The blues in Chicago: Cadillac Records

Joanne Laurier
20 December 2008

Written and directed by Darnell Martin

In 1941 renowned folklorist Alan Lomax traveled to the impoverished Mississippi Delta region on behalf of the US Library of Congress to record a 26-year-old sharecropper named McKinley Morganfield. The expedition took place just four months before the US entered World War II and on the eve of a decade-long FBI investigation of Lomax for his left-wing connections.

Cadillac Records, the new movie by American director Darnell Martin, begins with this episode and moves on to chronicle the rise and fall of Chess Records in Chicago, whose roster at one time or another included such musical giants as Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon, Chuck Berry and Etta James.

"I'm meeting myself for the first time," says McKinley (Jeffrey Wright) when he hears the Lomax recording. With a new self-confidence, McKinley Morganfield becomes Muddy Waters and heads north to Chicago. There, he hooks up with wife-to-be Geneva (Gabrielle Union) and Little Walter (Columbus Short), a brilliant but unstable teenage harmonica player.

Banding together against poverty and racism, and the Chicago weather, the trio form a self-proclaimed family unit. Muddy's fortunes skyrocket when he plugs his guitar into an amplifier and electrifies his sound. He also collects a large number of girl-friends, all of whom apparently he supports to one extent or another.

It is 1947 in the blues metropolis. Leonard Chess (Adrien Brody) begins recording a constellation of gifted musicians. Muddy and Little Walter are among the first. Then comes Willie Dixon (Cedric the Entertainer), primarily a song-writer, and Howlin' Wolf (Eamonn Walker). A rivalry develops between Muddy and Howlin', partly fueled by professional jealousy, but there is more to it than that: the latter contends that Waters is too dependent on Chess and too trusting.

The small record label becomes the center of a new urban "race music" (the term used prior to the emergence of rhythm and blues to classify virtually all types of African-American music) and Leonard Chess aggressively markets his recordings. He provides his stars with Cadillacs and basic living expenses by shuffling around unpaid royalties, taking from what he owes one artist to pay another. (In one scene, the film shows IOU notes found in an office safe after Chess' death, suggesting the musicians were paid based more on what they asked for than on what they were contractually owed.)

Chess' dealings with Muddy are particularly paternalistic, at times degenerating into a love-hate affair. ("I made my money on the Negro and I want to spend it on him.")

Chicago blues is a cultural phenomenon that doesn't yet attract, or "cross over" to white audiences until Chuck Berry (Mos Def) signs on to Chess with a hybrid pop sound. ("All it took to bring us together—one man duck-walking across the stage.") Says Muddy, "The blues had a baby, and they called it rock ‘n' roll." A blow is struck when Berry is arrested at the height of his career, with racism a key component, and convicted in 1960. He is sent to prison for violating the Mann Act (which bans the transportation of females over state lines for "immoral purposes").

Another "cross-over" star with troubles in the Chess stable is Etta James (executive producer and pop singing star Beyoncé Knowles) whose classical ballad-style takes shape in her 1961 mega-hit, "At Last." Chess begins recording Etta with violins and other string instruments. As Etta battles drug addiction, she is warned to "sing the blues," not "live them." It's not clear whether it's "strictly business" when Leonard exploits Etta's emotional vulnerability, although he does want to prevent another artist from self-destructing like Little Walter.

A globally expanding musical revolution is assuming new forms. Arriving in 1964 for a two-day recording session at Chess is a long-haired British band, whose name is derived from a Waters song, "Rollin' Stone."

However, by this time the Chess label has put Muddy on the back burner, as the rock ‘n' roll craze damages the careers of traditional blues (and country) performers. Nearly broke and isolated, Waters is encouraged to go to England in 1967, with great and somewhat unexpected success. Muddy's career revives and reaches new heights as tragedy strikes Leonard Chess.

There are a good many films like *Cadillac Records* around at the moment: well-intentioned, about interesting and even provocative subject matter, seriously performed, yet, at the same time, quite limited.

Writer-director Martin obviously has a concern for the performers and their struggles, as well as a feel for the music. Her film does an entertaining job of refreshing the popular memory about a group of iconic artists and the label that made them famous. The music of Waters, Wolf, Berry, James and others is the film's heart and soul. Most of the actors perform their own vocals.

Whether Waters and the other black performers were conscious of the significance of their artistic efforts or not, their own emergence was inextricably bound up with social processes under way in the US that would eventually undermine the Jim Crow apartheid system in the South and de facto official racism in the North.

Moreover, postwar America in general was an extremely contradictory phenomenon. Socialists and left-wingers were

© World Socialist Web Site

purged from the labor movement and the entertainment business with great thoroughness, along with critical ideas, and a politically stagnant and conformist framework established. However, the ruling class was unable or unwilling to drive the mass of the population back to the conditions of the 1930s. It was obliged to grant economic concessions in the form of higher wages and living standards.

For the first time working class kids had a little money in their pockets and a little confidence in their step. The best popular music of the time reflects the peculiar nature of the epoch: lively, brash, anti-authoritarian, yet extremely narrow in scope, sometimes even puerile. The breaking down of racial barriers in the music business, uneven, unfair and incomplete as it was, took place within this context.

Can we expect a film writer-director to be guided by such an understanding? No, but the universal absence of deep historical understanding in the film community takes its toll. The filmmaker is sympathetic and sincere, intrigued by the figures she's investigating, but she brings an inadequate knowledge and level of feeling to the work. And that shows.

The movie's major problem is its relatively superficial approach to postwar Chicago, which perhaps accounts for director Martin's playing fast and loose with the historical record. (Muddy Waters' first trip to the UK was in 1958, not 1967; it is also unlikely that Leonard Chess and Etta James had a love affair. Other details are missing or rearranged. Poetic license accounts for much of this, but some of the alterations simply seem odd.)

Chess Records and its black artists were the product of a massive migration from the South in the postwar period, driven by the expanding use of the mechanical cotton picker. Between 1940 and 1960, Chicago's black population grew from 278,000 to 813,000. While wages and the overall conditions of life were an improvement on circumstances in the Deep South, widespread and brutally-enforced discrimination in housing and education prevailed. Riots and tension were endemic.

A deeper investigation and understanding of these times would have strengthened *Cadillac Records* in its quest to rediscover the spirit of an historic music.

Wright as Muddy Waters and Walker as Howlin' Wolf are both remarkable. Says Wright of Waters: "[He] dug this poetry and this music out of dirt and fused it with his own humanity and celebrated in spite of everything that was denied him. These folks were heroic artists in that way. They were producing something out of nothing." This sentiment comes through in the performance.

Knowles pours herself into the role of Etta James, however, unlike Wright, she's a little more self-conscious about tackling a legend, both dramatically and musically. Def is charming, but marches to his own beat rather than Chuck Berry's. Unfortunately, in a film of simplified characterizations, it is Brody's Leonard Chess that suffers the most. This is not the actor's fault; he is not given enough to work with.

Chess is a complex and fascinating character. Born in a Jewish community in what was then Poland, now Belarus, in 1917, Chess followed his father, along with his mother, sister and brother to the US in 1928.

His son Marshall, who grew up at Chess Records, describes his father as someone who "evolved from an immigrant to a bar owner in the ghetto to wanting to make money—seeing black people make the first real money of their lives [and] wanting to get a piece of it—to falling in love with the music." The confluence of geographical, historical and cultural factors responsible for such a personality as Leonard Chess—part-hustler, part visionary—is hardly touched on by the filmmakers. Their dramatization is essentially a surface one. Curiously, Chess is the film's only character who never ages over a 20-year timeframe.

There are questions the spectator wants to see addressed: what was Chess' relationship to the music, to his performers, to the African-American population? (He played drums on some of Waters' records.) What was the impact of the massacre of his co-religionists in the Holocaust on Chess. For that matter, what was its impact on the black musicians with whom he was dealing? Even if they never discussed it, that doesn't mean there was no impact.

Enormous events were taking place, which had far-reaching consequences. No one wants to see "talky" or "preachy" films, but dialogue, human conversation, exists for a reason, to condense and express in verbal form complicated processes. The filmmaker has simply decided to stick to the minimum. That's her privilege, but it limits the film.

Also strange is the case of the missing Phil Chess, Leonard's brother, who played an instrumental role at Chess Records since its inception. For the filmmakers to omit any reference to the other Chess, says Marshall Chess, is akin to making a movie about the flight of the Wright brothers minus one brother.

The film relies a little too much on the intriguing character of its protagonists and the allure of the music. When the music stops, rather formulaic dialogue takes over. Many of the characterizations and relationships are simplistically drawn. For example, Etta's torment and substance abuse stem simply from parental neglect. The confrontation between the singer and her supposed father, the pool player Minnesota Fats, is unconvincing to say the least. Moreover, the movie needlessly pumps up the melodrama by inventing a love story between Leonard and Etta. Her tearful rendition of "I'd Rather Go Blind" as he walks out of her life is soap-operatic.

The rivalry between Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf was expressive of something more fundamental than the film indicates. Wolf was angry with Waters for not understanding that Chess' "job is to make money off you." The label owner's paternalistic financial arrangements with his artists was all too evocative of sharecropping arrangements.

Martin's film is engaging, but, as a result of the issues, personalities and culture that the filmmaker herself touches upon and fails to examine deeply, unsatisfying.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site