

Bo Diddley still rockin' at 70

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (AP) — Bo Diddley's greatest claim to fame may not be his induction into the Rock and Roll of Fame, nor his star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame, nor his lifetime achievement award from the Grammys.

It was a Nike commercial.

Already a rock and blues icon, Diddley entered the American consciousness after a 1989 "Bo Knows" commercial for Nike. Commenting on football and baseball star Bo Jackson's guitar skills, Bo Diddley turned to the camera and said, "He don't know Diddley."

"I never could figure out what it had to do with shoes, but it worked," Diddley says. "I got into a lot of new front rooms on the tube. I thank Nike and Bo Jackson for doing it."

But this 70-year-old rocker, famous for his innovative use of rhythm, his square homemade guitar, dark glasses and black hat, has not reaped the financial rewards to go along with his music awards.

While Diddley appreciates the honors, "it didn't put no figures in my checkbook," he says angrily.

The need for money and not just a love of music keeps him constantly on the road, playing county fairs, small casinos, private parties and music halls.

"If you ain't got no money, ain't nobody calls you honey," he says.

He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland in 1987, followed by the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1989, and received his lifetime achievement award from the Grammys in 1998.

"It just told people they thought enough of Bo Diddley for me to be honored by putting my name on something, which is really great. But it didn't put no bucks in my kitty."

Diddley says he only received a small portion of the money he should have made during his career. Like other artists of his generation, he was paid a flat fee for his recordings and received no royalty payments on record sales. He also says he was never paid for many of his performances.

"I am owed. I've never got paid," he says. "A dude with a pencil is worse than a cat with a machine gun."

In 1994, he claimed to be \$300,000 in debt and was paying for a large home in Hawthorne, about 20 miles outside Gainesville. He later divorced and moved to a

secluded area outside Bronson, about 40 miles to the west. "My kids were deprived of going to college," he says. "The money I was making wasn't enough to send them somewhere."

Touring at his age doesn't trouble him.

"Seventy ain't nothing but a damn number," he says. "I'm writing and creating new stuff and putting together new different things. Trying to stay out there and roll with the punches. I ain't quit yet."

Born Ellas Bates on Dec. 30, 1928, in McComb, Miss., Diddley was later adopted by his mother's cousin and took on the name Ellas McDaniel, which his new wife, Sylvia, still calls him.

His family moved to Chicago when he was 5. He took violin lessons at the Ebenezer Baptist Church and learned guitar at age 10, when he began playing on street corners.

The name Bo Diddley came from other youngsters.

"I don't know where the kids got it, but the kids in grammar school gave me that name," he says. He liked it and made it his stage name.

"Diddley — that word has been around for a long, long time. When I was a kid, my mother used to say, 'You don't know diddley squat.'"

Diddley was playing Chicago's Maxwell Street in his early teens.

He was signed to the Chess and Checkers record labels in 1955. His first single, "Bo Diddley," went to No. 2 on the rhythm and blues charts.

"His Chess recordings stand among the best singular recordings of the 20th century," said Howard Kramer, assistant curator of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland.

Diddley said he had no musical influences growing up. "I don't like to copy anybody. Everybody tries to do what I do, update it. I don't have any idols I copied after."

But many artists, including the Rolling Stones, the Who, Bruce Springsteen, Buddy Holly, George Michael and Elvis Costello copied Diddley's style.

"They copied everything I did, upgraded it, messed it up. It seems to me that nobody can come up with their own thing, they have to put a little bit of Bo Diddley there," he says.

Diddley was a pioneer of the electric guitar, adding reverb and tremolo.

"He treats it like it was a drum, very rhythmic," said E. Michael Harrington, music theory and composition

professor at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn. But despite his technique and talent, Diddley said disc jockeys in the early 1950s called his work "jungle music." It wasn't until the pioneering disc jockey Alan Freed came up with the term "rock and roll" that Diddley's music found a home on mainstream radio.

Diddley said Freed was talking about him, recalling Freed's introduction before an Apollo Theater concert: "Here is a man with an

original sound, who is going to rock and roll you right out of your seat." Diddley's major hits included, "Say Man," "You Can't Judge a Book By It's Cover," "I'm A Man," "Shave and a Haircut," "Uncle John" and "The Mule."

"I came out of school and made something out of myself," he said. "I am known all over the globe, all over the world. There are guys who have done a lot of things that don't have the same impact that I had."



BO DIDDLEY

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