

# Chuck Berry won't roll over for anyone

*After 30 years, music legend keeps his privacy*

By Hunter Drohojowska and Richard Stayton

**A**pril 4 — Chuck Berry Day in St. Louis, an event concocted as part of the city's first arts festival. In a bar named Blueberry Hill, the event is announced by a big sign: "Celebrate Chuck Berry's 30 years as a performing artist. Rock & Roll Beer — \$10.50 a case." Instead of "Maybelline," the song he composed here so many years ago, the Rockola jukebox is tinkling with the sounds of a distant protegee: Billy Joel.

Still, it is Berry himself whose picture, under the banner of "Heroes of Rock & Roll," graces the cans of beer so eagerly chugged by fans readying for this evening's concert. Paraphernalia from the lives of Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly and other early rockers is strewn around the walls, but the biggest photograph in the place is that of Berry, mounted high on the wall like an effigy of Mao and autographed: "The Best of Beer and Life, Chuck Berry." At the root of the signature is a little, smiley face.

Meanwhile, several miles south on Delmar Street, in the posh part of town, a thick line of Berry's fans snakes around a renovated 1907 bank building called Jimmy's Cabaret. In the back room of this effete disco, Berry is finishing a box of Kentucky Fried Chicken. He isn't ready to see reporters yet.

Cabaret owner Jim Jamieson III, 27, nervously scans the crowd of 800 fighting for drinks at the tellers' windows. "This is an older audience," he says. "A lot of these people grew up with Chuck Berry."

That includes Jamieson's mother, a St. Louis native who remembered going to small clubs as a teen-ager to hear Berry. She adds that Ike and Tina Turner, also locals, played at her high school sorority dances. Her son insists,



Chuck Berry finally got his first Grammy — a life achievement award — in 1984.

*"There's fans that you know. One guy in a wheelchair in Atlanta, he's there each time and he takes pictures. We are both growing older."*

Chuck Berry

"Chuck Berry is a St. Louisian, not just some superstar living in (the suburb of) Wentzville."

Fans are already humming old Berry tunes: "Johnny B. Goode," "Rock and Roll Music," "My Ding-a-Ling." Many remembered the concerts at "Berry Park," the 40-acre farm just west of St. Louis where Berry performed in the 1970s for his hometown audience. Others have known Chuck even longer: An older black couple, he in a suit, she in a jeweled gown, were conspicuous among the white kids in their Levis. The woman, Ann Austin, had taught Berry to be a hairdresser at the Doro School of Beauty and Culture before he discovered his true calling. Of his rock 'n' roll career, she recalls, "I thought he had potential."

Berry looks 10 years younger than his 58 years. There is an air of nonchalance about him, though not of indifference, as reporters file into his dressing room. "Welcome to misery," Berry greets them, making a pun on his state's name. A reporter asks why, as a multimillionaire who could live anywhere in the world, he would still be in St. Louis.

"Because it's home. Roots. Familiarity. Country you're familiar with. People you're familiar with."

And how did he feel about his hometown celebrating the 30th anniversary of his first hit song?

"I don't know *whose* idea that was," he snaps, turning irritable. "It's been 29 years! It was May 21, 29 years ago." (Various biographies claim "Maybelline" was recorded in May 1955.)



Berry, the hero of rock 'n' roll, is a private person who does not much like interviews. The only one in this dressing room with whom he feels comfortable is Joe Edwards, proprietor of the Blueberry Hill bar, which produces Rock & Roll beer and pays Berry to use his photo on the can.

When a reporter tries to turn on a tape recorder, Berry scowls and with regal dignity announces, "You can turn that thing off now." We ask why he so dislikes interviews. "Why?" His face takes on a sly expression. "One time, some college student came and set the recorder on the table and said, 'I got an hour of tape.' And I said, 'Goodbye.' I'll

talk if you ask the questions. But most (reporters) don't have questions. There's no dialogue. That happens three or four times and word is out. It gets known."

The reporters acknowledge this with nods and grins. But they all know there is another reason for avoiding questions. The answers can be embarrassing for Berry, a man who has been imprisoned twice since the success of "Maybelline."

Berry is from a lower-middle-class family in St. Louis and served time in reform school on a robbery conviction before acquiring a degree in cosmetology and hairdressing. He went on to work on an auto assembly line to support a wife and kids. By 1953, he was back to working as a beautician and leading a three-piece blues group on weekends. In 1955, or 1956, he recorded an adapted country tune called "Ida Red." It was renamed "Maybelline" and became one of the first nationwide rock 'n' roll hits.

Of the next four singles, only "Roll Over Beethoven" was successful. In 1958 he recorded "Sweet Little Sixteen" and "Johnny B. Goode," but in 1959 he ran out of

luck and into the white establishment. He imported a Spanish-speaking Apache prostitute from El Paso to check hats in his St. Louis nightclub, then fired her. According to rock writer Robert Christgau, "She went to the police and Berry was indicted under the Mann Act. After two trials, the first so blatantly racist that it was disallowed, he went to prison for two years." Of the sentence, Edwards says, "No one else would have served time for that. He is really bitter about it."

When he got out in 1964, he and his wife had separated. He had a few hits — "Nadine" and "No Particular Place to Go" — but many believe they were written before he went to jail. According to Christgau, "Between 1965 and 1970, he didn't release one even passable new song, and he died as a recording artist."

In 1972, he had a success with "My Ding-a-ling," selling more than 1 million copies. In 1979, he released "Rockit," considered his best album in 15 years. But that year, disaster struck again. He was sentenced to a 100-day jail term, plus 1,000 hours to be performed at benefits, this time for tax evasion.

But now Berry is being presented with the key to the city.

Earlier that day, we went to three bookstores in different St. Louis neighborhoods asking for souvenirs, biographies, scrapbooks, photo histories, any printed material on the city's notorious — if not favorite — son.

"We used to have some books on Michael Jackson," said a clerk at one store, "but they were all stolen. Now we have a few on Prince left. But we don't have nothing on Chuck Berry." At another store, the clerk merely rolled his eyes. At the tourist mecca of LaCledde's Landing, we asked at the wax museum whether, among the representations of Mark Twain and Ronald Reagan, there was a waxen Chuck Berry.

"No," replied the girl, "but we just got a Michael Jackson."

We ask Berry whether all this hoopla about his 30th anniversary doesn't seem a little hypocritical. Doesn't he feel oppressed by all that

has happened to him? He pauses before answering.

"Well, the greatest oppression is to be deceased," he says. "When I look at those who've been deceased, I've been flying pretty high. I hold no grudges. It's like when you're happy, you're happy. Just money will make you feel like that."

But what about the Grammys? He received his first Grammy in 1984 as a lifetime achievement award. Doesn't he feel they are ... we grapple for the right adjective ... "Fictitious?" Berry finishes the question with a snap. "Perhaps!" he snorts.

Berry hasn't gotten involved in the pursuits typically associated with rock 'n' rollers: "Drugs is not my thing, or liquor either," he says. His kicks are making music and money. He managed to retain the rights to his music, publish his own songs, invest in real estate and keep his staff small.

How does Berry feel about hearing his influence on younger rock 'n' rollers like Prince or Michael Jackson.

"I can't hear the influence, but I hear similar things to it, similar strokes. There's nothing new under the sun. What everybody's done has always been done, but not by them."

Well, then, who were some of his influences? In a bored tone of voice, Berry rattles them off: "Tommy Longstreet, Nat Cole, T. Bone Walker, Tom Dorsey, Old Blue Eyes and Muddy Waters. A big influence. In fact, he's in my bloodstream."

And whose music does Berry like today? "My own, but I hear a lot of music. I listen to my music to improve it, I listen to other music for enjoyment. I like pretty much of what I hear, maybe one out of every 10 songs."

Is there anyone he feels strongly about? "My word about other artists is skeptical. 'Chuck doesn't like him, or does like him.' Does that mean somebody else should like him or shouldn't like him? There isn't time in this life to like or not like anybody," he sniffs.

But he is dedicated to one performer, which is part of his reason for this evening's performance: Ingrid Berry, his daughter, is the warm-up act. As dad is being interviewed backstage, Ingrid and her husband, also named Chuck, are rocking 'n' rolling for the club's impatient audience.

Talking about Ingrid — one of his four children — Berry's interest is piqued for the first time. "She's my blood. Whatever I say about her's got to be proud. Every father would be, regardless. It would be



like saying my right arm is best. It's for other people to say how good she is."

Berry himself is getting impatient. "This is the smallest job I've worked for 13 years," he admits. "I perform only because evidently there is a demand. The benefits of performance is only 3 percent of my career; I imagine three-tenths of a percent. But if people didn't want it, there'd be no demand and it's a livelihood for me."

He begins to change into the evening's dress: bright yellow acrylic bell-bottoms, a nylon pullover of red, blue and green diagonals that he calls a "Mexican shirt," and shiny black patent leather shoes. "Should I start out normally or bizarre?" he asks. "It's always one or the other."

Outside, 800 fans are restless. Berry says, "There's fans that you know. One guy in a wheelchair in Atlanta, he's there each time and he takes pictures. We are both growing older," he laughs.

Ingrid's gyrations and soaring voice are nearing the end. Berry will ride in a limo around the block to the front of the cabaret to make an entrance. Inside, sparklers sparkle and soap bubbles are automatically pumped into the air. Someone connected with the St. Louis Arts Festival reads a proclamation from the mayor, calling Chuck Berry the "founding father of contemporary popular music" and declaring April 4, 1985, as Chuck Berry Day. Berry grabs the paper and cries, "It actually says ..." but his words are drowned out by the applause. Berry jumps to center stage and soon is incanting, "Hail, hail, rock 'n' roll. Deliver me from the days of old. Long live rock 'n' roll. The beat of the drums loud and bold. Rock, rock, rock 'n' roll. The feeling is there body and soul."

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Chuck Berry kept performing through the '60s, although his records didn't sell.