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CULTURETECHLENS RESEARCH REPORT · CTL-RD-MUS-000001

Chess Records

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CultureTechLens NFP · Chicago, Illinois

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01 · Identity

Canonical name: Chess Records **Dossier ID:** CTL-RD-MUS-000001 **Entity type:** Business — independent record company (organization; defunct as an active label, 1975) **One-sentence identification:** Chess Records was the Chicago independent record label founded in 1950 by Polish-Jewish immigrant brothers Leonard and Phil Chess, whose blues, R&B, and rock-and-roll recordings — by Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Etta James, Willie Dixon, and others — defined the sound of Chicago blues and shaped rock and roll worldwide.

Disambiguation: Not to be confused with (a) the **2120 S. Michigan Avenue building** (a place; this dossier treats organization and building as separate entities per audit rule), (b) **Checker/Argo/Cadet** subsidiary labels (separate entities with their own edges), (c) **Aristocrat Records** (the 1947 predecessor), or (d) the current **UMG/Geffen reissue program** that trades on the Chess name. The Chicago bluesman **Willie Dixon never owned Chess Records** — his widow Marie bought the 2120 building in 1993 (see §27).

02 · Executive Profile

Chess Records (1950–1975) was the central institution of the Chicago blues recording industry and one of the most consequential independent labels in American music. Founded by brothers Leonard Chess (1917–1969) and Phil Chess (1921–2016), Polish-Jewish immigrants who entered the business through South Side nightclubs, the label grew from a trunk-distribution operation

selling "race records" to Black retail stores into a vertically integrated company — pressing plant, studio, publishing, shipping, and label printing under one roof at 320 E. 21st Street — that put Chicago blues on national charts and, through British rock's embrace, around the world.

CTL establishes the following with confidence: the 1950 founding and the Aristocrat (1947) lineage; the founders' biographies; the address chronology (Cottage Grove storefronts → 2120 S. Michigan, May 1957–1967 → 320 E. 21st, late 1966 onward); the subsidiary and publishing structure (Checker 1952, Marterry/Argo/Cadet, Arc Music 1953); the independent-distribution business model, including Leonard's own trunk sales and a 1954 Louisiana production deal; the 1969 sale to General Recorded Tape for $6.5 million plus stock; and the catalog path through All Platinum to MCA and into Universal Music Group, which owns it today (Geffen/UMe manage reissues). The 1985-vs-1986 and All-Platinum-vs-Sugar-Hill details of the MCA transfer are genuinely disputed and recorded as such.

What remains uncertain: thin spots include Arc Music's founding documentation, the All Platinum wind-down's asset inventory, the 1975 dismantling (hundreds of thousands of records reportedly destroyed), and the exact founder set of Aristocrat. The credit and royalty disputes — Maybellene payola credits, the 1977 Dixon/Waters suits against Arc, the Led Zeppelin suits — are documented facts, not folklore; the "found guilty" framing of the Zeppelin cases is refuted. CTL's standing position holds: Chicago electrified and industrialized the blues; it did not invent the electric blues.

03 · Significance

- Chess Records was the recording institution that industrialized the Chicago blues — electrified Delta-derived music captured in a purpose-built studio system, distributed nationally, and marketed across racial lines. [VERIFIED]
- Its catalog is the primary recorded document of the 1950s–60s Chicago blues canon (Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Willie Dixon) and of early rock and roll (Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley). [VERIFIED]
- The label's recordings were the study texts of the British blues revival: the Rolling Stones named themselves for a Chess single and recorded at 2120 S. Michigan in 1964; Chess masters underpin the rock canon from the Beatles to Led Zeppelin to the Voyager Golden Record ("Johnny B. Goode," 1977). [VERIFIED]
- Chess exemplifies the independent-label business model of the postwar era — self-distribution to Black retail, regional indie distributors, in-house production — and its limits: the 1969 sale and 1975 wind-down trace the consolidation of independents into the conglomerate system that became UMG. [VERIFIED]
- Its royalty and credit disputes (Dixon, Waters, Maybellene payola credits, the Zeppelin suits) are landmark cases in the exploitation-and-recovery history of Black music, directly seeding the Blues Heaven Foundation's royalty-recovery mission. [VERIFIED]

- The 2120 S. Michigan building (Chicago Landmark, 1990; Blues Heaven Foundation museum since 1997) is one of the most visited music-heritage sites in Chicago. [VERIFIED]

04 · Names/Aliases

Name	Source	Date range	Grade
Chess Records	Landmark report; all	1950–1975	VERIFIED
Chess Producing Corp. / Chess Record Corporation	Billboard ad Mar 24, 1958; Landmark report	1950s–1960s	VERIFIED
Aristocrat Records (predecessor name)	Landmark report; BMI-002	1947–1950	VERIFIED
"A GRT Record Group" (label credit)	45-sleeves label scans	1969–1975	VERIFIED
"A division of All Platinum Record Group" (label credit)	45-sleeves label scans	1975–1977	SUPPORTED
"A division of Sugar Hill Records Ltd." (label credit)	45-sleeves label scans	late 1970s	SUPPORTED
Checker / Argo / Cadet / Cadet Concept (subsidiaries, sometimes conflated with "Chess")	Landmark report; Wikipedia	1952–	VERIFIED
Middle Earth Records (UK subsidiary)	Wikipedia	1969–1970	SUPPORTED

Name ambiguity check: "Chess" as a label credit after 1975 refers to reissue programs (All Platinum, Sugar Hill, MCA, UMG), not the operating company. "Cadet Concept" appears in some sources as "Concept Records" — variant naming recorded, not two entities.

05 · Dates

- **1947** — Aristocrat Records founded, Chicago. [VERIFIED]
- **1950-06** — Chess Records founded/renamed; first release Gene Ammons "My Foolish Heart" (no. 1425). [VERIFIED]
- **1952** — Checker Records subsidiary started. [VERIFIED]
- **1953** — Arc Music (BMI) publishing set up. [SUPPORTED]
- **1954** — Stan Lewis/Shreveport production deal (4858 series). [SUPPORTED]
- **1955** — Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley first Chess recordings ("Maybellene," "I'm a Man"); Marterry/Argo launched (Dec 1955). [VERIFIED]
- **1956 (late)** — 2120 S. Michigan purchased. [VERIFIED]
- **1957-05** — Move to 2120 S. Michigan; Sheldon studio opens (late 1957). [VERIFIED]

- **1958** — Chess takes over Sheldon studio; renamed Ter-Mar by mid-1958 (Billboard; Wikipedia says 1959 — disputed, adjudicated to 1958). LP production begins. [VERIFIED/DISPUTED date]
- **1960** — Etta James joins; Ralph Bass A&R (1958 per landmark report — disputed). [VERIFIED/DISPUTED]
- **1963** — WVON established (Chess brothers part-owners). [VERIFIED]
- **1964-06** — Rolling Stones record at 2120 S. Michigan. [VERIFIED]
- **1965** — Argo renamed Cadet. [VERIFIED]
- **1966** — 320 E. 21st Street purchased; move late 1966–early 1967. [VERIFIED]
- **1968-11-02** — Sale to GRT announced. [SUPPORTED]
- **1969-01** — Sale to GRT completed ($6.5M + 20,000 GRT shares). [VERIFIED]
- **1969-10-16** — Leonard Chess dies, heart attack, age 52. [VERIFIED]
- **1972** — "My Ding-A-Ling" No. 1 pop (Chess's only); GRT consolidates Chess into Janus; Phil Chess retires, moves to Arizona. [SUPPORTED/VERIFIED]
- **1975** — GRT winds down Chess; remainder sold to All Platinum; alleged mass record destruction. [SUPPORTED/PROVISIONAL]
- **1977** — Dixon & Waters sue Arc Music. [VERIFIED]
- **1979** — Ter-Mar Studios at 320 E. 21st closes; GRT ceases operations. [SUPPORTED]
- **1985/1986** — MCA acquires Chess catalog (year and seller disputed). [DISPUTED]
- **1987** — Dixon–Led Zeppelin settlement. [VERIFIED]
- **1990-05-16** — 2120 S. Michigan designated a Chicago Landmark. [VERIFIED]
- **1993** — Marie Dixon purchases 2120 building. [VERIFIED]
- **1997** — Blues Heaven Foundation museum opens at 2120. [VERIFIED]
- **2008-07** — Universal Studios fire destroys UMG masters including Chess recordings. [SUPPORTED]

06 · Geography

- **1928** — The Czyż family settles in Chicago (West Side); Leonard and Phil educated in Chicago public schools; father operates Chess & Sons Junk Shop, 2979 S. State St. [VERIFIED, Landmark report]
- **1946–1950** — Macomba Lounge, 3905 S. Cottage Grove (Landmark report: 3905 S. Drexel Blvd — street-name discrepancy recorded as disputed). [SUPPORTED]
- **1947** — Aristocrat office: small storefront, 2300 E. 71st St. [VERIFIED, Landmark report]
- **1948** — Aristocrat office moves to 5249 S. Cottage Grove. [VERIFIED, Landmark report]
- **1950–1954** — Chess operates from a storefront at the northwest corner of 49th St. and Cottage Grove Ave. [VERIFIED, Landmark report]

- **1954–1957** — Double storefront, 4750–52 S. Cottage Grove Ave (makeshift studio installed 1954). [VERIFIED, Landmark report]
- **1957-05–1967** — 2120 S. Michigan Ave (purchased late 1956; first owned location). Record Row corridor: Vee-Jay at 2129 and 1449 S. Michigan within blocks. [VERIFIED]
- **1966/1967–** — 320 E. 21st St (eight-story factory; pressing plant; Ter-Mar Studios). [VERIFIED]
- **Early 1970s** — Chess label operations relocated to New York City under GRT. [SUPPORTED]
- **1997–** — 2120 S. Michigan: Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation museum. [VERIFIED]

Migration arc: the label's artists were overwhelmingly Great Migration Southerners (Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon from Mississippi; Little Walter from Louisiana; Koko Taylor from Memphis) recorded on Chicago's South Side — the geography is the story. Community-area precision: 2120 S. Michigan sits in the Near South Side; the Cottage Grove addresses in Greater Grand Crossing/Woodlawn-adjacent corridors. CTL does not collapse these.

07 · Biography/History

Origins (1928–1947). Lejzor Szmuel Czyż (b. March 12, 1917, near Pinsk) and his brother Fiszel (b. 1921, Motol) were brought to Chicago in 1928 by their Polish-Jewish immigrant family and grew up on the West Side, working with their father in a junk shop at 2979 S. State Street. Leonard moved into liquor distribution and then taverns and nightclubs catering to a primarily Black South Side clientele; the largest was the Macomba Lounge, opened with Phil in 1946. The clubs' live jazz and blues gave the brothers their commercial education in Black music. [VERIFIED]

Aristocrat (1947–1950). In 1947 Leonard watched a Hollywood scout talk to Macomba house-band singer Andrew Tibbs; his response — "if he's good enough for Hollywood, I'll put him on record myself" — launched the record business. He bought time at Universal Recording (then in the Civic Opera building) and cut Tibbs's "Union Man Blues." Operating from 2300 E. 71st St., the sessions were issued on Aristocrat Records, owned by a partnership of Leonard, Phil, and investor Evelyn Aron. Leonard handled local distribution himself — records in his car trunk, rounds of record and variety stores, barber shops, beauty salons, and other Black-owned businesses — and acted as distributor for other small independents; he traveled to Detroit, the Midwest, and the South with a wire recorder scouting talent. In January 1950 Phil joined full-time, Aron withdrew to start her own distributing company, and on a Memphis presser's suggestion the label was renamed Chess Records. The first release, Gene Ammons's "My Foolish Heart" (June 1950, no. 1425 — the brothers' childhood apartment number), was a hit. "That was when Chess was really born." [VERIFIED]

The 1950s: blues and rock and roll. Building on Aristocrat's jazz/blues base, Chess recorded Delta-derived blues for the Great Migration market: Muddy Waters (recording for the brothers since 1947), Howlin' Wolf (via Sam Phillips's Memphis pipeline), Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Willie Mabon, J.B. Lenoir. Willie Dixon, employed from the early 1950s to coordinate recordings, became songwriter, arranger, session bassist, and producer — "right arm"

to Leonard Chess — and the label became his laboratory for the Chicago blues sound. Checker Records (1952) gave the company a second imprint for radio play. The 1954 deal with Shreveport distributor Stan Lewis tapped the Louisiana Hayride circuit. In 1955 two unknowns — Bo Diddley (spotted street-performing by Dixon) and Chuck Berry of St. Louis ("Maybellene") — made Chess a rock-and-roll label; Berry's and Diddley's records crossed to the pop charts while the label dominated the R&B charts. [VERIFIED]

2120 S. Michigan (1957–1967). Purchased late 1956 and occupied in May 1957 after a $20,000 remodel, 2120 was Chess's first owned home: executive offices, shipping room, and a second-floor studio with a concrete-lined master vault — ending dependence on outside studios (a failed 1954 makeshift studio at 4750–52 S. Cottage Grove notwithstanding). The studio, first managed by the Sheldon subsidiary (designed by Jack Weiner), was taken over by Chess in 1958 and renamed Ter-Mar (for Terry and Marshall Chess); engineers Malcolm Chisholm (1958–59, ex-Universal Recording) and Ron Malo (from 1959; built the basement echo chambers) shaped the house sound, with A&R man Ralph Bass recreating the nightclub atmosphere on the floor. Berry cut four of his seven top-ten singles there; the roster ran from Muddy, Wolf, Little Walter, and Sonny Boy through Buddy Guy, Etta James (from 1960), and Koko Taylor to the Moonglows, the Dells, Ramsey Lewis, Ahmad Jamal, and the comedy albums of Moms Mabley and Pigmeat Markham. The Rolling Stones recorded there in June 1964, cutting the tribute "2120 South Michigan Avenue." [VERIFIED]

The 1960s: expansion and radio. Chess diversified into soul and R&B (Roquel "Billy" Davis as 1960s A&R/producer; the house session band including Maurice White, Louis Satterfield, Pete Cosey, Phil Upchurch), gospel, jazz, spoken word, and comedy. The brothers entered broadcasting as part-owners of WVON (1963) and acquired WSDM-FM. In 1966 they bought the eight-story factory at 320 E. 21st Street and moved in late 1966–early 1967, building a vertically integrated "music factory": eight-track recording, pressing plant, label printing, shipping — "from performance to record shop, in 24 hours." The move traded streetwise informality for corporate scale, diluting the creative spark even as the company chased the pop market. [VERIFIED]

Sale and after (1969–). Announced November 2, 1968 and closed January 1969, the brothers sold Chess to General Recorded Tape for $6.5 million plus 20,000 shares of GRT stock; both brothers and Marshall Chess stayed in management, with Marshall as president. Leonard — ill, feeling "over the hill" — died of a heart attack on October 16, 1969, aged 52. Phil left for WVON, retiring in 1972 to Arizona (d. 2016, age 95). GRT consolidated Chess into Janus by 1972, wound the label down by 1975, and sold the remains to All Platinum Records (Englewood, NJ); Ter-Mar Studios operated at 320 E. 21st until 1979. The catalog passed through the Robinson companies to MCA (1985/86 — year and seller disputed) and, via the MCA/PolyGram merger, into Universal Music Group, which owns it today with Geffen/UMe managing reissues. [VERIFIED/DISPUTED as noted]

Afterlife. The 1977 Dixon/Waters suits against Arc, the Arc-vs-Zeppelin suits (1972), and Dixon's personal 1987 Zeppelin settlement are the legal spine of the label's exploitation-and-recovery

history — and the direct seed of Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation (1984), headquartered since 1997 at 2120 S. Michigan, the building his widow Marie bought in 1993 and the city landmarked in 1990. [VERIFIED]

08 · Chronology

Format: `YYYY-MM-DD — event — grade — source`. Feeds the Timeline registry.

- 1917-03-12 — Lejzor Szmuel (Leonard) Chess born near Pinsk — VERIFIED — Memphis Flyer 2024; BMI-002
- 1921 — Fiszel (Phil) Chess born, Motol — VERIFIED — timenote; BMI-002
- 1928 — Czyż family settles in Chicago — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1946 — Macomba Lounge opened (Leonard with Phil), 3905 S. Cottage Grove [Drexel Blvd per Landmark report — disputed] — SUPPORTED — Landmark report; Wikipedia
- 1946-02 — Macomba liquor license granted to Phil Chess — SUPPORTED — Wikipedia (Macomba Lounge)
- 1947 — Aristocrat Records founded — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1947-09 — Leonard Chess buys into Aristocrat (month provisional) — PROVISIONAL — Wikipedia
- 1950-01 — Phil Chess joins Aristocrat full-time; Evelyn Aron withdraws — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1950-06 — Chess Records founded (rename); first release Gene Ammons "My Foolish Heart" no. 1425 — VERIFIED — Landmark report; Pollstar
- 1950-10 — Macomba Lounge burns down — SUPPORTED — Wikipedia
- 1952 — Checker Records subsidiary started — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1953 — Arc Music (BMI) set up by Leonard Chess and Gene Goodman — SUPPORTED — Wikipedia
- 1954 — Production deal with Shreveport distributor Stan Lewis (4858 series); makeshift studio at 4750–52 S. Cottage Grove — SUPPORTED/VERIFIED — Campbell; Cash Box 1954-06-26; Landmark report
- 1955 — Chuck Berry "Maybellene" and Bo Diddley "I'm a Man" first Chess recordings — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1955-12 — Marterry label launched (renamed Argo; Cadet 1965) — VERIFIED — Wikipedia; Landmark report
- 1956 (late) — 2120 S. Michigan purchased — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1957-05 — Chess moves to 2120 S. Michigan — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1957 (late) — Sheldon Recording Studios opens at 2120 — VERIFIED — Wikipedia; Landmark report

- 1958 — Chess takes over Sheldon studio; renamed Ter-Mar (mid-1958 per Billboard; 1959 per Wikipedia — disputed); LP production begins; Malcolm Chisholm hired — VERIFIED/DISPUTED — Landmark report; Billboard 1958-06-09
- 1959 — Ron Malo replaces Chisholm as engineer — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1960 — Etta James joins Chess — VERIFIED — BMI-002; Landmark report
- 1963 — WVON established (Chess brothers part-owners) — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1964-06 — Rolling Stones record at 2120 S. Michigan ("12 x 5"; "2120 South Michigan Avenue") — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1965 — Argo renamed Cadet — VERIFIED — Wikipedia; Landmark report
- 1966 — 320 E. 21st Street purchased — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1966-12/1967-01 — Move to 320 E. 21st; 2120 vacated 1967 — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1968-11-02 — Sale to GRT announced — SUPPORTED — RareSoul 2012
- 1969-01 — Sale to GRT completed ($6.5M + 20,000 GRT shares) — VERIFIED — Landmark report; GRT article
- 1969 — UK subsidiary Middle Earth Records established (Pye distribution) — SUPPORTED — Wikipedia
- 1969-10-16 — Leonard Chess dies, heart attack, age 52 — VERIFIED — Landmark report; Rock Hall
- 1970 — Middle Earth Records closes — SUPPORTED — Wikipedia
- 1972 — Chess's "My Ding-A-Ling" No. 1 pop (label's only); GRT consolidates Chess into Janus; Phil Chess retires to Arizona — SUPPORTED/VERIFIED — tsimon; Wikipedia
- 1972 — Arc Music sues Led Zeppelin ("Bring It On Home"); settles with Dixon/Burnett credited — VERIFIED — U. Oregon textbook; ledzepnews
- 1975 — GRT winds down Chess; remainder sold to All Platinum; alleged mass record destruction — SUPPORTED/PROVISIONAL — tsimon; MUSIC-001
- 1977 — Willie Dixon and Muddy Waters sue Arc Music over royalties; Dixon founds Hoochie Coochie Music — VERIFIED — Wikipedia; shaunmurphyband
- 1977 — "Johnny B. Goode" launched on the Voyager Golden Record — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1979 — Ter-Mar Studios at 320 E. 21st closes; GRT ceases operations — SUPPORTED — Wikipedia; Landmark report
- 1980 — Gerald Sims acquires 2120 building from the Chess family — VERIFIED — Landmark report
- 1984 — Willie Dixon founds the Blues Heaven Foundation — SUPPORTED — HistoryMakers
- 1985 — Dixon sues Led Zeppelin personally ("Whole Lotta Love") — VERIFIED — U. Oregon textbook
- 1985/1986 — MCA acquires Chess catalog from Robinson companies (year/seller disputed) — DISPUTED — tsimon/Springer vs Landmark report/Discogs

- 1987 — Dixon–Led Zeppelin out-of-court settlement — VERIFIED — Wikipedia; U. Oregon textbook
- 1990-05-16 — 2120 S. Michigan designated a Chicago Landmark — VERIFIED — BMI-002
- 1992-01-29 — Willie Dixon dies — VERIFIED — Wikipedia
- 1993 — Marie Dixon purchases 2120 building — VERIFIED — HistoryMakers
- 1997 — Blues Heaven Foundation museum opens at 2120 — VERIFIED — HistoryMakers
- 1999 — MCA/PolyGram merged into UMG (catalog now UMG-owned) — VERIFIED — Springer; Peel Wiki
- 2008 — *Cadillac Records* and *Who Do You Love?* released (fictionalized) — VERIFIED — tsimon; timenote
- 2008-07 — Universal Studios fire destroys UMG masters incl. Chess recordings — SUPPORTED — Wikipedia
- 2016-10-19 — Phil Chess dies, Tucson, age 95 — VERIFIED — NPR; Pollstar
- 2016-11-20 — Marie Dixon dies — VERIFIED — HistoryMakers

09 · People

Founders, workers, family, collaborators — including ordinary workers where documented (celebrity bias checked).

- **Leonard Chess** (1917–1969) — co-founder; talent scout, deal-maker, public face; played bass drum on a 1951 Muddy Waters session (timenote, PROVISIONAL color). [VERIFIED]
- **Phil Chess** (1921–2016) — co-founder; business operations; WWII Army veteran; later WVON. [VERIFIED]
- **Evelyn Aron** — Aristocrat investor/office manager; withdrew Jan 1950 to start her own distributing company. One of the few named women in the label's business history. [SUPPORTED]
- **Marshall Chess** (b. 1942) — Leonard's son; VP Jan–Oct 1969, president post-GRT; founded Rolling Stones Records. [VERIFIED]
- **Terry Chess** — Phil's son; with Marshall, the namesake of Ter-Mar Studios and the Marterry label. [SUPPORTED]
- **Willie Dixon** (1915–1992) — coordinator/songwriter/arranger/session bassist/producer from early 1950s; the label's creative director in practice. [VERIFIED]
- **Ralph Bass** — A&R director (hire 1958 vs 1960 disputed); recreated nightclub atmosphere in-studio. [VERIFIED role]
- **Roquel "Billy" Davis** — 1960s A&R manager/chief soul producer; ex-Motown orbit. [SUPPORTED]
- **Malcolm Chisholm** — master engineer 1958–59 (ex-Universal Recording). [VERIFIED]
- **Ron Malo** — engineer from 1959; built the basement echo chambers. [VERIFIED]

- **Jack Weiner** — designed the 2120 studio; co-owned Sheldon; left 1958. [SUPPORTED]
- **Gene Goodman** — co-founded Arc Music (1953). Thinly documented. [PROVISIONAL]
- **Stan Lewis** — Shreveport distributor; 1954 production partner. [SUPPORTED]
- **Sam Phillips** — Memphis supplier of Wolf/Thomas/Ross/"Rocket 88" recordings. [VERIFIED]
- **Robert E. "Buster" Williams** — Memphis presser credited with suggesting the "Chess" name. [SUPPORTED]
- **Maurice White** — session drummer, 1960s; later Earth, Wind & Fire. [VERIFIED]
- **Louis Satterfield, Pete Cosey, Gerald Sims, Phil Upchurch, Leonard Caston, Sonny Thompson** — 1960s session band. [SUPPORTED]
- **Otis Spann, Little Walter, Fred Below, Lafayette Leake** — blues-session core. [SUPPORTED]
- **Marie Dixon** (d. 2016) — Willie Dixon's widow; bought 2120 (1993); Blues Heaven Foundation president. [VERIFIED]
- **Gerald Sims** — former Chess session guitarist; bought 2120 from the family (1980); reequipped the studio. [VERIFIED]
- **Andrew Tibbs** — Macomba house-band singer whose 1947 session drew Leonard into recording. An ordinary working musician at the hinge of the story. [VERIFIED, Landmark report]
- **Tom Archia, Armand "Jump" Jackson, Sammy Goldberg** — Macomba/Aristocrat-era musicians and talent scout. [SUPPORTED, Wikipedia Macomba]

Missing-women note: beyond Evelyn Aron and Marie Dixon, no women executives, engineers, or session players are documented in the sources consulted — a selection-bias finding, not an absence claim (cf. MUSIC-001's "zero named women in Chicago soul session histories").

10 · Organizations

- **Aristocrat Records** (1947–1950) — predecessor; renamed Chess. [VERIFIED]
- **Checker Records** (1952–) — subsidiary; blues/R&B, Bo Diddley. [VERIFIED]
- **Marterry/Argo/Cadet Records** (1955–) — jazz/pop subsidiary. [VERIFIED]
- **Cadet Concept** — late-60s psych-rock imprint ("Concept" variant naming). [SUPPORTED]
- **Arc Music (BMI)** (1953–) — publishing arm. [SUPPORTED]
- **Chevis / Flomar** — additional Chess publishing companies (named in passing; not verified in this pass). [PROVISIONAL]
- **Sheldon Recording Studio Inc.** (1957–58) — initial 2120 studio operator. [VERIFIED]
- **Ter-Mar Studios** (1958–1979) — in-house studio. [VERIFIED]
- **General Recorded Tape (GRT)** (1965–1979) — buyer 1969. [VERIFIED]
- **Janus Records** — GRT label; Chess consolidated into it by 1972. [SUPPORTED]
- **All Platinum Records** (Englewood, NJ) — bought Chess remains c. 1975. [SUPPORTED]

- **Sugar Hill Records Ltd.** — Robinson-family reissue vehicle; disputed MCA seller. [PROVISIONAL]
- **MCA Records** — acquired catalog 1985/86 (disputed). [DISPUTED]
- **Universal Music Group / Geffen / UMe** — current owner/managers. [VERIFIED]
- **WVON-AM / WSDM-FM** — Chess brothers' radio holdings. [VERIFIED]
- **Memphis Recording Service (Sun)** — talent supplier. [VERIFIED]
- **Pye Records** — distributed UK subsidiary Middle Earth. [SUPPORTED]
- **Middle Earth Records** (UK, 1969–70) — subsidiary. [SUPPORTED]
- **Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation** (1984–) — nonprofit; 2120 tenant since 1997. [SUPPORTED]
- **Hoochie Coochie Music** — Dixon's publishing company (1977). [SUPPORTED]
- **Sammy Dyer School of the Theater** — 2120 occupant 1969–1980. [VERIFIED]
- **Rolling Stones Records** — Marshall Chess's post-Chess label. [VERIFIED]

11 · Places

See §06 for the full address chronology. Key places as entities: 2120 S. Michigan (RD-MUS-000001-004), 320 E. 21st (RD-MUS-000001-005), Macomba Lounge (RD-MUS-000001-031), Record Row corridor (RD-MUS-000001-032). Organization/building separation is maintained throughout.

12 · Events

- **1964-06 — The Rolling Stones sessions at 2120.** The band records for *12 x 5* at Chess's studio and cuts the tribute instrumental "2120 South Michigan Avenue." Evidence-first: documented by the Landmark report; illustrates the British-validation dynamic — narrate with care per MUSIC-001's standing rule (center the Chicago creators, not the white reception). [VERIFIED]
- **1968-11-02 — GRT sale announced; 1969-01 — completed.** End of family ownership. [VERIFIED]
- **1969-10-16 — Death of Leonard Chess.** [VERIFIED]
- **1972 — Arc Music sues Led Zeppelin.** [VERIFIED]
- **1975 — GRT wind-down; alleged mass destruction of Chess stock.** Treat as provisional; no sensationalism. [PROVISIONAL]
- **1977 — Dixon & Waters sue Arc.** [VERIFIED]
- **1985–1987 — Dixon's personal Zeppelin suit and settlement.** [VERIFIED]
- **1997 — Blues Heaven museum opens at 2120.** [VERIFIED]
- **2008-07 — Universal Studios fire.** Chess masters among those destroyed (contested whether copies survived). [SUPPORTED]

13 · Works/Products

Representative recordings (not a discography — that is Ruppli 1983's job):

Recording	Artist	Year	Note	Grade
"My Foolish Heart" (Chess 1425)	Gene Ammons	1950	First Chess release	VERIFIED
"Rollin' Stone"	Muddy Waters	1950	Named the band and the magazine	VERIFIED
"Rocket 88"	Jackie Brenston & his Delta Cats	1951	Via Sam Phillips; No. 1 R&B	VERIFIED
"Maybellene"	Chuck Berry	1955	Payola co-credit (Alan Freed) documented	VERIFIED/ SUPPORTED
"I'm a Man"	Bo Diddley	1955	Checker	VERIFIED
After School Session (LP)	Chuck Berry	1958	Among first Chess LPs	SUPPORTED
"Say Man"	Bo Diddley	1959	Checker	VERIFIED
"At Last"	Etta James	1960	Cut at 2120	VERIFIED
"2120 South Michigan Avenue"	The Rolling Stones	1964	Tribute instrumental, cut at 2120	VERIFIED
"Bring It On Home"	Sonny Boy Williamson II (Dixon)	1966	Subject of 1972 Arc suit	VERIFIED
"My Ding-A-Ling"	Chuck Berry	1972	Chess's only No. 1 pop	SUPPORTED
"Johnny B. Goode"	Chuck Berry	1958	Voyager Golden Record, 1977	VERIFIED

Also: the Chess *sound* as product — the 2120 studio chain (Chisholm/Malo, echo chambers, Bass's nightclub atmosphere) was itself a manufactured good.

14 · Relationships

Human-readable relationship layer. Every edge below also appears in `relationships.json` (Appendix A schema) with provenance and grade. 58 edges: 43 VERIFIED, 14 SUPPORTED, 1 DISPUTED.

Founders & family: Chess Records →founded-by→ Leonard Chess (V); →founded-by→ Phil Chess (V); →renamed-from→ Aristocrat Records (V); Leonard →sibling-of→ Phil (V); Leonard →parent-of→ Marshall Chess (V); Marshall →president-of→ Chess Records 1969 (V); Marshall →founded-by→ Rolling Stones Records (V). **Lineage & name:** Aristocrat →co-founded→ Evelyn Aron (S); Buster Williams →suggested-name-for→ Chess Records (S). **Buildings & studios:** Chess →headquartered-at→ 2120 S. Michigan 1957–67 (V); →headquartered-at→ 320 E. 21st from 1966/67 (V); Ter-Mar →operated-at→ 2120 (V); →operated-at→ 320 E. 21st (S); Sheldon

→succeeded-by→ Ter-Mar (V); Ter-Mar →hired-by→ Malcolm Chisholm (V); Chisholm →engineer-at→ Ter-Mar 1958–59 (V); Ron Malo →engineer-at→ Ter-Mar from 1959 (V); Ralph Bass →a&r-director-at→ Chess (V — hire date disputed); Billy Davis →a&r-manager-at→ Chess 1960s (S). **Corporate:** Chess →parent-company-of→ Checker (V); →parent-company-of→ Argo/Cadet (V); →parent-company-of→ Middle Earth UK (S); →publisher-of→ Arc Music (V); Leonard →co-founded-by→ Arc Music (S); Chess →acquired-by→ GRT 1969 (V); GRT →sold-assets-to→ All Platinum c. 1975 (S); Chess →acquired-catalog-from→ MCA 1985/86 (DISPUTED — both sides recorded); Chess →owned-by→ UMG (V). **Artists (recorded-for):** Muddy Waters (V), Howlin' Wolf (V), Willie Dixon (V), Chuck Berry (V), Bo Diddley (V), Etta James (V), Little Walter (V), Sonny Boy Williamson II (V), Buddy Guy (V), Koko Taylor (S), Otis Rush (S). Willie Dixon →employed-by→ Chess (V). Maurice White →session-musician-for→ Chess (V). Otis Spann →session-musician-for→ Chess (S). Sam Phillips →supplied-recordings-to→ Chess (V). Stan Lewis →distribution-partner-of→ Chess 1954 (S). Chess →located-on→ Record Row (S). Chess →part-owner-of→ WVON (V). Phil Chess →worked-at→ WVON post-sale (V). **Legal:** Arc Music →sued→ Led Zeppelin 1972 (V); Led Zeppelin →settled-with→ Willie Dixon 1987 (V); Muddy Waters →sued→ Arc 1977 (V); Willie Dixon →sued→ Arc 1977 (V); Dixon →founded-by→ Hoochie Coochie Music (S). **Buildings' afterlife:** Sammy Dyer School →occupied→ 2120, 1969–80 (V); Gerald Sims →purchased→ 2120, 1980 (V); Marie Dixon →purchased→ 2120, 1993 (V); Marie Dixon →spouse-of→ Willie Dixon (V); Blues Heaven Foundation →headquartered-at→ 2120 from 1997 (V); Leonard Chess →owned→ Macomba Lounge 1946–50 (S); Rolling Stones →recorded-at→ 2120, 1964 (V).

Verified-only graph ingestion: the 43 VERIFIED edges are cleared; the 1 DISPUTED edge (MCA acquisition) enters with both sides recorded; SUPPORTED edges enter with grade visible, never as verified-only.

15 · Claim Ledger

Five grades: VERIFIED / SUPPORTED / DISPUTED / PROVISIONAL / UNRESOLVED. Every claim maps 1:1 to `CTL-EF-MUS-000001` (EF-### → CLM-###). Type 04 REFUTED records map here to DISPUTED with "refuted — see CTL-EF-MUS-000001"; UNVERIFIABLE → UNRESOLVED. (Neither UNVERIFIABLE nor UNRESOLVED occurs.)

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
CLM-001	VERIFIED	Chess Records founded 1950, evolved from Aristocrat Records (1947), renamed on Memphis presser's advice.	Landmark report; Billboard ad 1958.	Landmark report	P	1950	Rename month approximate.	None
CLM-002	VERIFIED				P	1928	None.	None

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
		Founders Leonard (b. 1917) & Phil (b. 1921) Chess, Polish-Jewish immigrants, settled Chicago 1928.	Landmark report; BMI-002.	Landmark report				
CLM-003	PROVISIONAL	Aristocrat ownership: Leonard + Phil + Evelyn Aron; split (40/40/20 or 50/50) unsettled.	TSimon; BMI-002 (noted).	TSimon	S	1947	Founder split unsourced.	None
CLM-004	VERIFIED	Leonard was Macomba Lounge co-owner/operator 1946–1950, the pathway into recording.	Landmark report; Macomba Wiki.	Landmark report	P	1946	None.	None
CLM-005	SUPPORTED	Macomba at 3905 S. Cottage Grove (vs Landmark report's 3905 S. Drexel Blvd).	TSimon; Landmark report.	TSimon	S	1946	Street-name conflict.	Land repo Drex EF-0
CLM-006	VERIFIED	Renamed Chess June 1950; first release Gene Ammons "My Foolish Heart" (no. 1425).	Landmark report; Pollstar.	Landmark report	P	1950-06	None.	None
CLM-007	SUPPORTED	The Chess brothers' ethnicity and class backgrounds shaped their access to Black music networks.	TSimon; timenote.	TSimon	S	—	Interpretive framing.	None
CLM-008	VERIFIED	Chess Records HQ: 2120 S. Michigan May 1957–1967 (owned); then 320 E. 21st.	Landmark report; Landmark Commission.	Landmark report	P	1957	None.	None

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
CLM-009	SUPPORTED	"Chess" name as shorthand "the house that blues built"; Marterry = Marshall+Terry.	The Riffin'; BMI-002.	The Riffin'	S	—	Marterry etymology inferred.	None
CLM-010	SUPPORTED	Chess was a "family business" with few college-educated staff; operated like an extended family.	TSimon.	TSimon	S	—	Single-source.	None
CLM-011	VERIFIED (core); SUPPORTED (Lewis deal)	Business model: independent distribution to Black retail, trunk sales, regional indie distributors; 1954 Stan Lewis Louisiana deal.	Landmark report (trunk sales); Campbell/Cash Box 1954 (Lewis).	Landmark report	P/S	1950s	Lewis deal single-contemporary-source.	None
CLM-012	VERIFIED	In-house studio = key asset: ended outside-studio dependence.	Landmark report.	Landmark report	P	1957	None.	None
CLM-013	DISPUTED	Sheldon→Ter-Mar: Chess takeover 1958 undisputed; rename year 1958 (Billboard) vs 1959 (Wiki).	Billboard 1958-06-09 (via Landmark); Wiki.	Billboard	P	1958	Year only.	Both EF-01
CLM-014	VERIFIED	In-house engineers: Malcolm Chisholm (1958–59), Ron Malo (1959–); Malo built echo chambers.	Landmark report.	Landmark report	P	1958	None.	None
CLM-015	VERIFIED	Subsidiaries: Checker (1952), Marterry/ Argo→Cadet (1955/1965), Cadet	Landmark report; Wikipedia.	Landmark report	P	1952	None.	None

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
		Concept; A&R roles Bass/Davis.						
CLM-016	VERIFIED	Publishing: Arc Music (BMI) founded 1953 by Leonard Chess & Gene Goodman; also Chevis/ Flomar.	Wikipedia; MUSIC-001.	Wikipedia	S	1953	Goodman docs thin.	None
CLM-017	SUPPORTED	Leonard scouted talent personally incl. Louisiana trips; Bo Diddley spotted by Dixon.	TSimon; Landmark report.	TSimon	S	1955	Color detail.	None
CLM-018	VERIFIED	Sam Phillips/ Memphis pipeline supplied Howlin' Wolf, "Rocket 88" (Brenston), others.	Landmark report.	Landmark report	P	1951	None.	None
CLM-019	SUPPORTED (roster); VERIFIED (Maurice White)	1960s session band incl. Satterfield, Cosey, Upchurch, Louis Satterfield; Maurice White session drummer.	Landmark report; MUSIC-001.	Landmark report	P	1960s	Roster list completeness.	None
CLM-020	DISPUTED	Ralph Bass joined Chess as A&R in 1958 (Landmark) vs 1960 (Rock Hall).	Landmark report; Rock Hall.	Both P	S	1958/60	Year only.	EF-0
CLM-021	SUPPORTED	Marshall Chess founded Rolling Stones Records after serving Chess VP/ president.	Wikipedia; timenote.	Wikipedia	S	1969	Exact timing thin.	None
CLM-022	VERIFIED	GRT sale: announced 1968-11-02,	Landmark report; RareSoul; GRT Wiki.	Landmark report	P	1969	None.	None

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
		completed Jan 1969; $6.5M + 20,000 GRT shares; brothers + Marshall retained.						
CLM-023	VERIFIED	Leonard Chess died Oct 16, 1969 of heart attack, age 52.	Landmark report; Rock Hall.	Landmark report	P	1969	None.	None
CLM-024	VERIFIED	Phil Chess left for WVON; retired 1972; moved to Arizona; died Oct 19, 2016 age 95.	NPR; Pollstar; BMI-002.	NPR	S	2016	None.	None
CLM-025	VERIFIED	Leonard founded WVON 1963 with Leonard & Phil as part-owners.	Landmark report; BMI-002.	Landmark report	P	1963	None.	None
CLM-026	VERIFIED	320 E. 21st: purchased 1966, move late 1966–early 1967; 8-story integrated facility (recording/pressing/printing/shipping).	Landmark report.	Landmark report	P	1966	Move month.	None
CLM-027	VERIFIED	2120 afterlife: Sammy Dyer School 1969–80; Sims bought 1980; Chicago Landmark 1990-05-16.	Landmark report; BMI-002.	Landmark report	P	1990	None.	None
CLM-028	VERIFIED	Marie Dixon bought 2120 in 1993; Blues Heaven museum opened 1997; Marie d. 2016.	HistoryMakers.	HistoryMakers	P	1993	None.	None
CLM-029	VERIFIED	Ter-Mar Studios operated at 320 E.	Wikipedia; Landmark report.	Wikipedia	S	1979	Exact closing day.	None

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
		21st until 1979 (GRT ceased ops).						
CLM-030	SUPPORTED	Middle Earth Records (UK) 1969–70; Pye distribution; folded with Janus deal.	Wikipedia.	Wikipedia	S	1969	Single-source.	None
CLM-031	DISPUTED	MCA acquisition: 1985 via All Platinum (tsimon/ Springer) vs 1986 via Sugar Hill (Landmark/ Discogs).	tsimon; Landmark; Discogs.	Mixed P/S	S	1985/86	Seller AND year.	Both EF-0
CLM-032	VERIFIED	Catalog chain: GRT → All Platinum → MCA → UMG; Geffen/UMe manage reissues.	Landmark; Springer; Peel Wiki; UMe.	Mixed	P	—	Chain clear; §31 node disputed.	None
CLM-033	SUPPORTED	"Maybellene" payola credit to Alan Freed documented; co-credit also on two Diddley songs.	Wikipedia; timenote.	Wikipedia	S	1955	Mechanism of payment inferred.	None
CLM-034	SUPPORTED	Chuck Berry's 1957–58 St. Louis arrest (Mannes Act) cost tour revenue & disrupted Chess operations.	TSimon.	TSimon	S	1958	Single-source.	None
CLM-035	VERIFIED	1977: Dixon & Waters sued Arc Music over royalties; Dixon founded Hoochie Coochie Music.	Wikipedia; shaunmurphyband.	Wikipedia	S	1977	None.	None
CLM-036	SUPPORTED	Dixon's disputes extended to 1977	Wikipedia.	Wikipedia	S	1977	Amounts unknown.	None

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
		settlement negotiations; exact sums unclear.						
CLM-037	SUPPORTED	1972 Arc Music sued Led Zeppelin over "Bring It On Home"; settled with Dixon/ Burnett credited.	U. Oregon textbook; ledzepnews.	Academic	P	1972	Settlement sum unknown.	None
CLM-038	VERIFIED	1972 related Atlantic suit over "How Many More Times" (Chester Burnett's "How Many More Years"); settled 1972.	U. Oregon textbook.	Academic	P	1972	None.	None
CLM-039	VERIFIED	1972 settlement terms: credit to Dixon & Burnett; settlements unknown sums.	U. Oregon textbook.	Academic	P	1972	Sums unknown.	None
CLM-040	VERIFIED	1985: Dixon personally sued Led Zeppelin over "Whole Lotta Love"; settled out of court 1987 with copyright acknowledgement.	U. Oregon textbook; Wiki (Dixon).	Academic	P	1987	Sum unknown.	None
CLM-041	VERIFIED	Chicago ELECTRIFIED and industrialized the blues; did not invent electric blues (Smithsonian: Muddy's Chess sides "basically identical" to 1942 Lomax sides	Smithsonian (carried); MUSIC-001.	Academic	P	—	Framing.	None

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
		"except for electricity").						
CLM-042	PROVISIONAL	In 1975 GRT destroyed hundreds of thousands of Chess records (mass destruction).	MUSIC-001 (carried); tsimon.	TSimon	S	1975	Scale & mechanism unclear.	None
CLM-043	SUPPORTED	2008 Universal Studios fire destroyed UMG masters incl. Chess recordings; scale contested (copies may survive).	Wikipedia.	Wikipedia	S	2008	Destruction vs copy status.	EF-04
CLM-044	DISPUTED	"Willie Dixon bought Chess Records" — refuted; see CTL-EF-MUS-000001 EF-044.	Landmark; HistoryMakers.	P	S	—	None.	Clair sour EF-04
CLM-045	DISPUTED	"Chess Records founded 1947" — refuted; see CTL-EF-MUS-000001 EF-045 (1947 = Aristocrat).	Landmark report.	P	S	1947	None.	Clair conf pred EF-04
CLM-046	SUPPORTED	Etta James's Chess tenure (1960–mid-70s) was among the label's core artist relationships.	Landmark report; BMI-002.	P	S	1960	Contract detail thin.	None
CLM-047	VERIFIED	Chess recorded "race records" for Black audiences; its own marketing sometimes used segregation-era terms.	Landmark report; MUSIC-001.	P	S	—	None.	None

ID	Grade	Claim	Evidence	Source	P/S	Date	Uncertainty	Cont evid
CLM-048	VERIFIED	"Johnny B. Goode" (1958) launched on the Voyager Golden Record 1977 (Sagan committee).	Landmark report.	P	S	1977	None.	None
CLM-049	DISPUTED	"Led Zeppelin was found guilty of plagiarizing Willie Dixon" — refuted; see CTL-EF-MUS-000001 EF-049.	U. Oregon textbook.	P	S	—	None.	No v exist

Ledger–evidence reconciliation: 49 claims ↔ 49 evidence records, 1:1. Grades align per Type 04 mapping: VERIFIED 27 · SUPPORTED 14 · PROVISIONAL 2 · DISPUTED 6 (3 genuine disputes — CLM-013/020/031 — plus 3 refuted myths mapped from Type 04 REFUTED: CLM-044/045/049, each marked "refuted — see CTL-EF-MUS-000001") · UNRESOLVED 0.

16 · Evidence Summary

The dossier's claims rest primarily on the City of Chicago Landmark Designation Report (2019/2020, cited throughout as "Landmark report") — a municipal historic-preservation document built from primary materials (corporate filings, Billboard issues, building records) and the single strongest primary-adjacent source. Contemporary trade-press evidence (Billboard 1958-06-09 for the Ter-Mar rename; Cash Box 1954-06-26 for the Stan Lewis deal) adjudicates date disputes. Academic legal-history evidence (University of Oregon "Pay for Play" textbook, 2021) grounds the Led Zeppelin and Arc Music litigation. The HistoryMakers oral-history archive (Willie and Marie Dixon finding aids) grounds the 2120 building's post-1980 chain. MUSIC-001's carried findings (Payola-by-royalty credits; 1987 Zeppelin settlement; the electrification thesis) are cited as prior CTL evidence, not fresh research.

Weak sources used, flagged: The Riffin' (industry blog, EF-009), faroutmagazine, tsimon.com (fan enthusiast site — widely sourced but non-academic), and Wikipedia (used as a finding aid and for uncontested dates, never as sole evidence for a VERIFIED claim). **Circular sourcing:** The GRT sale figure ($6.5M + 20,000 shares) repeats across fan sites that may share one source; the Landmark report and the GRT Wikipedia article provide the independent anchor. The MCA year/seller split (CLM-031) is where sources fail to converge — see §31 and red-team.md.

17 · Artifacts

Dossier files: - `dossier.md` (this file) - `entities.json` — 54 entities, Appendix A schema - `relationships.json` — 58 edges: 43 VERIFIED / 14 SUPPORTED / 1 DISPUTED (the MCA edge; embedded summary corrected from a stale 39/18/1 count — fix applied 2026-09-28) - `evidence-file.md` — CTL-EF-MUS-000001, Type 04, 49 records - `visuals.md` — graphics specs + rights log - `sources.md` — annotated bibliography - `red-team.md` — Appendix C self-critique - `gaps.md` — research gaps and next steps

Registry update: ~/workspace/culturetechlens/RESEARCH-REGISTRY.md listed this dossier "In research" as of 2026-09-28; update to "Completed" on sign-off per the registry rule.

Data-architecture note: Entities, evidence records, sources, places, timeline entries, and the verified relationship graph all flow into CTL's shared registries (Entity → Evidence → Source → Geography → Timeline → Media → Relationship Graph → Black Cultural Knowledge Graph).

18 · Rights & Provenance

- **Music/lyrics:** No lyrics quoted beyond 1–2 lines anywhere in this dossier. Song titles and factual descriptions only.
- **Images:** No historical images of performers are reproduced in this dossier. The visuals.md rights log starts uncleared; any future performer photograph must clear (a) a rights-cleared source (LOC, Smithsonian, institutional archive with stated license), (b) Illinois post-mortem publicity rights (50 years — note: Muddy Waters d. 1983, Howlin' Wolf d. 1976, Chuck Berry d. 2017, Willie Dixon d. 1992 — some images still within the 50-year window), and (c) item-level provenance recorded in visuals.md before publication. No AI-generated historical imagery or people, ever.
- **Video:** YouTube may illustrate the story but is never evidence. No embedded video claims in this dossier rest on YouTube.
- **Third-party text:** No substantial quotation from copyrighted sources; all extracts are short factual passages with attribution.
- **Privacy:** Deceased persons (Leonard Chess d. 1969, Phil Chess d. 2016, Willie Dixon d. 1992, Marie Dixon d. 2016, Malcolm Chisholm d. 2018?) are treated with standard historical care. No living private individuals are discussed beyond public facts (Marshall Chess is a public figure; no private data included).

19 · Sources

Full annotated bibliography in `sources.md`. Primary/secondary labels and weak-source flags:

Primary (institutional): City of Chicago Landmark Designation Report — Chess Records Office and Studio (strongest source); Chicago Landmark Commission pages; Chicago Landmarks registry; Illinois Secretary of State corporate data (where referenced); Billboard and Cash Box contemporary issues (1954, 1958); Rock Hall Leonard Chess induction PDF (1987);

HistoryMakers finding aids (Dixon papers); U. Oregon Press "Pay for Play" textbook (2021, academic).

Secondary (strong): NPR (Phil Chess obituary 2016); Pollstar obituary; Memphis Flyer (Leonard Chess centenary 2024); Discogs label pages (for MCA-era credit analysis); Springer/chess book research pages; Peel Wiki (UMG holdings); RareSoul (GRT sale press release reprint).

Secondary (weak, flagged): Wikipedia (finding aid; uncontested dates); tsimon.com (fan enthusiast, well-sourced but non-academic); The Riffin' (blog); faroutmagazine; timenote.info; campber.people.clemson.edu (fan discography); shaunmurphyband.com (blues fan site); 45-sleeves.com label scans (useful artifact images, unverified provenance).

Prior CTL work: CTL-DR-MUSIC-001 (mythology audit; three carried findings); CTL-DR-BMI-002 (audit duplicate-cluster strongest member).

20 · Cross-Project Links

- **CTL-DR-MUSIC-001** (Chicago music mythology audit): three carried findings preserved verbatim (§27, §15 CLM-033/040/041/049). No contradiction with the audit's harmonized positions — the dossier's only internal conflict (MCA 1985/86) is a newly documented source-level disagreement within the catalog chain, not an audit contradiction.
- **CTL-DR-BMI-002** (Black Music in Chicago entities): `canon-chess-records` is the cross-project canonical ID; duplicates.json cluster 21 (BCI-001 + BMI-002) resolves to it. BMI-002 was the strongest member.
- **Future dossiers:** canon-muddy-waters, canon-howlin-wolf, canon-chuck-berry, canon-willie-dixon, canon-etta-james, canon-record-row, canon-voyager — natural follow-on entities already referenced as related IDs.
- **Knowledge-graph flow:** 43 VERIFIED edges are cleared for the verified-only graph; the 1 DISPUTED edge (MCA) enters with both sides; 14 SUPPORTED edges enter graded.

21 · Contradictions & Adjudications

1. **MCA acquisition — 1985/All Platinum vs 1986/Sugar Hill.** Fully recorded in EF-031/ CLM-031. NOT adjudicated: sources do not converge; the purchase agreement is the missing document (gaps.md #1). Both sides are kept live in entities.json and relationships.json (DISPUTED edge).
2. **Sheldon→Ter-Mar rename year — 1958 (Billboard) vs 1959 (Wikipedia).** Adjudicated to 1958: contemporary trade press outweighs a tertiary source. EF-013/CLM-013 marked DISPUTED with adjudication recorded.
3. **Ralph Bass hire year — 1958 (Landmark) vs 1960 (Rock Hall).** Not adjudicated: both sources are primary-adjacent; recorded as DISPUTED.
4. **Macomba Lounge address — Cottage Grove vs Drexel.** Not adjudicated: contemporary evidence not yet located; Cottage Grove favored on preponderance.

5. **Leonard Chess bass-drum session.** Carried from timenote; graded PROVISIONAL-equivalent color, not a dossier claim.
6. **2008 UMG fire inventory.** Contested; graded SUPPORTED, both readings recorded (EF-043).
7. **"Found guilty" / "Dixon bought Chess" / "Founded 1947."** Refuted; Type 04 mapping applied (EF-044/045/049 → CLM-044/045/049 ledger DISPUTED).

No contradiction with the cross-project audit's harmonized positions. The audit found Chess facts consistent across projects; this dossier preserves that consistency and adds one newly surfaced source-level dispute (§31).

22 · Confidence Statement

High confidence: founding, Aristocrat lineage, founder biographies, address chronology (2120/320), studio engineering history, the GRT sale terms, the catalog chain's endpoints (GRT→All Platinum; MCA→UMG), the royalty-litigation outcomes, and the three refuted myths.

Medium confidence: the 1954 Stan Lewis deal's significance (single contemporary source), Ter-Mar rename year (adjudicated), Maurice White's exact session tenure, Middle Earth Records, the 1975 destruction's scale.

Low confidence / genuinely unresolved: Arc Music founding documentation, the All Platinum wind-down asset inventory, Aristocrat's founder split, the MCA purchase agreement, the 2008 fire's Chess inventory.

Method: accuracy outranked completeness throughout. Where sources did not converge, the dossier records the disagreement rather than choosing a winner — except where a contemporary primary source (Billboard 1958) clearly outweighed a tertiary one (Wikipedia 1959).

23 · What Would Change This

- **MCA purchase agreement or contemporaneous corporate filing** → resolves CLM-031 (the largest gap).
- **GRT purchase agreement** → pins the $6.5M/20,000-share terms to a primary document and clarifies what "Chess" comprised (masters, publishing, pressing plant).
- **GRT→All Platinum contract** + **asset inventory** → resolves the 1975 dismantling and what All Platinum actually bought.
- **Arc Music corporate records** → resolves EF-003/EF-016 founder-split questions.
- **AFM session logs or union contracts** → would surface women workers, ordinary staff, and session economics.
- **A 1975–1979 GRT accounting** → would pin the wind-down timeline and master-tape survival.
- **A contemporary Macomba Lounge address source** → resolves EF-005.

- **The 2008 UMG fire inventory (if ever released)** → resolves EF-043.

24 · For the Reader

This dossier was built to answer one question: **how did a two-storefront Chicago record company, run by two immigrant brothers who started with records in a car trunk, become the institution that industrialized the Chicago blues?**

The short answer: by owning the whole pipeline. Chess didn't just record blues musicians — it scouted them (Leonard with a wire recorder in the South), recorded them in its own studio (2120, then 320), pressed and shipped the records itself, published the songs through its own BMI company, and sold them through its own network of Black retail and regional indie distributors. That integration is what "electrified and industrialized the blues" means: Chicago didn't invent the electric blues — Muddy Waters's Chess sides were, in Smithsonian's formulation, "basically identical" to his 1942 Lomax recordings "except for electricity" — but Chess turned that electricity into an industry.

The hard edge of that story is the money. The same system that made the records also produced payola co-credits, the Arc Music royalty suits of 1977, and the decades-long legal fight with Led Zeppelin that ended — twice — in settlements, never in a courtroom victory. Willie Dixon's revenge was institutional: the Blues Heaven Foundation, headquartered in the very building where the records were made. That's why this dossier treats the building and the company as separate entities — the music lives in one, the business in the other, and the story needs both.

If you're building with this dossier — an exhibit, a curriculum, a tour — start at 2120 S. Michigan, but tell the whole chain: Cottage Grove storefronts → 2120 → 320 E. 21st → the GRT sale → the catalog's long road to MCA and UMG. And remember: the catalog you hear today on Geffen/UMe reissues is the same one Leonard Chess sold for $6.5 million and some stock in January 1969.

25 · CTL Framing

- **Black Cultural Intelligence lens:** Chess Records is a case study in Black cultural production inside a non-Black-owned institution: the artists, the sound, the audience, and the retail network were Black; the ownership, publishing, and royalties were not. The dossier's royalty and credit findings (payola credits, Arc suits, Zeppelin settlements) are the institutional evidence of that asymmetry — documented, graded, and refutation-checked.
- **Myth correction as method:** Three refuted myths (guilt verdict, Dixon ownership, 1947 founding) are kept in the ledger precisely so the record shows what was tested and failed. CTL does not drop refuted claims; it grades them.
- **Chicago-first:** Every address is a South Side or Near South Side address. The geography sections refuse the "Chicago blues" abstraction — the music was made at specific buildings on specific blocks, and the buildings are separate entities with their own afterlives.

- **Evidence before elegance:** Where the sources split (MCA 1985/86), the dossier keeps the split. The largest gap is named in §23 and gaps.md, not smoothed over.
- **People over legends:** The people section names session musicians, engineers, a Memphis presser, a house-band singer, and the two women the sources document — against the celebrity-bias pull of the marquee names.

26 · CTL Branding

This dossier is a CultureTechLens deliverable.

- **Wordmark:** CULTURETECHLENS
- **Master slogan:** "Culture, Clearly Seen."
- **Descriptor:** Black Cultural Intelligence
- **Visual identity:** black / deep red / gold (per the CTL vision boards; applied to all public-facing graphics — see visuals.md)

All public derivatives of this dossier (exhibits, pages, decks, prints) must carry the wordmark, slogan, and descriptor above, and use the black/deep-red/gold identity.

27 · Standing Findings Preserved

These carried findings are preserved exactly, not relitigated:

1. **Chess songwriting/royalty credit disputes are DOCUMENTED**, including "Maybellene" payola-by-royalty credits. (EF-033, CLM-033; MUSIC-001)
2. **Willie Dixon's Led Zeppelin suit SETTLED in 1987**; "found guilty" framings are false. (EF-040/049, CLM-040/049; MUSIC-001)
3. **Chicago ELECTRIFIED and industrialized the blues.** It did not invent electric blues; Smithsonian scholarship holds Muddy Waters's Chess sides "basically identical" to his 1942 Lomax recordings "except for electricity." (EF-041, CLM-041; MUSIC-001)

28 · Appendix A — Entity & Relationship Schemas

Entity schema (entities.json): `{ id, canonical_id?, name, type (org|person|place|label|work|event|other), role/description, grade, sources[], notes }`. Canonical IDs are used only where the cross-project audit assigned one (`canon-chess-records`); all other entities use dossier-local IDs (`RD-MUS-000001-###`).

Relationship schema (relationships.json): `{ id, subject, predicate, object, grade (VERIFIED|SUPPORTED|DISPUTED), dates, evidence_ref (EF-###), sources[], notes }`. Only VERIFIED edges feed the verified-only graph.

29 · Appendix B — Research Log

- **2026-09-28** — Dossier launched; registry status "In research."

- **2026-09-28** — entities.json built (54 entities), relationships.json built (58 edges), both JSON-validated.
- **2026-09-28** — Evidence file CTL-EF-MUS-000001 (Type 04) built: 49 records, 1:1 with claim ledger; mixed-status records normalized; EF-049 split out; version-note counts verified.
- **2026-09-28** — Primary research: City of Chicago Landmark Designation Report (strongest source); Billboard/Cash Box contemporaneous issues; U. Oregon legal-history textbook; HistoryMakers finding aids; Discogs label scans; GRT-sale sources.
- **2026-09-28** — relationships.json embedded summary corrected (was 39/18/1; actual 43/14/1).
- **2026-09-28** — dossier.md drafted (34 sections); visuals.md, sources.md, red-team.md, gaps.md drafted.
- Revalidation: `python3 -m json.tool` on both JSON files post-edit.

30 · Appendix C — Red-Team Checklist

Full red-team pass in `red-team.md`. Checklist coverage: unsupported claims flagged (EF-003, EF-042, EF-029); circular sourcing checked (GRT figure, tsimon); myth correction completed (three refuted myths); date/address conflicts adjudicated or recorded (Ter-Mar, Bass, Macomba, MCA); missing-women audit (§09); celebrity bias checked (engineers, presser, house-band singer named); survivorship bias noted (we see the hits, not the trunk-sale failures); catalog-chain precision enforced (All Platinum vs Sugar Hill vs MCA; MCA edge DISPUTED); rights & privacy reviewed (§18; Illinois publicity rights; no lyric quotation; no performer images reproduced); YouTube excluded as evidence; org/building separation maintained; identifiers grounded in files read this session.

31 · Appendix D — Gap Register

Full gap analysis in `gaps.md`. Top gaps: (1) MCA purchase agreement — the largest gap, resolves the 1985/86 All Platinum vs Sugar Hill dispute; (2) GRT purchase agreement; (3) GRT→All Platinum contract and 1975 asset inventory; (4) Arc Music founding/corporate records; (5) Aristocrat founder-split documentation; (6) AFM session logs / session contracts (women workers, ordinary staff); (7) 1975 dismantling and master-tape survival accounting; (8) 2008 UMG fire Chess inventory; (9) Macomba Lounge contemporary address evidence.

32 · Visualizations

See `visuals.md`. Planned/built: (a) data-driven address-timeline graphic (Cottage Grove → 2120 → 320 E. 21st), (b) ownership-chain graphic (Aristocrat → Chess → GRT → All Platinum → MCA → UMG) with the disputed 1985/86 node visually flagged, (c) verified-only relationship network map, (d) rights log (starts uncleared; item-level provenance required for any performer photograph; no AI-generated historical imagery).

33 · How to Cite This Dossier

> CultureTechLens, **CTL-RD-MUS-000001 — Chess Records** (Research Dossier v1.0, 2026-09-28). Evidence file CTL-EF-MUS-000001. Entity registry: `canon-chess-records`. "Culture, Clearly Seen." — CULTURETECHLENS · Black Cultural Intelligence.

Claim-level citation: `CTL-RD-MUS-000001 §15 CLM-###` (ledger) → `CTL-EF-MUS-000001 EF-###` (evidence). Only VERIFIED claims are quotable as fact; DISPUTED claims must be presented with both sides.

34 · Sign-Off

- [ ] Claim ledger (§15) reconciles 1:1 with CTL-EF-MUS-000001 (49 claims ↔ 49 records) — verified 2026-09-28.
- [ ] Relationships count verified from JSON: 58 edges — 43 VERIFIED / 14 SUPPORTED / 1 DISPUTED — summary corrected 2026-09-28.
- [ ] Entities validated: 54 entities, JSON-validated 2026-09-28.
- [ ] Rights log reviewed: no performer images reproduced; no lyrics quoted; Illinois publicity-rights rule noted (§18).
- [ ] No contradiction with the cross-project audit's harmonized positions (§21).
- [ ] Standing findings preserved verbatim (§27).
- [ ] CTL branding present (§26): CULTURETECHLENS · "Culture, Clearly Seen." · Black Cultural Intelligence · black/deep-red/gold.
- [ ] Registry: update ~/workspace/culturetechlens/RESEARCH-REGISTRY.md to "Completed" on sign-off.
- [ ] Red-team (Appendix C) and gap register (Appendix D) completed — see red-team.md, gaps.md.

References

Annotated bibliography. Grade key: P = primary/primary-adjacent, S = secondary. Weak sources are flagged with ⚠ and their use is limited as noted.

Primary / primary-adjacent

- **City of Chicago Landmark Designation Report — "Chess Records Office and Studio"** (P, strongest). Municipal historic-preservation report built from building records, corporate filings, and contemporary trade press. Grounds: founding/Aristocrat lineage, founder biographies, full address chronology, distribution model (trunk sales), studio engineering history, GRT sale, 2120/320 building history. URL: https://jurnal.jumanji.workers.dev/host-https-www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/zlup/Historic_Preservation/Publications/Chess_Records_Office_and_Studio.pdf

- **Chicago Landmark Commission / Chicago Landmarks registry pages** (P). 2120 S. Michigan designation (1990-05-16) and property data.
- **Billboard, 1958-06-09** (P, via Landmark report). Contemporary trade evidence: Sheldon→Ter-Mar rename timing (adjudicates to 1958).
- **Cash Box, 1954-06-26** (P, via Campbell). Contemporary trade evidence: Stan Lewis production deal.
- **Rock Hall — Leonard Chess induction PDF (1987)** (P). Biographical; used for Ralph Bass hire-year side (1960).
- **HistoryMakers finding aids — Willie & Marie Dixon papers (A2013_228)** (P). 2120 purchase (1993), Blues Heaven museum (1997), Marie Dixon death (2016). URL: https://www.thehistorymakers.org/sites/default/files/A2013_228_EAD.pdf
- **University of Oregon Press, "Pay for Play" textbook, ch. 36 (2021)** (P, academic). Legal history: Arc Music suits (1972), Dixon personal suit (1985) and settlement (1987), settlement terms (credit, unknown sums). URL: https://opentext.uoregon.edu/payforplay/chapter/chapter-36-landmark-musical-work-copyright-infringement-cases/
- **NPR obituary — Phil Chess (2016-10-20)** (P, journalistic). URL: https://www.npr.org/... (obituary coverage; date of death 2016-10-19).
- **Memphis Flyer — Leonard Chess centenary (2024)** (S→P-adjacent, journalistic). Founder biography.
- **Discogs — "The Original Chess Masters" label page** (S, artifact evidence). MCA-era label credits; supports the Sugar Hill lineage reading. URL: https://www.discogs.com/label/290371-The-Original-Chess-Masters
- **45-sleeves.com — Chess 45 label scans** ⚠ (S, artifact evidence). "A GRT Record Group" / "A division of All Platinum Record Group" / "A division of Sugar Hill Records Ltd." label credits. Unverified provenance; used only to establish what credits appear on physical artifacts. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20150315022120fw_/http://45-sleeves.com/USA/chess/ches-us.htm
- **Peel Wiki — UMG holdings** (S). MCA/PolyGram→UMG chain; Geffen reissue management.
- **RareSoul — "Chess Records to be sold to GRT" (2012)** (S, press-release reprint). Announced 1968-11-02. URL: https://raresoul.com/chess-records-to-be-sold-to-grt/
- **ledzepnews.com (2025)** (S, specialist). Docket history of Dixon's 1985 suit; corroborates settlement-only resolution. URL: http://ledzepnews.com/2025/04/12/the-previously-untold-history-of-willie-dixons-legal-battle-with-led-zeppelin-over-whole-lotta-love/

Secondary — strong

- **Pollstar obituary — Phil Chess (2016)** (S). Biographical; founding date. URL: https://news.pollstar.com/2016/10/20/phil-chess-co-founder-of-blues-label-chess-records-dies/
- **Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold* (St. Martin's, 2000)** (S, book-length scholarship). The standard Chess business history; cited via MUSIC-001 where consulted.

- **faroutmagazine — Chess history** ⚠ (S, popular). GRT sale context. URL: https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/chess-records-a-brief-history-of-chicagos-legendary-blues-label/
- **tsimon.com — "Chess Records"** ⚠ (S, fan enthusiast, extensively sourced). GRT wind-down, MCA 1985 account, Marshall Chess. URL: http://www.tsimon.com/chessrecords.htm
- **Campbell / Clemson — Chess discography pages** ⚠ (S, fan discography). Stan Lewis deal; Cash Box citation. URL: http://campber.people.clemson.edu/chess2.html
- **shaunmurphyband.com** ⚠ (S, fan site). 1977 Dixon suits; Hoochie Coochie Music. Corroborated with Wikipedia; not sole evidence for any VERIFIED claim.
- **The Riffin'** ⚠ (S, blog). "House that blues built" framing; Marterry etymology. Interpretive only.

Secondary — weak / finding aids only

- **Wikipedia — Chess Records, General Recorded Tape, Willie Dixon, Macomba Lounge** ⚠ (S). Used as a finding aid and for uncontested dates; never sole evidence for a VERIFIED claim. Note: GRT article corroborates the $6.5M/stock terms found in the Landmark report.
- **timenote.info** ⚠ (S). Leonard Chess biography; bass-drum anecdote (not a dossier claim); Marshall Chess.
- **Robert L. Campbell session-discography site** ⚠ (S). 4858-series detail.

Prior CTL work (internal evidence, cited as such)

- **CTL-DR-MUSIC-001** (Chicago music mythology audit, 2026-09-28). Three carried findings; 1975-destruction provisional finding; Macomba history; "race records" framing.
- **CTL-DR-BMI-002** (Black Music in Chicago entities, audit strongest member for Chess cluster). Canonical IDs, landmark date, Etta James tenure.

Circular-sourcing notes

- The GRT sale figure ($6.5M + 20,000 GRT shares) repeats across fan sites (tsimon, GRT Wikipedia article) that may share one original source. The Landmark report and RareSoul's press-release reprint provide independent anchors; graded VERIFIED on that basis, with the caveat recorded in EF-022.
- The MCA acquisition year/seller split (1985/All Platinum vs 1986/Sugar Hill) is where circularity fails — sources do not converge, which is why the claim is DISPUTED rather than resolved by weight of repetition.