

Rock 'n' roll great Chuck Berry dead at 90

By Hiram Lee
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Rock 'n' roll legend Chuck Berry died March 18 at the age of 90. It would be difficult to overstate his influence on American popular music in the second half of the 20th century. Perhaps more than any other artist in the genre, including Little Richard, Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, Berry defined the sound of rock 'n' roll. In addition to his pioneering work on the guitar, Berry's clever lyrics paved the way for many things to come. The immortal guitar intro to "Johnny B. Goode" (1957) can still be counted among the most exciting moments in rock 'n' roll.

Though he was already married and well in his twenties by the time his first great recordings were released, Berry's work became closely associated with teenage culture in postwar America, including their access to cars and the independence that provided. He wrote some of the first great teenage anthems with songs like "School Day" (1957) and "No Particular Place to Go" (1964).

Many of his songs contain an irresistible forward momentum. As a performer, Berry's own energy appeared to be endless. He would stomp his feet while he sang or hop across the stage on one leg while kicking his other leg out in front of him—a move that came to be known as the "duck walk." There seemed to be something burning up inside him.

But those writing about Chuck Berry now, who see only pure fun and youthful innocence in his work are missing something. To have a car is one thing, to have a car payment is another. Berry had both in mind. Among his best songs are those which give voice to the less enjoyable sides of life. There is, for example, the great opening verse in "Come On" (1961, later recorded by the Rolling Stones):

Everything is wrong since me and my baby parted/
All day long I'm walking cause I couldn't get my car started/
Laid off from my job and I can't afford to check it/
I wish somebody'd come along and run in

to it and wreck it

In "Too Much Monkey Business" (1956), he complains about everything from bad jobs to war:

Running to-and-fro, hard working at the mill/
Never fail, in the mail come a rotten bill

With anger never giving way to self-pity, the characters in Berry's best work keep moving forward with good humored optimism. With these songs, Berry managed to sing not just of his own life, but of many lives.

Berry's music also gave expression to—and may have helped along—changing relations between blacks and whites in the postwar period. While many commentators have pointed to Berry's supposed self-censoring when it came to more explicit references to race and racism in his lyrics, there was also a conscious decision on Berry's part to seek out a wider, more universal audience. Barriers were breaking down.

Berry, for his part, loved supposedly "black" jazz and R&B as well as "white" country music and bluegrass. He saw no reason to avoid playing one or another style for any particular audience. He happily combined these and other influences in his own work.

Singer and songwriter Brian Wilson, the leader of the Beach Boys in the 1960s, told *Rolling Stone* that Berry "taught me how to write rock 'n' roll melodies, the way the vocals should go. His lyrics were very, very good. They were unusually good lyrics. I liked 'Johnny B. Goode,' all about a young, little kid who played his guitar. He inspired me as a lyricist. He made me want to write about cars and surfing. I liked the lyrics to 'Roll Over Beethoven.' It felt like what he was doing was new."

Born October 18, 1926, Berry grew up in a middle-class family in a predominately African-American neighborhood called The Ville in then-segregated St. Louis, Missouri. His mother was a school principal and his father had his own

construction company.

As a teenager, Berry got into trouble for armed robbery and stealing cars, the first episodes in a series of legal troubles that plagued him throughout his life. Locked up in a reformatory until he turned 21, Berry demonstrated genuine musical ability while singing in a prison quartet.

Within a year of his release, he had married and taken a job in an auto factory. To make extra money, he began playing guitar in a trio led by the remarkable pianist Johnnie Johnson. He quickly made his mark as a performer, eventually attracting the attention of blues legend Muddy Waters. The latter encouraged him to get in touch with Phil and Leonard Chess, the Jewish immigrant brothers from Poland whose label Chess Records (in Chicago) was home to Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Rogers, Little Walter and other blues greats.

Berry's first big hit was "Maybellene" (1955). Listen to it and you will lose your breath. Hit after hit followed, for both Chess and Mercury Records. "Roll Over Beethoven" (1956), "You Can't Catch Me" (1956), "Rock and Roll Music" (1957), "Sweet Little Sixteen" (1958), "Johnny B. Goode" (1958), "Carol" (1958), "Back in the U.S.A." (1959) and "Memphis, Tennessee" (1959) are just a few of his essential works. No serious music collection is complete without a good anthology of these songs.

In 1960, Berry's life and career suffered a major setback. He was convicted under the Mann Act, which prohibited the transportation of women across state lines for "immoral purposes." The law was often used to drum up sex scandals in order to settle political scores. Along with Berry, its most famous victims included Charlie Chaplin and boxer Jack Johnson.

Berry spent more than a year in prison for his alleged involvement with a teenage employee he had hired in from another state to work at his nightclub, Berry's Club Bandstand, in St. Louis. Upon his release from prison, he scored more hits, but the damage had been done.

For much of his later career, Berry travelled alone, relying on a different group of unrehearsed local musicians in each town to serve as his backing band. His performances were uneven, often careless. It was perhaps more difficult to sing the old good humored songs with the same optimism. In the late 1970s, he

was sent to prison again, this time for tax evasion.

If one can judge by later interviews and documentaries like 1987's *Hail ! Hail! Rock ' n' Roll*, Chuck Berry could be bitter, difficult to work with and arrogant. Berry can often be heard *insisting* on his own greatness, even in those years when he was in decline. But Berry was indeed great. As tawdry details of this or that scandal come up again after his death, or rumors about fights with this or that musician begin to surface ... none of it erases the extraordinary contribution of his music.

Links to Berry's recordings:

Johnny B. Goode

School Day

Too Much Monkey Business

Maybellene

Roll Over Beethoven

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