



# The Story of Chess Records

*John Collis*

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If one man can be credited with creating the language of rock 'n' roll it is Chuck Berry. In the early 1950's he was just an ambitious Nat "King" Cole imitator gigging in St Louis, but ten years after moving to Chicago and cutting his first hit, "Maybelline", in 1955, he built a catalogue of classics that inspired the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and every rock musician since.

Meanwhile his Chicago rival Bo Diddley, the earthiest and arguably the most exciting of the rock 'n' roll performers, was reminding us that this music was just a step away from the blues. Although he was raised in Chicago, his music was a bizarre, electric version of the blues of his birthplace, Mississippi.

Between them Chuck and Bo caused a revolution in Chicago blues, hitherto largely unknown to white America and the mass market. Both were signed to Chess Records, established by Eastern European immigrants, the Chess brothers, who provided the shop window for Chicago bluesmen, while also conforming to a now all-too-familiar pattern, as white entrepreneurs exploiting black talent.

Chess Records both examines the subject of exploitation within the record business and celebrated the music of two unique and important artists and the extraordinarily fertile blues environment out of which they grew.

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