



Group 2: Chuck Berry as Songwriter: The Lyrics

Source 1 Chuck Berry's Appeal to White Teenage Audiences

"Berry's incredible success is due to his ability to articulate the concerns and attitudes of his audience in his music. At the height of his success, Berry was a 30-year-old black man singing to a mostly white, teenage audience. Dubbed the 'Eternal Teenager,' Chuck Berry's knowledge of the pop market made it possible for him to break color barriers and play to an integrated audience."

-- From chuckberry.com, The Official Site of Chuck Berry

- According to this quote, which group made up a good portion of Berry's audience in the late 1950s?
- What does the quote suggest about why Berry was so popular with this group?
- Remember that in the mid- to late-1950s, much of the United States was still segregated by race. Why was it an important turning point for a black artist to become so popular with white teenagers in this period?

Source 2 Excerpt of Lyrics to "School Days" (1957)

*Up in the mornin' and out to school
The teacher is teachin' the Golden Rule
American history and practical math
You're studyin' hard and hopin' to pass
Workin' your fingers right down to the bone
And the guy behind you won't leave you alone*

*Ring, ring goes the bell
The cook in the lunch room's ready to sell
You're lucky if you can find a seat
You're fortunate if you have time to eat
Back in the classroom, open your books
Gee but the teacher don't know how mean she looks*

Discuss:

- As he did with all of his songs, Chuck Berry wrote both the music and the lyrics to "School Days." To whom does he seem to be speaking in this song?
- Why might Berry write a song describing the experiences of middle-class teenagers?



Source 3
Excerpt from Lyrics to “Back in the USA” (1959)

*Looking hard for a drive-in, searching for a corner cafe
Where hamburgers sizzle on an open grill night and day
Yeah, and the jukebox jumping with records like in the USA*

*Well, I'm so glad I'm livin' in the USA
Yes. I'm so glad I'm livin' in the USA
Anything you want, we got right here in the USA*

- Whose experiences does Berry seem to be reflecting in this song?
- In the late 1950s, many parents felt that Rock and Roll was a negative influence on their children, and that it promoted rebellion and bad behavior. There were also fears that Rock and Roll was somehow the work of communists aiming to destroy American society.
 - Does Berry seem like a rebel in this song? What values does he seem to be promoting?
 - How does he feel about “livin’ in the USA”?
 - Why might this song have particular appeal to mainstream audiences during this time period?

Source 4
Video Excerpt, Live Performance of “Johnny B. Goode” (1958)

Discuss:

- Who are the people in the audience?
- How are the people in the audience dressed? What can you guess about their background from the way they appear?
- How do they seem to feel about Berry’s performance?
- What does this clip suggest about how white teenage audiences felt about Berry’s music?

Summary Questions:

- Berry was one of the first Rock and Roll performers to write his own music. What are some of the advantages for a musical artist in also being a songwriter? How did Berry’s talent for writing lyrics help make his music popular with white teenagers?
- Berry is often described as Rock and Roll’s first major “crossover” artist – a black artist with a Rhythm and Blues background who gained great popularity on the Pop charts and with mainstream white audiences. What do these sources suggest about how he was able to accomplish this?