

**I**N the spring of 1955, Charles Edward Anderson "Chuck" Berry was a blues singer-guitarist in St. Louis, Missouri. Twenty-eight years old, dashing handsome, and a flamboyant showman, he had gotten a trio together (with Johnny Johnson on piano and Ebby Harding on drums) and did steady weekend work at the Cosmopolitan Club (later a grocery, now a club again, called the Cosmo Hall) in East St. Louis. Having finished the night course at the Poro School of Beauty Culture, he was also a hairdresser and "cosmetologist", and he wasn't sure which one was the moonlight job. No one expected the blues to support a man, and Chuck had a wife and two daughters, so it was nice to have a trade to fall back on. Anyway, both occupations were a big step up from the assembly line work he had been doing before at the G.M. Fisher car body plant.

He wasn't a star ("Nobody pays you no attention 'round here till you gets your first Cadillac", says a bluesman still active in East St. Loo), but the music had new possibilities. Ike Turner had just come up from Mississippi and was the talk of the town. Before Ike, blues in St. Louis had been almost an amateur business, done for a few bucks a night on a pick-up basis, and no one thought much about repertory or instrumentation. But Turner had a band that played arrangements, as near as could be note-for-note copies of hit records. Still small time, but now the small time was aping the big time. Chuck took it a few steps further.



"Chuck was always thinking progressive", recalls Gabriel Hearn, a trumpeter-disc jockey who now runs a dirty movie house in East St. Louis. "His music had a zing to it nobody else had. And professional — he made his guys wear uniforms and be real neat. Not even Ike was doing that. Chuck was a perfectionist, always had the best equipment, even bringing his own mikes to a job. Things had to be right, and, man, that was always Chuck's way". A city kid exposed all his life to normal American culture, Berry could also play a wider range of music than the country-born bluesmen, moving easily from country blues to the ballads of Nat "King" Cole and Louis Jordan, or even to a country and western tune. "You gotta remember", says Gabriel, "radio wasn't like it is now, each station only playing one sort of thing. They had hour shows of everything, so if you could play blues and ballads and country and novelty numbers, you reached more people. Chuck was versatile that way".

Ambitious too — "There was hungry cats and satisfied cats", said another musician, "and Chuck was among the hungriest" — but that wasn't new. One of a carpenter's six children, he grew up in Elleardsville (the Ville, natives call it), a quiet black St. Louis neighborhood of small brick houses and tree-lined streets. His family were sober middle class, devout choir members at the toney Antioch Baptist Church, but Chuck was a feisty, eager boy. Quick-witted and quick-tongued, he was always in trouble and as quickly out. "Smart as a whip, Chuck", says a lady who grew up with him. "Everybody knew he'd amount to something, leastways that's what he always said, but you just didn't know what".

Like every other black kid with more brains than patience, Chuck didn't know either. He had taken up guitar in high school, but not seriously. What could he do? Trying out the role of the young criminal, he got caught in a clumsy robbery attempt and was sent to reform school for three years. When he came out in 1947, 21 years old, he still didn't know. In 1955, after over seven years of waiting and working, hoping and wondering, he thought maybe the break had come. He had written a few songs he liked and could get up the fare to Chicago, so like hundreds of hopefuls before and since, he went up to the South Side, blues capital of the world.

From there on it reads like the storybooks. The greenhorn in the big city, Berry went to hear the big star Muddy Waters, who, with typical generosity, let him sit in for a set. Impressed, Waters told him to go see "Leonard". That was Leonard Chess, the founder of Chess Records which had and still does have the Chicago blues scene in its pocket. Berry went to Chess with a tape he had made on a borrowed recorder in St. Louis "Wee Wee Hours", a mellow blues he had written, and "Maybellene", a novelty number based on a country tune he had rewritten and given a boogie-woogie beat. "We thought Maybellene was a jokey know", recalls Chuck's old pianist, Johnny Johnson. "Took the name off the hair cream bottle. People always liked it when we did it at the Cosmopolitan, but it was 'Wee Wee Hours' that we was proud of, that was our music".

Leonard Chess knew better. A tough businessman who had started out selling records from his car, he knew his break had come too. Having established a solid base of bluesmen whose work sold only to blacks and paid only his basic costs, he was developing black talent that could make it in the far richer white market. He wasn't alone. King, Federal, Specialty, Savoy — all small independents that had signed the young black artists the big companies wouldn't touch — were working on making the race breakthrough. (Sun Records in Memphis was doing an analogous thing with young white country talent — Elvis, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis.) They knew that they were sitting on a gold mine, that if white kids could just hear the music, they'd go crazy. Closer to the grass-roots than the major record companies, they had already seen the beginnings.

"When I used to go on the road with black acts I was handling in the forties, they didn't let whites into the clubs", says Ralph Bass, an W&R man who worked for several independents before going to Chess about ten years ago. "Then they got 'white spectator tickets' for the worst corner of the joint, no chairs and no dancing, and the tickets cost more too. But they had to keep enlarging it anyway, 'cause they just couldn't keep the white kids out, and by the early fifties they'd have white nights sometimes, or they'd put a rope across the middle of the floor. The blacks on one side, whites on the other digging how the blacks were dancing, and copying them. Then, hell, the rope would come down, and they'd all be dancing together".

Perry Como, Eddie Fisher, Teresa Brewer, Pattie Page; "That's Amore", "Doggie in the Window", "Stranger in Paradise", all coming from the radio ballroom shows — it was okay, and you hummed the tunes



when they were on Your Hit Parade. But they weren't done for you, and they didn't do anything to you. They were just there, co-extensive with and as natural as that Ike-WASP-peace-and-prosperity consensus which was threatened only by a few commies at the top, no swelling from below. There was nothing to criticize because there was little else to know. Then you heard "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" and you knew there were worlds "they" hadn't told you about.

1955. In somebody's basement you heard "Work with Me, Annie" and "Annie Had a Baby"; you sniggered, and marveled that "they" allowed it (or that this Hank Ballard had such daring). After that Georgia Gibbs' cute "Dance with me, Henry" was not only a laugh, but a tip-off that "they" had known about this new world and hidden it from you. Then came "Maybellene" and this skinny jumpy colored cat called Chuck Berry. Craazy! A beat that made Bill Haley pallid, nutty words like "motivatin", and a story about a guy chasing a Cadillac in his beat-up Ford to catch his girl. Oh, the triumph of the "V-8 Fo'd" leaving the "coupe de ville" sitting like a "ton of lead". But even more, it was the drive of the thing, the two minutes of rush, pure manic intensity, that sucked you in.

1956. "Blueberry Hill", "Fever", "See You Later, Alligator"; Little Richard, who could sing higher and lower and faster than anybody; Carl Perkins, who laid it right out: "Don't step on my blue suede shoes". The Platters, Mickey and Sylvia, Frankie Lyman, Gene Vincent, and then Elvis, the King, who was in flesh, spirit, and aura more perfect, more beautiful, more you than you could ever, ever hope to be. He sold about seven million records that year, and it was all over. "Lisbon Antigua" was a big hit that year too, and maybe you bought a copy, but it didn't matter, 'cause rock'n' roll was here to stay, the good times had begun to roll, and you sang with Chuck Berry, "They're really rockin' in Boston, Pittsburgh P.A., Deep in the heart of Texas, and round the Frisco Bay".

Chuck was rockin' too. The record he cut in May was number one in July, and in August he was signed to a tour that circled from New York to Florida and back, "one hundred and one nights in one hundred and one days", remembers Johnny Johnson. "Whew, the feeling it was to go from nothing to top bill in a few weeks I could never explain". There was only one way to rock success in those days. Get a hit, go on the road and push it; as it fades, put out another and go out and push that. No time to lose because the sun was finally shining so you'd better start raking that hay, man, who knows when it's gonna cloud over again. Chuck Berry worked like that for five years, touring with every star in the big package shows, appearing in three rock movies, and playing on all the TV "bandstands".

On stage he was magic, a glittering, rubber-faced jester who sang you the truth and made you laugh. Every star danced as he sang, but only Chuck had the "duck walk" that he first did at the Brooklyn Paramount in 1956. His back stiff and straight, he'd squat down over on heel, his other leg sticking out in front, and with his head at a weird tilt, he'd bounce across the stage, holding his guitar before him like a machine gun. All the way across, playing like mad, then back to the mike and coming in shouting right on the beat. The whole theatre would gasp then rock with applause. He had done the impossible with perfect grace.

"We didn't see too much of Chuck in those days", says Johnson. With Ebby Harding, Johnny's now back where he started, playing pick-up piano around St. Louis on weekends and working in a steel foundry during the week, but he recalls his days close to stardom without regret. "Yeah, we'd work at night, then Chuck would be in his room until the bus left writing new tunes. Always writing, never seen such a hard worker".

After "Maybellene" came "Roll Over, Beethoven", then "School Days", and then one begins to lose track: "Sweet Little Sixteen", "Rock'n' Roll Music", "Johnny B. Goode", "Oh Baby Doll", "Memphis", "Reelin' and Rockin'." Tune after perfection, Berry's revved up voice and slashing chorded guitar, Johnson's rippling, darting piano, Harding's sledgehammer drumming, and above all the lyrics — words of comic daring, cynicism and naivete, sexuality and mock innocence, bizarre invention and banality. All of it, right down to the technical production that made the records sound as if they were recorded in a garbage can, all of it great rock'n' roll music...

Let me hear some of that rock'n' roll music,  
Any old way you choose it,  
It's got a back beat you can't lose it,