



The first great wave of new independent record labels came between the years 1944 and 1947. The major labels of the time – RCA, Columbia and Decca (now MCA) – had all the established orchestras, singers and vocal groups under contract, so it was up to the independent labels to develop and nurture the new talent and to discover and promote the new trends. Most of the men responsible for founding and sustaining the independent record labels of the 1940s have since retired, sold out or died. In fact, only one of those pioneers is still active with his label: Ahmet Ertegun, chairman of Atlantic Records.

Ertegun, the son of a career diplomat, was born in Istanbul, Turkey. When he was twelve, his father was appointed Turkey's ambassador to the United States. Ahmet attended St. John's College, in Annapolis, Maryland, and Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C. He had always been a record collector, with a strong interest in jazz and the blues.

In 1947, Ertegun and Herb Abramson founded Atlantic. The label scored its first major hit in 1949 with Stick McGhee's "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee." Within a few short years Atlantic became the premier rhythm and blues label. The artist roster of the time reads like an honor roll of stars: Ruth Brown, Big Joe Turner, Ray Charles, LaVern Baker, Clyde McPhatter, the Drifters, Ben E. King, the Coasters, the Clovers, Ivory Joe Hunter, Chuck Willis and many, many more. During this period Ertegun was producer or coproducer on the vast majority of records made on his label. He was also active as a songwriter for many of the early Atlantic artists, often using the pseudonym A. Nugetre (Ertegun spelled backwards).

Though Ertegun was less directly involved as a producer in the Sixties and Seventies, he was on hand at Atlantic to direct the phenomenal growth of the label into the area of soul (Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Percy Sledge, Booker T. and the MGs, Sam and Dave, Solomon Burke, King Curtis) and rock (the Rascals, Iron Butterfly, Vanilla Fudge, Cream, Led Zeppelin, Yes, the Bee Gees, Blind Faith, Crosby, Stills and Nash, King Crimson, Genesis, Roxy Music, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, the Rolling Stones).

Atlantic continues to produce hit acts, and Ertegun continues to influence and inspire new generations of artists.



In the early days of rock and roll, a few men made it possible for the voice of change to be heard. The forces that were then shaping music foreshadowed the end of separate black and white societies. In the late Forties, Jackie Robinson started playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and Jerry Wexler, at Billboard, helped change the name of the black-music chart from Race Records to Rhythm and Blues.

As a boy, Wexler had worked with his father as a window washer. After college (where he studied journalism) and the army, he started reporting for Billboard. But soon he caught the boogie disease. He left Billboard in 1951 to work for a music-publishing company and in 1953 joined Ahmet and Nesuhi Ertegun at Atlantic Records. Before he knew it, he was drinking champagne at all-night recording sessions with Mabel Mercer, singing background with Ahmet Ertegun on Ray Charles songs, driving down a dimly lit Alabama highway with two gallons of bootleg booze on the way to a Rolling Stones session, having a fine time.

Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters, LaVern Baker, Ruth Brown, Joe Turner, Ray Charles, Professor Longhair, Ivory Joe Hunter, Chuck Willis, the Coasters, Aretha Franklin, Joe Tex, Solomon Burke, the Clovers, Wilson Pickett, Duane Allman, Dr. John, Dusty Springfield, Delaney and Bonnie, Willie Nelson, Allen Toussaint, Tony Joe White, Kim Carnes, Mavis Staples and Bob Dylan are just some of the artists Wexler has produced. His work, as classic as the films of Howard Hawks or the stories of John O'Hara, is characterized by conciseness, humor and style. Such Wexler productions as Ray Charles's "What'd I Say" (coproduced with Ahmet Ertegun) and Aretha Franklin's "Chain of Fools" are like surprise parties, serendipitous celebrations.

The lightness of much early rock and roll can be misleading. Men like Wexler, the Erteguns, Sam Phillips and the Chess brothers succeeded because they were strong in their dedication to something they believed in. The future success of rock and roll will depend on such dedication.

Ahmet Ertegun (left) and Jerry Wexler (center) with Big Joe Turner



In 1928, an Orthodox Jewish family named Chess came to America from Poland. They moved to Chicago, living at 1425 South Karlov, in the South Side, where Leonard, the older son, worked with his brother Phil in their father's junkyard. The Chess family found a sympathetic neighborhood in the black ghetto. Orthodox prayers, sung in elaborate Hebrew cantillation, found echoes in the blues scales and gospel harmonies of the Chesses' adopted neighborhood. As the years passed, the family made modest investments in liquor stores and eventually began running a saloon called the Macamba Lounge, which featured jazz and blues performers.

The Chess brothers started Aristocrat Records in 1947, issuing small-group and blues releases, then formed Chess Records two years later. The first Chess release was saxophonist Gene Ammons's version of "My Foolish Heart," which was a sizable radio, retail and jukebox hit. The record number was 1425 – a reminder of the brothers' origins on South Karlov. The very next record was Muddy Waters's legendary "Rollin' Stone."

The powerful backbeat and literally electrifying impact of Muddy's amplified guitar would become key elements of rock and roll. Later, in 1955, Chuck Berry brought his distinctive rhythm-guitar patterns to Chess. The backbeat, electric lead guitar and rhythm guitar remain the defining characteristics of rock and roll to this day.

Over the years, the Chess roster expanded to include world-class blues artists like Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley, Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller), Little Walter, Willie Mabon, Jimmy Rogers, Otis Spann and Etta James. Chess not only became the true repository of American roots blues but also presented black music for the edification and delectation of white audiences throughout the world.

Phil Chess specialized in jazz recording, working with such great artists as Sonny Stitt, Ramsey Lewis and Ahmad Jamal. Leonard, who died in 1969, specialized in the blues, a form of tragic poetry in folk music, an eloquent combination of joy and lament. And Marshall Chess, Leonard's son, carried on the tradition in his work with the Rolling Stones. No other family has given the world a greater contribution of honest, epic-making music.



**AHMET ERTEGUN**  
Born July 31st, 1923  
Istanbul, Turkey

**JERRY WEXLER**  
Born January 10th, 1917  
New York, New York



**LEONARD CHESS**  
Born March 12th, 1917  
Poland  
Died October 16th, 1969  
Chicago, Illinois