Rhythm&Blues

Blacks&Jews

How a Bunch of Upstart Jewish Independent Record Producers Helped Turn African American Music into a National Treasure

ANDREW MUCHIN

LEONARD CHESS was dubious about the blues songs that his Chicago company, Aristocrat Records, was recording one April day in 1948. Aristocrat usually recorded jazzy blues with horns, but this session featured a lone singer and his guitar, accompanied by a bass fiddle.

Bluesman Muddy Waters had only recently switched from acoustic to amplified electric guitar in order to be heard in the Windy City's noisy taverns. His guitar playing was piercing—reminiscent of the acoustic blues of the Mississippi Delta, where he grew up—and loud. His singing was expressive and strong but he slurred his words and had a thick southern black accent. Chess couldn't understand a word.

"What's he saying? What's he saying?" Chess snapped, relates Nadine Cohodas in *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*. "Who's going to buy that?"

He soon had an answer. The first 3,000 copies of Waters' "I Can't Be Satisfied" sold out in two days. The once-skeptical Chess heard the *ka-ching* of countless Chicago cash registers. "Chess began to come close to me," Waters later told *Living Blues* magazine.

Chess brought in his brother Phil as a partner, after founding partner Evelyn Aron left the company. Within a decade, the Polish immigrants turned the renamed Chess Record Corp. into an internationally known independent recording company that produced influential blues, jazz, doo wop and rock 'n' roll, paving the way for the British Invasion of the 1960s.

The Chess story is typical of the wild independent record business that developed around the emerging black music of the 1940s and '50s. Sure, Jews weren't the only whites involved in black music. But the independent record business was dominated by young Jewish men who started out with nothing, men in short-sleeved white shirts and skinny black ties who were equally fluent in black slang and Yiddish, and who could have just as easily sold appliances and bowled with a B'nai B'rith lodge. Instead they made it their business to promote the creative sounds that were coming from the black world.

These men—and occasionally women— came from all over the country. Syd Nathan owned

Phil Chess and Etta James, circa 1962

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DAVID GOLDBERG

Art Rupe's Specialty Records hit the big time with Little Richard, Sam Cooke, Fats Domino, Percy Mayfield and other musicians

three labels, King, Queen and Federal Records, in Cincinnati. In Los Angeles, Art Rupe founded Specialty Records; Paul Reiner owned Black & White Records; Leo, Edward and Ida Messner had Aladdin Records; Lou Chudd had Imperial Records; Jules, Saul and Joe Bihari had Modern Records. In New York, Moe Asch owned Folkways Records, Alfred Lion co-owned Blue Note Records, Milt Gabler founded Commodore Records and Norman Granz owned a series of labels, most notably Verve Records and Pablo Records. Across the river, Herman Lubinsky had Savoy Records in Newark, and Fred Mendelsohn owned, at various times, Savoy, Regal and Herald Records, all in New Jersey.

"Jews got into the record business on a large scale in the late '30s and early '40s because Columbia and the other majors dropped 'race music' in the 1930s," explains jazzman, scholar and owner of GoJazz Records Ben Sidran. "Jewish small businessmen took their place in what was often a 'nickel and dime' business."

The three major record companies of the time —Columbia, Victor (RCA), Decca, and new kid on the block Capitol—had pulled out of black music in order to cut down their use of shellac, a major component of records at that time. Shellac, imported from Asia, was in short supply due to the war with Japan. To get their record orders fulfilled, the new independent producers ingratiated themselves with the record pressers and fit themselves into holes in the companies' press schedules. Some went so far as to collect scrap records that the pressers could melt and turn into new ones.

"I think one thing these guys all had in common was that they loved the business," adds Sidran. "They were *tumelers*—shmoozing, hanging out in delis. There was a rough-and-tumble atmosphere. Jews have been drawn to that."

These ambitious businessmen didn't always have a choice. "The '40s were a time when even bright Jews could not easily find a place in the WASP world of communications," Arnold Shaw writes in *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues*. "The music business, however, was wide open for Jews as it was for blacks."

In the beginning, producing 78 rpm "race" records, which were sold by the song, didn't look very profitable. Even the musicians had no inkling of their music's economic potential.

Until then, the main market for black music had been blacks. It wasn't until they started turning out discs that white producers realized there was crossover potential into the larger music world; that is, the white music world. Only in hindsight did it become clear that the label owners were part of a much larger movement—that of Jews who played key roles in developing and popularizing African American music: blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and soul. Some produced records while others wrote, performed and published black songs, managed entertainers, or ran the clubs where the music could be heard. Still others studied black music academically. Journalists wrote critically, and lovingly, about the musicians.

But no one in this movement dreamt that the black music they were introducing to the world would inspire generations of musicians, leading to the development of rock 'n roll, and inspiring the music of mega-influential white musicians such as Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.

CHICAGO'S LEONARD and Phil Chess were street-wise South Side Chicago greeners. After working for their father in his scrap yard, they opened the Macomba Lounge and booked small jazz groups, writes Cohodas. Leonard Chess's knowledge of black Chicago led him to join Aristocrat in 1948. Later, when his brother Phil joined him in the record business, they sold the Macomba.

The renamed Chess Records gave the world the newly electrified and still wildly popular Chicago blues. The blues derived from the acoustic music that southern blacks played, and had brought with them as they moved north in search of jobs.

Having worked among the newcomers, the Chess brothers saw an untapped potential audience. They discovered great singers and produced big hits. Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf championed a rough, rhythmic, melodic sound. Later, label-mates Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry added breakneck rhythms to the blues and produced early rock 'n' roll chart-busters such as "Bo Diddley" and Berry's "Maybelline." Etta James crooned R&B hits like "I'd Rather Go Blind" while Koko Taylor had a blues hit with "Wang Dang Doodle."

Meanwhile, out in Los Angeles, Art Rupe was trying his hand at the record business.

Rupe, born Arthur Goldberg, grew up in racially-mixed McKeesport, Pa., just outside of Pittsburgh.

"There was a tremendous amount of ethnic intermingling," recalls Rupe, now in his eighties. "In a picture I remember seeing of me with my classmates, I look like a sugar cube in a coal bin. We were all poor, and whether white or black, aspects of our culture were the same. I particularly enjoyed listening to blues records in one of my black friend's homes. What bonded us was a culture shaped by our similar economic status, not our ethnicity."

Tall and skinny, Rupe was a star Hebrew pupil at the local temple, which offered him a scholarship to rabbinical school. Instead, he headed west to get into the movie business. When he couldn't get his foot in the door, he tried to get a job writing for Bob Hope and Red Skelton's radio shows. Broke and unemployed, his third choice of career was producing records to sell in small stores in Watts and other black neighborhoods.

What's R&B anyway?

"Up in the morning and off to school," sings Chuck Berry, a black rock 'n' roll pioneer, in "School Days," one of many hits he recorded for brothers Leonard and Phil Chess. Consider this lyric your invitation to a crash course in African American music.

The melodies, sounds and rhythms in black music combine to evoke key aspects of the human condition: love (think of James Brown's "I Feel Good"), jealousy (W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues"), sexuality (Ray Charles' "What'd I Say"), pride (Aretha Franklin's "R.E.S.P.E.C.T."), the rewards of the afterlife (just about any spiritual). It's folk music from the soul, the heart, the *kishkes* and, yes, the sexual organs.

That's not to say it's only about the id. African American music is fluid, stretching and highlighting time through syncopation, or playing the rhythm between the beats. (Hum a line of "St. Louis Blues." You'll find yourself around, not on, the beat.) The music swings, that difficult-to-define quality in which the melody and rhythm create a sense of propulsion at any speed. (Recall Billie Holiday's unhurried rendition of "God Bless the Child.") The music is improvisational, allowing the musician to express the feeling of the moment. (Think of Ella Fitzgerald's giddy scat singing.)

African American music began with the southern slaves, who transformed the syncopated drumming and a cappella folk songs of their African heritage into field hollers—rhythmic call-and-response songs—and spirituals—religious songs that identified with the Israelite slaves in Egypt and expressed faith in salvation in heaven.

By the 1890s, the hollers and spirituals were combining to form the blues. Southern black men, accompanying themselves on guitar, were performing slow, plaintive laments and churning, danceable party songs.

As rural blacks migrated to cities, the blues blended with classical (white European) piano music to produce ragtime, the intricate, syncopated style that sounds like J.S. Bach got his mojo workin'. Urban brass bands—both concert ensembles and marching groups—added blues to their more formal arrangements, producing early jazz.

In the Roaring Twenties, black musicians took their bluesy horn jazz north, exposing it to a wider public that included young white musicians such as Benny Goodman in Chicago. In New York, jazz joined with dance, literature and the visual arts in a crescendo of black culture known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Jazz and blues songs were a staple of 78 rpm records in the 1930s and '40s. By the late 1940s, popular music had become an industry, and the industry was changing. Big band jazz wasn't earning its keep on the road. Jazz musicians were devising a new improvisational style dubbed bebop, which sounded best in smaller groups.

The swing jazz of the big bands also transferred to smaller groups, which emphasized speed, the back beat, an emotional singing style and lyrics about urban ghetto life. This new style was dubbed rhythm and blues, or R&B. (Think Louis Jordan's "Is You Is, Or Is You Ain't [Ma' Baby?"])

In the late 1950s and early '60s, the focus of some R&B switched to singing drenched in the exultant gospel stylings of the black church. You've probably heard of this new genre—the territory of Aretha Franklin, James Brown, and the late Ray Charles. It's called Soul.

Rupe approached his new business methodically. Unlike the Chess brothers, he decided to focus on the black urban market, and he carefully studied the kind of music his target audience wanted. Buying stacks of records, a metronome and a stopwatch, he timed the recordings' introductions choruses, repeat choruses, and analyzed the lyrics in order to find out what worked in the most popular songs. After determining that urban blacks preferred horns and a polished sound, he decided on "a big band sound, expressed in a churchy way."

Typical of the independent labels, his Jukebox Records operated on a shoestring. His first "office" was a cigar box, rented for $2 a month on someone's desk, where he received mail. Success didn't take long: Jukebox's first record, the Sepia Tones' "Boogie No. 1," sold 70,000 plus copies, a respectable amount in the 1940s.

Rupe sold Jukebox in 1946 and opened Specialty Records. His artists Roy Milton, Joe Liggins, and Camille Howard all had hits. In search of new talent, Rupe was one of the first label owners to gravitate toward New Orleans.

He arrived in the birthplace of jazz in 1952, attracted by singer/pianist Fats Domino. On that trip, Rupe signed singer Lloyd Price. Price's "Lawdy, Miss Clawdy" was rated the #1 R&B record in 1952 by *Billboard* and *Cashbox* magazines, says Rupe. "If there had been Grammies, it would have taken them all home. It was considered one of the first crossovers of black music to white teenagers."

Price urged singer Richard Penniman to send a demo tape to Rupe, who in 1955 recorded the young man, under the name Little Richard. Penniman's very first session produced the manic hit "Tutti Frutti." He had a string of 11 more hits for Specialty, including "Long Tall Sally" and "Good Golly, Miss Molly." Little Richard, who quickly became a nationwide sensation, was one of the first major crossover artists.

Rupe also recorded Percy Mayfield who wrote the hits "Hit the Road Jack," and the anti-racism

Syd Nathan with a young James Brown (second from left)

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song "Please Send Me Someone to Love" as well as many others. Another major coup was Sam Cooke. "Forty to fifty percent of Specialty's business was gospel," Rupe says. "Sam Cooke was a gospel singer and recorded gospel for us for seven years. We recorded his hit 'You Send Me.'"

Rupe, who became personal friends with some of his artists, couldn't believe his success. "When I got into the business, few white people fooled around with this kind of music," he says. "It was called 'nigger' music, and one of my friends called me a 'nigger lover.' I've never forgotten that ... I had no idea that it would ever appeal to many white people."

While Rupe was striking gold in L.A., back east in Newark, Herman Lubinsky was producing hits with a slightly different formula. Stubby-fingered, cigar-smoking, copyright-hungry and notoriously cheap, Lubinsky was running a small record store in 1942 when he started Savoy Records. At first, the label released records by leading jazzmen. Then, throughout the 1950s, the label produced R&B hits, often with the songs of Jewish songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who were later inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame.

Another independent producer was former department store owner Syd Nathan. Nathan opened King Records in an old icehouse in suburban Cincinnati in 1945. Nathan began with white country music, but soon added "race" music in order to increase his market share. He released R&B music on a subsidiary he called Queen Records, co-writing the Bull Moose Jackson hits "All My Love Belongs to You" and "I Can't Go on Without You" using the name Sally Nix.

His other artists included veteran bluesman Lonnie Johnson and singers Ivory Joe Hunter and Wynonie Harris. In 1956, soul singer James Brown had his first hit, "Please, Please, Please," on King, and the label's recording of Bill Doggett's "Honky Tonk" rose to #1 on the R&B charts.

Nathan also operated Federal Records, which scored a hit with the Midnighters' sexually suggestive "Work with Me, Annie."

"Overweight and a careless dresser, [Nathan] hardly looked like the man who could transform a defunct icehouse into one of the country's giant record independents," writes Arnold Shaw. "Nathan developed a plant in which he could record, master, press and produce finished disks, including the printing of album covers. He was one of the Henry Fords of the record industry."

JERRY WEXLER grew up a self-described jazz record hound. He became a pioneering music reporter for *Billboard* in New York, convincing the magazine to replace the term "race records" with one he had coined—"rhythm and blues."

Through his work at *Billboard* he met Herb and Miriam Abramson and Ahmed Ertugun, owners of Atlantic Records. Joining Atlantic as a co-owner, he supervised the recording of hits by

Leonard Chess, circa 1967

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Phil Chess and Aretha Franklin, circa 1967

some of R&B's top singers. *In Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music*, written with David Ritz, Wexler recalls working with LaVern Baker, Ruth Brown, Wilson Pickett, Solomon Burke, Etta James and his big three: Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding and Ray Charles.

Wexler's talent as a producer was to adopt whatever role a performer needed from him. With the multi-talented Charles, he basically stayed out of the way, beginning with Charles's first big hit, "I Got a Woman." With Franklin, he scuttled her pop style in favor of her gospel roots. Wexler matched Redding with the Stax Records studio band in Memphis, Booker T. & the MGs.

Wexler worked closely with Leiber and Stoller, like him East Coast Jews who became sincere "white Negroes." The songwriters reveled in black culture, claiming even before they graduated high school that they didn't write songs for whites. The pair's hits include "Hound Dog," performed first by blues singer Big Mama Thornton, "Jailhouse Rock," "Smokey Joe's Cafe," "Kansas City," "Poison Ivy," "Love Potion, #9, "There Goes My Baby," and, with Ben E. King, "Stand By Me" and "Spanish Harlem".

New York was also the stomping grounds of Norman Granz.

"The single most important recording producer and concert producer was a Jew, Norman Granz," writer Nat Hentoff said in an interview. His Pablo Records recorded Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker and Oscar Peterson. "Particularly in the 1970s, when rock music began to take over and extraordinary jazz men couldn't get recording contracts, Granz recorded them with Pablo," Hentoff explained.

Another New York exec was Milt Gabler, a record store owner who founded Commodore Records in 1937. Gabler wrote lyrics for Duke Ellington and Nat King Cole, paired Ella Fitzgerald with Louis Armstrong and even handed out cash to needy musicians. In 1939, he recorded Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit," a controversial ballad about lynching written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish New York schoolteacher.

Jewish immigrant Alfred Lion co-founded Blue Note Records, one of the world's most influential jazz labels, in 1939.

"When he was kid in Berlin, he got hooked on black musicians," Hentoff explained. The New York-based label hit its stride in the late 1940s, releasing records by bebop pianists Bud Powell and Thelonius Monk.

LIKE EVERYTHING small in America, the independent record labels, both R&B and jazz, died out in the 1960s and '70s. That moment in music time—and the niche market—vanished when barriers fell between black and white music, in part because of the success of

the Jewish independent producers had in mainstreaming their artists. At the same time, the music industry, engorged on rock 'n' roll, became big business. The little guys got out of the way, often selling at a profit.

Charges that the "little guy" label owners made more money in many cases than the artists they recorded—particularly in blues, R&B and soul—have haunted them since the 1940s.

"Lubinsky was the cheapest [guy] in the world," record producer Ralph Bass told Shaw. "Both Nathan and Lubinsky thought the same way. You couldn't make a g-d damn phone call with Lubinsky. 'Write a letter!'—unless it was life or death—'Write a letter.' ... But despite it all, I have no ill feeling toward any of them ... They worked so hard making money, and they were financial geniuses for their times."

Singer/songwriter/producer Willie Dixon called Leonard Chess "a maneuverer. He was dealing with people who didn't know anything about the recording business," Dixon claimed in *I Am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story*, written with Don Snowden. "I call it swindling, but most people call it smart business when you can take advantage of some one who don't know no better ... Chess would always find one way or the other to take my money."

Marshall Chess, son of Leonard Chess and a onetime Chess Records executive, disagrees. "My father was tough," Marshall says. "He was no angel. But he wasn't a thief, and he wasn't a crook."

Music publishers and record labels were necessary and hardly inherently evil, argues Sidran, also has a doctorate in American studies. Nineteenth-century songwriter Stephen Foster died broke, he explains, "because there was no publishing business for music." Moreover, Jews aren't responsible for "the system, the economics, and the way the economy has never been based on justice for all."

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Herman Lubinsky parlayed his small recordstore in Newark, N.J. into a major label—Savoy Records

Aretha Franklin and Phil Chess in the studio

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Musicians, adds Bruce Iglauer, owner of Alligator Records in Chicago, a contemporary blues label, may feel cheated, but they need to see the big picture.

"When we enter into our business relationships, all the financial risk falls on me," he says. "I'm the one who's paying for everything, so I don't think it's wrong that if the gamble pays off, that I should expect to make more per record than you the artist do, because if the gamble doesn't pay off, I lose more than you do."

The Jewish R&B producers gambled on the talent they found. They gambled on local, regional and sometimes national musical tastes. And they won, catapulting black music into the forefront of the music business, creating legendary songs, albums, and reputations.

"People forget these Jewish fellows in the business were entrepreneurs who spent their money to make hit records," Art Sheridan, head of a small independent Chicago label called Chance in the 1950s, told journalist Mark Lisheron for an article published by the now defunct *CommonQuest* magazine.

"There wasn't any more altruism at the time than there is today in the music business. The singers wanted to be heard. We wanted to sell records." Ⓜ