



# Howlin' Wolf

JUNE 10, 1910 - JANUARY 10, 1976

BY PETER GURALNICK

**H**OWLIN' WOLF WAS LARGER than life in every respect. As an entertainer, as an individual, and as a bluesman, he was outsized, unpredictable, and always his own man. He was a great blues singer who possessed that quality of egocentric self-absorption that is the mark of the true showman. To many people this may seem contradictory, but Wolf proved that to its natural audience

blues is not all pain and suffering, but is instead a kind of release. When you listen to the blues, you should be moved; doubtless you should take the deep blues of a singer like Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf with the sense of dignity that is intended. You should also come away with a smile on your lips.

Howlin' Wolf was a totally enigmatic personality. He was a man at once complex, driven, and altogether impossible to read. I think he was as much a mystery to his friends and contemporaries as to the casual outsider, an enormous man (6' 3" and over 275 pounds in his prime) of great placidity, sudden explosiveness and an infinite capacity for hurt. Johnny Shines, who idolized Wolf to the extent that he followed him around as a young man and was himself called Little Wolf, said: "[When] I first met [him], I was afraid of Wolf. Just like you would be of some kind of beast or something. Because it was an old saying, you know, people thought about magic and all such things as that, and I come along and say a guy that played like Wolf, he'd sold his soul to the Devil. And at that time Wolf had the most beautiful skin anybody ever seen in your life, look like you just can blow on it and it'd rattle. And I was kind of afraid of Wolf....It wasn't his size, I mean the *sound* he was giving off."

Wolf was the kind of person around whom legends accumulated because of the belief he invested in them.

He was born Chester Arthur Burnett on a plantation between West Point and Aberdeen, Mississippi, on June 10, 1910. He grew up listening to Charley Patton, Son House, Willie Brown, and the Jackson school of Tommy Johnson with its delicate falsetto moan, in the midst of a Mississippi blues tradition so vital that it remains the underpinning for much of today's popular music.

He was never much of a guitar player, and even his harp playing, encouraged though it was by his brother-in-law Sonny Boy Williamson, was always fairly rudimentary. It was

his voice that was his crowning glory, a voice which could fairly be called inimitable, cutting with a sandpaper rasp and overwhelming ferocity but retaining at the same time a curious delicacy of shading, a sense of dynamics and subtlety of approach that set it off from any other blues singer's in that rich tradition. It combined the rough phrasing of Patton with the vocal filigree of Tommy Johnson and its familial descen-

dant: the blue yodel of Jimmie Rodgers, a white country singer whom Wolf always admired. This became Wolf's howl.

Although he began singing blues locally at age 17, it was not until he moved to West Memphis in 1948 that he put together a full-time band (which included, at one time or another, Little Junior Parker and a very young James Cotton on harp) and began broadcasting over radio station KWEM. Sam Phillips opened up his Memphis Recording Service (forerunner of Sun Records) in 1950, heard Wolf on the radio, and recorded him shortly thereafter, leasing the results to Chess Records in Chicago. Through a series of business misunderstandings Wolf ended up on the Bihari brothers' RPM label at virtually the same time, and there was a period of about a year—during which records

were coming out on both labels—before Leonard Chess reached an agreement with the Biharis, came down to Memphis, and persuaded Wolf to move north. It was 1952.

His sound never really changed. It was the same in 1975 as it had been 25 years earlier. His blues continued to reflect the conditions from which they first sprung; as a result, his performances were both unpredictable and exciting because, quite naturally, they reflected how he felt. His blues could be savage, doleful, elated, or mournful by turns, depending on his mood; but the fascination of his performance, aside from the towering nature of the music itself, was his almost constant sense of engagement.

For Howlin' Wolf, there was no differentiation between art and life.

## WOLF'S RIGHT HAND: HUBERT SUMLIN, LEAD GUITAR

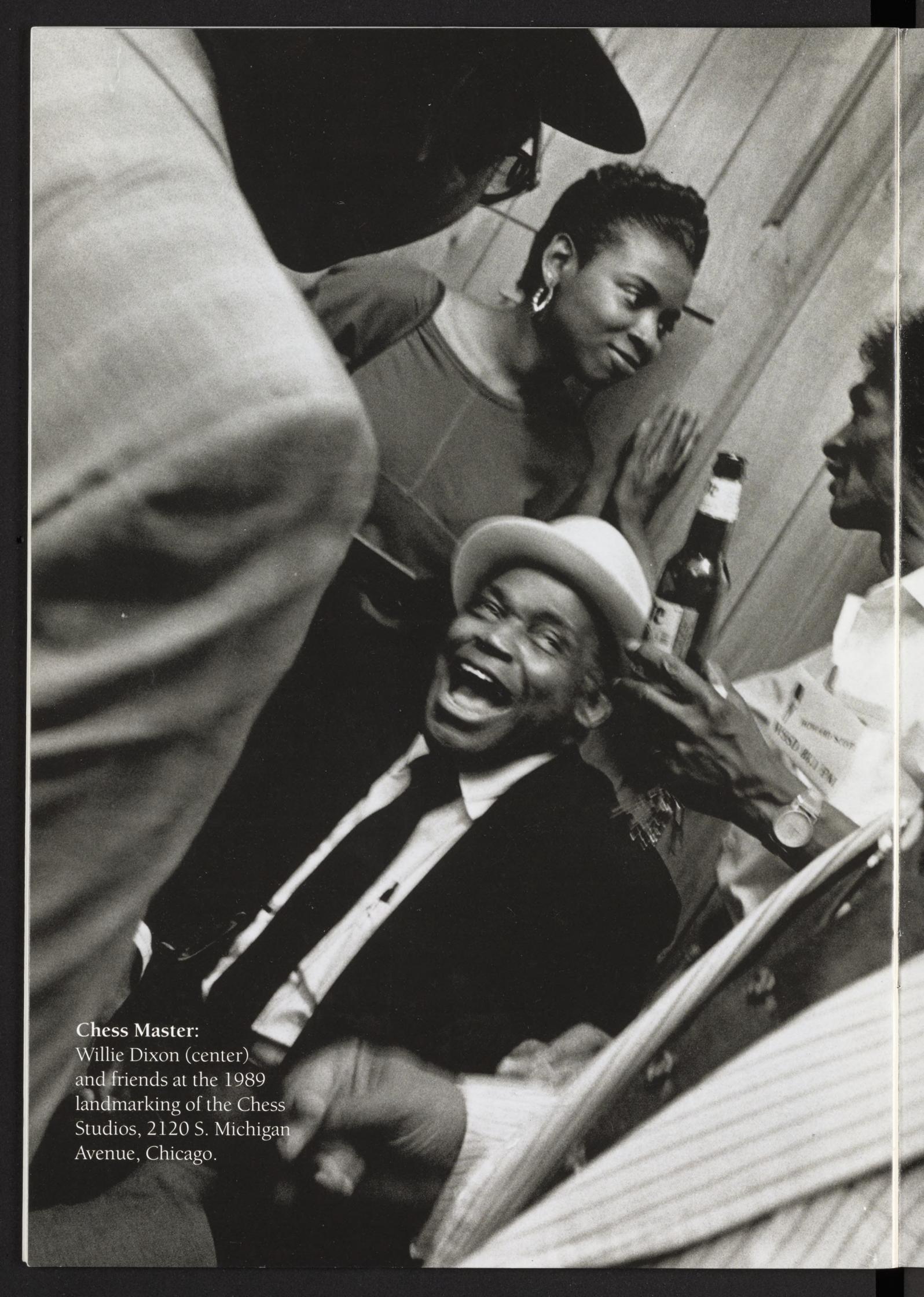
**G**UITARIST Hubert Sumlin was and is an utterly unique stylist who played on nearly all of Howlin' Wolf's greatest recordings—"Spoonful," "Killing Floor," "I Ain't Superstitious," "Back Door Man," "Little Red Rooster," and more.

"It is impossible to imagine Howlin' Wolf without Hubert Sumlin," wrote Samuel G. Freedman in *The New York Times* in 1987. "Except for a one-year stint with Muddy Waters, [he] played with Wolf from 1953 until Wolf's death in 1976. His crackling, jagged, eccentric guitar lines were almost as much a trademark of Howlin' Wolf's music as was the singer's huge, raspy roar of a voice. . . ."

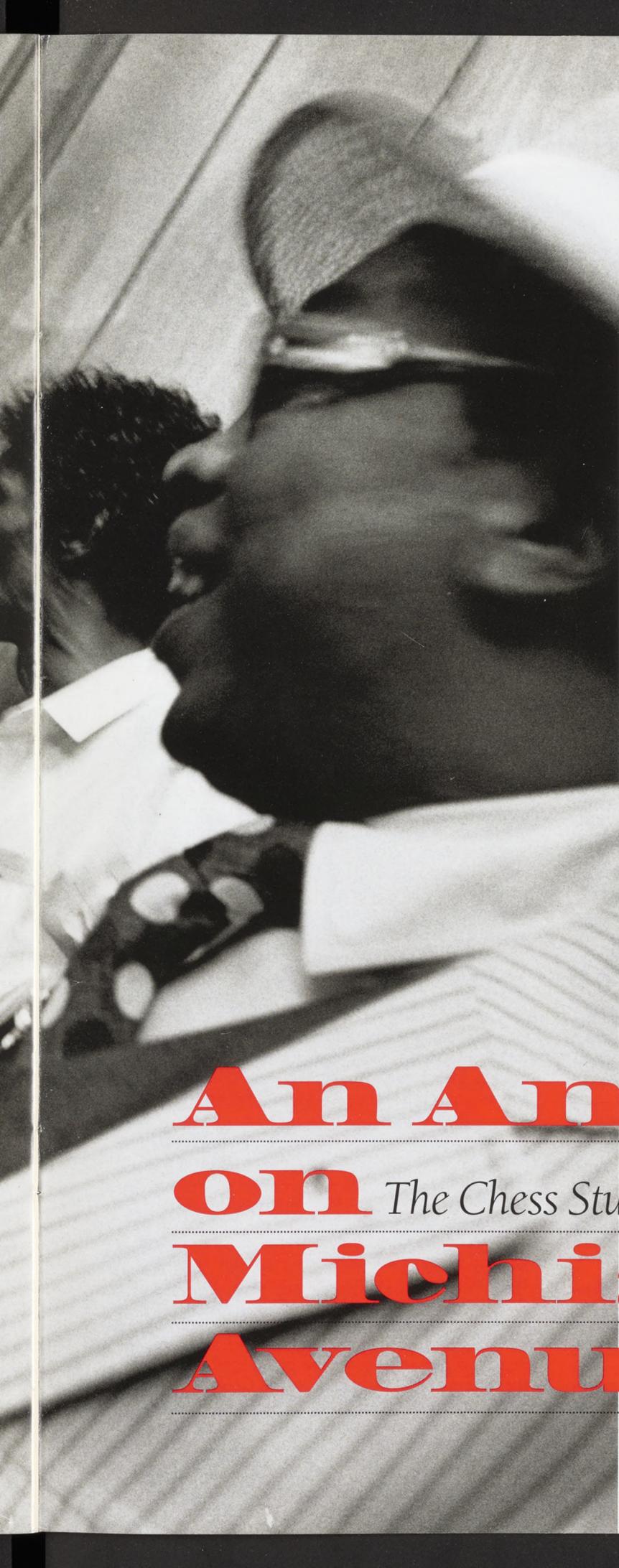
"He always conveys a certain edginess, an intended anarchy. He doesn't play like a singer; his quirky, menacing lines almost heckle the melody. In the urban blues, only the pianist Champion Jack Dupree treats the 12-bar convention as cavalierly as Mr. Sumlin."

After Wolf's death in 1976, Hubert Sumlin was set adrift. He played with Wolf's former tenor saxophonist Eddie Shaw in the latter's Wolf Gang band and gigged sporadically on his own with whatever pickup group came with the booking. Remarkably, he rebounded in 1987, when his first U.S. solo album, *Hubert Sumlin's Blues Party* (Black Top), brought him a whole new career at the age of 56.

Andrew Schwartz



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



**T**HE 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*  
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**Michigan**  
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**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

**B**UT 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.”

**B**Y 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.)