

FURTHER REVIEW

THE FATHER OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

While Elvis Presley was a hillbilly singer who started singing the blues, Chuck Berry was a blues singer who started singing country and hillbilly music.

Both ended up in the same point in music history, however: The birth of rock 'n' roll. The difference, of course: Elvis was a brilliant performer. But Berry performed *and wrote* most of his own music.

Chuck Berry was born in St. Louis on Oct. 18, 1926 — a century ago.

A NEW MIX OF MUSICAL STYLES

Music was an important part of Berry's life from the very start. A local gospel choir used his family's middle-class home as a rehearsal venue. He began learning how to play guitar in his mid teens.

At age 17, he was involved in a string of robberies and was sent to prison. Released on his 21st birthday, he went to work at an auto assembly plant and began studying to be a hairdresser. He continued to play guitar in his spare time and began mimicking licks played by his favorite blues musician, T-Bone Walker.

In 1953, Berry began playing with the Johnnie Johnson Trio. Two years later, he met Muddy Waters and asked for advice on how to get signed to a record contract. Waters sent him to Leonard Chess of Chess Records.

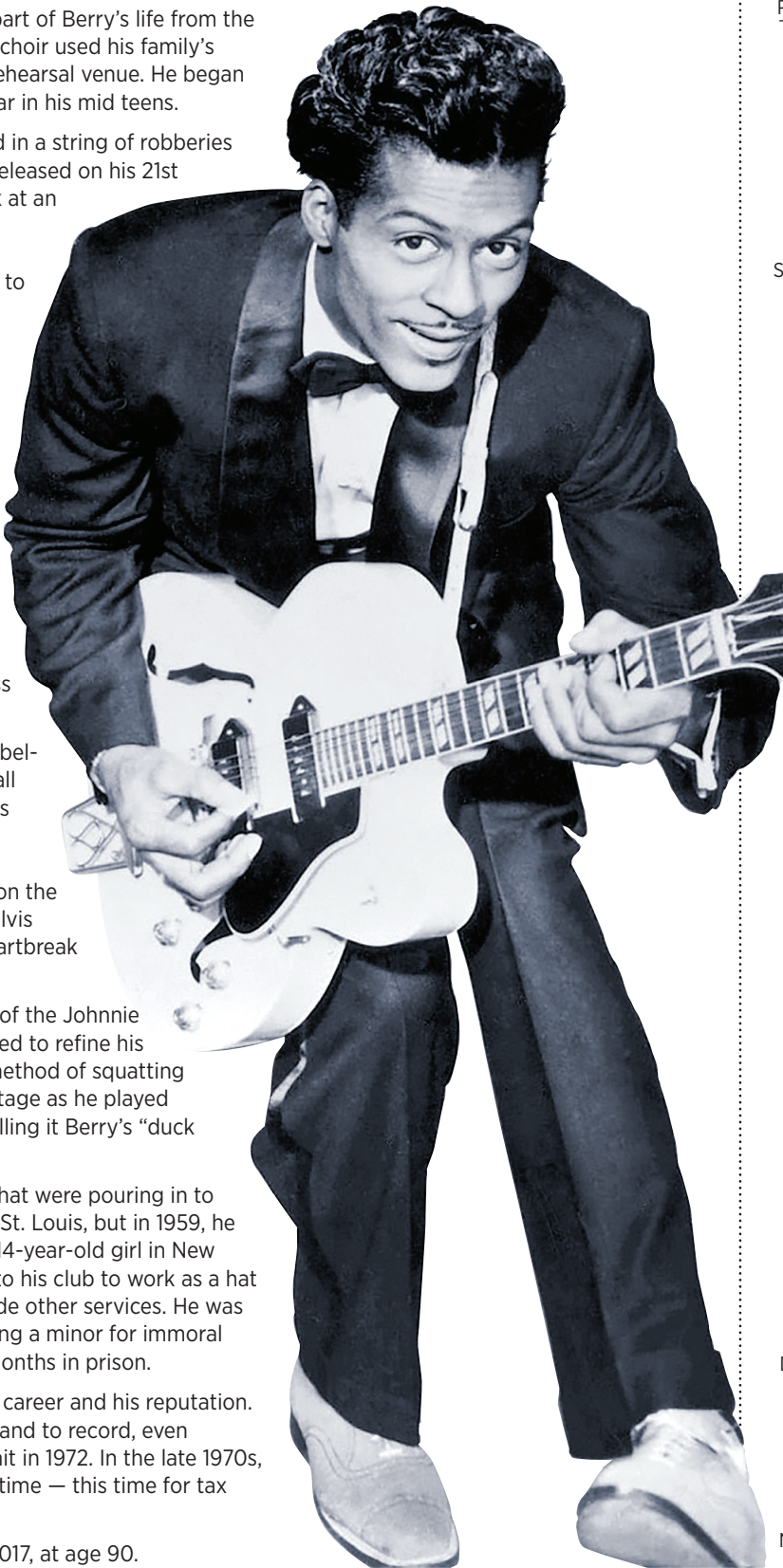
His first release was "Maybellene," which hit it big on all three of Billboard's singles charts at the time: Pop, Country and Rhythm and Blues. It peaked at No. 5 on the Hot 100, months before Elvis Presley's first big hit, "Heartbreak Hotel."

Berry became the leader of the Johnnie Johnson Trio and continued to refine his stage act, developing a method of squatting and hopping across the stage as he played his guitar. Folks began calling it Berry's "duck walk."

Berry used the royalties that were pouring in to open a successful club in St. Louis, but in 1959, he was arrested for hiring a 14-year-old girl in New Mexico and bringing her to his club to work as a hat check girl — and to provide other services. He was found guilty of transporting a minor for immoral purposes and spent 20 months in prison.

This put a chill on Berry's career and his reputation. He continued to perform and to record, even scoring an unlikely No. 1 hit in 1972. In the late 1970s, he went to prison a third time — this time for tax evasion.

Berry died on March 18, 2017, at age 90.



CHUCK BERRY'S SINGLES

RELEASED	PEAK IN THE BILLBOARD HOT 100
July 1955	Maybellene #5
May 1956	Roll Over Beethoven #29
March 1957	School Day (Ring! Ring! Goes the Bell) #3
June 1957	Oh Baby Doll #57
September 1957	Rock and Roll Music #8
January 1958	Sweet Little Sixteen #2
March 31, 1958	Johnny B. Goode #8
1958	#81 Beautiful Delilah
August 1958	Carol #18
October 1958	#47 Sweet Little Rock and Roller
October 1958	#83 Jo Jo Gunne
1958	#71 Merry Christmas Baby
1958	Run Rudolph Run #10
1959	Anthony Boy #60
Feb. 17, 1959	Back in the U.S.A. #37
March 1959	Almost Grown #32
March 1959	#80 Little Queenie
January 1960	Let It Rock #64
1960	Too Pooped to Pop #42
February 1964	Nadine (Is It You?) #23
May 1964	No Particular Place to Go #10
August 1964	You Never Can Tell #14
October 1964	Little Marie #54
December 1964	Promised Land #41
March 1965	#95 Dear Dad 2 weeks at No. 1
July 1972	My Ding-A-Ling #1
November 1972	Reelin' and Rockin' #27

CHUCK BERRY'S GREATEST HITS



1955 Maybellene

When Berry met with Leonard Chess, the record executive asked him to come back the next week with some original songs.

A week later, Berry returned with his bandmates and a demo tape including four songs. Chess liked one in particular — "Ida Mae," which Berry had based on an old country song, "Ida Red" — but asked Berry to change the title and lyrics for copyright purposes.

Berry made the new song about one of his favorite topics: fast cars. But recording "Maybellene" — named after a brand of hair cream — required 36 takes to record a final version.



1957 School Bell (Ring! Ring! Goes the Bell)

As the 30-year-old Berry went to work writing songs that would appeal to the teenage record-buying audience, he eventually thought of high school and the students who suffered through boring classroom days looking forward to dancing and being with their boyfriends and girlfriends.

The title of the song doesn't appear in the lyrics, leading some folks to think the name of the song was "Hail, Hail, Rock 'n' Roll." This, in fact, was used as the title of a 1988 rock documentary featuring Berry.



1957 Rock and Roll Music

"I was heavy into rock and roll" — a new genre that Berry had helped develop — "and had to create something that hit the spot without question," he told an interviewer.

Berry's producer recruited Blues legend Willie Dixon to play bass on this track.

The distinctive guitar riff Berry used at the top of the song would influence many subsequent rock songs. It would be covered — somewhat gleefully — by the Beatles in 1964. The Beach Boys would score a comeback No. 5 hit with their version in 1976.



1958 Sweet Little Sixteen

Berry was inspired to write this song when he was on a tour with a number of other big-name performers an a teenage girl came around asking all the headliners for their autographs. "She couldn't have seen one act on the show — unless it was mine!," Berry said.

In 1963, the Beach Boys would rewrite the lyrics to this song to make it into a No. 3 hit, "Surfin' U.S.A." However, Capitol Records failed to credit Berry's original. He threatened to sue and settled for sole songwriting credit.



1958 Johnny B. Goode

This song is a highly fictionalized autobiographical tale.

Berry was from St. Louis, not Louisiana. His upbringing was middle class, not poor. He could read and write very well. He graduated from beauty school with a degree in hairdressing and cosmetology.

The name "Johnny" was from the leader of the trio Berry had joined in 1953, Johnnie Johnson. And "Goode" was the house where Berry grew up at 2520 Goode Ave.

Berry lifted the guitar break from a 1950 T-Bone Walker song called "Strollin' With Bones."



1972 My Ding-A-Ling

Berry's one and only No. 1 hit was a modified version of a 1952 song by Dave Bartholomew, who could collaborate with Fats Domino on "Blueberry Hill" and "Ain't That A Shame."

Berry loved singing the intentionally suggestive lyrics in his stage act. He once told a reporter for Rolling Stone that he had wanted to be a comedian at one point.

This song was recorded at the Lanchester Arts Festival in Coventry, England, on Feb. 3, 1972. The performance was 11 minutes long, but trimmed down to 4 minutes for the single version.