



Records: Chuck Berry

THE LONDON CHUCK BERRY SESSIONS [Chess]
 CHUCK BERRY'S GOLDEN DECADE [Chess]

TOGGLING ALONG AN INDIANA highway in a flashy two-tone Chevrolet Bel-Air, radio tuned to some local radio outlet, listening to the usual run of popular music, and suddenly there's an unfamiliar voice,

a hot, rattling guitar, and a rousing lyric delivered in rapid-fire, high-energy manner. That was the better part of twenty years ago, America was in the heart of those wonderful Eisenhower years, and rock and roll was just getting rocking and rolling.

A few white musicians had made it with the kids of the country—Bill Haley and the Comets and Elvis Presley

were in their first popularity—but the black musicians of the period were still mostly restricted to black-oriented radio stations and a black club circuit. Those who did make it into the big white marketplace did so by sounding white—Nat King Cole was the chief example.

And then came Little Richard, Fats Domino, and Chuck Berry — all of them veterans of the R&B circuit but a startling sound to white America, whose main musical experience was provided by Perry Como, Eddie Fisher, Rosemary Clooney, the McGuire Sisters and the Chordettes.

The energy and topicality of R&B was able to wipe the popular sludge right off the airwaves, but the problem in its acceptance was clearly racial. Any number of commentators have suggested that Elvis's success grew from the fact that he was white but sounded black.

In any case we learned somewhere along the line that, as long as we were going to listen to black-oriented music, we might at least offer its creators the courtesy of listening to it from them, at least part of the time, and along came a generation of black rock and roll artists, along with a growing acceptance of purer blues from the likes of Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker among many others.

Probably the most important black rock-and-roller—and possibly the most important rock-and-roller of all, if you count *influence* as well as *personal credits*—was Chuck Berry. Lillian Roxon thinks that, if he had been white, Berry might have been as big as Presley. I am inclined to agree and to add —and far more deserving.

Berry was a major force in the development of rock guitar out of the earlier blues style, in the development of rock lyrics and in the general leaping, raving style of rock performance. His distinctive guitar openings herald dozens of rock songs. His topics alternate between the hot earthiness of traditional blues lyrics and the schoolyard orientation of much early rock. But where most schoolyard rock was (and still is) vapid and sloppy, Berry's has always been sharply pointed, wry, self-aware.

As for his influence on more modern rockers, one need only compare a list of Beatles and Rolling Stones

by Dick Lupoff

songs with Berry's output and see where the English groups got their early songs—and the basis of many of their late ones.

Not only did the Beatles record Berry's record "Roll Over Beethoven" and "Rock and Roll Music," but Berry pops up, sometimes unexpectedly, in the music of many rockers.

Item: "Sweet Little Sixteen" turns up in Cat Mother's "Good Old Rock and Roll" and in the Beach Boys' "Surfin' USA."

Item: Part of the lyric of Berry's "You Can't Catch Me" appears in the Beatles' "Come Together."

Item: "Thirty Days" (for some reason revised to "Forty Days") turns up in the repertoire of Ronnie Hawkins, the original leader of a band called the Hawks that in turn worked for Bob Dylan and finally emerged as The Band.

Berry is still working, cutting records for Chess and touring periodically; his latest effort, *The London Chuck Berry Sessions*, is a combination of the two—an LP side recorded in London studios, another recorded live at the Lanchester Arts Festival. He's still in good form, especially when there's a live audience to work with.

The studio cuts include three rockers and a fine blues tune, "Mean Old World," by the late Little Walter. The rockers are by Berry himself, and he lays out as neat a lyric as ever — "I wouldn't walk a block but I'd dance a mile."

The live tracks are better than the studio side, especially Berry's old "Reelin' and Rockin'," and in a rap introducing "My-Ding-A-Ling" he expresses a major element in his music.

"There's nothing wrong with sex, not a thing wrong with sex, sex is a beautiful and honorable thing. . .this is a free country, live like you want to live, baby."

That might well be the spirit of rock and roll, the spirit of the flower generation, the spirit of the counter-culture, the spirit of Chuck Berry. As an ideal it may be admirable; as a matter of practicality, the experiences of the past few years have shown it to be incomplete at best, if not outright unviable.

Chuck Berry's Golden Decade is a re-issue of a 1967 double album, itself a compilation of material dating

back to 1955. As the *London Sessions* show us where Berry is today, *Golden Decade* shows us where not only Berry but rock and roll came from. Twenty-four tracks in all, including a dazzling series of hit songs and a few familiar tracks—they must have been "B" sides of singles, originally—that are nonetheless rewarding.

The more I listen to the output of past and present artists, the more I compare styles, lyrics, performances, the more I am inclined to think that Chuck Berry was, indeed, the most important single force in the development of this music—and hence, in an indirect manner, of much of the contemporary radical counter-culture.

Oh, and that song coming out of the Chevrolet car radio so long ago—just for the record, it was "Maybelline." Named for the eye-cosmetic, in Berry's consciousness at the time because he was contemplating a career as a beautician. What a parallel reality that would have been! ■

RECENT AND NOTEWORTHY:

GERONIMO BLACK [*Uni*] Former Mother of Invention Jimmy Carl Black plus a crew of refugees from Dr. John, Love and other groups form not so much a super-group as a solid new band doing a variety of music that ranges from raunch-rock to protest. There's still a way to go for the band, but their debut album has enough fine moments to warrant a good listen, and an expectation of better to follow.

WHO WOULD GIVE HIS ONLY SONG AWAY, Adam Miller [*Chelsea*] Adam Miller is Chelsea's entry in the sincere - young - man sweepstakes, and he does a fine job of it. He writes lyrics of love and loneliness, sings them in a sweet, pure voice that sounds like 60% James Taylor, 30% Elton John, 10% you-name-it (maybe Adam Miller), against a superbly polished if somewhat over-lush crew of session men. A super-slick commercial product, but is it art?

DUANE AND GREG ALLMAN [*Bold*] Before there was an Allman Brothers Band, Greg and Duane were session men working out of an obscure studio in Florida, and laying down tracks of their own when business was

dull. Little Bold Records has dug out nine of those tracks and released a pleasant, fascinating album; if you're not into the Allman Brothers' music, don't start here, get one of their later Capricorn albums. But if you've got those already, the Bold album will provide invaluable early material for your collection.

FOGHAT [*Bearsville*] Three refugees from Savoy Brown plus Rod Price from the talented but little-known Black Cat Bones make an excellent (if unsurprising) new group. Best cuts on their debut album are by Willy Dixon ("I Just Want To Make Love To You") and Chuck Berry ("Maybelline").

FRITZ THE CAT [*Fantasy*] Sound track albums being what they are, and the film *Fritz the Cat* being what it is, this record delivers a lot more than it promises. Tasty jazz and blues, some historic (Bo Diddley, Billie Holiday) some new (Merl Saunders, Alice Stuart), most of it worth listening to on its own merits rather than for its association with the controversial movie.

THE AGE OF STEAM, Gerry Mulligan [*A&M*] Big band jazz is a risky kind of music—there is a substantial danger of losing all of the freshness and freedom of the small combo and floundering into an area unpleasantly like commercial big-band pop. Slick but sterile. Mulligan avoids this; his new album has an amazing feel of freedom and lightness to it, with masterful performances by Tom Scott and Bud Shank as well as Mulligan himself.

AMERICAN GOTHIC, David Ackles, [*Elektra*] Ackles is a playwright as well as a musician; his albums (this is his third) logically reflect the mixed blessing of theatricality. Vivid, lyrical—but at times maudlin and self-indulgent. *American Gothic* is his best to date.

THE SIDEWINDERS [*RCA*] Five young musicians make up a pretty together rock and roll band, performing original music, and tossed into the marketplace by RCA to sink or swim as they may. In all likelihood they'll sink, despite considerable talent and

a fine, crisp production job credited to Lenny Kaye. Why do the recording companies issue so many albums, then offer them no support? That's a mystery; it's also a tragedy.

THE LONDON MUDDY WATERS SESSIONS [Chess] Accompanying the current Chuck Berry *London Sessions* and last year's superb Howlin' Wolf album, one by my personal choice as the world's greatest blues man. Waters never falters, the studio men are outstanding, the material is largely his own and Willy Dixon's—a fine album was inevitable, and this one lives up to its promise 100%.

CARL AND THE PASSIONS—SO TOUGH/PET SOUNDS. The Beach Boys [Brother] An interesting notion—*Pet Sounds*, the Beach Boys' first "serious" album, re-issued in a set with *So Tough*, their newest release. To be honest, I've always enjoyed the Beach Boys as pleasant "singles" musicians but have never gotten into their albums and have been mystified at the critics, like Paul Williams, who have gone into rhapsodies at the genius of Brian Wilson. This latest release leaves my opinion intact.

STONES (From Page 15)

Calculatedly crude and debased, the Stones represent the utter negation of accepted standards. Their attraction for audiences so far transcends "mere" entertainment that it is tempting to suggest that they are not entertainers at all. Their importance is symbolic. They don't exist on a literal level.

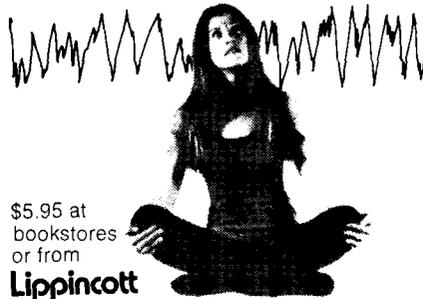
THE BEATLES AND THE STONES represented a choice between the bright and the sinister aspects of their bygone era. The Beatles sang an innocent song called "I Want to Hold Your Hand." The Stones said, "Let's Spend the Night Together." (For Ed Sullivan's dollars they were not beneath rendering it as "Let's Spend Some Time Together." Everyone knew what the proper lyrics were.) The Stones sang of "Mother's Little Helper," "Sister Morphine," "You Can't Always Get What You Want," and "Sympathy for the Devil." The Boston Strangler cropped up as "Midnight Rambler."

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Somewhere people must argue over whether art imitates life or life imitates art. Of course, it works both ways. Artists reflect and represent what they see but they also lead and inspire. After the Beatles ceased to exist as a coherent organization — whatever their attainments as individuals—the Stones continued and still do. Both groups are the archetypes and the essence of our times.

But “our times,” in the red hot, up-to-the-minute world of instant pop music, are just about over. The new adolescents listen to the twang of different guitarists. Beneath the garish makeup on Mick Jagger’s face, the lines of his skin were clearly visible.

The Rolling Stones may go on a while longer entertaining us old folks in our late twenties and thirties, but I fear not very much longer. They may even come to America again, and if they do I’ll probably drag my aging

bones through the whole far-fetched struggle of getting to see them again.

But somehow I don’t really expect it to happen at all.

Somehow this 1972 tour has a distinctive feel of goodbye to it.

ROBERT SHERRILL (From Page 8)

Hence he has only been admitted to the White House when the President himself is absent—for example, at a recent all-woman social event which featured champagne with strawberries floating in it. Says Sherrill, “I’m suing for the credential just to have fun. Obviously it is worthless. The last place you’re going to find any news is at an official White House conference.”

—Compiled by Jim Ridgeway and Bo Burlingham with the assistance of Zodiac News Service

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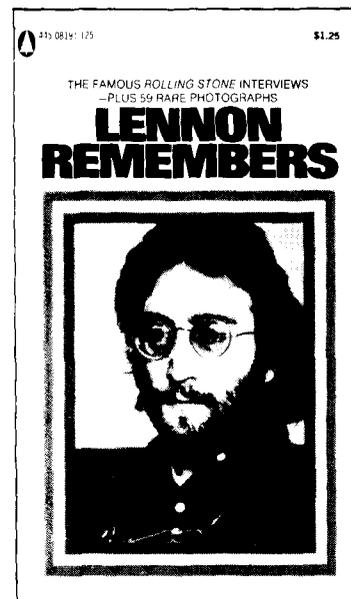
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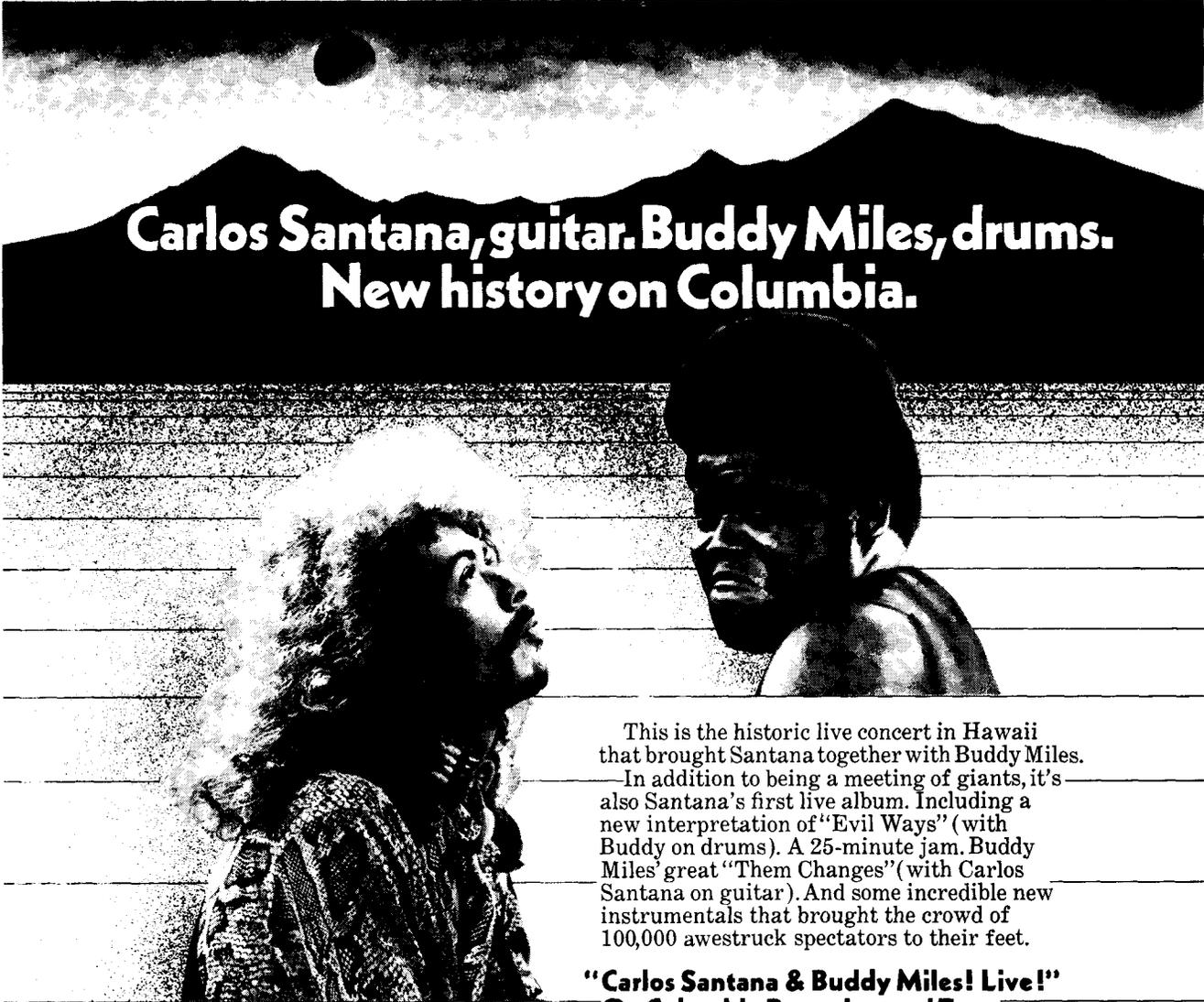
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