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2120 SOUTH MICHIGAN

By the time Leonard and Phil bought a narrow, two-story building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue, the surrounding neighborhood already was known as “record row.” Vee Jay was down the block and across the street at 2129. Milt Salstone’s MS Distributing Company was at 2009, Garmisa Distributing was two doors away at 2011, Mercury Records’ distributor was at 2021, Paul Glass’s All State Distributing was at 2023, United Distributors was near the end of the block at 2029. One of the city’s prominent publishing companies, Bantom, was at 1323 South Michigan, one block from Capitol Records’ distributor at 1449. So the move was a logical one, and Leonard and Phil must have hoped for the same kind of synergy among like-minded neighbors that existed for a few years around Cottage Grove, the previous home to ten or so record operations.

Twenty-one twenty had been constructed in 1911 as a commercial investment property. It was only twenty-five feet wide and was sandwiched between the two-story Standard Supply Company, which dealt in machinists’ equipment, and a seedy roominghouse, the seven-story Fairview. The majority of the Fairview’s clientele were truck drivers making a one-night stop on their way to and from the stockyards. Though narrow, the building ran deep, roughly 125 feet back from Michigan Avenue to an alley. Over the years, consistent with the neighborhood, 2120 had been occupied by a number of commercial tenants. Prior to the Chess brothers’ purchase, the building had housed a furniture slipcover manufacturer and a tire company but was vacant when the brothers bought it. While they put up the money,

Leonard and Phil instructed Nate Notkin, their lawyer, to draw up the papers so that the building would be in Joe Chess’s name. They would pay him rent every month. It was a way to give their father and mother additional income.

The new building was not in particularly good shape; that probably appealed to Leonard because it meant he could get a good deal. Though it would take some work, 2120, with its substantial interior space, could be turned into the kind of offices the brothers wanted. It would, however, have to fit within a budget. More than one set of plans was required before architect and owner were in agreement about what to do. The choice was between what was optimum and what was minimally acceptable weighed against Leonard’s wallet.

Leonard was going to be forty years old on March 12, 1957. Up to now he had seemed indestructible despite the days on end of long hours, little sleep, and bad habits—too much coffee, too many cigarettes. His family noticed that occasionally he looked uncomfortable, panting while he was chasing the dog or lifting something heavy, grimacing at shooting pains in his arm. The last week in January, in the midst of running the business from Cottage Grove and planning the move to Michigan Avenue, Leonard felt so bad he went to see Dr. William A. Brams, one of the city’s prominent cardiologists. Brams did a routine test in his office, and the news wasn’t good. Leonard was having a heart attack.

The doctor ordered him to go immediately to Michael Reese Hospital, insisting that Leonard not even stop at home for a change of clothes, let alone stop at the office to make arrangements for his absence. He would have to rest for six weeks, at least two in the hospital. When they learned Leonard was in Michael Reese, friends sent get-well cards and letters. More than one was signed “Mother,” a joking reference to Leonard’s favorite nickname for everyone. (One friend even sent him a Mother’s Day card at the appropriate time, “To My Favorite Mother.”)

Asking Leonard to lie down and take it easy was asking the impossible. He was a man in motion, even on the weekends at home. If he wasn’t doing business, he was fixing things, drinking one cup of coffee after another, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. The heart attack made him angry because it interfered with his plans. His life had momentum. Things were moving and moving fast, and now he was in a hospital bed disconnected from the phone and the business. The anger made an impression on Marshall. It wasn’t that he had never seen his father mad before, but it was the boiling, almost helpless frustration that made it different.

Leonard was allowed to go home to Glencoe by mid-February, but then he had to stay there for another few weeks. Right after his birthday on March 12 he started coming back to the office for a few hours every day. At the end of the month he and Revetta took what was supposed to be a short vacation to Florida, though it turned out to be a working one. He was monitoring the business long distance, checking in with the office and his magazine contacts to make sure Chess was a weekly presence in their R&B chitchat columns. *Cash Box* duly noted a report from Florida in its April 6 issue.



Neither Leonard nor Phil knew anything about studio construction but they knew people who did because of their long relationship with Bill Putnam at Universal Studio. Putnam and his crew handled most of the Aristocrat, Chess, and Checker work. One of the youngest men at the studio was Jack Wiener, a self-taught eighteen-year-old who worked on mastering the tapes that would be turned into records, refining them for sound and musical mix. Wiener had seen Leonard and Phil coming in and out of the studio and had worked on some of the tapes they made in the small Cottage Grove office—and he always considered these a challenge because to his ear the quality was terrible. But the first time he actually met one of the brothers was when Phil bought the young engineer a cup of coffee. They had a reputation for being very frugal, so the small gift was noteworthy. The extra coffee was a small celebration because one of the Chess tunes was about to be covered by a white artist on a major label.

Wiener was gradually getting to know Leonard and Phil, but their budding friendship was put on hold when Wiener accepted an offer in 1956 from Randy Wood, the head of Dot Records and one of Universal's major clients. The job was in California, where the label was moving. Wiener stayed barely a year. He came back to Chicago early in 1957 after his father had a heart attack. It was fortuitous timing for Leonard. He offered Wiener, now only twenty-two, a wonderful opportunity: the chance to build a studio and bring in his own recording clients. It would be a joint venture. Wiener would have a one-third interest; Leonard would put up the construction money and Wiener would pay back his one-third from the proceeds.

While it sounded appealing, Wiener needed to think about it, and the

brothers had to make more than one entreaty. They finally hashed out the deal over coffee at Deutsch's, the informal extension of the Cottage Grove office. Leonard and Phil had very limited space at 4750, and if they couldn't do business on the telephone and needed to do it in person, Deutsch's was the place.

When Wiener saw 2120, his heart sank. "A lousy choice," he thought, "too small and too narrow." The space on the second floor designated for the studio was roughly twenty feet wide and thirty-seven feet long. But it was all he had to work with, and Leonard told him to do it right. There was more than the wish for a good sound; Leonard knew that any improvements stayed with the building, and by extension, him as the owner. The first thing Wiener did was cover the original wood floor on the second story with two inches of cork. Then he laid concrete over that. He designed the walls, which were painted beige, to float on resilient springs for complete isolation from the adjoining rooms. This was to maximize soundproofing. On one wall were nine adjustable panels that could be opened for greater absorption of sound. When all the panels were closed, they presented a hard surface. And perhaps most important, there were no parallel surfaces in the room. The idea was to eliminate any rumbling that might occur from the low resonance of the drums, the bass, or heavy traffic from Michigan Avenue. Sound engineers knew that such low frequencies would bounce off parallel walls and hinder the recording process.

Wiener also built two echo chambers for special effects, running wires from the second floor studio down to the basement on either side of the room. A microphone and speaker were attached to each wire in the basement. He also built a specially designed twelve-channel console for the control room, turning the makeshift studio at Cottage Grove into his shop during the construction process. The rest of the equipment at 2120—tape machines, microphones, amplifiers—was up to the standards of any other independent studio. The control room was at the east end of the studio, nearest Michigan Avenue. Behind it were two rooms with the machinery to make the record masters.

Though the original plans called for large men's and women's restrooms on the second floor, they were eliminated. In their place was a small washroom with just a toilet and sink—a setup entirely in keeping with Leonard's no-frills approach: functional and not fancy. There was also a smaller rehearsal studio on the second floor and a small office, which Wiener used.

Behind that was empty space. Within a year or so a vault was built to hold the company's tapes.

While Wiener was putting the studio together, Leonard hired Bernard Chalmers and Associates to do the renovation work. By the time Wiener started on the studio, the first floor had been gutted and was being rebuilt, including the front. Twenty-one twenty needed a fresh face, and a new aluminum recessed storefront was installed, framed by dark artificial stone slabs. Set back behind the show windows was a partial wall of ornamental ribbed glass.

Although some extras, like the big bathrooms and fancy wood display shelves in the front, were eliminated from the original plans, the brothers did spring for California redwood trim for the first floor interior, including their side-by-side offices, and for the small office on the second floor. The redwood was one of the last things to be installed, a detail mentioned in *Cash Box*, which provided readers with periodic updates about how the move into 2120 was going.

The first few days in the new studio operation were a blur to Wiener. With so many things to think about on those warm summer days it was hard to remember who was even coming in to record. For good luck he had put up a small wall-hanging in his second-floor office, a gift from his parents. It was the theater masks, tragedy and comedy, and he already knew there was a good chance he would experience a little of each.



It was fitting that the first sessions at 2120 were with the musicians who had given Leonard and Phil their first taste of success: Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, and Chuck Berry. The brothers would be missing one of the fold, however. Upset about money he believed was owed him, Willie Dixon had left Chess to go to work for a small local label, Cobra Records, run by Eli Toscano. Dixon would come back now and then, however, to do a session.

Though Leonard didn't play golf, that didn't stop him from going to an out-of-town golf outing sponsored by bandleader Fred Waring. Even though the studio was just getting up and running, Leonard no doubt knew he could do business at the function. There were going to be lots of industry people there, and he was most adept at making new connections and reinforcing old ones at these kinds of events. Besides, Phil was in Chicago looking after things.

According to his agreement, Wiener was recording the Chess musicians as well as outside clients he brought in. He operated as "Sheldon Recording Studios," using his middle name for the business. In the first few months of operation he did work for Atlantic and some local talent sent to him by another prominent Chicago disc jockey, Daddy-O Daylie. Wiener also made himself useful to Leonard outside the office, picking him up at his Glencoe home, which was not far away from Wiener's own house, and dropping him at Midway Airport when he went out of town. The first time Wiener picked Leonard up on Oakridge Drive there was a shock of recognition when he got to the door. He knew the house; it had been built for his father's employer and Wiener and his brother had wired a speaker system inside.

Leonard appreciated getting a ride from Wiener, though he wasn't crazy about the cramped quarters of the MG the young man drove. But it was still better than going by himself: he worried that something might happen to his Cadillac in the parking lot, and it rankled him to have to pay a parking fee. It was one more example of Leonard's penchant for saving money. There were others. When Wiener wanted to hire his father to keep the books for the studio, Leonard said absolutely not. Wiener hired his father anyway but paid him out of his own earnings.

It didn't take long to establish traditions at 2120. If Deutsch's had been the informal commissary for 4750 South Cottage Grove, Batts Restaurant, in the New Michigan Hotel across the street, became its successor. The restaurant's motto was "Next to Home . . . It's Batts," and that seemed to be true for Leonard and Phil and their associates. Sometimes they went there for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Most days the same choices were offered for the latter two meals: chop sirloin steak (with baked potato and salad), soup (clam chowder or beet borscht), and homemade blintzes (cheese, cherry, strawberry, or banana). And there was always a weekday businessman's special—perhaps soup, baked perch with Spanish sauce, potato and vegetable, all for \$1.50. Phil's son, Terry, by now ten years old, loved to go to the office with his father on weekends because it meant breakfast at the restaurant.

Batts was also convenient. There was a back door to the hotel lobby right across from the Chess offices. Not only that, it was efficient. If any of the men needed a shoe shine or a haircut, they could get either on the way in or out. The shoe shine stand and the barber shop were a few feet from the restaurant's back door.

On Cottage Grove, Carri Saunders was the receptionist, only now she had new power, conferred on her by the ability to buzz people in and let

them go upstairs to the studio or to the back of the first floor to see Leonard and Phil. Idell Nelson also moved over to 2120 to continue to handle clerical matters, and within a year or so, Ruth Brown, a white woman and no relation to the popular Atlantic singer, was also hired. Sonny Woods continued to supervise the stockroom and still served as Leonard's in-house record reviewer.

Musicians had to get used to the new studio, and in general it was a happy adjustment for those who had done their rehearsing and some of their recording in the cramped quarters of 4750. Even though the place was new and modern, it almost immediately had character. Whenever Waters and his band came in, they commandeered the back part of the studio, sitting in folding chairs and talking among themselves far from the control room. "I remember the smell of Muddy's sessions," said Marshall, who was nearly sixteen now and spending more time learning the business. "There was sweat. Not because he didn't take a shower, but sweat . . . you take a shower and fifteen minutes later, you sweat. You get four or five guys in there in an unair-conditioned place, recording in the summer in Chicago. I'm not saying it was a bad smell," he added. "It was a smell." He called it "funk."

Mixed in with the "funk" was the occasional waft of marijuana coming from the upstairs bathroom. It was the musicians' informal hangout, the place to share a joint.



The first ads with the new company address had appeared in *Billboard* even before Leonard and Phil and their small staff moved in. One of them, a full page on May 20, 1957, was instructive not just for the information on the whereabouts of the "Chess Producing Corp." but also for an update about where Chess was musically. It was the first ad to give prominence to albums, one by Berry on Chess and three on the increasingly active Argo label, each of them more jazz oriented than the first Argo releases, which were the singles by "Frogman" Henry and Paul Gayten. Leonard and Phil were moving into long-playing records, but they were doing so with caution. Their bread and butter was the R&B market, which was based on the fast fading 78 market and the growing market of the smaller 45s and extended-play 45s. The latter had two or three songs on each side but was still a small disc. Leonard told one music writer that 45s were outselling 78s

"seven to three," but he was reluctant to phase out 78s altogether because he knew they were still popular with his southern customers, who still had phonographs that played these records. Atlantic told the same writer that 75 percent of its singles were 45s.

Chess was not the only R&B company taking its time with long-playing records. The prevailing feeling among the independents all through 1956, and reinforced by their dealers, was that only the biggest pop stars could carry a long-playing record of vocals. Artists such as Dinah Washington, who crossed over into different categories, could carry an LP of jazz or pop standards, but one that was all blues was not likely to work. Rhythm-and-blues instrumentals had a better chance, and in fact the few R&B long-playing records that came out in the last quarter of 1956 were instrumentals with the exception of Fats Domino on Imperial Records.

Chess did have one LP under its belt, *Rock, Rock, Rock*, which had been issued at the end of 1956 in conjunction with Alan Freed's movie. The majors, by contrast—RCA, Columbia, Decca—already had committed to the long-playing records, and it was possible to buy classical fare, Broadway show tunes, movie soundtracks, some pop compilations, and jazz. There was enough LP activity that both *Billboard* and *Cash Box* ran sections each week about what was going on in the album field or, as *Billboard* called it, "packaged records." The trend was unmistakable. In the February 16, 1957, issue the magazine reported that sales of LPs had risen to 26 percent of all sales in the first three quarters of 1956 from 15 percent from the same period in 1955. The actual dollar increase jumped to 60 percent of total revenue spent on records in 1956 from 44 percent the previous year.



As the *Billboard* ads suggested, Chess production hadn't slowed down even though the brothers were in the midst of a construction project and Leonard was sick for more than a month. The releases coming out of 4750 were a mix of everything in the Chess stable: new blues from Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, and Jimmy Rogers; more Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Lowell Fulson, Bobby Charles, and the Moonglows. Perhaps it was hyperbole, but Leonard got a kick out of one disc jockey, who he said was so anxious to be the first to play "I'm Afraid the Masquerade Is Over" by the Moonglows that he played a broken copy. It was the flip side, though, that was the more unusual of the two

numbers. “Don’t Say Good Bye” had a lush string backing. “You’d never believe this came out of the Chess studios,” *Billboard* said, “but there it is.”

Leonard continued to have good luck picking up music from other labels. His decision to lease and then release two songs from the J&S label by the duo Johnnie and Joe, “I’ll Be Spinning” and “Over the Mountain, Across the Sea,” proved to be a good one. Both made it onto the *Billboard* charts, the latter popular enough to register for four months.

The Argo subsidiary was also more productive, beginning to move into the pop-jazz arena and doing so with LPs. That made sense from a marketing standpoint; other companies had already led the way, and the jazz customers were becoming accustomed to the twelve-inch disk.

Productivity was also synonymous with Chuck Berry. He not only stayed busy all the time, he had also been a success from the beginning of his relationship with Leonard and Phil. Most everything he recorded since the release of “Maybellene” in the summer of 1955 had done well—seven songs on the trade paper charts, one right after the other. They were witty and easy to grasp, and he never lost that danceable beat. Berry was also a popular attraction for the big rock-and-roll shows that toured the country, good for him and good for the label.

Berry’s newest release in the spring of 1957, “School Day”—which actually had been recorded the previous December—was no exception to the trend. It opened with a lively chord repetition and one of Berry’s classic rhymes: “Up in the mornin’ and out to school, the teacher is teaching the golden rule. American history and practical math, you study ’em hard hopin’ to pass.” The trade papers predicted great things for it, and they were right. By mid-April it was on the charts. By May, Berry was battling for the number one spot on *Billboard*’s three R&B tallies—sales, radio play, and jukeboxes—with a young musician who seemed to be reshaping and redefining the musical landscape every time he stepped to the microphone, Elvis Presley. His “All Shook Up” and Berry’s “School Day” alternated between number one and number two on the R&B charts for most of the month. The competition in *Cash Box* was similarly intense, though on the pop charts, Presley was invariably three or four notches above Berry.

Presley came out of Memphis, nurtured by Sam Phillips, the same record man who had given Chess Records Jackie Brenston and his “Rocket 88” and the one-of-a-kind Howlin’ Wolf. Presley knew from the time he was a teenager that he wanted to make music, but it had not been love at first sight between Phillips and the shy young man. He first stopped in at Sun Records in the summer of 1953, but it took Phillips nearly a year before he

summoned Presley back to his studio for some work with local musicians who had already made a none-too-successful record at Sun. Their studio time on that hot July day in 1954 was not going very well, but when Presley and guitarist Scotty Moore and bass player Bill Black started into an old Arthur Crudup tune, “That’s All Right Mama,” Phillips heard something special. It was the same visceral feeling he had when he first heard Howlin’ Wolf. There was something fresh here, he was sure, even though the song was not original and the musical arrangement was ragged. Its raw honesty made it work.

Phillips was right. And he also believed he might have the key to unlocking a new and potentially large market for the music of the Howlin’ Wolfs and other black performers he cared about so much, even if it wasn’t performed by them. He knew their music appealed to “white youngsters,” he told a Memphis reporter in 1959, reminiscing about his first days with Presley. “But there was something in many of those youngsters that resisted buying this music. The southern ones especially felt a resistance they probably didn’t quite understand. They liked the music, but they weren’t sure whether they ought to like it or not. So I got thinking how many records you could sell if you could find white performers who could play and sing in this same exciting, alive way.” Disc jockey Alan Freed believed the same thing, only he was cultivating a white market for the black performers who made the music he loved as much as Phillips did.

“That’s All Right Mama” was an immediate hit in Memphis. *Billboard* gave it a boost with a short review that called Presley “a potent new chanter who can sock over a tune for either the country or R&B markets.”

The magazine was two-thirds right. What they hadn’t predicted was that within eighteen months, Elvis Presley would capture the pop market, too.

Slightly more than a year after his breakthrough with Phillips and Sun Records, Presley signed with RCA Victor, which bought his Sun contract for \$35,000—more than had ever been paid before for a popular singer, let alone one who was not fully tested. While the majors had had little success with conventional R&B and its largely black audience, Bill Haley on Decca had shown that this hybrid “rock and roll” could be lucrative.

Along with his RCA deal Presley signed a songwriting agreement with the well-established company Hill & Range, which set up a separate publishing firm for Presley. The headline in a December 3 *Billboard* story about Presley was right on the mark: “DOUBLE DEALS HURL PRESLEY INTO STARDOM.” The story explained that RCA intended to “push his platters in all three fields—pop, r&b and c&w.” Within a month of his signing, RCA

announced that Presley would perform on four consecutive segments of *Stage Show*, produced by Jackie Gleason and hosted by Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey. It was Presley's entry into television, opening the way for him to break out of country and western. RCA even took out a full-page ad in *Billboard* announcing Presley's arrival as "the most talked about new personality in the last 10 years of recorded music."

It had been a great moment at Chess when "Maybellene" spent a month as number one on all three of *Billboard's* R&B charts and led the *Cash Box* HOT charts in a dozen cities, and then when it crept into the top ten on the popular charts for a couple of weeks. But that was nothing compared to Elvis Presley. His first million seller was "Heartbreak Hotel," and it was followed by seven more million sellers within a year. He was topping the charts in all three genres, just as RCA had hoped. He was so popular by the beginning of 1957 that when *Billboard* ran its annual chart of bestselling artists for the previous year, Presley, listed in first place, had four songs after his name, not just the usual one. On top of that he was in first and seventh place in bestselling albums—the only one from the rock-and-roll/rhythm-and-blues field to be represented in the top fifteen list. It was another tribute to his stunning popularity.

This was one of those transformational moments, the kind that caused the most astute observers in the industry to rethink and revise their assumptions and ideas. This had to be more than just a fluke. Maybe it was the moment when musical boundaries would disappear. *Cash Box* thought so. "Rock and Roll May Be The Great UNIFYING FORCE," the magazine trumpeted in inch-high letters in a March 1956 editorial. Citing "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Blue Suede Shoes," by Carl Perkins, another Phillips find who had burst on the scene, the magazine said, "The overwhelming sensation in the record business this week is the fact that two records which started essentially in the country field have become hits also in the pop and rhythm and blues area." This success, the editorial went on, "demonstrates clearly the possibilities that exist—and which are becoming more definite all the time—of bridging all three markets with one record."

Over at *Billboard* the talk was about "the integration of chart categories," and by the time Presley had garnered his fifth and sixth bestsellers early in 1957, the magazine called him "something of a trend all by himself." But the editors also sensed a pivotal change, one important enough to prompt a change in how they covered the industry.

From now on there would be no more "Rhythm and Blues Notes." Instead the column would be expanded and renamed "ON THE BEAT—

Rhythm & Blues—Rock and Roll." Gary Kramer, the columnist, said that the new format, introduced February 16, "will cover not only rhythm and blues—but also the other musical areas that have developed in the past few years under the inspiration of the unusually wide acceptance of the R&B idiom. 'Rock and roll' and what has come to be called 'rockabilly' are the most important of these. No abstract categories prevent the teenager today from buying records by Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, Carl Perkins or Little Richard at one and the same time. The trade, therefore, must revise and perhaps abandon some of its old boundary lines."

Kramer credited the independents with spurring the trend: "They pioneered and nourished rhythm and blues—and rock and roll—and are still its vanguard."

Presley and Perkins had shown the possibility of enormous drawing power across the spectrum. Writing in a subsequent column, Kramer suggested the reverse was true as well. Once, he said, "rhythm and blues" meant a black market. "Today for almost no rhythm and blues manufacturer, however, is the Negro consumer the prime target. His operation is typically geared economically to anticipated sales to both white and Negro customers . . . Indeed it is significant that recent releases of artists like Ruth Brown and Fats Domino hit pop charts as soon as R&B." Kramer called this "an interesting case of integration of the tastes of the majority into the minority."

Record men like Leonard and Phil, who operated on instinct and intuition, would never have considered these matters in such conscious, intellectual terms. They knew Presley was good for business. He brought customers into the record shops. They weren't in a headlong rush to get their own Elvis. Rather the Presley phenomenon meant, as Kramer suggested, the continuing promise and possibility of new markets.

One of the many musical "what ifs" has been the question of whether Chuck Berry could have been Presley had he been white. That frames the question backward. It was because Elvis Presley was white that he had such an impact. He was exciting, alive, sexual, sensual, threatening, even dangerous to some, and he came in for his share of criticism and vilification. A black performer doing the same things in that moment and in a highly public forum was unacceptable. Muddy Waters at his most provocative, in a club before an enthusiastic black audience with a Coke bottle stuffed in his pants, to be popped open when his song hit a fever pitch, would not be tolerated. He would have violated every racial-sexual taboo. Berry himself appreciated the racial-sexual borders, if for no other reason than his occa-

sional scrapes with southern sheriffs angry and unsettled by his popularity among young southern white women only too happy to share his company. Sam Phillips had also understood, and perhaps in their own way Leonard and Phil had too. They were more interested in doing what they knew how to do, making records that might capture some of the market that Presley opened up. With their own studio they felt ready to compete with even more energy.



Leonard and Phil had made more good decisions than bad since becoming full-time record men, but if they had forgotten that precarious days always loomed on the horizon, a July 8, 1957, story in *Billboard* reminded them all over again. “Indies Feel Money Pinch Despite Hits” said the headline. The story was a discussion of “a general tightening up” among the independents, even those who were considered successful. “A number of indies state that in spite of the apparently thriving condition of their business they are hard pressed for ready money,” the magazine explained. “Some blame the distributors, claiming that the average distrib meets his bills promptly only on those lines he needs—lines which are currently hot. Often an indie, when he needs money most, gets back a flock of records instead.” The surest way to avoid this, the story went on, is to have at least two hits in a row. That way the distributor can’t get the newest hit without paying the bills on the previous one.

Leonard was both particular and demanding about his distributors. Harold Lipsius of Universal in Philadelphia knew that only too well. One of his salesmen, Harry Finfer, paid Leonard a courtesy call late in 1956. When Leonard asked how things were going, Finfer spent all his time talking about the releases on Universal’s new in-house label, Jamie. Leonard listened quietly. After Finfer left, he called Lipsius and told him he was pulling Chess out of Universal. All he heard, he said, was about Jamie, nothing about Chess.

Lipsius was flabbergasted. Despite a few entreaties, including one in person in Chicago, he could not get the label back. Finfer, he realized ruefully, was wearing two hats, Jamie salesman and Universal distributor. In Leonard’s office, he had forgotten which one he had on.

Such tough-mindedness surely contributed to the success of Chess. The brothers also considered themselves lucky that they were making enough

music now so that at least one or two of their musicians would have a hit to carry them through the lean days of the others. But stories like the one in *Billboard* were constant reminders that they could never let up.

The new and more sophisticated setting of 2120 did not change Leonard’s way of operating when he involved himself in the straight blues sessions. Sonny Boy Williamson had recorded five tunes earlier in 1957; in September he did his first session in the new studio backed by a four-piece band including Little Walter’s former drummer, Fred Below, and Willie Dixon, who was making one of his periodic appearances. Warming up for one of the takes, Williamson hummed a few notes and set the rhythm. After several bars of harmonica introduction, he started to sing: “Little village, too small to be a town.” He repeated the line.

“What’s the name of that?” Leonard interrupted from the control booth.

“Little Village, Little Village, motherfucker,” Williamson said, his voice rising.

“Little Village.”

“There isn’t a motherfuckin’ thing in there about a village, you son-of-a-bitch,” Leonard shot back to the laughter of the musicians. “There’s nothin’ in the song that has anything to do with a village.”

“Well, a small town.”

“I know what a village is,” Leonard retorted.

“Well, all right, goddammit. You don’t, you don’t need no title,” Sonny Boy yelled. “You name it after, after I get through with it, you son-of-a-bitch. You name it wha’ch you want. You name it your mammy if you want.”

That broke Leonard up. “Take one,” instructed the engineer, who was so distracted he misspoke for the start of the second take. “Rollin’.”

It seemed like a good omen and a blessing for the new offices and studio that the cover of the August 3 *Cash Box* featured Chuck Berry. He was dressed in a dark suit and bow tie, crouched with his guitar in a ready-to-play mode. The caption underneath said he was “one of the country’s top recording artists.” Within six weeks he would have another solid hit, “Rock and Roll Music.” The lyrics, about a backbeat “you can’t lose it any old time you use it,” were an apt recognition of the musical moment.

At the same time the brothers had another stroke of good luck when a master they bought from the Casa Grande label, “Happy Birthday Baby” by the Tuneweavers, turned into a hit. The song stayed on the charts nearly three months. There wasn’t too much hyperbole in the breezy observation *Cash Box* made about the brothers in its R&B chat column: “Proves they

can pick 'em.” The truth of that observation was borne out again with the success of “Long Lonely Nights” by Lee Andrews and the Hearts, which the brothers had picked up from the Main Line label. These things weren't done completely by chance, however. Leonard and Phil had what they considered pseudo-talent scouts, disc jockeys at various stations around the country who played new material and then gauged the response. If there was good, instant feedback, they'd call Chicago to let Leonard or Phil know, and then the two would decide, usually after checking with a few record stores, whether to buy the disk and put it out on Chess. In other words, “there had to be some action” on the record to get their interest.

The Andrews record caught the attention of Atlantic as well, and there was a race to buy the master that went literally down to the wire. Leonard beat his competitors by about an hour, but Wexler and Ertegun were not deterred. In a few days, Clyde McPhatter cut a version for the label, and he and Andrews each sold well.

While Chess and Checker were turning out records, the brothers were also tending to Argo. But it was evolving now from the pop-blues flavor of “Frogman” Henry into jazz. Leonard and Phil were beginning to bring in other individuals, at least part time, to help keep the company moving forward musically. Though they didn't sit down and plot these moves according to a business plan, they did have the sense to hire people who knew more substantively about the music than they did and could increase the likelihood that the new things they were trying would find a niche.

In the wake of Leonard's heart attack, the brothers also realized they needed help in publicity. They were fond of a young promotion man who worked for the distributor David Rosen in Philadelphia. Max Cooperstein had been handling Chess and Checker records for a couple of years and had an affinity for the product. He used his good connections to Dick Clark, host of a popular Philadelphia-based television show, *American Bandstand*, to get Bobby Charles, Dale Hawkins, the Moonglows, and Chuck Berry on the air, and that made an impression on the brothers. Cooperstein started his Chess tenure traveling with Phil to Boston, Buffalo, Detroit, and Pittsburgh. Before long he would be summoned to Chicago to handle the promotion work right out of 2120. Chess Records was no longer a little family operation.