

CHUCK BERRY



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1955-2017</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Brown Eyed Handsome Man (1956)</i>

Page contents:

- [AFTER SCHOOL SESSION](#) (1957)
- [One Dozen Berrys](#) (1958)
- [BERRY IS ON TOP](#) (1959) 🌸
- [Rockin' At The Hops](#) (1960)
- [New Juke Box Hits](#) (1961)

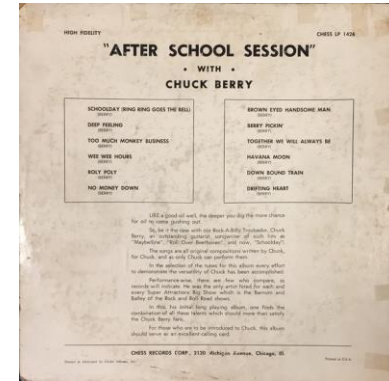


AFTER SCHOOL SESSION

Album released:
May 1957

V A L U E
3 4 5 4 5

More info:



Tracks: 1) School Day (Ring Ring Goes The Bell); 2) Deep Feeling; 3) Too Much Monkey Business; 4) Wee Wee Hours; 5) Roly Poly; 6) No Money Down; 7) **Brown Eyed Handsome Man**; 8) Berry Pickin'; 9) Together (We Will Always Be); 10) **Havana Moon**; 11) **Down Bound Train**; 12) Drifting Heart; 13*) You Can't Catch Me; 14*) I've Changed.

REVIEW

If you look up «singles artist» in the dictionary, Chuck Berry should be grinning right straight in your face — more than any other artist from the 1950s, perhaps, is the man associated with the jukebox rather than the phonograph. Consequently, reviewing his output through his LPs on the Chess label feels exceedingly weird, largely because the sequencing throws chronology out the window and may easily concatenate tracks separated from each other by three or four years — not so big a deal, perhaps, as it would be in the 1960s, but still disorienting.

On the other hand, some part of me insists that discussing Chuck Berry is quite necessary in terms of LPs, because it is only those LPs — rather than singles, or even best-of compilations — that give you a wholesome picture of Chuck Berry the Artist rather than merely Chuck Berry the Founding Father of Rock'n'Roll. Nobody could ever deny that 'Roll Over Beethoven' and 'Johnny B. Goode' are the exact reasons why Chuck Berry was sent down to Earth; but after you have properly sat through the majority of Chuck's output from his peak years, you might get a deeper and juicier appreciation for these rock'n'roll classics by placing them in the wider context of Berry's musical hobbies, interests, and emotions. Maybe he was not *that* much more than 'Johnny B. Goode', but much of that extra territory is still worth an excursion or two, and I will be more than happy to serve as your humble guide for it.



By the time Chess had decided that their most rambunctious artist deserved his own LP, Chuck had already spent almost two years on the label and had seven singles, most of them Top 10 R&B hits, under his belt. The biggest ones ('Maybellene', which put him on the radar; 'Thirty Days', an homage to Hank Williams; and 'Roll Over Beethoven', an homage to the heroes of classical music whom Chuck politely asked out the door) are not included here, presumably because they had only recently been included on **Rock, Rock, Rock!**, the soundtrack to a famous early rock'n'roll musical and Chess Records' very first LP, on which Chuck Berry shared the bill with the Moonglows and the Flamingos, decent R&B ensembles in their own right but quickly eclipsed by the genius of Mr. Berry. Other than that, **After School Session** does a fairly decent job of collecting all the other A- and B-sides from 1955 to early 1957, and throws a couple of previously unreleased instrumental tracks to complete the picture.

The title of the LP is a fairly obvious reference to Chuck's latest single at the time, which is also the first track here — 'School Day (Ring! Ring! Goes The Bell)' — but it is actually more symbolic than that. Leonard Chess and his people very quickly understood that, by signing Chuck to their label, they were tapping into a completely new target group: where Chess Records' usual music, the slow, dark, heavy Chicago blues of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, largely appealed to black and/or «mature» white audiences, Berry's faster, lighter, and generally funnier music with its casually mundane topics would first and foremost appeal to bored teenagers, looking for a ray of hope. So it is hardly surprising that the first song on Chuck's first LP is *the* straightforward schoolroom anthem of 1957; in fact, it is the very first song in a long series of school-bashing anthems which goes all the way to 'School's Out' and 'Another Brick In The Wall, Pt. 2' — except that, unlike Alice Cooper and Roger Waters, Chuck Berry is a friendly and humorous guy, and instead of spewing active hatred, he poeticizes passive boredom, the only salvation from which is, of course, the juke joint.

In a way, 'School Day', though certainly not the most famous Chuck Berry song (too slow!), might be the quintessential Chuck Berry song — and not just because it is so anthemic (no coincidence that "hail, hail, rock'n'roll!" was adopted for the title of the famous concert film), but because there are few other songs in the man's catalog matching the total and absolute adoration for his guitar displayed in this performance. I mean, Chuck *loved* his guitar —L-O-V-E-d it to the heights of absurdity, more so than any other guitar hero in the 1950s and possibly more than anybody else until Hendrix came along and kicked that love into an even more modern age. The very first ringing riff in 'School Day', of course, imitates the school bell — but that is just the beginning of the story, because the rest of it consists of a long, engaging, immersive dialog between Chuck Berry, the singer, and his faithful instrument. Chuck may be one of the earlier Riffmeisters, but just like the best Riffmeisters of the 1960s, such as Keith Richards and Pete Townshend, he is too easily bored to pin down an entire

performance to just one repetitive riff. Instead, his guitar here follows all the minor nuances and inclinations of his voice: "Up in the morning and out to school!" (upbeat, rousing, get-up-and-shine high-pitched riff), "the teacher is teaching the Golden Rule" (gruff, stern, low-pitched riff — teachers are no fun), "American history, practical math" (nagging, sneering, nasal twang riff — yadda yadda yadda), "you studying hard and hoping to pass" (repeat nagging, sneering riff, but now it's mocking *you*, the wretched protagonist), and so on.

But the coolest thing about the song is how it actually goes from a symbolic condemnation of the American school system, with the repetitive one-note riffs mocking the monotonous boredom of the classroom, to a laudatory hymn on the liberating power of rock music — without changing the melody even once. Somewhere along the way, "Ring! Ring! Goes the bell" becomes "Hail! Hail! Rock and roll", and the exact same riffs that, just a minute ago, were used to vent your negative feelings, take on a powerful, celebratory nature. It's like a goddamn optical illusion — you know that, of course, your brain is driven by Chuck's words which convey extra meaning to his notes, but it still feels weirdly unexplainable. "The feeling is there, body and soul" indeed.

As you move on to the man's other brilliant singles, such as 'Too Much Monkey Business', one more thing that catches the eye is the excellency of Chuck's backing band. Although he never made it big as a proper electric blues artist, he *did* record at Chess, where the resident bass player, for instance, was the great Willie Dixon, and when you hear the big man slap that big bass, one thing you totally get is that we ain't in Nashville any more — most of Chuck's classic hits have a tougher, grittier «bottom» sound than that of the white boys' rockabilly bands. And while the song is usually remembered for its lyrics — an innovative, beatnik-ish approach to phrase crafting as well as an early milestone in the history of rap — for me the song really gets cooking during the instrumental break, with Chuck's machine-gun licks blasting over Dixon's wobbly echo chamber and Johnnie Johnson's smooth, but inobtrusive piano playing in the background.

The B-side to 'Too Much Monkey Business' was even better, though. 'Brown Eyed Handsome Man' has two things in its favor — (a) it arguably has the single juiciest guitar sound in Chuck Berry history, a perfect combination of slightly crackling distortion with a bit of extra treble presaging the legendary «woman tone» and (b) it features Chuck's poetry at its most inventive and symbolic (forgive the man for misspelling Milo Venus as *Marlo* Venus, it actually makes the song a bit more quizzical). The feeling is clearly narcissistic — I bet Chuck was quite counting on attracting the ladies with the tune — but it is narcissistic in a most charming and friendly way, loaded with a powerful optimistic charge right from the opening notes. The man may have been quite well-known for having a bad temper, but one place where he *never* let it show was on his

recordings: each single Chuck Berry song is always life-affirming, even when he enters critical mode ('Too Much Monkey Business' just has him shrug off all the innumerable life's problems like so much water off a dog's back).

Actually, come to think of it, this record does feature at least one exception, which is exactly why Chuck's LPs, or at least some of his lesser known tracks, are worth studying. 'Down Bound Train', one of the first known rock songs to open with a fade-in and close with a fade-out, is a fast, terse, one-note rockabilly stomper threatening alcohol abusers with fire and brimstone, and its proto-punkish melodic structure and moody atmosphere make it a unique standout. If Nick Cave ever joins a Chuck Berry tribute somewhere, this is definitely the song for him to cover — Chuck himself does not quite have the imposing voice to properly convey all the terror of the lyrical imagery. No idea why he had chosen such a morose subject for the B-side to 'No Money Down', which was in itself a rather forgettable effort to turn 'Hoochie Coochie Man' / 'I'm A Man' / 'Mannish Boy' etc. into a car-themed piece of slow rock'n'roll.

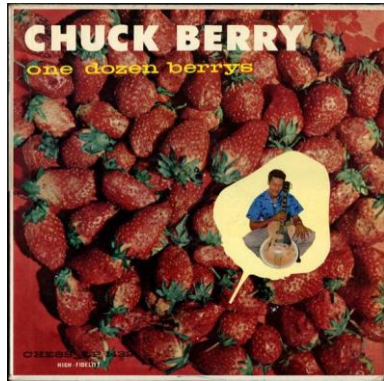
But even if not all the songs here work on an equally impressive level, I would still ask not to ignore Chuck's instrumentals. On 'Deep Feeling', he uses a simple and minimalistic, but efficient slide-playing technique which somehow manages to infuse a bit of rock'n'roll sharpness into this seemingly inoffensive Hawaiian lullaby, cleverly playing with sharp tones, dissonance, and distortion to sting you in the face in your hammock every few seconds or so. On 'Berry Pickin'', he carries out a key-changing experiment, alternating the tune between a happy Latin jingle and a driving piece of rock'n'roll — not sure if it actually «works», but at least it is not generic. And 'Roly Poly' is just a cool three-minute jam where you get to enjoy all of Chuck's — and Johnnie Johnson's, for that matter — trademark licks in one go.

All of these great-to-nice moments easily wipe out the negative effects from a few pieces of obsolete filler, e.g. 'Havana Moon', one of Chuck's less convincing genre experiments — not because he sucks at impersonating Caribbean accents (he does, though), but because impersonating a Caribbean accent seems to be the song's only point, as it is essentially a very repetitive joke tune about an unlucky Cuban guy failing to make it with an American girl. Also, 'Wee Wee Hours' is a good example of why Leonard Chess actually pushed Chuck away from recording stereotypical slow 12-bar blues — Dixon and Johnson are always a gas to listen to, but Chuck Berry as a deep blues howler just does not cut the mustard. Of course, maybe he just had too many teeth for that kind of business — I couldn't say for certain that Sonny Boy Williamson had a better singing voice, but Sonny Boy *could* pull off that kind of schtick convincingly and Chuck... well, not after 'Brown-Eyed Handsome Man' he couldn't.

Still, **After School Session** shows that the *place* is often every bit as important as the *time*: I can't help but wonder if

Chuck's talents would be just as appreciated, or if Chuck, rather than just about anyone else, could have become *the* major, *the* quintessential rock'n'roll idol for an entire generation of British kids overseas, if he had exercised his songwriting talents somewhere other than Chicago. Even if the cheery nature of his songs, on the surface, seems the farthest thing away from the solemnity and gloominess of Chicago's blues greats, the music still bears that seal, and in the end it is the volatile combination of seemingly incompatible ingredients that does the trick. In the world of 1950s rock'n'rollers where about half of the guys had their roots in the country sounds of Nashville, and the other half in the jump blues and R&B sounds of popular African-American entertainment, Chuck pretty much stood alone with his influences and environment — and as far as I am concerned, those were the *best* possible influences and environment. Which is why, you know, there's Chuck Berry, and then there's everyone else, as good as they are. Period.





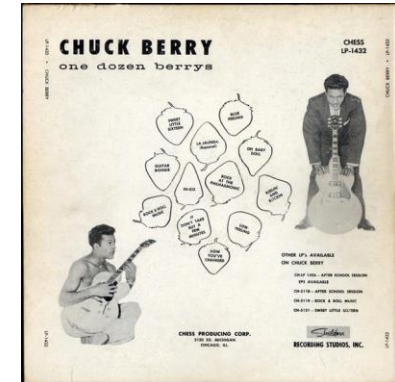
ONE DOZEN BERRYS

Album released:

March 1958

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) **Sweet Little Sixteen**; 2) Blue Feeling; 3) **La Jaunda**; 4) Rockin' At The Philharmonic; 5) Oh Baby Doll; 6) Guitar Boogie; 7) Reelin' And Rockin'; 8) Ingo; 9) Rock And Roll Music; 10) How You've Changed; 11) Low Feeling; 12) It Don't Take But A Few Minutes.

REVIEW

In between May 1957 and March 1958, the period which separates Chuck's first LP from his second one, Mr. Berry put out three singles. The first one was 'Oh Baby Doll', and it was a bit inauspicious: way too melodically close to 'Maybellene' for comfort, which was not good because people did not really expect Chuck to repeat himself — indeed, next to 'Maybellene' itself and such major hits as 'School Day' the single pretty much flopped. The speed of the track is great, and Johnnie Johnson's sprinkling piano rolls are fantastic, and Willie Dixon slaps that bass like no tomorrow, and it is fun to hear Chuck pronounce things like "alma mater"... but still, the song failed to become a truly golden classic for obvious reasons: Mr. Rock'n'Roll could do better than rehash his melodies from three years ago.



Mr. Rock'n'Roll probably agreed with this, and just a few months later put out 'Rock And Roll Music'. Now the trick of 'Rock And Roll Music', the way I see it, is that the song itself is not so much *rock-and-roll*, really, as it is sheer *pop* with a bit of rock'n'roll trimming. It is certainly pop in spirit, much more of a celebration than a rebellion; but it is also pop in form,

ditching the trilinear blues stanza and replacing it with a vocal melody that sounds almost European (Spanish? Italian?) in origin... actually, I have not the least idea of how Chuck came up with that melody: the man's mind did work in quite mysterious ways when he was on the level. In any case, it is interesting to note that the song would later be famously covered by the Beatles and still later infamously by the Beach Boys, but not by the Rolling Stones or the Animals or whoever else would do Chuck Berry covers in droves — for the true gritty aficionados of undiluted rhythm and blues, this alleged ode to rock'n'roll must have seemed a bit fruity. But while it does feel weird to me trying to imagine how the song would have sounded like if covered by the Stones, it does not sound one bit weird when performed by Chuck — because Chuck was, after all, first and foremost a good-vibe entertainer, trying to get his listeners to smile and have fun rather than rip their chairs out of the floor or beat up security staff.

He did, however, initiate a long-standing tradition of somewhat excessively pompous, self-conscious anthems to the sacral powers of rock'n'roll, completely devoid of any signs of rebelliousness or shock value — 'Rock And Roll Music' is a direct spiritual ancestor of KISS' 'Rock And Roll All Night', Joan Jett's 'I Love Rock And Roll', and even the Who's somewhat sarcastic, but still pretty good-natured 'Long Live Rock'. Yet Chuck's song is still better than all those others combined, if only because it was clearly not designed with the idea of a million strong lifting it up in a stadium: not a pseudo-spiritual battle cry for the masses, but a fairly personal declaration of one man's preference for rock and roll music over any other genre. If it comes across as anthemic, it is more by accident than on pretentious purpose.

On the *other* hand, it is hard to get rid of the feeling that Chuck was gradually growing quite full of himself — if only because 'Sweet Little Sixteen', the follow-up to 'Rock And Roll Music', was just as poppy, celebratory, and anthemic as its direct predecessor. "They're really rockin' in Boston, in Pittsburgh P.A., deep in the heart of Texas and 'round the Frisco Bay" is, after all, as rallying as could possibly be — and putting an imaginary teenage girl on top of that universal movement was essentially Chuck's subtle trick to endear himself with the ladies, but the song was essentially another one of those "hail hail rock'n'roll" moments that presented the new music as a freshly organized empire, and its performer as the Supreme Emperor of his delirious realm. Not that there was anything wrong with that, of course, as long as the chorus kept on building up and up and up... and *down* like that, or as long as Chuck put that new stop-and-start trick to such seductive use. And yet again, it is funny how, of all the bands to cover the song, it was not some dangerous rhythm & blues combo, but the frickin' Beach Boys who produced the most memorable rendition — though their reckless decision to steal away the song (as 'Surfin' USA') rather than properly credit it actually cost them in the long run.

Once 'Rock And Roll Music' and 'Sweet Little Sixteen' firmly restored Chuck to the top positions on the charts (he would never again rise quite that high), it looked like it was time for another LP — which, understandably, included all three of his latest singles. Unfortunately, the overall results this time around were not nearly as satisfactory as with **After School Session**. Although this album, too, tries diligently to present Chuck as a diverse and experimental songwriter and performer, the non-hit singles are largely disappointing — at the very least, there are certainly no neglected gems like 'Down Bound Train' to be found. Arguably the only other classic number is 'Reelin' And Rockin', the B-side to 'Sweet Little Sixteen' which probably needs no introduction — it is simply the funniest kickass number Chuck ever wrote, and it would become even funnier and more kick-ass when he extended it with tons of improvised smutty verses during live shows.

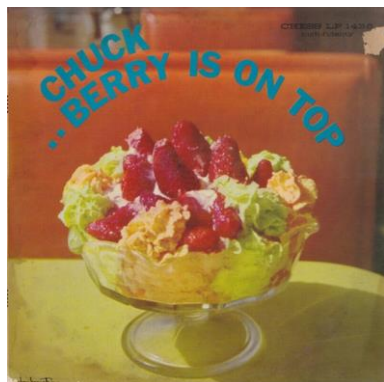
But other than that, at least *half* a dozen of these particular «Berrys» aren't all that delightful. First and foremost, five of them are purely instrumental, and while it is generally fun to hear Chuck jam with his pals, most of these jams are forgettable and really sound like dress rehearsal versions for vocal classics. 'Guitar Boogie', for instance, is pretty much 'Reelin' And Rockin' without the words; 'Blue Feeling' is the slow blues of 'Wee Wee Hours' with Johnnie Johnson playing a much larger role than Chuck himself; and only 'Rockin' At The Philharmonic' stands out as a relatively self-sufficient jam, but still not nearly as memorable as 'Deep Feeling' or 'Berry Pickin' from the previous album. The weirdest thing of all is 'Low Feeling', which is actually nothing but a slowed down version of 'Blue Feeling' (!), for some reason placed on the same album with the untampered tape — as if the word «filler» needed a definition update.

To make matters worse, **One Dozen Berrys** is also home to one of the silliest, if not to say stupidest, tracks in Chuck's early repertoire — 'La Juanda' (often misspelled as 'La Jaunda', including the track listing on the original album). It follows in the steps of 'Havana Moon', reflecting Chuck's strange passion for bad foreign accents, and this time gives us a spoof of Mexican balladry, which Chuck for some reason delivers with a pseudo-Spanish accent despite admitting that "hablo solo en Ingles y no comprendo Español". It is not particularly catchy, and absolutely inauthentic, and, most importantly, not at all funny. See, Chuck Berry does have a fine sense of humor, but honestly, he never was no Gene Ween, and that humor largely failed him when he tried to get into some particularly distant character. Well... sometimes he does, then again I think he don't. Or something like that.

Two more vocal numbers do not manage to patch things up too well. The slow, moody blues of 'How You've Changed' feels underrehearsed and underproduced (the song would later be picked up and polished to dark and creepy perfection by the Animals); and the fast country-rock of 'It Don't Take But A Few Minutes' sounds like something Chuck could have

improvised in said few minutes with a bunch of friends on his front porch (though it's at least entertaining). In the end, it all seems *very* hastily thrown together — and indeed I do believe that most of these album-only tracks were recorded during a two-day session in December 1957, most likely with no proper songwriting process involved at all. Maybe there is a certain amount of goofy charm in the spontaneous, off-the-wall nature of the whole thing, but, personally, I am not a big fan of the mish-mash approach where spontaneous throwaways are mixed with well-polished gems of genius songcraft — it would have been much better to save that stuff for a special fan-oriented release called **One Dozen Raspberries**. Three or four classics aside, the rest is certainly not worth any sort of special hunt.





BERRY IS ON TOP

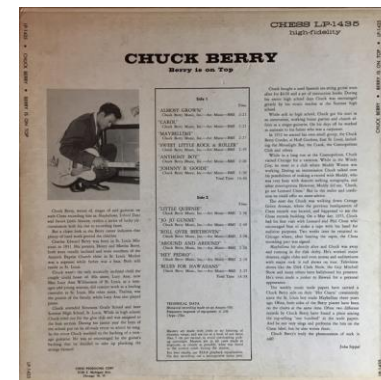
Album released:

July 1959

V A L U E

3 4 4 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Almost Grown; 2) Carol; 3) Maybellene; 4) Sweet Little Rock & Roller; 5) Anthony Boy; 6) Johnny B. Goode; 7) Little Queenie; 8) Jo Jo Gunne; 9) Roll Over Beethoven; 10) Around And Around; 11) Hey Pedro; 12) Blues For Hawaiians.

REVIEW

Chess Records had chosen the strategy of summarizing Chuck Berry's output in LP form on a yearly basis — but as the summer of 1959 rolled along and there still was not enough completely new material to fill up two entire sides, they decided that they had no choice but to go back to the past and complete the record with just about anything that had so far eluded LP representation, even if it meant starting out with Chuck's very first single from way back in 1955. The result was **Berry Is On Top**, a much more pompous pun than **One Dozen Berrys** and a much more chaotic agglomeration of tracks — but also, unquestionably, the most consistent and filler-free release of the original «classic trilogy». At least half of the songs on here were instant classics, quickly adopted by many giants of the British Invasion and familiar even to the most casual customers of rock'n'roll music — I mean, when you have 'Johnny B. Goode', 'Little Queenie', and 'Roll Over Beethoven' sitting on the same record, what's left but to just give up? In mid-1959, Chuck Berry *was* on top, and if not for this irresistible attraction to underage Apache waitresses — all part of God's plan to destroy rock'n'roll music, of course — who knows how much longer the man would have remained there.



To knock the hype down just a little bit, let us first toss out the clunkers — no Chuck Berry album is *completely* filler-free, though even the man's misses at the time have an intriguing aspect to them. First on the list is 'Hey Pedro', the original B-side to 'Carol', a limp, repetitive, utterly passion-free Latin vamp over which Chuck ad-libs some parodic lines in his mock-Cuban accent, already familiar from 'La Juanda' — I don't exactly know what in particular Chuck could have against Cubans (he didn't spend *that* much time in Florida, did he?), but once again, his sense of humor totally fails him once he puts aside his rock'n'roll spirits and substitutes them for parodies of stereotypes. And I wouldn't even mind an offensive parody of a stereotype if the music was up to par — but this shit sounds like it was just quickly tossed off in a couple of minutes when he suddenly realized he'd booked studio time without writing enough material.

Next on the list are two odd, but ultimately not-too-exciting A-sides on which Chuck also tried to do something «different». 'Anthony Boy' seems to be picking up the vibe of 'School Days' with its all-too-personal tale of an unlucky schoolboy bullied and humiliated by his wicked girl classmates — but if 'School Days' was a rebellious anthem of rock'n'roll as a means of liberation from the tyranny of the classroom, then 'Anthony Boy' is basically just a joke song; deceptively opening with the exact same guitar trill as 'School Days', it then immediately turns into a goofy boy scout marching ditty which has Chuck Berry inventing Herman's Hermits five years before Herman's Hermits invented themselves. As a filler B-side, it would have been comprehensible; as an A-side, it was an embarrassment, and predictably opened 1959 as one of Chuck's biggest flops — what was he even thinking?

Only marginally better — though for completely different reasons — is 'Jo Jo Gunne', a very strange rocking tune which opens with the usual 'Roll Over Beethoven / Johnny B. Goode / Carol' riff but quickly turns into another repetitive, echoey, muddy vamp over which Chuck tells us a long, long, LONG story of the adventures of... wild animals in Africa "in ancient history, four thousand B.C.". All I remember from the narrative is that there was a monkey, a lion, and a kangaroo (Chuck's knowledge of African zoology certainly leaves a lot to be desired, but then again, maybe he thought four thousand B.C. was such a long time ago, you couldn't go wrong even if you threw in some mammoths and dinosaurs), but otherwise, the narrative went absolutely nowhere, the humor was non-existent, the brief in-between verse breaks had the sole purpose of letting Chuck catch a breath, and the entire song seemed to have one and only one purpose — to make you wonder if Chuck Berry had really gone crazy or if he was just throwing one of his pranks on his audiences. (Apparently, it did impress some people — like a few members of the great psychedelic band Spirit, for instance — enough to have them form a band named Jo Jo Gunne in the early 1970s, which was probably the biggest legacy the song left behind).

Finally, the sole LP-only track here, closing off the album, is 'Blues For Hawaiians', an instrumental exploring the same moods and techniques that Chuck had already demonstrated earlier on the Hawaiian-influenced 'Deep Feeling', except this time he really goes overboard with the «floating» sliding sound. It feels cool for a few seconds, but quickly gets tedious — Chuck is no virtuoso, and he cannot achieve the same level of expressivity with his «Hawaiian guitar» that he can with his rock'n'roll antics, so ultimately it's just three and a half minutes of lost time for all of us.

But once we have sacrificed all that stuff to the hungry God of Filler, there are still eight absolutely indispensable classics left on the platter — songs that I am really reluctant to comment upon, because what sort of new things under the sun could be said about 'Roll Over Beethoven' or 'Johnny B. Goode'? Well, since pretty much all of these are known from multiple cover versions as well, let me just run a brief comparative analysis to see if any of those had made the original «expendable» or if there are certain elements about Chuck's own versions that still kick the shit out of everybody else. Starting off in chronological order, we have...

...well, 'Maybellene', of course, Chuck's very first single that put him on the map. *Never*, as of yet, heard it done better by anybody — perhaps the original is grossly lo-fi even compared to Chuck's later recordings, with the lead guitar sounding as if it were played out of a tightly zipped suitcase, but the tempo, the jackhammer, proto-Motörhead percussion, the rapid fire passion in the vocals; all of these elements create a feel of overdrive which often, though not always, characterizes a great artist's first offering, when he *knows* it's now or never, it's gonna make him or break him, and gives out 200%. Listen to that guitar break — the mad flurry of Berry-licks loosed like shrapnel on the audience. Not only did *nobody* play guitar like this back in 1955, but I don't think even Chuck himself played it quite like that again ever after. Who's gonna kick his ass over this one? Gerry and the Pacemakers? Don't make me laugh.

'Roll Over Beethoven' — I think the one «alternate» version we all have in mind is the Beatles', with George Harrison taking lead vocals. (Well, there's also ELO, of course, but any version of 'Roll Over Beethoven' that crosses Chuck Berry with *actual* Beethoven has to be regarded from a «meta» perspective, so we'll leave that one out). Beatles' covers of Chuck Berry are not to be laughed off — remember how they so fully realized the anthemic potential of 'Rock'n'Roll Music' — but what they always tend to do is make the songs sound more serious than they were originally intended. Here, for instance, they (a) slightly slow down the tempo, so that you might get a little more inclination to listen and a little less to dance, (b) give the song a grumbly, distorted, vampy riff which makes it feel busier and more *insistent*, if not outright aggressive, (c) have George deliver the message in an almost wartime-proclamation tone, without the slightest hint of humor contained in

Chuck's original delivery. So you could think of the Beatles' version as 'Roll Over Beethoven With A Ball And Chain', whereas Chuck does that with more of a feather-tickle touch. I'll take both and choose one depending on how pissed off I feel at this particular time of day.

'Johnny B. Goode' — forget it. Not even Marty McFly does a 'Johnny B. Goode'-enough to replace the original version. Not a single artist in the world has ever managed to come up with a way to steal that song from Chuck. It's been imitated, mutated, mutilated (Hendrix played some totally crazyass live versions), but nobody ever made it more exciting than the combination of Chuck's guitar, Chuck's vocals, and Johnnie Johnson's barrelhouse blues piano rolls. If not the sole, then the primary reason for Chuck Berry being put on Earth was to give us 'Johnny B. Goode', and nobody can take it away. Not even worth discussing.

'Around And Around', the B-side to 'Johnny B. Goode', is another matter. Of the two British Invasion bands who laid their grubby hands on the song — the Animals and the Stones — I unquestionably select the Stones' version as definitive, and I think they annihilated Chuck with their performance. Perhaps he just did not give it enough attention, being so busy with 'Johnny' and all, but the original is a little underdeveloped: the vocals feel slightly tired, the piano is stuck too deeply into the background, and while the classic guitar riff is already there, it feels thin and wimpy. The impression is that the Stones put more soul and *belief* in the song than Chuck did himself, making it their definitive early rock'n'roll anthem — no wonder they used it to open their famous performance on the T.A.M.I. Show. Great rock'n'roll performance from all parties involved, but in the event of a need to score, it's one less for Chuck and one more for the British boys.

The Stones present an equally serious challenge to 'Carol', which they also tightened up and made far more dangerous and ballistic than the original, but this is the same case as with 'Roll Over Beethoven' — one might argue that they made it a bit *too* serious, taking out the goofy humor of Chuck's story about a guy who has to learn to dance in order to keep his girl safe from competitors. The best thing about the song is the exciting, unpredictable dialog between Chuck and his own lead guitar — echoing each of his vocal lines with a subtle mood twist — but the clinch here is that Keith Richards totally got that, and made *his* guitar engage in an equally meaningful dialog with Jagger's delivery. (He would explore that dialog even further when the Stones would seriously slow the song down on their 1969 American tour, as captured on the **Ya-Ya's** album). Ultimately, it's a tie.

'Sweet Little Rock'n'Roller' probably has its main competitor in Rod Stewart's 1974 hit version — though I have always preferred his live performance of the song with the Faces and guest star Keith Richards which, [captured on video](#), is like the

ultimate embodiment of the garishness, flamboyance, narcissism, drugged-out nonchalance, reckless abandon and total excitement of the glammy mid-Seventies. The funny thing is that Rod had to change Chuck's original lyric of "she's *nine* years old and sweet as she can be" to "*nineteen* years old" — apparently, in 1959 it was still possible to sing the song as if it were really innocently describing the joy of a little girl discovering the excitement of rock'n'roll music, but in 1974, the sexual revolution imposed certain rules of its own. Anyway, I'm torn here, but ultimately 'Sweet Little Rock'n'Roller' feels like something that is best experienced in an exorbitantly inebriated state of mind, so I'm giving the nod to Stewart, the Faces, Keith, and whoever else was rocking the glamhouse down with the song in the most decadent years of the Me decade. It almost feels as if Chuck was seeing far ahead into the future when he wrote about "five thousand tongues screamin' *more, more!* and about fifteen hundred waitin' outside the door" — predicting arena-rock way before it happened.

Next to this, 'Almost Grown' feels almost hush-hushy, a quiet little tale about a teenage guy who doesn't really want to do much — just a perfect little bourgeois anthem for all those kids who *don't* want to break down windows and knock down doors, but would rather just get their eyes on a little girl (ironically, the backing vocals keep chanting "night and day, night and day", which is clearly a stylistic reference to Ray Charles' 'The Night Time Is The Right Time', which goes to show that even unpretentious, non-rebellious quiet bourgeois kids can still have their natural urges like everybody else). But unlike something like 'Anthony Boy', the song is quite rock'n'roll in essence, catchy, fun, and memorable — although I can certainly understand why, unlike the previous six, it was hardly ever covered by anybody of importance, meaning that Chuck wins by definition through total lack of competition. Night and day.

Finally, there's 'Little Queenie', possibly the last great classic to come out of Chuck Berry's songbook — and one of his most compositionally complex, going from a sung blues verse to a spoken bridge section before erupting in the rock'n'roll chorus. Again, it's a triumphant show of Chuck's subtle, but always relevant psychologism as he describes, page by page, all the stages of inviting an unknown attractive girl to dance — and maybe a little something extra — and the song is totally made by that quiet, half-spoken bridge ("meanwhile... I was thinkin'... she's in the mood... no need to break it...") which finally turns deliberation into decisiveness. This magic has no equals, although Jerry Lee Lewis, another master of rock'n'roll suspense (in fact, mood-wise 'Little Queenie' shares a lot with 'Whole Lotta Shakin'), came pretty close. (So did the Stones on the 1969 tour, though they also slowed down the song, giving it a wholly different flavor). The almost desperate guitar breaks at the end of the song are the ultimate kicker — some of those licks would later end up on the Stones' cover of 'Down The Road Apiece' — so chalk one more up for Chuck here.

The one single from 1959 that did not manage to make it onto the album was 'Back In The U.S.A.', coupled with 'Memphis Tennessee' — repeating the theme of «bourgeois contentment» with the former and Chuck's somewhat creepy fascination with little kids on the latter. Neither of the two is a particular favorite of mine, but both are classics all the same, and I'd certainly rather have the Chuck Berry original of 'Back In The U.S.A.', with its sincere giddiness of realization how lucky one is, after all, to live in a *first* world country, even despite all of its well-known problems, to Linda Ronstadt's cover from the sickly hedonistic year of 1978. As for 'Memphis Tennessee'... everybody covered it and nobody could ever do anything interesting with it (though I like the little guitar riff that the Animals appended to the end of each verse on their version), so, again, consider the original unsurpassed.

This concludes our little game which didn't really have much of a purpose to it other than to loyally support the greatness of **Berry Is On Top** with loads of text. But if you don't need a load of text to get the idea that something can be really great, and prefer instead to go with something ultra-laconic, then how about this: the rock'n'roll of Chuck Berry is the thickest foundational pillar of 20th century pop culture, and **Berry Is On Top** has the densest concentration of Chuck Berry's rock'n'roll anywhere other than on an extensive compilation. What else *really* needs to be said?..



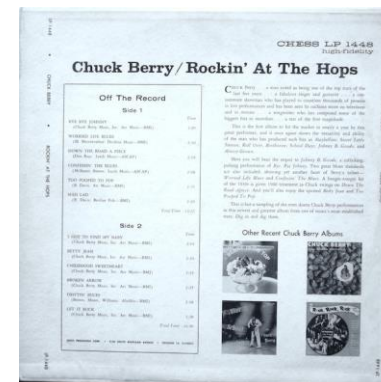


ROCKIN' AT THE HOPS

Album released:
July 1960

V A L U E
3 3 3 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Bye Bye Johnny; 2) Worried Life Blues; 3) Down The Road A Piece; 4) Confessin' The Blues; 5) Too Pooped To Pop; 6) Mad Lad; 7) I Got To Find My Baby; 8) Betty Jean; 9) Childhood Sweetheart; 10) Broken Arrow; 11) Driftin' Blues; 12) Let It Rock.

REVIEW

Although there are a few critics and fans out there who would, without batting an eye, place Chuck's fourth LP at the same level of quality as the classic trilogy (including Bruce Eder writing for the All-Music Guide, whose description of the record once again reminds me about the curiously different ways of human brain wiring) – I think it's fair to say that, on the whole, **Rockin' At The Hops** has not gone down in history as a particularly memorable LP of original Chuck Berry material. For that matter, *not a single* subsequent Chuck Berry LP would go down in history as particularly memorable, with the possible exception of a brief «comeback» with **St. Louis To Liverpool** after Chuck's prison term.



The reason for this decline is occasionally indicated to have been the beginning of Chuck's legal persecution – the infamous «Apache Trials» of the early 1960s, which, back at the time, were commonly perceived as doubly motivated by racism and anti-rock'n'roll sentiment, but today have begun to be re-evaluated as reflecting Chuck's predatory relations with young ladies (you can read all about it in this detailed write-up of [the story of Chuck Berry and Janice Escalanti](#)). All of that, to

some degree or other, is probably true — the racism, the hatred for rock'n'roll, *and* Chuck's appetite for easily exploitable teenage girls — but as tempting as it would be to just forget all about the music and turn this text into a moral judgement of corrupt Western society, it is more important to note, at this particular juncture, that at least half of the songs that make up **Rockin' At The Hops**, had been recorded in mid-1959, at the peak of Chuck's fame, way before the Escalanti incident even happened (that was in December of the same year), let alone went to trial.

Just look at all those songs recorded at Chess Studios on [July 27–29, 1959](#): 'Betty Jean', 'County Line' (this outtake stayed unreleased until the 1970s), 'Childhood Sweetheart', Count Basie's 'One O'Clock Jump' (another outtake), 'Broken Arrow', 'Let It Rock', 'Too Pooped To Pop', 'Say You'll Be Mine', 'Let Me Sleep Woman'. Any of these ring a bell? Well, maybe 'Let It Rock', which was resurrected by the Stones for their early 1970s tours and has since then been covered by a variety of neo-rockabilly and plain nostalgic artists. But even 'Let It Rock' ain't no 'Johnny B. Goode'... oh, that's right: 'Let It Rock' is 'Johnny B. Goode', only without the hooks.

Considering that the *previous* Chess session, held in February of that same year, gave us at least two quite memorable classics ('Almost Grown' and 'Back In The USA'), we can now safely identify the time period from February to July as *the* time frame in which Chuck Berry's personal muse, which had been so generous to him over the previous four years, packed up her things and quietly left the apartment. Perhaps she got a disturbing premonition that one of these days, her lover boy would decide to traffick her, too, across state borders for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery. But more likely, she simply decided that her mission with this guy was done. They had a 4-year contract going on, and on May 21, 1959, the 4th anniversary of recording 'Maybellene' at Chess Studios, it just happened to expire. I have no other explanation, but there you have it — a plain, unadorned, transparent case of the «Fifties' Curse» in action.

Naturally, some things cannot be simply taken away. The groove, the (sometimes working, sometimes not) humor, the ability to play exciting lead guitar — all of that is evident on 'Let It Rock', and Chuck's little unfinished horror story of a bunch of railroad workers caught by surprise by an off-schedule train nicely reminds you of his taste for combining the mundane, the merry, and the macabre, except that the song is called 'Let It Rock' for some reason, and that's the only message that the absolute majority of listeners shall ever get from it (*particularly* if you hear the Stones version, where it is impossible to make out a single word of what Mick Jagger is singing).

What is *not* at all evident is what precisely motivated Chuck to take the verse melody of 'Johnny B. Goode', refill it with new lyrics, completely omit the chorus and re-record the song as it is, replacing the chorus with a couple of off-kilter guitar

solos. Yes, some of his B-sides and LP filler tracks in the past might have been like this, but this was the very first time he decided to release a blatantly lazy re-write as an A-side — and although such was his glory at the time that it still somehow managed to chart (in February 1960, one month before the start of the trial), it would be his last entry in the Top 100 before the temporary «comeback» of 1964.

The rest of the session brings no surprises — it is quite consistently lacklustre. 'Betty Jean' is a blatant re-write of 'Sweet Little Sixteen' which turns an originally constructed and humorously uplifting anthem to rock'n'roll into a simplistic love declaration, with corny backing vocals ("sing the song Chuckie boy" is just gross) and a half-baked guitar solo buried deep in the mix. 'Childhood Sweetheart' is a formulaic piece of uptempo 12-bar blues on which Chuck is so bored, he even gets to playing the 'Dust My Broom' riff for a while. Meanwhile, 'Broken Arrow' continues the tradition of 'Brown Eyed Handsome Man' in giving us several humorous lyrical vignettes connected by a single theme... in this case, the theme being «stupid behavior» where an Indian chief getting into battle with a superior tribe is compared to the idea of sending your lady out shopping and ending up having her spend all your money on "a mink stole here and a chinchilla there". Uh... okay. It's one thing to have Chuck Berry recycling his own riffs, but when he starts recycling his own sense of humor, that's where the *real* trouble begins.

The last song from July 1959 that made it onto the LP is one I'm rather conflicted about: on one hand, 'Too Pooped To Pop' at least sounds a little *different* — it is the first time, if I'm not mistaken, when a Chuck Berry song is driven by sax rather than guitar and piano; it's also got a moderately catchy chorus, and the lyrics, about an old geezer («Casey» — not Casey Jones, though!) trying to get hip with the kids, are at least funnier than the ones on 'Broken Arrow'. On the other hand, the song, written by Billy Davis (mostly known at the time for co-writing hits for Jackie Wilson, and later — for the Coca-Cola jingles), is a clear mismatch: its nonchalant attitude and relaxed New Orleanian vibe rather makes it ideal for the likes of warm-climate Huey "Piano" Smith than cold-climate Chuck Berry. Toothless vaudeville like that works best with natural clowns, and while Chuck did enjoy *clowning*, that's not quite the same as being a clown, if you get my drift — I'm sure somebody like Pete Townshend would definitely get it, for instance.

As we finally move into 1960, we find that things start to get a little different. The piano on these later tracks is mostly handled by Ellis "Lafayette" Leake instead of Johnnie Johnson; whether this is in any way connected with Chuck's sudden predilection towards slow blues numbers is questionable (Leake did play on some of his slower numbers earlier on, but he also played on 'Rock And Roll Music' and 'Little Queenie', so no generalizations here) — but it is possible to assume that by

early 1960 Chuck was in a more somber mood than usual, for obvious reasons. Hence, 'Driftin' Blues', recorded on February 12, 1960 in an *extremely* (for Chuck) self-pitying manner: "if my baby would only take me back again / well you know I ain't good for nothin' and I haven't got a friend" sounds quite convincing under the circumstances. Ironically, even though slow mournful blues is probably one of the last styles we'd ever want to associate Chuck Berry with, at this point in his career he may be doing it better than anything else — it's definitely got more feeling than the comparatively upbeat, horns-driven take on 'I Got To Find My Baby', a song that harkens back to the days of jump blues and slow Little Richard-style R&B.

From late March and early April of the same year comes the last bunch of songs, spearheaded by 'Bye Bye Johnny' — at least this time around, the song does not even pretend to be masquerading as something other than a continuation of 'Johnny B. Goode'. You could make a case for 'Bye Bye Johnny' from the change-of-perspective angle, what with the lyrics focusing on the *mother* rather than the *son* this time around ("*she remembered taking money out from gathering crop / and buying Johnny's guitar at a broker shop*" — hey, if you're not tearing up around this point, you got a heart of stone, mister!), but problem A is that an emotional mother's perspective does not agree all too well with the rock'n'rolling rhythm, and problem B is — do we *really* give that much of a damn? 'Bye Bye Johnny' is simply one of those sequels, like 'Jim Dandy Got Married' or 'Peggy Sue Got Married', whose only reason of existence is to remind us of the frailty, predictability, and general weakness of the human mind.

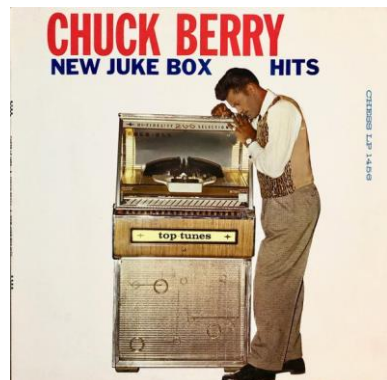
The covers are generally just as devoid of interest as the self-rewrites: 'Worried Life Blues', on which Chuck struggles to find a common language with Matt Murphy on lead guitar, is worthless next to Ray Charles' soulful version from the same year, and 'Confessin' The Blues' is equally worthless next to Little Walter's [soulful version](#) from 1958. The best of these recordings is probably 'Down The Road A Piece', which is also a cover of a pretty old tune (by Don Raye, from 1940) that Chuck most likely adapted from the Amos Milburn [boogie-woogie version](#) (he even adapts some of Amos' piano licks for his guitar); it features Berry's best soloing on the entire album, although the tempo is a little slovenly — something the Stones understood well enough when covering the song in 1964 at Chess Studios, under Chuck's very eyes.

Come to think of it, it is quite telling that the Stones played so many songs off this very album — 'Bye Bye Johnny', 'Down The Road Apiece' and 'Confessin' The Blues' ended up on their early studio records (although the latter rather follows Little Walter's version than Chuck's), while 'Let It Rock', as I already said, ended up in their live set later on in the game. In addition, the Animals played 'Worried Life Blues' (though, again, they probably were more inspired by Ray Charles than Chuck), and the Beatles covered 'I Got To Find My Baby' for their BBC sessions. One might think that this was all due to

Rockin' At The Hops being such a great album — but in reality, it was precisely because *these* songs were so relatively inferior that the white British kids hoped to be better able to put their own stamp on them. And 'Down The Road Apiece' is a classic example of that — with all due respect to Chuck, the Stones' version really flies where Chuck's barely finds the strength to get off the ground.

Naturally, if you lower your expectations low enough, **Rockin' At The Hops** is still quite a classic Chuck Berry experience, perhaps a little bit overloaded with slow blues songs, but still featuring that inimitable late-Fifties Chicago sound in all of its atmospheric glory. I'd be lying if I said that 'Let It Rock' and 'Bye Bye Johnny' do not «rock». But all through the mid-1950s, Chuck Berry amazed the world by constantly finding *new* ways to make his stuff «rock» — different chord changes, different vocal hooks, different theatrical approaches — and this here is the breaking point when he simply ran out of those new ways, fair and square. I'd honestly trade a couple of years of my current life for a chance to have been his roadie from early to mid-1959, just to be able to see how exactly he «lost the way». Too much money? Too many fast cars or young Apache girls? Too much pressure from the industry? Too tired from touring? Too pooped to pop? Or was that simply a case of, you know — creative exhaustion, when the pool of potential ideas that your brain has been given at birth has been drained and there's absolutely no way to refill it from the outside?..





NEW JUKE BOX HITS

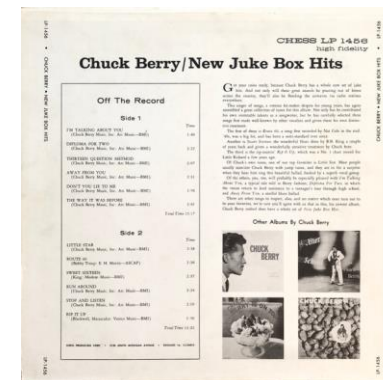
Album released:

March 1961

V A L U E

2 2 2 1 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) I'm Talking About You; 2) Diploma For Two; 3) Thirteen Question Method; 4) Away From You; 5) Don't You Lie To Me; 6) The Way It Was Before; 7) Little Star; 8) Route 66; 9) Sweet Sixteen; 10) Run Around; 11) Stop And Listen; 12) Rip It Up.

REVIEW

The title of this LP is a downright lie, or, to put it more mildly, a classic example of wishful thinking. Only one song on **New Juke Box Hits** could have really squeezed inside a juke box — ‘Little Star’, released as a single in early 1961 — and it was anything *but* a hit. In fact, even if Chuck’s reputation had not plummeted because of the «Apache Trials», I have a hard time imagining anybody getting particularly excited by this somnambulant doo-wop waltz, replete with corny backing female vocals and an uninspired guitar solo, lost somewhere deep in the mix. About the only thing here that could raise some empathy are Chuck’s own vocals, unusually tender, vulnerable, and pleading: "*Although you are so very far / Please help me, help me, little star*".



As we have already established with the previous review, Chuck’s slide from creative genius to self-plagiarizing mediocrity started quite some time *before* his legal misfortunes; however, there is still a fuzzy atmospheric line that separates **New Juke Box Hits** from **Rockin’ At The Hops**, namely, an all-pervading atmosphere of misery, depression, and bitterness, and this is most certainly due to the fact that all of these songs come from sessions extended over the period of early 1960 to

early 1961, all through which Chuck was busy getting tried, convicted, and then waiting for his appeal, before finally accepting his fate and heading to jail in early 1962. Admittedly, it would be unreasonable to expect too many of those songs to even *try* to sound happy — and when they do, it would be reasonable to expect that we wouldn't be too convinced. Case in point: 'Thirteen Question Method', a little romantic dance number with a tinge of bossa nova that feels like a loose rewrite of 'Thirty Days'. The lyrical challenge is amusing — you're supposed to guess the nature and intentions of the «thirteenth question» yourself — but Chuck's singing and playing feel totally off, as if his mind was really elsewhere at the time. (And how could it not be? The recording session was held exactly one month after his original conviction). Play it next to 'Reelin' And Rockin' and feel the difference — this here is the sound of a man who has no strength to simulate vivaciousness.

It is telling that two more «rockers» here date from a special recording session held in January '61: my guess is that either Chuck himself, or the people at Chess, were so alarmed at the overall morose nature of most of the stuff he'd recorded in 1960 that at least a couple more «classic Chuck Berry-style» rock'n'roll songs were required to make the next LP a viable commercial proposition. By then, however, he'd completely run out of inspiration, so both numbers are covers — and 'Rip It Up', at the very least, ends up being Chuck at his least convincing. Next to Little Richard, Elvis, or even Bill Haley, all of whom produced rip-roaring versions of this Saturday night anthem, Chuck's performance is sluggish, lazy, and showing minimal interest. Rarely do you get to hear a "*Saturday night and I'm feelin' fine*" that is less believable than this one.

Bobby Troup's old travelogue 'Route 66' fares a little better, because the song is essentially just a love letter to American toponymics, not necessarily requiring the artist to be jubilant about it; still, next to something like 'Back In The USA', Chuck's one and only *true* love letter to his home country, there is something monotonously perfunctory in the way he checks off those names one by one — Amarillo, Flagstaff, Barstow — and his piano player, Lafayette Leake, seems to be infected with the same languidness as he plays the keys without any serious emotions. Consequently, the best thing about this recording is that it would be later picked on by the Rolling Stones — to whom all of these mysterious town names were probably like Middle-earth back in early 1964, and who transformed Chuck's insipid cover into one of the most snappy, tight, killer pieces of nascent British rhythm'n'blues.

Not surprisingly, Chuck fares here a little better with those rockers that trade in his most common stuffing — giddiness and happiness — for anger and bitterness, emotions that he tended to use much more sparingly while being «on top». 'Don't You Lie To Me', a cover of an old blues song, may be understood as a secret message to Janice Escalanti: "*You know there's two kinds of people that I just can't stand / That's a lying woman and a cheating man*". Regardless of who was in the right

and who was in the wrong here, there is no denying, I think, that on *this* track, at least, Chuck's singing is far more spirited and infectious than on any of the «happy» rockers. The grumbly «brass farts» that echo each of his lines reinforce the pissed-off feeling, and you can feel some real snap coming out of his fingers for the guitar solo.

Somewhere in the middle stands 'I'm Talking About You', another «middling» Chuck original later tried on by the Stones: not exactly an «angry» one, but not exactly «happy», either. The lyrics deal with a story of communication breakdown — Chuck's protagonist is desperately courting a girl without too much luck — and it is possible that the atmosphere of nervous tension and irritated waiting that permeates the song indirectly correlates with Chuck's own waiting for the fate of his appeal. In any case, next to 'Rip It Up' and 'Route 66', recorded at the same session, 'Talking About You' is a stand-out, with Chuck's nervous and irritated "*come on and give me a cue, so I can get a message to you!*" checking the right emotional box and the guitar solo, again, showing signs of life (although musically, I think, it is Reggie Boyd on bass who is the real hero here — it was a real cool touch to not have him stop along with the rest of the band for the last line of each verse, so that the bass tension of the song could be continuous).

Alas, apart from the small bunch of failed «happy» rockers and the even smaller bunch of semi-successful «pissed-off» rockers, **New Juke Box Hits** is crammed from top to bottom with slow, dreary, atmospheric blues ballads. And the problem here is that, as much as you might like to disagree with me, Chuck Berry can't really do «sad». Being moody, pensive, and melancholic simply does not come to him naturally — not in the recording studio, at least. I have already mentioned the disappointing effect of 'Little Star'; but other broken-hearted ballads like 'Away From You' or 'Stop And Listen' sound every bit as amateurish. If I want truly crushing soul-blues like that, I just go all the way to Otis Rush, whose voice and guitar are God's true gift to every broken-hearted loner; Chuck Berry sounds about as natural being Otis Rush as Meatloaf covering J. J. Cale. Nobody remembers any of those ballads and for a damn good reason. And what's up with those awful backing vocals all over the place? They sound like they're taken from some old Andrews Sisters recordings.

A particularly silly decision was to cover Big Joe Turner's (and B. B. King's) 'Sweet Sixteen' — perhaps triggered by the title's proximity to 'Sweet *Little* Sixteen', in which case it's a bit of a manipulative trick; Chuck tries to put his own stamp on the song by playing it in a more quiet, hush-hush way than the big, soulful belts of his predecessors, but his attempts at sounding «subtle» are too generic to raise interest. He might not be hitting any bum notes, and his subdued guitar soloing may be technically OK, but how exactly is he going to outplay B. B. King at his own game? And how exactly would his singing here be distinguishable from a veritable horde of plaintive blues crooners who came before him?

Many are the famous cases in the history of rock music when people were able to convert their personal temporary troubles into beautiful and timeless art; **New Juke Box Hits** should not be included on that list — honestly, it should be locked up in the archives along with Chuck's court protocols, as little more than a historical document reflecting a particular state of mood at a particular time. With the exception of 'Talking About You' and 'Don't You Lie To Me', there is really nothing here worth salvaging, and what else there is only betrays Chuck's artistic limitations: he is not a natural crooner, not an outstanding bluesman, not a particularly good interpreter of other people's songs, and not the kind of artist who works well under heavy pressure.

Curiously, Chuck's last gift to us before heading off to serve his sentence was not half-bad. 'Come On', released as a single in October 1961, is both melodically more interesting and emotionally more satisfying than any one tune on **New Juke Box Hits**. It's almost unusually poppy for Chuck (a bit influenced by the ongoing twist craze, probably), it features an unusually «colorful» guitar tone (as compared to the more typical ragged and distorted vibe), it has his sister Martha supporting him on backing vocals, and it resonates pretty damn well with his then-current situation: "*Everything is wrong since me and my baby parted / All day long I'm walking 'cause I couldn't get my car started / Laid off from my job and I can't afford to check it / I wish somebody'd come along and run into and wreck it*" feels pretty personal, and the nervous tension feels pretty palpable. When, two years later, the Stones selected the song for their first single, they did a good job with it, but Mick Jagger would deliver the lyrics in the intonation of a dissatisfied mama's boy — Chuck here sings it with all the heavy load of a grown-up man who's getting a little tired from being kicked around by life. Unlike the album, 'Come On' is a decent enough farewell to the first phase of Chuck Berry's musical career, brought to an abrupt end by his prison term — from which Mr. Berry would already be emerging into a completely different musical world, one that would, at the very least, want to think twice before deciding to re-embrace the father of rock'n'roll with the same degree of warm welcome as it did before the «Apache Trials».

