

Chuck Berry!

Mike Kerman

1969

A cop stood on the Grande stage, presumably to hold the crowds back. He was confused. He had no idea what was happening.

Some black guys and a girl went on stage coming out of the stoned-filled amorphous crowd to reaffirm their blackness and hipness. They knew what was happening.

The kids were there. They come every week. It doesn't really matter who's playing. They can be with their friends, dance, and lie on the floor high. Drop out on a Saturday night to prepare again for their pretty one-story suburban high school-prison. They kinda knew what was happening.

The people who grew up with rock and roll, watched the Coasters on American Bandstand on Saturday night, matured with Dylan and still dug the sounds, were there. For them, it was both a nostalgia and music trip and they knew what was happening.

A different breed also showed up. Guys who graduated high school in the late fifties—they went to the hop and cried along with Paul Anka—but lately they've been getting into Herb Alpert and Bobbie Gentry. For this one night though they knew what was happening.

Chuck Berry had returned.

It was obvious to see why John Lennon had said that the Beatles had really wanted to get back to the early stuff in which Chuck Berry was the big influence.

They could never put on a show like him. They tried and did a good white job of it at the beginning. But no more. They're big record execs now and their music is an encyclopedia of styles—none of which grabs you by the balls.

Chuck Berry grabbed you when you weren't looking. Slowly, mysteriously, hypnotizing the crowd until the frenzy had everybody moving.

I had wondered what it would be like. Would Chuck Berry be like a museum piece of the past—grinding out "Sweet Little Sixteen" for the ten thousandth time like a black, hip, sleek rock and roll machine that spewed out a musical carbon copy each time.

Or would he be a vulgar modernized, old man trying to keep up with the psychedelic kids? Remember that Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf had sold their souls to Chess Records recording the worst wawa peddle blues shit with white hippie sidemen.

But Berry was neither. His music has no age; nothing contrived, no cop-outs to be "in."

If Chuck Berry is thirty-seven, his body and energy won't admit it. He started the set with "Maybelline" and went on to present a mixture of goodie-oldies and blues.

He had the same high-pitched, strange, unique voice. The same vitality, ease, and showmanship. He could do no wrong. "Johnnie B. Goode" sounded as fresh and vibrant as the first time you heard it on the radio.

His blues moved and never bored you. Like good blues, it caught you into a spell when you weren't looking. And yes, he could really play guitar, not just pound out some chord progressions.

He was raunchy and funky. The music was fun. Not super-polished and sterile like Blood, Sweat and Tears and so many pop-rockers whose music is as shiny as the plastic-coated record jacket.

Berry got down. As the song went “At a quarter to six (he) was as hard as a cee-ment mix.” The condition hadn’t changed much since a “quarter to one” or “half-past two.” No ambiguities here.

The more Berry got into the music, the more the audience followed. By the end, the music got people up off their seats cheering and moving. The spirit was in everybody. People got closer to the stage and each other.

The kids who had missed out on the “early” Berry saw that music didn’t begin with the “Beatle revolution.”

The few blacks basked in the glory of their music and joined their brother on stage. And the music united them, for a short while, with the white kids who stood by and tried to move.

The ‘50s grads were brought back in time. It was a homecoming game and they were hip for a night.

But the cop stared, looked confused, and wondered just what had happened.

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