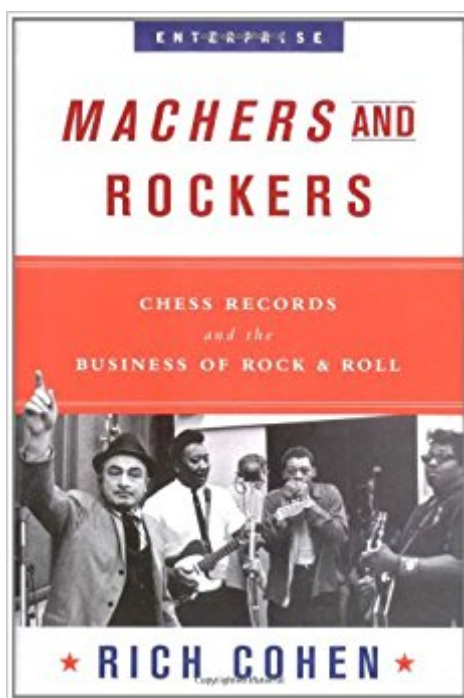


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# Machers And Rockers: Chess Records And The Business Of Rock & Roll (Enterprise)



## Synopsis

"Rich Cohen is a born storyteller, and this tale of how Muddy Waters and Leonard Chess helped invent Rock & Roll in Chicago in the 1950s is a tough, funny and smart read. It's a big story, told in a big way." —Jann Wenner A tour-de-force history of Jews, blues, and the birth of a new industry. On the south side of Chicago in the late 1940s, two immigrants, one a Jew born in Russia, the other a black blues singer from Mississippi met and changed the course of musical history. Muddy Waters electrified the blues, and Leonard Chess recorded it. Soon Bo Diddly and Chuck Berry added a dose of pulsating rhythm, and Chess Records captured that, too. Rock & roll had arrived, and an industry was born. In a book as vibrantly and exuberantly written as the music and people it portrays, Rich Cohen tells the engrossing story of how Leonard Chess, with the other record men, made this new sound into a multi-billion-dollar business aggressively acquiring artists, hard-selling distributors, riding the crest of a wave that would crash over a whole generation. Full of absorbing lore and animated by a deep love for popular music, *Machos and Rockers* is a smash hit.

## Book Information

Series: Enterprise (W.W. Norton Hardcover)

Hardcover: 222 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (September 17, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 9780393052800

ISBN-13: 978-0393052800

ASIN: 039305280X

Product Dimensions: 5.7 x 0.9 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.4 out of 5 stars 21 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #832,432 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #91 in Books > Business & Money > Management & Leadership > Distribution & Warehouse Management #482 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Business #520 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Recording & Sound

## Customer Reviews

In a postscript to his dynamic history of Chess Records, Cohen (*Tough Jews*) confesses that its tale is one he's been telling since adolescence, "using whatever was at hand to make the case: not only

does this song rock, it also has something big to tell us." Cohen's book has something big to say too—about how the unlikely marriage of the shtetl and the plantation produced Chicago blues and rock and roll. The music that exploded into the living rooms of America and the world might have remained in the juke joints of the South if not for "record men" like Leonard Chess, whose label is rivaled only by Atlantic for its influence. Sensing an audience where the big labels didn't, Chess carted unvarnished recordings of artists like Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry in the trunk of his Cadillac, getting them in stores and on the air by any means necessary. Cohen weaves the story of the mercurial, lovable but not always entirely ethical Chess with the stories of the artists he recorded and well-judged glimpses of social history. Though written with the energy of his teenage bull sessions, Cohen's history avoids the rhetorical excess nearly endemic to rock and roll books, offering instead a punchy and driven but also sturdy and careful narrative. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

More acclaim is rendered to Chess Records and Leonard Chess, in particular, in Cohen's engaging book based on the proposition that "Leonard Chess, along with a handful of the musicians he signed and promoted and coddled and fucked over and enriched, invented the very idea of Rock & Roll." The musicians Leonard and his brother, Phil, signed and so forth included Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, and the rest of the Chicago blues elite, and this is inevitably the story of black musicians and Jewish businessmen coming together to almost inadvertently create timeless rhythm and blues and inspire the development of rock. Cohen blends the artists' stories with the upward progress of Leonard Chess' family, notably including son and eventual rock mogul Marshall, who called Muddy Waters grandfather. The Chess story hasn't languished untold, but Cohen's version of it, centered on the savvy businessman who moved to "an old money town" as his business grew but kept commuting to the south side to make it work right, is utterly fresh. Mike Tribby Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

These "record men" were a special breed. Men like Herman Lubinsky at Savoy in New Jersey, Sam Phillips at Sun in Memphis, Syd Nathan of King Records in Cincinnati and one Leonard Chess were the driving force in the evolution of the music we now call rock and roll. "Machers and Rockers: Chess Records and the Business of Rock and Roll" concentrates on Leonard Chess and tells the remarkable story of Chess Records. In the span of 20 years beginning in 1948, the Chess brothers, Leonard and Phil, would build Chess records into the second largest independent record company in America. No small achievement! More importantly, it was Leonard Chess who played a pivotal

role in bringing the blues out of the fields and into America's cities. It was this development, perhaps more than any other, that would ultimately result in the emergence of what we now call rock & roll in the mid 1950's. How did these guys do it? Why did these men succeed when so many others tried and failed? As author Rich Cohen points out there was really nothing terribly mysterious about it. Leonard Chess was a savvy businessman who was determined to succeed in the record business. And God knows, he was not afraid of hard work. Successful "record men" would do whatever it took. Leonard Chess was actively involved in nearly every aspect of his business. He beat the bushes in search of talent. He signed the artists and produced the records. Then he would stuff thousands of records into the trunk of his car and hustle them all over the Midwest. For the indies like Chess there was little margin for error. A major miscalculation could doom a small record company. "Mach and Rockers" is a revealing look into the underbelly of the recording industry in 1950's America. However, as other reviewers have pointed out there are several glaring errors in this book. Some pretty sloppy research if you ask me. The best I can muster is a lukewarm recommendation. Since there are a number of books devoted to the subject of Chess records you might want to check out one of those.

The story of Leonard Chess and the musicians he brought to prominence is nothing short of fascinating. It is hard for us to relate to the racial and ethnic barriers standing in the way of the black bluesmen and their Jewish promoters. "Crossing over," a term meaning a black artist making it to the top 40 hit list, was the ideal these men sought. After seeing the movie "Cadillac Records," I wanted to learn more about the era, and found my way to Rich Cohen's book. It is a quick read, and while Cohen gives you a taste of the subject, he certainly could have gone into a lot more depth. His writing is often flowery and sentimental, but he does introduce the reader to the real story of the birth of rock and roll and its creators.

If you're a blues fan, this is a great historical document. It has many interesting details about how the great Chess recording family started out and got along. The writer is a Jew and he explores the subject matter from the cultural viewpoint of the "machers", but believe me, there's much about rockers here, also. I've been over some of these facts in other books enough to have spotted a few dubious historical facts in the book, most notable of which was that Chuck Berry was not a teenager in the 50's. He wasn't just out of high school when he wrote those songs. He was almost 30. I'll leave the rest of the nitpicking to someone else, but otherwise I found this to be an interesting twin odyssey in which people of divergent cultures shared the same path for a few years before ultimately

diverging. It was a great read. I'm way slow, but I finished this in four days. The subject and the way it was written just sucked me into it. I highly recommend this book.

This is a decent book that is mostly about the life of Leonard Chess, who was the genius behind Chess Records, which produced some of the greatest electric Blues and Rock 'N' Roll records of the 1950s and '60s. Unfortunately, the author constantly misquotes lyrics to songs by Muddy Waters, Chess Records' biggest star, something for which there is no excuse. There are also many other inaccuracies in the book, such as: the author stating that "Gershwin created the template for Jazz" (page 88), which is beyond absurd, the mentioning of Robert Little John (does the author mean John Littlejohn?) and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown being Chess artists (page 105), stating that there wouldn't have been a Woodstock without the Beatles (where is the proof of this?), giving incorrect lyrics to a Little Walter song (page 112), stating that The Moonglows' lead singer was Ben E. King (he was a part of The Drifters), mentioning that older Blues stars, specifically Lonnie Johnson, were pushed into retirement during the Rock 'N' Roll era and "rediscovered" twenty or thirty years later (this would mean Lonnie was "rediscovered" in the '70s or '80s, by which time he was long dead), and some minor mistakes. This is an easy read and certainly not a bad book, though.

I did not notice most of the errors mentioned by other reviewers, but toward the end of the book I became conscious of mistakes like the repeated misspelling of Beale St. ("Beal"), "J. Giles" for J. Geils, and the claim that the Who were touring behind "Who's Next" as their current album in 1977! The writing is breezy and conversational (almost to a fault) and apparently there was no fact checking done at all: was Cohen his own editor? This is a colorful and informal conversational essay that reads like a very long Rolling Stone piece. You will enjoy the many anecdotes, but be aware that the author plays fast and loose with the facts.

Just looking through the pictures he shows a picture of phill chess with the muddy waters band, including muddy, pointing out little walter but not even naming bo diddley who is pictured. this wasn't a band. the three of them made a lp called super blues. mis quoted lyrics and stories that are backwards or sideways fill up the book. rich cohen does point out some interesting facts/points about the chess label being sold and for those points alone i would recommend the book,,,just buy it as cheaply as you can.

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