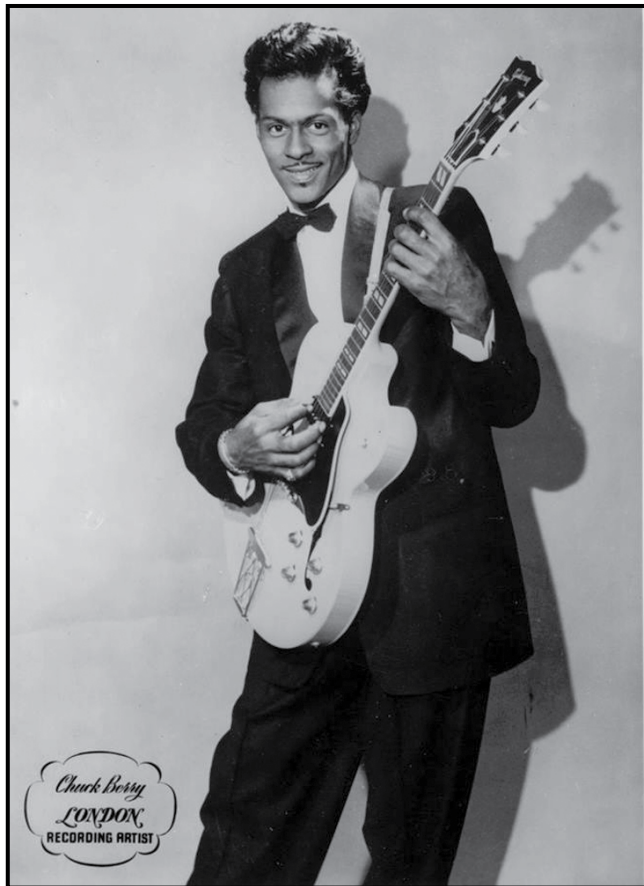


CHUCK BERRY

THE MUSIC AND THE MAN

Neil Slaven ponders whether the two can be reconciled



UK London Records promotional photo, circa late 1950s. From the B&R Archive.

“If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it Chuck Berry”. So said John Lennon, another gifted wordsmith and a shrewd judge of rock’s history and heritage. If a justification for Chuck Berry’s status as a progenitor of rock’n’roll were needed, one only has to point to the influence he had on the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and those musical thieves, the Beach Boys. And they were just the famous ones.

Throughout America and Britain in the 1960s, it was hard to find a rock band that didn’t have a Berry copyright in their repertoire. In fact, you couldn’t claim to be a rock band unless you paid the requisite homage, for Chuck Berry was a vital part of the genetic code of rock. As Keith Richards admitted, “I’ve stolen every lick he played”.

It could be the sentimental ‘Memphis, Tennessee’ or the raucous ‘Johnny B. Goode’ or the iconoclastic ‘Roll Over Beethoven’, three of what music reporter Mark Savage has identified as “Seven of the King of rock’n’roll’s best songs”. That doesn’t disqualify ‘Brown Eyed Handsome Man’ or ‘School Day’ or ‘Sweet Little Sixteen’, they were just the songs that went down best. Chuck never called himself an intellectual but he sure as hell wanted you to know how good he was with words – and how clearly he enunciated them on his records. He managed to encapsulate the U.S. younger generation’s dissatisfaction with the lot their parents were passing on to them.

Right from the start with ‘Maybellene’ he depicted their world in lyrics rich in detail. Who doesn’t have it imprinted on his memory: “As I was motorvatin’ over the hill I saw Maybellene in a Coupe de Ville, Cadillac a-rollin’ on the open road, Nothin’ to outrun my V8 Ford”.

All the elements of his future hits were present, pounding rhythm, aggressive guitar riffs and a simplistic but vigorous solo style. It became a number one rhythm and blues hit, ‘Thirty Days’ and ‘Roll Over Beethoven’ rose to number two, ‘Too Much Monkey Business’ and ‘Brown Eyed Handsome Man’ were a double-sided hit reaching numbers four and five, ‘School Day’ and ‘Sweet Little Sixteen’ hit number one, ‘Johnny B. Goode’ number two. Shall I go on?

He had a handle on self-promotion, too. ‘Brown Eyed Handsome Man’ opens with, “Arrested on charges of unemployment, he was sittin’ in the witness stand, the judge’s wife called up the district attorney, she said ‘Free

that brown-eyed man. You want your job you better free that brown-eyed man”. In his autobiography he says he was inspired to write the song during a tour of California. “What I didn’t see, at least in the areas I was booked in, was too many blue eyes. The auditoriums were predominantly filled with Hispanics and ‘us”.

Then there’s “(De) Milo’s Venus was a beautiful lass, She had the world in the palm of her hand, but she lost both her arms in a wrestling match to meet a brown-eyed handsome man”.

Berry claimed inspiration from a diverse set of musicians, among them Charlie Christian, Tampa Red and Nat King Cole, but the most direct influence was surely Louis Jordan, whose records displayed a similar breadth of reference and the vital ingredient of humour.

Even so, as with ‘Brown Eyed Handsome Man’, there was usually a darker message beneath the overt good-time imagery. An article by Daniel Finkelstein in *The Times* four days after Berry’s death declared ‘Chuck Berry was a political revolutionary’. He didn’t say so but ‘School Day’ (number one rhythm and blues; number three pop) very neatly proves the point. After three verses about the travails of the classroom, it’s off to the jukebox to blow away the tutorial cobwebs. The song’s final verse is a call to teenage arms: “Hail, hail, rock ‘n’ roll, deliver me from the days of old”.

Towards the end of 1957 another Top Ten single, ‘Rock And Roll Music’, reinforced the message: “Rock ‘n’ roll music, any old way you choose it, it’s got a back beat, you can’t lose it, any old time you use it, it’s gotta be rock ‘n’ roll music, if you wanna dance with me’. ‘Sweet Little Sixteen’ (number one on the rhythm and blues chart and number two pop) was the clincher: “Sweet little sixteen, she’s got the grown-up blues, tight dresses and lipstick, she’s sportin’ hi-heel shoes, oh but tomorrow morning, she’ll have to change her trend, and be sweet sixteen, and back in class again”. Berry was ensuring it wouldn’t be a quiet revolution.

There must have been some nervous reaction from parents whose children were being incited to rebel by a thirty-year-old man of colour but I’ve never found it. It seems Berry did what he could to play down his racial heritage. Marshall Chess noted: “He sort of had this persona of wanting to be Hawaiian, the way his hair was, his shirts. He would say he was part Hawaiian and in a way he could look Hawaiian. I think that something with his being Hawaiian was knowing that he could be more successful if maybe he wasn’t black”.

The thought was made manifest in February 1958 when Berry recorded ‘Blues For Hawaiians’, and I’ve always thought ‘Deep Feeling’ (the B side of ‘School Day’), apart from being superior to ‘Blues For Hawaiians’, had a hint of the islands about it. And then there was ‘Mad Lad’. Johnnie Johnson reckoned Berry “wanted to be anything – but an Afro-American, I guess”. When stopped by police on the way to New York, Johnson noticed that Berry’s driving licence identified him as ‘Indian’.

By then Berry was accustomed to police interest. He was eighteen when he was jailed for three years for petty robbery. He describes the circumstances in his autobiography. He and his friends James and Skip set off to Kansas City in Chuck’s 1937 Oldsmobile. By the time they arrived money was low so Skip, “as ugly as death eating a dirty doughnut” robbed a bakery, coming away with a handful of bills. The next day Chuck and Skip robbed a barbershop, bringing their take to 94 dollars. Later that night, after commandeering another car, they were arrested by state troopers. They were convicted three weeks later and Chuck was sent to Alcoa Intermediate Reformatory for Young Men. He was released on 18th October 1947, his twenty-first birthday.

Then there was Janice Escalante, a teenage hustler that Berry picked up in El Paso, Texas. Apart from stimulating his libido, he figured she’d be a good hostess at his Club Bandstand. The police thought otherwise and arrested him for transporting a minor across a state line. He was sentenced to three years jail and a \$10,000 fine. He found out that ‘good behaviour’ cut five months of every year off his sentence, but twenty-one months was some stretch for the music star he’d become. He regained his freedom in October 1963.

Meanwhile his recording career had been put on hold after a long run of success, from ‘Johnny B. Goode’, ‘Carol’ and ‘Almost Grown’ to ‘Back In The USA’, ‘Let It Rock’ and ‘Too Pooped To Pop’.

When it was known that Berry would be released, Chess issued ‘Come On’ and ‘Go, Go, Go’ in July, the latter featuring the further adventures of Johnny B. Goode, his guitar and his duck walking. ‘Nadine’, taken from his first session after his release, followed in February 1964. Then the sun came out: ‘No Particular Place To Go’, released in May rushed up to a number two rhythm and blues hit. Both songs, along with ‘You Never Can Tell’ and ‘Promised Land’, were written while he was incarcerated in Springfield Federal Medical Center.

‘No Particular Place To Go’ was a classic Berry song, immaculately rhymed and ironically hilarious: “Can you imagine the way I felt, I couldn’t unfasten her safety belt. Riding along in my calaboose, still tryin’ to get her belt a-loose . . .” ‘You Never Can Tell’ was almost sentimental by comparison

but still with incidental details of the ordinary life: "They furnished an apartment with a two-room Roebuck sale, The coolerator was crammed with TV dinners and ginger ale. They bought a souped-up jitney, 'twas a cherry-red '53..."

"Promised Land" follows the narrator across America and ends, "Los Angeles give me Norfolk, Virginia, Tidewater four ten 0 nine, tell the folks back home this is the promised land callin', And the poor boy's on the line". Prison couldn't stem the flow of the Berry brand.

The singles dried up in 1965 but two albums emerged, 'Chuck Berry In London' (although five tracks were cut in Chicago in December 1964) and 'Fresh Berries', the latter with assistance from Paul Butterfield and Mike Bloomfield. Berry's last session for Chess in April 1966 yielded a single, 'Ramona Say Yes' and 'Lonely School Days'.

There was some surprise amongst the faithful when it was announced that Chuck Berry had signed with Mercury. Surprise turned to dismay when Berry spent several days re-recording fourteen of his previous hits. Hidden amongst them was 'My Tambourine', a spineless run-through of what would become 'My Ding-A-Ling'.

He would remain contracted to Mercury for three years, recording intermittently during the period, including an album with Steve Miller's Blues Band in the summer of 1967. In his review of the Bear Family Berry box in B&R 295, Byron Foulger reckons Miller's harmonica playing was 'atrocious' - "He sounds like a chicken having its neck wrung". I've never heard the Mercury material but it was hard to find from day one and the record company must have regretted their investment.

Cue more surprise. Chuck Berry returned to Chess in November 1969 to cut 'Tulane' and his first version of 'My Ding-A-Ling'. For some reason there were no more singles until 1972.

In the meanwhile, Berry made albums, 'Back Home' cut in Chicago and 'San Francisco Dues' recorded in Okemos, Michigan (it says 'ere), on which Berry was featured as vocalist only apart from a couple of instrumentals. His next recording project was the live recording in February 1972 at the Lanchester Arts Festival in Coventry, at which the full eleven-minute nightmare of 'My Ding-A-Ling' was committed to tape. Mercifully, the single version was seven minutes shorter.

This and 'Reelin' And Rockin', formed part of 'The London Chuck Berry Sessions'. The balance of songs for the album were cut in London with Derek Griffiths, who was later to be my landlord, on guitar, along with Rick Grech, and Faces Ian McLagan and Kenny Jones.

The following month an hour-long 'Chuck Berry At The BBC' was filmed, for which he was accompanied by Rocking Horse, led by pianist and Stetson-wearer Mick Snow. It was repeated on BBC Four on 24th March this year. Berry was in great good humour and almost garrulous, accentuating the rhythmic aspects of his guitar playing with duck walks, splits, clutching his guitar in various positions or pumping it in time with the beat, including a solo during 'Mean Old World' with the guitar resting on his shoulder.

Sadly, ten minutes or so were wasted on audience participation for 'My Ding-A-Ling' before he closed out the show with a storming sequence of 'Bye Bye Johnny' and 'Johnny B. Goode'. A solo performance of 'South Of The Border' for which the band provided the final chord was released on a British Chess single.

The following March he began to record songs for the albums that would become 'Bio' and 'Chuck Berry'. 'Bio' itself was issued as a single, his last for Chess. Around this time GRT, who now owned Chess, shut down the Chicago office and studio and the remainder of Berry's recordings would be made in New York. For an end-of-May 1973 session he was backed by Elephant's Memory, a rock'n'roll band he'd encountered when he appeared on the Mike Douglas television show with John Lennon.

Over three days in August 1974, his final eponymous album was recorded with a clutch of New York session men, including veteran pianist Ernest Hayes. Two songs had been cut a year earlier and one of them was 'I'm Just A Name', a prophetic title given that Chuck Berry's career was in eclipse. He didn't record again until 1979, when he cut 'Rockit' for Atco. But it was also the year when he was sentenced to four months in jail and four years on probation for tax evasion.

And that wasn't the end of it. In 1990 he received a suspended sentence when police found a hoard of videotapes of women using the toilet in a restaurant he owned. A class action suit brought by 59 women cost him over a million dollars plus legal costs.

It took some shine off the Grammy he'd been awarded in 1985 for Lifetime Achievement. In the same year he was one of the first inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Then to celebrate his sixtieth birthday, director Taylor Hackford and Keith Richards filmed the documentary, 'Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll'. Hackford told *Rolling Stone*, "Chuck was more difficult than any movie star I've ever worked with. More complicated, more difficult, more diabolical". It turns out Universal gave Berry \$500,000 for the rights to his music. But he refused to take part in the first day of shooting unless the producer came up with more money, which was handed to him in a brown paper bag. Once the shoot was finished, Keith Richards said he was going to sleep for a month. It also inspired his classic put-down: "wouldn't warn to Chuck Berry if I was being cremated beside him".

When the film was released a local newspaper printed a piece with the headline, 'Hail! Hail! The Bankroll'. His rival Bo Diddley once said: "Chuck Berry is a businessman. I admire him for being a businessman. The name of the game is dollar bills".

But the more you heap criticism on him, the more you suspect he didn't give a damn. British promoters learned to hate him for demanding a Rolls



Chuck Berry in London early 1960s. From the B&R Archive.



Chuck Berry labels from around the world: Columbia (Australia); London (UK); Sun (Phillipines); Quality (Canada) and Mercury (USA). From the B&R Archive.

Royce instead of a Jaguar XK12 to transport him to gigs. For demanding more money backstage while the crowds were baying for his appearance.

I was seeing a girl who worked for one promoter of a Chuck Berry tour and within a week the office had given its employees 'Fuck Chuck' t-shirts. I begged and pleaded but never got my hands on one.

How to sum up? Musicians, not just bluesmen, compartmentalise their lives. What happens on the road isn't brought home. The wives who wait for them know what's happening while they're away but count on their return.

In 'Can't Be Satisfied', Robert Gordon's biography of Muddy Waters, he points out that his subject's voracious consumption of 'outside wives' was another aspect of the creative urge that imbued his music. That can't be said of Chuck Berry, who exhibited a cold, calculating attitude towards the business of music-making.

It was a mixture of arrogance and retribution, every sleight, real or imagined, had to be paid for and blackmail was the price of his talent. I like his music as much as the next man but I'm glad I never met him.

Charles Edward Anderson 'Chuck' Berry died on 18th March 2017, aged 90.