



Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records

Nadine Cohodas

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Sun Records gave us rock and roll, Motown Records gave us pop soul, and Chess Records gave us the blues. Chess was THE label for Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Chuck Berry, Etta James, and Bo Diddley--and in this critically acclaimed history we learn the full story of this legendary label. The greatest artists who sang and played the blues made their mark with Leonard and Phil Chess, whose Chicago-based record company was synonymous with the sound that swept up from the South, embraced the Windy City, and spread out like wildfire into mid-century America. *Spinning Blues into Gold* is the impeccably researched story of the men behind the music and the remarkable company they created. Chess Records--and later Checker, Argo, and Cadet Records--was built by Polish immigrant Jews, brothers who saw the blues as a unique business opportunity. From their first ventures, a liquor store and then a nightclub, they promoted live entertainment. And parlayed that into the first pressings sold out of car trunks on long junkets through the midsection of the country, ultimately expanding their empire to include influential radio stations. The story of the Chess brothers is a very American story of commerce in the service of culture. Long on chutzpah, Leonard and Phil Chess went far beyond their childhoods as the sons of a scrap-metal dealer. They changed what America listened to; the artists they promoted planted the seeds of rock 'n' roll--and are still influencing music today. In this illustrated book, Cohodas expertly captures the rich and volatile mix of race, money, and recorded music. She also takes us deep into the world of independent record producers, sometimes abrasive and always aggressive men striving to succeed. Leonard and Phil Chess worked hand-in-glove with disenfranchised black artists, the intermittent charges of exploitation balanced by the reality of a common purpose that eventually brought fame to many if not most of the parties concerned. From beginning to end, as we find in these pages, the lives of the Chess brothers were socially, financially, and creatively entwined with those of the artists they believed in.

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