History of Rock Review Paper- Katherine Buchholz

Chuck Berry is an excellent artist and musician from before 1965 with many hits like the one called Roll Over Beethoven[[1]](#footnote-1), but his legal problems and incarcerations overshadowed his musical accomplishments in the 1950s. The recording is from the album 20th Century Masters: The Millennium Collection: Best of Chuck Berry which came out in 1999, though the song came out in 1956 and it is still the original version. The style of the song is the signature twelve bar blues for many songs during this time period, with an emphasis on the backbeat. For the rhythm, it is clear that the drums are the primary source of it with their beat that can be heard throughout the whole song and is very important to the song. The melody has some fast parts to it and then it becomes moderate speed for other parts of it, with the electric guitar as the primary source of sound, especially during its solo in the middle of the song. The harmony can be heard with the piano being played, and even a little bit of saxophone in there too. There is even a bass that is being played, which might be faint, but it contributes to the low register of the song. The song has repetition, a piano solo, and a rocking guitar solo. Chuck Berry has a basso voice in this and the tempo is an Allegro in 4/4. The piano and saxophones are piano most of the time during the song, while the drums are consistent in the background throughout the whole song. The electric guitar starts off a bit more forte and then disappears for a bit until a solo during the song and then there is a bit of crescendo with the electric guitar near the end of the song where the drums also become a more forte than they were throughout the song, signifying the end of the song. The instruments make the song lively, happy, and full of enthusiasm. The other instruments and their musicians on this recording make it a very good performance especially the pianist Johnnie Johnson. This song is signature Chuck Berry music, it shows off his guitar skills.

Chuck Berry was born in St. Louis on October 18, 1926, and was born into a good working-class black family, so he had a variety of jobs before music. He grew up in a three-bedroom brick cottage, where the community was thriving, and his family was very musical. He never had even seen a white person until he was like 3, but he did know piano and music before learning to walk. Berry’s earliest influences were blues and swing with people like Muddy Waters and Nat King Cole. The point of his life where he realized he wanted to do this was in 1941 at Sumner High School with its middle class black student body when he refused to sing one of their classics and instead sang “Confessin’ the Blues” which they went wild for, and he realized he wanted to learn the guitar himself from his accompanist. That’s when he did learn and began to play on his own at nightclubs[[2]](#footnote-2). He was the first to fuse blues, country, and rhythm-and-blues together that was something that spoke to American teenagers, now known as rock and roll. All of this while he was just a onetime autoworker. His first success was Maybellene in 1955 at 29 years old, which led to even more like Roll Over Beethoven, School Days, and Johnny B. Goode to name a few of the others in the 1950’s and 1960’s. He was a baritone with good diction and lyrics, but what really helped him was the way he played the electric guitar. On his electric guitar he put blues and rhythm and blues licks in with some bluegrass inflections, so that it would fit a pop song during that time period. He faced lots of racism early in his career because he was black, so he was turned away when there were live performances, and some of these people thought he was white with his clarity when singing, so when they figured out he wasn’t they said no[[3]](#footnote-3). Roll Over Beethoven was written as a loving dig at his sister Lucy who spent lots of time playing classical music on their piano, so young Chuck Berry didn’t really have a turn at playing the popular music he wanted to play[[4]](#footnote-4). His songs didn’t just apply to young white adolescents concerns of parents, dancing, cars, teenage romance, new music, and lust, but also to the African American youth with the R&B beat and electrification in country runs, so it applied to everyone teenager in some way. For Berry, the guitar was on the same level as lead vocals with trade-offs like in jazz, which is still the way you can see the guitar used today. There were lots of sexual and racial incidents in his life like him saying the St. Louis police singled him out because his nightclub was interracial, and the most notable one with the Mann Act conviction in 1961 where he supposedly transported a 14 year old girl illegally over state lines[[5]](#footnote-5).

In 1944, Berry and his friends went on a road trip and proceeded to do a robbery spree until they were caught, and they were jailed unfairly and with maximum sentences because of their race.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the early 1950’s he joined his former classmate in a trio as a guitarist, and they started to make a name for themselves, and in December 1952 they played New Year’s Eve at the Cosmopolitan Club which was mostly black, but they were doing very well after this especially because of Chuck’s want to please the crowd. His career took off to what we know it to be after going to Chicago, specifically the Palladium, and talking to Muddy Waters who told Berry that Chess Records was his shot, so he took that advice, and the rest is history. Then, there was his signature duck walk that audiences loved him everywhere for with his guitar and teen oriented material. All this made Chuck Berry into the enigmatic personality who we know today that has this excellent song “Roll Over Beethoven”.

There are so many different articles about Chuck Berry and his jail sentences, so they have overshadowed the rest of his career that was before 1965. One of the articles I found was from August 29th, 1959 titled Negro Singer Jailed: Accused of Trying to Date Mississippi White Girl[[7]](#footnote-7) and it was in the New York Times. I found similar ones in the Washington Post[[8]](#footnote-8), the Boston Globe[[9]](#footnote-9), and the Philadelphia Inquirer though their reporter was in Virginia[[10]](#footnote-10), which all pretty much said the same thing as the first article I found, so it really makes it, so the jail sentences overthrow the appreciation for his music. It talks about how he was arrested the night before the article was published after performing at a white high school fraternity where this girl accused him, though he said it was all a misunderstanding because her and her boyfriend were just asking for an autograph from him, which he gave to them. It said he was held at their county jail on disorderly conduct charges with an investigation being pursued by police. What I do know is that even with all this craziness in life, there were people like the Beach Boys and The Rolling Stones who were inspired by him during the rest of the 1960’s with their own music, which was surf rock and the British Invasion. So, even with these jail sentences, people still loved his music and were inspired by him. It helped that he kept on going in the 1970’s and onwards though his touch wasn’t completely the same as before, there were still some hits like the song My Ding-a-Ling, the consistency of his touring, performing for Jimmy Carter at the White House, and so much more that made him recognized as a pioneer of rock up until his death at 90 years old on March 18th, 2017[[11]](#footnote-11). All of this is what cements him and his music, like Roll Over Beethoven, as one of the first greats of rock history.

Another artist that went to jail a few times after 1965 was Ozzy Osbourne of the band Black Sabbath. The first time was when he went to jail in 1965 for 7 weeks in Birmingham for failing to pay the fines for a burglary conviction[[12]](#footnote-12). That was when he wasn’t really known yet and a teenager still, so it didn’t really affect his career at all. The second time was when he tried to strangle his wife Sharon on September 2, 1989. This happened because of his addiction to alcohol that he depended on, and because he was at a low even though he recently had a top 20 platinum hit with his No Rest for the Wicked album. Sharon recounted that there was a bad atmosphere and he came downstairs after going to sleep and told her it was time for her to die, and then he proceeded to jump on her and actually try to strangle her, but it didn’t happen because someone was there to stop him by having the police arrest him. This landed him in his worst nightmare of not knowing why he was in a jail cell until he asked and discovered what he had done that he didn’t remember. Ozzy himself even admitted that he didn’t mean to do this[[13]](#footnote-13). What this shows is that Ozzy Osbourne with his crazy antics and things that happened like trying to kill his own wife, him being in Black Sabbath seemed to fuel all of this because it was during the time where the band was popular, so the music wasn’t necessarily overshadowed by any of this but went along with it and might have even partially helped the record sales. In this case, his legal problems and times in jail didn’t appear to overshadow the musical accomplishments from Black Sabbath but helped them, unlike what these things did to Chuck Berry which was the exact opposite.

1. "20th Century Masters: The Millennium Collection: Best of Chuck Berry." *Alexander Street*, 1999. Accessed November 26, 2018. https://search-alexanderstreet-com.proxy.longwood.edu/view/work/bibliographic\_entity|recorded\_track|696962. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Weinraub, Bernard. "Sweet Tunes, Fast Beats and a Hard Edge." *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*, February 23, 2003. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.longwood.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/92561935/pageviewPDF/9D07F2452FCC4B5APQ/1?accountid=12144>. The New York Times, Page 1 and 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.longwood.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000002888> – Couldn’t find the article again to recite, but it was there when used it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hiatt, Brian, David Browne, Jon Dolan, Hank Shteamer, and Kory Grow. "Chuck Berry: 20 Essential Songs." Rolling Stone. June 25, 2018. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/chuck-berry-20-essential-songs-129229/too-much-monkey-business-1956-129626/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Weinraub, Bernard. "Sweet Tunes, Fast Beats and a Hard Edge." *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*, February 23, 2003. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.longwood.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/92561935/pageviewPDF/9D07F2452FCC4B5APQ/1?accountid=12144>. The New York Times, Page 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berry, Chuck. *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography*. London: Faber, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. "NEGRO SINGER JAILED: Accused of Trying to Date Mississippi White Girl." *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.longwood.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/114688583/fulltextPDF/32B932EA99344566PQ/1?accountid=12144>. The New York Times from 29 August 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. "Singer Is Arrested." *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.longwood.edu/hnpwashingtonpost/docview/140935383/1F1D1F7F96694DE4PQ/1?accountid=12144>. Washington Post from 29 August 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. "Charles Berry, Singer, Jailed for Date Bid." *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.longwood.edu/hnpnewyorkbostonglobe/docview/504649333/236A9D671AFC49DEPQ/2?accountid=12144>. Daily Boston Globe from 29 August 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ""They Had Me Wrong", Chuck Berry Tells Guide; Fans Are Still with Him." *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.longwood.edu/hnpphiladelphiainquirer/docview/568668427/F2E923EB87CC45D7PQ/9?accountid=12144>. New Journal and Guide from 05 September 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pareles, Jon. "Chuck Berry, Rock ’n’ Roll Pioneer, Dies at 90." *The New York Times*, March 18, 2017. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/18/arts/chuck-berry-dead.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mgallucci. "Rock Stars Who Have Done Time." Ultimate Classic Rock. September 13, 2013. Accessed November 26, 2018. <http://ultimateclassicrock.com/rock-stars-who-have-done-time/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jeff Giles. "That Time Ozzy Osbourne Tried to Kill His Wife." Ultimate Classic Rock. September 02, 2014. Accessed November 26, 2018. <http://ultimateclassicrock.com/ozzy-osbourne-tries-to-kill-sharon/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)