

I want automatic heat,
I want a full-length bed
In my back seat;
I want short wave radio,
I want TV and a phone,
You know I gotta talk to my baby
When I'm riding along.

Powering it all was a terrible urgency to detail the world of the kids he sang to, down to those "wallets filled with pictures", so everyone would know it was real and beautiful, and no joke. "Roll over, Beethoven, an' dig these rhythm and blues!" Comically arrogant, yes, but also Chuck Berry's gauntlet thrown down in challenge to conventional culture and all its sacred cows; it was the ultimatum to the Ike-Wasp consensus from the barbarian at the gates, the first warning that "they" had better dig this energy that was making their children dance.

Berry poured out the energy tour after tour, record after record, and the strain told. He always had to work hard at rock, says Leonard Chess, keying himself up to get the rhythm right, to get the power going. One part of him still preferred the blues, the easier, more comfortable groove, and he even asked Chess if he could record blues under an alias. Chess said no ("Rock was what was happening"), but on most of his albums there are one or two instrumentals that show a soft and pensive Chuck Berry. Rock, he always felt, was "commercial". "On tour", Johnson says, "we did the hits, one after another, but sometimes if it was real late Chuck would relax for once, and we'd do some blues, runnin' on and on. But mostly Chuck was all business".

He never had a manager or the normal retinue of leeches politely called "aides", and the corporations that handled his money had no members outside his family. "There weren't many people Chuck trusted", says Chess. "He kept a close watch on himself. Never drank, no drugs. Took only his own advice. A showman, yeah, but inside a timid guy, fighting all the time". His St. Louis nightclub, Chuck Berry's Club Bandstand, was the fulfillment of a dream, but he ran it more as businessman than as genial host. A fulfillment too was the brick mansion he bought for his wife and children on the cul-de-sac where the cream of St. Louis black society live in enormous dignity. But he could be there only infrequently. He had many separate worlds, and keeping them separate required full-time control and no mistakes

He made one. Late in 1959 a prostitute he had picked up while on tour in Juarez, and then brought back to St. Louis to be a hat check girl in his club, turned herself in to the police after he dropped her. She was, she admitted then, only 14 years old, and Berry was arrested and charged with violating the Mann Act. Given a few sordid realities, the charge becomes absurd. The girl, a Spanish-speaking Apache Indian from New Mexico, had been a prostitute for a year and he hardly had "compelled, induced, and incited" her "to give herself up to debauchery", in the language of the indictment. And a man of Chuck's status doesn't have to bring his pick-ups home; it's probably true, as he insisted, that his real intent, which the law requires proven, was to learn Spanish because he thought songs in foreign languages

were the coming trend (though he might have had a few other things on his mind as well). But the law and the public were not ready to take so worldly a view.

The case dragged on for two years through two humiliating trials, both in St. Louis. The first judge was so blatantly prejudiced, calling Berry "this Negro" or "whatever his name is", that his judgment was vacated, but the verdicts of both trials were the same: guilty. The implicit substance of the charge was expressed by the newspaper headline: "Rock 'n' Roll Singer Lured Me To St. Louis, Says 14 Year Old". "They" had always known that this dirty music was corrupting their children, and now they had caught a gaudy nigger with his pants down to prove it. "Is this the kind of man our children idolize?" Maybe if they could put him away in jail, they could believe that the answer to their own question wasn't yes.

Chuck entered the Federal Penitentiary at Terre Haute in February of 1962. It looked as if they had not only gotten him, but rock 'n' roll as well. It was the absolute end of an era which had passed its peak four years before. Buddy Holly was dead, and so was Richie Valens and the Big Bopper, all victims of the same plane crash. Elvis had come out of the Army a changed man, every trace of the young rocker smoothed away. Jerry Lee Lewis had been driven from the spotlight by a similar trumped up "sex scandal". Gene Vincent, Fats Domino, Little Richard — all were fading memories, replaced by anemic nonentities like Joey Dee, Bobby Vinton and Chubby Checker. Chuck had hung on longer than any of the others, but even his clean, straight style had been corrupted by strings and choral back-ups in desperate attempts to keep up. The first rock'n' rollers were now voting adults, and the jet-setters were twisting at the Peppermint Lounge. What had been fresh in 1955 had become formula, and then simply repetition. The crackle of that early da-DAH da-DAH rock beat became the endless drone of "pa pa oom mau mau, pa pa oom mau mau". Adventurous young musicians were playing folk.

And then, just as before, with the same out-of-nowhere bursting, it all happened again. Liverpool, London, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and then everywhere, reelin' and rockin' on a scale that the fifties could not have conceived. The new stars were different; they were regular middle class city kids who could have become lawyers or doctors or grown-ups of one accepted variety or another. But they didn't, and with a blitheness that was shocking, they said they didn't want to; they, and the kids who followed them, wanted to rock their lives away.

Without exception they acknowledged their debt to Chuck Berry. It was not just that they played his songs, but with their every act, they said that they had laid their burden down, closed their books, and made that trip out of the classroom and into the street.

NEVER saw a man so changed", Carl Perkins said of Chuck not long ago. "I did a tour of England with him after he got out of prison. He had been an easy-going guy before, the kinda guy who'd jam in the dressing rooms, sit and swap licks and jokes. In England he was cold, real distant and bitter. It wasn't just jail, it was those years of one nighters, grinding it out like that can kill a man, but I figure it was mostly jail".

Everything had changed for Chuck when he came out. His club was gone, and so was his marriage, his fans, and his moment. There was nothing else to do but go back to work and figure out a new game, this time playing it with no mistakes. Leaving his wife and children with the house in St. Louis, he moved out to Wentzville and started Berry Park. He did a packed return concert in Detroit to start touring again, and made the charts a few more times with some of his greatest songs, including the rollicking "Promised Land". But those were probably (though Chess is not telling) tunes he had recorded years before that had never been released. His new songs were tired, often just updated lyrics sung over the music from his hits of nearly ten years before. Despite the fact that the Beatles, Beach Boys and Rolling Stones were making hits with their versions of his songs, Chuck's own attempt at a comeback was a failure. DJ's played his early records as golden oldies but ignored his new ones, and without radio exposure Chuck as a contemporary performer disappeared from rock'n' roll.

His response was to bury himself ever more deeply in Wentzville and get his business affairs neatly rationalized and entirely in his own hands. It would be impossible to estimate Berry's considerable wealth, but he has never been broke. His early records still sell, and the royalties from the countless "cover" versions by



other artists, several of them million sellers in their own right, amount to a substantial income. To get more capital for the park, which quickly became his main occupation, Chuck left Chess Records and signed with Mercury for a \$150,000 advance. He continued to take gigs when they were offered and his policy on payment was and is unswerving: \$2000 a night, half to be paid in advance, the rest immediately before going on stage. A short-sighted policy perhaps (he refused to play at the Monterey Pop Festival, forgoing invaluable exposure, because he was asked to play free), but one that guarantees him a predictable income without forcing him to trust anyone.

"It's a ritual every time Chuck plays here", says Paul Baratta of the Fillmore West. "Chuck breezes into the office about five minutes before showtime the first night and says, 'Let's do our thing'. I give him a check, he endorses it. I count out the money, give it to him, then he counts it out, pockets it, and gives me back the check as a receipt. He says 'Mellow', then goes on stage and knocks 'em out. We've done it so often now, maybe he'll wink at me, but it's still a ritual".

Berry's concert dates are becoming more frequent. After Bill Graham first booked him at the old Fillmore in 1967, Chuck started to get the "psychedelic" ballroom jobs. The new rock generation flocks to hear him play his old songs, but the more relaxed format allows him to do the long blues jams as well. As good a showman as ever, he makes every set a triumph. At 43, his duck walk is still a superbly graceful feat, and he always goes off stage to a standing ovation. He has no intention of stopping. "I asked him when he would retire", says Baratta, "and he said, 'When I get tired of playing or people get tired of hearing me play, and I think the latter will happen first. I have it figured. See, I'll never play, never ever play for less than \$1000 a night. So some day I'll get a call from some 22-year-old punk promoter and he'll say he really wants me but he can only offer \$950. And I'll tell him, Congratulations, son, you've just become the man who retired the great Chuck Berry".

But that day is still years away. Berry, his contract with Mercury expired, is going back to Chess where Leonard, still at the helm, says he has "a few ideas" about how Chuck can get hits again. Maybe Chuck Berry will be back topping the hit parade. Who knows, and will it matter? What does revival mean in a world where music, preserved on plastic, never ages or is lost? I hope Chuck Berry comes back, tears loose, and blows a few new minds; I think he can do it. But he's really done it already, and the ball he started keeps rolling on.

"This rock bit", he said in a rare interview with Ralph Gleason, "it's called rock now, it used to be called boogie-woogie, it used to be called blues, used to be called rhythm and blues, and it even went through a stage of what is known as funk... Names of it can vary, but music that is inspiring to the head and heart, to dance by and cause you to pat your foot, it's there. Call it rock, call it jazz, call it what you may. If it makes you move, or moves you, or grooves you, it'll be here. The blues rolls on, rock steady knocks, and they all are here now and I think they all will be here from now on".

Rock on, Chuck Berry!

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