

# “Roll Over Beethoven”—Chuck Berry (1956)

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Essay by Bruce Pegg (guest post)\*



*Chuck Berry*



*Original label*

“Maybellene” may have been his first hit song. “Johnny B. Goode” may have been his most influential. Improbably, the sophomoric “My Ding-A-Ling” may have been his biggest commercial success. But “Roll Over Beethoven” remains the definitive Chuck Berry composition, the Rosetta Stone that unlocks our understanding of his influences, his creative process and his enduring appeal.

The song has its beginnings in the bars and clubs of East St. Louis where, in the mid 1950s, Berry and pianist Johnnie Johnson played an eclectic musical mix of white country, black rhythm and blues and pop standards for the rough and rowdy crowds. To that repertoire, Johnson had contributed a piano instrumental, “Johnnie’s Boogie,” his interpretation of Meade “Lux” Lewis’s “Honky Tonk Train Blues,” originally recorded by Lewis for Paramount in 1927 and later for Victor in 1947. Typical of boogie-woogie piano pieces, both “Johnnie’s Boogie” and “Honky Tonk Train Blues” feature a bouncing, undulating left-hand bass line (Johnson called it his “choppin’ bass”) which, when sped up, creates an insistent, driving rhythm that Berry easily adapted to guitar.

But if Johnson’s left hand laid the foundations, it was Berry’s pen and guitar that built “Roll Over Beethoven.” Though Berry and Johnson were later to disagree over whether Johnson helped with the melody, there is no dispute that, with Johnson working alongside, in the basement of Chuck’s tiny, three-bedroom cottage at 3137 Whittier Avenue, in the heart of the black middle-class St. Louis neighborhood known as The Ville, Chuck Berry paired his lyrics and guitar with Johnson’s choppin’ left hand bass and treble right. A melody developed, and the song was formed.

On the surface, like many Chuck Berry compositions that were to come, “Roll Over Beethoven” is an anthem to rock and roll music, which, by 1956, and the year of the song’s release, was sweeping the nation. But like so many Berry songs, the lyrics run much deeper than simply celebrating teenage life. They begin with the line “Gonna write a little letter, gonna mail it to my local DJ,” a nod to disc jockeys across the nation who were so instrumental in the rise of rock and roll. But it is likely that Chuck had one specific DJ in mind: Alan Freed. It was Freed who had paved the way for rock and roll by popularizing black rhythm and blues for the growing

audience of white listeners tuning in to his Moondog radio program on WJW in Cleveland in the early 1950s. And it was Freed who helped launch Berry's career in August 1955 by playing "Maybellene" on WINS, the New York radio station, making the single an enormous national hit and its singer a sensation almost overnight.

The second and third verses are full of the concise, economic language that is the hallmark of the best Chuck Berry compositions. Using the metaphor of a contagious illness to describe the way rock and roll was infecting the country, Berry peppers the verses with such memorable phrases as "I got the rockin' pneumonia, I need a shot of rhythm and blues/I caught the rollin' arthritis sittin' down at the rhythm review." The lines are delivered with a crisp syncopation that perfectly matches the urgency of the driving musical accompaniment.

Interestingly, the song lacks a chorus, but one line, "Roll over Beethoven," is repeated in each verse along with an accompanying line "and tell Tchaikovsky the news" in two of them. The meaning is unmistakable: the hedonism and exuberance of rock and roll music is overtaking the old, established order, symbolized by the classical composers and their sophisticated symphonic creations. But as Berry revealed in his 1986 autobiography, the lines were also a playful dig at his classically trained sisters, mezzo soprano Lucy and pianist Thelma, who would routinely banish their younger brother from the family piano in order to further their own musical ambitions.

The lyrics in verses four and six depict teenagers dancing to the music on a jukebox that is "blowing a fuse." Though they describe a scene that would mostly be of interest to a teenage audience, once again the rhythmic delivery and clever alliteration set the words apart from the more pedestrian teenage fare of the day.

But there are two more lines in the song that are worthy of mention. "Early in the mornin'," Berry begins the fifth verse, "I'm a-givin' you a warnin'/Don't you step on my blue suede shoes." The lines manage to reference two songs that not only reveal one of Chuck's significant influences but also seek to illustrate his songwriting savvy. In the first line, he makes direct reference to "Early in the Mornin'," a 1947 hit for Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five that was featured in the movie "Look-Out Sister." Jordan's influence on Chuck's songwriting, especially in the way Chuck used Jordan's humor and narrative structure in his own lyrics, is incalculable. The second line references the 1955 Carl Perkins rockabilly classic. "Blue Suede Shoes" went on to be an enormous hit for Elvis Presley, who also performed it on two groundbreaking national television appearances in March and April of 1956.

Such pop culture references appear numerous times in Berry's songs: aside from the obvious naming of car brands in many songs, there are the musical references to advertising jingles and TV theme tunes in "Jo Jo Gunne" and lyrical references to the character of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer in "Run, Rudolph, Run" and to Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" TV show in "Sweet Little Sixteen." Such references were deliberately calculated to connect with his youthful audience while simultaneously adding a commercial appeal to the songs, and while Berry may not have been the first songwriter to employ the technique, he was certainly a prolific proponent.

Commercially-calculated lyrics guaranteed to appeal to a teenage audience. Cleverly-crafted phrases set to a frenetic, unstoppable rhythm. In the world of 1950s pop music, when a songwriter's canvas was restricted to two-and-a-half minutes, such elements would fill a song to overflowing. Yet Chuck Berry saw fit to graft onto "Roll Over Beethoven" an incendiary intro, a blistering guitar riff that became the rock and roll equivalent of viewing the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and seeing Michelangelo's autograph on the sole of God's foot.

In much the same way that Johnnie Johnson appropriated Meade "Lux" Lewis's music to form his own idiosyncratic sound, so Chuck fused together several of his guitar influences into fifteen seconds of music that would define both his own style and the styles of countless guitar players, known and unknown, for decades. It begins with a phrase learned from "Ain't That Just Like A Woman," played by guitarist Carl Hogan on the 1946 recording by Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five. Berry's twist on Hogan's riff was to play it on two strings rather than one and add in slurs, techniques he learned from several other guitarists, most notably T-Bone Walker and Goree Carter. A disciple of Walker's, Carter's 1949 recording "Rock Awhile" featured an introduction that was not only a direct influence on "Roll Over Beethoven" but also Chuck's double-string technique and his overdriven guitar tone.

Over time, the introduction became synonymous with Chuck Berry. He used it, or variations on it, in many of the great songs that were to follow, most notably in "Johnny B. Goode," "Little Queenie," "Back In The USA" and, in fragmented form, in songs such as "Jo Jo Gunne," "Sweet Little Rock And Roller," "Let It Rock," "Promised Land" and "Dear Dad."

Either on April 16 or April 19, 1956, all these different elements--rhythm, melody, lyrics and guitar introduction--finally came together in a small, one-story, red-brick building on Chicago's South Side. The building, 4750 Cottage Grove, served as both a recording studio and business office for Chess Records, the small yet important independent record label that was home to Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, The Moonglows and blues greats Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon.

Documentation for the session is contradictory, so the recording personnel for "Roll Over Beethoven," its B-side "Drifting Heart," and the follow-up single of "Too Much Monkey Business" and "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" are hard to pin down. Berry and Johnson, it is clear, made the trip up from St. Louis. More than likely, they were accompanied by sax player Leroy C. Davis, trumpeter Vincent Pitts and drummer Melvin Billups, though whether Pitts and Billups ever played on the recording is unclear. In Chicago, they were joined by Willie Dixon, this time in his capacity as the Chess house bass player, and possibly Fred Below, Chess's regular session drummer.

Whatever the lineup, Chess Records recorded "Roll Over Beethoven" that April and released it a month later, but it was to take yet another month before the song charted in the "Billboard" Hot 100. In "Billboard" terms, the song was a modest hit, entering at number 29 on June 30 and spending just four more weeks in the lower reaches of the chart.

Yet the song's influence has massively outlived its brief initial moment in the spotlight. In March 1964, The Beatles' version of the song made it as high as number 68 on the "Billboard"

chart, eventually becoming one of 12 Beatles songs on the chart the week of April 4. (Remarkably, The Beatles' version was never even issued as a 45 in the US. To satisfy the demand for all things Beatle that year, the version that charted was a Canadian pressing that was imported into the country.)

A surf-inspired version by The Velaires in 1961 and a classically-inspired version by The Electric Light Orchestra in 1973 (complete with an introduction taken from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony) were also "Billboard" chart hits (peaking at numbers 51 and 42, respectively). Other covers, recorded by such disparate artists as fellow rock and roller Jerry Lee Lewis, rockabilly/country artist Narvel Felts, hard rock outfit Uriah Heep and some 340 other acts (according to long-time Berry historian Morten Reff), show the song continues to resonate with different generations and musical genres. And the song's lyrics were repurposed by pianist Huey Smith for the title of his 1957 hit "Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu" and songwriter Terry Thompson for his "A Shot of Rhythm and Blues" (the B-side to Arthur Alexander's 1961 hit "You Better Move On"), both of which were also covered extensively.

In the 1986 documentary "Chuck Berry Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll," Chuck outlined the origins of "Roll Over Beethoven" and his music in general. "Put a little Carl Hogan, a little T-Bone Walker, and a little Charlie Christian together," he told director Taylor Hackford, "and look what a span of people that you will please! And making it simple is another important factor ... in being able to play my music. If you can call it my music. Ain't nothing new under the sun."

Such comments are not false humility. They are an explicit understanding that creativity involves taking disparate existing elements and fusing them into a new combination, forming a unique work of art that is greater than the sum of its parts. Merge a 1920s boogie-woogie beat, 1940s rhythm and blues guitar styles and 1950s teenage pop lyricism and you have "Roll Over Beethoven," Chuck Berry music in its quintessential form, and a roadmap for the rock revolution that was to come.

*Bruce Pegg is a writer, editor and musician. He is the author of "Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry" (Routledge, 2002) and the liner notes to "Rock and Roll Music: Any Old Way You Choose It" (Bear Family Records BCD 17273), the comprehensive 16-CD Chuck Berry box set released in 2014. (Mr. Pegg would like acknowledge Berry historians Fred Rothwell, Morten Reff, Dietmar Rudolph and Tim McFarlin, who offered a number of suggestions that were incorporated into this essay.)*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.