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’, the latter of which is quite simply the best song”. That doesn’t disqualify ‘Brown Eyed Handsome Man’ or ‘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”.

Berry claimed inspiration from a diverse set of musicians, among them Charlie Christian, Tampa Red and Nat KingCole, 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 trial 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’, relaid 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 gonna 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-heels 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’.

That 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 1957 oldsmobile. By the time they arrived morning was low so Skip, “as usual time you use it” robbed a bakery, coming away with a handful of bills. The next day Chuck and Skip robbed a barber shop, 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 Algoa Intermediate Reformatory for Young Men. He was released on 18th October 1947, his twenty-first birthday.

Then there was Janice Escalante, a teenager hustler that Berry picked up in El Paso, Texas. Apart from stimulating his libido, she 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 Grow’ 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 drum 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.

The ‘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 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 1957 oldsmobile. By the time they arrived morning was low so Skip, “as usual time you use it” robbed a bakery, coming away with a handful of bills. The next day Chuck and Skip robbed a barber shop, 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 Algoa Intermediate Reformatory for Young Men. He was released on 18th October 1947, his twenty-first birthday.

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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 jintey, ‘twas a cherry-red ‘53…”

“Promised Land” follows the narrator across America and ends, “Los Angeles give me Norfolk, Virginia, Tidewater four ten zero 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 ‘Lonesome 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 four of his previous hits. Hidden amongst them was ‘My Ding-A-Ling’, a spineless run-through of what would become ‘My Ding-A-Ling’.

He would remain contracted to Mercury for three years, recording intermittently including an album for 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 duet of ‘I’m Your Man’ with Royce 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 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.