

are wearing out, pieces falling off, and buildings built before energy was a problem and big-box stores were the competition present challenges to preservation-minded owners and to the county's Architectural Review Board. Working with Reston's own Design Review Board while projects are still on the drawing boards has smoothed this process significantly.

Challenges to Preserving the Recent Past

Aside from the technical challenges of preserving an architectural fabric that was never intended for anything near posterity, the biggest challenge to preserving the recent past of Fairfax County is overcoming the notion that it just isn't past enough. The "50-year threshold" has not been crossed, and we are dealing with architectural nostalgia, not architectural history. This, however, is a purist, not populist, argument. A browse through any of today's "Antiques and Collectibles" shops where Fiesta Ware, Tonka trucks, and chrome-plated dinette sets command premium prices reflects the growing public fasci-

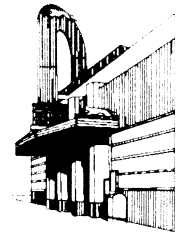
nation with the recent past. But, what of this past is significant enough right now to warrant public respect and scholarly interest?

In Fairfax County, as in any other suburban jurisdiction, the answers fall along a sliding scale. To us, however, all evidence of the recent past is significant because of what it can teach us about where we, not just our parents or grandparents, have come from and how we have coped, for better or for worse, with the opportunities, needs, and constraints of geometric growth. That is why we are sifting through what is left of the resources of the recent past, some to merely note, some to celebrate, some to preserve, and all to respect. Would that our parents and grandparents had done the same.

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Landmarks of Chicago Blues and Gospel Chess Records and First Church of Deliverance



For most of its first 20 years of existence, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has been largely concerned with the protection of the city's world-famous collection of late-19th and early-20th century architecture: the skyscrapers and early commercial buildings of the Loop, the mansions of the Gold Coast and the Near South Side, and a variety of Prairie School residences.

On at least two occasions in the last few years, however, the Commission has headed in an entirely new direction, from the well-traveled paths of architects Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright to that of such influential musicians as Chuck Berry, Dinah Washington, and Muddy Waters.

In 1989, the Commission designated an otherwise nondescript, two-story building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue as a Chicago Landmark, due to its use between 1957 and 1967 by Chess Records, one of the principal music labels associated with the development of American blues and rock and roll. And, in 1994, a former hat factory building at 4315 South Wabash Avenue was given city landmark status, partly because of the importance of its longtime occupant, the First Church of Deliverance, to the development of American gospel music in the 1930s and 1940s.

The process of landmarking these two buildings, particularly in the case of Chess and its interior design, has proven to be a new and enlightening challenge that has altered the way the

Chicago preservation community looks at recent-date historic sites. It also raises several questions about how to document these modern sites, and the need for new research techniques.

The Chess Records Story

In contrast to the finely detailed buildings that authenticate the works of Chicago's turn-of-the-century architects, Chess Records was a raucous, streetwise business rough-hewn out of the city's streets. Leonard and Phil Chess were tough-talking Polish immigrant brothers who captured the distinctive sound of Chicago's African American blues performers of the 1950s and 1960s on record, forever altering the course of American musical history.

Many other companies, such as Cobra, J.O.B., and VeeJay, also helped to make Chicago a vibrant musical recording center in the mid-1950s. A few of their buildings—such as Cobra's studios in the 2800 and 3400 blocks of West Roosevelt Road and the Universal Studios at Rush Street and Walton Avenue—are still standing. However, the Chess building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue is probably the most intact, and important, survivor.

The brothers had established themselves in the operation of nightclubs on Chicago's South Side in the 1940s. Catering primarily to a black clientele, the Chess brothers recognized the commercial potential of the local musicians who performed in their clubs. In establishing Aristocrat Records in 1947, they sought to capture the intensity of these performances on record.

From the beginning, the Chess brothers made their label a forum for the rugged, emotional sound of "Mississippi Delta," country blues.

Among the roster of blues artists recorded by Chess throughout the 1950s were Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walter, and Willie Dixon, the latter being a multi-talented composer, bass player, and producer who had a major impact on the creative direction of the Chess label. Equally important were the contributions of Chess Records, and its subsidiary Checker Records, in the early rock and roll recordings of Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry. Leonard Chess' first office was in a small storefront at 2300 East 71st Street. The following year he moved to a new storefront location at 5249 South Cottage Grove Avenue, where the operations remained for three years. The label changed its name to Chess in 1950 and Phil Chess joined his brother full time.

From 1951 to 1954, when 10 records produced by Chess made the national hit charts, the company operated out of a storefront at 750 East 49th Street. Between 1954 and 1957, its headquarters was a double storefront at 4750-4752 South Cottage Grove Avenue.

Several of these early buildings still remain, but the best known Chess address—and the one that the City of Chicago chose to designate as a landmark—is the two-story building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue, where Chess Records operated from 1957 to 1967. Many of Chess' most influential recordings were made here, including "Johnny B. Goode," "Rescue Me," "Red Rooster," and "I'm a Man."

In addition, "2120" is the address that many musicians have long equated with the Chicago blues sound. In the 1960s, several British rock groups came here to record, including the Rolling Stones ("12 x 5") and the Yardbirds, and the building itself has continued to be a tourist mecca for blues fans from around the world.

The Story of First Church of Deliverance

In contrast to Chess Records, the story of First Church of Deliverance is a less transient one. It was founded in 1929 as a small congregation on South State Street, but since 1933 it has continuously occupied the building at 4315 South Wabash Avenue.

The reasons for the building's designation as a Chicago Landmark principally relate to its unique Art Moderne style of design, which is quite unusual for a house of worship. But an equally important part of the church's history relates to its influential role in the general acceptance of gospel music.

Under the leadership of its longtime pastor and founder, Rev. Clarence H. Cobbs, First Church was one of the earliest African American churches to broadcast its services on the radio, beginning in 1934. (One of the earliest radio ministries in the U.S. dates to 1921 at WHT in Chicago.)

The building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago is unremarkable except for its former use as the home of Chess Records from 1957–1967. Chess and its recording artists were instrumental in the development of American blues and rock and roll.



While spiritual music had always been an integral part of First Church services, it was largely through its weekly radio broadcasts that the church became widely known as a national center of gospel music. An *Ebony* magazine article called Rev. Cobbs “the most popular Negro radio minister in the U.S.,” and noted that his broadcasts were heard by more than one million listeners.

Although gospel music had deep roots in African American culture, it emerged as a popular musical style only in the 1930s. Thomas Dorsey, the longtime music director of Pilgrim Baptist Church on Chicago’s South Side, is considered the father of American gospel music, having set his church’s hymns and spirituals to a more secular, syncopated jazz/blues beat.

In 1937, less than a mile away at First Church of Deliverance, Rev. Cobbs had hired organist and composer Kenneth Morris to be his gospel choir director. Morris and music director Julia Mae Kennedy quickly established a musical program that began to attract local and national entertainers.

Jazz/blues singer Dinah Washington frequently sang at the church with the Sallie Martin Singers, and trumpeter/singer Louis Armstrong also took part in musical events. Other notable musicians who have either made recordings in the church or been otherwise associated with its musical programs include Nat King Cole, Earl (Fatha) Hines, Delois Barrett Campbell, and Billie Holiday, who, church lore maintains, often brought her pet chihuahua to Sunday services.

In addition to Morris’ influence as choir director and organist (e.g., he introduced the Hammond electric organ to gospel music), he and Sallie Martin, who is often acknowledged to be the

“mother of gospel music,” wrote and published numerous gospel standards, including Mahalia Jackson’s “Dig a Little Deeper” and “How I Got Over,” the theme song of First Church of Deliverance.

According to national gospel authority Beatrice Johnson Reagon, Morris and Martin “were among the vanguard of musicians who began...the changes that occurred in gospel music during the 1930s and 1940s.”¹

The “Fugitive Nature” of Research

In order for a building—or object or district—to be considered for city landmark status, it first has to be recommended to the City Council by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, a nine-member board appointed by the Mayor. The Commission’s decisions are aided by a research staff that is now a part of the Department of Planning and Development.

In late 1988, when the Commission staff proposed landmark designation of the Chess Records headquarters, it was unsure of how the Commission would react to the proposal. With a period of significance spanning a decade in the 1950s and 1960s, Chess Records was the most recent-date site ever proposed for Chicago Landmark status. Furthermore, the notion of designating a building that was related to recent musical genres was far from the Commission’s more common themes of architecture and history.

The building itself also was problematic. Part of the significance of the site was that the Chess Brothers had made an impact on the course of international popular music while working out of makeshift quarters in a small, two-story loft building in an unglamorous commercial district, immediately south of downtown Chicago. Sited amid other small-scale buildings, the 25’-wide terra cotta front of the Chess Records building was well designed, but unexceptional in its architectural composition.

It was also a somewhat sobering experience to research something of such recent vintage. While this enabled the Commission’s staff to talk to many of the people who were actually involved in the history of the building—including many very knowledgeable musicians, recording engineers, and visitors—the divergent recollections of these observers, especially compared to actual site evidence, demonstrates the vulnerabilities and potential inaccuracies in researching recent history. It also provides a wonderful reality check about the presumed accuracy of our research of the more distant past, where the opportunities to talk to actual participants are not possible.

As it turned out, Chess was a very “workaday” place. The alterations to the 2120 South Michigan Avenue building were done quickly and

First Church of Deliverance, shown here shortly after 1946. Visible atop one of the towers are speakers that broadcast services to the street. Radio broadcasts of First Church’s services helped to popularize modern gospel music. Photo courtesy of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.



FIRST CHURCH OF DELIVERANCE
4313 South Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

REV. CLARENCE H. COBBS, PASTOR
REV. MATTIE THORNTON, ASST. PASTOR

PATTON'S STUDIO
455 S. 97th St.
Chicago, Ill.

inexpensively to serve a specific purpose, with little aesthetic forethought. Many of the original participants interviewed by the Commission's staff were amused by the interest shown in the exact details (history, construction materials, chronologies, etc.) of a business and building they thought of in an everyday casual manner.

Through building inspections, personal interviews, and research in numerous, 30-year-old music trade journals, the history of the building was gradually pieced together.

Historic Fabric...of the 1950s

Originally erected in 1911 for an auto parts dealer, the building was later used for the wholesaling of neckties and upholstery slipcovers. In 1956-1957, it was remodeled as the headquarters of Chess Records, in order to give a modern appearance for the growing company and to combine office, studio, stock room, and shipping facilities.

Nomally, these alterations would be considered to be obtrusive and inappropriate changes for a 1911 building. In this case, however, they con-

stituted a "historic fabric" that was integrally tied to the period of the building's musical significance.

The building's granite- and terra cotta-framed first floor had been replaced in 1956-1957 by composition stone cladding and a stock brushed-aluminum storefront. The interiors were cosmetically altered with a typical, late-1950s buildout that included redwood paneling and "lanon stone" facing for walls, fluted translucent glass for office partitions, and ceilings of drywall and perforated acoustical tile. The studio and other parts of the building continued to evolve during occupancy by Chess, as engineers and recording technologies rapidly changed.

Furthermore, after Chess moved out in 1967 (to 320 East 21st Street), more changes occurred, as the building was remodeled for a dance and theater studio run by a former Chess studio manager. Later, the building was bought by a former Chess musician and remodeled again. Consequently, by the late 1980s, the building contained layers of paneling, ceiling tile, and other materials reflecting these various changes. The preservation challenges, needless to say, are unusual; how, for instance, do you date such recent materials as 1950s, versus 1970s, drywall?

The only evidence of the original floor plan for Chess Studios was a set of drawings filed with the city for its building permit in 1956. However, there was a significant divergence between these drawings and what could be observed by a thorough inspection of the building today, including such major changes as the location of stairs and walls.

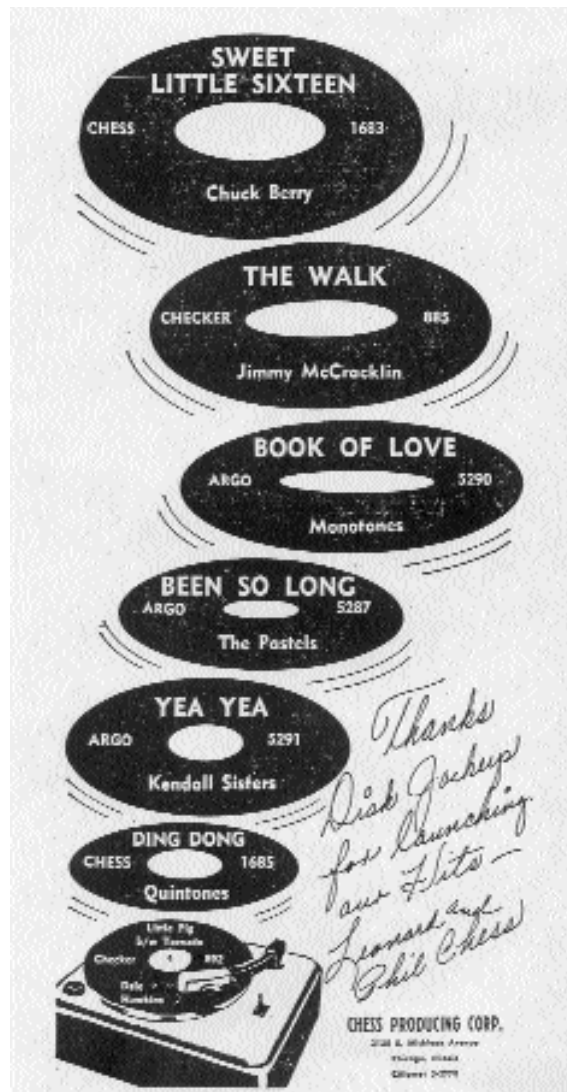
A major discovery—made subsequent to the landmark designation research—was obtained through contact with Jack Wiener, an original Chess engineer who was responsible for the build-out of the entire 1956-1957 remodeling. He revealed that the plans filed with the city were almost completely thrown out and redone at the time of the remodeling, particularly in the second floor studio area. (A particularly sobering discovery for those of us who depend heavily on official permit drawings.) Site investigation further revealed that the wall configuration of the 1956-1957 interiors were more intact than staff had originally surmised.

As for First Church of Deliverance, the changes that were made to its interior have been minor. As a result, the research into this structure was much less complicated and the major concerns have focused on the church's largely unaltered terra cotta-clad, twin-towered exterior.

The Landmark Process

In the case of Chess Records, staff had initially feared there would be difficulty in getting the nine-member Landmarks Commission Board to

Promotional literature for Chess Record Company, shortly after it moved its operations in 1957 to 2210 South Michigan Avenue. Photo courtesy of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.



designate something so recent, so modest, as a Landmark. Early on, this fear was confirmed when one commissioner asked: “What’s a Chess Records?” Despite that one query, however, the fact that the music was so well known to most of the Commissioners actually helped contribute to its acceptance.

It turned out that a mere mention of the song “Johnny B. Goode,” recorded by Chuck Berry at the Chess Studios in 1958, was an immediate touchstone to most of those involved. At one City Council meeting, an alderman—in fact, an oft-time foe of landmarks—noted, “Yeah, I always liked that song,” and voted for designation.

The proposed designation of the Chess Studios also generated widespread public interest. News of its proposed designation immediately made the front page of the Chicago newspapers and spread across the country in magazine articles and radio and television broadcasts—something never experienced even in the cases of the most famous and threatened Sullivan and Wright buildings.

A live radio broadcast from the building in 1989 by musician John (Cougar) Mellencamp urging listeners to write to the Landmarks Commission to “save” the building generated hundreds of letters, even though most had mistakenly interpreted this announcement to mean the building was threatened by demolition.

Since the building was designated a landmark in 1989, the Commission’s staff has assisted the building’s new owners, Blues Heaven Foundation (founded by the late Willie Dixon), to determine an appropriate restoration plan. The building’s “period of significance” was determined to be pre-1960, which was the time when the studio was remodeled for multi-track recordings.

Fortunately, both pre-1960s engineers are alive and willing to work with the foundation to reconstruct the original appearance and equipment. While the studio’s most important music was recorded pre-1960, this period of restoration unfortunately will not reflect the appearance that was seen later by the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, and other music groups who later recorded there.

In addition, there remains the challenge of restoring materials and equipment which, while cheap and improvised in the 1950s, are ironically difficult and often costly to duplicate today. This includes: solid redwood paneling, Flutex ribbed glass, acoustical walls of pyrobar furred out with drywall held by spring clips, original electronic equipment, rubber floor tile, and a basement echo chamber.

Furthermore, serious attention must be given to the repair and conservation of the building’s 1950s-era storefront; for instance, what kind of finish was given to the aluminum at the time and what was the appearance of the original “2120” address sign itself. Few exterior photos survive, and memories of such minor details have predictably lapsed.

As mentioned previously, the issues pertaining to First Church of Deliverance, which was designated a Chicago Landmark by the Commission in 1994, were much less complicated than those of Chess Studios, largely because the major significance of the building was its distinctive Art Moderne style of architecture. In contrast, its landmark designation gained only a small amount of news coverage.

The lessons learned from these two designations—and from the on-site building research—should be both humbling and enlightening for preservationists. They point out the urgency of researching our recent musical past, particularly while the documentation and individuals connected to the buildings are still alive. These buildings also remind us that our sense of history can be found not only in the architectural plans of buildings, but in the diverse cultures of our communities.

Notes

- ¹ Beatrice Johnson Reagon, editor, *We’ll Understand It Better By and By, Pioneering African American Gospel Composers* (Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 17.

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Since 1989, when this photo was taken of Chess Records’ former home (1954-1957) at 4752 South Cottage Grove Avenue, the ornamental terra cotta panels have been removed by vandals. Photo courtesy of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.

