

Chess Records in Chicago



Left: Phil and Leonard Chess; Right: "Smokestack Lightning" single by Howlin' Wolf (1956)

In 1947, Leonard Chess, a Polish immigrant in Chicago, bought into the Aristocrat Records company. Three years later, his brother Phil bought up the remaining stakes and the two became the sole owners of the small record label. They renamed it Chess Records.

During the 1950s and 60s, the various studios that Chess used to record music became important gathering places for many of Chicago's Blues artists. The Chess brothers capitalized on the recent northbound influx of African Americans from the South, who represented a rapidly growing market for their product, not to mention a fresh pool of talent. Among the many Blues musicians who recorded for Chess were Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Willie Dixon, Otis Spann, and Matt Murphy (all of whom were born in Mississippi), as well as R&B singer Etta James and early Rock and Roll artists Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry. Even the Rolling Stones, British artists who were deeply influenced by the American Blues, made a pilgrimage to record at Chess when they visited Chicago in 1964.

The pace of life in Chicago literally electrified the "gut-bucket" music of the rural South. The Country Blues sound relied heavily on un-amplified instruments such as the acoustic guitar and harmonica. The so-called Urban Blues recorded at Chess tended to be louder, and was likely to feature electric guitars, bass, drums, piano, harmonica, and a powerful singer – more than enough to cut through the noise of a bustling nightclub when played on a jukebox. And the big city nightclub scene was something Leonard and Phil Chess knew something about: their early days as young entrepreneurs in the 1940s were spent running some of the most central black nightclubs in Chicago's South Side neighborhoods.

Chess Records fostered a unique culture of collaboration amongst its roster of musicians who came together in the studio and onstage. Label mates often recorded each other's songs and played in each other's bands. The company's enduring legacy speaks to the success of this participatory approach to recording, as well as having a keen understanding of the music that appealed to an urban Black audience.