

Chuck Berry: Father of Rock & Roll

While many artists are rock pioneers, Chuck Berry is considered the first who put it all together: the country guitar licks, the rhythm and blues beat, and lyrics that spoke to a young generation. In just a few songs, he created the musical directions for how to make rock & roll.

“If you tried to give rock & roll another name,” Beatle John Lennon once said, “you might call it Chuck Berry.”

Born October 18, 1926, in St. Louis, Missouri, Berry grew up in a middle-class African American neighborhood, the fourth of six children. His father was a part-time preacher and his mother sang in the choir, so gospel was Berry’s first musical memory. The radio later introduced him to boogie-woogie, blues, swing, and “hillbilly” songs. After classmates cheered his singing in high school, Berry decided he wanted a music career.

In his early twenties, he became a popular artist in St. Louis clubs performing other artists’ songs. Soon he began writing his own, at first by changing lyrics and notes of songs he already knew.

His big break came in a May 21, 1955, recording session at Chicago-based Chess Records when he borrowed from “Ida Red,” a country song, and relied on his electric guitar to turn it into the raw and lively “Maybellene.”

“With its opening guitar run—a rapid mixture of notes and chords—the song had a relentless energy,” music historian Nadine Cohodas wrote. “Then there were Berry’s unconventional lyrics ... creating an unmistakable mood.”

By year’s end, “Maybellene” had sold a million copies, and Berry saw he had tapped into a new consumer market: white teenagers with pocket money who were searching for music they could call their own. Though long past his teens, Berry drew on boyhood memories to write lyrics about driving, dating, and going to school.



“Everything I wrote about wasn’t about me, but about the people listening,” he said.

From 1955 to 1965, Berry recorded a string of songs considered the foundation of rock & roll. A dazzling performer, Berry toured solo, confident that local backup musicians would always know his songs.

Though his stardom faded over the years, Berry performed regularly until his death in 2017. His influence continues. He was among the first class of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, inducted in 1986. In 2000, when Berry received the Kennedy Center Honors Award, President Bill Clinton called him “one of the 20th century’s most influential musicians.”

Sources: *American Songwriter*; *Lillian Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia*, by Lillian Roxon; *Chuck Berry: The Biography*, by John Collis; *The New York Times*; Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (rockhall.com); *Rolling Stone*; *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*; *Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*, by Nadine Cohodas

LISTEN:

“Johnny B. Goode”

“Maybellene”

“No Particular Place to Go”

“Roll Over Beethoven”

“School Day”

“Sweet Little Sixteen”

“Rock & Roll Music”

“You Never Can Tell”