

Arts

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Blue heaven

With beatific be-musement, Marshall Chess says that he never set out to be a music legend: "It's amazing. Chess Records, then The Rolling Stones, then the birth of hip-hop... I didn't go after one of those things. They just happened."



up one of the most important record labels in rock history, one so key that they're making not one, but two films about it. The Czysz brothers, as they were then, had arrived in Chicago in the 1940s, refugees from a Poland where people slept with their horses to keep warm.

me his white grandson," says Chess. The artists who followed Waters on to the (now renamed) Chess label are a pantheon of blues gods: Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Bo Diddley, Memphis Slim, Memphis Minnie, John Lee Hooker, Rufus Thomas, James Elmore, Willie Dixon, Etta James and Buddy Guy and others.

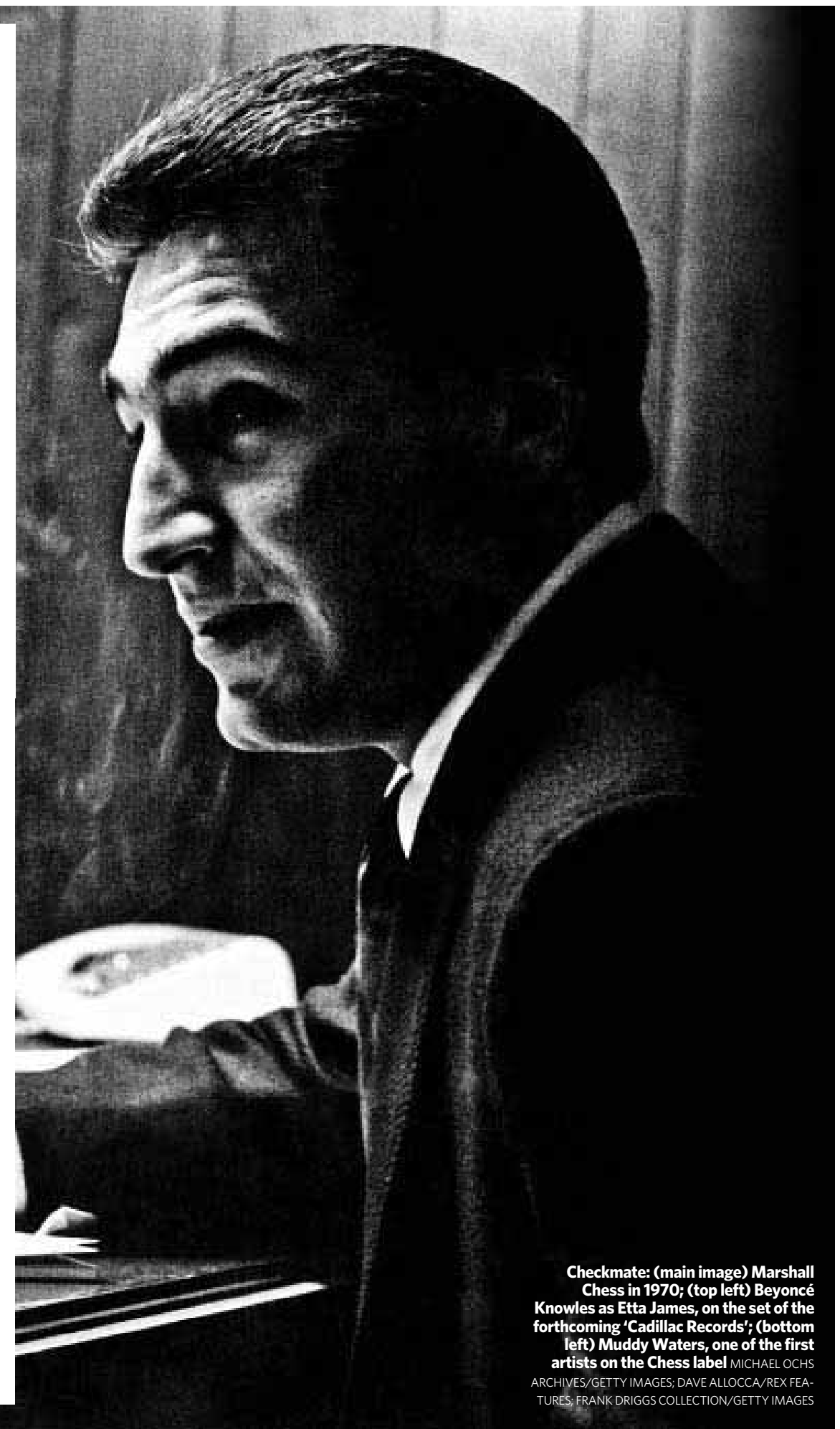


"He was our greatest star," says Chess, who is still Berry's music publisher. "We were the hottest blues label. Then rock'n'roll started, and we had Chuck and Bo Diddley, and they crossed over." In part, that was because the Chess brothers played the notorious, but inescapable, payola game that led to influential DJs like Alan Freed getting writers' credits (and so royalties) on records in exchange for playing them.

Chess Records brought the blues to the world. Now Hollywood is in on the act. Simon Hardeman talks to music mogul Marshall Chess

setting up the Rolling Stones' record label, with the band's now permanent-trade-mark lips logo. He had become president of Chess, but his father was dead (without leaving a will, which still rankles) and the label was out of family hands. "I was depressed, and I heard the Stones were unhappy with their label and manager. So I got Mick's number and I called him up and came to London.

mirror, and that night I told Mick: 'I've got to get out of here, man. It's nothing to do with you.'" A few years later, in 1979, he found that the Chess catalogue was owned by "this black label in Englewood, New Jersey". It was Sugar Hill Records. He wanted to buy it, but they didn't need money, having just released "Rapper's Delight". "So I made a deal with them and began putting out LPs resurrecting Chess. But I was there for all these amazing hits -



Checkmate: (main image) Marshall Chess in 1970; (top left) Beyoncé Knowles as Etta James, on the set of the forthcoming 'Cadillac Records'; (bottom left) Muddy Waters, one of the first artists on the Chess label

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