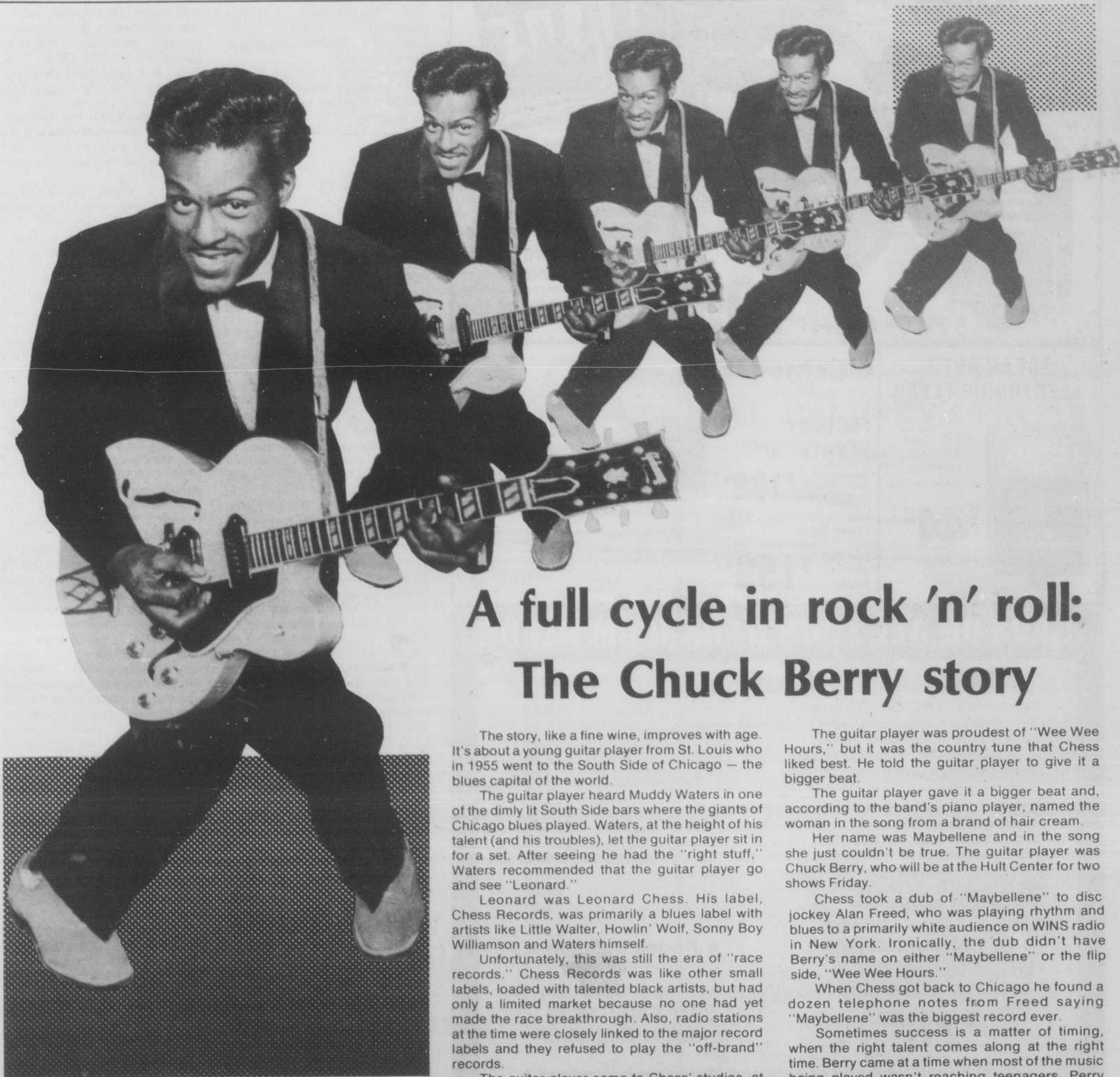


distractions

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Graphic Design by Mark Pynes

A full cycle in rock 'n' roll: The Chuck Berry story

The story, like a fine wine, improves with age. It's about a young guitar player from St. Louis who in 1955 went to the South Side of Chicago — the blues capital of the world.

The guitar player heard Muddy Waters in one of the dimly lit South Side bars where the giants of Chicago blues played. Waters, at the height of his talent (and his troubles), let the guitar player sit in for a set. After seeing he had the "right stuff," Waters recommended that the guitar player go and see "Leonard."

Leonard was Leonard Chess. His label, Chess Records, was primarily a blues label with artists like Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson and Waters himself.

Unfortunately, this was still the era of "race records." Chess Records was like other small labels, loaded with talented black artists, but had only a limited market because no one had yet made the race breakthrough. Also, radio stations at the time were closely linked to the major record labels and they refused to play the "off-brand" records.

The guitar player came to Chess' studios, at 2120 South Michigan Avenue, with a tape made on a borrowed tape recorder. Four songs were on the tape, including a reworked country tune the guitar player had given a boogie beat and a slow blues number named "Wee Wee Hours."

The guitar player was proudest of "Wee Wee Hours," but it was the country tune that Chess liked best. He told the guitar player to give it a bigger beat.

The guitar player gave it a bigger beat and, according to the band's piano player, named the woman in the song from a brand of hair cream.

Her name was Maybellene and in the song she just couldn't be true. The guitar player was Chuck Berry, who will be at the Hult Center for two shows Friday.

Chess took a dub of "Maybellene" to disc jockey Alan Freed, who was playing rhythm and blues to a primarily white audience on WINS radio in New York. Ironically, the dub didn't have Berry's name on either "Maybellene" or the flip side, "Wee Wee Hours."

When Chess got back to Chicago he found a dozen telephone notes from Freed saying "Maybellene" was the biggest record ever.

Sometimes success is a matter of timing, when the right talent comes along at the right time. Berry came at a time when most of the music being played wasn't reaching teenagers. Perry Como, Eddie Fisher, Teresa Brewer, Patti Page were singing songs like "Ko-Ko-Mo," "That's Amore" and "Doggie in the Window."

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From behind the lines to beyond the ordinary, Gary Scott photographs well. Page 4B.



What is the journalism school doing teaching funny business? Find out on Page 6B.



Plus: New books, including Vonnegut's most recent. Review on Page 3B.