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Chess Records, then The Rolling Stones, then the birth of hip-hop... I didn't go after one of those things. They just happened."

It was the family business, after all. If his folks had run a grocery, you can ROCK & ROLL MUSIC bet he would have taken on the firm and expanded it; if they'd been doctors, he would worked his socks off to have his own initials etched into the name plate; if they been gangsters... well, there's more than a hint of Pacino in the looks of the smiling, spry, 66-year-old I meet in the Covent Garden Hotel.

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musement, Mar-bels in rock history, one so key that they're artists who followed Waters on to the who is still Berry's music publisher. "We shall Chess says making not one, but two films about it. The Czyz brothers, as they were then,

CHESS

ple slept with their horses to Lee Hooker, Rufus Thomas,

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up one of the most important record la- me his white grandson," says Chess. The (now renamed) Chess label are a pantheon of blues gods: Howlin' Wolf, Little out to be a music had arrived in Chicago in the 1940s, Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Bo Didd- Diddley, and they crossed over." In part, refugees from a Poland where peo- ley, Memphis Slim, Memphis Minnie, John that was because the Chess brothers

> keep warm. "My father got James Elmore, Willie into the liquor business Dixon, Etta James and in a black neighbour- Buddy Guy and others. And then there was

people didn't want to Chuck Berry. "I was his set up in those neighbourhoods," says when he came out of Chess. Soon, there was prison [Berry did four club called the years after bringing a 14-Macamba Lounge, where year-old Apache waitress it was "jazz, along with hookers and pimps. My father across a state line] and we were desperate be-

got the idea that black people cause he was our biggest star. He came would spend money. So in 1947, he bought right from jail, looking raggedy. My dad Pittsburgh, which was half a day's drive a white label called Aristocrat records." gave me \$100 and said. 'Take him down Young Marshall began by fetching the to State Street and get him some new ing, 'What's happening? We're getting all drinks for an up-and-coming bluesman clothes.' Then he came right back to our called Muddy Waters. "Muddy would call studio and recorded 'Nadine'.

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out inescapable, payola game that led to in fluential DJs like Alan Freed getting writers credits (and so royalties) on records in exchange for playing them. "He [Freed] played the hell out of Chuck's firs record, 'Maybellene', because of that. My father says he made the deal. and by the time he got to

played the notorious

away, my uncle back at home was scream these calls for thousands of records! Marshall Chess's biggest solo coup was

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, mirror, and that night I told Mick: 'I've with the band's now permanent-trade-mark lips logo. He had become president do with you." of Chess, but his father was dead (withthe label was out of family hands. "I was black label in Englewood, New Jersey" unhappy with their label and manager. up and came to London.

the clubs in London, and I was treated was there for all these amazing hits like royalty by all these groups because of Chess. I was at the St James club when the guy who worked with Eric Burdon [Chas Chandler] brought over Jimi Hendrix. I was there the night he played his first gig in London. I knew he was good... but I wasn't looking at it musically, I was looking at it more from marketing."

They formed Rolling Stones Records in 1970. But they needed a logo, "The Stones were at a castle near Rotterdam, recording, and on my way there I saw a Shell gas station, and it didn't have the name, just the sign, and I got the instantaneous thing that our logo shouldn't have to need a name. Then that night, sitting round with Keith, Mick and Charlie, I laid it on them. I don't remember how we came up with the tongue and lips specifically.

It's not surprising that the memory blurs at this point. It was the start of a

I was taking drugs, everything, sleeping, waking, it was the whole scene. One day, I woke up in Montreux and looked in the



A few years later, in 1979, he found that

out leaving a will, which still rankles) and the Chess catalogue was owned by "this depressed, and I heard the Stones were It was Sugar Hill Records. He wanted to buy it, but they didn't need money, having So I got Mick's number and I called him just released "Rapper's Delight". "So I made a deal with them and began put "I'd met the Stones. I used to go to all ting out LPs resurrecting Chess. But I



There are two films in production about Chess Records - Cadillac Records and Chess. "The first one has Adrien Brody playing my father, Jeffrey Wright play ng Muddy Waters, Mos Def playing Chuck Berry, and Bevoncé playing Etta James. I heard her version of 'I'd Rather Go Blind', and it blew me away."

Finally, I ask the question that has been nagging at me: "Were you into the music?" Marshall Chess thinks, even grimaces a little. "That's a real hard question. Was I going out like an English fanatic and buy ing every single by an artist? No. But some how I was into Chess Records... I think it grew on me. I'm more into it now than 've ever been.'

Chess Moves' is out on 2 June on Commercia



'White Lines', 'The Message', and so on It was there that he met the Sugar Hill rhythm section, who have now been "retrofitted" by Keith Le Blanc to classic Chess tracks by Howlin' Wolf, Waters, James and more, on Chess's latest project, Chess Moves. "Blues purists hate it," he laughs. "The original was the best, the purest, but it's still my job to spread it to new markets. And it works!"

"It was all sex and drugs and rock'n'roll.



wild ride through the Seventies, all the wilder because Chess lived with the band I lived with Keith on Cheyne Walk, and Mick was next door. I knew Anita [Pallenberg], Bianca [Jagger], the whole thing



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

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