

# Pop: The Early Blues Sound Better Than Ever

By DON HECKMAN

**I AM THE BLUES:** Willie Dixon [Columbia CS 9987]. **POP ORIGINS** (Chess LP 1544). It's a little hard to believe that at this late date it should be necessary to reconfirm the continuing story of white exploitation of black music. But for the many skeptics still around, two fascinating releases will provide convincing evidence.

The first is devoted to the songs of Willie Dixon, a man who has been one of the most quietly influential forces in the shaping of contemporary pop/rock/blues. A ubiquitous bass player in his younger days, Dixon has functioned

for the last couple of decades as a staff producer for Chess records. In that capacity he has written an enormous number of songs for such performers as Chuck Berry, Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, Lowell Fulson, etc., and through them, of course, for their many white imitators.

Some of the best known—"Back Door Man", "The Seventh Son", "I'm Your Hoochie Cooche Man," "Red Rooster"—are included. Unfortunately, however, Dixon's vocal skills are not exactly the equal of his songwriting abilities; even the assistance of a sterling back-up group of Chicago

blues players can't compensate for the generally lusterless quality of his interpretations. Still, performances by composers of their own works are always valuable items to have, even when they are mildly flawed.

The second, a Chess collection, is fascinating. Quite simply, it is a collection of the original versions of tunes by black performers that were subsequently recorded—and made into hits—by white groups. Some examples: "Roll Over Beethoven," written and recorded by Chuck Berry in 1956, and recorded by the Beatles in 1964; "Susie Q," recorded by Dale Hawkins in 1957, and by Creedence Clearwater Revival in 1968; "You Shook Me," recorded by Muddy Waters in 1962 and by Led Zeppelin in 1969. Altogether, there are 14 such pieces, by, in addition to the performers mentioned, Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley, Lowell Fulson and Little Milton. Interestingly, in almost every case the originals (many of which were written by Willie Dixon) hold up remarkably well, often sounding better, even a decade later, than their more contemporary copies. And that's another thing. The contemporary copies very often are just that—copies, sometimes with arrangements which are virtual note-for-note simulations of the originals. If that's not exploitation, then perhaps the word needs redefinition. (Yes, I've heard all the stories about white folks having the blues, too. Sure they do, but what I'm talking about is not having the blues, but playing the blues in note-for-note, inflection-for-inflection imitation of the work of black bluesmen.) Chess has provided an extraordinarily valuable set of musical reference points for

everyone interested in pop music. Don't overlook this one.

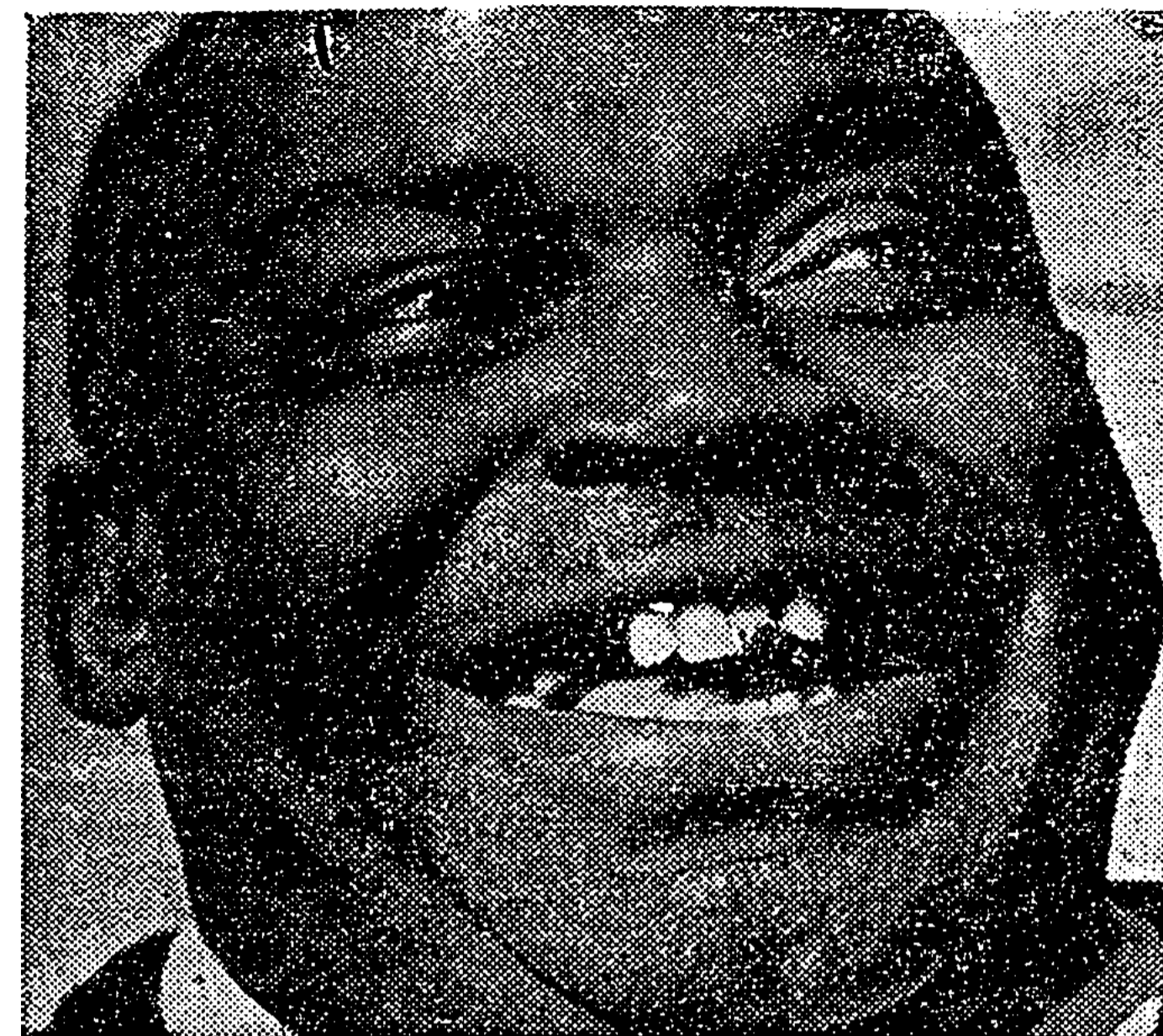
**LADIES OF THE CANYON:** Joni Mitchell (Warner Bros. RS 6376). I have been hopelessly in love with Joni Mitchell since the unheralded arrival of her first brilliant recording. This is her third collection, and she keeps getting better and better. Her crystal clear imagery is as shining bright as ever, and her melodies, if anything, seem to be improving. She always has been a fine guitarist and now, surprisingly, she is becoming a growingly powerful singer, too. Unlike the sometimes delicate vocalizing on her first two recordings, Miss Mitchell's work here seems to revel

in chance-taking. She uses epiglottal stops, wide, head-tone vibrato and resonant chest tones—a range of vocalizing that would be remarkable even if Miss Mitchell hadn't written all the songs on the album.

With records this good it always is difficult to recommend highlights, since each of the songs has so many unique qualities. But for starters, try "For Free," a song about a Greenwich Village street musician, "Big Yellow Taxi," perhaps the first entry in a new genre that might be called Ecology-folk ("They paved paradise. And put up a parking lot."), and Miss Mitchell's already-classic "The Circle Game."

**DEJA VU:** Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (Atlantic SD 7200). A new outing by The Law Firm—as they are affectionately called these days—easily matches the unswerving musical intensity of the group's first recording. More emphasis is placed upon solo work, perhaps because of the presence of new member Neil Young, and the electric backing of drummer Dallas Taylor and bassist Greg Reeves heightens the complex vocal harmonies that the group produces in such effortless fashion.

Unlike some of last year's super bands, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young continues to be a heavy group.



David Gahr

Blues singer Willie Dixon  
"Quietly influential"



Martin Mills

Folksinger Joni Mitchell  
"Crystal clear imagery"

The New York Times

Published: April 5, 1970

Copyright © The New York Times