

about relationships to the not so distant past of Chicano politics. In both cases, ethnically specific museums struggle to envision their future audiences as they continue to serve the communities from which they emerged.

David Shneer is associate professor of history at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He is the author of Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust (Rutgers University Press, forthcoming in 2010).

Response

Casandra Hernandez

David Shneer's article raises important questions about the role of ethnic museums in the construction and expression of ethnic identity in the United States. His insights about Jewish museums are in many ways relevant to the Hispanic/Latino community of Phoenix, which feels itself significantly underrepresented and misrepresented in established museums. As the former president of

Chicanos Por la Causa expressed, a proposed Latino cultural center is meant to "show the other side of the community that we're not just gang bangers and other things that they think we are." Many questions have emerged about this center: Who will it serve? Why are so many Hispanic-operated museums in the country favoring the term *Latino* as opposed to *Chicano*, *Mexican*, or *Hispanic*? What are the politics of *Latinization* for U.S. Hispanic-operated museums?

As Shneer notes and as the Phoenix case study exemplifies, there are many tensions in the establishment and operation of any ethnic museum.

1. Empowerment vs. commoditization:

Do ethnic museums construct ethnic identity in ways that empower minority communities to see themselves as equal citizens? Or do they construct it in ways that are easily digestible and marketable to a broad consumer audience?

2. Self-reflection vs. cheerleading:

Do they function as spaces where communities can be self-critical or are they ethnic cheerleaders? Is ethnic

cheerleading justified if it empowers a community that is the target of discrimination?

3. Insider vs. outsider audience:

Do ethnic museums teach their home communities about themselves? Or do they educate a broader American audience about the value of cultural diversity?

4. Plurality vs. essentialism:

Do ethnic museums reduce fluid and complex identities to essentialist voices? Or do they embrace diversity within their own communities?

As an organizer of the *Exhibiting Ourselves* symposium, I join Shneer in arguing for more responsive and visionary ethnic museums, and for the development of new critical approaches to cultural representation in museums and cultural centers.

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Listening for Jews in the History of the Blues

Ari Y. Kelman

Some people make pilgrimage to famous delis trying to taste or to remember Jewish life. Others go on walking tours looking for traces of Jewish life in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, Fairfax, or Maxwell Street. Some go to synagogue to hear strains of ancient texts, and others dig deep into the earth hoping to find Jewish history cast in pottery, bone, or bronze. I listen for hints of Jewish life on wax, vinyl, and shellac in places like 2120 South Michigan Avenue: the home of Chess Records.

Chess Records is one of the most important, most influential record labels in popular music. During the 1950s and 1960s, it defined the sound of Chicago blues, and its label was responsible for an avalanche of great music. Among the artists who began their careers at Chess: Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon, Bo Diddley, and Koko Taylor. As if that weren't enough, those artists wrote, recorded, and released the music that inspired the generation of white

British musicians who helped define rock and roll. (The British Invasion owes itself to Chess Records, and the Rolling Stones built their entire career on trying to sound like Muddy Waters.) At the risk of overstating: without Chess Records rock and roll may never have developed, and it certainly would not sound the way it does today.

So, on the first warm day of late spring in 2009, I found myself at 2120 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago, the home of Chess Records from 1956 until 1965. In a space I had heard but not before seen, I didn't find a celebration of the music or the label. Instead, I found a muted acknowledgment of a history behind the music—a story of Jews and African Americans, of unfinished business, of royalties, and American culture. 2120 South Michigan Avenue isn't a shrine, it is an exhibit of cultural contradictions.

Chess Records, famously, was owned by two Jewish brothers: Leonard and Phil Chess. It was one of a number of Jewish-owned

"independent" labels that emerged during the late 1940s and early 1950s in almost every city with a Jewish population: Cincinnati had King, Los Angeles had Modern and Aladdin. Newark gave us Savoy, and Commodore, Old Time, and Atlantic were all based in New York. And almost all of these labels specialized in music by and for African Americans.

This was at the time when Billboard and Cash Box, the two largest music industry magazines in the U.S., kept separate charts for "pop" music and "race" records. Basically, this method of record keeping divided white audiences from black, but the Chess Brothers understood that African American communities represented a market that most of the major labels (Decca, Columbia, and RCA) would not touch.

Leonard Chess, the first of the brothers to enter the recording business, freely admitted that he didn't know anything about music, but once sold on the blues by a young Muddy Waters, he grew in his

ability to hear a hit song. For Leonard, musical success was not built on scales but on sales.

Leonard proved a tireless salesman and recruiter for Chess (and its subsidiary, Checkers), but the financial dealings between the Chess brothers and their artists became a source of conflict and tension practically from the very beginning. The Chess brothers believed they paid artists for their work, while the artists regularly made claims of being ripped off or cheated out of their rightful share of the royalties.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle. The music business is a complicated tangle of laws, loopholes, and subsidiaries that dictate how everyone involved in the production of a record is paid according to their contribution to any and all of the following: radio play, touring, concerts, payola, publishing, record sales, songwriting credits, and studio performances.

Neither the Chess brothers nor their artists seemed to have fully understood contracts or the legal ins-and-outs of getting paid for making music. And the sums of money created in that murky middle area created as much bad blood as it did music. This is why 2120 South Michigan Avenue is currently the home of Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation, which operates the modest museum. Dixon played a key role at Chess Records. He was one of the most prolific songwriters at Chess and played bass on countless recordings. Perhaps most importantly, though, he made sure to get songwriting credit, which has assured him and his family a steady stream of rightfully earned royalties. Dixon bought the building and created the foundation sometime in the early 1990s and established it as a modest statement of the legacy of Chess Records.

Modest may be an overstatement. Ascending a famously narrow staircase, one arrives in what had been the Chess studio, where musicians played and recorded these important records. The room is practically

empty. The walls are largely blank, decorated sparingly with assorted records and posters and an oversized photo of Dixon.

Through a window, one can see the control room where Dixon and the Chess brothers would have sat during a recording session. The room is empty, save a table and some contemporary sound equipment.

The artifacts that the museum does house are placed largely without identification. On the north wall is a framed 78-rpm record: Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," one of the first blues songs to sell a million copies and something of a landmark in the American recording industry. But it just hangs there without a label or anything else to convey its significance (it was not recorded on Chess).

A few Coco Taylor gowns, a pair of Chuck Berry's pants, a few hats, and assorted albums and posters rest in display cases deployed around the building's two stories, but little exists to put Chess Records or Willie Dixon or any of what happened there into any context at all.

The Chess Brothers are virtually absent.

I sat in the studio trying to listen for echoes of songs like "Spoonful" and "Hoochie Coochie Man," but my mind drowned out those sounds with questions about American Jewish history. This building, which housed one of the most powerful cultural institutions in the U.S. was, for me, a Jewish cultural site because of the role that Leonard and Phil Chess (and their families) played in the growth and development of American popular music. As a Jew and a music fan, I came to Blues Heaven to celebrate Chess Records, but sitting in the spare studio, I couldn't bring myself to do that. The space demanded a different commemoration.

This place is a far cry from practically every other Jewish museum I'd ever been to. There was no donor wall, no delicately lit installations, no lengthy wall text (full disclosure: I've worked at two such museums and written lengthy wall text). Yet, in its rough

edges and absences, this place spoke much more strongly than its Jewish counterparts because it refused to cover over the complicated circumstances of producing American popular culture in favor of ethnic flag-waving.

Blues Heaven does not offer the heart-warming story of Heschel and King marching in Selma, and it does not share the story of Jewish labor activists struggling for the liberation of the working class. Blues Heaven tells a story about Jews and African Americans that is still—some forty years on—far from settled. The story revolves around a pair of Jewish brothers who produced some of the most important music of the twentieth century and left behind not only an unmatched sonic legacy, but a more painful one as well that still echoes with the inequalities between African Americans and Jews in mid-century Chicago.

For Jews like me, Blues Heaven's empty walls and halls echo with the whole story that's not there, the story that is still too hard and awkward to tell: should the Chess heirs pay back-owed royalties to their artists? Did the artists, however naively, willingly enter into contracts that did not benefit them? Who now owns Chess Records? Who owns its music? Its legacy? Who owns the right to tell that story?

These questions hung in the air like old melodies and made my experience there more powerful than a reconstruction of Leonard's office or a life-sized facsimile of the studio's control room could have. Instead of richly detailed labels and troves of vintage treasures, the space seemed unable to tell the stories that it held—an odd fate for a place so full of sound.

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