

LET'S welcome to the Fillmore the man who made contemporary music, **CHUCK BERRY**. Deafening applause. Berry leapt out into the spotlight and up to the mike.

"All right?" he shouted

"All right!?" said the crowd.

"All right?"

"All right!"

"All right!" said Chuck. "Yeah! It's nice to be back in California, I needed the sunshine". Rippled laughter. He took a pose, chopped a quick chord, and sang.

Up in the morning and out to school

The teacher is teaching the golden rule...

He had on a black shirt, loose yellow slacks, and yellow shoes with chains across the instep. His long hair was tousled, his face already stippled with sweat.

Working your fingers right down to the bone,

And the guy behind you won't leave you alone...

His mouth was tight, his eyes looked out from a frosted distance behind his high Indian-proud cheekbones.

Back in the classroom, open your books,

Gee, but the teacher don't know how mean she looks...

Street corner hustler and show business dude, he was arrogantly elegant and vice versa, and his staccato choruses rolled out in whiplash strands.

Soon as three o'clock rolls around,

You finally lay your burden down,

Close your books, get out of your seat,

Down the halls and into the street...

The crowd — the standard long-haired, dropped-out, stoned-out mob — made little squeals as the song moved toward the climax. The red Gibson flashed in his hands like a rapier, his body lithe as a willow.

Drop the coin right into the slot,

You've gotta hear something that's really hot,

With the one you love you're making romance,

All day long you've wanted to dance...

As the crowd breathed a near audible yeah of recognition, Chuck chanted what had been, a decade before, the prophetic incantation of a generation.

Hail, hail, Rock'n' Roll!

Deliver me from the days of old,

Long live Rock'n' Roll!

The beat of the drum so loud and bold,

Rock, Rock, Rock'n' Roll!

The feeling is there body and soul.

— Chuck Berry, "School Days"*

He commanded the stage, magically looking not a day older nor one whit changed, creating a live rerun of a time gone by. To comprehend that handsome figure was to re-experience an era, to taste adolescence and the fifties; and the memories he evoked were memories of himself. The presence of Chuck Berry made past and present one, packed into one complete moment the feelings of a young lifetime growing up in America, and then opened up the way to exaltation, to digging who you had been, who you were, and who you could become...

Hail, hail, Rock'n' Roll!

Deliver me from the days of old.

TO get to Berry park, Chuck Berry's combination amusement park/country club near Wentzville, Missouri, you take Interstate 70 about 40 miles out of St. Louis and get off on High-

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way 61. It's the same exit as for Hannibal, and it's real Huck Finn country, corn and bovine lushness shadowed by massive clouds and pervaded by a damply buzzing August heat. Off from 61, Highway Z angles through Wentzville, past the Kroger and Ben Franklin stores, across the railroad tracks and by the grain elevator ("The Farmers of This State Built and Paid for a Lot of Elevators But This One They Own", a fading sign proclaims). Then it cuts out into the country and takes you the last five miles to the park.

Chuck has lived in a house hidden on the Berry Park grounds for about six years — since he got out of jail. The house is well appointed for his hobbies — with a guitar-shaped swimming pool, a darkroom, a videotape machine, a professional recording studio — and he lives there in self-sufficient semi-seclusion. On one hand still a public person, he is the park's full-time host and manager as well as barbecue chef for the big catered parties held there. He tours actively, playing between 50 and 100 dates a year, and in the past three years he has recorded five albums.

On the other hand he is a virtual recluse. He delivers his albums to Mercury Records as finished tapes for them to press and distribute; otherwise, he avoids the company. "Don't want to complain", complained a Mercury executive, "but yeah, he's a stubborn guy, living in the boondocks, taking no advice. Set in his ways, I'd call it. Sometimes he won't even return phone calls". Berry has cut his touring down to quick trips to the job and back to Wentzville by himself, taking only a guitar and a small suitcase. "I'm proud to say that if you call me in the morning, and if there's a plane going to where you're at, I'll play and please you in the evening", he said not long ago.

If Berry has close friends, none of his acquaintances know any of them, and no one has seen him in his old St. Louis haunts for a long time. He has given only two interviews in years, and in those, while being polite, he kept to bare facts and ornate rhetoric, taking no stands and telling only what he wanted told. His publicity biographies skim over his life, dwelling on details like his love of home-made chili, strawberry shortcake and "relaxing at a good movie". Unlike some stars who play an intricate striptease for their public, Chuck Berry is serious about his privacy and, consequently, is successful in defending it.

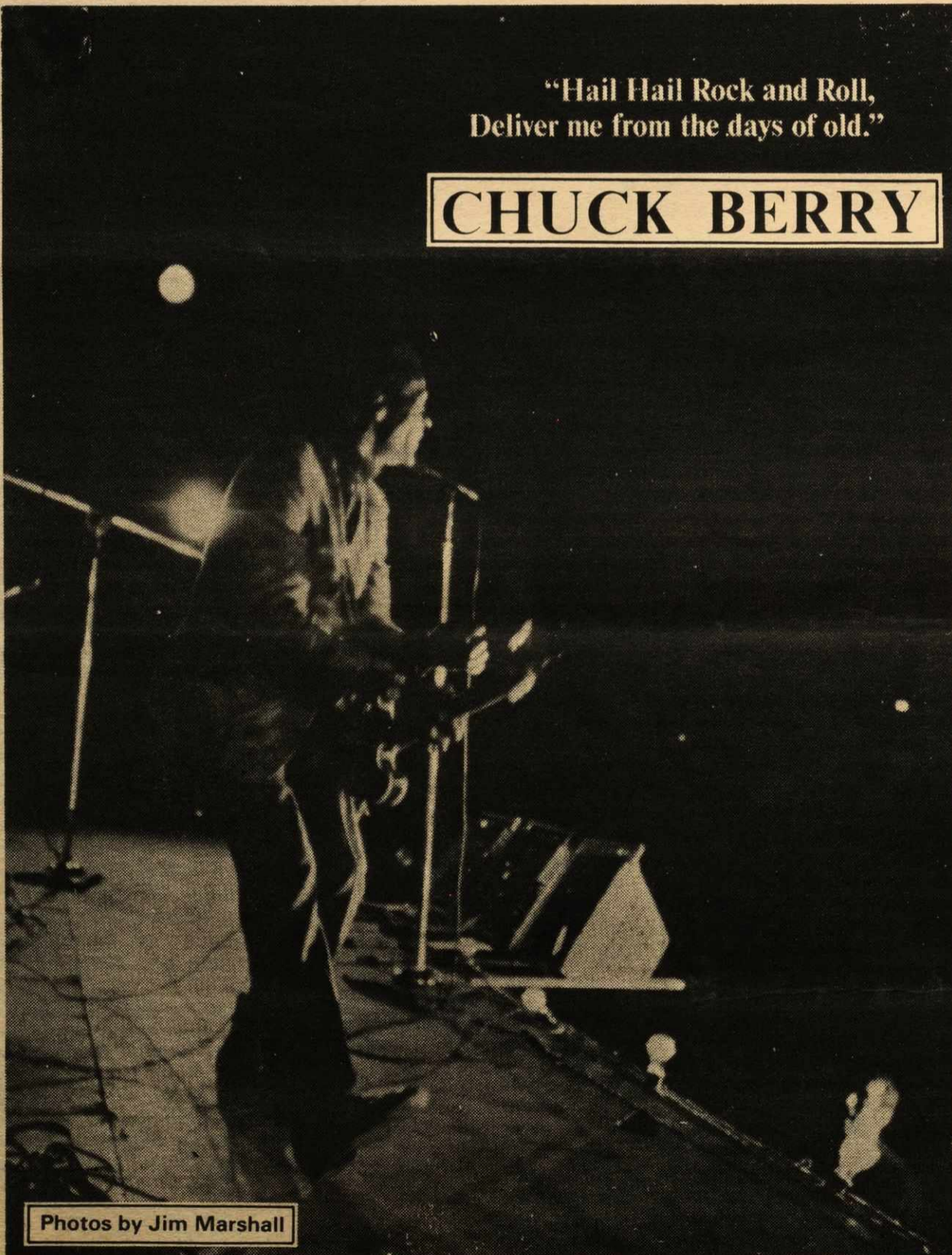
His guard does come down a little in Wentzville. Everybody in town (pop. 2700) knows him by sight; he's been coming to Wentzville all his life to visit cousins, and he's often seen wheeling through in one of his powder-blue Cadillacs. It's been Caddies for a long time, but once he had a 58 Ford, black with chromed dual pipes, skirts, a Continental spare kit on the back, railroad air horns on the hood, and one of those tops that dropped back into the trunk. "Straight nigger machine", says a Wentzwillian.

The townspeople find it hard to figure Chuck. They're not proud of him, and there's never been anything like a Chuck Berry Day. They're curious, but with him that's a frustrating occupation. Not that he's unfriendly, people say, no sir. He had the senior class out to his park for their spring picnic last year for free, just like he let the school use his movie theatre in town for the school play, and he even did the lights for it himself. He's always come by the proms and Legion Hall dances when he could to do some of his old tunes, and now that he owns the Corner Bar, he plays there a little most Friday nights. And he even lets "Dialogue Wentzville", the inter-race meetings of the Human Development Corporation, get together at his place.

It's just that you never get to know him. He doesn't put his name to anything; most folks don't know half the things he's doing. Secretive, some call it, saying that "this ex-con rock-singing nigger's gonna buy up the whole place on the sly, and then where'll we be?" A few parents were worried about letting the school kids go out to the park ("he was in jail for a sex crime, you know"), but the kids had a great time, especially when he let them use his videotape machine. He's never done anybody in town any harm — in fact, just the opposite. He's friendly when you meet him, never aloof; it's just that, well, you never know what he's thinking. "What'd he come way out here for, when he could be living it up in St. Louis, Chicago, anywhere?"

"Hail Hail Rock and Roll,
Deliver me from the days of old."

CHUCK BERRY



Photos by Jim Marshall

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