

TOO MUCH MONKEY BUSINESS?

Byron Foulger delves into the new Chuck Berry sixteen-CD box set released by Bear Family



Chuck Berry at the Princess Club, Manchester, 1967. Photo: Brian Smith.

There can't have been many artists who have had so many re-issues and re-releases of their recordings, than Charles Edward Anderson Berry. Countless record companies across the world have released his recordings, certainly the photographs in the books accompanying this CD box set would indicate this. Unfortunately I do not possess Morton Reff's four 'Chuck Berry International Directories' (Music Mentor Publications) to check such facts but for such a popular artist, who straddles blues, r&b and rock'n'roll with ease, this must surely be the case.

In fact when an artist such as Chuck Berry has had his music released so frequently, constantly refashioned to suit various themes (for instance Ace Records' 'On The Blues Side') and by all sorts of record companies, which have licensed his recordings, (many reputable and some not so), including those who have issued them under public domain legislation and those which have simply 'bootlegged' the music, Berry fans and collectors in general might well ask if a release like this is really necessary. In fact, when a recent public domain release of Chuck's work was reviewed in these pages, the reviewer, obviously frustrated at such issues, finished off the review with these words: 'prime rock, good sound, cheap price, dull box, too much monkey business for me to be involved in'. Even Bear Family itself has recently issued a 'Chuck Berry Rocks' CD in its 'Rocks' series. And of course there have been the three MCA/Hip-O 4CD sets, which at the time of issue, would have seemed to represent everything that any Chuck Berry fan might conceivably desire.

Whether you think this release is necessary or not is a personal view. But nobody could disagree with the fact that if any company were to do a project such as this full justice, then that company must be Bear Family.

Sixteen CDs is a lot of music. In fact it is 21 hours and 11 minutes to be exact, or 1271 minutes if you are used to CD timings being in minutes! I love Chuck Berry's music - or should I say I love a lot of it. Even considering his early recordings which contain much of the Chuck Berry music that I idolise, but there are some also-rans, tracks such as 'Thirteen Question Method' and 'Diploma For Two' for example.

Included in the box is every vinyl single and album track - starting with a rare pre-Chess single with Joe Alexander from 1954, when Berry, (as 'Chuck Berry'n'), accompanied Alexander on a 45 issued by a local St Louis label, Ballad; all the celebrated and legendary Chess singles and album cuts from 1955 to 1966 and from 1969 to 1974; his Mercury recordings from those intervening years; the Atco album (a recording from 1979 at Berry Park Studio, Wentzville in Missouri), as well as other classic live recordings from 1956 to 1972.

I was a little confused at what is implied on the Bear Family website, where it states: 'All the Mercury recordings, and the Atco album. Every surviving alternate take as well'. At first I thought it meant all alternates for all labels, but then realised that many of the alternate takes on the Hip-O issues aren't included in this set, but not all Mercury alternate takes are included either.

In the end I have concluded that what Bear Family means is that they have included all tracks that have been issued on vinyl and at least one version of all numbers that have only been issued digitally. It also appears that in this context, a different mix for a track counts as

a different number, for instance the April 1966 cut of 'Ramona, Say Yes' was issued on a 45 and therefore is included in this set; it was however issued on both a Chess and Hip-O CD as an alternate mix, and therefore is also included in this set. In other words, this is not the complete Chuck Berry that I imagined it would be (at least of studio recordings); if you want that, you will need at least one or more of the Hip-O CD sets in addition to this release, and some vinyl albums of live performances!

As far as I can tell, as regards studio recordings, there are but three previously unheard tracks. They are 'Fast B6' - a Chess instrumental from 1959, mainly featuring Johnny Johnson on piano and reminiscent of Meade Lux Lewis's 'Honky Tonk Train Blues'; 'Oh Captain', a Mercury cut from 1966 (this being a 'synchronised' version compared to the issued cut, a rather jarring, almost 'rock' number) and 'Rock Cradle Rock', again a Mercury cut, this time from 1968, a typical Berry composition, trying to recreate his 'Chess' sound it would seem.

While CDs one to eleven feature studio recordings, the last five focus on live concert recordings and warrant further comment. The first two tracks are 'Maybelline' (sic) and 'Roll Over Beethoven' from the 'Camel Rock'n'Roll Dance Party' in 1956, followed by an 'introduction' and four tracks from Chuck's appearance at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, and two concerts performed at The Walled Lake Casino in Detroit on 25th and 26th October, 1963. Two 1967 performances at The Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco take up CD fourteen while CD fifteen provides us with Chuck's 1969 gig at The Toronto Rock'n'Roll Festival. The last disc gives us a performance at Coventry's Lanchester Arts Festival in 1972, one track ('South Of The Border') recorded at the BBC Television Theatre the same year; his 1964 appearance on the BBC's Saturday Club radio show; an interview and Dr Pepper commercial from 1977 and finally, a medley of 'Reelin' And Rockin'' and 'Roll Over Beethoven', also from 1977, from the Wilton Theater, Los Angeles.



From the Harry Davis Collection.

It is pointless reviewing the bulk of the music on this set - it will be known inside out by 99% of B&R readers, suffice to say that the sound is excellent, (as would be imagined for Bear Family), so I'll concentrate on the tracks that deserve further mention.

First of all then there are the two Joe Alexander sides, both rather square cuts, one a calypso, the other a ballad, and I wouldn't have recognised Berry's input. I am not sure why these tracks appear near the end of the first CD, this seems to go against the grain of the, generally chronological, presentation of the tracks, perhaps I missed something in the text.

CD three contains both sides of The Ecuadors' (including Billy Roquel Davis, Harvey Fuqua and Etta James) Chess coupling of 'Say You'll Be Mine' and 'Let Me Sleep Woman', Chuck adding distinctive guitar breaks to these two vocal group offerings which were recorded at the end of a mammoth session when the group backed Berry on a few of his numbers such as 'Betty Jean' and 'Broken Arrow'.

A salient recording in my book, 'Nadine', his first studio recording after he left jail in 1964, was an absolute stunner to me, presumably rather like Nadine herself! It emphasised what had been missed. Both truncated and full version of 'Chuck's Beat' and 'Bo's Beat' are included, the single versions appearing chronologically in the set, but the full tracks appear on CD ten, presumably because of their length it was considered better to place them at the end of Chuck's studio recordings, this also occurs in the case of the longer version of 'Bio'.

CD eleven contains various alternate takes and stereo versions of numbers featured in earlier CDs, ones that appeared on labels like Pye, Marble Arch and even Chess; and the 1979 Atco album, which I have not heard before; but it's no great shakes.

A couple of general points that have struck me over the playing of the studio recorded CDs: the Mercury tracks are better than I remember them and didn't Johnny Johnson provide absolutely magnificent piano accompaniment?

The live material probably needs a little more attention. Alan Freed introduces Berry's two 'Dance Party' tracks; they have been around a long time and are pretty good for a live recording from 1956, but there is no Johnny Johnson in Freed's Rock'n'Roll Orchestra!

The Newport Jazz Festival tracks suffer from Chuck having a jazz band backing -and no Johnny Johnson. The Walled Lake Casino material comes from two nights' recordings, the second night's recordings have already been issued on Hip-O, but the first night's offerings have not been out before, presumably because sound is better on the second night's take. Backing is from the Berry Gordy All Stars, they are not bad at all, but presumably were performing out of their natural comfort zone. Chuck sounds confident and of course plays nothing but his early hits and at times it all becomes a little 'sing-along-Chuck' (with audience participation), but it could have been a lot worse!

The Fillmore material, all issued by Mercury, has the benefit of the Steve Miller Band for backing, but Miller's harmonica is atrocious. He sounds like a chicken having its neck wrung! All in all these recordings do little for me, but appearing before a 1960s hippie crowd they probably did a lot more for Chuck. The Toronto material was, apart from one track, 'Bonsoir Cherie', issued on Magnum, with only guitar, bass and drums backing, Chuck doesn't sound like Chuck really should, and although it undoubtedly is him of course, this is getting on towards Status Quo style rock.

The final CD coughs up twelve tracks from Coventry's 1972 Lanchester Arts Festival - another four appear on CD eight as they



Chuck Berry in Waco, Texas, 1957, promoting his new album. From the Harry Davis Collection.

were released as Chess singles; a piano is credited as being present but rarely is noticed. Only one track from the 1972 BBC concert, 'South Of The Border' (backed by Rockin' Horse with Mick Snow on piano), is here, I assume because it was on a Chess single. This is followed by four tracks from a BBC session in 1964, introduced by radio presenter Brian Matthew; and again, because they were presumably issued on vinyl, another six appear on CD four. The sound is generally good and the piano work from John Hawken shows how important a good piano was to Chuck's music.

The last CD winds up with a short interview introducing a Dr Pepper advert and a short medley from Los Angeles's Wilton Theater, which is quite successful and featured in the soundtrack to the 'American Hot Wax' film.

As Chuck's music will be well known to most B&R readers, fans of Berry will already have virtually all the tracks, the two books which come with the set are, to me the most the most interesting aspects of this release.

The first book, 252 pages, is entitled 'Chuck Berry - Rock And Roll Music' (with a short introduction from Sir Paul McCartney - not sure why!). The backbone of the book is Chuck's story as told by Bruce Pegg, whose biography, 'Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times Of Chuck Berry', was published by Routledge in 2006.

It makes for informative and interesting reading, and at the relevant timelines, further pieces by Roger Fairhurst ('On Tour With Chuck Berry 1964-65') and Michael Snow ('At The Beat Club') are interjected. A full, comprehensive discography by Fred Rothwell follows, then a photographic feature, 'Chuck Around The World', showcases many of the labels and covers that have been used for his international releases, and finally, as an appendix, there is a CD track listing, an alphabetical listing of his studio and live recordings, and a list of credits.

However, it's the second book, 'Chuck Berry: The Harry Davis Pictures' that is the killer item in this release. British photographer and blues authority, Bill Greensmith, who resides in St. Louis, found the photo archive of Chuck Berry's uncle, Harry Davis, a few years back. Bill was invited to the house of Harry Davis's widow and spent six hours each Monday for eight months investigating the thousands and thousands of snaps and negatives that had been left on Harry's passing, and following this research the book includes many previously unseen images of Chuck with his family and friends and performing, pre-fame, at blues nightspots in and around St. Louis. The photos included with this set are in a high quality 104-page hardbound book.

The main box set retails at around 299 Euros, but if you are feeling really affluent, there is the deluxe version which features the same material, but presented in a replica edition of a full-sized ES-series guitar case - it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it - and a snip at a mere 499 Euros! It seems there are only 88 copies of this limited edition version - so you need to get your skates on to get one!

Byron Foulger was reviewing 'Chuck Berry: Rock And Roll Music - Any Old Way You Choose It - The Complete Studio Recordings' (BCD17273) and 'Chuck Berry: Rock And Roll Music - Any Old Way You Choose It - The Complete Studio Recordings (Guitar Case Edition)' (BCD17053).

A full track listing for and details of both sets can be downloaded at the Bear Family website www.bear-family.com



Chuck Berry, late 1930s. Photo: From the Harry Davis Collection.