



Háskólinn
á Akureyri
University
of Akureyri

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Faculty of Social Sciences

Modern Studies

2014

**From Race Records to Rock'n'Roll:
How Chess Records helped to eliminate racial
barriers in music**

Pétur Karl Heiðarson

Final BA Thesis in Modern Studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social
Sciences



Háskólinn
á Akureyri
University
of Akureyri

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Faculty of Social Sciences

Modern Studies

2014

**From Race Records to Rock'n'Roll:
How Chess Records helped to eliminate racial
barriers in music**

Pétur Karl Heiðarson

Final BA Thesis for 180 ECTS unit in Modern Studies at the Faculty of
Humanities and Social Sciences

Instructor: Dr. Giorgio Baruchello

I hereby declare that I am the only author of this project and that is the result of own research

Ég lýsi hér með yfir að ég einn er höfundur þessa verkefnis og að það er ágóði eigin rannsókna

Pétur Karl Heiðarson

I here by declare that this thesis fulfills, in my opinion, requirements for a BA -degree from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Það staðfestist hér með að lokaverkefni þetta fullnægir að mínum dómi kröfum til BA-prófs við Hug- og félagsvísindasvið.

Giorgio Baruchello

Abstract

To the children of the modern age, music is an indispensable part of everyday life and accessible to everyone. Class, race, age and gender are of no or little importance, everyone can listen to music by anyone. This is, however, a relatively new aspect of music. Well into the later half of the 20th century, music was subject to racial and cultural segregation, just as almost every other aspect of society. White people had their music, and black people had their own. In this thesis, I will look at one particular company's participation in eliminating the aforementioned racial barriers in music, namely Chess Records.

Founded in 1950 by two Yiddish speaking Jews, Leonard and Philip Chess, that immigrated to Chicago at an early age, this company showed a rare disregard for race and focused more on the entrepreneurial opportunities found in *The Blues*. Though only a relatively small independent record company, *Chess Records* played an important role in the progression of *the Blues* to *Rock'n'Roll*, a genre deliberately created by music tycoons to sell the music of African Americans to white people. By capitalizing on the interest in black music, shown by new generational entity, *the teenager*, *Chess Records* took its place as one of the most influential names in music.

Útdráttur

Fyrir þá sem lifa á tuttugustu og fyrstu öld er tónlistin jafn sjálfsagður hluti daglegs lífs og fötin sem menn klæðast og maturinn sem á boðstólum er. Hún er öllum aðgengileg burtséð frá stétt, aldri og kynþætti. Allir hafa aðgang að tónlist hvar og hvenær sem er. Þetta var samt ekki raunin áður fyrr. Alþýðutónlist skipaði óæðri bekk en tónlist yfirstéttar. Ekki var þetta síst áberandi þar sem hörundslitur skildi menn að.

Í ritsmíð minni skoða ég útgáfustarf og samskipti fyrirtækisins Chess Records í Chicago við svarta tónlistarmenn úr Suðurríkjum Bandaríkjanna. Fyrirtækið var í eigu tveggja bandarískra bræðra, Leonards og Philip Chess, pólskra gyðinga sem fluttu til Chicago á unga aldri. Þeir eygðu tækifæri í blues-tónlist hinna svörtu Suðurríkjamanna sem hvítir menn höfðu sniðgengið fram að þessu. Þeir litu ekki á hörundslitinn sem neina hindrun í samskiptunum við hina hæfileikaríku svörtu tónlistarmenn og unnu tónlist þeirra brautargengi.

Chess fyrirtækið átti mikinn þátt í framgangi rokktónlistar um miðja 20 öld. Rokktónlistin var gagnert sköpuð af viðskiptamönnum í blúsgeiranum sem gerðu hana aðgengilega fyrir hina hvítu tónlistarmenn. Ný kynslóð sýndi tónlist svartra mikinn áhuga og Chess bræðurnir hömruðu járníð meðan það var heitt og sköpuðu sér á þann hátt mikilvægan sess í tónlistarsögu 20. aldar.

Thanks to Giorgio

For a strict schedule, impressive patience and almost un-earthly quick replies

Thanks to my grandfather

For being ready by the phone whenever I needed help (and of course, for all the help)

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Black – Jewish relations	4
Chapter 1.....	6
1.1 From Cxyz to Chess	6
1.2 From the Macomba Lounge to Aristocrat Records.....	8
1.3 From Morganfield to Muddy Waters	11
1.4 From Aristocrat to Chess.....	12
1.5 From Chess to Checker	14
1.6 From Waters to Walter	14
1.7 Willie Dixon	15
1.8 WVON	16
1.9 The end of Chess Records.....	17
Chapter 2.....	18
2.2 The role of <i>the Blues</i>.....	20
2.3 Radio	21
2.4 Chess Records’ Advantage	22
2.5 The Birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll.....	24
2.5.1 Rocket ‘88	25
2.5.2 Bo Diddley	26
2.5.3 Chuck Berry.....	26
2.6 Reactions to Rock’N’Roll	28
Chapter 3.....	28
3.1 Payola and Royalties.....	29
3.2 Lawsuits	30
3.3 The Chess Plantation	31
3.4 Leonard Chess - The Activist.....	33
3.5 Bo Diddley’s Beach Party	33
3.6 Racial Indifference	34
3.7 Myths and Tall Tales	35
3.5.1 I’m a Backdoor Man.....	35
3.5.2 Muddy Waters painting the Ceiling.....	36
Conclusion.....	37
Bibliography	43

Introduction

Chess Records, this relatively unknown record company, at least to the children of the 21st century, has shaped today's music in such a way that one can easily doubt that it would be the same if brothers Leonard and Philip Chess had not seen a rare business opportunity in the raw talent of the Chicago blues scene.

A bit of a forgotten legend, best known to music geeks, Chess Records suddenly made it into the spotlight again in 2008 when not one, but two movies were made about it. Both movies claimed to tell the story of Chess Records, the forgotten legend, to which rock and pop music owed so much. Their influence on pop music in the modern era does not seem to be as apparent as those of, say, the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. However, both of those pop and rock giants have Chess records much to thank for, and one may even contemplate the idea that perhaps there would be no Beatles or Rolling Stones, if it were not for Chess Records.

Every music enthusiast has to pay due credit to Chess records. Having at least seven of their artists enlisted in *the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*, not to mention Leonard Chess himself, who is enlisted in a special non-performer category: the company's influences are manifold and immense.

The Beatles reference Muddy Waters in their song *Come Together* – “He got muddy water, he one mojo filter”. Their tune, *Back in the USSR* is also a caricature tribute of sorts to Chuck Berry's *Back in the USA*. Angus Young from AC/DC has also cited Waters as amongst his biggest influences, saying that *You Shook Me All Night Long* was a tribute to Muddy Waters' *You Shook Me*.

The reason I chose to make Chess Records the issue of this thesis, instead of one of the numerous artists whose influences can be easily pointed out with reference to fellow modern musicians, is that this independent small fish in a large pond cut a swath through the African-American music scene of the mid-20th century, enabling a

scene which would have a monumental impact on the role of race in music¹, namely *Rock'n'Roll*.

For a comparative image of the Chess brothers' importance vis-à-vis the artists that they employed, one can think of George Martin, the Beatles' record producer and composer, who is often referred to as "the fifth Beatle", due to his influence upon and importance to their music.

Of course, one must not downplay the role of the artists themselves: without them nothing would have happened, but the intermediaries may not be forgotten either. Nor can we give into the taboo of not mentioning the role that race and racism played in this context, because, as it happened, black people quite simply lacked the credibility and respect that was granted to white people, and therefore needed white entrepreneur to promote the African-American talent.

When introducing *the University of Akureyri* to a group of to-be-graduates in Reykjavík, I was asked to tell them about my thesis. When I mentioned how these two lower-middle class Polish Jews helped working-class black people to reach the ears of the privileged white people, a necessary part of pursuing a career in music, people were generally shocked. Some laughed nervously, not quite knowing whether my remark was racist – and if their laughter was perhaps making them racist as well –, others looked around as if to double-check that they did not have a black person in the class, offended by this seemingly tremendous racist comment. This response made me realize how big the taboo still is and how even bigger it must have been in the 1950's.

¹ *Race Music* was a collective term, used to describe the music popular with the African American peoples (Evans, 2000). Nadine Cohodas, author of the biography on *Chess Records, Spinning Blues into Gold* (2000), states that categorizing a song as form of *Race Music* was more of a predetermination of the listener's race, rather than that of the performer himself.

Black – Jewish relations

The story of Chess Records is, amongst other things, a story of Black – Jewish collaboration and alliance. At a time when race predisposed and defined characteristics (at least to the beholder), social status and class, *Chess Records* was a place where people of different racial backgrounds looked beyond the color of their skin and religion(or lack thereof) to obtain a common goal (Cohodas, 2000; Greenberg, 2006; Koskoff, 2000).

Since the early years of the United States of America and up until the beginning of the last century, the relationship between Jews and African Americans had been little and usually of a similar nature as those of European Americans and African Americans. Some Jewish settlers in America made their living in international trade, which at the time involved mostly the import of rum, sugar and slaves, and a handful of Jews owned slaves. But over all, very few Jews showed an interest in slavery, neither outspokenly endorsing nor opposing it², usually mirroring the views of the general white public.

As geographical circumstances would have it, most Jews lived in the North and African Americans were mostly situated in the South, so there rarely was a reason for neither party to intervene with the other's affairs (Jewish Virtual Library, 2008).

In the 1950's and 60's, in the post-war turmoil, an alliance was formed between the African American civil rights movements and the Jewish petty bourgeois, built on the foundation of analogous experiences of bigotry and discrimination on the one hand, and shared interests and a liberal vision on the other. This Black-Jewish alliance was perhaps symbolized best in 1965, when Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched side by side in the *Selma Civil Rights March* (Greenberg, 2006).

² A few exceptions existed: Rabbi David Einhorn was an outspoken anti-slavery activist and was driven out of his hometown, Baltimore, because of his position. On the other hand, Rabbi Morris Raphall was outspoken pro-slavery activist and used the passages of the Bible to justify it (Jewish Virtual Library, 2008).

This alliance is a controversial subject. Although most, if not all, agree that a co-operation was existent, many scholars have questioned it being an alliance, strongest arguments stating that the intentions and objectives of the Jewish side were others than a sincere desire and ambition for social justice and equality, but rather a less-virtuous regard for the advancement of the social status of Jews (Greenberg, 2006).

This line of thinking – especially amongst Black supremacist groups, many of which had turned to anti-Zionist ideology while their popularity grew quickly – as well as political advancements in different directions, meant that come the end of the 1960's, the alliance fell apart to the lament of many, who mourned the decline of a *Golden Age* (Greenberg, 2006).

Similar to the controversies concerning the Black – Jewish alliance, some have questioned if the motives that the Chess brothers had were just chivalrous and driven on by a yearning for social justice, suggesting that it was more about taking advantage of the situation, advancing their own status under the pretext of helping the pauper, even cheating the artists out of their money (Cohodas, 2000; Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

In the documentary *Godfathers and Sons* (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003), Rapper Carlton “Chuck D” Ridenhour talked about the mentality of the previous century, a post-slave mentality, which caused troubles in the business relationship between the black artists and Jewish enterprisers. The artists were temperamental and sensitive towards having a white patron or benefactor, thinking the paternalistic way of business to be degrading and bearing a reminiscence of slave – plantation-owner relationship, but still relied largely on that patronage when their art was at a low point in sales.

In any case, the sheer number of people whose art was produced and published by *Chess Records*, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Etta James, Bo Diddley, Chuch Berry, Little Walter, John Lee Hooker, Buddy Guy among them, lends support to the claim that this small independent record company served as a cradle to *Rock'n'Roll* in its infancy (Cohodas, 2000; Larkin 1998). And the fact that, while the trend was to maximize turnover by getting white musicians to cover the music of African

Americans³(Cohodas, 2000; Koskoff, 2000), *Chess Records* stayed true to its roots, publishing and developing the sounds of the artists that had provided the company with its success right up to the end⁴, strengthens the claim that *Chess Records* launched the blues (Cohodas, 2000).

Chapter 1

1.1 From Czyz to Chess

Lejzor Czyz was born on March 12, 1917 into a poor Jewish family living in the town or *Shtetl*⁵ called *Motele*⁶, a largely Jewish community in Poland. His mother, Cyrla, and his father, Yasef, already had a daughter called Malka, and would later have a third child, a boy called Fiszel (Cohodas, 2000).

Lejzor and Fiszel would later come to shape modern music as we know it(, but back then they were merely the sons of a poor couple in Motele, which meant sleeping in one room with all of their family, sometimes with farm animals inside to add warmth, and even sleeping on top of an oven when winters got especially brutish (Cohodas, 2000).

³ When *race music* from the independent labels started to cross over to the *pop charts* from the *race charts*, the major labels, such as *Columbia, RCA and MGM*, started actively using white artists to record covers of songs by African American artists, that had shown potential of crossing over (Cohodas, 2000; Sanjek and Straw, 2000).

⁴ In *Godfathers and Sons* (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003), Marshall Chess, the son of Leonard, produces a hip-hop track on which rappers Chuck D and Common rap over the classic Muddy Waters tune *Mannish Boy*, performed by the band that originally backed Waters on the *Electric Mud* record, released in 1968.

⁵ Yiddish word for a village with a large Jewish population.

⁶ Yiddish spelling; other known forms are *Motol, Motoul* and *Motal* (Wolraich and Miller, 2006; Polick, 1997).

In 1922, Yasef got an opportunity to move to America, the New World, but that meant leaving his family behind while he gained enough revenue, working as a carpenter, to send back home to them.

In 1928, Yasef (who now was called Joseph in order to better fit into his new society) could finally afford to send for his family, who came *via* steamboat as promptly as possible. Upon the family's reunion at Ellis Island, New York, they dropped their Polish names and took up American names, which they had chosen beforehand; Lejzor and Fiszel changed their names into Leonard and Philip; Cyrla became Celia; Malka became Mae. Joe had already teamed up with two other men, building an apartment-building in one of Chicago's fast-growing Jewish areas. Joseph was to keep one of these apartments for himself and his family (Cohodas, 2000).

This Yiddish-speaking Jewish family, who had immigrated from Poland, now consisted of English-speaking Chicagoans. And as was evident of all Americans, they were affected by the Great Depression, although their lives would continue to be better than the ones they used to have in Motele.

Nevertheless, Joe Chess, who had been a shoemaker in Motele and worked as a carpenter in Chicago, had no more carpeting work when the Great Depression hit. In 1935, together with Morris Pulik (formerly Moishce Pulik), Celia's brother, he started a junkyard business, *The Wabash Junk Shop*, a popular choice for unemployed residents of Chicago. It was hard work, and its repute as a career-of-choice for the forced-entrepreneurs of the Great Depression meant that supply exceeded the demand, which added up to long hours for little money. The children helped as much as they could, Mae even dropping out of school and the boys taking additional jobs as delivery boys, both of milk and newsletters (Cohodas, 2000).

Leonard partnered up with his father in the junkyard business after his uncle Morris died in a car crash. Phil was granted a scholarship as a result of his prominent football skills and was away for three semesters. Yet he came back to work at the junkyard, realizing that university life was not for him.

The junkyard did not prove particularly prosperous or enjoyable for Leonard, and when the opportunity struck in 1942, he bought a liquor store, *Cut-Rate Liquor*,

situated at 5060 South State Street, in an all-black neighborhood in the outskirts of Chicago. In 1943, Phil was drafted for the Army, in which he served until 1946. At that time, Leonard had already sold *Cut-Rate Liquor* and bought a place situated in a more centrally located area, center of business and social activities. The place he called *708 Liquor Store*, selling liquor and playing music from a jukebox. Leonard ran the business for about one year, at which time he sold the *708 Liquor Store* and bought a place called *The Congress Buffet*. This change was a bit bigger than the previous, since now he owned a club situated in the middle of the vibrant nightlife of Chicago's black community (Cohodas, 2000).

When Phil came back, it seems as though he was automatically made a partner in his brothers business, which now was called *The Macomba Lounge*. Aside from few weekends helping as a milk-delivery boy and a short while working together at the *Wabash*, this marked the beginning of a long and prosperous partnership, to which pop culture has more to thank than we know (Cohodas, 2000).

1.2 From the Macomba Lounge to Aristocrat Records

In the 1940's, the already considerably big black community of Chicago expanded from 278.000 residents to 492.000, an expansion of 77% (Cohodas, 2000). In comparison, Iceland has around 326.000 residents today and the highest variant of Statistics Iceland projects 491.000 residents by the end of 2060 (Statistics Iceland, 2013).

This extreme increase of population, usually referred to as the *Great Migration*, was by a large part due to the xenophobic atmosphere of the general white public (History.com, 2010). If the Jim Crow laws of segregation were not enough (Early, N.D.), advances in technology that made sharecroppers of the Mississippi Delta redundant were for many the final push to seek new opportunities in urban centers (Cohodas, 2000).

The Chess brothers reaped the fruits of the *Great Migration*, making their living off the black community (although, in her bibliographical account of *Chess Records: Spinning Blues into Gold* (2000), Nadine Cohodas prefers calling it "making their

living in” (p. 4), hence removing any underlying accusations of exploitation). *The Macomba Lounge* was amongst the most popular after-hours clubs, their patrons being by a large part revered musicians from the jazz-, swing-, and other forms of the growingly popular black-music scene, who came after their gigs at other clubs for a jam-session. *The Blues* had not yet reached the attention of the Chess brothers, but *the Macomba Lounge* was certainly the first step towards their career in music.

Any club owner in Chicago knew that live music was essential to keep a profitable business going and the closely tied music- and nightlife scenes made the step from the hustle of bartending to the relatively easy going recording industry a logical one to take. Being a respected owner and an ambitious businessman, Leonard Chess quickly formed a closely knitted social web, of which prominent members of the music scene were adherent, artists and tycoons alike. It was through these social ties that Leonard got the notion of Andrew Tibbs, a talented singer in whom Leonard showed great interest (Cohodas, 2000).

Leonard was involved in a poker club of sorts, a frequent gathering of fellow South Side Jews who played cards amongst themselves. It was in that group that Leonard first got an idea that later would prove to be his most important one, both to himself and the rest of the world. Namely, to get involved in the record industry. The Brounts and the Arons, couples who Leonard knew from the poker club, had a new record company up and running when *the Macomba Lounge* was around one year old. This company was called Aristocrat Records and had recorded some of *the Macomba's* attractions, such as Tom Archia, a member of the house band at *the Macomba*, and Jump Jackson (Cohodas, 2000).

Aristocrat Records was a fast-expanding company, following the standardized pattern that most other companies followed, i.e. recording hit artists who were almost exclusively white musicians, the target group being other white people. Then there were the Race records, which were targeted at black audiences (Cohodas, 2000).

Leonard knew that he wanted to record Tibbs on his own, seeing in him a rare opportunity that he believed would not go unnoticed by others – neither businessmen looking for a source of income or the general public that might provide that income. He got in touch with the Arons and struck a deal with them, squeezing Tibbs in when

a Clarence Samuels session had ended sooner than expected. He even managed to use Samuels' backing musicians, Dave Young's orchestra, to play Tibbs' tunes.

The record sold very well, given that an absolute minimum number of records were pressed to minimize risk since the producers did not expect much. Their low expectations were perhaps not odd, given the controversial nature of the lyrics: while the A-side featured *Union man Blues*, a fairly straight forward Blues tune, the B side featured *Bilbo is Dead*, a song which sarcastically mocked the passing of Theodore G. Bilbo, the former Governor of Mississippi and an outspoken racist, member of the *Ku Klux Klan* and segregationist. (United States Senate, n.d.; Cohodas, 2000)

Although only a minor hit amongst the marginalized black community, this record marked the beginning of Leonard's career in music. Following the divorce of Evelyn Aron and her husband, Charles, in 1948 Leonard bought John out, as well as Fred and Mildred Brout and Art Spiegel, who had provided most of the financial support in the beginning, though having minimal influence in running the company. With the financial help of his father, whose hard work had finally paid off when he found his way in real estate, Leonard managed to become one of the only two owners of *Aristocrat Records* in 1948 (Cohodas, 2000).

Although short-lived, their collaboration seems to have had a substantial effect on the *Chess Records'* legacy, serving as a sort of dress rehearsal, or a boot camp if you will. What Leonard provided to *Aristocrat Records*, at least in the beginning, was a talent for business and a clear ambition for making money, as well as the closely woven net of connections to Chicago musicians. What he lacked, however, was the understanding of music. Evelyn, who came from a very different background, her father and mother being both musicians of considerable means, had a very relaxed attitude towards money and provided much more of a leap-of-faith kind of outlook towards business, as well as her artistic views and deep understanding of music, which working-class Leonard lacked (Cohodas, 2000).

1.3 From Morganfield to Muddy Waters

As *Aristocrat Records* progressed, with Tom Archia as their price hog and their focus set mainly on race music, another turning point came into Leonard's life. Around late 1947 and early 1948, a man called Sunnyland Slim, a blues piano player and singer, came into the *Aristocrat* studios to record his music. He had been spotted by Sammy Goldberg, a talent scout through whom Leonard had spotted out Tibbs as well. His was the first band to relieve *Aristocrat Records* of the jazz-band setup, the swing orchestra and the brass-bands, bringing only a piano, a bass and drums. A last-minute change of mind made Sunnyland call for his guitar player as well, McKinley Morganfield. He was a talented bluesman, a sharecropper from the Mississippi Delta, who had come to Chicago in 1943, not looking for just another hard job to barely make a living, but rather to pursue his dream of becoming a musician. He had been playing together with Sunnyland, another Delta sharecropper, for a while, Sunnyland being usually the leading man. (Cohodas, 2000)

Morganfield asked to play one of his own songs when Sunnyland finished his set, and recorded two songs. The sound of both Sunnyland and Morganfield was something completely different (Rolf, 2007) to the popular mainstream music of the time, but it would be a while until the Arons (and later Leonard, at the time only a salesman for *Aristocrat Records*) would be willing to release the records, thinking it something too raw and rough for the crowds. The records were released in February of 1948, failing to succeed (Cohodas, 2000).

In April 1948, the Arons had divorced and Leonard bought into the company, as mentioned above. Evelyn and Goldberg were convinced that Morganfield and Sunnyland had that special something, a certain mean disposition that would be very well received by the public. Leonard remained ever skeptical, but agreed to get them once more into the studio to do another session. They recorded four songs, the first two being *Good Lookin' Woman* and *Mean Disposition*, and the next two: *I Feel Like Going Home* and *I Can't be Satisfied*. A three thousand copies of a record consisting of the latter two songs, *I Can't be Satisfied* on the A-side and *I Feel Like Going Home* on the B-side, were pressed, and sold out the day after arriving in stores (Cohodas, 2000).

Although Sunnyland Slim would not become a big player in Leonard's success, his partner McKinley Morganfield was now on his way to become one of the legends of blues under the name of Muddy Waters. He and Leonard developed a deep friendship over time, both reaping the fruits of the other's success, and both undoubtedly being one of the biggest reasons for the other's phenomenal success and status amongst the later legends of music. (Cohodas, 2000)

1.4 From Aristocrat to Chess

By the end of 1949, Evelyn Aron had grown weary of running Aristocrat Records. The different backgrounds and ambitions of her and Leonard were becoming too much of an obstacle for her, and she wanted to go and try her luck in another field of work in the music industry, distribution.

Her departure meant that Leonard was holding the reins by himself, while Phil was still keeping *the Macomba Lounge* up and running. It soon became clear that running both the companies alone was too much for the brothers, and a change was necessary. At the best possible time, a fire burned *the Macomba Lounge* to the ground, relieving the brothers of having to sell the company and leaving them with a substantial amount of insurance money. (Cohodas, 2000)

After *the Macomba Lounge* was destroyed, the brothers could put all their energy into developing *Aristocrat Records*. They saw fairly quickly that Chicago, although the population was big and getting even bigger, would not be enough for them to make a living off records sales. A rule of thumb for the smaller labels was that a record selling forty thousand copies would be enough to turn a small profit and reaching the charts, possibly even a number 1 seat, but eighty thousand was the goal, i.e. an unquestionably successful record, turning profit for everybody and creating a financial security for quite a while.

Leonard's eyes turned south, were he had a business associate called Buster Williams. He was of the same working-class background as Leonard and had the same eye for business and drive for moneymaking. The Memphis-based Williams saw to it that records from *Aristocrat*, and later *Chess Records*, would reach the South. He was also the owner of *Plastic Products*, a company which pressed some of the brothers'

records on credit, an important factor for independent labels such as *Aristocrat*. Williams had a belief and trust in both Leonard and Phil, their talent for business as well as their instinct towards music, so he would let them pay when the records had turned profit (Cohodas, 2000).

It was Williams' idea to change the name to *Chess Records*, a more snappy and attention-grabbing name than the cumbersome *Aristocrat Records Distributing Company*. In June 1950, *Aristocrat Records* were changed into *Chess Records*, at least outward. It was not until 1952, when the brothers had finally managed to save up some money, that they officially incorporated *Aristocrat Records* into *Chess Records*, dividing the shares equally between Phil, Leonard and Revetta, Leonard's wife (Cohodas, 2000)

Contrary to what some might have expected, and indeed what the movie *Cadillac Records* depicts, Muddy Waters was not the price hog for *Chess Records*. They stayed rather on the safer route that *Aristocrat Records* had already paved, mostly recording jazz numbers. The first record was a jazz tune called *My Foolish Heart*. It was saxophone-player Gene Ammons' take on a theme from a 1949 movie by the same name. The song was already a hit, and therefore a fairly safe one to distribute. The next *Chess* record was one by Waters, *Walkin' Blues*, backed by *Rollin' Stone* on the B-side.

It is ironic that the B-side track of, in a way, a B-class record from *Chess Records* (being a record with considerable potential, but not a sure win as Ammons' cover tune was) would later become one of the most iconic tune of their whole career, lending its name, not only, to the band called *The Rolling Stones* but to *Rolling Stone Magazine* and Bob Dylan's *Like a Rolling Stone*. Jimi Hendrix even covered the tune under the name *Catfish Blues* in 1967⁷.

⁷ Catfish Blues was the name of a Blues tune by Robert Petway, recorded in 1941. Petway's song served as a basis for Muddy Waters' *Rollin' Stone*, although there were definite lyrical and rhythmical changes, a rework of the former. Jimi Hendrix' session for the Dutch TV show *Hoeppla*, featured a cover of Muddy Waters' *Rollin' Stone*, referencing Petway's original in both the title and lyrics (Marshall, 2011).

1.5 From Chess to Checker

In April 1952, the brothers made their next move on the chessboard, the creation of a subsidiary label called *Checker Records*. Its creation was supposed to enable Leonard and Phil to take a new direction, focusing mostly on *Country and Western* music. Aside from a handful of recordings under those genres, however *Checker Records* would eventually focus mostly on *Rhythm and Blues*, and never actually strayed far from the safe road, paved by *Chess* beforehand.

Many radio stations had a quota-system of sorts, which limited the number of records each label would get played at each time, to which many labels responded by creating subsidiaries. In all probability, *Checker Records* was only half-heartedly created as a basis for a new direction in recording, and actually had a more conventional and, admittedly, a less noble role of attaining more airtime for Leonard's and Phil's clients (Cohodas, 2000).

1.6 From Waters to Walter

Around the time when Leonard and Phil were busy with the creation of the *Checker Records* subsidiary, a new talent was discovered at a surprising time and place: in the middle of a Muddy Waters recording session. A young harmonica player, Marion Walter Jacobs, who was known as Little Walter and had been a member of Waters' backing band for a while, took the lead in an instrumental tune which the band played at clubs when ending a set.

A Louisiana native, Little Walter had played as a street performer in New Orleans since he was a child of 12 years old, travelling to Arkansas at age 14, from where he went to Tennessee, Missouri, finally settling for a while in Chicago in mid 1940's. (Biography.com, n.d.; Cohodas, 2000)

Although just a young boy, Little Walter managed to create a following of prominent bluesmen, who admired his ear for the blues, as well as his unique playing style. A fan of jumping blues and saxophone players such as Louis Jordan, Little Walter imitated the playing styles of those musicians, lending an eccentric dynamic to his

harmonica, which suited the postwar blues of Chicago perfectly. Although he played the harmonica acoustic, as tradition would have it, later on he would also be one of the first to play an amplified harmonica, providing a passion and boldness that the harmonica often lacks as a lead instrument vis-à-vis the piano or electric guitar.

Jimmy Rogers, Muddy Waters' guitar sideman, introduced Little Walter to Waters and despite being 15 years his junior, Little Walter fitted him perfectly (Cohodas, P. 68).

Although put up on the shelf for a while, a *Checker Records* production was eventually released, on which Little Walter and his band played the instrumental, which had been named *Juke*, backed with a tune called *Can't Hold Out Much Longer*. It proved to be an instant *R&B*⁸ hit, the first of many which Little Walter would provide for *Chess* (Cohodas, 2000).

1.7 Willie Dixon

Willie Dixon had been a part of Leonard's and Phil's life for a long time before becoming their right-hand man at *Chess Records*. Ever since the *Macomba* days, he frequented the lounge as a patron after playing shows at other clubs in the neighborhood, sometimes even playing the bass in late-night jam sessions. This big Mississippi native and ex-boxer would come to evolve a deep friendship with the brothers, on par with that of Muddy Waters.

Although releasing a number of records in his own name, Willie Dixon had another crucial role as an intermediary, talent scout and business associate to the brothers. As well as being a rich source of material and a go-to session artist, writing and playing hundreds of tracks for *Chess Records*, he provided Leonard and Phil with a vast social network in the black community of Chicago. He was a man who knew everyone and kept close tabs on what was happening in the community. Although Leonard and Phil had been in the business a long time and therefore knew a lot in their field, their race

⁸ *Rhythm and Blues*: A kind of electrified blues with a consistent and strong beat, not to be confused with the genre which developed in the 1980's and came to be known as contemporary *R&B* (or with a more phonetic abbreviation *RnB*) (Rolf, 2007).

and status as businessmen rather than artists would keep them from attaining a degree of social connection equal to Dixon's (Cohodas, 2000). Marshall Chess said about Dixon that he "*might have been the first black record executive in the world. He did everything with those artists; business; made music; wrote lyrics* (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003). Dixon himself encapsulated his immense connections and status in the local African-American culture on his album and its titular song *I am the Blues* (1970).

1.8 WVON

It had been a long time interest for Leonard⁹, when in 1962, he and Phil founded *L&P Broadcasting*, through which they finally bought an AM station, *WHFC*, and *WEHS* its FM outlet, for one million dollars from Richard W. Hoffman. The stations had been up and running since 1926, and had established a fairly big group of listeners, limiting the risk taken on by the brothers, and although the license was registered in Cicero, the headquarters were only about 3 miles from the *Chess H.Q.* at *2120 South Michigan Avenue* (Cohodas, 2000).

The call letters *WHFC* stood for "Where Happy Folks Congregate" and *WEHS* stood for "Elizabeth Hoffman's Station" paying an homage to Hoffman's mother. The brothers changed the name of the AM station to *WVON* "Voice of the Negro" and changed the FM to *WHFC*, so as to keep a relation to the past, still providing a venue where happy folks could keep on congregating.

Leonard thought that, by focusing on all or some of the many ethnic groups of Chicago, as some radio stations did, he would not gain the full capacity of advertisement revenue each ethnic group could provide. His idea was that by focusing solely on the black populace, which as addressed before was a little touched market, advertisers that had a financial interest would flock around his station, since the black demographic made up one fourth of the population (Cohodas, 2000).

⁹ Leonard actually bought a small station, *WTAC*, in 1959, located in Flint, Michigan, for 260,000 \$. The station did not live up to expectations and Leonard sold it in 1960 for 555,700 \$ (Cohodas, 2000).

1.9 The end of Chess Records

In the later half of the 1960's, Marshall Chess, who had been working for his father and uncle as a intern of sorts for some time, learning the ropes from the veterans, started to show initiative in regards with the progression of the Chess dynasty. He wanted to expand the horizon of *Chess Records*, which he thought was missing out on the up and coming generation. He started the *Cadet Concept* subsidiary, through which he released psychedelic experimental music, a first for *Chess Records*. Making considerable success with *Rotary Connection*, a highly experimental psychedelic group that featured Minnie Riperton¹⁰ amongst the line-up's most notable members, the subsidiary was off to a good start.

Cadet Concept Records are perhaps best known for the ill-perceived psychedelic-experimental concept albums *Electric Mud*(1968) and *Howlin' Wolf's New Album*(1969). On them, Marshall put together a band to rework old tunes by the masters, as well as some covers, draping them in psychedelic attire. Although they have lived on to enjoy some acclaim, Rapper Chuck D, for an example, said *Electric Mud* served as a gateway album for him into earlier and rawer *Blues* works, the albums are widely recognized as total flops (Cohodas, 2000; Larkin, 1998; Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

Although Marshall's attempt on widening the *Chess* scope did not go completely as planned, by no means is he a reason for the decline of the *Chess* dynasty. His involvement merely serves as a landmark in their history, which, although looked promising when *Cadet Concept* was established, was already suffering the brothers ever growing interest in the radio business.

After 22 years of recording as *Chess Records* and about 3 as *Aristocrat Records*, along with the many subsidiaries, the Chess brothers sold the company to *General*

¹⁰ Minnie Riperton is perhaps best known for her 1975 single *Loving You*. She had worked as a receptionist at Chess in the past and made a few releases on Chess and Checker, some under the name Andrea Davis, some as a backing vocal to Etta James (Cohodas, 2000; Ankeny, N.D.).

Recorded Tape for 6 and a half million dollars. Tragically, Leonard suffered a heart attack and died shortly thereafter, and his death marked the twilight of the legendary label. In the following years, Phil soon departed from Chess to WVON radio, his main interest at that time, leaving the company to Marshall, who served as president after the acquisition of *GTR*. Finally, in 1970, Marshall's departure to *Rolling Stones Records*, the Rolling Stones' own record company, where he would serve as founding president, served as the final nail in the coffin (Cohodas, 2000).

Chapter 2

Among the many social determinations of musical meaning in the United States, none has proven more powerful and enduring than that of race – The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music (Koskoff, 2000).

When *Aristocrat* and later *Chess Records* were founded, musical segregation was alive and well. *Race Music* was a common denominator for all music played by African-American performers and was thereby deemed unsuitable for the Caucasian community in America (Cohodas, 2000; Koskoff, 2000).

Arguably, *Race Music* was a much freer form of art than the easy-listening pop music, which was favored by big commercial radio stations and record labels (Cohodas, 2000). Since the market had a much lesser interest in *Race Music*, which initially was the folk music of the African-American peoples, it was free to evolve in all kinds of directions. A freedom which over time led to *the Blues* – in all its shapes and sizes, *Rhythm and Blues*, *Rock'n'Roll* and later *Funk*, *Disco*, *contemporary R&B* and *Hip-Hop* (Koskoff, 2000).

Although *Muddy Waters'* and *Howlin' Wolf's* electrification of *the Blues* was an important part of a wave preluding *R&B* (or *cat music*, as the Caucasian youth of North America was prone to call the genre), it still was considered *Race music*, and theirs was always a proud Delta-born Sharecropper's *Blues*. They were classic Bluesmen, the Beethoven and Bach of *the Blues* and *Rhythm and Blues* (Pinkerson

and Levin, 2003). The next generation of musicians, such as Little Walter, Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry, had the same deep understanding of the *Blues*, but were also children of a new society which was opening up fast, where *Race Music* would soon be a thing of the past and *Rock'n'Roll* would take over the music industry (Koskoff, 2000).

2.1 The Birth of the Blues

If *the Blues* is the ancestor of *Rhythm and Blues* and *Rock and Roll*, where are the ancestral grounds of *the Blues*? *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* (Evans, 2000) calls *the Blues* a mixture of European and African music, where the obdurate but lavish forms of European music and instruments, such as the fiddle, saxophone, piano and guitar, meet a soulful and largely unrestrained African heritage. This was accompanied by the struggle and hardships of the black Americans and a lack of means, often resulting in secondary instruments played alongside washboards and jugs (Evans, 2000).

Much of the black population of America originates from the Savanna region of West Africa, where a part of the lower echelons of society are called *Griots*, who make their living as professional musicians, leading a life as wayfarers or vagabonds. Not that Blues Musicians are necessarily the *Griots* of the United States or modern times, the connection being perhaps a tad bit too far back in history, but the similarities in their lower-class status, a wandering lifestyle and their music – often played on stringed instruments accompanied by a somewhat gloomy social commentary in their lyrics as well as dramatic but hefty singing style – are not to be demoted (Evans, 2000).

A much closer progenitor to *the Blues* is the *field holler*, an extremely basic free form of solo chanting or singing, from which much of the basic melodic model of the former seems to be derived. As the name suggests, this type of music was recollected mostly by slaveholders, farmers and travelers who observed the singing of slaves out in the fields and later by farmworkers. Since most black farmworkers went to church, this type of untamed musical style served as a great influence to the religious music

played in black sermons, where a backing instrument was at hand and songs took on a more closely woven rhythmical pattern (Evans, 2000).

By adapting elements of these different musical styles, i.e. *the field holler* and the vocal expression of religious music, together with exerted influences, both lyrical and harmonic, from the narrative European folk ballad, a foundation for *the Blues*, with its *blue notes*¹¹ and *12-bar pattern*¹², was made.

In the following years, *blues* would become a descriptive word in the title of many songs, first they were mostly played by the popular *vaudeville* entertainers and *ragtime* pianists, but *the Blues scene* would soon have its first stars, such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (Evans, 2000).

2.2 The role of *the Blues*

A famous Willie Dixon quotation states: “The Blues is the roots, the rest is the fruits.” The snappy rhyme and the ginger, but to-the-point nature of the quote, makes it a favorite of *the Blues* scene. Although it is perhaps an overly simplifying statement, it rings true in a number of ways. *The Blues* provided the oppressed and largely illiterate black public of America an outlet by means of which they could express themselves and uphold some kind of a public consciousness. (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

Rapper Chuck D spoke of the importance of *the Blues* to Americans of African descent, saying that by studying “...the recorded history of *Blues, Soul, Funk* and *Jazz*, for the last 100 years... you get the timeline of how black people lived... black people in this country didn’t have an outlet to have our stories told. But in our music we was able to express ourselves and our inner sides.”(Pinkerson and Levin, 2003) This

¹¹ *The Blue notes* are typically flattened 3rd or 7th notes of a major scale, taking the place of an expected major interval (Bitesize, N.d.).

¹² *The 12 bar pattern* is a chord progression upon which most traditional blues songs are based. It consists of 12 measures, each divided into three phrases of four measures in which three chords, tonic (I), subdominant (IV) and dominant (V), are arranged in the following manner: I, I, I, I – IV, IV, I, I, – V, IV, I, I. It still is one of the most common chord progressions in all music derived from *Blues* (Bitesize, N.d.).

serves as a good summary on what *the Blues* provided as a means of expression. The oppressed public had an outlet through which they could safely express their frustrations and troubles to their peers.

Howlin' Wolf was recorded frequently explaining the meaning of *the Blues*, and what it meant to "have *the Blues*". *The Blues* was not only a style of music, but a state of melancholia:

I'm gonna tell'ya what the blues is. When you ain't got no money, you got the Blues... a lotta' people holler about "I don't like no Blues" but when you ain't got no money and can't pay your house rent and can't buy you no food, you damn sure got the Blues. Any time you thinkin' evil, you thinkin' about the blues.

Although in this interpretation *the Blues* as more of a state of depression and general pessimism towards the harsh lifestyle forced upon African Americans, it underpins Chuck D's explanation on the role that *the Blues* plays as a sort of a public psychotherapy.

2.3 Radio

Despite there always being a minority of white people to whom African American music appealed¹³, it remained a largely untouched market up until 1947, when restrictions on the number of radio stations in each market, originally issued by the FCC,¹⁴ were lifted. Prior to that, the number of radio stations in each market was limited three, or sometimes up to five. The licenses required were largely owned by the major radio stations, such as *NBC*, *CBS* and *Mutual*, who focused most of their attention on Caucasian audiences and pressured the FCC to uphold the restrictions, which helped enormously with monopolizing the market (Key, 2000).

¹³ For an example the *Hipsters* or *Hepcats* of the 1940's: A subculture of white people who aspired to live their lives in the manner of black *Jazz* musicians, dressing and talking in a similar way, as well as sharing a relaxed attitude to sex and drugs. Bing Crosby spearheaded this subculture, and is often referred to as being "the first hip white person to be born in America" (Marcus, 2001).

¹⁴ Federal Communications Commission.

Around 1947-48, the medium of television began to demand attention from the big stations. Subsequently, the pressure on the *FCC* went down and the restrictions were lifted. Just as they had with the radio, the major stations focused almost all their attention on white audiences. The cost of keeping up the format that the big corporations had created – largely consisting of drama or comedy programs – was too high for the independent radio stations. This was both due to an almost doubled increase in number of radio stations, and because advertisers had taken a dramatic turn over to television, advertising revenue from radio dropping by some 38%. The independent radio stations were left with the burdensome task of finding a way to decrease their overhead, as well as finding a new target audience to increase the advertisement revenue again (Key, 2000).

To decrease the overhead, most of the airtime was dedicated to a single person who played music, the Disc Jockey, instead of live acts, with technicians, actors, musicians and whatnot. To increase the advertisement revenue, their eyes turned to the largely neglected African Americans, playing all kinds of *Blues*-oriented music, *gospel*, *jazz* and vocal groups. While these were strictly aimed at the black populace, *Black appeal radio stations* (Bill Barlow, 1999) whites who had a taste for black music, but had difficulties consuming it in live performances, could now sate their appetite unhindered. This newfound demographic proved a deep and rich source of income for entrepreneurs and the number of *Black appeal radio stations* went from four in 1949 to four hundred in 1956 (Key, 2000). One of these four hundred was the Chess brothers' *WVON radio - Voice of the Negro*, which was solely devoted to the black demographic and, as mentioned before, was Leonard's way of giving back to the community in which he and his brother had built their company and made their fortune (Cohodas, 2000).

2.4 Chess Records' Advantage

As I will discuss in chapter 3, the subject of the Chess Bros' way of business is a heated one. They paid the talent a sparse salary, although in accordance to union rules, royalties to artists were measured in cents *per* sold record, whereas their cut was in dollars. They had a number of falling-outs with their talent and staff through the years, but they did show their talent an unequalled loyalty, recording and selling

the already old-fashioned sounds of *Howlin' Wolf* and *Muddy Waters* while other independent labels focused all their attention on *Rock'n'Roll*, favored by youngsters of all races. Not that *Chess Records* was by any means antediluvian in itself – the label, and its subsidiaries had a number of artists on both the *Rhythm and Blues* and *Rock'n'Roll* frontline – but this persistent focus on formulas that originally built the companies repertoire, such as the Delta-Bluesmen and *jazzy* sax-players, as well as an aptitude for fresh talent would concoct to their status as a legendary record label.

After World War II, The United States were in an economic upsurge and with the still relatively new mediums of records, movies and radio, times were certainly changing fast. The major labels had a fixed focus on a certain target group, the middle class grown-ups had served well as such, being pretty much the only people with the means and interest required, but for entrepreneurs like Leonard and Phil Chess, a new opportunity came with this economic boom. The lower classes had more money than before, which meant that records were not only for the rich, so there was a definite chance to capitalize on some aspects of their culture. On top of that, a new generation cared less about race or class and more about age, creating an entity based on the adolescent years: The Teenagers¹⁵ (Cohodas, 2000; Nicholson and Bowman, 2000; Du Noyer, 1995).

Well into the 20th century, *Pop music* consisted largely of white musicians doing covers of originals by their black counterparts. The major labels had white singers, songstress' and singing groups whose career depended on songs that where eligible to cross over from the *Race Charts* to the mainstream. By reaching the *R&B* charts, a song proved itself of some value and could be covered by white musicians, thereby reaching the mainstream, white audiences. This kind of success could make the record company that produced the original a considerable amount of money, but the

¹⁵ Some have suggested another, more pragmatic and psychological reason for the ease with which black music could penetrate the white market when the age of the *teenagers* arose, sex and sexuality. While the music itself was loaded with sexual innuendos, lyrically and musically, even the name of the genre it self being a sexual reference, the segregated society and the racism of the general public meant that black musicians posed a much less of a sexual threat to white males (Nicholson and Bowman, 2000).

musician's income, which depended on royalties, not writing credit, suffered greatly (Koskoff, 2000; Cohodas, 2000).

Minor labels or *Independents* (abbr. *Indies*), as they are sometimes referred to, had a rare chance of reaching out to this new age group, who in turn showed an ample interest in the fresh sounds of the black *Rhythm and Blues* musicians and their records. Race had always been a huge factor in deciding what would be recorded, played and distributed, and although it remained so for quite some time, the unprecedented interest that white teenagers now showed in the traditionally black music was a strong indication that times were changing.

2.5 The Birth of Rock'n'Roll

The most decisive step in an attempt to remove the issue of race from the music, was perhaps taken by radio disc jockey Alan Freed, when he coined the phrase *Rock'n'Roll*¹⁶ and used it in the name of his radio show *Moondog Rock'n'Roll Party*. Freed's show on the Cleveland radio station *WJW* was the first to air *Rhythm and Blues*, a genre that was largely boycotted by the mainstream-oriented radio stations that targeted white audiences. Retailer Leo Mintz, friend to Freed, had noticed a big increase in white teenagers coming into his stores looking for *R&B* records and / or artists they had heard on the radio. It was he who suggested that Freed should have a program that was tailored to the demands of white teenagers on the look-out for *R&B* (Nicholson and Bowman, 2000; Cohodas, 2000).

Although Freed's intent was not merely a chivalrous one, rather an attempt to capitalize on the enticement that African American culture had on young people, white and black alike, it made a tremendous impact on the heinous role of race and racism. And in fact, not only did it do so in music, since *Rock'n'Roll* did in fact become a lifestyle rather than just a musical genre (Nicholson and Bowman, 2000).

¹⁶ Rocking and rolling were words that had been used for some time as pseudo-words for dancing, partying and for sex, and the words had elevated in use throughout the 1940's (Bowman and Nicholson, 2000).

2.5.1 Rocket '88

In order to pinpoint the exact time at which *Rock'n'Roll* emerged, people have long argued what could be considered to be the first *Rock'n'Roll* song. Many tracks are eligible candidates and strong argument, based on time of publishing, sound, feel and rhythm, are presented for each¹⁷. In 1951, a record producer called Sam Philips contacted the Chess Bros'. Philips was a man who prided himself in having a acute predilection for music that was unaffected by the ideas and partialities of the main stream and popular culture. The reason he contacted *Chess Records* was a song he had produced, written and performed by Ike Turner and his six-piece band, sung by Jackie Brenston. That song was a little up tempo tune called *Rocket '88*, a song which today is a strong candidate for a nomination as the first *Rock'n'Roll* song ever, although Turner himself did not agree:

...I don't think that "Rocket 88" is rock'n'roll. I think that "Rocket 88" is R&B, but I think "Rocket 88" is the cause of rock and roll existing... Sam Phillips got Dewey Phillips to play "Rocket 88" on his program - and this is like the first black record to be played on a white radio station - and, man, all the white kids broke out to the record shops to buy it. So that's when Sam Phillips got the idea, "Well, man, if I get me a white boy to sound like a black boy, then I got me a gold mine", which is the truth. So, that's when he got Elvis and he got Jerry Lee Lewis and a bunch of other guys and so they named it rock and roll rather than R&B... (Petersen, 2011: 156)

Nonetheless, with Turner's *Boogie-Woogie* piano style, fast driven rhythm, the chic saxophone solos, the adolescent, if not a little shallow, nature of the lyrics, and a fortunate mishap – a torn speaker in a guitar amplifier that led to an unintentionally muffled and distorted sound, which has since become a fundamental quality of *Rock* – *Rocket '88* became a tune that met all the qualifications that would later be requirements of a *Rock'n'Roll* song (Cohodas, 2000; DeMain 2012).

¹⁷ In March 2012, *mental_floss magazine* presented a top 5 list of songs that were worthy of being called the first *Rock'n'Roll* track. Musician / Journalist Bill DeMain put the list together in chronological order, and featured *Rocket '88* as the youngest candidate. Arthur *Big Boy* Crudup's 1946 tune *That's All Right Mama* was the oldest tune.

2.5.2 Bo Diddley

Bo Diddley was the pseudonym of one Ellas McDaniel, another Mississippi-born musician and all-around handyman of the neighborhood. Ellas Otha Bates moved to Chicago's South Side with his aunt, Gussie McDaniel, in 1934. Ellas, who by then had dropped his surname, Bates, and taken up the McDaniel family name, played both the violin and the trombone in his local church, and was eventually even offered to join the church orchestra as a classical violinist (Cohodas, 2000).

When the sounds of John Lee Hooker hit his ears, Ellas McDaniel shifted gears, picking up the guitar and joining hands with percussionist Jerome Green and harmonica player Billy Boy Arnold, with whom he would develop the signature *freight train sound* - the shuffling, raw African beat, and the over-driven guitar - that would make the group a mainstay at *Chess Records*.

He had a decisive, if not a little primitive beat in his songs, a reminiscence of the old-school type of blues that Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf played, but had a certain buoyant quality to it that the others lacked. It was certainly an offspring of the Blues. But although the lyrics had much ado about similar lovers' quarrels as those of Muddy Waters and his peers, Bo Diddley's music had a kind of carefree attitude that had a strong appeal to adolescents (Cohodas, 2000).

Bo Diddley's was a signing that would prove to be the next big step in music for *Chess Records*. The Blues had already evolved into *R&B*, with musical entrepreneurs such as Little Walter manning the *Chess* frontline. But Diddley's strong and decisive beat would fit straight into the genre-in-the-making, DJ Alan Freed's *Rock'n'Roll* (Cohodas, 2000).

2.5.3 Chuck Berry

While Bo Diddley's rough-hewn beat and peculiar sounds from his homemade guitars were certainly something new and interesting, a juvenile delinquent called Charles Edward Anderson Berry, known under the sobriquet Chuck Berry would provide the next step in the *Chess*' journey towards *Rock'n'Roll* (Cohodas, 2000; Bowman and Nicholson, 2000).

Chuck Berry, born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, had an upbringing which was embellished with music and religion. From an early age he got a chance to develop his musical talent, while singing in church choirs. He did, however, turn his back on the classical concept introduced to him by the church choir, preferring hillbilly, blues and folk music (Cohodas, 2000). Indeed, his song *Roll over Beethoven*, is about that choice exactly, the classical masters rolling over for the masters of the new musical era of the Blues.

My heart's beatin' rhythm

and my soul keeps a-singin' the blues.

Roll Over Beethoven and tell Tchaikovsky the news.

His music and lyrics had a similar sort of zestful confidence as those of Bo Diddley, as well as possessing a naïve leitmotiv to his lyrics which was what the audience of the new *Rock'n'Roll* longed for, the lives and troubles of adolescence were reoccurring themes in his songs. Berry had another important factor, his mixture of styles; *Country-Western* and *Rhythm and Blues*, made his music easily accessible and not as foreign for the white teenagers (Cohodas, 2000; Bowman and Nicholson, 2000).

Although it was becoming less and less of a hindrance to the spread of the African American music and, Berry himself indeed having a big impact on the establishment of *Rock'n'Roll* as an entrepreneur, some have suggested that the color of his skin might have thrown a big wrench in the works of Berry. Cohodas (2000) states that one of music's big "what ifs" has long been whether, if not for the color of his skin, Chuck Berry could have reached the same heights as Elvis Presley did. She points out that, music set aside, racial taboos made it impossible for a black musician to be a character on par with Presley. Elvis was a performer, a public stage persona, with whom indifference to taboos and restrictions was closely connected. For a black performer, doing the same things, and especially breaking sexual taboos, was much more dangerous (P. 147-148).

2.6 Reactions to Rock’N’Roll

Although Presley got away with his sexually suggestive etiquette, he did become a subject of ample dispute. To some, he was a foreshadowing of what would happen to the white youth with the continuation of *Rock’n’Roll*’s ever successful campaign. Asa Carter was one of the most hefty anti-*Rock* activists. A member of both the *Ku Klux Klan* and *North Alabama Citizens’ Council (NACC)*, she had a big platform to express her semi-apocalyptic assumptions on the effects this “... basic heavy beat of Negroes” would have on the white adolescents. Her outcry to the Mayor of Birmingham, Alabama against the “indecent and vulgar performances by Africans before our white children,” in the Municipal Auditorium, even led to a ban therein, against any event with interracial ensemble. Carter’s protest had a snowball effect, leading to bans and restrictions of all kinds towards racial mixing through dance and music in the neighbor states of Texas and Louisiana. Eventually, the rest of the country was participating in all kinds of restrictions against *Rock’n’Roll*, the *pièce de résistance* being President Eisenhower’s public statement on the change of standards following *the Twist*, a dance which was danced to *Rock’n’Roll* music. “*What has happened to our concepts of beauty, decency and morality*” (Bowman and Nicholson, 2000. P. 354-355).

Chapter 3

“When they get you in the record business, someone gonna rip you anyway so that don’t bother me. If you don’t rip me, she gonna rip me, and if she don’t rip me, she gonna rip me, so I’m gonna get ripped, so you don’t be bothered by that, because people round you gonna rip you if they can.” – Muddy Waters

Clashes between artists and businessmen have always been a tedious companion of success in music. Both parties realize that without the other, no money can be made, but are also aware that one’s making money means the other’s making a considerably less amount of money. It was, and still is a love-hate relationship in which the artist is both a necessity and a nuisance to the magnate and vice versa, homogenous to the fragile entanglement of capital and labor under capitalist premises.

3.1 Payola and Royalties

Well into the latter half of the 20th century, the music industry of the United States was still in development. Having relied mostly on sheet music and piano rolls as a source of income, the industry faced a big change when record pressing and the radio came into being, and proved to be very successful media. These new technologies meant that a greater opportunity to make a living off music was at hand. The market expanded and at the same time a greater percentage of the market could be reached, so more money was to be made and there was room for more people to partake in the fixture and that, in turn, meant that there were more ways to make the commerce more profitable. But it also meant a greater complication in the distribution of any resulting wealth. There was now not only a composer and a printer, but a number of new intermediaries such as the record producer, publisher, presser and the Disc Jockeys, who played the records over the radio, thereby having an enormous authority in the music industry (Sanjek and Straw, 2000).

The whole industry was in its infancy, so to speak, and strict rules and, perhaps as importantly, roles had yet to refined. The payola installment to a middleman, who would then do his part in making a record reach its full potential, became such a necessary companion of a record publishing, that Disc Jockeys and Record pressers were sometimes on the payrolls of a number of record companies at the same time (Cohodas, 2000).

One popular way to get the most amount of airtime in radio was to pay the Disc Jockeys, although this method was frowned upon at best – downright criminal at worst. Depending on both the relationships between Disc-Jockey and producer and the aptitude for sales each record showed, these “lucrative payments” could vary in amount and form, everything from a monthly salary to over-sumptuous Bar-Mitzvah presents (Cohodas, 2000).

When dividing the spoils from record-sales, a certain amount went to the presser, another to the producer, etc. As well as getting paid a minimum for the recording session, the artist himself got writing credits, royalties, which entitled him to a percentage of each record sold. A popular way to make the afore-mentioned lucrative installments to Disc Jockeys was to give them writing credits on legal forms. Alan

Freed, for example, was the writer of twenty-eight titles in his time. This sometimes even happened without the artist's knowledge. Leonard and Phil Chess were certainly not innocent of dealing in this way, as became evident when Chuck Berry denied ever having known of any author to his songs other than himself, although Freed was credited as a co-writer of his on a number of tunes (Cohodas, 2000).

Understandably, this kind of business was a rich source of accusations of exploitation, the real composers being unhappy with having to share both money and artistic credit with somebody else who had actually contributed nil. In all probability, in tune with the capitalist-entrepreneur-nature of their deeds, the Chess brother's thinking was consistent with the business-minded saying: "*you have got to spend money, to earn money*". Even though the musician would get a lesser percentage of each sold records, the final amount would evidently be higher if they did their best to ensure as much airtime as they could afford, by all means possible. To Leonard and Phil, and indeed to most label owners, the end result would justify the means.

3.2 Lawsuits

"...my father, If you wanna call him the Plantation Owner then call him!" Marshall Chess (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003)

One thing still prevailed: *Chess Records* and *Arc Music*, its publishing branch, were making a big profit, while the artist's cut, from whom the product initially came, was not proportionate. The conclusion, some thought, was that *Chess Records* was cheating its artists to further its own profit. This conclusion was always rejected by Phil and Marshall Chess, their main argument being that at the time this kind of treatment was not only a conventional practice, but to the benefit of everyone (Cohodas, 2000; Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

Come the 1970's, when the industry had undertaken some changes, growing and taking on a more legally based form, especially with the growing number of white musicians partaking in *the Blues* scene, former *Chess Records* artists started to publicly express their discontent about unpaid, and / or underpaid royalties. Some even pressed charges: Howlin' Wolf demanded 2,5 million dollars in damages for

unpaid and underpaid royalty fees, and similar demands came from Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon. One of the *Chess Records* representative attorneys, Peter Herbert, said that in his mind, the claims were ill-founded and probably “an effort on the part of an agent to renegotiate a better publishing deal with somebody else”. The exact nature of the settlements remain confidential, some of the claims were settled before going to court, others had to be settled in court (Cohodas, 2000).

3.3 The Chess Plantation

In 1983, Phil talked to drummer Charles Walton, the “informal historian of the South Side music world” (Cohodas, 2000: 96) about their way of business. He talked about the paternalistic nature of their dealings with their artists, for whom they paid rent; bought them cars¹⁸; provided lawyers when needed¹⁹; more often than not, these payments were advances on royalties. This was a well known way of business in the music industry, and at the time, nobody seemed to mind but those years later, Phil’s mind had changed: “You know this wasn’t right, that wasn’t right, which I’m not gonna dispute. I’m not gonna defend. I know in my mind what it was and that’s it.”(Cohodas, 2000. P. 96)

Surely, it had a paternalistic element to it, and the Post-Slave mentality rapper Chuck D talked about is certainly not far off. Mitty Coltier, *Blues* and *Gospel* songstress, remembered getting a Pontiac Bonneville, a 4,000\$ vehicle, from *Chess Records*. This was a statement of trust, this gesture showed that Leonard trusted her talent to be able to return at least the 4,000\$. Probably, in Leonard’s mind, that token of trust would be the most important factor of the transaction, but one can not brush aside the fact that, in the form of an investment, he loaned her money she had not asked for, expecting the money to be returned, thereby constraining her to *Chess Records* (Cohodas, 2000).

¹⁸ Cadillacs were held in an especially high regard (Cohodas, 2000. P. 94). The name of the 2008 film dramatisation of *Chess Records* drew its title from this mode of dealing, being called *Cadillac Records*.

¹⁹ Nate Notkin, the lawyer of the Chess Bros’ handled at least half a dozen paternity lawsuits for Muddy Waters, winning them all(Cohodas, 2000. P. 94).

Marshall Chess has defended his father on a number of occasions saying that even though his father was a tough and shrewd business man, and certainly no angel, "...he wasn't a thief, and he wasn't a crook,"(Cohodas, 2000: 311). On another occasion he said that "It wasn't the labels saying "I wanna be the Company Store", it was the artist coming every day: I need; I want" (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003). In his mind, the fault was not only Leonard's or Phil's, it was also the artist's, who treated *Chess Records* like a bank, withdrawing money and getting loans almost whenever they felt like it.

Billy Davis reminisced about the way these transactions worked. He said that whatever he got paid, he felt was enough, and probably a good deal more than he would get from anybody else. He did note that he deemed the transactions as paternalistic, since the brothers always kept the upper hand and gave the artists the money they felt was adequate, but they never did refuse anyone which could even mean that the artists were "ahead of the game" as he called it. "I've asked thousands and thousands of dollars from Chess for different things and never once was refused for anything, you know. So there was times when I was ahead of the game, I'm sure, as far as I'm concerned." (Cohodas, 2000: 229).

What remains is the fact that the business brothers Chess conducted with their employees did obscure their public image to make them look like oppressors or tyrants, who took advantage of the racial element at play. Namely, that most recording artists were lower-class African Americans who had little or no formal education, and had grown up in poverty, and thereby having a very limited understanding of finances and their rights as employees (Cohodas, 2000: 310-311; Pinkerson and Levin, 2003)

Marshall Chess pointed out that all the major artists at *Chess Records*, only Chuck Berry and Willie Dixon left because of financial disagreements, both eventually returning to *Chess*. Which lends support to the notion that, despite all accusations of financial and racial exploit, the Chess brothers were, in fact, benefactors and friends of their employees (Cohodas, 2000).

3.4 Leonard Chess - The Activist

Although he was never zealous or outspoken anti-racism-activists, after reaching a certain status as a self-made man with considerable means, Leonard did become a philanthropist of sorts and a sympathizer and member of both Jewish and African-American organizations. In an interview with *Chicago Daily News* in 1967, he said that one of the reasons behind *WVON* radio, was to give something back to the black community, off which he had reaped so much success²⁰. At one time, he sent a 2,000\$ check to Martin Luther King, following the message that he could send more if needed. In 1967 he was chosen the *Chicago Urban League's*, of which he was a member, Man of the Year, admired for his patronage and immense connections in the black music business, which had proved a rich source of funding for the organization (Cohodas, 2000). Although, as discussed in chapter 2, some people thought they oppression of black people would be to the advantage of the superior white race, racism served as no vantage point to the Chess brothers.

3.5 Bo Diddley's Beach Party

In the summer of 1963, Bo Diddley and his band, under Marshall Chess' supervision went to record a live album in a beach club on Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, which was frequented by white patrons on the search for new music that they would not find on an inland radio station. The album was to be mustered from two concerts, played and recorded on July 5th and 6th and was to be called *Bo Diddley's Beach Party*. On the second night, Jerome Green jumped off the stage and played his maracas on the ground, where a group of white women gathered around him dancing.

The police that were overseeing the event quickly cut the concert short and arrested all the musicians for this racial intermingling they had initiated with their music. The police hurled Marshall up against a wall and said to him: "Jew boy, you messing around with these niggers' gonna get you locked up where no one's gonna find you!" The Chess team simply did as the policemen said, stopped recording and left, in order

²⁰ Although his words were much more blunt: "I made my money on the Negro, and I want to spend it on him" (Cohodas, 2000. P. 277).

to steer clear of any charges. There was no aftermath to the incident, but it served as a reminder that, despite looking the part, the Chess' were not white Americans, especially if they chose the company of African Americans (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

3.6 Racial Indifference

Chicago had served as a cultural melting pot for long²¹, displaying much more tolerance towards racial mixing in South Side Jazz clubs than was to be found in other parts of the States. Often owned by African Americans, many of these clubs were places where “blacks and tans” would perform and play to audiences of a mixed racial background. Nevertheless, segregation prevailed and although white people's interest in *Jazz* and, later, other forms of African American music, was tolerated as a part of the white-man's freedom of choice, black people could not cross over to the North Side club scene (Koskoff, 2000).

A big advantage of the Chess brothers, was that race seemed of no interest to them. Marshall Chess told an amusing anecdote from his youth regarding the Chess family's nonchalance about race: in the middle of his Bar Mitzvah ceremony, he looked at the ensemble who had gathered to witness the event at the invitation of his parents and saw his Jewish family, with the traditional Yarmulke skullcaps resting on their head, and in between them Muddy Waters and other Chess Records musicians, sporting their voluptuous pompadours, wildly out of their element (Cohodas, 2000; Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

The nonchalance towards race probably had a lot to do with the fact that as Polish-born Jews, who spoke English with a heavy Chicago accent, embellished with an abundance of black slang and a touch of Yiddish, who had lived all their American lives in the South Side of Chicago, surrounded by the black community, the Chess family were no strangers to racism. As Charles Walton simply put it, when talking

²¹ In the 1920's, Louis Armstrong was already playing for audiences of mixed racial background in Chicago's South Side (Koskoff, 2000).

about the success of *WVON*, it was due to the fact that Leonard “*hung out with blacks*” (Cohodas, 2000: 221).

3.7 Myths and Tall Tales

As often seems to be the nature of fame and success, urban myths and legends follow closely and undermine or underpin the true nature of the deeds. Given the racial element involved in *Chess records*, the company has had its share of accusations of exploitation and scrutiny.

But there are some stories, on “the Chess way of business”, that seem to have little or no proof of being true. In the two stories that will be addressed here, race continues to be a consistent theme: The greedy Jew, blinded by the shimmer of money, making the black artist, who has been his main source of a steady income over the years, do his dirty work in a time of a musical downturn, or otherwise generally treating them with disrespect.

Many of the key players in the stories are dead, as is the case with many of the *Chess Records* controversies, leaving only the one pointing the finger. But an abundance of anecdotes and recollections, many of whom are documented in Cohodas’ book (2000), provided by Marshall Chess and other former staff members of *Chess Records* as well as acquaintances of the family, lend support to the claim that Leonard and Phil were never actively trying to exploit their staff. Rather, the small-business-minded not-by-the-book financial arrangements the Chess Brothers sometimes had with their artists made them look that way at times and did in fact land them in trouble in later years (Cohodas, 2000).

3.5.1 I’m a Backdoor Man

In an interview *with Blues Access Magazine* in 1999, the daughter of Willie Dixon, Shirli Dixon-Nelson, told a story about a backdoor staircase at 2120, South Michigan avenue, *Chess Studio’s* most floction. In the interview she said that all African American people were directed to use this staircase to enter the studio, although steep

and tight, and not the front passage, as all Caucasian members of society could do. This is not the only time this staircase surfaces and the tale serves as a lurid invalidation of the racially tolerant façade which Leonard and Phil are often admired for.

Blues Access Magazine offers an open letter complaint feature on their website, where a number of people, including Nadine Cohodas, try to rebut this rumor by pointing out that no record of racial discrimination of any kind exists, but an abundance of records signifying that indifference to race characterized the company and its owners.

Chess Records headquarters were located in a neighborhood with heavy traffic, probably not a feasible environment for expensive gear to be left standing at the back of a truck while other gear was carried slowly up to the studio on the second floor. Conveniently, Chess studios had a backyard, where gear would be safe on the back of a pickup truck, while the rest was carried in through the backdoor and up the stairs leading straight up to the studio.

Incidentally, the vast majority of Chess artists were of African descent, so they will have used the backdoor stairs most of the time, and may even have been obliged to do so when transporting heavy gear up to the studio. While the mystery of the backdoor staircase remains unsolved, the clues suggest that the issue of race was added to the mixture afterwards (Cohodas, 2000).

3.5.2 Muddy Waters painting the Ceiling

One of the most famous stories of their exploitation of talent comes from Keith Richards, one of the Rolling Stones' guitarists and original members. The band was under strong influences of the Chicago Blues scene and were self-proclaimed "no. 1 fans" of Muddy Waters.

Upon their arrival at Chess Records Studio, a man in black overalls was painting the ceiling, a man that they quickly recognized as Muddy Waters. He then later proceeded to load the Stones' amplifiers onto a truck. Richards didn't know whether this peculiar use of the blues legend's talents was merely due to his good nature or

because his records weren't selling at the time, but nonetheless stated that the Chess Brothers had a strict work-for-your-pay policy (Fox and Richards, 2010).

Nadine Cohodas rebutted Keith Richard's story in her book, *Spinning Blues into Gold*, with references to Billy Davis and Esmond Edwards, members of the *Chess Records* staff, who, at the time, were both in the studio every day, all day long. Both Davis and Edwards say that Leonard's respect for Muddy meant that he would have been the first man to tell Muddy Waters to stop if he would have started working on anything else then music. Dick LaPalm, promotional executive at *Chess Records*, even said he was sure that Muddy Waters was not in the building at the said time (Cohodas, 2000, p. 243-244)

Conclusion

"Some called us Nigger-lovers, other accused us of ripping off our artists. But really we had the same agenda; we both wanted a better life. It was all about making money..." - Marshall Chess

To be able to fully apprehend the impact *Chess Record* had on racial barriers in music, it might be helpful to get a beauty-saloon brochuresque "before vs. after" look at society.

The extensive cultural impact *Chess Records* had has become evident with the ample amount of references and homages paid to the legacy of the people involved. As mentioned in the introduction, it was home to the Bachs and Beethovens of *the Blues* and its descendant genres. *Chess Records* was strongest on the *Blues* forefront, fundamentally, a blues label and as such, despite being a relatively small label, it is generally considered to be one of the greats of the scene. Cub Koda, musician and musical critic, even called the company "America's greatest *Blues* label" in his review of *Chess Blues*, a box set consisting of over a hundred *Chess* songs, released in 1993 (Koda, n.d.).

Chess Records' importance and influence have even been recognized by the

Government of the United States. since 1999, Chess Studios at 2120 South Michigan Avenue has enjoyed a special landmark status, granted from the Clinton Administration as a part of an program called "Saving America's Treasures". It has been serving as a home to *Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation* since 1997, when restoring it to its original form was completed. *Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation* is an organization which was built by Marie Dixon, Willie's late wife, and Shirli Dixon-Nelson, his late daughter. It is now run by another daughter of his, Jacqueline Dixon. The organization has a program called *Blues in the Schools*, which presents *the Blues*, both musically and historically, to schoolchildren. It also has two scholarship programs, Muddy Waters Scholarship and Willie Dixon Scholarship, each yearly awarding funds "to two (2) deserving individuals, based upon scholastic achievement, concentration of studies, and financial need." (Blues Heaven Foundation web side, 2007). Closing on half a century since the company ceased to exist, *Chess Records* is still influencing music.

In forms of reviews; covers; various Hall of Fame inductions; lyrical references; films (dramatizations and documentaries alike); discographies and biographies, it has been made obvious that the company mattered to musicians and music aficionados alike. But the social impact is perhaps not as obvious.

When the Cxyz family came to Chicago, they moved into a neighborhood close to the intersection of Maxwell Street and Halsted street, that fast grew an almost exclusively Jewish locale, bordered by other, entirely white, immigrant communities, Irish and German. After the first World War, that all-white community begun to change. Blacks moved into the South Side by the thousands, taking over as the lowest class now that the white immigrant communities had become relatively well established (Cohodas, 2000).

It tells a harsh tale that, despite knowing that they would be greeted with hostility rather than hospitality; violence, both verbal and physical, in the public and private sphere, African Americans still moved to Chicago, where jobs were said to await them, to escape the spite with which they were treated in the South (Clayton and Drake, 1993; Cohodas, 2000).

The aforementioned intersection of Maxwell and Halsted streets, became a place were

Jews and Blacks would meet and greet. Jew-town, as it was called, was an old market place for the Jews of Chicago. There, they gathered for small scale business ventures, which in turn attracted the neighboring African Americans, buying goods and playing their music, which now had been electrified in order to rise above the clamor and commotion of the passersby (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

When Leonard and Phil Chess made their first move on the checkerboard in 1950, by founding *Chess Records*, they took the first step towards changing music with the help of the black talents from the South, by putting the newly electrified *Delta Blues*, which was becoming a genre of its own – *Chicago Blues*, to their advantage. Subsequently, nationally renowned musicians rose within the Chicago world.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, when *Chess Records* was at its peak, and its influence on the African American music scene of Chicago was at its greatest, a lot was happening in the American society, especially as regards the African American populace. Although the struggle for civil rights was not yet the movement it would become, spearheaded by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., there was a certain restlessness towards and discontentment with the racial status quo. The Jewish shared the discontent of their black neighbors to some degree: Despite the color of their skin, they held a status as an ethnic minority, and were thought to be inferior to the ruling, white class (Cohodas, 2000; Greenberg, 2006).

In these conditions, an alliance was formed between African Americans and Jewish Americans. This alliance crystallized in business relations, such as those conducted at *Chess Records*, where the Jewish entrepreneurs provided the African American people an ephemeral platform for promotion of black talent, whilst the black community sought to build one of its own. African Americans had no easy task before them if they wanted to seek the aid of Caucasian entrepreneurs for production, publishing or promotion of any kind. And, similarly, the Jewish businessmen had a hard time finding their own platform in the largely-white market sphere, and had to point their focus in other directions (Cohodas, 2000; Greenberg, 2006).

The Jewish businessmen provided the African Americans with a well-perceived financial aid, and in turn got a rare chance to produce and promote the aboriginal music of the Black South, a form of music created through ages of oppression and

subjugation, with its origins in the collective consciousness of the slaves that were brought to the New World from Africa. In some aspects, it looks as though the Jewish entrepreneurs were using the poor status of the black talent to their own advance: their lack of proper schooling, as well as a good involvement and understanding of a society functioning under capitalist premises, often paying them scarcely, keeping them happy with gifts and / or advances in forms of investments, instead of paying them an acceptable salary. But as the Chess family has said a number of times, this was a widely accepted way to conduct business in the social turmoil of the time, and would soon be eradicated with rules and regulations, as the involvement of these ethnic minorities in the market sphere became more widely accepted in it self (Greenberg, 2006).

By the end of the 1960s and through the 1970s, a great change took place in the civil struggle of African Americans. As laws , that strengthened their struggle and the need for help became less, anti-semitism and anti-zionism became a part of black nationalist groups, such as the *Black Panthers*. This marked the end of a Black-Jewish alliance, which some mourned as *Golden Years*. The momentary platform *Chess Records* had provided in these *Golden Years*, did leave the door open for black musicians, who had by then reached the ears and acceptance of the general public. Race music was a thing of the past, and the blue note had taken over the minds and lives of many, if not most, musicians and music aficionados (Greenberg, 2006).

At a demonstration, documented in *Godfathers and Sons Rock'n'Roll* (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003), where patrons of the old Maxwell Street protested a local construction plan and demanded the rejuvenation of the old Maxwell Street scene, a sign put the whole concept of Black and Jewish relations in regards to music quite simply with the words: "Blacks + Jews = Blues". Similar to Willie Dixon's ginger "*the blues* is the roots, rest is the fruits", this slogan has to it a simplicity and a gusto that makes it an easily favorable one. It also has a great deal of truth to it, since it was this collation of interests of different ethnic groups, that made *the Blues*. It was the capitalization of the melting pot that was Chicago's south side, that enabled the birth of *Rock'n'Roll* (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

Perhaps, the role and importance of *Chess Records* is best summarized by Rich Cohen, in his book *Machers and Rockers: Chess Records and the Business of Rock &*

Roll(2004), where he says that with the help of *Chess Records*, Leonard "became one of the great engines of American life, a creator of teen culture, a presser of race records that crossed over into the mainstream" (:14-15). It was this crossing over of race records into the mainstream, by the means of *Rock'n'Roll* and the teen culture, that made, not only Leonard Chess, although he was the outward representative of the company, but *Chess Records* such an important figure in history.

To Asa Carter, and other anti-*Rock'n'Roll* activists, who protested, in a soapbox preacher-like manner, the genre's advancement into white mainstream culture, *Rock'n'Roll* signified a horrid change in both the social structure and in the general sense of morals in American society. Although the doom and gloom spirit of their predictions, and the overly dramatic presumptions of the moral effect it would have, were perhaps uncalled for, some aspects of their prophecy came true (Bowman and Nicholson, 2000).

Arguably, the most important social effect of *Rock'n'Roll* was the racial mingling brought with it. Unlike some genres, *Chicago Blues* or the closely related *Detroit Blues*, regional genres that, for a deep understanding of the music, demanded the listener was a part of a collective consciousness of the community it arose from, *Rock'n'Roll* was not a stationary genre. Its traditionally naïve and lightweight lyrics, sexual undertones and unyielding beat, made it both appealing and accessible and effectively, white teens, to whom *Rock'n'Roll* was a new interest, found themselves immersed in black culture, listening to the music of black people and dancing to it at open concerts (Cohodas, 2000; Du Noyer, 1995; Bowman and Nicholson, 2000; Larkin 1998).

The white teens came as foreigners into that culture, and thereby had to adjust to rules and standards the already applied therein, often resulting in whites and blacks dancing together at events. These teenagers "began to question the racial status quo that governed America" (Bowman and Nicholson, 2000: 355). A seed was planted, and this new generation of teenagers came of age at an important time, namely in the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement reached its peak. Simply put in *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*: "Rock and roll, in effect, resocialized a number of white youth and played a part in the long struggle to end the system of American apartheid" (Bowman and Nicholson, 2000: 355). Although *Rock'n'Roll* or *the Blues*

can hardly be given credit for starting the civil rights movement in the 1960s, they did provide an important endorsement and even active help from the white *Rock'n'Roll* enthusiasts that were the teenagers.

The music of African American musicians found it self especially well perceived by the musical connoisseurs of Western Europe, who were largely free of the racial bigotry and xenophobia that for long had hindered black people in succeeding to full extent in America. In Europe, they met the same racial indifference as they did in the Jewish American business class, their music was in the forefront and the color of their skin mattered little. This even resulted in a scene called *the British Invasion* in the 1960s, where British groups actively paid homage and showed respect to their musical heroes. This scene was spearheaded by no lesser names than *the Rolling Stones; The Beatles; The Animals; The Who* and many more (Cohodas, 2000; Bowman and Nicholson, 2000; Larkin, 1998).

In short, the story of *Chess Records* is a story of an unique collaboration, whose success was attained with a healthy blend of entrepreneurship, musical talent and being at the right place at the right time. Right across the street from the *Wabash Junk Shop*, there was a small church, were the brothers witnessed the religious music of their neighboring African American community (Cohodas, 2000; Pinkerson and Levin, 2003). Despite having no technical or cultural understanding of the music, Leonard and Phil knew from early on that there was something unique about their music. “They’d start like on a Friday night, handclapping and shoutin’ man, and I tell ya, that was great! That’s were we actually got the whole nucleus started right there.” (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003).

Rest is history, Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Howlin’ Wolf, Little Walter, Etta James, Willie Dixon, Bo Diddley – all these great talents, and many more, helped to shape the foundation of modern popular music, drawing from their own cultural inheritance, shunned upon by the white populace. As I mentioned in the introduction, the intermediaries may not be forgotten, and are arguably just as important as the talent they produced. It was the Chess brothers’ aptitude for talent, their own talent of knowing what would sell and what would not, that created an unparalleled mixture of the aforementioned mainstays that helped shape the sound of a new generation. A generation that would question the previous generations’ stance towards race.

36 years ago, Voyager 1 went into space with a gold plated audio and video disc, *The Golden Record*, which carried sounds and images from earth, in case the spacecraft was found by alien life forms. On the disc, there were songs from indigenous peoples all over the world, among them there were Louis Armstrong's Melancholy Blues, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and a Chess Records production, Chuck Berry's Johnny B. Goode (Pinkerson and Levin, 2003; Voyager website, n.d.).

Bibliography

- Ankeny, Jason. (N.d.) *Minnie Riperton: Artist Biography by Jason Ankeny*. AllMusic. Retrieved on April 25, 2014 from <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/minnie-riperton-mn0000500889/biography>
- Barlow, William. (1999). *Voice Over: The making of black radio*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Biography.com. (2014). Marion Walter Jacobs. Retrieved March 23, 2014, from <http://www.biography.com/people/little-walter-9383615>
- Blues Quotes. (N.d.). *Muddy Waters Quotes*. Retrieved march 3, 2014 from <http://www.bluesquotes.com/search/label/Muddy%20Waters%20Quotes>
- Bowman, Rob; Nicholson, Sara. (2000). Rock. In E. Koskoff, (Ed.). *The Garland Encyclopedia of world music: The United States and Canada*. (pp. 347-363)
- Burnett, Chester. *Howlin' Wolf: How many more years*. [Video]. Retrieved April 10, 2014 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpKB6OZ_B4c
- Cohen, Rich. (2004). *Machers and Rockers: Chess Records and the Business of Rock & Roll*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Cohodas, Nadine. (2000). *Spinning Blues into Gold – Chess Records: The label that launched the Blues*. London: Aurum Press.
- Demain, Bill. (2012). *5 candidates for the first Rock'n'Roll song*. Mental_floss. Retrieved April 25, 2014 from <http://mentalfloss.com/article/30288/5-candidates-first-rock-n-roll-song>
- Drake, St. Clair and Horace R. Clayton. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 (original publication 1945).
- Du Noyer, Paul (editor). (1995). *The story of rock'n'roll: The year by year illustrated chronicle*. New York: Schirmer.
- Early, Gerard. (N.d.) *Jim Crow Era*. Retrieved on April 20, 2014 from http://www.pbs.org/jazz/time/time_jim_crow.htm
- Evans, David. (2000). Blues. In E. Koskoff, (Ed.). *The Garland Encyclopedia of world music: The United States and Canada*. (pp. 637-650)
- GCSE Bitesize. (N.d.). *Music: Blues*. BBC. Retrieved March 20, 2014 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/music/popular_music/blues1.shtml
- Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn. (2006). *Troubling the Waters: Black Jewish Relations in the American Century*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

- History.com. (2010). *Great Migration*. Retrieved on April 20, 2014 from <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration>
- Jewish Virtual Library. (n.d.) *Black-Jewish relations in the United States*. Retrieved March 23 from http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0003_0_03042.html
- Key, Susan. (2000). Ethnic Radio. In E. Koskoff, (Ed.). *The Garland Encyclopedia of world music: The United States and Canada*. (pp. 558-561)
- Koda, Cub. (N.d.). *Chess Blues: Review by Cub Koda*. Allmusic. Retrieved april 27 from <http://www.allmusic.com/album/chess-blues-mw0000092572>
- Larkin, Colin. (1998). *The Encyclopedia of popular music*. London: Macmillan.
- Manning, Christopher. (2005). *African Americans*. The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago. Retrieved on April 29 from <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/27.html>.
- Marcus, James. (2001) “*The first hip white person*”. [Book review on *Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams*][online edition] *The Atlantic*. Retrieved on April 23 from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/02/-the-first-hip-white-person/302104/>
- Marshall, Matt. (2011). *A brief musical history of “Catfish Blues”*. American Blues scene Magazine. Retrieved April 25, 2014 from <http://www.americanbluesscene.com/2011/03/a-brief-musical-history-of-catfish-blues/>
- Moon, D. Thomas. (1999). *Strange VooDoo: Inside the vaults of Chess Studios* [online]. Blues Access Magazine. USA. Retrieved March 10, 2014 from http://www.bluesaccess.com/No_36/chess.html
- Petersen, Holger. (2011). *Talking Music: Blues Radio and Roots Music*. London: Insomniac Press
- Pinkerson, Daphne (producer) and Levin, Marc (producer/director). (2003). *Martin Scorsese presents the Blues: Godfather and sons* [Documentary]. Seattle: Martin Scorsese (Executive Producer) Vulcan Productions, Inc.
- Polick, A. L. (1997) *The Destruction of Motol* [online version]. *Jerusalem: Former residents of Motol in Israel*. Retrieved February 15, 2014 from <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/motol/motol.html>
- Richards, Keith; Fox, James. (2010). *Life*. New York: Back Bay.
- Rolf, Julia (editor). (2007). *The definitive illustrated encyclopedia of Jazz and Blues*. London: Flame Tree Publishing.

- Statistics Iceland. (2010). *Population projection 2013-2060*. Retrieved on February 15, 2014 from <https://hagstofa.is/?PageID=421&itemid=2a950858-46c6-48dc-8272-4288af2fa8b7>
- Sanjek, David; Straw, Will. (2000). The music industry. In E. Koskoff, (Ed.). *The Garland Encyclopedia of world music: The United States and Canada*. (pp. 256-268)
- The United States Senate. (N.d.) *The Election Case of Theodore G. Bilbo of Mississippi (1947)* Retrieved on March 20, 2014 from http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/contested_elections/126Theodore_Bilbo.htm
- Voyager: The Interstellar mission. (N.d.). *What is the Golden Record?* Retrieved april 28, 2014 from <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html>
- Willie Dixon Blues foundation* [website]. (2007). Retrieved from <http://bluesheaven.com/>
- Wolraich, Debra; Miller, Charlynn. (2010). *Welcome to Motol*. Retrieved on February 15, 2014 from <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/motol/>