

Ghosts of the Delta Still Walk the Halls of Chess Records

September 4, 2024 **by Dan McCue**

CHICAGO — Chipped and worn, like frescoes discovered under a blanket of ash in the ancient city of Pompeii, the numbers above the door, “2120,” were the first real indication one was about to step into history.

With the daytime portion of the Democratic National Convention transpiring just blocks away at the McCormick Center, an entire portion of South Michigan Avenue was cordoned off by large concrete barriers.

At one end of the resulting public square, local residents and business people hurried on their way to whatever then preoccupied them; on the other, young entrepreneurs hawked t-shirts and other paraphernalia, all of it politically-themed, to the delegates who wandered by.

Sitting smack in the middle of all this, on a magnificently clear and sunny Chicago afternoon, stood an unassuming two-story building with a terracotta facade and 1950s-era aluminum storefront.

“Chess Producing Corp.” the sign above the large storefront window read.

Despite the poster heralding “The Rolling Stones at Chess” and an artisan’s tribute to the bluesman and songwriter Willie Dixon, it was almost hard to imagine that the Mount Vesuvius that erupted here changed the course of popular music

Yet there’s no question that it did.



The Chess Records Building, located at 2120 S. Michigan Avenue.
(Photo by Dan McCue)

It was within the walls on the other side of the glass that a pair of brothers, Polish-Jewish immigrants, first captured the sound of

the Chicago blues — a rich gumbo of the Mississippi Delta, electrified guitars and a driving drumbeat — and coaxed from it a whole new form of music that became known as rock and roll.

Along the way, Phil and Leonard Chess, as the brothers were known after jettisoning their given names Fiszal and Lejzoe Czyż, brought Dixon and other blues artists, among them Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Etta James and Sonny Boy Williamson II, to national attention.

As a second act, they launched the careers of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, helping to tear down the cultural barriers that separated White and Black audiences in post- World War II America.

“This is the original doorway,” said Janine Judge, executive director of Willie Dixon’s Blues Heaven Foundation, which has owned the building since Dixon’s widow purchased it in 1993, beginning the restoration work that continues to this day.

“Imagine the hands that opened this door over the years,” Judge said cheerfully.

“And this room right here,” she added, just a few steps inside the door, “was the lobby for Chess.”

“If you’d been here in the late 1950s and early 1960s, you would have seen a

The legendary address. (Photo by Dan McCue)

couple of chairs in here, along with a table with ashtrays on —

back then, of course, everybody was smoking, even doctors,” she said.

Something in Judge’s tone revealed a mild sense of exasperation. Asked what she did before she became enmeshed in preserving Chicago’s legacy of the blues, she quickly revealed why.

“My background is in pulmonary medicine, critical care, neonatal therapy,” she said with a smile.

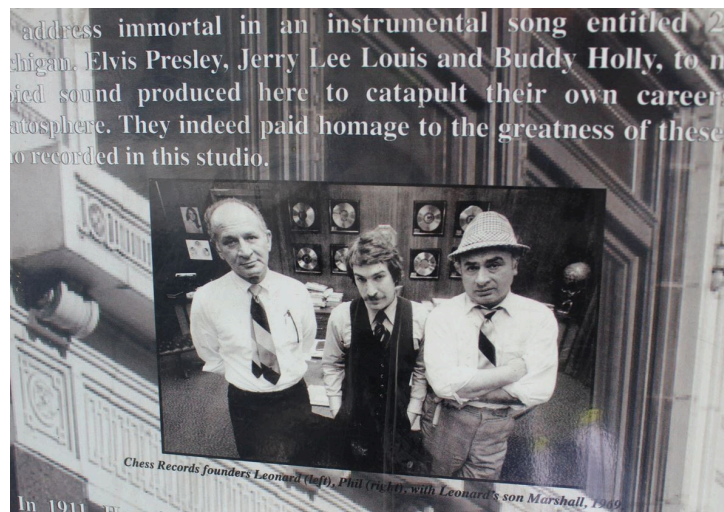
“I worked at Children’s Memorial Hospital,” she added.

The facility is now called the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago.

“So this is where you would wait for your audition, or wait for the receptionist to buzz you in through this second door to meet with one or both of the Chess brothers,” Judge said, returning to the glory days of the record label.

“The front window is not original to the building,” she continued, gesturing to her right. “But that’s thanks to Little Walter [Jacobs, the blues singer and master harmonic player.] He was upset with Leonard one day and likely drunk, and he drove his car right through the original windows.

“Hopefully no one was sitting in here waiting for an audition that day, but that incident is one example of why the brothers had a security door installed



inside the lobby
— they weren't
always dealing
with the
soberest of
musicians.”

The founders, Phil and Leonard Chess, with
Leonard's son, Marshall. (Photo by Dan
McCue)

Judge laughed knowingly.

“In fact, Sonny Boy Williamson tried to climb through this little window right here to get to Leonard,” she said, indicating the very small sliding glass window set into the wall that separated the waiting room from the rest of the building.

“Sonny probably thought Chess owed him some money, but it was so long ago no one remembers,” she said.

Little Known Origin Story

Little is known definitively about the origins of the Czyż family in Poland.

What is known is that they were poor and they were living in Motal, a village on what was once Poland's eastern border, but is now in Belarus, when Lejzor, the eldest son, was born in March 1917.

Fiszel followed four years later, joining a family that also included an older sister named Malka.

Some accounts suggest Fiszel was born in Częstochow, a larger city that seemed to offer more economic opportunities for their father, a carpenter.

Burgeoning hostilities between Bolshevik Russia and Poland, however, soon put an end to dreams of prosperity.

In response, the elder Czyż decided to make his way to the United States, promising his wife that he would send for her and the children as soon as he was settled.

Initially, having arrived at Ellis Island, Czyż's luck was no better than it had been in Poland. Finding nothing but frustration in New York, he made his way to Chicago, where he established a small junkyard.

Now solvent, if not exactly thriving, he sent for his family and Americanized their names: Czyż became "Chess," Lejzor "Leonard", and Fiszel "Phil."

The family was
now on its way,
Chess believed. It
wouldn't be long,
he thought,
before Leonard
and Phil, working
in the junkyard
after school,
joined in the
family business
full time.

The problem
was, his sons
wanted nothing
to do with the
junkyard or the
scrap metal sales
in which it
specialized.

“Basically, America left them dazzled,” Judge said.

“I mean, this was the first time in their lives that they experienced something as elemental as indoor plumbing, but what really got to them was the music, the Black music, that they were exposed to in the neighborhood,” she said.

The music was Black gospel music which they heard emanating from the doors and windows of a church in their neighborhood.

More often than not, the stories go, their father would go looking for his homegrown workforce after school only to find the two boys sitting on the curb across from the church soaking in the glorious sounds.

Determined to make their own way in their adopted country, Chess used the business acumen his father had taught him and a meager savings to buy into an existing liquor store business, an enterprise that put him in direct contact with a different kind of Black musician — blues singers who had relocated from the Deep South in search of work.

By the time his brother returned from the Army, Chess had his sights set on something bigger, and together they opened a music club they called the Macomba Lounge,

“The club featured live entertainment practically around the clock, providing both Jazz and Blues musicians with work and exposure,” Judge said.

“At some point, a guy came in and expressed an interest in recording some of the musicians, and Leonard, by this time an astute businessman in his own right, said, ‘Not so fast.’ And he thought to himself, ‘I’m going to learn about this recording business and make some money off of it myself.’”

As it happened, Chess was a participant in a weekly poker game that also included Evelyn Aron and her husband Charles, part owners of a new label, Aristocrat Records. Chess bought a small piece of the label.

“Basically, he saw it as an opportunity to learn the business, while he worked as a sales rep for the company,” Judge said.

By the time the Arons divorced a few years later, the company, of which Chess owned about half, had begun to enjoy some success with a new artist, Muddy Waters; his “I Can’t Be Satisfied” being its first bonafide hit.

In early 1950, the brothers bought Evelyn Arons out; six months later they changed the company’s name from Aristocrat to Chess.

Up to this point, the operations of Aristocrat Records had largely been managerial in nature — the label had no recording or manufacturing facilities of its own, forcing Arons and eventually Chess to book time at various commercial recording studios around town and have the resulting records manufactured by third parties.

That practice continued at Chess, with the label moving from storefront to storefront, while amassing an ever-growing roster of blues artists, including the aforementioned Howlin’ Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walker as well as Willie Mabon and J.B. Lenoir.

And they even had a hit on their first try when Chess’s instrumental recording of Gene Ammons’s “My Foolish Heart” went to number eight on the Billboard charts.

But two events changed Chess forever.

The first was the hiring of Willie Dixon as songwriter, house bassist, studio bandleader and producer/arranger; roles he'd play separately or in some combination on virtually all of the label's major hits.

In a 1989 interview, Dixon recalled that he was playing with a group called the Big Three Trio, when he first fell into Chess's orbit.

"My band was working around the corner from the Macomba Lounge, a tavern owned by Phil and Leonard Chess, at a place called the El Casino Club, and after our sets I would go over and jam with the guys they had playing," Dixon said.

"Now, Leonard Chess was always telling me, 'Once I start recording, I'm going to call you.' But I just thought it was a yarn, you know, from a stranger," he said.

In time, however, Chess did begin to call, at first asking Dixon to play bass on individual sessions.

Dixon's full-scale involvement with the label began in 1951 after the Big Three Trio broke up.

By then, Dixon was already a potent songwriter, having written "My Babe," his first number one R&B chart hit,

Momentoes of Chuck Berry's illustrious career.
(Photo by Dan McCue)

for Little Walter, “Seventh Son” for Willie Mabon, and “Pain In My Heart” for himself.

But he became a producing force to be reckoned with the night he gave Muddy Waters “I’m Your Hoochie Coochie Man,” and then supervised the recording session. In its initial release it sold 75,000 copies:

Suddenly everyone on the Chess roster wanted the songwriting producer to work on their session or, to put it more accurately, wanted a Dixon song the author intended for someone else.

“The singers were always afraid the other guy was getting the better song, so a lot of times I would have to tell them that the song was written for somebody else,” Dixon laughed. “Howlin’ Wolf in particular could be pretty rough to deal with. He never wanted to do any of the songs I wrote expressly for him until he got a talking-to from Leonard Chess.”

The other game changer for the label was the arrival of Chuck Berry, who had heard the Chess brothers “did right” by Black musicians and drove up from his hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, to audition for them.

Like his counterpart Sam Phillips at Sun Records in Memphis, Chess was convinced his Black artists could enjoy widespread crossover success if only they could somehow break through the segregated color line that permeated the business at the time.

For Phillips, who often railed against the racist nature of the business — cynically opining that if he could find a White singer with a Black feel, he could make a million dollars — Elvis Presely was the vehicle for bringing the Black music he loved to the masses.

At Chess, where the majority of artists were mature Black men with unpolished rural accents, Chess knew he was making great records; the question was how to get the broader record-buying public to embrace them.

In his case, Berry, with his “cleaner” diction and penchant for wordplay and topics that appealed to a younger audience, would prove to be the barrier-breaker.

Berry fancied himself both a singer in the tradition of Nat “King” Cole and a guitarist in a big band like Charlie Christian, and in fact he’d already broken new musical ground when he joined a group known as the Sir John Trio at the Cosmopolitan in St. Louis shortly after Christmas 1952.

“I hired Chuck Berry to work with me because I was a man short for the gig,” piano player Johnnie Johnson remembered during a 1990 interview.

“Our trio was well-liked at the time, and recognized as a group, but adding the guitar and using it in place of the saxophone, that was something different in those days,” Johnson said.

“Chuck had more of a flair for showmanship than the fellow he was replacing,” he continued. “Chuck came in there clowning, doing these little moves and pantomimes to get people’s attention. That’s when he came up with the duck walk and all that, and he started writing these shuffle boogies and guitar boogies, providing songs to the group almost immediately.”

A trip to Chicago and a tip from Waters inspired Berry to pay a visit to Chess Records for the very first time.

The year was 1955 and the itinerant label was then located in a building with a double storefront at 4750–52 South Cottage Grove Avenue.

Since it had no studio facilities, Berry was told to go home and make a proper demo tape of songs he had written.

On his next visit to Chicago, this time at Chess's invitation, he was told his first session would be held at the Universal Recording Studio on E. Walton Street (now the site of an AllSaints brand clothing store).

The plan was to record a song Berry called "Ida Red."

"It was a western tune that Chuck wrote and we had been playing," Johnson remembers. "Leonard Chess heard it, liked the song, but did not like the name. I think he said it was 'too country' or 'too rural' sounding.

"And then
somebody
notices this
mascara box
lying on the floor
in the corner of
the studio and
Leonard Chess
said, 'Well, hell,
name the damn
thing
"Maybelline. And
that's how
"Maybelline" got its name, off a discarded mascara box," he
said.

The legendary Chess recording studio. (Photo
by Dan McCue)

The success of "Maybelline" would have a profound material effect on the Chess family and their record label.

Marshall, Leonard's son, would later remember the money the song brought in paid for his Schwinn three-speed bike, and the first window air conditioner unit the family would ever own.

And it wasn't long after the song's ascent on the charts that the Chess brothers bought the narrow two-story building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue. The building erected in 1911 had previously been home to a slipcover factory and a seller of men's ties.

A few days after that, the brothers hired architect John S. Townsend Jr. to design a series of alterations that would convert it into offices, shipping facilities and a world-class recording studio.

Chess Records Museum in Former Shipping Room

Judge always starts the formal part of the building tour leading visitors down a short hall and into the rectangular room that once served as the company's shipping room.

"This is where the discs would be inserted into their paper and cardboard sleeves to be sent off to retail stores across the country," she said.

Today the space serves as a Chess Records museum with displays that are rotated every few months.

The displays themselves are mostly modest. On this particular afternoon they include artifacts, including articles of clothing, record albums, signed guitars and other mementos recalling the careers of Waters, Berry, Diddley, and Guy, who was never a major Chess Records artist in his own right, but who played on innumerable sessions for the label.

Judge made sure to comment on each artist in turn, playing short snippets of their work while telling tales of escapes from

oppression in
the South, face-
to-face
confrontations
with racism,
artistic
struggles, and
ultimately
musical success
and world wide
recognition.

Bo Diddley's jacket, hat and guitar. (Photo by
Dan McCue)

"This song was
recorded right upstairs with Willie Dixon on upright bass. A
generation of young people know it because it was featured in the
movie 'Back to the Future,' but you may also know it as one of
the songs that was sent on a journey out of our solar system
aboard the Voyager spacecraft," she said.

In 1977, NASA launched two spacecraft, Voyager 1 and 2, on a
mission to explore Jupiter, Saturn and the outer reaches of our
solar system, before continuing on to deep space. Each carried a
12-inch gold plated record that contained music, sounds and
images picked to represent the great diversity of life on Earth.

According to the late astronomer and TV host Carl Sagan, the
idea was that perhaps the disc would someday be discovered and
listened to by some form of extraterrestrial life, light years from
Earth.

In addition to greetings in 55 different languages, Sagan
included, among other tracks, the sound of a mother kissing a
child, Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," selections by Bach, Mozart
and Beethoven, a sample of Azerbaijani folk music, the sounds of
humpback whales, and Berry's "Johnny B. Goode."

By the time Judge played the familiar lead guitar burst that opens the track, the idea that these very notes, recorded mere feet from where one was standing, are now somewhere in the deep void of space brought a lump to one's throat.

Fortunately, the story has a punchline. In early 1978, not long after the probe was launched, a psychic played by Steve Martin on "Saturday Night Live" revealed that aliens had in fact intercepted the spaceship and had sent back an urgent four-word response.

"Send more Chuck Berry," they said.

To bring her tourist guests back down to Earth, Judge leads them back toward the front of the building, pausing about halfway to unlock Leonard Chess's former office.

Dominated by redwood paneling, a large redwood desk and a 1950s-era Kuba stereo console and turntable, the room looks and feels as if Chess, who died in 2016, just left it for a long weekend.

Behind his leather chair, which has left scuff marks on the cabinets behind it, are a portable tape typewriter and a vintage 1950s Zenith Table Top Tube Radio. On the spare desk, a half dozen telephone messages, standing upright in a holder, still wait to be returned.

His brother Phil's office, right next door, is now shared by Judge and Dixon's daughter.

This is where Judge fills in more of the backstory of the business history Chess Records. Strewn about on top of the stereo, if strewn is the right word for such an impeccably ordered space, are 45 rpm singles and albums.

The include
Berry's "Reelin'
and Rockin,"
Williamson's
"Dissatisfied,"
The Dells "Stay In
My Corner," an
eponymously
titled Diddley
album, and The
Ramsey Lewis
Trio's "The In
Crowd" recorded
at The Bohemian
Caverns in
Washington, D.C.

Muddy Waters and Big Mama Thornton.

"You might
notice that there
are a variety of labels here," Judge said. "In addition to Chess,
you'll see the names of Chess subsidiaries, Checker and
Argo/Cadet.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

"That was done primarily to differentiate between the genres of
music that were being recorded here. It was also smart because it
protected disc jockeys from being accused of playing Chess
Records all day long. They could say, 'Well, I play Chess, but I
also play Argo/Cadet ...' and most people would be none the
wiser," she said.

"Next folks we're going to head up to what we call 'the studios'
at the Chess Records building. Are you ready to climb what we
like to call the stairway to blues heaven?" she asked cheerfully.

The walk up the stairs leads to a narrow hall the walls of which now bear large likenesses of the artists for whom this route was the way to a rehearsal or an all-important session.

At the end of the hall, a left and quick right takes one into what is now “the Willie Dixon room.”

Along one wall is another display case, this one containing one of Dixon’s hats and a jacket, handwritten manuscripts, a Grammy award and other memorabilia. In an opposite corner, under a portrait of Dixon enraptured in performance, is his well-worn upright bass.

“He was 6’4” and weighed about 300 pounds,” Judge said, explaining some of the evident wear and tear on the instrument.

“Or as Willie liked to say, he was ‘built for comfort, not for speed.’”

The amazing thing about the portrait is what it reveals about the size of his hands.

“Willie was
actually an
amateur Golden
Gloves champion
boxer, and later a
sparring partner
for heavyweight
champion Joe
Lewis,” Judge
said as one
leaned forward
for closer
inspection.

Muddy Waters albums. (Photo by Dan McCue)

“Then he discovered his manager was making more money from his fights than he was and they got in a brawl right in the boxing commissioner’s office,” she said.

The fight led to an immediate suspension for Dixon, though accounts vary as to its length. Regardless, by the time it was lifted, Dixon was fully immersed in the blues culture of Chicago’s South Side and writing the first of what would ultimately be some 6,000 songs.

“So thank goodness for that suspension,” Judge said.

“Most of the songs he wrote that became hits were recorded first right here in this building, and we’re still mining his works.” she said. “In fact, his daughter Jacqueline sent us one of his old hats not so long ago and we discovered yet another Willie Dixon song inside the hat box, one that has not yet been published.”

In Willie Dixon’s day, the room that now bears his name was called Studio B.

“And this,” Judge said, pointing to a bare spot on the tile floor, “Is where Willie made Chuck Berry rehearse ‘Johnnie B. Goode’ a good 40 times before he finally said, ‘Okay, Chuck, that sounds good. Let’s put it on tape in the next room.’

“So next time you hear ‘Johnnie B. Goode,’ you can recall standing right in the same spot where Chuck was probably dropping f-bomb after f-bomb,” she said with a laugh.

From there it was across the hall to the hallowed space — the Chess recording studio itself.

To the uninitiated, taken in by the musical instruments and a few other features in the room, the space looked remarkably intact, despite the fact Chess vacated the building in 1967.

But as Judge was
quick to explain,
the Willie Dixon
Blues Heaven
Foundation had
its hands full
when it finally
was able to buy
the building and
adjoining open
space in the early
1990s.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

Dixon had actually wanted to buy the building almost from the moment it became available, seeing it as a venue for keeping blues alive and the music in the nation's consciousness.

Instead, it was bought by former Chess musician Gerald Sim, who saw the building as a wise business investment, and saw his role as landlord as one of being as accommodating as possible to his tenants.

The one thing he wasn't was a man who put much stock in historic preservation.

Though he planned to keep a portion of the upstairs as a working recording studio, Sim greenlighted significant renovations for the dance studio and rented out the ground floor to another business.

His changes included houndstooth patterned paneling in the main studio space, and the installation of a drop ceiling and mirror ball above it.

“All of these, of course, had to be removed to bring the studio back into alignment with the blueprints kept by Phil Chess,” Judge said.

What’s remarkable is all of this took place immediately after a particularly profitable period for Chess.

Among the hits recorded during the studio’s last decade were Etta James’s “At Last,” Fontella Bass’s “Rescue Me” – Chess’s first million seller since the halcyon days of Berry in the 1950s – and Pigmeat Markham’s “Here Comes the Judge,” which some argue may well have been the first rap song.

Ironically, it was that success that brought the curtain down on 2120 S. Michigan Avenue. Believing they were entering a new flush era, the Chess brothers moved their label to an eight-story former factory building a few blocks away.

But neither
Chess nor the
label he founded
with brother
would last that
much longer. In
early 1969, the
Chess brothers
sold their label
to a company
called General
Recorded Tape
for \$6.5 million.

Buddy Guy’s guitar. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Six months later, Chess died of a heart attack, the event that precipitated the sale of the old building. Today the high-rise site of the relocated Chess Records is a condominium.

Judge has spent the better part of two decades – including the COVID era when fundraising dried up – trying to put it all back again.

This is a challenge because many of the old photographs of the studio focused on the musicians working inside it. A wonderful example of this is a large, virtually lifesize photograph of Dixon, Waters and a very young Buddy Guy.

The photo was taken in September 1963 by Don Bronstein, the renowned Chicago-based photographer who took many of the images used on Chess album covers, but was perhaps best known as Playboy's first staff photographer, creating covers and centerfolds for the magazine until his untimely death at age 41, while on assignment in Mexico.

It captures the musicians as they were recording "Folk Singer," the only all-acoustic album Water ever recorded.

Judge, now ensconced in the studio, while members of the tour sit amongst the instruments in the studio, played a track from the album.

"It's a bit haunting listening to any of the tracks from 'Folk Singer' in the studio, but it sounds as if they're still in the room with us today," she admits. "Frankly, I kind of think they are — except for Buddy, of course, who's still out there touring, thank goodness."

What It Was Like to Record at Chess

The studio itself is populated by a drum set, several guitars and amplifiers, a piano, and, in the middle of the space, a lone microphone that belonged to Dixon himself.

As Judge played more of the amazing music recorded in this space, one recalled Dixon explaining his approach to recording it.

“[As a producer] I’ve always believed in giving the other guy’s idea the first chance to see if it goes over well. It’s only if I think I can improve on the idea, one way or the other, that I’ll ask them to sit down and discuss it,” he said back in 1989.

“Of course, there are some people who’d rather fall out than agree, and in that case I’ll just quit and go along with them. I’m not a hard guy to get along with musically because I feel everybody has his own valid idea,” he said.

Diplomacy and
talent brought
bountiful
rewards.

Between 1955
and 1964 Dixon
wrote and
produced

“Mellow Down
Easy,” “I Just
Want To Make
Love To You,”
“Spoonful,”
“Back Door
Man,” and “Little Red Rooster,” among others.

Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters and a very young
Buddy Guy captured in the studio in September
1963. (Photo by Dan McCue)

“Wang Dang Doodle,” the last major blues hit he produced, was recorded by Koko Taylor in 1965.

In the studio, Dixon dispensed with formulas, freely substituting instruments to get a different feel on a record. Such was the case with Waters’ “You Need Love” (later retooled by Led Zeppelin as “Whole Lotta Love”).

Another of Dixon's departures was dropping the use of the harmonica for punctuating guitar riffs.

His philosophy was, "It's not just the instrument that takes the part, but the part it takes."

The results, judging from the numerous cover versions of his songs that exist and his impact on such British Invasion acts as The Animals, The Yardbirds and The Rolling Stones, may be timeless.

"The thing you've got to do, naturally, is capture the mood of the music," Dixon said.

"Whether you're a musician on a session or the producer, you've got to hear the mood that's going to sink into the listener's system and make them feel it. It all depended on what the singers wanted themselves, you see.

"I would always try to have a song with me when I arrived for a session that I thought would fit the artist, something that they'd feel was good enough and they could empathize with, because that's the idea," he continued.

"We'd talk and I'd hear them sing. You know everybody is weak in certain things and my first job would be to find out what their weakness was. I'd listen for certain phrases that they liked to use, certain expressions, and I'd try to have those things together in such a way that they could use them in a song."

Because many of the artists he produced never learned to read a proper chart, Dixon would sing them their parts. Many times he actually whispered the lines into Howlin' Wolf's ear while cutting a record.

According to Dixon, many a take was ruined when Wolf interrupted a verse with, “What? I didn’t hear what you just said.”

But having to deal with Wolf’s eccentricities wasn’t the only thing Dixon looked back on with humor.

“There were
always little
things that
happened, but,
you know, a lot of
people give little
things a great big
build-up, making
people think it
was a great big
thing when it
wasn’t,” Dixon
said. “I can

The Rolling Stones in the studio, June 1964.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

remember Sonny Boy Williamson recording this song in the studio that required the drummer to come in at one point and make this big crashing sound.

“The drummer was behind this baffling, you know, that keeps the sound of one instrument from bleeding into the sound of another, and just as he got to this break, the whole thing fell down. Wham!

“It made a great big crashing sound and believe it or not, we kept that on the record. It came in right on time. The drummer fell down, but he was able to keep playing somehow. A lot of guys who were on the session still talk about that one,” he said with pride mixed with good humor.

Johnnie Johnson also recalled recording at Chess.

“One of things I remember is that we’d always try to get the final take in the least amount of tries that we could,” he’d said.

“They would do a sound check, of course, adjusting the balance for each instrument, and while they were doing that, we’d run through the song two or three times, just to get a feel for what Chuck was saying in the tune or to feel out what he was thinking.

“That’s generally how it went once we’d recorded a few times, but I can also remember too well how nervous I was going in to do our first record, ‘Maybelline’ and ‘Wee Wee Hours,’” Johnson said.

“I was really scared I was going to hit the wrong key and mess up the recording,” he continued. “But after that session, once we established that we’d have this like rehearsal before, it became very relaxed and it would take maybe three or four cuts and the record would be made.

“Not that the unexpected didn’t happen. Maybe certain things would go down that didn’t go down the last time. I mean, there were times for instance, that Chuck might call out for something right in the middle of the take ... and we’d have to start over, that kind of thing.

“You didn’t have all this modern stuff that they’ve got now; back then you had to take it step by step. But generally speaking, after that first session at Chess we were very comfortable, it was the same old routine to us,” Johnson said.

Judge herself features a hilarious example of what could transpire in the studio upstairs at 2120 S. Michigan Avenue on the tour.

It's an exchange
between
Williamson and
Chess during a
session recorded
in September
1957.

The recording
stayed in the
Chess vaults for
more than a
decade before a

The view from the control room. (Photo by
Dan McCue)

12-minute version, complete with false starts and off-color
banter, was released as part of a compilation album called
"Bummer Road."

"What's the name of this?" Chess says from the control room.

"'Little Village,'" Williamson shouted back from the studio.

After a slight pause, during which Chess seems to have registered
some confusion, Williamson adds: "A little village,
motherf***er! A little village!"

"There's isn't a mother f***in' thing there about a village, you
son of a b****! Nothing in the song has got anything to do with a
village!"

By now, the other musicians in the room: Dixon, pianist
Lafayette Leake and Otis Spann, guitarists Eddie King Milton,
Luther Tucker, drummer Fred Below, and Delta bluesman Robert
Junior Lockwood are laughing in the background.

"Well, a small town!" Williamson says, trying to move on.

I know what a village is!” Chess snaps.

“Well all right!” Williamson says. “You know, you don’t need no title! You name it after I get through with it. You name it what you want to. You can name it your mammy if you want to!”

With that, Chess was laughing.

“Alright. Take one. Rolling ...”

Afterwards, Judge resumed talking about the challenges of bringing the historic place back to life.

The thing that seemed to grieve her the most was that Sims tore out all of the acoustic panels which had lined the south wall of the studio.

“One of the things I always try to impart to people who visit is that the sound of this room was as much an ‘instrument’ on those records as those the musicians played,” she said.

“Even in its current state, when we have people in to record, the sound of this space is

incredible, but
it's not quite the
same," she

A poster from a past exhibit, celebrating The
Rolling Stones' visit to Chess Records in 1964.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

continued,
adding, "there
are stories about how they used to open and close those acoustic
panels to tune the room for different sessions."

Though the spaces for the panels are clearly evident in the side
wall, Judge said it took some time to figure out their design.

"I personally researched those panels for about 15 years, but I
was stumped," she said.

Then she saw the photographs Bob Bonis, tour manager for the
Rolling Stones and the Beatles in 1964 and 1965, took during the
former band's visit to Chess Records in early June 1964.

The visit would mark the first time the Stones recorded in the
U.S. and they would return two more times over the next year,
recording their single "It's All Over Now," and about 20 others
songs, most of them covers of Chess tunes.

All through that first session, Bonis, an amateur photographer,
clicked away with his Leica M3 camera, documenting not just the
Brian Jones-era Rolling Stones, but in a series of long shots taken
from the control booth, the landscape and architecture of the
studio itself.

"I relied heavily on those photos as our restoration continued,
particularly the photo hanging on the far wall over there," Judge
said, motioning to a framed, black and white photo of Brian Jones
and Charlie Watts in mid-song.

"This photo clearly shows the original panels behind them,
exactly where we see big black rectangles in the white walls

today,” she said.

Once the ongoing panel reconstruction project is completed, “they’ll kind of look like the front of speaker cabinets, and they’ll stick out from the wall a little bit, like the originals in the photograph, because they’ll be on hinges we can open and close,” she said.

Just outside the side exit to the control room, which leads back into the hallway, is one last room, which Judge explained was essentially a small waiting room, with second floor windows looking out onto Michigan Avenue.

Today, a guitar shaped neon sign adorns the center of these windows, bearing the legend, “Keeping Blues Alive.” In Chess’s day, these windows were boarded over to protect the control room and master-cutting lathe from street noise.

Preserving the Legacy of the Blues

Once Chess was sold, Willie Dixon founded his own small label, Yambo Records, and then proceeded to form a series of “all star blues bands” which toured extensively in the U.S. and across Europe.

These live performances, blues showcases really, were nothing new for Dixon who started the American Folk Blues Festivals that began introducing European audiences to the leading blues performers of the day, in 1962.

“At the time, Willie felt blues artists here in the States were not being appreciated for their talent, nor were they getting paid what they should have been. So with some friends from Germany, he started those festivals and brought his friends over to perform at them,” Judge said.

But it was closer to home that his real work was done. Beginning in earnest in the mid-1970s, Dixon began both advocating for the blues — an extension of his concert work — and fighting to secure copyrights and royalties for blues musicians who had been exploited in the past.

Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Park, now the scene of free summer blues concerts. (Photo by Dan McCue)

In 1982, realizing his diabetes was becoming more and more of an issue, he founded the Blues Heaven Foundation to continue his efforts to preserve the blues and secure its vibrant future even if he was unable to do so himself.

The foundation quickly established scholarships under the names of Dixon and Waters, a music mentoring program, an emergency artists assistance program and began sprucing up the “Willie Dixon Blues Garden” in the vacant lot directly adjacent to the Chess building.

Today the modest lot is home to the free “Record Row Concert Series,” fifteen weeks of free blues concerts presented by the foundation every Thursday night from June through September.

“Willie started the foundation with the mission to help promote, protect and preserve the blues, but he also wanted to make sure you could hear blues,” Judge said. “I mean, how do you know if you like blues if you can’t even hear it?”

“And that’s still a big part of our mission today, trying to get more and more people to hear the blues, because if they do, they might like it and listen to it,” she said.

“Willie always maintained that the blues are the roots of American popular music, and that’s the truth. Just about all music, except classical, stems from the blues,” Judge said. “And that belief and these goals are what inspired him to start the Chicago Blues Festival, which is now the largest free blues festival in the world.”

Despite being able to shift some of his activities to the foundation, Dixon himself kept busy — in 1985, he sued Led Zeppelin, claiming its “Whole Lotta Love” infringed on his song “You Need Love,” a 1962 track he recorded with Waters.

It wasn’t the first time Zeppelin was accused of running afoul of Dixon and Chess’s copyrights. In 1972, Chess Records’ publishing arm, Arc Music, sued the band claiming its “Bring It on Home” infringed on the copyright of a song of the same title written by Dixon and recorded by Sonny Boy Williamson in the mid-1960s.

Both lawsuits were settled out of court, with Arc Music and Dixon receiving unknown settlements from the British rock group.

In 1988, Dixon won a Grammy for an album of all-new material called “Hidden Charms,” and in 1989, he was celebrated with the

release of a box set of his greatest recordings and even published his autobiography.

However, the fulfillment of his dream to buy 2120 S. Michigan Avenue and turn it into the home of the Blues Heaven Foundation was something he wouldn't live to see.

Dixon died of heart failure in California in January 1992, and it was his widow, Marie, who ultimately purchased the building a year later.

"It all came about due to a phone call to Marie from Phil Chess," Judge said.

Chess would significantly outlive both his brother and Dixon. He died in his sleep in 2016 at the age of 95.

He had heard Sim was having financial problems and needed to sell.

"Go get that building," Chess told Dixon. "Because Willie should have had it all along."

"So that tells you about the relationship between Willie Dixon and the Chess brothers," Judge said. "He wasn't just an employee, he was literally their right hand man. In fact, Bo Diddley often said Willie Dixon was Chess Records, and that was the truth.

"So Marie closed on the building in March 1993, and immediately set out to restore it according to the blueprint she received from Phil Chess. It took her about five years, but she was finally able to open it for public viewing in September 1997," she continued.

Indeed, Marie Dixon reopened the building with a flourish — a dedication ceremony at which she formally donated the building

to the Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation, fulfilling her husband's dream.

On May 16, 1990, the address was designated a Chicago landmark by then-Mayor Richard M. Daley and the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.

"The Blues Heaven Foundation continues to maintain the historic landmark today, and hopefully always will," Judge said.

"Blues music really does belong to America," she continued, paraphrasing a brief video presentation she played at the start of the tour, nearly two hours earlier. "And it really is one of the great assets of Chicago.

"I mean, the city is known all over the country — all over the world — for the blues and this building is the premier historic site associated with this music," she said. "It's the place where a lot of the records and rehearsing and getting songs together and everything happened."

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