

CHUCK BERRY: FATHER OF ROCK & ROLL

While many artists are rock pioneers, Chuck Berry is widely considered the first who put it all together: the country guitar licks, the rhythm & blues beat, and lyrics that spoke to a young generation. In just a few songs, he drew a musical blueprint for what the world would soon know as rock & roll.

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

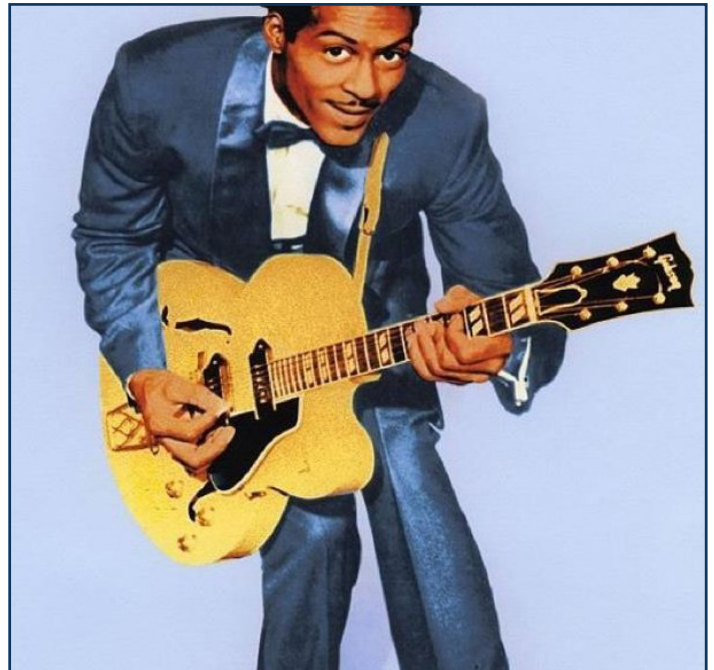
Born October 18, 1926, in St. Louis, Missouri, Berry grew up in a middle-class African American neighborhood, the fourth of six children. The radio introduced him to boogie-woogie, blues, swing, and “hillbilly” songs. After he wowed classmates with a vocal performance in high school, Berry was determined to have a music career.

Detoured by a three-year prison term for a teenage robbery spree, Berry got back on track and became a popular performer in St. Louis clubs singing other artists’ songs. Soon he began writing his own songs.

His big break came in a May 21, 1955, recording session at Chicago-based Chess Records when he took the basic melody and fast tempo of “Ida Red,” an old country song, and used his electric guitar and his brand-new lyrics to turn it into the raw and rollicking “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 an emerging market: Black and white teenagers with new buying power who were searching for music they could call their own. Though long past his teens, Berry avidly drew on his own adolescent memories to write lyrics about driving, dating, and going to school.



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LISTEN

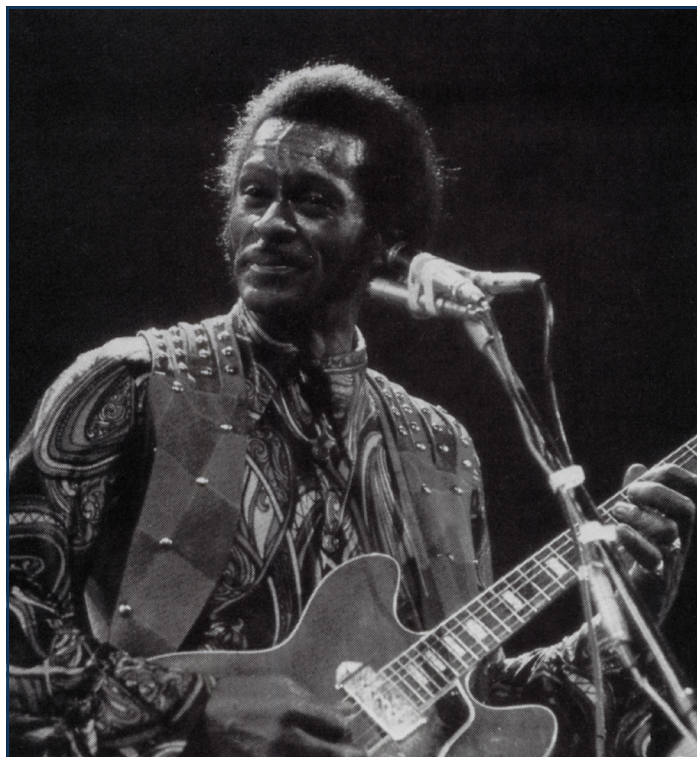
“Johnny B. Goode,” “Maybellene,” “Roll Over Beethoven,” “School Day,” “Rock & Roll Music”

CHUCK BERRY: THE FATHER OF ROCK & ROLL (CONTINUED)

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

In his so-called “golden decade,” 1955–1965, Berry recorded a string of songs now considered the foundation of rock & roll. A dazzling stage performer, Berry toured solo, confident that local backup musicians in any city would always know his songs because they were so popular and so well known.

Though his songwriting slowed in later years and he died in 2017, Chuck Berry’s influence endures. He was among the first class of the Rock & 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.”



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Why is Berry considered the “Father of Rock & Roll” and, as this biography says, not simply a “pioneer?” Explain the difference using evidence from the text.

2. Circle the phrase “drew a musical blueprint” in the first paragraph. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand the meaning of this phrase. Then, define what “drew a musical blueprint” means your own words.

3. Who was Berry’s target audience, and how did he appeal to them as a songwriter? Why is this significant?
