

Dixon, Dorsey Murdock ^[1]

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by Douglas Denatale, 1986

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Dorsey Murdock Dixon, millworker, songwriter, and country musician, was born into a family of Darlington, S.C., factory workers. His father, William McQuiller Dixon (1875–1939), was a steam engine operator in the Darlington Cotton Manufacturing Company whose seven children followed him into the mill. Dorsey left school after the fourth grade and began working in the Darlington mill when he was twelve. At an early age he showed an aptitude for music in a setting that fostered homemade music. He learned traditional and sentimental songs from his family and neighbors, who would gather at the Dixon house for music making. A local schoolteacher gave him violin lessons, and by the age of fourteen he had taught himself to play the guitar.

World War I ^[2] brought Dixon a four-year respite from the textile mill while he worked as a railroad signalman for the Atlantic Coast Line ^[3] in Darlington. In 1919 he was laid off by the railroad and joined the countless mill workers who traversed the Piedmont in search of jobs. During this period he was employed in a Lancaster, S.C., mill and may have worked elsewhere. Sometime around 1927 he made his way to East Rockingham in Richmond County ^[4], N.C., where he found work in the cloth room of the Aleo Mill. His parents, his sister Nancy ^[5], and his brother Howard ^[6] all followed him to North Carolina.

In 1927 Dixon married Beatrice Lucele Moody, a fellow mill worker. They were the parents of four boys: Dorsey, Jr., William, Thomas, and Roger. Shortly after their marriage, Dorsey and Beatrice followed Howard Dixon to the Little Hanna Pickett Mill village in East Rockingham. During this time, Dorsey's interest in music intensified with the discovery of his talent for composition. A disastrous fire in a Cleveland, S.C., school-house in 1923 had lingered in Dixon's memory, and in 1929 he expressed his reaction in a poem. His mother and his brother Howard noted that the words could be set to the popular tune, "Life's Railway to Heaven." Encouraged by their enthusiasm, Dorsey began to compose in earnest, developing a pattern he would follow all his life. His first-hand experiences were cast into poetry and set to traditional and traditionally inspired tunes. His subject matter was overwhelmingly drawn from his religious speculations on local tragedies. In spite of long working hours, Dixon would rise at five o'clock in the morning to pursue his art, and he began to play at local functions with his brother Howard.

In the early 1930s, two events played a major role in forming Dixon's musical career. The turn of the decade was a period of unrest in the Carolina textile mills ^[7]. The violent 1929 strike in Gastonia fueled unrest in Rockingham, where workers went out on strike in 1931. William B. Cole, the intractable owner, shut down his second mill, the Little Hanna Pickett, in retaliation. The strike spread to the Aleo, East Rockingham's third mill, and the town became locked in a bitter dispute between owner and worker, which was only settled with the governor's intervention. Dixon turned to his mill experiences for several songs. A fragment he had learned in the Lancaster mill became "Weaver's Life." He made wry commentary on Rockingham mill conditions in "Spinning Room Blues" and "Weave Room Blues," sung with relish by the strikers. These songs led to his late rediscovery by students of occupational song.

More significant for Dixon on a personal level was the arrival in East Rockingham of the itinerant country musician, Jimmie Tarlton. A fine instrumentalist and confirmed drifter, Tarlton made several sojourns with relatives in the Little Hanna Pickett village. He so impressed the Dixon brothers that they abandoned their guitar and violin duet in 1931. Dorsey developed a unique finger-picking style, and Howard took up the Hawaiian guitar. Their new sound gained them local fame and notice by Fisher Hendley, a fellow musician and talent scout for radio station WBT in Charlotte. In 1934 the brothers became regular performers on the J. W. Fincher's Crazy Water Crystals ^[8] Saturday Night Jamboree, a popular and influential program that brought the brothers wider recognition. On 12 Feb. 1936, they had their first recording session with an RCA Victor field crew in Charlotte. Over the next two years there were six more sessions in which fifty-five songs were recorded. In two of these sessions, Dorsey also recorded twelve songs with his wife Beatrice. Their commercial recordings brought the Dixons little financial return, however, and the reputation that Dorsey might have enjoyed for his compositions was thwarted by their identification with better-known artists. His songs proved popular among fellow musicians: Jimmie Tarlton had recorded "Weaver's Life" in 1932, Fisher Hendley recorded "Weave Room Blues" in 1937, and "Intoxicated Rat" was recorded by many musicians. A song Dorsey had composed on a fatal car accident in East Rockingham, which the brothers recorded in 1938 as "I Didn't Hear Anybody Pray," was recorded by Roy Acuff in 1942 as

"Wreck on the Highway." It is unclear where Acuff had learned the song, but he chose to copyright it under his own name.

Although "Wreck on the Highway" quickly became a country music standard, it brought no assistance to Dixon, who had moved from Little Hanna Pickett back to the Aleo Mill and thence to the Dunean Mill in Greenville, S.C. Disheartened by the Dixon brothers' reverses, by his continued reliance on mill work, and especially by the lack of recognition for his composing ability, Dixon approached a lawyer at his family's urging. In 1946 the threat of a lawsuit in the face of the Dixon brothers' prior recording brought Acuff's partner Fred Rose from Nashville to Greenville, where an out-of-court settlement was reached. With high hopes of further settlements, the family migrated to New York City in 1947; however, a year of this pursuit, supported by work in a Union City, N.J., rayon plant, brought no success, and the Dixons returned to East Rockingham.

His hopes for a musical career lost, Dixon continued his mill work until 1951, when he and his wife moved to Baltimore with their son William. In 1953 Dorsey and Beatrice separated, and he returned alone to East Rockingham. Sustained by his religious convictions, his music played a role in services at the Church of God of Prophecy in Hamlet, N.C., where he performed with his brother Howard once again.

Dixon's songs continued to interest students of hill-billy and occupational song. John Edwards, a young Australian collector, traced Dixon through record company royalty statements and began to correspond with him. His whereabouts identified, he was visited in 1961 and 1962 by folklorists [Archie Green](#) ^[9], Ed Kahn, and Gene Earle. Their visits produced an album of Dixon's music and led to his invitation to the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. The revival of interest in his music encouraged Dixon to resume performing. During a stay in Washington in November 1963, he was asked to record his music for the Archive of Folk Song in the Library of Congress and for Piedmont Records. His performing comeback was halted in 1964, when he suffered the first of several heart attacks. Forced to decline further invitations, he retired to the care of his son, the Reverend Dorsey Dixon, Jr., in Plant City, Fla., until his death. His body was carried home to East Rockingham.

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Image Credits:

Wreck On The Highway, Dorsey Dixon, I Didn't Hear Nobody, (Anyone), Pray YouTube video, posted by greanteawoman, January 14, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d43g8unp7Wk> ^[14] (accessed February 6, 2014).

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