

# Chuck Berry

**Also known as:** Charles Edward Anderson Berry

**Born:** October 18, 1926 in St. Louis, Missouri, United States

**Occupation:** musician

## BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The invention of **rock** & roll was a collaborative effort, yet many music buffs trace its beginnings back to a singer, songwriter, and guitarist named Chuck Berry. Taking what he knew from the blues, big band, swing, country, and pop, Berry developed a style and sound that uniquely spoke to the experience of the American teenager, and that appealed to white as well as black audiences. And he remains, arguably, **rock** & roll's most influential figure. Among those who admit to having emulated his complex guitar riffs and quick, witty lyrics in their early days are some of the most prominent bands and artists of the past 50 years--including the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen.

Berry has spent a lifetime in the spotlight, but the spotlight has not always been kind to him. Various lawsuits have been filed against the mischievous **rock** star, and he has served three prison terms. Despite these setbacks, he has held on to his image as one of **rock's** esteemed founding fathers. Berry was still rocking and still making the news in 2000, at age 74, when he received a Kennedy Center Honor at the White House for his lifelong achievement as a performing artist.

Charles Edward Anderson Berry was born on October 18, 1926, in St. Louis, Missouri (some sources--Berry himself is not among them--claim that he was born on January 15, 1926, in San Jose, California, where his parents lived before relocating to Missouri). It was in the Ville, one of the few neighborhoods in St. Louis where African Americans could own property, that Berry spent his formative years, honing his musical skills as a choir boy in his Baptist church, and as a bass singer in his high school glee club. At the urging of a music teacher, he bought a four-string tenor guitar (graduating later to a six-string guitar) and taught himself how to play. His introduction to music was an early one, as was his introduction to trouble and running with the law. At age 17, he and two friends were arrested for attempted robbery; Berry was sentenced to ten years in the Intermediate Reformatory for Young Men in Algoa, Missouri. In the reformatory Berry sang with a gospel group; he was released in 1947, on his twenty-first birthday.

Marriage and an upright life immediately followed his reformatory stint: Berry married Themetta "Toddy" Suggs in 1948 and took a job in an auto assembly plant. After completing night courses in cosmetology, he worked as a hairdresser, moonlighting as a guitarist for various bands to bring in extra money.

Berry soon gained a reputation in the St. Louis music scene, and in 1952 he formed the Sir John Trio with pianist and band leader Johnnie Johnson and drummer Eddie Hardy. The connection with Johnson would be a lasting one, and the influence of the pianist's boogie style would become evident in Berry's guitar playing. Berry had a knack for pleasing the crowd, and the band eventually changed its name to The Chuck Berry Trio. The band's repertoire included the blues, ballads, and a number of "black hillbilly" songs that jokingly parodied the country music popular to the city's white audiences. While the trio's hillbilly songs initially provoked laughter, they became popular dance tunes among the predominantly black club-goers.

During a visit to Chicago in 1955 Berry befriended his idol, the blues singer Muddy Waters. Taken with Berry's talent, Waters introduced him to Leonard Chess, then the president of Chess Records, an established rhythm & blues label that was looking to expand into other music genres. In his audition, Berry managed to impress Chess not as much with his blues songs as with a black hillbilly tune called "Ida Red." After reworking the song and giving it a new name, Berry recorded "Maybellene" in Chess's studios on May 21, 1955, with Johnson on piano, Jerome Green on maracas, Jasper Thomas on drums, and Willie Dixon on bass. Following its release on August 20, "Maybellene" hit Number 1 on Billboard's R&B chart and Number 5 on Billboard's pop chart, becoming one of the rare singles to reach hit status among both black and white audiences.

Key to the success of "Maybellene" was a promotional effort from Alan Freed, the disc jockey of WINS radio station in New York, then the most important station for **rock** & roll in the country. Chess had given Freed the single, and in exchange for airplay, the record executive granted the deejay 25 percent of the writing credit for the song. Berry wasn't aware of the bargain until the song was released and published, and he was unable to resolve the issue until 1986. Meanwhile, "Maybellene" sold more than a million copies.

From 1955 through 1960 Berry turned out a string of hit singles, all on the Chess label. In 1956 he climbed the charts with "Too Much Monkey Business," "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man," and especially "Roll Over Beethoven," a youthful anthem celebrating the triumph of low culture over high culture. Another trio of hits came in the following year, with "School Days," "Oh Baby Doll," and "**Rock** 'n' Roll Music," which the Beatles later covered. "Johnny B. Goode," "Reelin' and Rockin,'" and "Sweet Little Sixteen" were among Berry's successes of 1958, and five years later the Beach Boys came out with a thinly veiled replica of "Sweet Little Sixteen" called "Surfin' U.S.A." Recognizing that the Beach Boys had lifted his melody, Berry sued the band and won a songwriting credit.

As a performer, Berry enraptured audiences with his trademark guitar licks and his bent-kneed, rhythmic "duck walk," which he is said to have created during a performance one night to hide the wrinkles in his pants. He toured often, and like many other **rock** stars of his day he appeared in several motion pictures, including *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956), *Mr. Rock 'n' Roll* (1957), and *Go Johnny Go* (1959).

After a few years of newfound, whirlwind success, Berry began enjoying the wealth that had come to him. He bought land--upon which he would later build--in Wentzville, Missouri, purchased

a mansion for his family in St. Louis, and opened his own St. Louis nightclub, Berry's Club Bandstand.

The nightclub was to become the scene of a scandal for Berry that nearly ruined his career. After he fired a hat-check girl, Janice Escalanti, in 1959, Escalanti went to the police claiming that Berry had taken her across state lines for immoral purposes. Berry had met Escalanti, a 14-year-old from Arizona, during a visit to Juarez, Mexico, and had invited her to work for him at Club Bandstand. In a trial against Berry, testimony revealed that Escalanti was a prostitute when Berry had met her, and the star was found guilty of violating the Mann Act, a federal statute that forbade transporting minors across state lines for the purposes of prostitution. In October of 1961, after appealing his original sentence of ten years, Berry was sentenced to three years in prison and fined \$10,000. After serving 20 months, he was released on his birthday in 1963.

The ordeal devastated Berry. He had fallen out with his family, and was left with a strong distrust for the legal system as well as for the media that had hounded him. Once jovial and relaxed, he was now bitter and mistrustful. Yet in the end the scandal ruined neither his family life nor his career. Soon after his release from the Federal Medical Center in Springfield, Missouri, he began touring and recording again. While in prison, he had written a spate of new songs, some of which became hits in 1964 and 1965. Among these were "Nadine," "No Particular Place to Go," and "You Never Can Tell."

Berry toured Great Britain--where he had influenced so-called British Invasion bands like the Rolling Stones and the Beatles--for the first time in 1964. Also in that year, he opened Berry Park, an amusement park near Wentzville, and with guitar legend Bo Diddley he recorded the album *Two Great Guitars*.

In 1966 Berry signed with Mercury Records, but his stay with this company was to be brief. After making a few mistakes with Mercury--releasing a greatest-hits album consisting merely of re-recordings of old songs, and attempting to reinvent himself as a more contemporary performer with the albums *Live at the Fillmore Auditorium* (1967) and *Concerto in B. Goode* (1969)--Berry returned to Chess Records in 1969.

Back at Chess, Berry released the appropriately titled *Back Home Again* (1970) as well as *San Francisco Dues* (1970), which both made the national charts. The biggest hit of his career would come in 1972, with the risqué single "My Ding-A-Ling." Originally recorded by Mercury in 1968 as "My Tambourine," "My Ding-A-Ling" was a song that Berry had long been playing in adult nightclubs and that had thrilled his audiences in Great Britain. The single sold more than a million copies and reached the top of the U.S. pop charts on October 21, 1972.

Although Berry continued to record new albums throughout the '70s, including the popular *Rock It*, the musician found himself becoming increasingly contained to the **rock** & roll revival circuit. Capitalizing on this, he toured with Chubby Checker, Bill Haley and the Comets, and Bo Diddley as part of Richard Nader's 1973 **Rock** and Roll Festival. Footage from the festival, as well as from 1950s television, comprised *Let the Good Times Roll*, a well-received 1973 motion picture. Another film appearance came in 1978 with the fictional *American Hot Wax*, in which Berry and legendary deejay Alan Freed played themselves.

Legal troubles were once again in store for Berry in 1979, when he served four months in prison for income tax evasion. Ironically, just before going to prison, Berry performed at the White House at the request of President Jimmy Carter.

In the 1980s Berry's career was slowing down, and the music industry bestowed its honors upon the living legend. On February 26, 1985, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 27th Annual Grammy Awards, and the following year he was inducted into the **Rock** and Roll Hall of Fame at its first ceremonial dinner. In 1987 he published *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography*, a mixture of life stories and personal philosophies. The documentary film *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll* (1987) celebrated Berry's life and music, but its candid approach revealed a performer who was often controlling and volatile behind the scenes.

Publicity of a more blatantly negative kind came for Berry in 1990, when some 60 women sued him for allegedly videotaping them in the bathroom of his Berry Park restaurant, The Southern Air. Berry denied the antics, but paid a settlement of more than \$1 million. That same year, police raided Berry's Missouri home, nabbing marijuana and homemade pornographic videos. Berry's bad-boy reputation might have harmed him gravely had he pursued another kind of celebrity, but as a **rock** & roll star, he's generally pardoned for his mischief. Just over two years after the Southern Air incident, he performed at President Bill Clinton's inaugural celebration, and in 2000 he returned to the White House to receive a Kennedy Center Honor. In perhaps his most extravagant tribute, Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" was the only **rock** song included in the *Sounds of Earth* gold record--an auditory time capsule telling the story of Earth--stowed aboard the spacecraft Voyagers I and II in their journey beyond the solar system. If other intelligent beings exist in the universe, their introduction to **rock** & roll might come, appropriately, from the father of **rock** himself.

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born Charles Edward Anderson Berry, October 18, 1926, in St. Louis, MO; son of Henry (carpenter and church deacon) and Martha (schoolteacher); married Themetta ("Toddy") Suggs in 1948; four children. **Addresses:** Agent--Richard De La Font Agency, 4845 South Sheridan Road, Suite 505, Tulsa, OK.

## AWARDS

Lifetime Achievement Award at 27th Annual Grammy Awards, 1985; Blues Hall of Fame, 1985; **Rock** and Roll Hall of Fame, 1986; Kennedy Center Honors, 2000.

## CAREER

Led a blues trio in St. Louis in early 1950s; signed by Chess Records, 1955; hit Billboard's Top Ten and topped R&B chart with "Maybellene," 1955; released first LP, *After School Session*, 1957; topped R&B chart and reached #2 in Billboard's pop chart with "Sweet Little Sixteen," 1958; hit top of the charts with "My Ding-a-Ling," 1972.

## WORKS

- **Selected discography**
- *After School Session*, Chess, 1957.
- *One Dozen Berrys*, Chess, 1958.
- *Chuck Berry Is On Top*, Chess, 1959; remastered and reissued, 1987.
- *Chuck Berry's Greatest Hits*, Chess, 1964.
- *The London Chuck Berry Sessions*, Chess, 1972.
- *Bio*, Chess, 1973.
- *Rock It*, Atco, 1979.
- *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll*(motion picture soundtrack), 1987.
- *The Chess Box*, Chess, 1989.
- *Missing Berries: Rarities, Volume 3*, Chess, 1990.

## FURTHER READINGS

### Periodicals

- *New York Times*, August 23, 2000, p. E3.
- *Rolling Stone*, December 3, 1987, p. 71.
- *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, November 15, 1998, p. D1; January 4, 1996, p.7.
- *Time*, October 19, 1987, p. 84.

### Online

- "Chuck Berry," <http://www.history-of-rock.com/berry.htm> (January 16, 2001).
- "Chuck Berry Biography," [http://sonicnet.com/artists/ai\\_bio.jhtml?ai\\_id2757](http://sonicnet.com/artists/ai_bio.jhtml?ai_id2757) (January 16, 2001).
- "The Kennedy Center Honors: Chuck Berry," <http://kennedy-center.org/honors/history/honoree/berry.htm> (January 16, 2001).
- "**Rock** and Roll Hall of Fame Inductees: Chuck Berry," <http://www.rockhall.com/hof/inductee.asp?id=67> (January 16, 2001).

## Recent Updates

**April 13, 2004:** Berry's album, *St. Louis to Liverpool*, was re-issued. **Source:** *Billboard*, [www.billboard.com/bb/releases/week\\_3/index.jsp](http://www.billboard.com/bb/releases/week_3/index.jsp), April 16, 2004.

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