



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Chuck Berry

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April 8, 2017

The season and year was the fall of 1958. I was attending the University of New Mexico as a first-semester freshman. Two of my friends from my high school class (Lovington, New Mexico) were also at UNM. Their names were Freddy Harkey and Leslie Gillette.

Freddy Harkey was a talented musician. He performed with the flair of Buddy Holly and Holly's Crickets. I was biased, but I thought Freddy was a better composer, singer, and musician than Buddy was. But then, it is difficult to argue that "Peggy Sue" and "That'll be the Day" are mediocre rock songs.

Freddy had his own band in Lovington and was in demand across the county. Freddy also help us attract girls at the Hokona Hall girl's dorm at UNM by walking over to the dorm, guitar in hand. He would place himself, along with his two high school buddies, in a second floor recreation room, then play and sing popular rock and roll music.

Before long, Leslie and I were in rock and roll heaven, having more girls at our dancing disposal than we could handle. Before long, other males began to follow the three of us from the Mesa Vista men's dormitory to Hokana Hall for Freddy's one-man concerts.

Leslie Gillette was my roommate for that semester. Both of us harbored fantasies of heavens other than rock and roll music. But in spite of Freddy's personal help, our fantasies---with a quasi-successful exploration here-and-there, remained mostly fantasies.

Leslie was one of the most intelligent men I have ever met. Not once did I come remotely close to defeating him in chess or gin. On occasion, his father Dr. Gillette, (who delivered me 18 years before) would saunter by our chess game (his office and hospital were located underneath the Gillette residence). He would observe briefly the game underway, offer one suggestion to each of us, and return downstairs to attend to his patients. Leslie understood his father's hints. I did not, leading to uninterrupted checkmates of my Kings.

Yet Leslie's grades were all Fs during his first semester at UNM. He rarely attended classes. One afternoon, early in the second semester, his father showed up at our dorm room...after driving 300 miles from Lovington to Albuquerque. He had Leslie pack up his belongings and return to Lovington. Dr. Gillette was a good-hearted but no-nonsense man. He would not bankroll his son's desultory habits.

Later, Leslie earned a Ph.D in physics and became a star for the White Sands missile facility.

Before Leslie was retrieved from further academic disgrace by his father, Freddy, Leslie, and I discovered a rock and roll concert was to be held at the newly built Albuquerque Coliseum, a huge facility built largely underground. One could not gain an appreciation of its size from the outside. But once inside, it was, O my god! larger than the Lovington High School gym. We country lads had not yet made it to Madison Square Garden. (I am pleased to report I saw a game played in the original building of the Garden. I took a train from Washington, DC to see UNM defeat some obscure team from an Ivy League school.)

For the rock and roll concert, the headliners were Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, some singing groups, whose names I have forgotten. I have vague memories of Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard playing, but I am not sure. What I am sure of is that we were going to see, live!

two of my rock and roll idols. I played these men's music, and I danced to their songs hundreds of times in the community youth center in Lovington.

And there, I learned the art of dirty dancing. Patrick Swayze had nothing on Lea County dirty dancers, and we were before his time. He should have paid us royalty rights.

Because this article is a tribute to Chuck Berry, we will leave the other stars and dirty dancing for future eulogies.

Chuck Berry: A fusion of Jazz and Rock and Roll

During the past few weeks, after Berry's death was announced on March 18, I have been thinking about the concert in 1958. Before that time, I had not seen Chuck perform, even on television. My father did not allow TV in our home until I left for college in the fall of 1957. Thus, I had come to love this man's music, but did not know about his stage skills.

A TV journalist said (I missed getting the source) that he had fused jazz and rock and roll. As I watched him perform in Albuquerque that night, I was not considering these esoteric lines of thought. I was thinking of wanting to dance in the aisles to his music---which Leslie did.

The journalist's statement holds true. More than those early pioneers of rock and roll, Berry's blending of jazz and rock indeed fused the two forms of music. Of course, purists on both sides of the jazz and rock aisles will take issue with this claim.

To buttress my argument, Bruce Springsteen tweeted: "Chuck Berry was rock's greatest practitioner, guitarist, and the greatest pure rock 'n' roll writer who ever lived."¹ Mr. Springsteen did not address his jazz skills, but if you listen to some of Chuck's solos, they have the spirit of jazz in them.

The most surprising discovery about that night was how athletic and handsome he was. Many newspaper photos did not convey these impressions. Pictures below speak for themselves:



To appreciate the talent and impact that Chuck Berry had on the music world, here is a quote about the man from www.reasonstorock.com:

Of all the early rockers, Chuck Berry was by far the most significant. He was really the first artist to exhibit many of the traits that would come to define the form.

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/18/entertainment/chuck-berry-dies/>

First, he featured his own electric guitar prominently in his music. He used the instrument to give his material a propulsive, driving rhythm underneath his vocals, and then used equally rhythmic lead parts to echo and accent his vocals. This presaged the overall importance of guitars and guitarists in the idiom.

Next, he exhibited the highest degree of musical integrity. Not only did he play guitar on all of his recordings, he wrote and sang all of his own material. The result is the most satisfying and consistent recorded canon of any of the early rockers.

Others, like Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley, frequently relied on outside sources to supply their songs. The results were often uneven, with some of the best performances seeming to happen despite the supplied material, and not because of it.

Much like Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry developed a unique songwriting style that prominently featured his own talents on guitar. Diddley developed a “shave and a haircut, two bits” rhythm that proved repetitive and inflexible over the long haul. Berry’s style, on the other hand, while still unmistakable, proved to be much more flexible, ultimately being used for dozens of songs, many of which have proven to be enduring rock classics.²

While doing the research for this article, I listened to Chuck’s music and downloaded lyrics to some of his songs. As I read the lyrics, it came to me that Mr. Berry offered much more than nonsensical passages whose primary purpose was to rhyme. Below are some comments about his lyrics from the *New York Times*:³

“Brown Eyed Handsome Man” (1956)

Mr. Berry said that this song — a sly and daring commentary on race relations — was written after an episode he witnessed outside a concert he was playing in California. (A Hispanic man was being handcuffed by the police when a woman ran up, screaming to let him go.) In typically masterful manner, Mr. Berry was able to draw effortlessly on the worlds of art (the Venus de Milo) and baseball to convey the wide-ranging allure of “brown-eyed” — barely encoded to mean “nonwhite” — men.

² http://www.reasonatorock.com/artists/chuck_berry.html

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/19/arts/music/chuck-berry-songs.html>

“Memphis” (1959)

Mr. Berry's most tender and arguably most literary lyric had its roots in [Muddy Waters's](#) classic blues “[Long Distance Call](#).” He worked for more than a month on the words, though other than some of his wife's relatives, he claimed to have no specific connection to Memphis itself. The song is a one-sided conversation between the narrator and a telephone operator, expressing that he misses a girl named Marie, and that they are being kept apart by Marie's mother. The final verse reveals that Marie is, in fact, the narrator's 6-year-old daughter and that her mother left their home and took Marie with her; in a remarkable phrase, he recalls the girl's cheeks covered in “hurry-home drops.”

Read the *New York Times* article for a better and more complete description of the effect of Mr. Berry's lyrics, especially in concert with his music. No question, he was a man of genius in his genre. I am not equating him with Dave Brubeck. They excelled in different forms of music. Chuck could not play Dave; Dave could not play Chuck. Or maybe they could. We will never know.

Genius, even the same fields, comes in many varieties.

Nonetheless, put on some Chuck Berry music. Read his lyrics and listen to his musical compositions. His whole equals more than the sum of his parts. And for that, we can be grateful.

Another aspect about Mr. Berry's lyrics: They were rarely repetitive, other than the refrain/chorus. Consequently, they often told a story, sometimes filled with metaphors. Here is one example of his use of symbols in his work. I am told the brown eyed man was an emblem about a person of disadvantaged color.

Brown Eyed Handsome Man lyrics

Arrested on charges of unemployment,
he was sitting in the witness stand
The judge's wife called up the district attorney
Said you free that brown eyed man
You want your job you better free that brown eyed man

Flying across the desert in a TWA,
I saw a woman walking across the sand
She been a walkin' thirty miles en route to Bombay
To get a brown eyed handsome man
Her destination was a brown eyed handsome man

Way back in history three thousand years
In fact every since the world began
There's been a whole lot of good women sheddin' tears
For a brown eyed handsome man
It's a lot of trouble was brown eyed handsome man

Beautiful daughter couldn't make up her mind
Between a doctor and a lawyer man
Her mother told her darlin' go out and find yourself

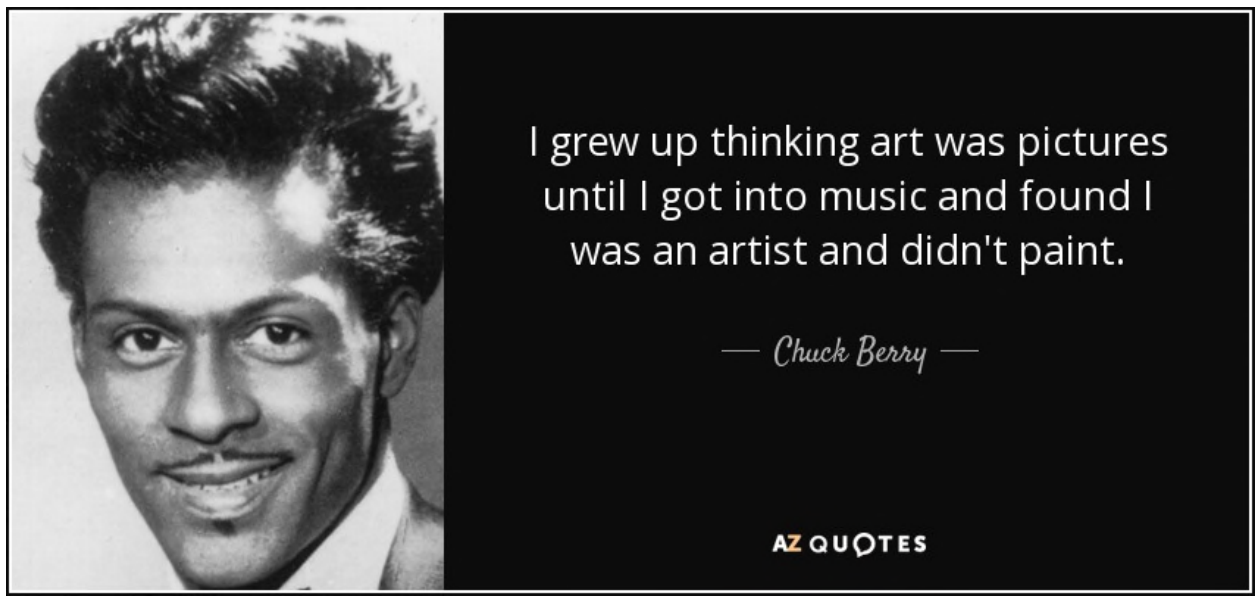
A brown eyed handsome man
Just like your daddy, he's a brown eyed handsome man

Milo Venus was a beautiful lass
She had the world in the palm of her hand
But she lost both her arms in a wrestling match
To get brown eyed handsome man
She fought and won herself a brown eyed handsome man

Two, three count with nobody on
He hit a high fly into the stand
Rounding third he was headed for home
It was a brown eyed handsome man
That won the game; it was a brown eyed handsome man

Because of his jazz and rock and roll style, Chuck Berry turned off some jazz enthusiastic people. Not me. I thought he was bringing together a new form of music.

Later, in the middle-1970s, I watched him perform at a club in Georgetown, DC. I was transfixed by him in the 1970s as I was some 15 years later, as I am now.



⁴<https://www.google.com/search?q=Photos+of+Chuck+P%3DBerry&espv=2&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwimva331ZLTAhVE7mMKHe5kCQcQ7AkINw&biw=1108&bih=612#imgrc=17H0Wn0b38HAMM:>