



I WAS A SEMI-RETARDED suburban Philly rock 'n' roll brat in the early 1970s when a wave of 1950s nostalgia hit the country like a greasy, twenty-year-old fart. With long hair hanging from my head but a crotch that was still hairless, I sat in a nearly empty movie theater watching *Let the Good Times Roll*, a concert documentary featuring 50s rock 'n' roll stars, most of them black. The film contained live footage from some bloated, overdone, there's-no-reason-the-backup-band-should-have-a-trombone-section oldies show filmed in New York in 1971, interspersed with backstage comments from the stars. Most audience members in the movie seemed to be white with long hair, just like me.

Although not one black person lived within ten miles of me, I bore no prejudices toward the performers. In fact, I wound up liking all but one of them. **Chuck Berry** was his usual eager-to-please, show-stopping self.

Fats Domino was likeable because he always smiled, too. **Little Richard**, with a giant spangly coiffed pom-pullet and screamingly colorful

silk outfits studded with mirrors, minced and howled and climbed atop pianos and sweated so much, his eyeliner began to run down his cheeks. What's not to like about *that*?

Bo Diddley was the only one who left a bad taste in my mouth. He didn't smile like the other stars. He lumbered around the stage like a cranky grizzly bear with his big Mr. Potato Head sour-pussed mug, his thick ugly eyeglasses, and his rectangular guitar that immediately annoyed me. The only impression his songs left on me was that he seemed to say his own name a lot, which I found exceedingly dumb. His backstage comments, spat out with pissy, bad-cigar-breath venom, were fixated on a single theme: He invented rock 'n' roll, others ripped him off, and he deserves to get paid for it. He just yabbered and jabbered and wouldn't shut the fuck up about it.

"You invented rock 'n' roll?" I thought to myself. "Fuck, I ain't ever HEARD of you!"

I WOULD LIKE TO STATE FOR THE RECORD that I was wrong, and I feel horrible about it. Although it would be overstating things to say Bo Diddley *single-handedly* invented rock 'n' roll, he definitely invented MORE of it than anyone else. And there are good arguments that he was THE major influence in the genesis of surf music, heavy metal, the British Invasion, and rap. The man is a Godzilla-sized musical monster.

I first came to embrace this fact in the early 1980s, when I nicked a cassette of his greatest hits that featuring a picture of Bo in his 1950s prime, red checkered suit and all. First song on the tape was also the first single he ever released, 1955's eponymous "Bo Diddley," boasting a jagged Stone Age/Space Age guitar rolling in like waves of desert heat and melting your mind. Bo, originally a drummer, played his guitar as if it were a percussion instrument. And the riff on "Bo Diddley" was pounded out in a cadence that would become his signature.

Phonics don't do it justice, but I'd render it something like BOMP-buh-BOMP-BOMP-buh-BOMP-BOMP. It has become known as the "Bo Diddley beat" and forms the rhythmic backbone for many of his songs, as well as countless smash hits for pea-pickin' butt-pirates who saw fit to steal it. That beat shakes like an earthquake. There's something eternal about it. Bo Diddley drilled down into the core of the rhythmic collective unconscious and came up with pure black oil.

MUSIC THEORISTS ARGUE over the Bo Diddley beat's origin. It has been linked to sources as varied as: the "shave and a haircut, six bits" barbershop song; the "hambone" rhythm that black slaves would pat out on their bare chests and legs using their hands; some lost rhumba cadence; and jungle-movie soundtracks from the 1940s. Bo dismisses all such claims and says he invented the beat himself while fucking around with the cowboy song "I've Got Spurs that Jingle Jangle Jingle" on his guitar.

BO DIDDLEY'S MY NAME

Bo Diddley songs that feature his name in the title:

Bo Diddley Put the Rock in Rock 'n' Roll • *Bo Diddley-itis* • *Bo's Beat* • *Bo Diddley is Loose* • *Bo Diddley is Crazy* • *Bo Diddley is a Lover* • *Bo Diddley is a Gunslinger* • *Bo Diddley* • *Hey Bo Diddley* • *Diddley Daddy* • *Bo Meets the Monster* • *Bo's a Lumberjack* • *Cookie-Headed Diddley* • *Bo's Guitar* • *The Story of Bo Diddley*

America's Greatest Bitter Black Musician



BO KNOWS FASHION: (L-R)...

1. Bo vainly trying to reinvent himself as a psychedelic funkster by recording an album called *The Black Gladiator* (1970) and wearing an outfit that looks stolen from The Village People's "Biker" character...

2. Bo in the 1960s, with his female guitarist "The Duchess" and Jerome Green, Bo's maracas-playing sidekick....

3. The cover of the *Bo Diddley is a Gunslinger* album (1961).

Bo employed that tireless beat, tweaking it just a bit each time, on about half of the songs on that greatest-hits cassette. The barest, most elemental example of Bo recycling his own beat was the reverb-soaked, all-alone-in-the-darkness guitar line on "Mona," one of the purest love songs ever written.

That one beat...the one he's known for...would have been enough to cement his legend. But this cassette oozed seductive beats all over the place, many of them spiced-up by sideman Jerome Green's voodoo-possessed maracas-shaking. Every song was stirred around and simmered in the same hypnotic, hazy, snake-charming, witch-doctor gumbo, skulls on sticks shaking up and down to the beat. Bo Diddley was channeling Satan, there was no doubt about it. "Say Man," considered by many to be the first rap song, was driven by a weird, caffeine-overdose, piano-tinkly, south-of-the-border tempo, over which Bo and Jerome traded verbal insults about each other's girlfriends. "You Can't Judge a Book by its Cover" was peppered by a breathless rhythm that conjured torches and gospel tents. And my favorite track, "Road Runner," had one of the heaviest guitar sounds ever recorded, just screaming slabs of black steel punching you unconscious. In yet another layer of irony that forms the Ironic Onion called Bo Diddley, he pioneered the guitar-god ethos that later would be purloined by white guys who forgot about people such as Bo Diddley.

Bo also broke new thematic ground with his remorseless killer-stud persona. He was always walking through barbed wire and wearing cobra snakes for neckties and eating steel nails and drinking gunpowder soup. When he came to town, the streets got empty and the sun went down. Except for a few of the darker-themed country artists, such self-woven antihero mythology was absent from the rest of popular music until punk rock came along and offered paint-by-numbers nihilism.

When the British Invasion stole American music and sold it back to Americans, no one's music was stolen more than Bo Diddley's. The Rolling Stones, Kinks,

Animals, Manfred Mann, and Yardbirds all covered his songs. British bands such as The Pretty Things and Cops and Robbers stole their goddamned names from his songs. Even Pink Floyd, a band seemingly unaware that things such as rhythm existed, was rumored to have cut their musical teeth by performing entire sets of Bo Diddley covers.

NEARLY FIFTY YEARS after he first recorded "Bo Diddley," bitterness and an all-swallowing sense of having been FUCKED OVER remain the primary themes of almost every interview Bo gives. He's bitter at the FIFTY MILLION DOLLARS worth of royalties he reckons that record-company sharks have skimmed from his pockets. He's bitter that in the early 1970s, he was driven into premature obscurity to the point where he took a job as a small-town sheriff in New Mexico. He's bitter every time he hears his beat plagiarized on TV commercials. Bitter that he's in his 70s and still has to tour small clubs to make ends meet. "I opened the door for a lot of people," he lamented to one reporter, "and they just ran through and left me holding the knob."

My head would crack open and bats would fly out of it if I were faced with Bo's predicament. If I had created something that altered the musical landscape with the finality of an atomic bomb and was still forced to play rinky-dink clubs almost TEN YEARS after becoming a senior citizen, I'd want to punch somebody.

So here's what I suggest, Bo: You're coming to **Dante's on December 27th** for two shows. I will be the DJ for both shows. I am the same white boy who doubted your importance way back in that movie theater in 1972. If you're still feeling bitter when you get to Dante's, you can punch me square in the face, and I swear I won't call the cops. Take your best shot. You're in your seventies, so I'm sure it won't hurt too bad. Not as bad as what they did to you, anyway. X

RIPPED OFF

A short list of well-known artists, all of whom are white, who stole the instantly recognizable "Bo Diddley Beat" and used it in their songs:

Elvis Presley
("His Latest Flame")

Buddy Holly
("Not Fade Away")

Johnny Otis
("Willie and the Hand Jive")

The Who
("Magic Bus")

The Rolling Stones
("I'm All Right")

The Strangeloves
("I Want Candy"—later recorded by Bow Wow Wow)

Bruce Springsteen
("She's the One")

U2
("Desire")

David Bowie
("Panic in Detroit")

Elvis Costello
("Lover's Rock")

X
("Under the Big Black Sun")

George Michael
("Faith")

