

## Chuck Berry: Father of Rock & Roll

---

While many artists are rock pioneers, Chuck Berry is universally considered the first who put it all together: the country guitar licks, the rhythm and blues beat, and lyrics that spoke to a young generation. In just a few songs, he drew a musical blueprint for what the world would soon know as rock & roll.

“He may be the single most important name in the history of rock,” critic Lillian Roxon wrote in her 1969 landmark *Rock Encyclopedia*.

“If you tried to give rock & roll another name,” Beatle John Lennon once said, “you might call it Chuck Berry.”

Born October 18, 1926, in St. Louis, Missouri, Berry grew up in a middle-class African American neighborhood, the fourth of six children. His father was a part-time preacher and his mother sang in the choir, so gospel was Berry’s earliest musical influence. The radio later introduced him to boogie-woogie, blues, swing, and “hillbilly” songs. After he wowed classmates with a vocal performance in high school, Berry was determined to have a music career.

Detoured by a three-year prison term for a teenage robbery spree, Berry got back on track and became a popular performer in St. Louis clubs singing other artists’ songs. Soon he began writing his own, at first by changing lyrics and notes of songs he already knew.

His big break came in a May 21, 1955, recording session at Chicago-based Chess Records when he borrowed from “Ida Red,” an old country song, and relied on his electric guitar to turn it into the raw and rollicking “Maybellene.”

“With its opening guitar run—a rapid mixture of notes and chords—the song had a relentless energy,” music historian Nadine Cohodas wrote. “Then there were Berry’s unconventional lyrics ... creating an unmistakable mood.”

Joe Perry of the rock group Aerosmith has called Berry “the Ernest Hemingway of rock & roll ... He tells a story in short sentences. You get a great picture in your mind of what’s going on, in a very short amount of time, in well-picked words.”



By year’s end, “Maybellene” had sold a million copies, and Berry saw he had tapped into an emerging market: white teenagers with new buying power who were searching for music they could call their own. Though long past his teens, Berry avidly drew on his own adolescent memories to write lyrics about driving, dating, and going to school.

“Everything I wrote about wasn’t about me, but about the people listening,” he said.

In his so-called “golden decade,” 1955-1965, Berry recorded a string of songs now considered the foundation of rock & roll. A dazzling stage performer, Berry toured solo, confident that local backup musicians would always know his songs.

Though his songwriting slowed in later years, Berry continued to perform until his death in March 2017. His influence endures. He was among the first class of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, inducted in 1986. In 2000, when Berry received the Kennedy Center Honors Award, President Bill Clinton called him “one of the 20th century’s

---

**Sources:** *American Songwriter*; *Lillian Roxon’s Rock Encyclopedia*, by Lillian Roxon; *Chuck Berry: The Biography*, by John Collis; *The New York Times*; Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ([rockhall.com](http://rockhall.com)); *Rolling Stone*; *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*; *Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*, by Nadine Cohodas

---

### LISTEN:

“Johnny B. Goode”  
“Maybellene”  
“No Particular Place to Go”  
“Roll Over Beethoven”  
“School Day”  
“Sweet Little Sixteen”  
“Rock & Roll Music”  
“You Never Can Tell”

### READ:

*Chuck Berry: The Biography*, by John Collis (Aurum Press, 2002): The author offers an unvarnished look at Berry’s musical genius and sometimes controversial life.

*Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry*, by Bruce Pegg (Routledge, 2005): This biography brings clarity to Berry’s groundbreaking career, examining his most famous songs in depth.