

CHICAGO AND CHESS RECORDS

Chicago was the Promised Land for a vast number of southern blacks who migrated northward in the period before and immediately after World War II. The exodus from the cotton land of the Mississippi Delta included a great many rural bluesmen who joined in the search for better opportunities in the factories and steel mills of Chicago and Gary. The spontaneous flowering of talent that created the Delta blues was repeated and amplified in Chicago, where the harsh realities and alienation of the blues were set against an electrified urban landscape in one of the great musical epiphanies of the century. Chess Records, launched in the late forties by two Polish-born immigrants, Leonard and Phil Chess, was the most stable and long-lived of the Chicago blues labels and was home to the best of the tough, Delta-rooted style of urban blues played by transplanted southerners like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon, Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walter, Elmore James, Robert Nighthawk and other Chess luminaries.

Chess Crossovers

Now universally accepted as one of America's great musical gifts to the world, the blues still appealed to a very small audience in the 1950's and Chess Records was simply a tiny independent label struggling to get by. The Chess brothers realized that their releases sold to a strictly limited and racially-defined market, and that even that market was beginning to shrink as a new generation of younger blacks began listening to and playing the happier and more dance-oriented *rhythm & blues*. As R&B records began crossing over into the pop charts and the rock & roll boom approached, the Chess brothers were painfully aware that their pure blues was far too raw for pop ears, and they began looking for other ways to tap into a wider market without losing their natural base.

Chess' first inroads into the pop charts came with two vocal groups, the **Moonglows** and the **Flamingos**, who sang sentimental ballads in an early "doo-wop" style that appealed to both the pop and R&B listeners. In fact, the Moonglows' "Sincerely" was appealing enough to be covered by the McGuire Sisters in 1955, while the Flamingos' "I'll Be Home" received the inimitable Pat Boone treatment in 1956. Needless to say, both covers outsold the originals: the Moonglows' "Sincerely" made it to #20 on the pop charts, while the McGuires took the song to #1; Pat Boone's "I'll Be Home" went to #4 while the Flamingo's original version failed to make the charts at all. The Flamingos had only minor success at Chess and left the label in 1956 (they had their biggest hit in 1959 with "I Only Have Eyes for You," on George Goldner's End Records). The Moonglows stayed on, singing background vocals for other Chess artists and recording a few more hits of their own. When the original group split up in 1958, Moonglows lead singer and "Sincerely" author Harvey Fuqua assembled a new group of Moonglows and scored a final hit with "Ten Commandments of Love." Fuqua moved on to be a producer and songwriter at Motown in the 1960's, taking along one of the replacement Moonglows, a young Marvin Gaye.

Another Chess vocal group, the aptly-named Monotones, scored a Top Ten hit in 1958 with the doo-wop classic, "Book of Love." Through its Checker, Argo and Cadet subsidiaries, Chess also produced several novelty-style hits in the fifties, including

Clarence "Frog Man" Henry's "Ain't Got No Home," Jimmy McCracklin's dance number "The Walk," and Dave "Baby" Cortez' instrumental "Rinky Dink." The label even scored a rockabilly hit with Dale Hawkins' "Susie-Q," and hit again with Eddie Fontaine's "Nothin' Shakin' (But the Leaves on the Trees)," a favorite live number of '60's British bands. R&B veteran Etta James recorded a string of hits on Argo and Cadet through the 1960's, including "Tell Mama," which was covered by Janis Joplin.

Two Chess rockers proved to have the depth and staying power of the label's blues giants: **Bo Diddley** and **Chuck Berry**, two of the seminal figures in rock's history (and in Berry's case, perhaps *the* seminal figure). Just as New Orleans was a natural musical home for piano players like Fats Domino and Little Richard, it is wonderfully appropriate that two of rock's greatest guitar innovators recorded for Chess Records, home of the electric blues. The signing of these two men and the brilliant records they made says much for the musical vision—and business acumen—of the Chess brothers, who, with their blues masters, had already recorded and preserved some of America's greatest music. Considering the far-reaching influence of urban blues along with the fact that Diddley and Berry both hit the pop charts a year before Elvis' first national hit, there's no disputing Chess' crucial role in the development of rock. As Bo Diddley put it, "we were the beginning of rock & roll, and Chess Records should be labeled as that—it deserves that honor."ⁱ

ⁱBo Diddley quote from Feb. 12, 1987 Rolling Stone magazine, issue #493, p. 98.