NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 1990)

OMB No. 10024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in ***How to Complete the National Register of (HistoricPlaces Registration Form*** (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x' in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for 'not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Berry, Chuck. House

other namelsite number Berry, Charles Edward Anderson and Themetta Suggs, House

2. Location

street & town 3137 Whittier Street n/a not for publication

city or town St. Louis n/a vicinity

state Missouri code MO county St. Louis [Independent City] code 510 zip code 63115

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☒ nationally ☐ statewide ☐ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Mark A Miles — October 28, 2008

Signature of certifying official/Title Mark A. Miles/Deputy SHPO Date

Missouri Deoartment of Natural Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is: Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
☐ removed from the National Register.
☐ other, (explain:) _____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

n/a

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling
DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

Current Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: shaped parapet single-family house

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation limestone
concrete
walls brick
roof
other

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

☒See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 7

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

☐ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

☒ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☐ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

☐ **B** removed from its original location.

☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.

☐ **D** a cemetery.

☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ **F** a commemorative property.

☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance
(enter categories from instructions)

PERFORMING ARTS

ETHNIC HERITAGE: BLACK

Period of Significance
1950-1958

Significant Dates
n/a

Significant Persons
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
Berry, Chuck

Cultural Affiliation
n/a

Architect/Builder
Moxey, William and James Podmore, builders/contractors

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

☒See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 8

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☒ Other Name of repository:

Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc.

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 9

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References
(Place additional boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	15	740920	4283103
2	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / /
3	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / /
4	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / /

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property.)
Lot 41 of Block 2, CB 4467, North Chouteau Place Addition

Property Tax No.

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected.)
The boundary encompasses all of the property historically associated with the Chuck Berry House.

See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 10

11. Form Prepared By

name/title see continuation page 29
organization _____ date _____
street & number _____ telephone _____
city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets
Maps A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.
Photographs: Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.
Additional items: (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

name/title Kimber Investments
street & number 1548 E. Nicholls Road telephone _____
city or town Kaysville state UT zip code 84037

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Summary

The Chuck Berry House, a single-family red brick dwelling with a shaped parapet,[1] is located at 3137 Whittier Street in the Greater Ville neighborhood of north St. Louis, Missouri. Currently vacant, the original one-story brick portion consisting of three rooms was constructed in 1910. In 1956, two rooms with concrete block walls were added at the rear. The modest building's design is accented by brick corbelling below the roofline. Shaded by a metal awning (with a faded letter "B," for Berry), a concrete block porch with a metal railing spans most of the façade, which faces east. Doors and windows are covered by metal grilles to discourage vandals. The original portion of the house—with a flat roof, raised basement and limestone foundation—is 22 feet wide and 29 feet deep. The house substantially reflects its appearance during the 1950 to 1958 period of significance as well as from earlier in the 20th century. It retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Elaboration

The Greater Ville residential neighborhood has become somewhat economically depressed although, unlike the Berry House, most of the other properties are occupied.[2] Unlike the original Ville neighborhood to the south, the Greater Ville neighborhood is more densely populated and overall its homes have been better maintained.

The Berry House stands on a narrow lot measuring 25 feet by 117 feet. It is positioned at the front of the lot, near the public sidewalk. Only a few feet separate the building from adjacent, roughly similar one-story, single-family dwellings to the north and south.

The primary (east) elevation of the Berry House is two bays wide with asymmetrical fenestration. Laid in a stretcher bond, the red bricks have been painted red (in the façade only). The main entrance is in the south part of the façade and a window is in the north (see photo 1). The entrance is much closer to the south side wall than is the window to the north. A limestone belt course, painted white, runs across the facade and forms the sill of the window. Five concrete steps aligned with the entrance lead to the wide but shallow concrete block porch, which has been painted white. A metal awning affixed to the brick wall is supported by simple metal columns. A decorative metal railing rings the porch.

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[1] In "A Preservation Plan For St. Louis, Volume 1," the Shaped Parapet Single Family House is described as a type of vernacular residential building which was popular in St. Louis between 1900 and 1920. "A Preservation Plan" was prepared in 1995 by the Heritage and Urban Design Division of the City of St. Louis, financed in part with federal funds administered by the Historic Preservation Program, Division of State Parks, Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

[2] But the Berry House may not remain empty much longer. Due in part to recent publicity in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the house may soon find a buyer.

The broken parapet has three raised sections and is capped with limestone. While the central section is much wider than those at the corners, each projects from the wall plane with triple courses of stretchers one brick deep over a single course that is half a brick deep. Below the roofline and above the awning, a course of brick corbels extends across most of the elevation (see photo 2). The pattern consists of a double course of stretchers which project from the wall plane the depth of one brick, below which are the corbels, comprised of single stretchers over single headers which project half a brick from the wall plane. The pattern is completed by an even shallower single course of stretchers which runs beneath the corbels.

Except for the front window, all windows in the original portion have wooden sills and are topped by segmental arches consisting of two rows of brick headers. These wood sash windows are double-hung 1/1s. Except for the façade, the roofline is topped with terra cotta coping.

The south elevation of the original portion has two windows, one large and one of medium size (see photo 3), and the north wall is blind. Both of these elevations have stepped parapet walls.

In 1956, the year that he recorded the classic songs "Roll Over Beethoven," "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" and "Too Much Monkey Business," Berry constructed a two-room concrete block addition to accommodate his growing family and presumably create or free-up space for practicing alone or with his band.

The addition's east wall abuts the west elevation of the original house (see photos 4 & 5). Built of aggregate concrete blocks with a solid concrete foundation, the addition is rectangular and somewhat narrower than the original portion of the building. It nearly doubles the original house's depth and is only a few feet narrower in width. The south wall of the addition is aligned with the south wall of the house except for a rectangular space where one set of stairs leads to a side entrance into the addition and another set of stairs leads to the basement under the original building. This elevation has two windows, one looking east over the stairs and the other facing south. Throughout the addition, metal awning windows are situated in square openings with concrete sills. The north wall of the addition is indented two or three feet from the north wall of the original house, leaving exposed a tall, narrow window on the original rear elevation (see photo 5). There are two windows on the north side of the addition. The addition's west (rear) elevation is punctuated by two square windows flanking a central entrance with double doors accessed by wide concrete steps.

A wire fence encloses the narrow back yard.

Interior

The Chuck Berry House retains its original floor plan throughout (see Figure 1). The main entrance opens onto a small hallway. Inside and immediately to the right of the entrance, a

doorway (widened, at some point) with a segmental arch leads to a square front room. A small bathroom is on the south side of the hall and a kitchen is straight ahead (west) in the back of the original part of the house. Doorways in both the kitchen and front room lead to what was originally a bedroom in the northwest portion. A doorway in the west wall of the kitchen (the original back door) leads to the two-room addition. The addition's rooms are aligned one in front of the other.

The early 20th century interior substantially retains its original hardwood floors, window enframements, and millwork (see photo 6). There are few interior doors of any kind, but door enframements are grooved, with bulls-eye corner blocks. Walls are lath and plaster. Doors to a bedroom closet and bathroom are historic and have multiple horizontal panels. Above the front window, a transom containing a leaded, art glass panel with a wreath design provides a decorative touch (see photo 7).

Integrity

Inside and out, the Chuck Berry House is in fairly good condition and has endured only relatively minor alterations. Exterior changes include painting the brick façade red, painting the belt course white, and parging the limestone foundation with cement. Probably after the period of significance, protective metal grilles were installed on window and door openings. The front door is modern and made of metal. The interior retains most of its original materials. At some point, the doorway between the entry hall and the front room was widened and segmentally arched. Some remodeling also has occurred in the kitchen, probably in the 1950s or 1960s. These appear to have been the only intentional alterations.

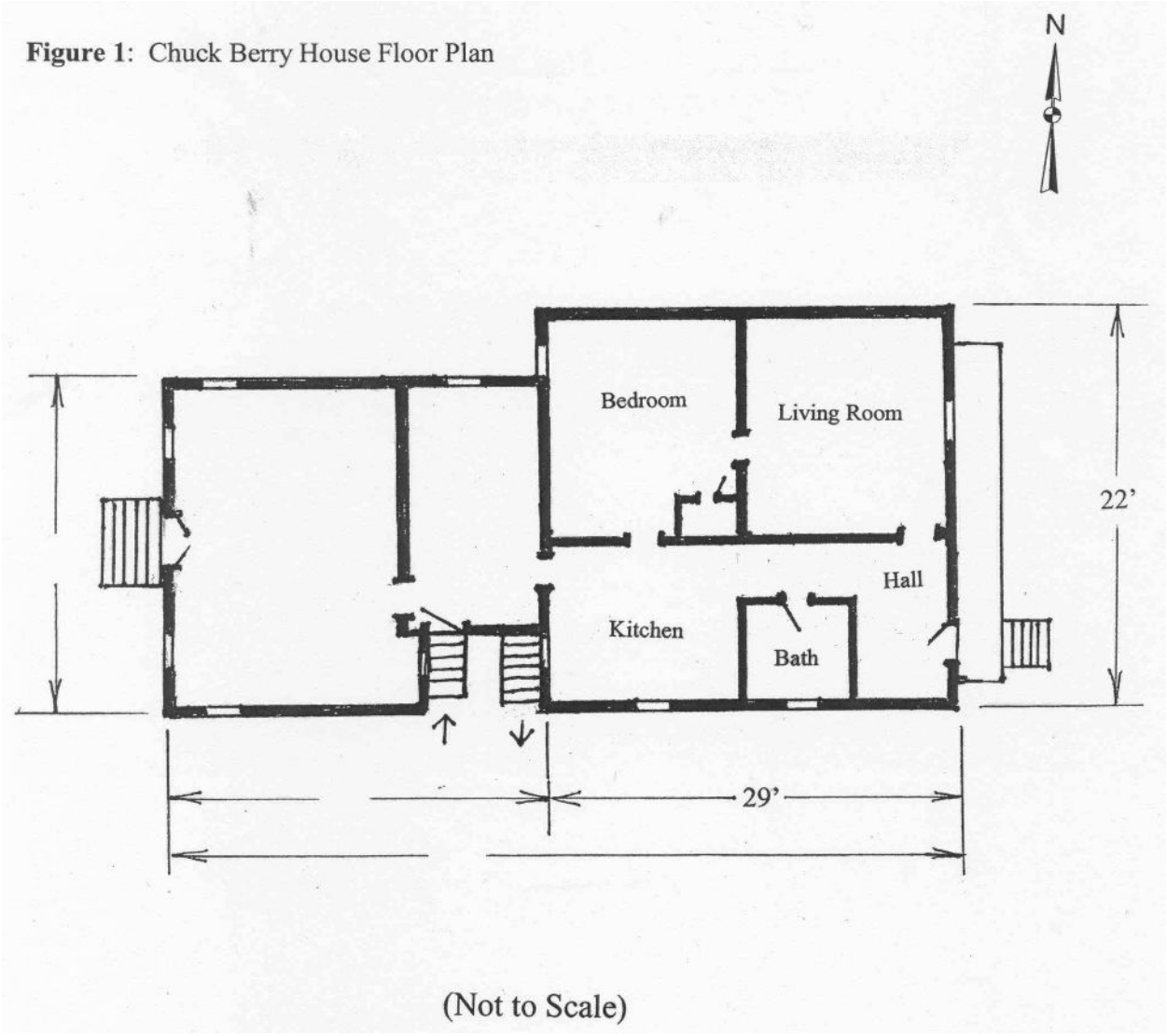
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 4

Berry, Chuck, House
St. Louis [Independent City], MO

Figure 1: Chuck Berry House Floor Plan



Summary

The Chuck Berry House at 3137 Whittier Street in St. Louis, Missouri, is significant under Criterion B in the areas of Performing Arts and Ethnic Heritage: Black. Charles Edward Anderson (aka Chuck) Berry and his wife Themetta purchased the small house in 1950 and lived there for eight years, a period during which he established his legacy as perhaps the single most important artist in the history of rock and roll. Once heard, Berry's particular blend of blues and country music and lyrics was immediately recognizable; it defined a subculture and influenced generations of rock musicians including the Beatles and Rolling Stones whose early albums included covers of Chuck Berry classics. Berry also was important as the first African-American artist to strongly appeal to both black and white audiences during a decade of civil rights turmoil and beyond. Typically appearing with a small pickup band, Berry developed a relationship with white youths who responded favorably to his messages of alienation and salvation by humor, especially in rollicking songs such as "School Day," "Roll Over Beethoven" and "Rock and Roll Music" that knew no racial barriers. The Berry House, purchased just two years after the abolishment of racial housing covenants, is significant at a national level because of Berry's transcendent importance as a rock artist. As *New York Times* critic Bernard Weinraub recently eulogized, "[Berry's] influence is so sprawling that the list of rock greats who owe him a large debt includes virtually everyone in the pantheon."[3] Although Berry continues to perform at the age of 82, his productive career has long been suspended and the songs he plays in concert have remained essentially the same for many years. Berry's contribution to music has been the subject of scholarly review over a long enough period for evaluation within its historic context, and rock critics have concluded that his best, most influential writing and recording was during the mid-to-late 1950s when he resided at 3137 Whittier. Built in 1910, the nominated house is the one property most closely associated with the rise of Berry's career, the development of his musical style and the time when his earliest string of hits had their greatest impact. Remarkably intact in an economically depressed neighborhood, the house includes a two-room concrete block extension added by Berry himself in 1956. While other Chuck Berry sites do exist, none has been associated with his career over such a relevant period of time as the house on Whittier. The period of significance reflects Berry's residence in the house from 1950-58.

Justification for Living Persons Listing

Although there are cautions against nominating properties associated with living persons who are still active in their careers, significance of the Chuck Berry House is justified under the National Register bulletins *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Properties Associated with Significant Persons* and *Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance within the Past Fifty Years*. According to National Register policy, conditions under which property associated with a living individual may be eligible include (1) the individual's productive career is concluded; (2) the individual's productive career has been

[3] Bernard Weinraub, "Sweet Tunes, Fast Beats and a Hard Edge," *The New York Times*, 23 February 2003.

compartmentalized, with scholarly recognition established for an early phase or phases or for ultimate, culminating, and universally recognized works; (3) the property is significant for associations with different themes/contexts not directly associated with the living individual; and (4) the property is associated with a specific designer or individual rather than an active firm.

Because Chuck Berry's *productive* career is essentially over despite the fact that he continues to perform, the first condition has been met: he is not producing original music, nor is he attempting to do so. His stage performances consist of the same classic songs that made him famous half a century ago, with an occasional blues standard thrown in for variety. As rock historian Carl Belz has observed, "Chuck Berry's style in 1964 was essentially the same as it was in 1955 and, from the evidence of his recent personal appearances, it is exactly the same today. Few artists have so consistently resisted the self-consciousness brought about by popular success."[4] Chuck Berry enjoys performing as a way of life and probably will continue doing so as long as he is able—and his very longevity almost certainly will end up being part of his legacy. As Berry has said, "I intend to continue to perform now and then, since continuity is a big part of my psychic anatomy."[5] In any case, Berry's career is clearly over in much the same way that the career of wood carver/folk artist Elijah Pierce's was over when the Ohio properties associated with his productive career were listed.[6] Berry at 82 is as unlikely to produce additional work that would require a major reevaluation of his contribution to popular music as was Pierce, at the age of 92, likely to carve new images out of wood that would necessitate a fresh appraisal. And unlike Pierce and his properties at the time they were nominated, Berry's significance was achieved more than 50 years ago. Exceptional significance is obvious in both cases.

The second condition also has been met: Berry's work during the 1950s is easy to compartmentalize, and critics already have established his prominent place in American rock music based on the period of his occupancy of the house at 3137 Whittier Street. His conributions during this period left an indelible mark on popular music and helped establish and define the rock and roll genre.[7] The third circumstance (such as if the Berry House were

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[4] Carl Belz, *The Story of Rock*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972; reprint, New York: Harper & Row,Inc., 1973, p.62.

[5] Chuck Berry, *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography* (New York: Harmony Books, 1987), p. 323.

[6] The Elijah Pierce properties in Ohio are cited (in NR Bulletin 22, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years*, p.9) as a rare case where properties associated with a living person have been listed.

[7] At least 16 songs on *The Great Twenty-Eight* were recorded from 1955 through 1958 while Berry resided in the nominated property at 3137 Whittier St. Additional songs on *The Great Twenty-Eight* (the 1984 album widely regarded as the best collection of Berry's most significant works) may have existed in at least some rough form before they were actually recorded, especially those recorded in the latter months of 1958 and the first few months of 1959. The Berry family moved out of the nominated property on July 15, 1958, Berry notes in the *Autobiography* (p. 190). He owned the property outright for several more years, then transferred ownership to his Thee Investment Company in 1967. The house was owned by the Suber family from 1978-2006. Since 2006, the property has been shuffled among banks.

individually significant under Criterion C for its architecture) apparently does not apply, and the fourth circumstance apparently pertains only to living but retired architects and designers whose individual work can be evaluated separately from their still active firms. [8]

Like the Energizer bunny, Chuck Berry just keeps going—but the fact that his productive career is over (regarding the second condition) has long been understood and this fact has made no difference to those assessing his contribution to rock music. More than thirty years ago, rock writer Robert Christgau was ready to close the book on Berry:

> Between 1965 and 1970 he [Berry] didn't release one even passable new song, and he died as a recording artist…..Berry's career would appear closed. He is a rock and roll monument at 50, a pleasing performer whose days of inspiration are over.[9]

Christgau, who in the same *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* article called Berry "the greatest of the rock and rollers," opined that the musician would probably die "sometime in the next 30 years." While the question of whether Berry was a great artist ultimately would be determined by others, Christgau said, it was likely that at least a few of his songs would live on for centuries even if Berry himself was forgotten.[10] Christgau of course was both right and wrong, but this was his idea of very high praise indeed. Once Chuck Berry stopped creating the truly inspired music for which he is known, he kept his career alive by simply repeating the great music he had already created. In 1992, Christgau had an opportunity to change his mind about Berry when the *Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* was revised and he once again wrote the comments for this artist. The accolades remained much the same although this time the critic opined that Berry would probably die "sometime in the next *20* years."

The majority of songs with which Chuck Berry is most closely identified originated during the golden period when he lived at 3137 Whittier, from the summer of 1950 till July 15, 1958. This list of classics includes but is not limited to "Maybellene," "School Day," "Rock and Roll Music," "Sweet Little Sixteen," "Johnny B. Goode," "Brown Eyed Handsome Man," "Thirty Days," "Too Much Monkey Business," "Reelin' and Rockin'," "Roll Over Beethoven," "You Can't Catch Me," "No Money Down," "Sweet Little Rock and Roller," "Wee Wee Hours," "Carol," "Beautiful Delilah," "Around and Around" and "Oh Baby Doll." Other classics written or recorded in 1958 during Berry's last year in the nominated house or early in 1959 after he had moved into a larger house on Windemere Place include "Memphis," "Back in the U.S.A.,"

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[8] While there is a concern about NR listing being used to advertise or endorse the work of active individuals, it is impossible to imagine Chuck Berry benefitting financially or otherwise from such an action. His reputation is secure and he has no stake in the house whatsoever. But the house, languishing for the past two years under the shifting ownerships of out-of-state banks, might have a better chance at preservation if it were listed.

[9] Robert Christgau, "Chuck Berry," *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, Jim Miller, ed. New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1976, p. 63.

[10] Ibid.

"Sweet Little Rock and Roller," "Little Queenie," and "Almost Grown."[11] A handful of additional very fine songs recorded upon Berry's release from federal prison in 1964—including "Nadine," "No Particular Place to Go," "You Never Can Tell" and "Promised Land—are thought by some to have been written before his jail sentence, but Berry himself says these last four were written during his incarceration.[12] Either way, the die was cast long before he went to jail on February 19, 1962, and the creative well seems to have gone dry soon after his release from confinement.

Berry's Childhood and Early Musical Influences

Charles Edward Anderson Berry was born on October 18, 1926 in his family's three-room home at 2520 Goode Avenue (now Annie Malone Drive) in the Ville neighborhood of north St. Louis. His father, Henry William Berry, had been raised on a small farm in north St. Louis County while his mother, Martha Bell Banks, had come to the city from Mississippi. Both were of African-American, American Indian and Caucasian heritage. Early in the 20th century, the Ville was one of the largest cohesive areas within the St. Louis city limits (along with the Mill Creek Valley) where African-Americans lived. Berry credits an uncle, John Thomas Banks, with inviting Martha to St. Louis specifically to meet his father shortly after World War I. After a courtship of approximately two years, they married in 1919. They had children Thelma, Henry and Lucy before giving birth to Charles. Two more children, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Martha, followed.[13]

The white housing covenants designed to keep African-Americans geographically confined within the city led to the blossoming of distinctive, tightly-knit communities in each neighborhood. As opposed to the poorer Mill Creek Valley with its older housing stock, the Ville, where construction boomed during the 1910s and 1920s, was considered the more "elite" neighborhood. There were of course other areas of St. Louis where African-Americans congregated, only they were not nearly so large and self-contained. Prior to 1950, the Ville became known for its relatively high quality of life with thriving churches, schools, and businesses bolstered by dedicated working class and professional residents. Charles Berry's childhood was shaped in part by these institutions and the relatively sheltered life the Ville offered in those days.

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[11] After moving into the new house on Windemere Place, Berry owned or retained an interest in the property at 3137 Whittier Street property for many years. His secretary, Francine, lived in the nominated house for awhile. Berry apparently rented it out before eventually transferring ownership to his own Thee Investment Company in 1967. Thee sold it to a private buyer in 1978.

[12] This is speculated in various places, but Berry shoots it all down in *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography* (p.216), stating that all four of these songs as well as the one titled "Tulane" were written in the federal prison at Springfield.

[13] Berry, p. xx-xxii.; Bruce Pegg, *Brown Eyed-Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry* (New York: Routledge, 2002) pp. 9-10.

Berry's parents were active in the Antioch Baptist Church (NR 9/17/99) where Henry was a deacon; both sang in the gospel choir. Their children attended Simmons Colored School (NR 9/17/99) and the famed Sumner High School (NR 4/19/88). Early on Henry Berry worked at various jobs while college-educated Martha stayed at home to raise their children. The family prospered, with Henry becoming a carpenter subcontracting for a white-owned realty company. Meanwhile their home was steeped in music. The piano and Victrola were central fixtures in the Berry household, there was choir practice, and Charles' sister Lucy became an accomplished, classically-trained mezzo-soprano. And St. Louis' unique semi-Northern, semi-Southern character practically assured Berry's exposure from an early age to both African-American jazz and blues and the traditionally white country & western radio stations.[14]

Charles Berry was well-loved at home but a sometimes difficult student. At age fifteen he reportedly shocked faculty members at Sumner High by singing a somewhat earthy blues number, "Confessin' the Blues,"during an otherwise staid school musical program. For various reasons he had trouble advancing toward graduation and in 1944, at the age of seventeen, he and two friends decided to give up on school and drive in Berry's car, a 1937 Oldsmobile sedan, to California. But this was wartime, and their money and worn out tires took them only as far as Kansas City. When they became desperate for cash to buy food and somehow return home, they robbed a bakery and a barber shop but were apprehended by state troopers east of Columbia in possession of a car they had tried to borrow but ended up stealing when the owner ran away. Berry was sentenced to ten years at Algoa Intermediate Reformatory for Young Men near Jefferson City. There he sang bass in a gospel quartet and formed a boogie-woogie band with fellow inmates before being released after serving three years.[15]

Marriage and Home at 3137 Whittier Street

Upon his release from Algoa, Berry worked in a St. Louis automobile factory and as a janitor, helped with his father's carpentry business, and took classes at a local cosmetology school.[16] In 1948 he met Themetta Suggs at the Ville's Annie Malone Day celebration, and the two married that same year.[17] The couple lived in rented apartments for two years, but Themetta's pregnancy in 1950 prompted them to seek something more permanent. They looked beyond the invisible walls encircling the Ville, where many middle class St. Louis blacks lived at the time (and which had been the home of other 20th century African-American artists and entertainers including Grace Bumbry, Tina Turner and Redd Foxx). The Supreme Court's 1948 decision in *Shelley V. Kraemer* had rendered racial housing covenants powerless, enabling the Berrys to purchase "a small three-room brick cottage with a bath and full basement" at 3137 Whittier Street, a historically white neighborhood just a few blocks north of the Ville on June 28, 1950. The house

[14] Harper Barnes, "Chuck Berry Goes from Bandstand to Bookstand," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, p. 4 October 1987.
[15] Pegg, pp. 14-18.
[16] Ibid., pp. 21-22.
[17] Ibid., p. 20; Berry, pp. 78, 86.

cost $4,500. The down payment was $450.[18]

In his autobiography, Berry fondly recalls the neighborly welcome he received from "the white family of Dimottios who lived next door." The Dimottios "welcomed us with open arms, giving us a pot of spaghetti over the backyard fence the third day after we moved in."[19]

Small, shaped parapet houses like the Chuck Berry House were popular in St. Louis neighborhoods between 1900 and 1920. Such houses were typically brick and of one story, with a two or three-bay front façade. A distinctive feature of this vernacular house type was the use of decorative or glazed bricks to somewhat enliven the primary elevation.[20]

What became the Berry's new home in the summer of 1950 had been constructed by independent contractor William J. Moxey in 1910. Moxey, having purchased property in the 3100 block of Whittier and on adjacent Rolla Place in March of that year, obtained building permits for identical one-story, three room houses on each lot. Contractor James Podmore's name appeared on the permits as the project's architect, but whether he and Moxey were mutual builders is unknown.[21] Geared toward the working class, these modest houses cost $2,200 to build. Moxey sold the house at 3137 Whittier to stonecutter August H. Bowenkamp on June 21, 1910, and over the next forty years it passed hands every few years from owners with occupations that included streetcar operator, seamstress and railroad worker. Many of these owners in turn rented their property to others.[22]

After Berry became the tenth owner in 1950, he installed a bedroom and half bath in the full basement so that he and Themetta might live there and rent out the first floor for supplemental income. Their first daughter, Darlin Ingrid Berry, was born on October 3, 1950. [23]

Formation of the Chuck Berry Combo and Development of Musical Style

During the summer of 1951, Berry purchased his first electric guitar from a local musician for thirty dollars and began to seriously study the instrument. Apart from his affinity for bluesmen such as Muddy Waters and Elmore James and country and western singers such as Gene Autry and Hank Williams, Berry idolized Charlie Christian of the Benny Goodman Sextet and Carl Hogan of Louis Jordan's Tympany Five. Both Christian and Hogan were pioneers in the use of the electric guitar, and Berry incorporated their styles into the development of his own (Berry

[18] St. Louis City Assessors Office; Berry, p. 86.
[19] Berry, pp. 86-87.
[20] Heritage and Urban Design Division, City of St. Louis, "A Preservation Plan for St. Louis, Volume 1," 1995, p. 241.
[21] Ibid.; *St. Louis Daily Record*, 9 March 1910; United States Census, 1910, 1920; building permits.
[22] Ibid.; United States Census, 1920, 1930.
[23] Berry, p. 87.

would later lift his signature opening riff from Hogan's introduction to "Ain't That Just Like a Woman"). With the purchase of a secondhand reel-to-reel recorder, Berry began writing his own music and lyrics in his basement at home.[24] (Gwendolyn "Genie" Hodges, 70, a former neighbor recently interviewed by the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, recalled hearing "music coming up from his basement.") [25]

In 1952, Berry's former classmate Tommy Stevens (Berry's guitar accompanist on "Confessin' the Blues" at Sumner High) invited him to sing and play rhythm guitar with his blues trio on weekends at a local club, Huff's Garden. Although the group was popular, six months later when boogie-woogie pianist Johnnie Johnson asked Berry to join his Sir John's Trio for a New Year's Eve show at the Cosmopolitan Club in East St. Louis, Illinois, Berry accepted; the Cosmo was far more prominent on the local music scene than Huff's Garden. Berry's gig with Sir John's Trio—which along with Johnson included drummer Ebby Hardy—was sufficiently successful that club owner Joe Lewis asked Johnson to keep him on as the group's new lead singer and guitar player. Given the opportunity, the charismatic Berry quickly developed skills as a front man, using a host of facial expressions, gestures, and moves (culminating in his legendary "duck walk") to engage and enthrall audiences. Plus he expanded the group's blues repertoire, unexpectedly breaking into country and western tunes with great success. As Berry explained:

> The music played most around St. Louis was country-western, which was usually called hillbilly music, and swing. Curiosity provoked me to lay a lot of the country stuff on our predominantly black audience and some of the clubgoers started whispering, "Who is that black hillbilly at the Cosmo?" After they laughed at me a few times, they began requesting the hillbilly stuff and enjoyed trying to dance to it.[26]

Throughout his career, Berry's appeal to both black and white audiences was legendary. Some critics such as Robert Christgau have suggested that thanks to his middle-class upbringing, Berry was already closer to white teenagers than the average black man "both economically…and in spirit." [27] Berry varied his delivery depending on whether he was singing blues or country, and his style was clearly biracial. Soon Sir John's Trio was drawing an integrated "salt and pepper" audience that at times, Berry estimated, was nearly 40 percent white.[28]

As Robert Christgau observed:

> Berry was the first blues-based performer to successfully reclaim guitar tricks that country and western innovators had appropriated from black people and adapted to their own uses 25 or 50 years before. By adding blues tone to some fast country runs, and yoking them to a rhythm and blues beat and some unembarrassed electrification, he created an instrumental style with biracial

[24] Ibid., pp. 87-88.
[25] Jack Wagman, "House of Rock," *St.Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 4, 2008.
[26] Berry, p. 89.
[27] Christgau, p. 60.
[28] Berry, p. 90.

> appeal. Alternating guitar chords augmented the beat while Berry sang in an insouciant tenor that, while recognizably Afro-American in accent, stayed clear of the melisma and blurred overtones of blues singing, both of which enter only at carefully premeditated moments.[29]

While patrons of the Cosmo Club loved Berry's countrified renditions, they merely amused his blues-loving wife during band practices in the family home on Whittier Street. As Berry explained:

> Toddy [as Chuck called Themetta] would get the biggest kick out of our rehearsals around the house, hearing me sing the country stuff. She cared less for country music, being a blues lover, and saw only the fictitious impressions I would insert in a tune to impress the audience with my hilarious hilly and basic billy delivery of the song. It could have been because of my country-western songs that the white spectators showed up in greater numbers as we continued playing at the Cosmo Club, bringing the fairly crowded showplace to a full house.[30]

Underpinning this blend of genres was the influence of band leader Louis Jordan, pioneer in the development of "jump blues," a combination of jazz and blues carried by the eight-to-the-bar bass line which formed a foundation for the evolution of rock and roll.[31] Jordan's fast-paced, humorous lyrics dealing with everyday experiences are reflected in Berry's own delivery and material. The positive response garnered by his performances with Sir John's Trio encouraged Berry to experiment further, both musically and lyrically. Though not the only early artist experimenting with the possibilities of the electric guitar, Berry's way of "bending…two notes against each other" in a system of riffs established patterns now recognized as fundamental to the rock and roll genre.[32] As Berry has acknowledged, the style he "created" was possible only through this varied fusion of influences.[33]

Writing about Berry's career in 1983, David Marsh recalled "the fast, ringing tone of his electric guitar" as the most striking characteristic of his style: "Chuck Berry is to rock what Louis Armstrong was to jazz. He established *the* basic mode of expression on the genre's key instrument, the guitar—an approach that shaped almost everything that was played after his rise. As a writer, his influence was hardly less great."[34] More than a decade later, *The New Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* called Berry the "archetypal rock & roller [who] melded the blues, country, and a witty, defiant teen outlook into songs that have influenced virtually every rock musician in his wake. In his best work—recorded mostly in the mid-and late Fifties—Berry matched some of the most resonant and witty lyrics in pop to music with a blues bottom and a country top, trademarking the results with his signature double-string guitar lick."[35]

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[29] Christgau, p.63.
[30] Berry, p. 90.
[31] Pegg, p. 24.
[32] Joe Perry, "Chuck Berry," *Rolling Stone*, 15 April 2004, pp.72-73.
[33] Taylor Hackford, *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll*, Delilah Films, 1987.
[34] Dave Marsh, *The New Rolling Stone Record Guide* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1983), p.38.
[35] Patricia Romanowski and Holly George-Warren, eds., *The New Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* (New

Between 1953 and 1954, as Berry's magnetic stage persona grew, Sir John's Trio became known as the Chuck Berry Combo. "By and large," according to Berry, "the songs I played on my first recording were quite like what we were then delivering at the Cosmo Club."[36]

Presumably wiser to ways of the music business and perhaps more ambitious than his band mates, Berry had already decided that cutting a record should be the group's next step when, in May 1955, he accompanied a high school buddy on a visit to Chicago.[37] The two spent an evening making the rounds of the city's South Side blues clubs, seeing bluesmen Howlin' Wolf and Elmore James before ending up at the Palladium Club where they met Muddy Waters, Berry's idol. "It was the feeling I suppose one would get from having a word with the president or the pope," Berry recalled, "I quickly told him of my admiration for his compositions and asked him who I could see about making a record." Waters pointed him in the direction of Leonard Chess, head of Chicago's independent and now legendary Chess Records, then at 4750-52 Cottage Grove Avenue.[38]

Chess Records, "Maybellene" and Beyond

One problem for musicians like Berry was the fact that major record labels still maintained a virtual stranglehold on the music industry, determining which artists would be allowed to reach a mass audience. Given the discriminatory racial climate of the day and assumptions about which artists would be the most profitable, relatively few black rhythm and blues musicians received mainstream exposure.[39] Even the massive postwar migration of Southern blacks to Northern cities and the convenient market they provided failed to tempt the major companies, though it did spur a rise in small independent labels. By 1952 there were approximately one hundred of these modest establishments, including Sun Records in Memphis and Atlantic Records in New York, seeking to capitalize on the largely untapped potential of African-American music. Independents could afford to take greater risks with artists because they had less to lose, and taking these risks led to the rise of rock and roll.[40]

Former nightclub owner Leonard Chess had founded Chess Records with his brother Phil in 1947. Muddy Waters had been their first major "discovery," setting an early tone for Chess as the label of electric urban blues. By 1953 the Chess brothers had formed ties with Cleveland disk jockey Alan Freed who moved to a major New York station the following year. Freed became

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York: Rolling Stone Press, 1995). The author of the Chuck Berry entry is unidentified.

[36] Berry, p. 94.

[37] Pegg, p. 29.

[38] Berry, pp. 97-98. The *Autobiography* gives the address as 4720 Cottage Grove but this appears to be a typo.

[39] "Rhythm and blues" was a catch-all term coined in 1947 to replace the term "race music" which had been applied to African-American recordings prior to World War II. Major record labels had dabbled in, but not embraced "race" recordings during the 1920s and 1930s since their primary audience was in the rural South. In 1949, *Billboard* renamed its Race Records chart as the Rhythm & Blues Records chart.

[40] Pegg, p. 32.

the nation's most powerful radio personality with an interest in African-American artists.[41] It was Freed who convinced Chess to sign an all-male group, The Moonglows, whose single "Sincerely" became (with Freed's support) the label's first #1 hit on the rhythm and blues chart in 1955, selling 300,000 copies. As covered by the mainstream McGuire Sisters for Decca, however, "Sincerely" sold over a million records. The same fate befell promising songs from most independents as they struggled to record a crossover hit (Pat Boone in particular had a penchant for striking gold with watered-down versions of R&B and early rock and roll songs, including "Tutti Frutti" and "Ain't That a Shame"). At the time Chuck Berry visited Chess Records the Monday morning after his encounter with Waters, the brothers were looking for someone capable of appealing to both black and white audiences, and their relationship with Freed would be fateful.[42]

The meeting with Leonard Chess was encouraging, and within a week Berry had returned to Chicago with four songs on a demo tape made at home on a one-track recorder—"Ida May," "Wee Wee Hours," "Thirty Days," and "You Can't Catch Me." The Chess brothers liked what they heard, especially "Ida May," a rhythm and blues/country and western hybrid dimly linked to an earlier western swing tune. Sensing that Berry had created something new, they invited him and his band back to make a professional tape in their Chicago studio.[43] On May 21, 1955, Berry returned for the original historic recording session. Berry's band then included Johnnie Johnson on piano and Ebby Hardy on drums. Chess provided additional musicians, which on this date included bluesman Willie Dixon on bass, drummer Jasper Thomas and maraca man Jerome Green.[44] Berry recalls in his autobiography that the session—during which all four of the demo songs were recorded—lasted into the night. And when Leonard Chess suggested changing the title of "Ida May," they came up with "Maybellene" (inspired either by the name on a box of mascara but deliberately misspelled, or a cow).[45]

As Phil Chess said, Berry's music was:

> Different. Different from Bo [Diddley], different from everybody. Like nothing we'd heard before… We figured if we could get that sound down on record we'd have a hit. There was just something about the rhythm, the beat. The song ["Maybellene"] had a whole new kind of feel to it.[46]

Chess held the first pressing—Chess Record #1604, "Maybellene" backed by "Wee Wee Hours"—for several weeks before passing it off to Freed in July 1955. Freed relentlessly aired "Maybellene" and the rest, as they say, is history. Freed reportedly called "Maybellene" his

[41] Ibid., pp. 35-36.
[42] Ibid., pp. 35, 37-38; Hackford.
[43] Hackford; Berry, p. 100.
[44] On "Maybellene," some sources list Hardy on drums and others identify Thomas as the drummer.
[45] Berry, pp. 103, 145, 319.
[46] Pegg, p. 38.

biggest record ever.[47] Berry's unique blend of hard rhythm and blues and biting, countrified vocal about the pursuit of a two-timing girl in a rival suitor's Cadillac struck a chord with wide appeal. A true crossover, the song peaked at #1 on *Billboard*'s R&B chart and at #5 on their Hot 100 chart—an entirely new chart created to accommodate the onslaught of rock and roll.[48] As "Maybellene" was selling and selling, Berry and his band began an exhaustive three-month tour which ended in New York that September with performances at the Paramount Theater and the Apollo Theater.

"Thirty Days," one of the other two songs recorded at the initial Chess session, reached #8 on the R&B chart following its release in September 1955. Berry continued writing, and the group returned to Chess to record again on December 20. One of these new songs, "No Money Down," peaked at #11 on the R&B chart. They went back on the road for a tour of major cities in the Midwest and South before recording "Roll Over Beethoven," "Brown Eyed Handsome Man," "Too Much Monkey Business," and others on April 16, 1956. "Beethoven" quickly rose to #29 on the Top 100 and #7 on the R&B chart, while the latter two both reached #7 on the R&B.[49]

Berry found time during this burst of success to move out of his basement and put some of his newfound wealth into a one story, two-room rear addition to the family home at 3137 Whittier. At a cost of $1,900, the addition made space for his growing family which by this time included a second daughter, Melody Exes (born November 1, 1952).[50] Further tours were complemented by film and television appearances as well as additional hits including "School Day" (released March 1957, #5 Top 100, #1 R&B), "Rock and Roll Music" (released September 1957, #8 Top 100, #6 R&B), "Sweet Little Sixteen" (released January 1958, #2 Top 100, #1 R&B), and "Johnny B. Goode" (released March 1958, #8 Top 100, #5 R&B). Berry recorded one more major hit, "Carol" (released August 1958, #10 Top 100, #12 R&B), a month before moving his family from 3137 Whittier Street to an 11-room mansion at 13 Windemere Place in Saint Louis' Visitation Park neighborhood on July 15, 1958 (City District 3/21/75).[51]

Some other Chuck Berry songs had made the charts, notably "Almost Grown" (#32 Top 100, #3 R&B) and "Back in the USA" (#37 Top 100, #16 R&B) before Berry's career came to a resounding halt in February 1962 when he was somewhat dubiously sent to prison.[52] It had started in December 1959 when Berry was initially indicted on a charge of violating the Mann Act, a piece of poorly written, loosely defined Progressive Era legislation meant to prevent white

[47] Freed's unbridled support was considerably tainted by the fact that he and another DJ were each receiving one-third of the writer's royalties for "Maybellene." Not until years later was Berry granted full ownership of the copyright. Pegg, p. 41 and Berry, pp. 110, 119, 189-190.
[48] Pegg, p. 42.
[49] Berry, pp. 115-139, 328-329, 334.
[50] Building permits.
[51] Berry, pp. 190, 328-329, 334; Pegg, p. 79; St. Louis City Directory.
[52] Berry, p. 335.

slavery and the abduction of under-aged females.[53] Although his first trial was thrown out because of the presiding judge's blatently racist attitude, Berry was convicted in 1961 at a retrial. His career suffered a major setback as he served three years of a five year sentence in the Federal Medical Center at Springfield, Missouri—although the damage was not immediately evident because after being released from prison on October 18, 1963, Berry enjoyed a brief resurgence when the songs "Promised Land," "You Never Can Tell," "Nadine," and "No Particular Place to Go" became hits. In fact, these four songs seem to have been regarded almost as highly as those recorded during his original golden decade.

But rock and roll had continued to evolve during Berry's incarceration. The Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show soon after Berry's return to society; a few months later they made their first visit to America, and the "British Invasion" was under way. Meanwhile, Berry apparently lost many concert bookings because, for awhile, getting permission from his parole officer to travel out of the state was difficult. Bad press during the trials certainly contributed to the decline of Berry's career, which for these and other reasons never regained its original momentum. There was irony to spare, since of course it was Berry's own music that had heavily influenced new bands including the Beatles and Rolling Stones whose recordings and performances were now displacing Berry and the other founding fathers of rock and roll—even as their covers simultaneously helped resurrect the careers of some, including Berry.

But while Berry gained new white fans when, for example, the Beatles released their version of his "Roll Over Beethoven" and the Rolling Stones covered his "Around and Around," the future clearly belonged to these younger bands. After a brief stint of successful songs in 1964 (the four songs mentioned above plus "Little Marie" and Go Bobby Soxer"), Berry's writing became sporadic and rather unsuccessful, both critically and commercially. Live versions of the novelty song "My Ding-a-Ling" and the previously released "Reelin' and Rockin" unexpectedly reached the charts in 1972, but the 1979 album *Rockit* (a play on the word "rocket") remains Berry's last major songwriting effort. While this album was reasonably well-received, its songs never gained the critical acclaim of Berry's early work. Berry has only dabbled in recording since then, but still enjoys performing and continues in that capacity despite the virtual end to his songwriting career more than forty years ago. As he stated in 1982 (at the age of 58):

> People don't retire. My father, and all these people, they cut grass. They fix their porches. Is that retiring? You might as well do something beneficial. I come out here and do my type of cutting grass. I can go back and have six cats to cut grass. Twenty cats to cut grass. So I'll do what they want me for, and get somebody else to cut grass.[54]

When asked about his songwriting in 2001 (at the age of 75), he replied:

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[53] The incident itself had occurred earlier in December when Berry drove a young Apache woman from El Paso to St. Louis, purportedly to work as a hostess or hat check girl in his newly opened Club Bandstand. When she was arrested on a prostitution charge after leaving Berry's employment, police determined that she was underage and that Berry was responsible for transporting her across state lines.

[54] *Goldmine Roots of Rock Digest*, p. 58.

> For many years I've been reluctant to make new songs. There has been a great laziness in my soul. Lots of days I could write songs, but I could also take my $400 and play the slot machines at the riverfront casino. In a way, I feel it might be ill-mannered to try and top myself. You see, I am not an oldies act. The music I play, it is a ritual. Something that matters to people in a special way. I wouldn't want to interfere with that.[55]

Rationalization maybe, but who is to say? While Berry continues to perform in 2008 (at the age of 81), these performances are indeed "rituals" in which he plays his classics along with an occasional blues standard (he always loved the blues). Traveling alone, his stipulations for promoters are that they provide the proper brand of amplifier and a backup band that knows his music and needs no rehearsal. So Chuck Berry performances today still consist primarily of the songs that made him famous fifty years ago. His reputation is securely entrenched in his groundbreaking material from the 1950s and early 1960s, and he has never attempted to change.

Chuck Berry's Impact on Popular Music and American Culture

Chuck Berry's contributions to rock and roll during the eight years when he resided at 3137 Whittier were enormous, and his house at that address is significant for its association with Berry under Criterion B in the areas of Performing Arts and Ethnic Heritage: Black. Berry was considered the genre's first singer-songwriter-guitar player, becoming and defining the role of the all-encompassing rock and roll front man for generations of musicians to come. Berry's style and success helped make the electric guitar the primary instrument of rock and roll, and the call and response pattern between his own vocals and riffs and Johnnie Johnson's piano playing became a standard element of the genre. His left-handed technique and use of the backbeat further influenced musicians. Said Belz:[56]

> In contrast to the majority of Rhythm and Blues artists of the 1950s, Chuck Berry did not rely upon the support of saxophones. Like Elvis Presley, he was "a man with his guitar." More than Presley, however, Chuck Berry played the guitar with a vitality that constituted an important element in the total effect of his records…..His songs repeatedly use an identical introductory phrase on the guitar, or a slight variation of it, and they rely internally on similar "favorite" guitar melodies and combinations. These elements hardly changed in a decade of record production. The artist intuited their aesthetic rightness, and he continued to use them because they remained expressively functional. His folk artistry, perhaps his genius, lay in the fact that he never tried to change them; he never felt the need to keep up with stylistic innovations, because he was never conscious of style itself.[57]

While scores of bands and individual artists have paid Berry the ultimate tribute of covering his songs, the intelligence and manner of his delivery were so unique that almost all crooner-style covers flopped (and when the Beach Boys copied "Sweet Little Sixteen" almost note for note in

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[55] Mark Jacobson, "Chuck Berry, The Father of Rock, Turns 75," *Rolling Stone*, 6 December 2001, p. 74.
[56] Timothy D. Taylor, "His Name Was in Lights: Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode," *Popular Music* (January 1992), pp. 33-35; Hackford.
[57] Belz, p. 65.

their hit song "Surfin' USA," the resemblance was so obvious that Berry was granted songwriting credits). Berry's songs and performances have inspired countless young musicians to follow in his footsteps, and his style became *the* style of rock and roll:

> Berry minted the fundamentals of rock guitar – metallic, locomotive strumming; the slashing flourish of his riffs and fills – and created a modern high-speed songwriting, a compact blend of Delta talking blues, everyday adolescence and Berry's own invented lingo ("As I was motorvatin' over the hill …"). Berry didn't have as much sex and gospel in his voice as Little Richard; Fats Domino had more Mother Africa in his rhythms. But Berry made the first hit records … in the language of America's first rock & roll generation.[58]

In his best songs, Berry's guitar playing, lyrics, and how the lyrics were delivered complemented each other to a remarkable degree:

> The lyrics of Chuck Berry's songs constitute some of the most exciting folk poetry in the rock field. They represent the folk artist's unconsciousness of art—particularly in his innocent notion that poetry should rhyme and that all rhythmic spaces should be filled, even if filling them necessitates the slicing of words or the creation of new ones. In "Too Much Monkey Business," for example, every verse rhymes, and, when words cannot fill the existing spaces, the artist fills them with a flexible "aah." Of course, the poetry in this song is *sung* poetry. Its quality cannot be duplicated by reading it or by writing it down. In Chuck Berry's breathless presentation, the "aahs" which conclude each verse change each time they are verbalized. In one case they imply a sigh of disgust and, in another, a type of sultry indignation. But the language of Chuck Berry's poetry is always ordinary. He employs it naturally and without sophistication. The impact of the Chuck Berry records suggests that naturalness came unconsciously to his music.[59]

As *New York Times* writer Bernard Weinraub put it in 2003, "[Berry's] influence is so sprawling that the list of rock greats who owe him a large debt includes virtually everyone in the pantheon."[60] Keith Richards, Mick Jagger, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan and Eric Clapton are only a few of the major artists who have attributed their own desire to become rock musicians and/or been greatly influenced by Berry's work. As an early rock encyclopedia put it in 1971:

> Chuck Berry may be the single most important name in the history of rock. There is not a rock musician working today who has not consciously or unconsciously borrowed from his sound, the sound that was to become the definitive sound of fifties rock.[61]

And there is the John Lennon quote, "If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it 'Chuck Berry'."[62] Without Chuck Berry, rock and roll would still exist but it would be

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[58] David Fricke, "The Art of Berry," *Rolling Stone*, 21 February 2008, p.73.
[59] Belz, p. 64.
[60] Weinraub.
[61] Lillian Roxon, *Lillian Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Universal Library Edition, 1971, p. 42.
[62] The occasion of this quote was undetermined, but it can be found on the Brainy Quote – John Lennon website at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/j/john_lennon.html. Retrieved on 7/24/08.

different.

Yet Chuck Berry did more than transform the landscape of popular music. Early rock and roll was inherently integrationist music, and along with Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino, Bo Diddley, Little Richard, Carl Perkins and a handful of other shapers of the genre, Chuck Berry was part of a brief period of hope during the mid-1950s when integration and mass assimilation into the "American Dream" seemed possible and perhaps even imminent. Coinciding with the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the sudden rise to prominence of these artists from the margins of society was instrumental in forcing the nation to confront its demons. As historian Glenn Altschuler has noted, 1950s rock and roll was responsible for "promoting integration and economic opportunity for blacks while bringing to 'mainstream' culture black styles and values."[63] Not only did early rock and roll blend black and white musical traditions, but it attracted integrated audiences as well.[64] And Berry's position as a black man intentionally targeting young, white audiences was particularly significant:

> Berry was the first blues-based performer to successfully reclaim guitar tricks that country and western innovators had appropriated from black people and adapted to their own uses 25 or 50 years before. By adding blues tone to some fast country runs, and yoking them to a rhythm and blues beat and some unembarrassed electrification, he created an instrumental style with biracial appeal.[65]

During the turbulent early years of social unrest when high percentages of whites came to Berry's performances, boundaries based on skin pigmentation temporarily melted away. At least they did while the music rolled off the stage—except on those occasions when he was denied access to the stage because of his color. Berry hardly escaped the racism of the 1950s, especially when touring in the South—although he mentions only a few such incidents (with much less bitterness than might be expected) in his autobiography. In one perhaps typical instance, Berry was denied entrance to a club in Knoxville where he had been booked to perform. Citing a city ordinance, the managers turned him away when they discovered that the white country and western singer of "Maybellene" they had expected was really a "niggra man." (The publicity glossies apparently had made Berry's face seem unnaturally light.) The singer sat outside in a rental car, listening to another band play his music. The discrimination was hardly limited to the South, though. In 1956, he was permitted to perform at St. Louis' Casa Loma Ballroom and was "treated nicely" although the corridor to the dressing rooms had been partitioned and there were barricades between the stage and dance floor, presumably to maintain separation of the races.[66]

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[63] Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America*, New York: Oxford University Press, Pivotal Moments in American History Series, pp. 35-66.

[64] Bruce Tucker, "Tell Tchaikovsky the News": Postmodernism, Popular Culture, and the Emergence of Rock 'N' Roll," *Black Music Research Journal*, Autumn 1989, pp. 278, 280, 288.

[65] Christgau, p. 56.

[66] Berry, pp. 135-138. Revealing almost to a fault, *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography* seems dead honest. And considering that people Berry trusted took financial advantage of him early on, his experiences with racism, a certain amount of governmental harrassment and a sometimes unfavorable press, his autobiography is amazingly gentle and

No matter how blatent the racism he sometimes confronted, Berry could take comfort in knowing that he had connected with whites like no black musician before him. In his autobiography, he fondly recalled the ecstatic responses he received from "solid white audiences" at Brooklyn's Paramount Theater on the "Maybellene" tour in September 1955: "I doubt that many Caucasian persons would come into a situation that would cause them to know the feeling a black person experiences after being reared under old-time southern traditions and then finally being welcomed by an entirely unbiased and friendly audience, applauding without apparent regard for racial difference." At that time, he noted, a black person still could not patronize St. Louis' Fox Theater, what he called his hometown's answer to the Paramount.[67]

While Berry's ringing guitar may be the most striking thing about his music, his vocals are the most memorable. Christgau considers him "the greatest rock lyricist this side of Bob Dylan, and sometimes I prefer him to Dylan."[68] Berry's lyrics dealt not only with teenage angst but with fundamental aspects of American life, both positive and negative, and they often had more than one level of meaning.[69] Racial references in early rock and roll were generally "below the surface, confined to subtexts, in coded language. As slaves, blacks had learned that they might be able to sing what they could not say." Beneath Berry's "endorsements of happiness, success, and fun, and his portrait of school as jail, he looked for ways to give voice to black culture and social aspiration."[70]

Altschuler cites "School Day," "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man" (interpreted from the beginning as "brown skinned"), and "Johnny B. Goode" as examples of songs crafted by Berry to have more than one level of meaning:

> The language in "School Days [sic]," for example, consciously invoked the black gospel tradition. As they celebrate the liberating power of music ("Hail! Hail! Rock and Roll,/Deliver me from the days of old/The feeling is there, body and soul") the lyrics hint at oppression and deliverance, with a race consciousness recognizable to anyone familiar with African-American religion. The opening lines of "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man" (1956) seem to promise a racialized discussion as well, this time of economic oppression and sexual power: "Arrested on charges of unemployment/he was sitting in the witness stand/the judge's wife called up the district attorney/said free that brown-eyed man"[71]

Regarding "Johnny B. Goode":

> Unlike…mythic black heroes of another era, Johnny does not defy an oppressive system. He can win

at times humorous, albeit raw.
[67] Berry, pp. 110-115.
[68] Christgau, p. 60.
[69] Ibid.; "The King Steers Clear of Town," source unknown, July 1982, Missouri Historical Society Vertical File.
[70] Altschuler, pp. 57, 62.
[71] Ibid., pp. 65-66.

> recognition from whites as well as blacks, Berry optimistically suggests, simply by demonstrating his genius with a guitar. But Berry did not make Johnny "a little colored boy," as he had in the original version of the song. Concerned that "it would seem biased to white fans," he made him a "little country boy" and, in a sense, invited listeners to see the song as a paean to careers open to talent in the United States, unrelated to race."[72]

Berry's lyrics also dealt with other social problems, as pointed out by *Rolling Stone* writers McGee and Miles. The song "Memphis," about a divorced father's desperate search for his daughter "at a time when American families are breaking up in record numbers…takes on new relevance." Berry "also wrote the greatest songs *about* rock & roll," in particular the songs "Sweet Little Sixteen," "Around and Around," "Rock and Roll Music," and "Roll Over, Beethoven."[73]

> At a time when critics discounted rock & roll as adolescent caterwauling, Berry was not only defining a subculture, he was providing running commentary on a country in the midst of change, more mobile, more affluent, more restless, free for the moment from the specter of war but bitterly divided internally over racial issues. Aiming his messages unequivocally at the younger generation, Berry made poetry of the seemingly mundane complexities of adolescent life. His was folk music for teens, with references to a world with its own language, symbols, and customs.[74]

Berry, of course, was also among the many African-American artists who were routinely cheated by the white-dominated music industry. Compared to white artists, black musicians typically received only a tiny fraction of royalties for their records regardless of how much money they generated in sales. In Berry's case, he admits that he failed to read the fine print in his first contract with Chess Records, and that he did not understand much of what he did read. But he felt reassured when told that he was signing "a standard contract," and when he saw the word "copyright" several times it sounded as if it was connected with the U.S. government and thus legitimate. Leonard Chess told him that Alan Freed and another DJ, Russ Frato, were listed as co-composers because the song in question, "Maybellene," would receive more attention if these "big names" were involved. "With me being unknown," Berry recalled, "this made sense to me, especially since he failed to mention that there was a split in the royalties as well."[75] Blacks were particularly vulnerable to such things until the assigning of copyrights, among other nefarious "payola" practices of the entertainment industry, were fully exposed during the quiz show hearings in 1959. Berry eventually was granted full ownership of the copyright for "Maybellene."

During the 1950s, the relationship between race and rock and roll remained confusing and

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[72] Altschuler, pp. 65-66.
[73] David McGee and Milo Miles,"Chuck Berry," {The New} Rolling Stone Album Guide (New York: Simon & Schuster, First Fireside Edition, 2004), p. 66.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Berry, p. 110.

contradictory. On the one hand, Berry was idolized by millions of Americans (not to mention millions of rock and roll fans around the world). White audiences sometimes cheered him wildly as if they were striking a blow for racial harmony and understanding as well as showing their appreciation of the music. On the other hand, Berry and other black performers were exploited by record producers and concert promoters, and on occasion could be barred from performing their own music, threatened and even attacked. Obviously, racial discrimination in all of its many forms could not be eliminated as easily as segregation.

Conclusion

Chuck Berry is not only an American icon but an international one. While he has had a somewhat troubled past, his musical significance is recognized around the world. There is no disputing his transcendent importance, and the Chuck Berry House at 3137 Whittier Street is the one building which witnessed the most prolific, influential period of his career. Here he developed his ground-breaking style, practiced with his band, and wrote "Maybellene" and a host of other genre-defining standards. He lived there with his wife and small family from the summer of 1950 through July 15, 1958, and he retained ownership of the property for several additional years. Berry recently visited the site and confirmed that, except for a new tree in the front yard, the property looks much the same today as he remembers it.[76]

Other Chuck Berry sites remain but they are not nearly as relevant to his career. His birthplace at 2520 Goode Avenue (now Annie Malone Drive) in the Ville survives and is listed in some local guidebooks, but birthplaces are generally nominated only when no more appropriate or relevant site is available.

The Cosmopolitan Club at 17th and Bond Avenue in East St. Louis, where Berry achieved local success between 1953 and early 1955, has been demolished.

The Chicago locations associated with Berry are not as relevant to his career as the nominated house and, in addition, have integrity issues. These include the Chess Records building at 4750-52 Cottage Grove Avenue where Berry met and had business dealings and musical discussions with Leonard and Phil Chess; the Universal Recording Studios at 46 E. Walton Avenue where "Maybellene" and other early Berry songs apparently were recorded; and a later Chess Records building at 2120 S. Michigan Avenue where Berry recorded additional hits beginning in 1957.[77] Although the Michigan Avenue site is a Chicago City Landmark, integrity issues apparently preclude its listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Apart from integrity concerns, all of these properties are of course associated with many artists in addition to Chuck Berry—

[76] Wagman.

[77] For an insightful account of what was likely to have been recorded where among the Chess sites, see Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon and others. Additionally, their periods of association with Berry would not be fully compatible with the required compartmentalization of his creative career.

Berry's former home at 13 Windemere Place, a side-gabled Colonial Revival in St. Louis' Visitation Park neighborhood is extant, but Berry resided there for less time than at the Whittier Street address and for a much less significant period of his career before beginning his prison sentence for the Mann Act conviction on February 19, 1962.

When not on the road Berry spends quite a bit of time at Berry Park, his country home and entertainment complex at Wentzville, Missouri. While Berry Park has been a fixture in his life for decades, this property, like the Windemere Place house, is obviously not associated with as long and significant of a period as the nominated property.

Berry owns and has owned a considerable amount of other real estate, but in terms of significant associations none of it compares even with those resources already mentioned. The best preserved and most appropriate Chuck Berry property for listing in the National Register is easily the nominated Chuck Berry House at 3137 Whittier.

Among his many accolades, Berry was the first artist elected to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and he is a member of the Nashville Songwriters Association International Hall of Fame. He received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 27th Annual Grammys in 1985. In 2000 Berry was one of four individuals honored for their "lifetime contributions to America's culture" by the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, and in 2002 he received BMI's prestigious Icon award.[78] Berry performed at President Bill Clinton's Inauguration in 1993 and at the White House at President Jimmy Carter's request, in 1979. *Rolling Stone* magazine currently ranks Chuck Berry as the fifth most influential artist in the history of rock and roll, preceded only by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley and the Rolling Stones. In 1977, NASA bestowed Berry with a share in perhaps the greatest honor it could convey by selecting "Johnny B. Goode" as one of only two representative examples of American culture for the "Golden Record" on its Voyager space probe.[79] The song now stands with a collection of folk music from around the globe and works by such masters as Beethoven and Bach as part of a canon of human culture hurtling through space.

St. Louis' main tribute to one of its most culturally influential citizens came in 1989 when Berry was given a star on the Delmar Loop's Walk of Fame.

Until a recent spate of publicity, the importance of the nominated property had been virtually

[78] "Kennedy Center Tributes Span Spectrum of Song and Dance; and Don't Forget Clint," *The New York Times*, 4 December 2000.
[79] "The King Steers Clear of Town," source unknown, July 1982, Missouri Historical Society Vertical File.

unknown and the home had languished under the shifting ownerships of out-of-state banks. Recently, the City of St. Louis Preservation Board and St. Louis Mayor Francis G. Slay endorsed listing of the Chuck Berry House in the National Register of Historic Places.

Berry stands to gain nothing by the listing of his former home, whereas the nation stands to gain by the acknowledgment of the building where one of its musical masters crafted the fundamentals of rock and roll. The property can be listed without violating any National Register guidelines. The early period of rock and roll is clearly over, and sufficient time has elapsed for a scholarly appraisal of Berry's contributions to its development. These contributions have been evaluated, with near-universal acclaim. Although Berry is still alive and performing on a limited basis, he is not creating original music nor is he attempting to do so, and therefore his productive career is over.

Figure 2: Chuck Berry, circa 1956. Source of photo: *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography*, p. 147

Figure 3: Cover of Berry's first LP album, released in 1957.

Figure 4: Cover of Berry's last major album, released in 1964. Its title acknowledges his enormous influence on the next generation of musicians, particularly those of the British Invasion.

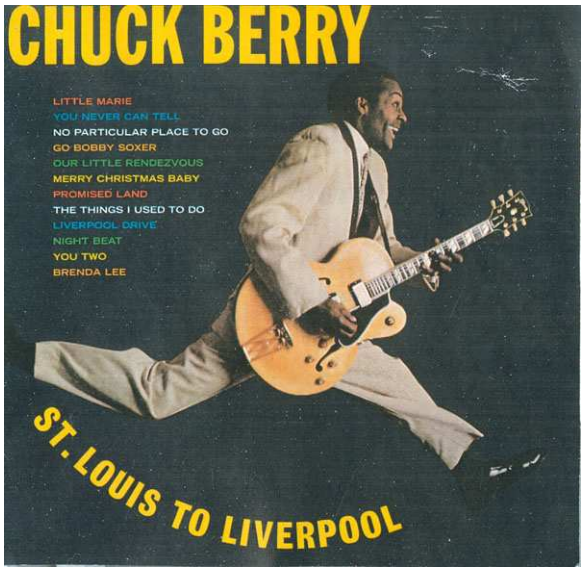

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Photo Log

Chuck Berry House
3137 Whittier Street
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri
Photographers: Lindsey Derrington and Andrew Weil
April 2008
Negatives on file at: Landmarks Association of St. Louis

1. Main elevation facing southwest from Whittier Street.
2. Parapet detail facing west.
3. Detail of southwest corner of original house, facing east.
4. Rear of 1956 addition, facing northeast.
5. Detail of northwest corner of addition, facing east.
6. View from bedroom looking east into living room.
7. Detail of art glass transom above front window in living room.


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