

Chuck Berry, Rock 'n' Roll Pioneer, Dies at 90

Chuck Berry, who with his indelible guitar licks, brash self-confidence and memorable songs about cars, girls and wild dance parties did as much as anyone to define rock 'n' roll's potential and attitude in its early years, died on Saturday at his home near Wentzville, Mo. He was 90.

[...]

While Elvis Presley was rock's first pop star and teenage heartthrob, Mr. Berry was its master theorist and conceptual genius, the songwriter who understood what the kids wanted before they knew themselves with songs like « Johnny B. Goode » and « Roll Over Beethoven ».

[...]

In "Sweet Little Sixteen," "You Can't Catch Me" and other songs, Mr. Berry invented rock as a music of teenage wishes fulfilled and good times (even with cops in pursuit). In "Promised Land," "Too Much Monkey Business" and "Brown Eyed Handsome Man," he celebrated and satirized America's opportunities and class tensions. His rock 'n' roll was a music of joyful hints, laughed-off tensions and gleefully shattered icons.

Mr. Berry was already well past his teens when he wrote mid-1950s manifestoes like "Roll Over Beethoven," "Rock and Roll Music" and "School Day." Born Charles Edward Anderson Berry on Oct. 18, 1926, in St. Louis, he grew up in a segregated, middle-class neighborhood there, full of gospel, blues, and rhythm and blues, along with some country music.

He spent three years in reform school after a spree of car thefts and armed robbery. He received a degree in hairdressing and cosmetology and worked for a time as a beautician; he married Themetta Suggs in 1948 and started a family. She survives him, as do four children: Ingrid Berry, Melody Eskridge, Aloha Isa Leigh Berry and Charles Berry Jr.

By the early 1950s, he was playing guitar and singing blues, pop standards and an occasional country tune with local combos. Shortly after joining Sir John's Trio, led by the pianist Johnnie Johnson, he reshaped the group's music and took it over.

By Jon Pareles, music critic, March 18, 2017

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