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Four-year-old Caton Blackburn, bottom left, dances with Gordon Wilkerson, 3, as local artists perform at the Southern Cultural Heritage Complex Thursday. Caton is the daughter of Jeb and Melissa Blackburn, and Gordon is the son of Richard and Ruth Wilkerson. **(Meredith Spencer • The Vicksburg Post)**

Willie Dixon's way: Mural, marker, party honor city son

By [Lauchlin Fields](#) and [Molly Mullen](#)

[06/29/07] *At least 700 at SCHC events*

The debut of a traveling Smithsonian exhibit brought out at least 700 people to dine and dance in Vicksburg Thursday, with multiple events centered on native bluesman Willie Dixon.

Crowds dodged showers and poured into venues to honor "the poet laureate of the blues," who would have celebrated his 92nd birthday Sunday.

It was a big start to a big week, with almost daily events leading up to and following the Fourth of July.

An evening jam session, bluegrass pickin' and gospel concert at the Southern Cultural Heritage Center launched the Smithsonian's New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music displays that will be free and open at the center for six weeks. The director, Bess Averett, said by 7:30, with an hour and half left and the crowd growing, at least 700 people had filled the former Catholic school campus downtown.

Averett said she was overwhelmed. "We are just so excited that Vicksburg decided to come out to support roots music," she said.

"Willie Dixon Day," is what Vicksburg Riverfront Mural Project chairman Nellie Caldwell termed the day of events, which began at 3 when about 40 people endured the heat and gathered along Willie Dixon Way to view the newly installed blues trail marker for the legendary singer, songwriter and bassist.

After a thunderstorm pounded through, umbrellas shifted to sun shields as temperatures steamed up to 91 degrees. The blues marker is the first in Warren County, but the 14th across the state to be installed by the Mississippi Blues Commission to honor the state's blues heritage.

"Willie was for the blues. That's what Willie was all about," said his widow, Marie Dixon, who was in town with her family for the festivities. "It's an honor to be back in his native land."

It was Marie Dixon's third trip to Vicksburg from her home in Chicago, where she runs the Blues Heaven Foundation, a nonprofit organization started by her husband to preserve the blues' legacy and to secure copyrights and royalties for blues musicians. Her trips before were for the naming of Willie Dixon Way in 2002 and for last year's Willie Dixon Wang Dang Doodle Blues Festival. Also in attendance were Dixon's youngest daughter, Jacqueline Dixon, and his grandson, Alex Dixon.

The marker gives a brief history of Dixon, who was born on Crawford Street and later lived on Openwood Street. The blues pioneer left Vicksburg for Chicago at the age of 17. Another side of the marker has pictures and a narrative about Dixon's roots in Vicksburg. As part of the dedication, Dr. Edgar Smith of Tougaloo College read a selection from Dixon's autobiography, "I Am The Blues."

"The whole of life is expressed through the blues," he read. "Blues is the true facts of life."

The celebration continued at the City Front floodwall, where nearly 200 people congregated to see the unveiling of a mural painted in honor of Dixon. The mural, sponsored by Ray and Nancy Neilsen, is the 22nd painted by artist Robert Dafford. It features a full-length image of Dixon holding a bass, which he played to accompany many of the more than 500 songs he penned throughout his career. The setting of the mural is The Blue Room, where blues and jazz artists across the state and region came to perform. An image of the Red Tops, Vicksburg's legendary dance band, is also part of the mural depiction of the city's musical heritage. A performance by Red Tops lead singer, Rufus McKay, and a speech by Wardell Wince, son of Blue Room owner Tom Wince, were also part of the event.

"This mural will tell its story to new people every day. And, it's a story I want people to know," said local music enthusiast Daniel Boone.

Marie Dixon said the mural will help people continue to recognize her late husband all over the world. She even sang one of his many songs to pay tribute to the moment.

"I'm wanted - I'm wanted all over the world," she sang to the crowd.

Other Dixon tunes were part of the festivities. Local musicians Osgood & Blaque sang three widely recognized Dixon songs, all of which went on to be hits for British R&B groups in the '60s and '70s.

State Rep. George Flaggs, D-Vicksburg, who attended both unveilings, commended Dixon's legacy.

"This is just the beginning of the recognition that Willie is going to get from the State of Mississippi," he said. "It is Willie Dixon and others we must honor in this state."

Marie Dixon said she was happy as people, old, young and inbetween, flowed into the school courtyard to

hear gospel music flowing from the convent chapel in one direction and blues from the other and blending with a bluegrass and folk trio in the middle.

"On a scale from one to 10, it's a 10," she said. "It's not totally surprising, though. My late husband was a likable man."

From the blues marker, to the mural, to the celebration of music, Dixon said she was a little overwhelmed.

"I honestly never thought I would live to see this day," she said.

Her grandson, Alex Dixon, was also surprised. He said he could remember Willie Dixon before he was truly considered a legend, when he was selling blues CDs at festivals and listening to Willie's long weekly family meetings, where he'd give advice.

"It didn't feel like a legendary family growing up," he said.

The Smithsonian panels and interactive displays explain that the root forms of American music were related as they evolved.

Having Dixon-related and exhibited-related events, Averett said, was appropriate.

"I saw that Willie Dixon quote on one of the panels - 'Blues is the roots, and the rest is the fruits,'" she said. "I thought if the Smithsonian was using a Willie Dixon quote to show all over the country, then I thought we could honor him in Vicksburg."

Deloris Gaines McGee was in town this week for a family reunion, and decided she needed to see the exhibit

"We just follow the blues," she said of her family, who now live in San Francisco and San Diego.

McGee said she was glad to see the exhibit in Vicksburg, rather than in California

"I lived some of this music, because I grew up here," she said. "It's part of heritage. Everything is moving so fast out there, but here it's laid back. It's home."

The Smithsonian is based in Washington, D.C. The traveling exhibit has been or will be in five other towns in Mississippi - the six chosen from 54 applicants, museum officials have said.

As it continues, there will be continuing programs, including lectures and performances on American musical styles.

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