

Ralph Bass

BY HARRY WEINGER

RALPH BASS WAS A CO-CREATOR

of some of the indisputable landmarks of rock & roll: producer of and/or witness to “Call It Stormy Monday” (T-Bone Walker), “Sixty-Minute Man” (the Dominoes), “Sleep” (Earl Bostic), “Work With Me, Annie” (Hank Ballard & the Midnighters), “Please Please Please” (James Brown), and so many more. His life spans five decades of music and stints with such pioneering indie labels as Black & White, Savoy, King, and Chess.

Yet for all of the artists he nurtured and the labels he toiled for, a Ralph Bass production was almost invisible. He inspired seemingly effortless performances from his vocalists and musicians in which the overriding concern was for pure feeling. “I didn’t give a shit about technique,” he says today. “To hell with bad notes. They had to feel it. I had to feel it.”

Part Italian, part Jew, all hipster-hustler, Ralph Bass was born May 1, 1911, in the Bronx and became a child violin prodigy who played his first concert at the age of six. But one night uptown at the height of the jazz age changed him forever.

“Chick Webb was playing,” Bass recalls. “I said to my friends, ‘Listen to that music! Look at those dancers!’”

Uprooted to the West Coast a few years later, Bass took a job at a Los Angeles manufacturing plant. The company picnics featured records in lieu of live music, and Ralph became the designated DJ. He thought he could do better than the sides he played, and was soon given the chance to prove it by Paul Reiner, the owner of Black & White Records. Bass was soon cutting the likes of Lena Horne, Ivie Anderson, Slim Gaillard, and T-Bone Walker. But it took a fluke hit to break him out of the pack.

In late 1947, Bass and jump-jazzman Jack McVea cut eight sides in three hours at L.A.’s Radio Recorders. “With one more to go and only a few minutes left,” Bass says, “the guys ran down a comedy routine called ‘Open The Door, Richard!’—and not very well, I thought, but there was no time to do it over. Next thing I knew, I was sitting on a national phenomenon.” “Open The Door, Richard!” touched off an American craze. The song went to Number Three Pop and was a factor in Capitol’s purchase of Black & White.

Flushed with this sudden success, Bass launched his own Bop label. His most famous date was a two-part live sax battle between Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray titled “The Chase” and “The Hunt.” Bass later founded Portrait Records and captured significant performances by Errol Garner.

Bass found his first consistent success with Herman Lubinsky’s Savoy Records from 1948 to 1951. The hits flowed freely from Big Jay McNeely, Brownie McGee, Little Esther Phillips, and the Johnny Otis Orchestra.

In 1951, King Records founder Syd Nathan offered Bass the Federal subsidiary, and he turned out one chart-topping R&B hit after another. Two of his biggest, the Dominoes’ “Sixty-Minute Man” and Hank Ballard & the Midnighters’ “Work With Me, Annie,” became embroiled in censorship battles. “It was a racial thing,” Bass says. “‘Makin’ Whoopee’ was considered cute, but a black record that white people didn’t understand, that was banned.”

Bass stayed with King/Federal for seven years. He signed James Brown, driving all night through a violent rainstorm to beat Leonard Chess to the deal. He witnessed the collapse of the color barrier, the creation of Hank Ballard’s original “Twist,” and the rise of payola. Living out of suitcases, Bass remained a driven soul even when his own family became a casualty of his fervor.

Chess hired him in 1958, and for the next 18 years Ralph Bass survived changing popular taste with notable successes: Etta James, Moms Mabley, Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin’ Wolf, and Muddy Waters, as well as gospel greats the Violinaires, and the Soul Stirrers.

“All I ever wanted was the musicians’ respect,” says Ralph Bass. “And to tell you the truth, I didn’t give a damn if whites ever bought my records!”

RALPH BASS PICKS SIX

T-Bone Walker, *Call It Stormy Monday*

(1947, Black & White, #5 R&B)
“A landmark, and I was no longer a novice. It gave me the confidence to go on my own.”

Little Esther Phillips, *Double Crossing Blues*

(1950, Savoy, #1 R&B)
“Cut as a demo, no title. I gave Esther \$10.00 and the Robins, who were signing backup, \$25—‘Thanks, kids.’ I never thought Herman Lubinsky would put it out!”

Little Willie Littlefield, *K.C. Lovin’ a/k/a Kansas City*

(1952, Federal)
“Wintertime, Kansas City, asleep in my hotel near the Flame Bar. At 4 a.m. a dancer bangs on my door to borrow five bucks for a room—she’s gotta have her man, only he lives with his mother. What the hell, I go with her and throw snowballs at his window, drive them back and pay for the room. A few months later, I meet Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller and tell them the story.” Thus: “Kansas City, Kansas City here I come/They got a crazy way of lovin’ there, and I’m gonna get me some.”

Hank Ballard & the Midnighters, *Work With Me, Annie* and *Annie Had A Baby*

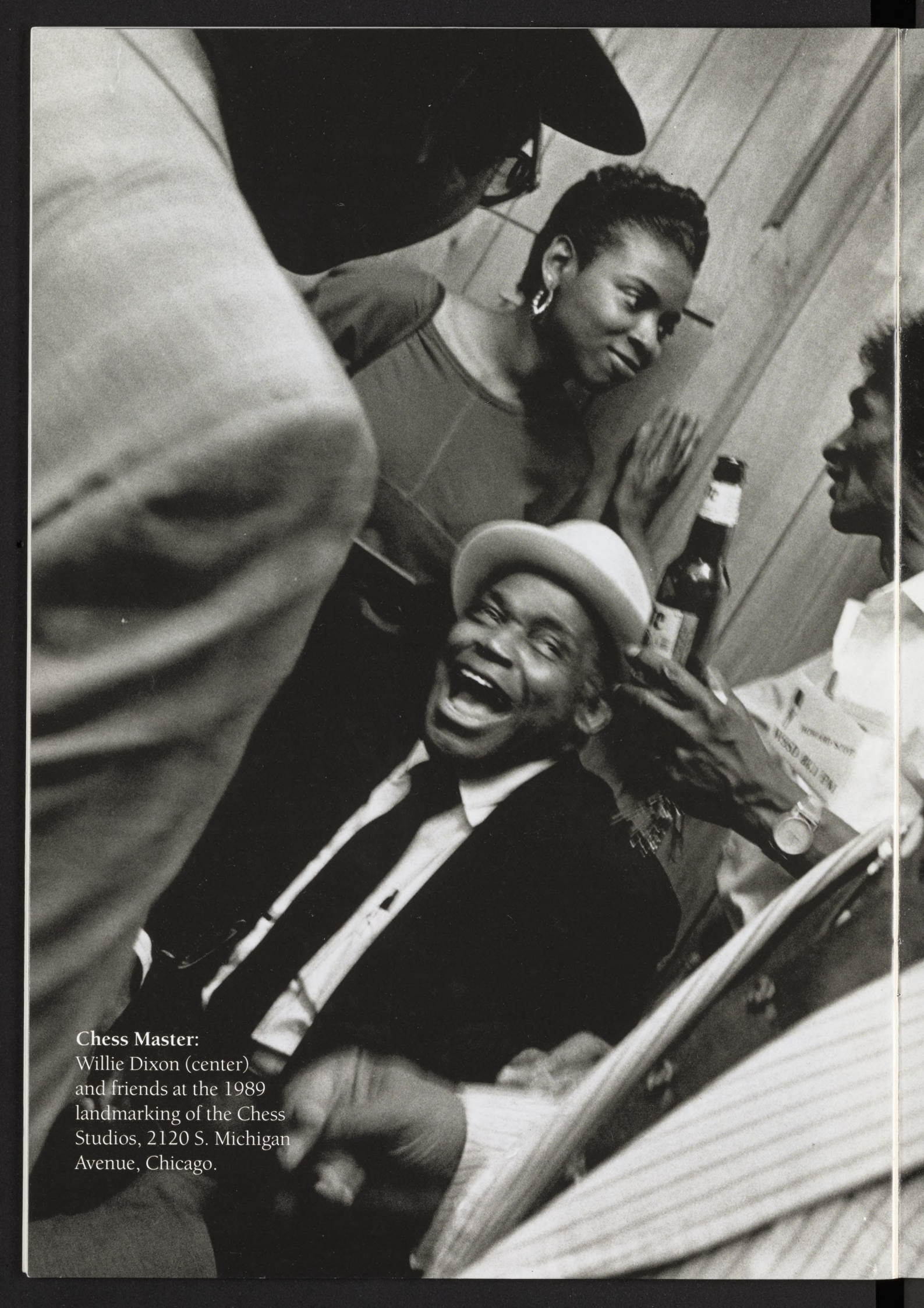
(1954, Federal, both #1 R&B)
“The original title was ‘Sock It To Me, Maddy’—back then, too nasty. But ‘work with it’ was a phrase everybody was throwing out. Annie was engineer Eddie Smith’s wife’s name. She was pregnant and about to drop—when she did, we thought of the follow-up.”

James Brown & the Flames, *Please Please Please*

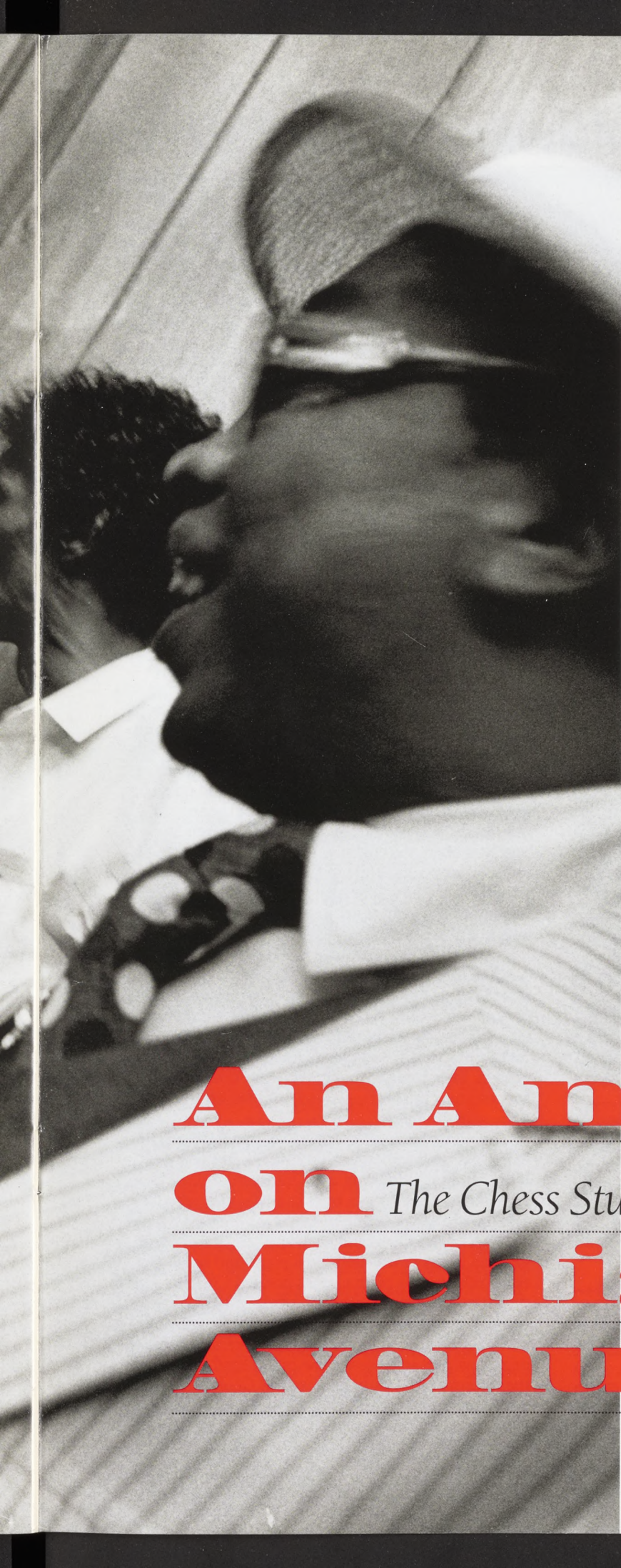
(1956, Federal, #5 R&B)
“Someone gave me their demo on the road. I didn’t even know who the lead singer was. All I wanted was that song. Syd Nathan tried to fire me, said it was the worst piece of shit he’d ever heard!”

Etta James, *All I Could Do Was Cry*

(1960, Argo, #2 R&B)
“One take, and Etta was crying her eyes out for real. The band wanted to do it over! I told them, forget it. I mean, how much more soul could I get from a singer?”

A black and white photograph capturing a candid moment at a landmarking event. In the center, Willie Dixon, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, dark tie, and a light-colored fedora, is laughing heartily with his mouth wide open. To his right, a woman with her hair pulled back and wearing a dark top looks on with a slight smile. In the background, another woman is visible, and a hand is seen holding a bottle. The setting appears to be an outdoor or semi-outdoor area with a wooden wall in the background. The overall mood is joyful and celebratory.

Chess Master:
Willie Dixon (center)
and friends at the 1989
landmarking of the Chess
Studios, 2120 S. Michigan
Avenue, Chicago.



THE HISTORY OF rock & roll is to a great extent the history of particular musical elements associated with geographic regions and/or independent record labels. The best-remembered proponents of these “sounds”—of Memphis, of Detroit, of New Orleans—are the marquee performers who brought the sound to the public, and the producers who served as catalysts for the stars’ success. But another, less prominent component in the equation was the studio environment, its session musicians and engineers. Imagine Motown without Holland-Dozier-Holland and the Funk Brothers house band, or Stax without the MGs and the Memphis Horns. . .and the list goes on.

The celebrated “sound” of Chess Records was really a succession of sounds. From its inception in 1947 as Aristocrat to its demise in the mid-’70s, the Chicago-based company founded by Leonard and Phil

An Anthill
.....
On *The Chess Studio Scene of Chicago*
.....
Michigan
.....
Avenue *by Don Snowden*
.....

“Those studio musicians were moving like

Chess mirrored the changing times with its output of jump blues, modern jazz, gospel, Delta-rooted Chicago blues, vocal-group R&B, classic rock & roll, comedy, and soul music.

Chess' dominance in Chicago over the years allowed the company to recruit session players from the cream of the Windy City's freelance musicians. Drummer Al Duncan and bassist Louis Satterfield were regulars in the pit band of the Regal Theater in the early '60s. Phil Upchurch was high school buddies with Curtis Mayfield, played on many early Impressions tracks, and handled the guitar when the Motown rhythm section rolled into Vee Jay to cut John Lee Hooker's "Boom Boom." Gene "Daddy G" Barge brought his saxophonic legacy (including Chuck Willis' "The Stroll" and all of Gary U.S. Bonds's hits) from Norfolk, Virginia to produce, arrange, and perform on Chess sides by Little Milton and Etta James.



Phil Chess

BUT CHESS WAS AN EVOLUTIONARY process that endured five locations and multiple sonic permutations beginning in 1947 at its original storefront on 71st and Phillips. By 1950, the Chess brothers had shifted their primary focus to Delta-bred blues (following Muddy Waters' seminal 1948 hit, "I Can't Be Satisfied"), changed their label's name from Aristocrat to Chess, and moved to new quarters at 49th and Cottage Grove. In 1951, Willie Dixon was lured away from his Big Three Trio with the offer of a Chess staff job. Over the next five years, recording in their own back room or at other Chicago studios like Universal, Chess cut a string of some 60 R&B chart hits by such future icons as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Chuck Berry, and Bo Diddley—with Willie Dixon as the brothers' right-hand man on the studio floor. The supporting cast included Jimmy Rogers, Robert Jr. Lockwood, David Myers, Louis Myers, and Luther Tucker (guitars); Dixon and Ransom Knowling (basses); Fred Below, Odie Payne, Clifton James, and Al Duncan (drums); Little Walter, Sonny Boy, and Big Walter Horton (harp); Harold Ashby (tenor); and Lafayette Leake (piano).

At the same time, Chess was recording urbane bluesmen like Jimmy Witherspoon and Lowell Fulson, and branching into gospel (including 14-year-old Aretha Franklin's first album) and jazz (with pianists Ahmad Jamal and Ramsey Lewis). The company also launched its Checker and Argo subsidiaries, in 1952 and 1956 respectively, and established an in-house publishing company, Arc Music, in 1954.

"There are three producers on every session," maintains Malcolm Chisholm, the engineer on innumerable

Chess sessions from 1955 to 1960.

"There is the producer in the theatrical sense, who puts together the money and hires the musicians. There's the producer on the session who says, 'The tempo's wrong, we're going to do it a little faster.' And there's the producer who says, 'Okay, that's it, next case.'

"Leonard Chess functioned frequently and very well as the theatrical form of producer. He was then perfectly content to let the people on the floor do the job. Will [Dixon] would run 'em off in a corner somewhere and rehearse them a bit, and we'd do the session.

"We just continued to churn out this stuff year after year, including some of the most horrible stuff, to my taste, I've ever run across, and some stuff that was absolutely wonderful. There are things like 'Back In The USA' and 'I'm A Man' that you know are classics when you cut them. You don't know if it's going to sell, but you know you're doing something useful."

In May, 1957, Chess moved again, to 2120 South Michigan Avenue in the heart of Chicago's Record Row. This new Ter-Mar studio housed administrative offices and a small rehearsal room *cum* demo studio on its first floor and the main recording facility on the second. The new room "was good for its day because it was 'live-er,'" says Ron Malo, the engineer who took over from Chisholm in early 1960 and ran Chess sessions for the next ten years. "We had to deaden it down when we went to four-track and eight-track to get more separation. It had angled walls and adjustable louvers in the walls.

"The musicians and singers were ready to perform—when that red light went on, that was 'money time' and they *performed*. We didn't have earphones, baffles, or separators. Billy Stewart's *Summertime* album was totally live, no overdubs. Billy Stewart was standing in the middle of the band, singing live and conducting the orchestra. I remixed the four-track—just doing the fades and adding a little echo—in 45 minutes, an album with 32 minutes of music."

New faces arrived at 2120—veteran R&B producer Ralph Bass and soul queen Etta James, and younger blues players Buddy Guy and Otis Rush. Willie Dixon returned to Chess after a brief late-'50s stint with Cobra, though now Chess blues sessions drew on a different pool of musicians and were as likely to feature organ and horns as the traditional piano and harp. The early-'60s success of Etta James pointed Chess in a new direction, one that became the label's principal focus when Billy Davis became head of A&R in late 1963.

"Billy Davis. . . organized the creative staff to some degree, whereby the system he put in kind of cloned the system Berry Gordy had," recalls Gene Barge. "Billy wanted to go more R&B, and Chess prior to that was

ants...it was definitely high competition.”

principally a blues/ jazz company.

“We could do three tunes in three hours if you had everything scripted. I had written everything out and had the rhythm section and background singers well-rehearsed so all they had to do was execute. It was not a matter of going into the studio totally unprepared and working premium time at premium rates. When you went up to Studio A, you just fine-tuned.”

In line with Davis' philosophy, Chess' first full-fledged studio band was hired early in 1964. It included Maurice White (later replaced by Morris Jennings) on drums, Louis Satterfield on bass, Bryce Robertson and Gerald Sims on guitars, and Leonard Caston and Raynard Miner on keyboards. Phil Upchurch entered the picture in 1967, doubling on bass and guitar. Gerald Sims, the current owner of 2120, left Chess in 1965 and was replaced by Pete Cosey.

“Those studio musicians were moving like ants up there,” recalls Cash McCall, part of a nascent Chess songwriting staff along with Raynard Miner, Sonny Thompson, Sugar Pie DeSanto, and Shena DeMell, among others. “As a songwriter, you went in there with the rhythm section and made the demo. Then word would get passed down that maybe Mitty Collier or Little Milton or Etta James was coming in, and then you had to hustle to get your song to the artist.

“There was a kind of hierarchy there and if you were new, you had to really hustle to get one of your songs cut. It was definitely high competition, and if you wore your feelings on your shoulder, it didn't get you too much. Most of the artists that came around Chess weren't taking any prisoners because they wanted their records to sound good and wanted them to sell.”

BY 1964, BLUES RECORDING was in decline, later aggravated by the deaths of Sonny Boy Williamson, Elmore James, and Little Walter. Muddy and Wolf were still recorded regularly, and other blues sessions occasionally brought the Chess brothers up to the control booth. “Phil and Leonard never came up to the studios *unless* it was a blues session,” McCall insists.

The 2120 studio began to attract a new breed of British rockers who had teethed on Chess vinyl and now dutifully trooped to the source. The Stones rolled in to cut 21 songs in three separate sessions, in '64 and '65; the Yardbirds touched down to cut their groundbreaking “Shapes Of Things” single. Toward the end of 1965, Chess gradually moved its base of operations around the corner to 320 East 21st Street. The shift to this six-story warehouse enabled Leonard Chess to consolidate his entire operation—pressing plant, distribu-



Leonard Chess

tion center, recording studios, offices for administrators, writers, and producers—in one locale.

“We'd go in around noon, maybe as early as ten o'clock, and be out of there by six or seven,” says Phil Upchurch. “We'd do the demos—a two-track, basically, of musicians live getting the basic groove happening. From there they'd get approved by the front office and we'd go over to the other side of the building and record them in the morning. They'd press the records at noon and in the evening they were playing them on the radio.”

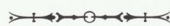
The larger studio at this expanded facility became famous for large-scale orchestral arrangements when the Dells made their hit reprise of “Oh, What A Night” and the first Rotary Connection album launched a career for Chess receptionist Minnie Ripperton. But the bulk of the blues, gospel, and R&B releases—to the musicians' near-unanimous relief—were cut in the

more intimate confines of Studio B.

Momentum slowed after Chess was sold to GRT in 1969 and fell rapidly when Leonard Chess died of a heart attack later that year at the age of 52. Restrictive corporate policies wreaked havoc on the freewheeling creativity of the label's salad days, and most of the key session players and engineers were long gone by the time of Chess' demise in 1974.

Gene Barge won a Grammy for co-producing Natalie Cole's “Sophisticated Lady” and toured Europe with the Rolling Stones. Phil Upchurch moved to L.A. and played rhythm guitar on several of George Benson's best-selling albums. Willie Dixon established himself as a solo artist and roving ambassador of the blues. Maurice White and Louis Satterfield went on to massive pop success with Earth, Wind & Fire; Satterfield has spent the past nine years playing behind Phil Collins in the Phenix Horns. But all have fond memories of the Chess studio scene.

“There was a lot of give-and-take and passing ideas around,” says Phil Upchurch. “You always looked forward to doing the gigs. We were proud of what we were doing—making money and having fun—you couldn't ask for much more than that. We didn't have any idea that the music was as important as it turned out to be.”



(Portions of this article were adapted from *I Am The Blues: The Willie Dixon Story*, by Willie Dixon with Don Snowden, available from DaCapo Press. Thanks to Cash McCall, Ron Malo, Malcolm Chisholm, Willie Dixon, Al Duncan, Louis Satterfield, Gene Barge and Dick LaPalm for their help in research.)