at the rock revival shows who assumed that Jimi Hendrix had invented psychedelic guitar sounds.)

A great dance beat and an exciting change of pace from the standard rock backbeat, the "Bo Diddley Beat" was quickly felt as one of rock's primary inspirations. Bandleader Johnny Otis, for example, used the beat and Diddley's maraca-laden arrangements on several records, including the 1958 hit "Willie and the Hand Jive." Mickey and Sylvia's 1956 hit "Love Is Strange" was co-authored by Diddley, and Mickey Baker's exotic guitar work shows his influence. Diddley fan Buddy Holly recorded his own version of "Bo Diddley" and adapted many Diddley traits into his own style, as did other admiring guitarists like Duane Eddy and Link Wray. The influence of Diddley's rhythmic focus can be felt in artists ranging from James Brown to the Everly Brothers, who called him the biggest influence on their acoustic guitar style. Diddley was also an enormous influence on the British Invasion groups, particularly the blues-based bands who covered his songs and made frequent use of "his" beat. The Rolling Stones, for example, amplified the Bo Diddley feel of Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away" and turned Muddy Waters' "I Just Want To Make Love To You" into a Diddley rave-up. The Who's "Magic Bus" is built over the Diddley beat, the Yardbirds recorded "I'm a Man" and the Animals recorded "Bo Diddley" and their own impressionistic "history" of Bo and rock & roll, "The Story of Bo Diddley."

A list of influences and "borrowings" could go on indefinitely, in all directions, up to the present day. Bo's beat, sound and style have become part of rock's Public Domain. Unfortunately, you can't copyright a beat and sound, and while his fortunes have improved of late, thanks to television commercials and the belated recognition of the music industry, he still has relatively little to show for having made such a vital contribution to the music that has made millions for others. "I don't sound like nobody else—everybody's trying to sound like me... And I haven't gotten a thing from it. Just give me credit for being the person that's sending everybody to the bank!"[iv] He may not have received the financial rewards, but he can certainly take pride in the permanent mark he has made on rock & roll and the living monument he will leave behind: the distinctive rhythm that everybody knows as the "Bo Diddley Beat."

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[i] An open tuning produces a chord when the open—unfingered—strings of a guitar are strummed.

[ii] *Rolling Stone* magazine #493, p. 80.

[iii] A near clone of "I'm a Man," called "Mannish Boy," was recorded by Muddy Waters and credited to Willie Dixon. The true origins of the song have been a matter of some dispute, though it seems that Diddley's version was first.

[iv] Bo Diddley, in conversation with author.