

The Sound of Chicago

Chuck Berry and Chess Records

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The 1950s was a defining era for American music, especially in Chicago, where blues and rock became increasingly popular with the city's growing Black population. Among the countless artists of the time, one stood out: Chuck Berry. By utilizing themes of youth, adventure, and romance in his lyrics, he was able to draw the attention of white audiences, a feat for African American artists at the time. His partnership with the iconic Chess Records – a record label described as “one of the greatest independent labels in history” by Guinness – allowed Berry to skyrocket to fame, selling millions of records during his time with the label.¹ As Chess Records reached the global stage, so too did Berry. In the present day, he is widely regarded as “the father of rock and roll,” as noted by NPR’s Audie Cornish.² By considering the historical context of the Chicago music scene and analyzing the pull Berry’s lyrics had on white audiences, it is possible to observe the immense impact Chuck Berry had on the city’s music scene. With the iconic Chess Records beside him, Chuck Berry became one of America’s most well-known artists and set the standard for generations of musicians to come by relating to American youth with his lyrics, rhythm, and persona.

Chuck Berry was born in 1926 in St. Louis, Missouri, the great-grandchild of former enslaved people.³ At the time, St. Louis was a heavily segregated city, and Berry would eventually leave for California in 1944, only to be arrested for armed

1 Paul McGuinness, “Roll Over, Beethoven: Chess Records And The Rock’n’Roll Revolution,” *uDiscoverMusic*, February 10, 2024, www.udiscovermusic.com/in-depth-features/chess-records-rock-n-roll-revolution/.

2 Audie Cornish, “Chuck Berry Immortalized On Voyager Space Mission,” *NPR*, March 20, 2017, www.npr.org/2017/03/20/520862763/chuck-berry-immortalized-on-voyager-mission-in-space.

3 “Chuck Berry,” *Biography*, Hearst Magazine Media, March 26, 2021, www.biography.com/musicians/chuck-berry.

robbery.⁴ In 1947, Berry was released from prison after serving three years and returned to his hometown to work for his father's construction business until the mid-1950s, when he began taking regular trips to Chicago, entranced by the city's local music scene.⁵ Around the same time, thousands of other African Americans were moving north and west in what is now called the Great Migration, seeking employment and freedom from racial violence.⁶ One of the major destinations for African Americans during this time was Chicago, which had been flooded with Black folk music since the 1910s with the first wave of this mass movement. It was in Chicago that Chuck Berry met Muddy Waters, a famous blues musician who also came up from the South to pursue a career in music. Muddy Waters was the one who recommended Berry to Chess Records.⁷ It was also at the suggestion of Muddy Waters that Berry released his first song, "Maybellene," which reached No. 1 on R&B charts in America and earned him a contract with Chess Records.⁸ This release sparked Berry's road to fame, a journey that began with his partnership with Chess Records.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, Chess Records signed many Black artists who became foundational in the creation of Chicago Blues, such as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Etta James. Bought in 1950 by Jewish brothers Leonard and Philip Chess, who immigrated to the U.S. from Poland, Chess Records was previously known as Aristocrat Labels.⁹ After purchasing the company, the brothers renamed it after their family name, which had been anglicized from Czyz.¹⁰ Despite not being African American themselves, the brothers quickly found themselves surrounded by Black culture in Chicago, especially after Leonard's purchase of the Macambo Lounge in a predominantly Black neighborhood.¹¹ This connection with the African American community is what led to the Chess brothers' interest in blues and rock, and became their first step into the music industry. The company moved quickly, becoming successful nearly overnight with hits such as "My Foolish Heart," "Juke," and *Rocket 88*.¹² Although it would not be until 1955 that the Chess brothers met Chuck Berry, he was quickly brought into the fold once introduced and together they produced several hit singles including "Johnny B Goode," "Rock'n'Roll Music," and "Sweet Sixteen," all of which, McGuinness claims, assisted in broadening Chess Record's scope past their central Black

4 "Chuck Berry," *Biography*.

5 "Chuck Berry," *Biography*.

6 "The Great Migration (1910-1970)," *National Archives*, National Archives and Records Administration, June 28, 2021, www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration.

7 "Chuck Berry," *Biography*.

8 "Chuck Berry," *Biography*.

9 McGuinness, "Roll Over, Beethoven."

10 McGuinness, "Roll Over, Beethoven."

11 McGuinness, "Roll Over, Beethoven."

12 McGuinness, "Roll Over, Beethoven."

audience.¹³

Chuck Berry's appeal to white audiences was not simply a coincidence but rather a result of his youthful lyrics that told stories of a life he never lived. With his lyrics about romance, dancing, adventure, and implied sexual activities, Berry captivated the youth of America. This is especially apparent in his hit song "Sweet Little Sixteen," which tells the story of a fashionable teenage girl who sought out famous musicians. Although many interpreted this song, along with many of Berry's others, as a glamorization of this lifestyle, Fryer claims that his lyrics contained a sense of distance and irony that criticized the actions of his song's protagonists.¹⁴ This distance is clear in the song's second and third verses where Berry writes, "She's just got to have / About a half a million / Framed autographs [...] She's got the grown-up blues / Tight dresses and lipstick / She's sportin' high heel shoes / Oh, but tomorrow morning / She'll have to change her trend / And be sweet sixteen / And back in class again."¹⁵ In these lyrics, Berry pokes fun at the girl's enthusiasm, writing "she's just got to have" and emphasizing her excessive need to chase fame. The third verse solidifies this almost mocking tone by reminding the listener that, as much fun as she has, she is still just a girl who has to go back to school when the night is over. In this sense, Berry does not take the girl's passion seriously and implies she is trying to grow up too fast, which is apparent in his saying, "She's got the grown-up blues." The themes of youth that Berry approaches in his lyrics spoke to his initial audience of Chicago's large Black community, putting him at the top of the rhythm and blues charts. His high position on music charts then exposed his music to a wider audience, including white youth. This white audience was captured by the themes of Berry's music, which "[transferred] the repression of blacks, economically and socially, to the repression of youth by adult authority," as can be seen in the rebellious narrative of "Sweet Little Sixteen."¹⁶ Berry took his personal experiences and translated them into a narrative that was more relatable to a white audience, allowing him to find a much wider listening base than other artists of his time. By analyzing the lyrics of "Sweet Little Sixteen," we can understand how Berry criticized the American teenage culture of obsession and sexual maturity, despite becoming a symbol for it himself, and reached a wider audience than other Black artists of his time.

Chuck Berry became not only a symbol of teenage culture and sexual promiscuity but also an iconic figure of Chicago's music scene. Today, Berry remains a legendary musician across the globe, spanning far past his origin city of Chicago. In fact, his influence has reached billions of miles past Earth with the aid of Voyager 1 and 2. In 1977, NASA launched these spacecraft, each carrying a gold-plated record with examples of human culture such as samples of music,

13 McGuinness, "Roll Over, Beethoven."

14 Paul H. Fryer, "'Brown-Eyed Handsome Man': Chuck Berry and the Blues Tradition," *Phylon* 42 no. 1, (1981): 60-72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274885>.

15 Chuck Berry, "Sweet Little Sixteen," *One Dozen Berrys*, Chess Records, 1958.

16 Fryer, "'Brown-Eyed Handsome Man.'"

nature sounds, and people talking.¹⁷ The goal of these records, called the Voyager Golden Records, was to provide knowledge of human life to any extraterrestrial life forms that may come across them. Placed alongside Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, Berry's music was chosen to represent humanity and preserved with the hope that one day, long after we are gone, we may be remembered. This honor speaks to the impact that Chuck Berry had on not only American music but rock and roll music around the world, and perhaps beyond.

Known to many as the father of rock and roll, Chuck Berry defined Chicago's music scene in the 1950s and '60s with the help of Chess Records, an iconic American recording company. By appealing to American youth with his glamorous lyrics and infectious rhythms, Berry widened Chess Records' audience to include both African Americans and white people, and in doing so brought rock and roll to millions of people around the world. Today, Chuck Berry is remembered as a pioneer of one of music's most popular genres and a massive inspiration to legendary bands such as the Rolling Stones and the Beatles. And perhaps when humans are forgotten as a blip in the grand scheme of the universe, it will be Chuck Berry's voice that remains an artifact of our species as he continues to inspire the universe with echoes of "*Go, go, go, Johnny, go.*"

17 Cornish, "Chuck Berry."