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Chuck Berry

Continued from Page 1B

None of those songs addressed the reality of teenagers lives. Not until Berry — not until they heard him singing and playing with his slick and almost maniacal intensity. Berry had an uncanny ear and eye for the angst of American youth, black and white. He sang of V-8 Fords and Coupe de Villes, capricious loves, sweet sixteen, jukeboxes, rockin' in Boston and Pittsburgh P.A. and being almost grown. It was the truth.

Berry's stage show was a phenomenon separate from his brilliant recordings. On stage he personified rock music's infectious rhythms. This jumpy, pompadoured, brown-eyed-handsome black man in his baggy trousers was the consummate rocker. Whether doing the splits, bouncing across the stage on his heel while strumming up the frets of his cherry-finish Gibson Stereo guitar or doing the "duck walk," he was rarely motionless. Always the professional, Berry played the hits the audience called out for as if it was the first time.

He was touring almost constantly, "one hundred and one nights in one hundred and one days." From New York to Los Angeles and back again, Berry did the big package shows through 1959 while he kept writing hits.

The list is voluminous, after "Maybellene" came "Roll Over Beethoven," and then his "School days," "Sweet Little Sixteen," "Rock 'n' Roll Music," "Johnny B. Goode," "Oh Baby Doll," "Memphis" and "Reelin' and Rockin'." Thereafter are hits, lesser hits, seminal hits and personal favorites.

Sailor talkin' to me,
Tryin' to run me up a creek,
Go on, you can buy it,
You can try it,
You can pay me next week,
ahhh,
Too much monkey business,
For me to be involved with
you.

Too Much Monkey Business



*You know I'm doin'
all right in school,
You know I don't
break too many
rules,
I don't ever get in
dutch,
I don't browse
around too much.*

Almost Grown



Graphic courtesy of Zorro Studios

Berry's tunes are considered the prototypes of how to phrase rock lyrics. The phrases leap between the on and off-time and are resolved right on beat. Berry explains his lyrics by saying "It's mathematics. If it's eight beats to two bars, then you can sing eighteen syllables. It's always best to sing fifteen, so you can grab a breath now and then."

Berry fell out of favor in the early 60s, partly due to legal problems, partly due to changes in the music scene. American youth all but forgot the progenitor of rock music until British musicians came across the Atlantic singing Berry's tunes.

It was something of a shock to hear the Beatles and Rolling Stones playing "Round and Round," "Roll Over Beethoven" and "Little Queenie," redefining the music for the next generation.

It is said imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The British musicians were playing Berry's tunes with only minor changes from his original arrangements. Pete Townshend, in "Substitute," may have been thinking of Berry when he wrote "I look all white, but my dad was black."

Berry is a taciturn man who lives a reclusive life in Wentzville, Mo. He still tours and plays selective gigs with performers like Bo Diddley. It's almost odd that the man who did so much for breaking down the barriers of race, who all but singlehandedly defined the form known as rock 'n' roll, who has survived almost three tumultuous decades of music should live quietly in Berry Park. Perhaps it's not odd — perhaps it's apt.

Let me hear some of that rock 'n' roll music,
Any old way you choose it,
It's got a back beat you can't lose it,
Any old way you use it,
It's gotta be rock 'n' roll music,
If you wanna dance with me."

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