

The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Chuck Berry (1926-2017) RIP—Michael's Rock and Roll Posse

I heard from about a dozen of you last night and this morning, as soon as you heard that Chuck Berry had died. This *Rolling Stone* was my first head's up, and it arrive by email last night at 6:03 pm Central Time. Many newspapers have obituaries stored for famous seniors, which they freshen up when the personality dies, and so this must be why RS was able to roll out these wonderful stories so quickly.

In truth, I have had my own tributes ready for some time in my mind's eye, for Chuck, Little Richard, and Fats Domino, and sort of one for Jerry Lee Lewis, the greatest rockers still alive and until yesterday, the first three were all alive and at the top of any such list. It is astounding that any of these hard-charging and hard-living guys have lived so long. I will truly mourn when Little Richard passes, given his role in my own rock and roll life <http://lawofrockandroll.com/cgi-bin/rockandroll/jump.cgi?ID=91;v=PDF;fname=/It%20is%20Only%20Rock%20and%20Roll%20Review%20M%20Olivas%20The%20Americas%20Review%2016%20Fall%20Winter> . But the DNA of Chuck Berry is all over rock and roll, and I was lucky enough to see him once, when I was in law school, in a DC night club in 1979 or 1980, near Howard University, where he played with a pick up band, the way he always did, unbelievably. I was only 10 feet or so from him in a very smoky, boozy joint, and it was one of the thousands he played in his long and fulfilling life. I remember his chiseled features very well, and still recall the exquisite guitar playing. I also saw him once in a nightclub he owned in St. Louis, but he was watching Taj Mahal perform that night, not playing.

The Taylor Hackford-directed documentary *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll* (1987), is among the best such rock and roll movies of all time, and was a tribute to Chuck Berry roots, his contributions, and his tempestuous life and desultory musicianship. The project was assembled by Keith Richards, who acknowledged the debt he owed Berry, and it clearly showed the singular focus and casual approach he had to his public performances. (See the memory of the movie by Hackford, below in *RS*.) But the mid-1950's and 1960's movies in which he participated are also fascinating, especially *Mister Rock and Roll* (1957) and *The T.A.M.I. Show* (1964), which I

consider the best rock and roll performance movie of all time. True, it was stolen by James Brown, but it is unimaginable that so many stars could have gotten together to play just a few songs each, and there is Chuck Berry, duck-walking, hopping around one-footed, and playing his licks on “Johnny B. Goode,” “Maybellene,” “Sweet Little Sixteen,” and “Nadine.” Take these songs and add “Roll Over Beethoven,” and you have the birth of rock and roll. Even though his goofy novelty song “My Ding a Ling” was his only No. One song, his three chords resonate through virtually every important song since 1955.

The influences were so profound that one of the earliest copyright infringement cases in rock and roll was brought by Berry against the Beach Boys for their 1963 “Surfin’ U.S.A.,” accusing Brian Wilson of infringing on the 1958 “Sweet Little Sixteen.” The RS story gets it wrong, as the resolution was to give Berry co-writing credit as a settlement—even though the Beach Boys’ manager and Brian’s father Murry Wilson did not reveal the settlement to his sons until years later:

<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/songs-on-trial-10-landmark-music-copyright-cases-20160608/the-beach-boys-vs-chuck-berry-1963-20160608>.

This morning, Brian Wilson tweeted (@BrianWilsonLive): “I am so sad to hear about Chuck Berry passing - a big inspiration! He will be missed by everyone who loves Rock 'n Roll. Love & Mercy.”

Love and Mercy, indeed. No one can say more, and whether or not we know it, everyone who loves rock and roll must love its father, Chuck Berry. May his soul rest in peace.

Rolling Stone



Chuck Berry, Rock & Roll
Innovator, Dead at 90



Peter Guralnick on Why Chuck
Berry Is Even Greater Than You
Think



'Hail! Hail! Rock n' Roll'
Honors Chuck Berry



Chuck Berry's Bottomless
Vault: Inside His Box Set





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