

Chuck Berry: reelin', rockin', rollin' forever

He calls for the house lights to come up. The Silva Concert Hall is suddenly awash in a yellow glow. Alone in the middle of a churning mass of bobbing heads and waving arms, Chuck Berry — with his cherry-finish Gibson — plays. The constant noise of 2,500 people cheering peaks only a few decibels beneath the sound of Berry's flashing chords. The audience dances in their seats, in the aisles and on stage around him.

His head is bowed, his eyes closed, as he plays the guitar chords that are distinctly *Chuck Berry*. He stands in a center of a circle into which no one dances, a lone man and his guitar. His longish, brushed-back hair, with a touch of greyness sprinkled through its blackness, wags above his head. Glistening sweat streaks down the brown flesh hollows of his cheeks. Berry's expression changes with each chord progression, blurring from pain to gentleness. Yet, even in gentleness, when he thinly smiles and nods his head at "getting it jess' right," his face betrays the deep etching of pain.

And all around him a steady 4/4 time makes the crowd dance and shout delirious — as Berry plays on.

In the dressing room between shows, Berry reclines on a couch. He has one shining patent-leather loafer cocked on the edge of the coffee table. He seems relaxed and easy-going, but the man is guarded and calculating in his words.

The reporters are in a semi-circle before Berry. Two sit on the floor, another is off to the side. They are more than a little aware that Berry doesn't do many interviews and the occasional volatility of his personality. There was already a "misunderstanding" and scuffle with a photographer who had to give Berry his film. Still, the reporters are awed. They ask Berry personal questions like:

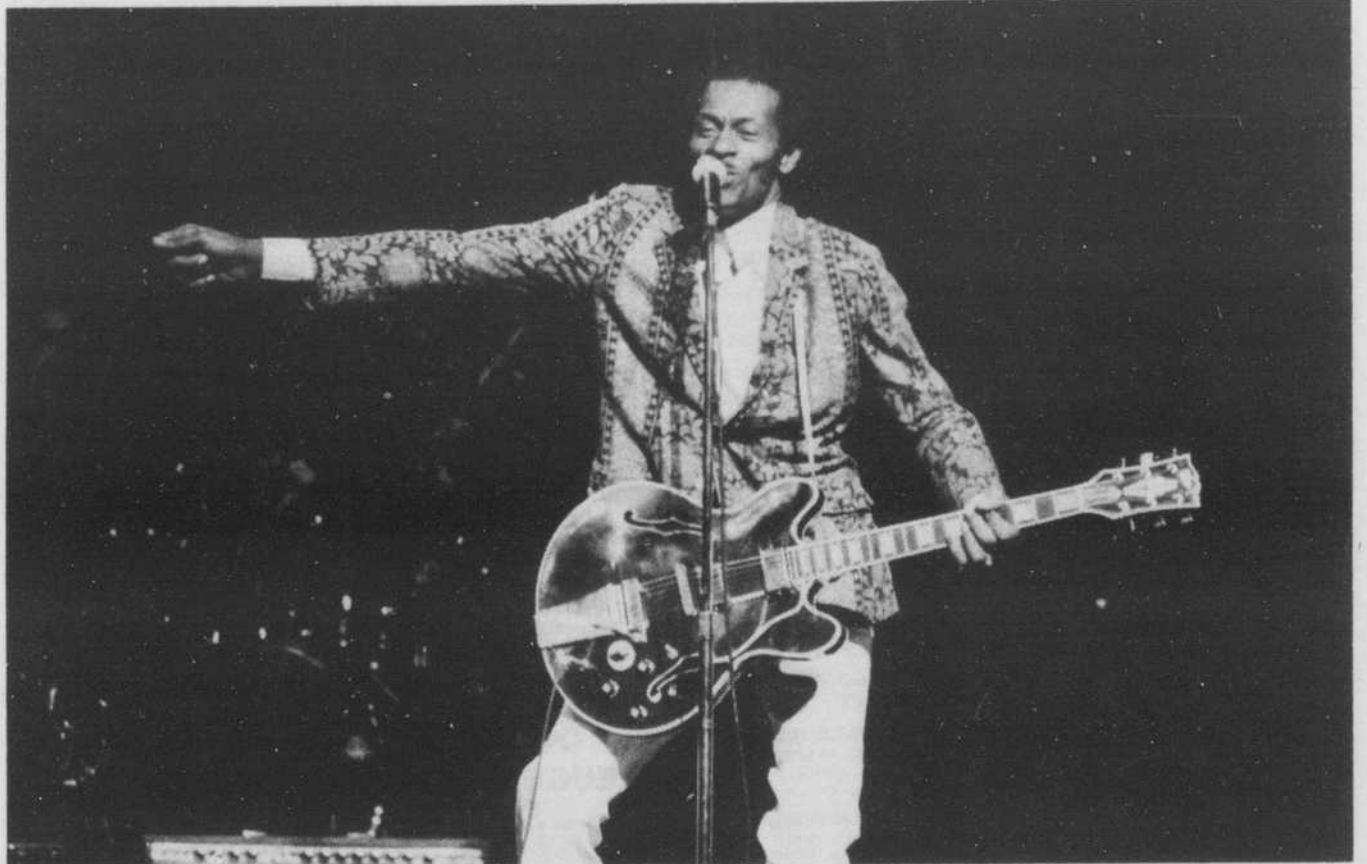
"Chuck, I've listened to your tunes all my life and ..."

"I remember the first time I ..."

"Chuck, I come from St. Louis also ..."

Berry's reminiscences ramble deftly through the past, the present. He spans decades as he chain smokes Salems.

Some recollections of his career possess a brittle veneer. He talks about his legal problems with the Internal Revenue Service, owing the government \$400,000 plus penalties, as if it was some amusing



misunderstanding.

"I told'em I had the money in my safe, Jim," he says with a laugh. "If you want it you gonna hav'tah come and git it."

But, between jags of his "home-boy" laugh is a bitter tinge.

"We didn't figure no computer would come out there (Berry's home in Wentzville, Mo.). Hey, we got rock roads. How could some computer come down rock roads?"

Berry toys with the reporters. One moment he's the jester, playing on their naivete and whiteness — the next he's regarding them shrewdly, reciting back to them their questions like they were posed by children.

"What did I find out about music that helped create rock'n'roll?" Berry repeats with an incredulous tone before clearing his throat and answering.

He talks about colleagues being exploited. Bo Diddley got "clipped" by his manager. Larry Williams missed out on Allen Freed's "American Hot Wax" shows because he wanted \$700 instead of the \$500 offered. He doesn't understand what happened to Little Richard.

Even though Berry was smart, he says he was exploited, too. Amazingly, Berry looks forward to 1983 because he'll finally be able to acquire sole rights to "Maybellene", "Roll Over Beethoven" and his other early songs.

The reporters lose their masks in his presence, he is an icon that still shines from their youth through the crawling of the years. Here is the man that orchestrated the soundtrack of their "teen-aged" rites of passage.

It is much the same with the audience for the two shows, they range in age from the 20s all the way to the 50s. There is an odd mix: some kind of overweight and conservative, young Neo-Wavers, families, some in cowboy hats and others appearing as if they'd just come from a cocktail party. All have come to see a living legend — "The man who taught the whole world how to play rock'n'roll guitar," as Jivin' Johnny Ethridge, the

announcer, says.

They enjoy the Whitetones and Johnny Limbo and the Lug Nuts — but it's Berry they paid money to see.

When Berry is introduced by Ethridge, they rise and give him a standing ovation. Out he strides, in yellow slacks and mottled-green suit coat. He jumps right into "Roll Over Beethoven" to the crowd's delight. The toll of age is only slightly evident. The crowd applauds Berry's every move. He struts and they clap. He wiggles his lanky body, they cheer. He plays a flawless "Maybellene" and when he crouches into the "duckwalk," they go wild.

The songs get mixed up. Berry laughs through skewed verses. The crowd doesn't care.

"Name 'nother one," he shouts to the front row. "Gimme the first verse."

Berry doesn't tour anymore. "I haven't toured since 1967," he says. He averages from six to eight selective gigs a month. According to Berry, it isn't for the money.

"I have enough money now to live comfortably until I'm 100," he says. "I don't have to be doing this, Jack."

Berry's all business, and it's disconcerting to the reverent reporters. He talks about his real estate in L.A., Canada and the 90-acre Berry Park in Wentzville. The reporters can't shake the image they've held so long of Berry the smooth "cat," the clowning rocker. It's disillusioning to see the man is not the same in life as he is on stage.

They ask him questions hoping he'll say something like "rock'n'roll is my life." He doesn't.

"My family used to go out and cut grass six days a week. This (performing) is how I go out and cut grass," Berry says.

The reporters rise to leave. Berry shifts something from his right hand to his left and offers a handshake. Throughout the entire interview he's held a Fender flatpick pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

Story by Cort Fernald
Photos by Mark Pynes



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