

Musical Legend Chuck Berry Is Still Rocking

Welcome to This Is America with VOA Learning English. This week on our program -- the music of Chuck Berry. Faith Lapidus and Doug Johnson tell about the man who is often called the father of rock and roll.

One of Chuck Berry's first releases was "Brown Eyed Handsome Man." The last verse goes like this:

Two, three count with nobody on
He hit a high fly into the stand
Rounding third he was headed for home
It was a brown eyed handsome man
That won the game; it was a brown eyed handsome man

The song came out in 1956, less than 10 years after major league baseball began to accept black players. The first was Jackie Robinson.

Rob Sheffield at Rolling Stone magazine wrote about baseball songs on his blog and had this to say: "The guitar speeds up as Chuck Berry heads into the climactic final verse, when that brown-eyed handsome man (Willie Mays? Hank Aaron? Jackie Robinson?) wins the game with a home run. Chuck would've made a lousy sportscaster ('two-three the count?') but that just adds to the excitement."

On stage, he became known for his wild performances, and his "duck walk" that many musicians copied. But his songwriting skills -- some call him a rock and roll poet -- and his guitar work really set him apart.

Early in his career he played mostly blues for black audiences in clubs in St. Louis, Missouri. But the most popular music in the area was country. So this musical scientist mixed country and blues and got songs like "Maybellene."

Chuck Berry was born on October 18, 1926, in St. Louis, where he still lives. His mother, Martha, was a high school principal. His father, Henry, worked with wood; he was a carpenter.

Charles Edward Anthony Berry was born the fourth of six children. He started singing in church when he was six years old. His interest in music stuck with him.

A lot of Chuck Berry's material is about teenage life, especially school.

Chuck Berry left school when he was 17. He headed west with two friends, but they did not get far. They were arrested after they used a gun to steal a car in Kansas City, Missouri.

He was released from prison after four years when he reached the age of 21. But that would not be the last of his legal problems over the years.

Chuck Berry signed his first recording contract in 1955, with Chess Records. One of his early hits was "Rock & Roll Music."

That song also became a hit with other bands, including a certain well-known British group.

Chuck Berry started performing around the country in 1957. Many years later, his tradition of asking to be paid before concerts even earned a part in the lighthearted crime film "Ocean's Thirteen."

BASHER TARR (DON CHEADLE): "Mr. Bank, do you know what Chuck Berry said every night before counting one-two-three-four?"

WILLIE BANK (AL PACINO): "What did he say?"

BASHER TARR: "Pay me my money!"

Filmmaker Taylor Hackford made a documentary called "Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll," named for a Chuck Berry song. It centered on the making of a concert to honor the musician on his 60th birthday in 1986.

Guitarist Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones organized the concert. Listening to Chuck Berry songs got him interested in music. In Keith Richards' words, "I didn't dream I could make a living at it but that's what I wanted to do."

Some of the best moments in "Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll" are between Keith Richards and Chuck Berry.

More than 75 artists and bands have done their own versions of Chuck Berry songs. Many have done several, including the Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley, Conway Twitty and Bruce Springsteen.

Here are George Thorogood and the Destroyers with "It Wasn't Me."

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, included Chuck Berry in its first year of honors in 1986. The Hall of Fame had this to say: "While no individual can be said to have invented rock and roll, Chuck Berry comes the closest of any single figure to being the one who put all the essential pieces together."

Our program was written and produced by Caty Weaver. Faith Lapidus and Doug Johnson were your announcers.

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