

## **Berry's "Maybellene" Popularizes Rock And Roll, 1955**

*Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" unexpectedly rocketed to the top of the music charts and set the stage for the **rock**-and-roll era*

### **Principal Personages**

Chuck Berry, a singer, songwriter, and guitarist who created a series of influential songs that defined early **rock** and roll and influenced generations of popular musicians Leonard Chess, a Chicago-based independent record producer who recorded many rhythm-and-blues acts and early **rock**-and-roll stars Alan Freed, a pioneer **rock**-and-roll radio disc jockey who championed the music of black artists Bill Haley, a singer, guitarist, and bandleader who fashioned a number of early hit **rock**-and-roll songs.

### **Summary of Event**

"Maybellene" was Chuck Berry's first hit and arguably, despite Elvis Presley's considerable fame, the most important initial reference point in the history of **rock** and roll. Berry melded rhythm and blues and country-western music with his special brand of guitar playing to fashion witty, defiant songs that have influenced virtually every **rock** musician. In his best work--including "Sweet Little Sixteen," "Carol," "Brown Eyed Handsome Man," "Roll Over Beethoven," "Living in the USA," and "Little Queenie"--Berry successfully melded resonant teen concerns with a blues base and country rhythms to fashion the basis of **rock** and roll.

Berry grew up in legally segregated St. Louis, Missouri. His teen years were troubled, and he spent time in a reform school; as a young adult, he tried working as a beautician and on a General Motors assembly line.

Making music, though, was his real love. By the early 1950's, he and pianist Johnny Johnson were leading a blues trio in clubs in and around St. Louis. In the process, Berry struggled to find a sound that appealed to both black and white audiences.

In this period, Berry melded a wide range of influences. Among guitarists, he favored the works of technical innovator Les Paul and jazz virtuoso Charlie Christian. Above all, though, T-Bone Walker's improvisational guitar stylings provided the source for Berry's highly danceable, insistent rhythms. Berry's vocal style owed much to Nat "King" Cole and Louis Jordan.

Berry's break came in the spring of 1955, when he made his way to Chicago to record a well-known song entitled "Ida Red" for Leonard Chess of independent Chess Records. Through club dates, Berry had revised "Ida Red," adding lyrics that he spit out in a rapid-fire fashion that perfectly complemented the song's narrative, which concerned a car chase.

"Ida Red," though, was in the public domain and thus could not be copyrighted, meaning that a recording of the song would generate no songwriting royalties. In the process of recording,

Leonard Chess thus asked Berry to provide new words and an alternative title. Out came "Maybellene," a paean to an automobile; the recording was highlighted by Berry's unusual guitar lines. Noted bluesman Willie Dixon played stand-up bass in the session.

Berry later recalled that "Maybellene" was his effort to meld country and western with his own teen laments of trying to get girls to ride in his 1934 V-8 Ford. The name "Maybellene," came, Berry claimed in his autobiography, from a book he had read in the third grade.

Leonard Chess and his brother Phil Chess were creating an independent record company in Chicago that assembled most of the major artists of the blues. The brothers had arrived in the United States in 1928 from Poland and had made their way into the club business on the black South Side of Chicago. After World War II, they hit their stride with recordings of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and John Lee Hooker. It would be Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, though, who would give Chess Records national prominence through the 1950's.

Leonard Chess interested innovative disc jockey Alan Freed (who was listed as a cowriter) in helping to popularize "Maybellene." Freed, who was then in the process of trying to make rhythm and blues accessible to a burgeoning middle-class, suburban, white teen audience, liked the unusual record. Working for an independent Cleveland, Ohio, radio station, Freed had earlier championed rhythm-and-blues artists the Clovers, Johnny Ace, and Ruth Brown with some success. "Maybellene," though, worked better than any song Freed had promoted before.

"Maybellene" jumped onto the record charts midway through 1955. *Billboard*, the influential bible of the record industry, praised it as "fine jockey and juke wax." The song entered the rhythm-and-blues charts and soared to number one by mid-August of 1955; it stayed atop the rhythm-and-blues charts until mid-October.

"Maybellene" took no longer to crack the pop music charts. Tops that summer of 1955 was Bill Haley's own crossover song, "**Rock** Around the Clock." Haley's style was also influenced by rhythm and blues. The white Haley heavily accented his music's beat, and his pioneering songs educated white audiences in black rhythms. Berry's "Maybellene" would take advantage of this. By the November of 1955, Berry had been named *Billboard's* most promising rhythm-and-blues artist. **Rock** and roll was poised to explode on the music scene, but the new genre still lacked an identity; that same year, Elvis Presley was named *Billboard's* most promising country-western star.

That neither Chuck Berry nor Leonard Chess nor Alan Freed was sure what had worked to attract the mass teenage audience to "Maybellene" could be seen in Berry's next few records. In 1956, only Berry's magnificent hymn to the new music, "Roll Over Beethoven," proved a hit; his other follow-up tracks, including "No Money Down," "Thirty Days," "Brown Eyed Handsome Man," and "You Can't Catch Me," sold little.

Berry, though, was ever the adapter, and he and Chess worked to create a follow up. He traveled continually to promote himself. In January, 1957, impresario Irvin Feld premiered a musical revue that featured Clyde McPhatter, Fats Domino, the Moonglows, and Berry, among others. Before

the tour closed five months later, its fourteen acts had appeared in every part of the United States, including places such as Colorado where no **rock**-and-roll show had ever been.

All this public-relations work paid off. During 1957 and 1958, Berry had five top-twenty successes, and six more of his tracks reached lower rungs on the charts. The late 1950's would prove to be Berry's golden age. In such hits as "School Day" (number eight on the pop charts and number one on the rhythm-and-blues charts in 1957), "**Rock** and Roll Music" (number eight on the pop charts and number six on the rhythm-and-blues charts in 1957), and "Sweet Little Sixteen" (which reached number two on the pop charts and number one on the rhythm-and-blues charts in 1958), Berry disseminated his lyrically sophisticated yet danceable style.

The secret, in retrospect, seems to have been Berry's unique ability to combine his insistent beat and catchy tunes with themes resonant to a white adolescent audience. "Johnny B. Goode" tells the story of the rise of a **rock**-and-roll star; "School Day" laments forced instruction; "Carol" and "Sweet Little Sixteen" celebrate teenage love; and "**Rock** and Roll Music" was both a hymn to and anthem for the latest teen craze. Berry even did "Run Rudolph Run," a Christmas novelty song in which Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, with the speed of a Sabre jet, runs Santa Claus down a freeway to deliver a doll to a girl and a guitar to a boy.

## Impact of Event

Chuck Berry's blend of rhythm and blues and country music, his songwriting style, and his innovative guitar picking proved enormously influential. The biggest **rock** stars of the next generation, including the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and the Beach Boys, all paid tribute to Berry's importance. Although Berry's own career had its ups and downs and was damaged by brushes with the law and by poor professional management, his effect on the course of popular music continued to be felt decades after he had ceased to be a major star. In short, Chuck Berry may be the most important name in the history of **rock** and roll.

One can forget how revolutionary Berry's approach was. In 1954, sanitized pop music was the rage. Patti Page was breaking "Young at Heart" on television's popular *The Colgate Comedy Hour*. Bing Crosby was a major star. It was only four years earlier that *Billboard* had dropped the term "race records" in favor of "rhythm and blues." Bill Haley's "**Rock** Around the Clock" was considered scandalous when it was introduced in the 1955 teen film *The Blackboard Jungle*, and Elvis Presley was still considered a country-western music star trying to sound like Dean Martin. Berry toured the world, and his famous "duck walk" (a crouching near-run across the stage Berry would make during intricate solo guitar passages) brought audiences to their feet. His live performance was captured on film in the unlikely setting of the Newport Jazz Festival in the motion picture *Jazz on a Summer's Day* (1960) as well as in a more sanitized form in the Alan Freed-produced **rock** films *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956), *Mr. Rock and Roll* (1957), and *Go, Johnny, Go!* (1958).

In the 1960's, Berry's influence became apparent in the work of many leading **rock** bands. In Great Britain, the Beatles acknowledged his centrality by placing "Roll Over Beethoven" and "**Rock** and Roll Music" on early albums, and the Rolling Stones often ended their live performances with a rousing version of Berry's "Bye Bye Johnny." In the United States, the Beach

Boys based their hit "Surfin' USA" directly on Berry's "Sweet Little Sixteen." More offbeat was Bob Dylan's 1965 single "Subterranean Homesick Blues," which sounded much like Berry's "Too Much Monkey Business."

In 1959, the bottom dropped out of Berry's life; he was convicted on an immorality charge concerning a teenage girl employed at his St. Louis club. Berry's conviction was initially reversed on appeal, but eventually authorities were able to send him to jail for two years. The prosecution of Berry's case has been widely held to have been racially motivated; nevertheless, the incident ended the remarkable early career of a master popular musician.

Berry would go on recording after serving his jail term, but he never recaptured the popularity of his 1950's peak. The intervening years, though, have given ample testimony to his enormous effect on the evolution of **rock** music; decades after his first success, he remains revered as one of the genre's true icons.

## FURTHER READINGS

- Berry, Chuck. *Chuck Berry : The Autobiography*. Simon & Schuster, 1987.

There is no better way to appreciate the far-reaching mind of Chuck Berry than look to his own words. This is the most important work on one of the most important figures in the history of rock and roll

- Gillett, Charlie. *The Sound of the City : The Rise of Rock `n' Roll*. Dell, 1970.

A pioneering work on the roots and rise of rock and roll that remains helpful despite its relative age. An insightful sociological treatment

- Reese, Krista. *Chuck Berry : Mr. Rock and Roll*. Proteus, 1982.

A well-produced but superficial biography, with wonderful color pictures and an adequate discography. Useful, though not entirely reliable

- Sanjek, Russell. "From 1900 to 1984," Oxford University Press, *American Popular Music and Its Business*. 3(1988)

Rock and roll survived because its products made money. This book, part of a three-volume series, illuminates the economic dimensions of the early rock-music business. There is little on Berry himself, but a great deal of vital information on the business he so powerfully affected

- Taylor, Paul. *Popular Music Since 1955*. G. K. Hall, 1985.

This fine annotated bibliography tells of the growing literature on rock-and-roll artists. A good place to start researching the history of rock and roll

- Ward, Ed; Geoffrey Stokes; Ken Tucker. *Rock of Ages : The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll*. Rolling Stone Press, 1986.

Offers the reader a fine survey history of the rock-and-roll era and Berry at the center of the development of the rock genre. A good place to start

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