

HAIL! HAIL! ROCK 'N ROLL

My appreciation of music has increased as I have grown older. I didn't come from a musical home. Early on, for some unexpressed reason, my mother forced me to take piano lessons for an unhappy year or so, but this unexplained, unvalidated torture only increased the unhappiness of my pre-adolescence. I was a pudgy little nerd inappropriately dressed by a mother who must have had a sadistic streak exacerbated by misanthropy. It wasn't just Mom. We didn't listen to music at home, went to no concerts or recitals and didn't even have a family record player until I was 20 or so.

But this paper has little to do with the impoverished musical milieu from which I sprang or with my misunderstood and misunderstanding mother. Rather it will deal with how I came to care for music more with the passing years and especially with Charles Edward Anderson Berry, "Chuck Berry," as you certainly know him, born 1926, died 2017 and laid to rest in his home town of those 90 years, St. Louis.

My first encounter with Chuck Berry occurred in the basement of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, Louisville, Kentucky. The basement also served as our parish hall, and there was held that most Catholic of parish events, the Tuesday night Bingo. St. Elizabeth Troop 17 ("The Best!"), Boy Scouts of America, supplied the vendors who spread out through the hall those Tuesday evenings with galvanized buckets full of either bags of freshly popped popcorn or iced Coke, Pepsi, Seven Up and RC Cola, and the occasional Orange Crush for the really eccentric parishioner.

I was one of those salesmen, earning perhaps \$1.50 for three hours work at age 12 or 13. One night when I heard the older boys, the dispatchers who loaded our buckets, singing and laughing about Chuck Berry's early hit "School Days" it struck a chord, although not a totally sympathetic one. Even then I knew there was something special about Berry's lyrics. He caught the essence of the junior high experience:

Up in the morning and out to school
The teacher is teachin' the golden rule
American history and practical math
You studyin' hard and hopin' to pass
Workin' your fingers right down to the bone
And the guy behind you won't leave you alone

Ring, ring goes the bell. . . .

I could appreciate the verisimilitude of that experience but nasty little study buddy that I was I could not cope with what happened at the end of the Chuck Berry school day. The horny kids piled out of school, down the street to the local junior juke joint, dropped the coin right into the slot, wanting to find something that really was hot. All day long they had been wantin' to dance. Nothing made me hot or wantin' to dance at that repressed and slow to develop age, and I judged Chuck Berry with my loser classmates whom I feared would grow up to be a new generation of the waitresses and factory workers that many of their parents were. All I wanted to do was study and get ahead.

As I understood it, not only was the singer of "School Days" short sighted and unambitious, he was cavalier in his disrespect for American culture. Even worse when

I heard “Roll Over Beethoven” I classified him as a hopeless smartass, a cultural Luddite. Of course, I had never heard Beethoven and wouldn’t for perhaps another seven or eight years, when a genteel girlfriend first made me listen to and even like classical music.

After the eighth grade and my years at the Tuesday night Bingo, I absented myself from felicity awhile, entering the Catholic minor seminary in Louisville. Obviously, my mind then needed to focus on things other than “Maybellene,” “Sweet Little Sixteen,” “Rock ‘n Roll Music,” “You Never Can Tell,” and the numerous other chart climbing singles that Chuck Berry recorded in the late fifties and up through the sixties. With the onset of the Beatles and other English and continental acts, his career receded, with his one and only number one Billboard hit ending that segment of his career—“My Ding a Ling,” in 1972.

By the early seventies I was long out of the seminary and quite interested in my own ding a ling, but I wasn’t paying much attention to Chuck Berry. I had been aware of his being arrested, tried and ultimately convicted under the Mann Act, allegedly for transporting a 14 year old girl across state lines, the Feds said for immoral purposes, Chuck said to serve as a waitress in his Southern Air restaurant west of St. Louis. Chuck lost that argument and drew three years in the joint. He resumed his career of public appearances when he got out. This was only the second of Chuck’s brushes with the law. When Chuck was in his teens, he and some friends short of transportation had borrowed a fellow’s car to get back home. Unfortunately Chuck had a gun on him when they “borrowed the vehicle,” the driver did not know the car was being borrowed and a disposition for underage armed robbery ensued. Chuck was

released from the reformatory when he turned 21. Much later, when Chuck spent a good part of the year on the road, appearing with local back up bands (including a very young Bruce Springsteen at one stop), he worked only for cash. This led to tax problems with the IRS. Chuck avoided jail time for this peccadillo but did wind up paying fines and doing community service.

So—perhaps the snotty little repressed Catholic boy from Louisville was right in avoiding having anything to do with the bad rocker from St. Louie? No, sadly your writer was about as wrong about Chuck Berry as he was about many other things in his misspent youth. It has taken me many years to come to terms with the fact that great artists, like great men and women of many professions and lines of endeavor are not necessarily saintly human beings. Not much has been written about Mr. Berry, but I put it to you here that he is and was a worthy successor to a long line of artistic criminal types—Francois Villon, Christopher Marlowe, Caravaggio, Rimbaud, Jean Genet, others. And the various brushes with the law are but footnotes to a stellar history.

Berry was not anxious to talk about his straying from the paths of righteousness, and we need not dwell on it either, for beyond his own songbook of catchy and memorable tunes with a driving beat and memorable, even poetic lyrics, Chuck was, as many have declared him, the “Father of Rock ‘n Roll”, the defining music of my generation. This involves more than merely being someone who inspired and shaped the music of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, Bruce Springsteen, Roy Orbison, many, many others.

Chuck Berry’s achievement went deeper. He united two segregated strands of music prevalent in the early fifties, rhythm and blues, the euphemistic name for “black

music,” which theretofore had only been played in black clubs and on black radio stations at the lower end and low wattage of the radio dial, for much less money with the big money strand of popular—white—music.

His work brought to an end the days when artists like Pat Boone could take a black song getting little air time on the mainline stations, cover it and turn it into a hit on the white charts. Chuck Berry was always interested in making a buck. He died worth perhaps fifty on sixty million dollars, and he was too astute to quietly sit in the back of the music bus. He made it his business to see that his music made it into the main stream of American and world music.

There is an interesting portrait of all this in a funky out of kilter film from 1984, from which I stole the title of this paper —“Hail! Hail! Rock ‘n Roll” —that comes from the movie that Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones made of a concert for Chuck Berry’s 60th birthday. It didn’t do big box office when it was released, but the two hour film is still available on Amazon Prime and is very much worth watching. While the neurotic, picky and self aggrandizing side of Chuck Berry is visible, the real text is seeing Chuck’s appreciation of doing his music the right, the exacting way; and his looking back showing his fellows, like Muddy Waters and Little Richard, what they should have been doing to insist that they be treated better by white, main stream society.

Perhaps the most telling moment of the two hour film shows Chuck the day before the concert that is the center of the film, walking through the unlocked door of the Fox Theater, the 1930s film cathedral of St. Louis, the site of the concert and telling us in a quite level, dispassionate, business like voice that his father and he were denied

admission to that very theater when Chuck was a boy. The understated cold pride of his delivery of those lines is memorable indeed.

All during the years when I had little appreciation of the complexity of Berry's achievement or of the arc of his career, he was appearing perhaps 100 nights per year at one night stands across America. He traveled alone, with his guitar and required the services of local bands as back up, often groups with knowledge of his music but little skill to play it. Bruce Springsteen tells the story of how his young group once backed up Berry without rehearsal, and without his even telling the group what the next tune would be. He expected them to simply jump in after he started the first line. Payment, as said earlier, was in cash and always up front. No cash no show. If Berry's fee was \$1000 for the performance, he would demand payment of \$1100 up front. If the band performed well, they got \$100. Otherwise not. We don't know whether Springsteen got paid his night. We do know that he and his band backed Chuck years later, the night he was inducted into the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame up the road in Cleveland.

Gradually I became aware of and appreciated Chuck Berry's music. Many of you were here for my paper "My Uncle Took the Message and He Wrote It on the Wall." Like my deceased fellow lawyer, Paul Martino, I took an instant liking to Chuck Berry's song "Memphis," when it was covered by Johnny Rivers, and it has stuck with me. In the passing years, the music of my youth, the tunes of the fifties and the sixties have become increasingly meaningful to me. There was a little about that in my short paper of a few years ago, "Eine Kleine Nachtmusick." While I have come to appreciate classical music greatly, it has not displaced the music of The Beatles, The Beach Boys, Chuck Berry, so many others in my heart. To the point that I become physically

ill when I hear one or another of my favorite tunes used to entice us to buy burgers or dog food or whatever else is for sale on the revolving meretricious wheel of American commerce. Those songs, the oldies but goodies as the late great Karen Carpenter put it reach into my heart, they give color to the tone and texture of my memories of my tumultuous years of upbringing, all the emotional confusion and yearning for something more clearly defined.

The Chuck Berry song book is part of the very fabric of my appreciation of American life as I now understand it to have been and wished I had more lived it. The romances of sweet little sixteen, the marriage of the young monsieur and the mademoiselle, the urge to dance on the sweaty afternoons after school, even the love of the missing and bereft child. Berry was right—it's all real, all good and you are not able to predict where life is going to lead. "C'est le vie,' say the old folks, 'it goes to show you never can tell.'" It is not black youth, not white youth, but the American youth of the fifties and sixties.

Life never led Chuck Berry away from St. Louis. As he did slow down over the last twenty or thirty years, he lived with his wife of 68 years (to whom he had often been unfaithful, but never willing to talk about it) in very comfortable houses just west of St. Louis. Up until the last few years he performed one Wednesday night of each month in the Duck Room of Blueberry Hill, a popular St. Louis watering hole. Yet another of the sorrows of a life not completely lived to the fullest is that I never made it to Blueberry Hill to see Chuck Berry perform. Nor did I attend the four hour long public funeral afforded his many admirers when he passed away in St. Louis in 2017. Surrounded by the great of the music world and other public luminaries, attired in a white suit, sequined purple

shirt, his sailing captain's hat on his head, his cherry red ES-335 Gibson guitar bolted to the inner lid of his coffin, Chuck was not there to do the duck walk or perform with the guitar upside down and everything but inside out, but was still very much the star of the show.

And yet the Chuck Berry show is not over. Travelling ever further beyond our solar system, deeper and deeper into space, the quixotic dream of yet another idiosyncratic, great American, Carl Sagan, lives on. His Voyager Space Craft is aimed toward our closest star neighbor, Alpha Centauri, only a smidgen more than four light years away. At its current speed, the Voyager should get there in some hundreds of thousands of years. Who knows? Perhaps beings unknown to us will open the Voyager and discover one of the artifacts Sagan's team selected to show these creatures, a golden record. Perhaps they will figure out how to play it. If so, they will hear among other items the only rock 'n roll record that made the cut onto the Voyager manifest, Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode":

Deep down in Louisiana close to New Orleans
Way back up in the woods among the evergreens
There stood a log cabin made of earth and wood
Where lived a country boy named Johnny B. Goode
Who never ever learned to read or write so well
But he could play a guitar just like a-ringin' a bell.

As Johnny's mother predicted, someday Johnny's name would be in lights. I'm hoping that long long after we and even the Literary Club are gone, the Alpha Centaurians will also be exclaiming---"Johnny B. Goode tonight!" Thus Chuck Berry will

be specially remembered and live on, for I am sure that Johnny B. Goode was an alter ego, another avatar of Charles Edward Anderson (“Chuck”) Berry.

But back to Earth for now. The name in lights, the satisfaction of doing something, anything so well, so easily with such aplomb and confidence that it was like ringing a bell, these were the dreams of my own career, my own life, my own little destiny, coming out of my own deep woods into the light of my days and nights.

The cry was and always will be—

Go Johnny go go
Johnny B. Goode

Presented to The
Literary Club of Cincinnati
November 29, 2021

