CHUCK BERRY

Chess Records' continuing search for a blues-based artist who could appeal to the rock & roll market yielded nothing less than the very *definition* of rock & roll: Chuck Berry. Berry's influence is so pervasive that simply playing rock & roll is paying him homage. While Elvis' magnetic presence embodied the stance and spirit of rock & roll, Chuck Berry, more than any other artist, defined rock's musical style and articulated the concerns and attitudes of its audience. "Roll Over Beethoven," "Johnny B. Goode," "Rock & Roll Music," "Sweet Little Sixteen," "School Days," "Back in the USA," "Memphis" and the other Chuck Berry classics helped establish rock & roll as a musical form in itself, no longer a hybrid of R&B and country styles, and formed the musical cornerstone—the musical alphabet—upon which rock & roll was built.

Performer and Poet

Chuck Berry established the guitar as *the* rock instrument: both the highlighted solo instrument and the rhythmic backbone of the music. He synthesized the diverse styles of his guitar heroes Muddy Waters, jazz guitarist Charlie Christian, electric blues pioneer T-Bone Walker, and Louis Jordan's guitarist, Carl Hogan, who Berry credits with inspiring his chiming song introductions. To these and other influences he added his rather peculiar fascination with "hillbilly" music and his interest in adapting for guitar the hard-driving solos of jump blues sax players and the pumping rhythms of boogie-woogie piano playing (an influence clearly heard in the rhythm guitar parts of songs like "Johnny B. Goode" or "Sweet Little Sixteen").

Berry was equally inventive as a songwriter and has deservedly been enshrined as the first great "rock poet." His songs display a great wit and insight, a great gift for storytelling and an eye for the tiniest details of teenage life. He was the first to celebrate the rock audience and rock & roll itself—the first to recognize adolescence as a world in itself, timeless and complete, with rock & roll as its rallying point and common language. His chants of "Hail! Hail! Rock & Roll, Deliver me from the days of old!" and "Roll Over Beethoven, and tell Tchaikovsky the news!" were good-natured but resounding battle cries for young fans eagerly defining their own private world and communal identity.

That a thirty-year-old black man proved to be the most articulate spokesman for young, largely white America is one of the great ironies of the rock era, though perhaps it was that very distance and perspective that enabled Berry to view his audience so clearly. Berry knew that the pop market of the 1950's wasn't ready to accept a black man speaking directly from his own experience, so he wrote for his audience and expressed *their* concerns instead: "Everything I wrote wasn't about me, but about the people listening to my songs. I didn't write "School Days" in a classroom—I wrote it in the Street Hotel, one of the big, black, low-priced hotels in St. Louis."[1]

As the Eternal Teenager, Berry was able to sidestep issues of age and color. He took care to keep the sensibilities of his mixed audience in mind, and developed a clearly enunciated singing style that was expressive yet free of overtly bluesy, "black" mannerisms. As a result, many early fans—and shocked southern concert promoters—had no idea that Berry was black. He sang his rapid-fire words with a delivery that combined the humor and showmanship of Louis Jordan with the emotional urgency of

Muddy Waters and the smooth clarity of his other hero, Nat "King" Cole: "Listening to my idol Nat Cole prompted me to sing sentimental songs with distinct diction. The songs of Muddy Waters impelled me to deliver the down-home blues in the language they came from, Negro dialect. When I played hillbilly songs, I stressed my diction so that it was harder and whiter. All in all it was my intention to hold both the black and the white clientele by voicing the different kinds of songs in their customary tongues."[ii]

Chuck Berry broke through color barriers and played and sold to a thoroughly integrated audience. He sang for Teenagers: a race defined by age, not color. Berry's songs have hardly aged at all in four decades. He remains the Eternal Teenager, and his songs remain the quintessential anthems to what it's like to be young in America, or at least what it *ought* to be like.

St. Louis to Chicago

Chuck Berry was born on October 18, 1926, and grew up in a lower middle-class neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri ("the best of the three colored sections of St. Louis"[iii]). His early years were relatively uneventful, that is until a misguided string of small burglaries with some friends landed Berry in Reform School for three years—the first of several run-ins with the law that have plagued his life and career. Upon his release, in 1947, Berry helped out with his father's carpentry business, landed a job in an auto assembly plant and studied to become a hairdresser. Fortunately, he continued playing the guitar as well, and began developing something of a reputation around St. Louis. On New Years Eve 1952/53 (the night Hank Williams died), Berry joined the successful Sir John's Trio led by pianist **Johnny Johnson**, beginning a long association between the two men. Berry was strongly influenced by Johnson—he adapted many of his piano boogie riffs and always considered the piano an integral ingredient in his songs (which is why many of them are pitched in "piano keys" such as C and Eb).[iv]

The Sir John's Trio became the house band at the popular Cosmopolitan Club in East St. Louis, and was soon renamed the Chuck Berry Combo as Berry's singing, playing and humorous stage act began to grab the spotlight. Blues numbers and Nat Cole ballads formed the core of the combo's material, but the joking "hillbilly" songs that Berry stuck into the act proved to be the real crowd pleasers: "Curiosity provoked me to lay a lot of the country stuff on our predominantly black audience and some of the clubgoers started whispering, 'who is that black hillbilly at the Cosmo?' After they laughed at me a few times, they began requesting the hillbilly stuff and enjoyed trying to dance to it. If you ever want to see something that is far out, watch a crowd of colored folk, half high, wholeheartedly doing a hoedown barefooted."[v]

Having achieved hometown hero status, Berry set his sights on a recording contract and set out for Chicago and an audition with Leonard Chess in May of 1955. Berry assumed that the blues numbers he'd written would be of greatest interest to Chess. (One of them, "Wee Wee Hours," was used as the B-side of his first single). Much to his surprise, however, it was one of the *hillbilly* numbers from his club act that caught Leonard Chess' ear. Based loosely on an old country song called "Ida Red," Berry's "Ida May" had been popular at the Cosmopolitan Club, but he never dreamed that the great blues label would be interested in a hillbilly novelty number! But Chess was looking for a way to move beyond the R&B market and felt that this "black hillbilly" just might be it. He was right: "Ida May," renamed "Maybellene," climbed to #5 on the Pop charts and #1

on the R&B charts in the summer of 1955. Chess Records had found its way into the mainstream with a curious reversal of the country-boy-plays-the-blues scenario that launched Elvis and his rockabilly followers. Coming from the opposite direction, the equation still added up to rock & roll.

"Maybellene"

"Maybellene" was recorded on May 21, 1955, with Berry and Johnny Johnson supported by Jerome Green (from Bo Diddley's band) on maracas, Chess veteran Jasper Thomas on drums and blues legend Willie Dixon on standup bass. (Berry: "Willie, stout as he was, was a sight to behold slapping his ax to the tempo of a country-western song he really seemed to have little confidence in."[vi]) There had certainly never been a recording quite like it at Chess before: the country bass line, boom-chick rhythms and the witty yarn-spinning vocals sound more like a C&W or Bill Haley recording than anything one would expect from Chess. Even the bluesy vocal slides ("oh Maybelle-e-ene") during the choruses wouldn't have seemed out of place on a Carl Perkins record.

On the other hand, Berry could not sound truly "country" any more than Elvis could pass for authentic blues, and it is the mixture of elements and Berry's playful stretch beyond his normal style that made the record sound so different and exciting. Johnson's piano playing, the heavy drums and maracas, and the lead style and distorted sound of Berry's guitar give "Maybellene" a hard R&B feel that balances the country elements. The "car horn" that opens the song is the first of many signature riffs that announce Chuck Berry songs, and the guitar solo in the middle is a first taste of his supremely economical and rhythmic lead playing. The first half of the solo is simply a single, repeated note played with a biting tone and propulsive rhythm, and even when the solo branches out it stays within a relatively narrow range and emphasizes repeated phrases that push against the beat. Berry builds tension and shapes the lead much as a riffing sax player in a jump blues number might, hammering a single note then shifting to a higher register and a pair of bluesy bends for a climax before straightening out to end the solo and make way for the vocals. Like his Chess compatriot Bo Diddley, Berry always concentrated on the *feel* of his guitar playing—the sound and rhythm were as important as the notes he played.

The lyrics of "Maybellene" introduce Berry's playfully descriptive writing style. ("As I was motorvatin' over the hill, I saw Maybellene in a Coupe de Ville...") He spins an impeccably detailed story of a car chase after a straying woman, though he seems a good deal more interested in the performance of the cars than in Maybellene herself—catching that Cadillac is the real objective. As in many of his songs, the narrative verses alternate with a repeating chorus based on a 12-bar blues progression. (In "Maybellene," the chorus—"Maybellene, why can't you be true?"— opens the song and serves as its catchy "hook.")

On the business side of things, "Maybellene" benefited from a form of "payola" that was widespread in the fifties. Although Berry wrote the song, the songwriting credits on the record read "Berry, Freed, Fratto," meaning that the songwriting royalties would be split between Berry and powerful music industry figures Alan Freed and Russ Fratto. It was clearly in everyone's interest to make the record a hit and, not surprisingly, Freed plugged the record on his radio shows, Fratto pulled some strings and, lo and behold, "Maybellene" *was* a hit. It all came as a surprise to Berry, who knew nothing of

the "deal" until he saw the record label himself, but he wasn't complaining—he had a hit! (This type of royalty sharing was common, and though it was certainly underhanded, it was at least a bit more dignified than the widespread practice of handing DJ's sacks of cash in exchange for playing a record.[vii])

The Brown-eyed Handsome Man

Two other songs recorded at Berry's first Chess session were further examples of his storytelling talent: "30 Days" is "Maybellene"'s musical twin, while "You Can't Catch Me" continues the car-chase theme, this time without a woman to complicate matters. At subsequent recording sessions, Berry moved away from the overt country tinges of "Maybellene" and crystallized his pure rock & roll style, though he didn't immediately target the teen audience alone. "Too Much Monkey Business" and "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man," recorded at the same session in 1956, are examples of the more "adult" and R&B oriented side of Berry's style.

"**Brown-Eyed Handsome Man**" opens with a distinctive guitar flourish that was later borrowed by Duane Eddy (on "Moovin' & Groovin'") and the Beach Boys (on "Surfin' USA"). The song employs Latin-tinged rhythms and guitar interludes to accompany Berry's ode to all the troubles women have gone through "ever since the world began" in search of a brown-eyed handsome man (including Venus De Milo, who "lost both her arms in a wrestling match" to win one). Given the racial climate of the fifties, "brown-eyed" was rather dangerously close to "brown-skinned," a coded implication not altogether lost on at least some segments of Berry's audience, though the humorous storylines, jumbled imagery and quick, comic asides defused the tension. (In a similar vein, the "little country boy named Johnny B. Goode" was originally the "little colored boy," until Berry decided not to push his pop listeners too far.)

The rapid-fire imagery and tongue-twisters of "**Too Much Monkey Business**" are one of Berry's most inspired sets of lyrics. The song is set to a 12-bar blues and a stop-start rhythm stripped down to a mere downbeat from the bass for the verses and punched up in the refrains by a surprisingly tough and bluesy guitar. The lyrics zoom through a catalog of everyday hassles—going to school and, with an older audience in mind, working in the mill and the filling station, fighting in the war and "fighting" with conniving women, shady salesmen and hostile pay phones. Each verse is a little tableau of "botherations" in the Real World, and each could easily have been an entire song. (The verses certainly contain more *words* than most entire songs. The flurry of syllables and images directly inspired the verbal assault of "Subterranean Homesick Blues," by the next generation's poet laureate, Bob Dylan.) Instead the hassles flash by, illuminated for a moment, and etched with dead-eye accuracy, but cut with a disarming humor and punctuated by wonderful, exasperated "aah"'s at the end of the verses.

"**Memphis**," from 1958, seems similarly aimed at an audience beyond teenagers. Berry recorded the song in his home studio, "on a $79 reel-to-reel Sears, Roebuck recorder that had provisions for sound-on-sound recording—I played the guitar and the [electric] bass track, and I added the ticky-tick drums that trot along in the background which sound so good to me."[viii] "Memphis" is a lovingly detailed story of a young love thwarted by his sweetheart's disapproving mother, or so it seems at first. Like a great short story writer, Berry sets the scene with vivid, concrete imagery: he pleads with the operator to get through to Marie, who called while he was out ("my uncle took the

message and he wrote it on the wall"); he describes where Marie lives ("on the South side, high up on the ridge—just a half a mile from the Mississippi bridge") and how much he's missed her since her mother "tore apart our happy home in Memphis, Tennessee." But the last verse contains a heart wrenching twist:

> The last time I saw Marie she was waving me good-bye,
> With hurry-home drops on her cheek that trickled from her eye,
> Marie is only six years old, information please,
> Try to put me through to her in Memphis, Tennessee.

Suddenly it's clear that the song is about a broken marriage and a father trying desperately to reach his daughter. Berry sings the song with an endearingly fragile voice, and embellishes the mood with one of his most tender guitar leads.

In "Memphis," as in most of his songs, Berry uses one specific character and setting to convey a universal truth, and does so with an elegance that any poet would admire. As Bruce Springsteen put it, "If you listen to one of his songs, it sounds like someone's coming in, sitting down in a chair and telling you a story about their aunt or their brother or describing some girl... it's descriptive, his eye for detail."[ix] Berry's songs were truly in a class by themselves in the 1950's, when most songs attempted little more than simplistic variations on "I love you, let me carry your lunchbox" or "come on baby, you *know* what I like!" The imagery and lyrical depth of "Memphis" is a tribute to the expressive powers of rock & roll in the hands of a great writer.

Roll Over, Beethoven!

"Brown-Eyed Handsome Man" and "Too Much Monkey Business" were big sellers in the R&B market but failed to make much of a dent in the pop chart, perhaps because the teen audience couldn't easily relate to them. They certainly *could* relate to another song from the same 1956 session: rock & roll's first anthem, "**Roll Over Beethoven**." In a playful swipe at the bad old, pre-rock days Berry invites the Maestro to "dig these rhythm & blues," and tell Tchaikovsky about it while he's at it. A lot of adults viewed the song as proof of their kids' poor taste and shocking lack of respect for "good music"—Beethoven surely *must* be rolling over in his grave!

But who cares what the adults think? They have nothing to do with "Roll Over Beethoven." "Roll Over Beethoven" celebrates the young new world of rock & roll and all the DJ's and jukeboxes that keep the music playing—the medium *is* the message—for all the dancers and sweethearts inflicted with the "rockin' pneumonia" cured only by a "shot of rhythm & blues." "Roll Over Beethoven" was rock's first great monument to itself and its audience, capturing all the magical excitement of a rock & roll dance and all the fun of being young. (All this from an almost middle-aged man? "I was thirty-one years old, but I could *remember*."[x])

Berry found his rock groove with "Roll Over Beethoven": a punched-up 12-bar blues, the song glides along in an upbeat dance tempo that is a little less frantic than the rockabilly rhythms of "Maybellene." The song is propelled by Berry's guitar, Willie Dixon's standup bass (which moves in and out of walking bass figures, giving the music an elastic feeling), and Fred Below's insistent drumming, which emphasizes a sparse snare drum backbeat. The chiming, double-string guitar intro to "Roll Over Beethoven" marks the first fully realized appearance of that most recognizable Berry trademark, and

the piercing, rhythmic guitar solo is classic Chuck Berry as well.[xi] To fill out the sound, Johnny Johnson provides a strange but effective piano embellishment, at times seeming lost in his own world, while a barely audible saxophone and trumpet provide a wash of sound behind the verses.

Berry learned a valuable economics lesson with "Roll Over Beethoven" as well. Although his songs always had a wide appeal, he now realized that teenagers would be his biggest market and he began tailoring his songs to their specific tastes and concerns. ("I write songs to sell. Everybody does, but most people won't tell you that. I will write whatever I think is going to sell to the most people."[xii]) Berry wrote for anyone who wanted to listen, but the Teenager with his hands on the wheel, his eyes on his girl and his record money in his pocket was never far from Berry's songwriting mind after "Roll Over Beethoven." Cars, girls, driving, drive-ins, dancing, rock & roll and all the other Facts of Life (including, unfortunately, school and parents) are described, celebrated or bemoaned in his teenage mini-dramas. Berry's songs were a mirror that reflected Young America's interests, concerns and idealized images of itself. For his legions of listeners on both sides of the Atlantic, they created a mythic landscape of an America full of fun, freedom, fast cars and wide-open spaces.

The Eternal Teenager

"**Sweet Little Sixteen**" is Chuck Berry's love letter to Everyfan, and was inspired by a frantic, real-life fan who was so anxious to get her prized autographs that she missed an entire show in the process. In "Sweet Little Sixteen," Berry looks on with a bemused compassion and captures the excitement and even the language of the breathless, starry-eyed fan: he describes her collection of famed autographs ("about half a million") and takes us into her home as she pleads for permission to go to the show ("Oh Daddy, Daddy, I beg of you—whisper to Mommy it's alright with you"). The last verse describes her "growin' up blues": as long as she's at the show, decked out in "tight dresses and lipstick," she's somebody special—almost an adult! For a few magic moments she can live her dreams, and she's determined to make the most of it, for tomorrow morning she'll just be "sweet sixteen, back in class again..."

In the choruses, Berry moves from the specific to the universal and makes his little heroine a symbol for *all* the young, excited fans. He takes us on a whirlwind of tour stops—Boston, Pittsburgh, Texas, San Francisco, St. Louis, New Orleans—where everybody's rockin' and "all the cats wanna dance with sweet little sixteen," and gives radio listeners around the country a chance to cheer as their city flies by (and a good reason to go out and buy the record; on top of that, the resourceful Berry virtually assured an *American Bandstand* booking by writing in a plug for the show). The stop-start rhythm in the verses, the swinging cymbals, Berry's boogie-rhythm guitar and some insanely exuberant piano playing all help to make "Sweet Little Sixteen" one of Berry's most irresistible songs.[xiii]

"**School Day**" opens with a guitar/alarm clock and takes us, step by step, through the Dark Side of teenage life: school, where boring classes, annoying classmates, crowded lunchrooms and mean teachers make the day drag on forever. The full band stops in between verses were an inspired bit of text painting: "Recording the song with breaks in the rhythm was intended to emphasize the jumps and changes I found in classes in high school compared to the one room and one teacher I had in elementary school."[xiv]

Mercifully, and with brilliant economy, Berry dispenses with the school day itself in two verses, then takes us "down the hall and into the street" and right to the *real* center of teenage life: the jukebox. Free at last! In Teenage America, as defined by Chuck Berry, one puts up with teachers and parents and a world that can't remember what it's like to be young for those glorious moments when the music's playing and you're dancing with your sweetheart and all the distractions and "botherations" seem like distant memories. As the song so eloquently puts it, "Hail! Hail! Rock & Roll, Deliver me from the days of old!"

Berry provides his own call-and-response throughout "School Days," with guitar lines that answer each sung phrase, echoing the melodic contour and syllabic rhythms of the lyrics. The interplay illustrates Berry's desire to imbue his guitar playing with the expressive immediacy of the human voice. In the final verse, the band accompaniment and guitar response are stripped down to a stark, pounding drum and single guitar note for the climactic chant of "rock, rock, rock & roll," as if in tribute to Rock's defiant simplicity and liberating beat.

That liberating beat—so strong you can't lose it—is praised again in "Rock and Roll Music," where the contrast between the Latin flavor of the verses and the straight rock of the chorus underscores the message. "Reelin' & Rockin'" and "Around and Around" are a return to the dancehall, while the delightfully rough and lively "Carol" hits on all of Berry's major themes—cars, dancing, lost and found love—and makes extensive use of Berry's chiming guitar interludes and guitar/voice dialogues. The equally infectious "Little Queenie" ("she's too cute to be a minute over seventeen") features sly spoken interludes where Berry mulls over his approach to the girl, while "Back in the USA" broadens its scope and pays tribute to the land of skyscrapers, freeways and hamburgers.

The key to Berry's music is it's simplicity, in the best sense of the word, and on the surface the musical and lyrical elements of Berry's music do not seem to vary greatly from one song to the next. The consistency and sustained vision of Berry's songwriting is indeed remarkable, but the variety he creates within his rather strict, self-defined limits is equally remarkable. The Sweet Little Sixteens of "Oh Baby Doll," "Sweet Little Rock & Roller" and "Little Queenie," the runaway women of "Maybellene," "Carol" and "Nadine," the school halls of "School Days" and "Almost Grown, " and the dancehalls of "Roll Over Beethoven" and "Around and Around" and his other characters and settings are distinct but ultimately interchangeable parts, both new and familiar. Likewise, Berry's band arrangements and guitar intros, leads and rhythm patterns are similar but never quite the same. As with the blues, the overall effect is that of variations on a theme: a knowledge of the theme enriches your understanding of the variations, but each variation stands on its own as well.

“Johnny B. Goode”

One song stands out as Chuck Berry's masterpiece: "**Johnny B. Goode**," recorded in February of 1958. All of the elements of Berry's sound are fully realized in "Johnny B. Goode," beginning with the chiming guitar intro that opens the song and the addition of a second guitar that toughens the overall sound ("Roll Over Beethoven," by comparison, has only one guitar and sounds relatively empty). A relentless dance groove drives the song, embellished by the lead guitar and rollicking piano. The song combines a repetitive 12-bar blues with a melodic pop song form of alternating verses and repeated refrains.

The guitar solo before the final verse is announced by a return of the opening guitar intro and is a mini-catalog of Berry's rhythmic lead riffs; the intro returns again in the middle of the lead break, shaping both the solo and the song and giving the band a chance to make another dramatic full stop and re-acceleration back up to tempo.

"Johnny B. Goode" finds Berry in typically articulate form: in one concise verse, like a camera zooming from a wide-angle shot to a close-up, Berry presents all of the essentials about Johnny—that he lives "deep down in Louisiana" and is a poor country boy who can't read and write too well but he can "play his guitar just like ringing a bell." The second verse finds Johnny down by the tracks, playing his guitar to the rhythm of the passing trains heading for the Big World out there, while in the final verse his mother promises that someday *he'll* be out there too, a big star with his "name in lights." (In Chuck Berry's world all things are possible—even a mother encouraging her son to play guitar!) By the end of the song, there's little doubt that he will make it—his success was confirmed in the 1960 sequel, "Bye Bye Johnny"—and the refrains celebrate his impending glory as Berry exhorts Johnny to "Go!" and gives his answer with his guitar.

"Johnny B. Goode" is the quintessential rock & roll "rags to riches" story, and though it is obviously not autobiographical, there are certainly elements of Berry's own life in the saga of rock's first mythic guitar hero. On a deeper level, the song and its setting in Louisiana ("close to New Orleans") was partly inspired by a tour stop in that city and "the thrill of seeing my black name posted all over town in one of the cities they brought slaves through..."[xv] Remembering that the song was originally written about a "little colored boy," it does indeed represent a sweet triumph for a man who lived to see his "name in lights" over places he couldn't even have entered in other circumstances. "I imagine most black people naturally realize but I feel safe in stating that *no* white person can conceive the feeling of obtaining Caucasian respect in the wake of a world of dark denial. 'Johnny B. Goode' was... brought out of a modern dark age."[xvi]

Into the Sixties: No Particular Place to Go

Chuck Berry's name was always in lights through the end of the fifties. Chess Records released a steady string of singles and albums and Berry made numerous television and movie appearances, most notably in 1959's *Go, Johnny, Go*, in which he had a substantial acting as well as performing part. Berry was also in great demand on the tour circuit, headlining on the big "package tours" that crisscrossed the country and on Alan Freed's famous Paramount Theater shows in Brooklyn. At his first Paramount show, Berry spontaneously broke into a comic crouched walk that he had used to entertain his family when he was young. The crowd went nuts, and the "duckwalk" became his most famous visual hook.

Berry *almost* made it unscathed out of the decade that had already claimed the life of Buddy Holly and the careers of Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. On December 21, 1959, however, he was arrested and charged with violation of the Mann Act: "the transportation of a minor across state lines for immoral purposes", also called the White Slave Act. After a December 1st show in Texas, Berry had visited Juarez, Mexico, where he became friendly with a young Apache girl named Janice. (Berry was happily married, but he never denied his incurable attraction to all women.) Berry offered her a job as a hat check girl at his newly purchased St. Louis nightspot, Club Bandstand, and she readily accepted, even though she was, as it turned out, all of 14.

What happened next remains a bit unclear, but Janice apparently left the club while Berry was on tour and returned to her former livelihood of prostitution. She was arrested, and in short order implicated Berry.

The press had a field day with the story of the "poor unfortunate" lured into a life of sin by the degenerate, *black* rock & roller. The general public needed little convincing: as the last of the untamed original rockers, Berry was a prime target in a pop world already rocking from the highly-publicized Payola scandals and several concert riots and other proof that rock & roll was destroying the moral fabric of America's youth. He was doomed. After a first trial so blatantly racist that it had to be thrown out (the judge continually referred to Berry as "this Negro"), he was finally sentenced to three years in prison. Although he didn't actually start serving his sentence until February of 1962, the intervening two years were taken up with trials, appeals and delays, and his record sales and concert bookings all but disappeared.

Berry ended up serving about two years in prison. By the time he was released, things had changed considerably . In fact, his songs were more popular than ever and *everybody* wanted to hear "Roll Over Beethoven." The catch was, they wanted to hear George Harrison sing it (and probably thought he wrote it). At the height of the British Invasion it seemed that this most American of songwriters could have been Knighted: all of the British bands were playing his songs, singing his praise and bringing Berry's music back to its homeland. Chuck Berry's songs formed the center ground between the blues-based bands led by the Rolling Stones and the power pop of the Beatles and their followers. Both camps covered his songs convincingly and were able to use his style to inform their own, whether they viewed him as the consummate tunesmith with a big beat or the guitar hero from Chicago's blues Mecca.

Meanwhile, in America, the jail term was quickly forgotten and Berry was enshrined as rock's official Elder Statesman.[xvii] He resumed his recording career and found himself in great demand for live shows, though now as an "oldies act." "Promised Land," "Nadine" and "No Particular Place to Go" (a carbon copy of "School Days") were highlights of Berry's comeback recordings, but the title of the latter pretty well summed up his musical predicament in the 1960's. In a time of constant change and innovation, Berry remained true to the pristine rock & roll that he'd invented—that a new generation was now building on and leaving behind.

Berry left Chess in 1966, then returned in 1970 and released an album entitled *Back Home*, one of the high points of his later career, followed by 1973's *Bio* and 1979's *Rock It*. The "Rock Revival" shows of the late sixties and early seventies brought Berry back as a returning hero for nostalgic hippies who had grown up with his music. Ironically, Berry scored the only #1 hit of his career in 1972 with "My Ding-A-Ling," a stupid, smutty live singalong that dismayed his old fans but thrilled a new generation of teens and subteens. He hit the charts for the final time the same year with a raunchy re-recording of his 1958 hit "Reelin' & Rockin'," then disappeared back into the oldies circuit, where he always played with local pick-up bands hired for the occasion, secure in his knowledge that *any* band anywhere will know how to play "Johnny B. Goode."

Although the hits dried up, Berry's talent for legal problems never deserted him. In 1979, a mix-up with the Internal Revenue Service sent him back to prison, this time for tax evasion. His three-year sentence was reduced to 120 days in jail and four years of probation, plus the bizarre additional requirement of 1,000 hours of community service

and benefit concerts. Since then he has managed to get into trouble with alarming and depressing regularity. Berry plays on, though, his place in history secure. 1986 saw his induction into the Rock Hall of Fame and a gala 60th birthday concert at the Fox Theater in St. Louis (which, Berry recalled with sweet irony, was off-limits to blacks when he was young). The concert was filmed and included in the 1987 movie *Hail! Hail! Rock & Roll*, and features an all-star cast of supporting musicians—including Eric Clapton and concert organizer Keith Richards—who are all obviously delighted to pay tribute to the original guitar hero.

Chuck Berry's music is now heading ever deeper into outer space aboard the Voyager I spacecraft on a digitally encoded copper disc of "Music from the Planet Earth." "Johnny B. Goode" was chosen as rock's representative in the musical greeting card to whoever might be Out There. In the meantime, his music lives on here in this world, and lives on in spirit every time anyone picks up a guitar and plays rock & roll.

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[i]Arnold Shaw, "The Rockin' '50's," (New York: Hawthorne, 1974), p. 146.
[ii]Chuck Berry, "Chuck Berry: The Autobiography," (New York: Harmony, 1987) p. 90.
[iii] ibid., pg. xxii.
[iv]Johnson alternated with Lafayette Leake as pianist on Berry's classic rockers; Bo Diddley, uncredited, contributed rhythm guitar to several Berry recordings.
[v]Berry., p. 89.
[vi]ibid., p. 103.
[vii]Berry finally won full rights to "Maybellene" in 1986.
[viii]Berry, p. 161.
[ix]Springsteen quote from *Hail, Hail Rock and Roll*.
[x]Bill Flanagan, "Written In My Soul," (Chicago: Contemporary, 1986), p. 82.
[xi]For an example of Berry's "stylistic continuity," notice the striking similarities between the "Too Much Monkey Business" and the "Roll Over Beethoven" guitar solos.
[xii]Flanagan, p. 80.
[xiii]"Sweet Little Sixteen" was also, several years later, the direct model for the Beach Boys' "Surfin' USA"—only the most obvious illustration of the musical & lyrical debt that the Beach Boys and surf rock owed to Chuck Berry.
[xiv]Berry, p. 152.
[xv]ibid., p. 127.
[xvi]ibid., p. 158.
[xvii]1965's *T.A.M.I. Show* concert film features a symbolic passing of the torch as Berry trades licks with Beatle substitutes Gerry & the Pacemakers.