

## Bo Diddley

Combining R&B and blues with eccentric onstage performances, Bo Diddley is often considered one of the pioneers of rock and roll music. Otha Ellas Bates was born on 30 December 1928. He never knew his father, Eugene Bates; his mother, Ethel Wilson, was only fifteen or sixteen years old when Ellas was born. Ethel's first cousin, Gussie McDaniel, raised him while the family tried to make a living as sharecroppers. In 1934, in the midst of the Great Depression, they moved to Chicago, where Bo started to develop an interest in music. His first instrument was a violin, and he took lessons from classical teacher O. W. Frederick. He also taught himself to play the drums and the trombone.



At age twelve Bates received his first guitar, a Christmas present from his stepsister, Lucille McDaniel. John Lee Hooker had already become one of his heroes, and he wanted to play just like him. But he had trouble strumming the guitar: *I couldn't play the guitar like everyone else*, Bo later recalled. Other guitarists have skinny fingers, I didn't, I play drum licks on the guitar. This music style evolved into the distinctive shave and a haircut, two bits rhythm that characterised most of his repertoire.

Bo probably started to use the name *Bo Diddley* around 1940, though its origins are uncertain: it might have been a nickname acquired during his brief boxing career, or it might refer to a harmonica player he saw in Mississippi or to a southern folk instrument known as the Diddley bow. Not even Diddley knew the origins of his stage name, recalling only that the kids gave me that name when I



was in grammar school in Chicago.”

While he was still in high school, Bo formed his first band, the Hipsters. The group, which later changed its name to the **Langley**



**Avenue Jive Cats**, performed on Chicago’s street corners and clubs. In 1955 Diddley cut a demo of two of songs, *Uncle John* and *I’m a Man*, and took it to Chess Records, one of Chicago’s preeminent blues labels. Leonard and Phil Chess liked the music but did not appreciate the lyrics of *Uncle John*, which they

viewed as what we would now describe as racist. They suggested that Bo change the words, which he did. The result was the classic song *Bo Diddley*, it reached the top of the R&B charts when it was released as a single in 1955.

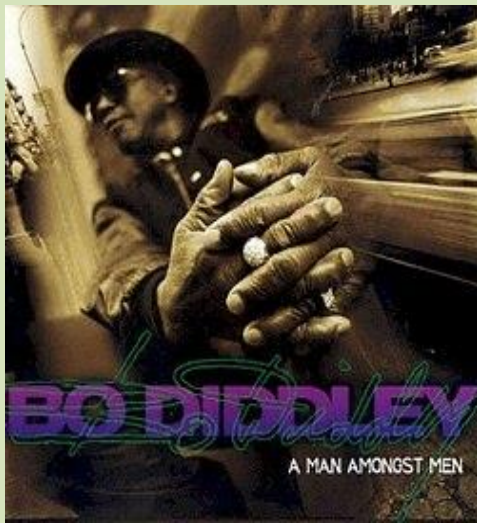
Other hits followed, among them *Diddley Daddy* and *You Can’t Judge a Book by Its Cover*. Bo made an almost immediate impact with his peculiar moves, flamboyant suits, and his square guitars, which he made himself.

Bo Diddley believed that his impact on the development of rock and roll had been underestimated. What gets me is when white brothers started playing guitars and sounding like us, and folks said that Elvis started rock ‘n’ roll. Well, let me tell you Elvis ain’t started a damn thing. I love what he did, but he came three years after me. I was already breaking records at the Apollo Theater.”



During the 1970s, when his career was on a downhill slope, Diddley went to New Mexico, where he served for a time as a deputy sheriff. In 1987, the same year he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of

Fame, and he moved to the Gainesville, Florida, area. Around that time, his popularity again started to rise. He performed at the



inaugurations of Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, and Bo's 1996 album *A Man amongst Men*, which featured renowned musicians including Jimmie Vaughan and Keith Richards, received a Grammy Award nomination. Still, the bitterness remained. When kids hear me play now they say, 'Hey, you sound like so-and-so.' Wow, that's an insult; it's degrading. They don't know I started the sound and the so-and-so's

copied me," Diddley explained. "When I hear that, it's a bad feeling, a hurting feeling. I ask myself why I'm still out here performing when all that has happened is that I've been forgotten.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, starting a show, he complained that he did not feel well and attributed the problem to smoke from large wildfires that clouded the air in his hometown of Archer, Florida. The next day, he was heading back home, when he seemed dazed and confused at the airport. Someone telephoned 911 on his behalf, and he was immediately taken by ambulance to Creighton University Medical Centre where he stayed for several days, he was then flown to Shands Hospital in Gainesville where it was confirmed that he had suffered a stroke. Bo Diddley died in Florida in 2008; he was 79 years of age.

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