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The historic Chess Records studio is empty. But Jacqueline Dixon always sees kings and queens.

Her warm, hopeful manner is similar to the nature of her father, Willie Dixon, the architect of the deeply rhythmic Chess Records sound. Dixon was 20 when her father died of heart failure in 1992. Now she is executive director of the Blues Heaven Foundation, which owns and operates the museum at 2120 S. Michigan.

Dixon was a Chess arranger-producer-songwriter who composed “(I’m Your) Hoochie Coochie Man” for Muddy Waters, “Spoonful” for Howlin’ Wolf and “Little Red Rooster” for Sam Cooke.

The Chess studio is the shrinking violet in the garden of America’s musical landmarks. The museum opened in 1997 but it is not on the radar for locals and tourists, as are Sun Records and the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis, Tenn.; Motown in Detroit, and the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City, Mo.

“We would like to take it to another level,” Dixon said during a conversation in the studio. “The possibilities are endless. But we’re not reaching the amount of people we need to reach. We’re still the best-kept secret in town. It’s mind-blowing when we see someone from Chicago.

“How did you find us?”

A couple of visits in June — including the Saturday afternoon of the Chicago Blues Festival — found only a handful of people checking out the site where Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley recorded, where the Rolling Stones recorded parts of their 1964 album “12 X 5” and where future singer Minnie Riperton worked as receptionist while trying to tame Sonny Boy Williamson, who wanted to hassle owner Leonard Chess about royalty payments.

On Tuesday, George Thorogood and the Destroyers will release an entire album devoted to Chess. (See story below.) The album’s “2120 South Michigan Avenue” title track was a Stones instrumental on “12 X 5.” The Thorogood album includes Buddy Guy guesting on “High Heel Sneakers,” which he originally recorded for Chess. Thorogood’s picture is in the first-floor gift shop.

The two-floor terra-cotta building is also headquarters for the Blues Heaven Foundation, which is down to a staff of three, including Dixon and her 73-year-old mother, Marie, who serves as president. “Sometimes people come here because they know the Rolling Stones recorded ‘2120’ here,” Dixon said. “They never heard of Willie Dixon. They don’t know Chess.

“We want to put the studio back. We need permanent equipment so we can do recordings here. Maybe some analog, because people want that original Chess sound. People like the acoustics. None of the walls are parallel, and the ceiling has a central point at the top like a tent.”

Koko Taylor and former Chuck Berry piano player-songwriter Johnnie Johnson recorded with Styx in 2005 at Chess. In 1989 John Mellencamp taped a worldwide radio broadcast at Chess to promote giving the building landmark status — which the city designated a year later. (Built in 1911, the 2120 building was originally an auto parts warehouse.)

After last summer’s Crossroads concert, drummer Steve Jordan (X-pensive Winos, the Verbs, the Blues Brothers) cut four tracks with Ron Wood, guitarist Hubert Sumlin and bassist Pino Palladino of the Who. The Chess fans brought out Willie Dixon’s 40-year-old stand-up bass from a vault at Chess. They did not use the instrument but deployed it as a historic vibe for the session.

“They bring in their own equipment, or they do the music in another studio and do the vocals here,” Dixon explained. “Some of Tom Petty’s band members came by. George Thorogood wanted to record here. We want to get the studio going as soon as possible.”

What a wang-dang-doodle for the local economy if sessions like this happened on a regular basis.

Jacqueline Dixon is unsure of her operating budget. “We make the bulk of our money from the tours,” she said. Blues Heaven charges \$10 per person for a visit to Chess. “Our greatest donor would be my mother, with funds from my dad’s catalog.”

Dixon was thrust into the role of executive director in the summer of 2003 after her sister, previous executive director Shirli Dixon-Nelson, died suddenly of an aneurysm. She was 40.

Dixon had wanted to increase her involvement with the foundation. "I was working for Mom with the publishing company," she said. "My nephew, who is an L.A. county sheriff, does fund-raising and special events."

The Blues Heaven Foundation still offers emergency assistance to elder blues musicians, with or without insurance, and gives an annual Muddy Waters Scholarship to a full-time Chicago college student studying music, African-American studies, history, journalism or a related field. "We'd like to have more scholarships, but we don't have the resources," Dixon said.

Dixon's mother has networked with the owners of the popular Sun Studio in Memphis. She is recovering from a mild health setback but plans to visit Sun for the first time later this summer.

The caveat is that Sun is a for-profit museum while Blues Heaven is not-for-profit. "That status will never change for us," Marie Dixon said earlier this week on the phone. "How we would work with Sun in a profit situation is what we have to talk about"

Her daughter added, "They've offered to help us expand the studio, which we appreciate. This should be a more lively neighborhood, like, when you come to Chicago, go to this music district. People pass us by all day not knowing we exist."

Marie Dixon could not disclose an operating budget but conceded Chess needs more staffing. "At least five to seven people," she said. "There's also upkeep of the building. That's an old building. It hasn't been a struggle to keep it open, but it could be better. We could do more exhibits there. We need financial help. We need help, students from Columbia College and other colleges who could get credit for doing work there. It is important to keep this alive."

Jacqueline Dixon is open to the idea of changing the name of the building from Blues Heaven to Chess Studios.

"At the time the whole purpose of purchasing any building was to house Blues Heaven," she explained. "Chess probably would make it easier to find since people aren't looking for Blues Heaven. It would help quite a bit, and we would consider it. My mom has a personal attachment to Blues Heaven, as we all do. It was my dad's baby."

The Dixons do not keep in touch with Marshall Chess, the son of Chess co-founder Leonard Chess. He is based in New York.

“If he is in town during Blues Fest, he will come by and speak with my mom,” Dixon said. “I don’t know that he has been at the building outside of when they were filming the Martin Scorsese series.” Marshall Chess was a key component in the Marc Levin film “Godfathers and Sons,” which was part of Scorsese’s acclaimed 2003 documentary series “The Blues.”

Do they wish they had more contact with Chess?

“No,” Dixon answered. “I don’t know how it would be beneficial for us to have more contact.”

Dixon lives just outside of Riverside, Calif. “I tried living in Chicago from 2007 to 2010,” she said. “The winters were not for me.” She works for the foundation from California and returns to Chicago three times a year. As a child she escaped her piano lessons by learning how to type in her parent’s home in Glendale, a suburb of Los Angeles. Dixon typed all the lyrics to her father’s songs. “He wanted to have all his songs on file other than hand written,” she said. “He had a bag of songs all the time.”