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10

Chess Records

THE EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY of American vernacular music over the last half-century-plus has often hinged on entrepreneurs who hung out in the shadows between mainstream culture and its marginal cousins. In ways they didn't intend, these businessmen became mediators, even advocates, for cultural outsiders.

Take black musicians. They had limited opportunities at major labels (where they, like other ethnic and regional groups, were usually cordoned into "race" and specialty record lines), major booking agencies, and major venues. And so again and again, small labels offering blues or rhythm and blues or gospel, black-driven musical formats not plugged into mass-market distribution pipelines, popped up across postwar America. The label heads, almost all of them white, had individual motives, of course, but most shared a vision of potentially profitable niche markets going untapped.

Such were the Chess brothers, Leonard and Phil, who after World War II started what became Chess Records. Born in Poland, the boys emigrated to America with their family in 1922, and grew up in Chicago. Though they kept links to their Jewish heritage, their businesses—a junk store, a couple of liquor stores—moved them steadily into the tangle of racial and ethnic relations that crisscrosses American culture like fault lines.

In 1946, Leonard, the elder dominant Chess brother, took over a bar in one of the black Chicago neighborhoods filling with southern migrants. The liquor license was in Phil's name. Like other tavern owners, the brothers saw that live bands drew customers, that there was money to be made in black music and its audience—and that idea shaped the rest of their lives. They improvised shrewd, streetwise business tactics, and they learned fast. By the time Leonard died of a heart attack in 1969, at age 52, he and Phil owned several record labels, a recording studio, a record distributor, a couple of music publishers, two radio stations, and a batch of real estate. More important, they had recorded more than their fair share of the best and most influential sounds of the postwar era.

As Nadine Cohodas recounts in *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*, Leonard Chess formed a bond with his customers and artists that went beyond money. Phil and Leonard apparently didn't feel African Americans were Other—or, if they did, as immigrant Jews they understood what that could mean. They were assimilated and secular: the word most frequently on Leonard's lips referred to, uh, Oedipal sexual contact. And they had drive and determination, so in black neighborhoods in Chicago, then all over the country, they absorbed local culture and sounds, made connections and friends, signed up musicians. They hustled records to DJs, record-store owners, and distributors on a road that stretched for years from dusty shacks to cities. By the late 1950s, Chess had grown from an ad-hoc two-man operation into a hitmaking group of record labels, a kind of mini-major label wrapped in myth. On an early US tour, the Rolling Stones came to Chicago so they could record in the same Chess studios their blues and R&B idols, whose songs they covered and "crossed over" to a white audience of millions, had used.

For in the minds of fans like the Stones, Chess was more than a record company; it was a matrix where key elements of postwar American popular culture were catalyzed. The births of gritty electric urban blues, rhythm and blues, then rock and roll are among the moments Chess Records helped create and chronicle. Framed by a world where the white-bread mainstream and racism and payola and cutthroat competition were daily facts of life, the Chess brothers produced pivotal innovators like Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, and Etta James, and nearly signed James Brown and Elvis Presley. They not only made money from selling black music to black Americans; like their friend, legendary DJ Alan Freed, they also introduced countless white American kids to those sounds.

This is the by turns fascinating, complex, and dry-as-top-40-charts story Cohodas wants to flesh out. Overall, she succeeds pretty solidly. A former reporter for *Congressional Quarterly* and author of *The Band Played Dixie: Race and Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss* and *Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change*, Cohodas connects a lot of dots and corrects earlier versions of Chess history by music writers who relied too heavily on unchecked hand-me-down anecdotes. (Just one example: a story Keith Richards has loved to tell journalists, including this one, over the years relates how when the Stones made their first pilgrimage to Chess Records on their first US tour, he met Muddy Waters—who was painting the ceiling. Though he hardly got a fair financial piece of the profits he generated for Chess, Waters never did menial work for the brothers, who treated him well, in their ersatz plantation-mentality fashion.) Still, Cohodas has done her homework: first-hand interviews with a variety of witnesses enliven her wide-ranging research

materials, which include artists' biographies, local newspapers, city directories, and trade magazines like *Billboard* and *Cashbox*, useful for tracking any record label's history.

Spinning Blues into Gold has a larger-than-life cast of characters. Berry, Waters, James, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Bo Diddley, Ahmad Jamal, Ramsey Lewis, James Moody—some of the brightest stars from blues, jazz, R&B, and soul waxed their music for Chess, and their records were instrumental in changing the shape of postwar popular music. What combo of magic and "ears" and instinct led the Chess brothers to hear a dim wire recording of a tune called "Ida Red," played for them by a disciple of Muddy Waters, and realize that young Chuck Berry probably had a hit—which he did, once the tune's name was changed to "Maybellene." With that, truly distinctive rock and roll guitar, Berry's onstage duck-walk, and an entire genre of car–kids–love songs, were launched.

So very much of what the Chess brothers recorded became part of the fundamental soundtrack for the 1960s garage-band efflorescence across America, at first entering the standard repertory by way of white blues-rock covers (the Stones, Eric Clapton, the Blues Project, Paul Butterfield) and then, as larger rock venues like the Fillmores began to book artists like them as part of their deliberate mix-and-match musical presentations, directly. And then there are key DJs like Freed, who from the 1950s on helped cross black music over to white radio listeners and drew (make that demanded) steady and steadily increasing payola from the brothers, as he did from nearly everyone, until the payola scandals broke and his prominence and attitude combined to cast him as the industry's available fall guy. (In this Congress and Freed were ushered toward each other by Dick Clark, himself a walking conflict of interests—he owned record labels, ran overpoweringly important teen TV and radio shows like American Bandstand—who came off, by deliberate contrast, as the battered industry's Mr. Clean.) Finally, there are other independent label heads, an always colorful cast, which here includes the Bihari brothers and Evelyn Aron, as well as a small host of behind-the-scenes Chess players.

It's almost inevitable that an institutional history like this will at times lapse into somewhat potted thumbnail sketches of individuals, but Cohodas usually keeps them evocative and on point as they intersect in the buzz of life around Chess Records. Her delving into the business ledgers and background, too often glossed over or reduced to easy and comforting art versus commerce clichés by music writers, is particularly strong. However, she does sometimes undercut the depth and strength of her reporting by overinterpreting scenes and characters. She seems defensive, for instance, about calling Leonard and Phil anything tougher than "frugal," though she quotes plenty of witnesses testifying to their noto-

rious unwillingness to part with money. When production head Dave Usher asked for a raise after a string of late 1950s hits, Leonard's typically tart reply was, "What do you think, you're one of my family?" Usher left Chess soon afterwards. His successor, Jack Tracy, negotiated a better deal, including producer royalties. At the end of his first year, the royalties totaled $750, and Leonard barked in his unilateral way, "We're going to change things. . . . You won't be getting a royalty again." Tracy didn't even bother to protest.

Perspective can change a lot, and Cohodas rightly, if a bit defensively, tries to contextualize the Chesses' financial practices. They bought new Cadillacs and rented apartments and paid lawyer's fees for their artists, but almost never handed out royalty statements. Atlantic Records' honcho Jerry Wexler, a friendly rival of the Chess brothers, saw their approach as updated paternalism. Cohodas points out that many if not most labels at the time did similar things, and eventually wound up in disputes with their musicians over money, copyrights, and the like—and that very much includes Wexler's pioneering Atlantic label. She also points out that most of the business (as was often the case with small indie labels) was in the brothers' heads, so there's frequently no way to verify Chess Records' numbers and transactions. But once again, she's done her homework: the book's epilogue, "Lawsuits and Legacies," narrates the staggeringly numerous financial and copyright clashes Chess had with its musicians following Leonard's death.

There are disconcerting moments when Cohodas's sympathies overreach her facts. She describes the role played by the brothers' wives, who were kept completely in the dark about Chess business, as "important" because they kept their houses neat and raised the children, and Leonard's wife Revetta packed the suitcases for his trips and got up early to make breakfast. In fact, as her book inadvertently makes clear, the Chess brothers were mainstream-traditional in terms of home life; what set them apart, as it did their indie-label peers, was the raw, unanswerable desire to document this music and culture they'd been drawn into, find a hit, then another, and avoid the postwar straight world's straitjacketed visions of life's possibilities, personally and professionally. After all, how many straight business execs hung out with motorcycle gangs and con men and thieves, the way Leonard Chess liked to?

Overall, though, Cohodas's dogged reportage powers her book past its relatively minor flaws and serviceable prose. Dotted by irreconcilable memories and unresolvable disputes that she lets stand, *Spinning Blues into Gold* adeptly mimics the often Rashomonlike residues of historical memory from its various protagonists. One example: when Chuck Berry was busted, tried, and ultimately imprisoned on Mann Act charges in 1959–61, the Chess brothers paid for his lawyers—according to them. Berry's autobiography, as Cohodas duly notes, denies it. Then again,

Berry, who always demanded to be paid in cash for his shows often before he even went onstage, then carted the proceeds around in paper bags, was probably the only Chess artist as cheap as the Chess brothers.

In the end, Cohodas has crafted an in-depth, fact-and-story-rich tour through an important site in American popular culture. If ultimately it leaves Leonard and Phil Chess themselves as informed sketches rather than full-lit characters, that's probably how they would have liked it.