

November 6, 2011--

Like most people, Gene Barge and Art Hoyle don't come around the historic Chess Records studio site all that often.

Barge was an arranger, producer and sax player and Hoyle — a former member of the Sun Ra Arkestra — was a session trumpet player at the 2120 S. Michigan site from the mid-1960s until 1967, when Chess moved to a bigger space at 320 E. 21st St. Hoyle is featured on the 1965 Fontella Bass smash "Rescue Me," which could be the theme song for the Chess site.

Last month they brought their horns to the former second floor studio. Hoyle had not been at Chess since the "Big Snow" of 1967.

They collaborated on a riff from Charlie Parker's "Now Is the Time."

From the first note of the song, the room was alive again. It was not a walk-through tour or a grainy VHS tape of Chess history.

The music from these icons was a living, breathing moment.

Part of a resurrection plan for the Chess building is to return it to a working studio, like the Sun Studios room in Memphis, Tenn., used by U2 and John Mellencamp. And the Chess site is a more diverse incubator of popular music than Sun.

Between the 1957-67 glory days at "2120," Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters and the Rolling Stones recorded at Chess. So did jazz pianists Ahmad Jamal and Ramsey Lewis, who recorded for Chess on the label's Argo and Cadet imprint. Chess put out mono sermonizing soul albums by the Rev. C.L. Franklin, Aretha's father.

The 85-year-old Barge stood at the rear of what once was the second floor studio.

He looked east to a distant vista.

"This could be a recording studio again," he said. "A lot of studios today are much

smaller than this. It would be very easy to convert this. It looks very different. It's nice and polished.

"On the right side we had our drum booth, where our drummer was Maurice White [who went on to form Earth, Wind and Fire]. [Bassist] Louis Satterfield would stand right beside him. Back here [on the southwest end] was the vocal booth."

Hoyle, 82, added, "It's a lot of small rooms now. Before it was one large room and the control room."

But the not-for-profit Blues Heaven Foundation, which operates the site, does not have funding to make the studio a reality.

Blues Heaven executive director Jacqueline Dixon would not disclose the foundation's operating budget last week in an interview from her home in Los Angeles. "We don't have a lot of money," she admitted. "Right now we need repairs for structural issues with the foundation. There's water damage and a crack in a ceiling [in the former downstairs office of founder Leonard Chess]. Those are triple-digit figures we are looking at. We're looking at contractors to donate their services."

While looking at the 54-year-old studio, Barge said, "It's been like pulling teeth to get something going in this area."

Chess as the centerpiece of a new "Record Row" has the support of Jerry Roper, president and CEO of the Chicago Chamber of Commerce.

"I used to run the Convention and Tourism Bureau [from 1984-93]," Roper said last week. "It's always been my desire to create some sort of district for conventioners. Not that we want to keep them off Rush Street or Michigan Avenue, but there's nothing by Chess and McCormick Place. For years we've been trying to get people to Chinatown, on and on. McCormick Place has 8 to 10 million visitors every year. It's a built-in audience.

"Chicago is rooted in the history of music, and we've done nothing with it."

Barge said, "This is a very historic street. During lunch break you'd go downstairs and you could see anybody standing outside. Muddy. I remember seeing [jazz saxophonist] Sonny Stitt out there talking. [Saxophonist] Roland Kirk. Ahmad Jamal. One day Ike and Tina Turner pulled up in this big Chrysler. They were trying to get a deal.

“Chess had a strong connection with St. Louis. Chuck Berry, Little Milton was living there. [Richard] Groove Holmes was in here. We had to help him lift that [Hammond B-3] organ upstairs. He was struggling and he was a big dude.” Holmes, who weighed 300 pounds, died in 1991 not long after appearing with mid-1950s Checker jump blues singer Jimmy Witherspoon at the Chicago Blues Festival.

“Etta James and Sugar Pie [De Santo] would run out to get some food,” Barge continued. “They’d bring back cheese and crackers and sit in the middle of the floor eating them, talking that talk. I guess we took it for granted, all these people considered ‘stars.’ ”

When artists had time they would swing around the corner from Chess to lunch at Mama Batt’s restaurant at 22nd and South Michigan.

The restaurant was a favorite of Mayor Richard J. Daley, and owners would send a bowl of chicken soup to City Hall when Hizzoner had a cold. Batt’s was part of the Lexington Hotel, where Al Capone lived between 1928 and 1931.

Batt’s closed in the late 1970s. The hotel was demolished in 1996.

“They had a ‘Redemptive Beef’ [sliced, freshly cut on rye] sandwich, and the Lemons brothers were cooks who eventually opened their own barbecue joint,” Barge said. “They cooked Jewish food like blintzes [and fried kreplach] at Batt’s. They had a very good corned beef sandwich.

“Most of our sessions were done in the daytime. When I was there it was Little Milton. Fontella Bass. [Vocalist] Billy Stewart was a character. He had two dispositions, either really jolly or hostile. I met Billy in the 1950s when he was a young kid and Bo Diddley’s keyboardist. Bo was a Chess artist and I was a Chess artist in ’55 and ’56.”

Stewart was an amazingly powerful singer. One of the first Chess hits for the rotund singer was the 1960 self-penned Latin-tinged “Fat Boy.” He probably ate at Mama Batt’s, too.

Stewart’s fluttering 1966 cover of “Summertime” has found itself in regular rotation on WLS-FM (94.7) and was featured on Bob Dylan’s XM radio show. Stewart hits like “Sitting in the Park” and “Strange Feelings” are beach music standards in the Carolinas.

Stewart and three members of his band were killed in 1970 when their car careened off a bridge into a river in North Carolina. He was 33.

Barge was a sax sideman at the “Summertime” session.

“They had an entire big band in here,” he said. “Billy was in the middle of the floor. He was doing his scat singing, and we’re trying to keep on the beat, pick up the first bar so we can all hear it together. Count that thing off and it was like a live concert. By having limited tracks, if you made a mistake you had to start all over. You couldn’t fix anything. We had 10 or 15 false starts on ‘Summertime.’ I think we had a four-track. We were one of the first studios in the country to go eight-track.”

Hoyle, Paul Serrano and John Howell were on trumpets, Bunky Green was on alto saxophone, Johnny Board on tenor saxophone and Rubin Cooper on baritone sax. Stewart fed off of Pete Cosey’s evocative guitar, Maurice White was on drums with his foil Satterfield on bass and Sonny Thompson played piano. The trombone section was made up of John Avant, Julian Prieser and Morris Ellis.

They all made magic.

The Stewart sessions on Oct. 6, 1965, were the last major recording project at “2120,” according to Barge and Hoyle.

“We had acoustic bafflers and cloth on the walls,” Barge said. “We put a carpet under the drums. The floor was a hard floor. The [slightly arched] ceiling was about the same. But it was a pretty live sound. This was one of the first studios in the country to have a solid echo chamber. [Late Chess engineer] Ron Malo put a microphone in the basement and ran it up here. They used the echo of that room to add to our sound.”

Malo was the engineer for the Rolling Stones’ first American sessions, done at “2120” in 1964. Before coming to Chess, Malo designed the Hitsville USA studio for Berry Gordy in Detroit.

The Chess studio was designed by engineer Jack Wiener. He installed the matched echo chambers in the basement. The Chess brothers opened the studio in a building originally constructed in 1911 for an auto parts dealer.

Barge studied the second-floor control booth window. “The window looks like it has

been replaced, but the carpentry and trim seems to be original. Off on the left side, you'd go up the stairs and that was our lacquer channel. That's where once the recording was done we'd press it on the master disc for our final master."

The building has had one other life as a recording studio after Chess left in 1967.

In the late 1980s, former Chess session player Gerald Sims purchased "2120," which had been a dance studio and office of former Chess producer Ralph Bass. "Record Row" was on its last legs. Otis Clay had a studio in the rundown Lexington Hotel, and Eddie Thomas was cutting his Dogs of War disco records a couple doors down from "2120." Sims, the father of former Bruce Springsteen bassist Tommy Sims (who also wrote the Eric Clapton smash "Change The World") installed 16- and 24-track facilities with the hope that Chess would return to its previous luster. It didn't happen.

Marie Dixon, the widow of legendary Chess songwriter-producer Willie Dixon, restored the building and in 1997 opened the present-day Blues Heaven within the site. The only time Barge returns is on a media request.

"One time I walked in and they started giving me the tour," Barge said with a gentle smile. "They didn't know I worked here. They said, 'Who are you?' I told them and they still didn't know who the hell I was."

History walks among us.