Bob Koester, one of the most important figures in the modern-day Chicago blues and jazz recording industry. As proprietor of the Jazz Record Mart, an internationally renowned mecca for blues and jazz aficionados of all stripes and musical persuasions, he is also a hero in the good fight to keep recorded music alive – whether on CD, vinyl, or even shellac!

In 1952, when Koester opened the Blue Note Record Shop at 3549 Laclede in St. Louis, he wasn’t thinking of himself as a blues mogul. Although he’d long admired vintage-era blues performers such as Blind Boy Fuller, Big Joe Williams, Memphis Minnie, and Big Bill Broonzy, his main interest was jazz, primarily of the “traditional” variety, and his focus was on acquiring vintage jazz 78s and re-selling them. Soon, though, with the help of a music-loving St. Louis policeman named Charlie O’Brien, he began finding blues musicians such as vocalist Edith Johnson and pianists Speckled Red and “Hi” Henry Brown, still living in the St. Louis area. Most were legendary among aficionados but hadn’t recorded – or, in many cases, even performed – for years. By this time, Koester had moved his store to Delmar Avenue, and he’d also launched a record label, which he originally called “Delmar.” These artists and others now had the chance to introduce a new generation to their music – some, in fact, revitalized their careers as live entertainers for a new (and primarily white) audience.

In 1958 Koester moved to Chicago, where he’s been based ever since (his Jazz Record Mart, now at 27 E. Illinois St., is an internationally renowned mecca for blues and jazz record buyers and collectors). At first, his label still focused primarily on artists whom most would call “traditional” – Big Joe Williams, Sleepy John Estes, Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup, et al. – but in 1965, Delmark released harpist Junior Wells’ Hoodoo Man Blues, an uncompromising blast of electrified urban juke-joint aggression. Magic Sam’s Wes Side Soul followed in 1967, and within a few years Delmark’s roster of younger-generation musicians and singers had grown substantially. Today, the label is the home of some of the world’s leading contemporary blues and jazz artists, even as its reissues of vintage-era recordings remain an important part of its ongoing activities. It should be mentioned that Delmark was also one of the first established labels to recognize the genius of the AACM – the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, Chicago’s legendary free jazz collective.

Obviously, then, Delmark’s “purist” days are long gone. From the stripped-down acoustic virtuosity of Big Joe Williams and Sleepy John Estes through the heavy-metal thunder of Toronzo Cannon; from the vintage ragtime and stride piano stylings of Art Hodes to the outward-bound explorations of artists like Muhal Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell, and Anthony Braxton (to name just a few), we see the ongoing evolution of America’s great native-born musical art forms, as restless in their refusal to stay put as the famously peripatetic Big Joe himself was until the end of his life, exemplifying the AACM’s famous aphorism: “Great Black Music, Ancient To the Future.” Or, as Delmark recording artist Sharon Lewis likes to remind us: “It’s all blues if it comes from the heart.”

We are delighted to honor Bob Koester, for all that he has done for the music and the musicians, with this year’s Spirit Award.
The Scott Brothers and the Scott family represent one of Chicago’s richest and most diverse musical legacies. They started out in the late ’50s as the Masquerades, a doo-wop vocal ensemble that included Howard, Charles, and Tommie Scott, along with Jimmy Thompson, Ike Hickman and guitarist Howard Taylor. Thompson soon left to forge a career of his own; eventually, as Jimmy Johnson, he became one of Chicago’s most influential and best-loved blues artists.

In about 1961, after the group had released its debut single, “Mister Man,” another brother, Buddy Scott, replaced Howard Taylor on guitar. Within a few years, though, as doo-wop faded from popularity, the other Scotts honed their instrumental chops as well and re-cast themselves as the Scott Brothers, becoming one of Chicago’s most in-demand session units and show bands. Buddy, being a more straight-ahead bluesman than the others, went off on his own to become a legend on the Chicago club circuit. When bassist and bass singer Howard Scott broke free from the Scott Brothers to work as a stand-up vocalist, he assembled a new group that eventually incorporated his other guitar-playing brother, Walter, on guitar and became christened the Scott Brothers World Band.

The World Band eventually joined forces with yet more family members, the Young Scotts, who included nephews Jerome and Kenneth “Hollywood” Scott (on bass and guitar, respectively), to serve as Tyrone Davis’s back-up aggregation. In about 1983, when the Scott Brothers half of the contingent departed, Hollywood and the others re-christened themselves Platinum. They remained with Davis until his death in 2005.

Walter’s versatile guitar work has graced countless Chicago soul recording sessions through the years; now dubbed Sir Walter Scott, he continues to work with the Chi-Lites, among others, as well as fronting a reconstituted World Band behind various vocalists on local shows. Hollywood is a first-call guitarist on the southern soul circuit (he also continues to lead Platinum, often accompanying Otis Clay, when he’s in town); Howard still sings occasionally, and he has become an esteemed mentor to young artists. Buddy, along with his band, the Rib Tips, held down the show at Lee’s Unleaded Blues on South Chicago Avenue for many years; his wife, the late Pat Scott, was usually the featured vocalist. He passed away in 1994.

The Scotts, in their various permutations, with a track record extending back over five decades, represent one of R&B’s most enduring and robust family legacies, and we are proud to honor them with this year’s Spirit Award.