Where was rock 'n' roll music born? The most honest answer to that question is both somewhere and nowhere. The origins of any cultural phenomenon involve many intersecting influences coming together, often coincidentally. This notion holds true for music, where influences play off of each other, taking the art form in new and often unexpected directions.

Just such a melding of coincidence and intention happened at a club in East St. Louis on New Year's Eve in 1953. What came together that night when Chuck Berry played at the Club Cosmopolitan for the first time would resonate through the history of music in the twentieth century. An aspiring performer, a band, and a new sound rang out along Bond Avenue on that night nearly 70 years ago. This is the story of how East St. Louis can rightfully claim its place as one of the birthplaces of rock 'n' roll.

East St. Louis in the 1950s hummed with activity and stood on the verge of profound change. Long a center of manufacturing and transportation, the city drew immigrants from Europe and African-American migrants from the American South from its very beginning. Relations between these communities alternated between peaceful coexistence and violent confrontation, the latter being typified by the 1917 race riots. The demographics of East St. Louis were changing in the 1950s as more than 10,000 white residents left the city. As a result, the city's white and African-American populations were roughly equal for a time.

While the white and black communities in East St. Louis often lived separate lives in the same place, one space where they often came together was in the city's night spots. The bars, clubs, and concert venues that made the city an entertainment destination for the area often played host to an integrated crowd. One such venue was the Club Cosmopolitan, located in a former grocery store at 1644 Bond Ave. Owned by East St. Louis policeman Joe Lewis, the club cultivated a more upscale image than many of the night spots in the city. It was at "the Cosmo" where the stage would be set for Chuck Berry to make music history in 1953.

By that year, Charles Edward Anderson Berry had already been interested in music for more than a decade. He gave his first performance as a student at Summer High School in his native St. Louis in 1941. Born into a middle class family, Berry's youth was not without its problems. He was arrested for armed robbery and stealing a car in Kansas City in 1944. He spent three years in prison in a state reformatory near Jefferson City, Missouri. While there, he formed a singing group that was good enough to perform on special release outside of the prison. Berry was given his freedom in 1947, returned to St. Louis, and began to put his life in order. He married Thelmetta "Toddy" Suggs in 1948. He worked in an automobile plant, as a janitor, and trained as a hairdresser. He and his wife were doing well enough to buy a house at 3137 Whittier St. in Greater Ville, the middle class, predominantly black St. Louis neighborhood where Berry grew up.

While he was establishing himself, music remained a powerful force in his life. Having played the blues since his teenage years, he was influenced by the music and playing style of T-Bone Walker, a pioneering musician in "jump" and electric blues. He started sitting in on gigs for extra money, honing his guitar style and his ebullient showmanship. It was a chance to do exactly this that would lead Berry to ultimately change American music.

It all began with a phone call on New Year's Eve in 1953. Johnnie Johnson, a talented jazz and blues pianist, had a problem. His band, Sir John's Trio, was booked to play at the Club Cosmopolitan in East St. Louis. Alvin Bennett, the saxophone player, had suffered a stroke earlier in the day and Johnson needed a replacement. Johnson knew Berry wasn't a saxophone player, so he made a phone call to Joe Lewis, the owner of the Club Cosmopolitan. Lewis agreed to have Berry sit in for Bennett. Berry was hesitant at first, but Johnson talked him into it. The performance was a success, and Berry was asked to return the following night.

The following night, Berry returned to the Club Cosmopolitan and played a set that lasted over two hours. The crowd went wild, and Berry was invited back for another set. Johnson was so impressed with Berry's performance that he signed him to a recording contract with the Chess Records label. The first single, "Maybellene," was released in 1955 and became a hit, launching Berry's career as a rock and roll legend.

This iconic portrait of Charles Edward Anderson "Chuck" Berry dates to 1958.
player (at that point, he was a passable guitarist), but because Berry was inexperienced, it was likely he would not be booked to play on New Year’s Eve. Berry agreed to play and made the trip on the Eads Bridge to the Illinois side of the Mississippi River.

He was a welcome addition to the band, bringing vocal talents, showmanship, and some new sounds that he had been working on. Bennett wasn’t able to return, so Johnson asked Berry to join the band permanently. The band was very interested in Berry’s blending of blues phrasing and the diction and singing style of “hillbilly” music, a popular genre at the time.

The other band members weren’t the only ones to notice. Word began to spread of, as Berry described it, “that crazy black hillbilly at the Cosmo.” People, both black and white, flocked to Bond Avenue to hear music that was both familiar and different at the same time. This led to a steady booking at the Cosmo for the band and growing buzz surrounding this irresistible new sound.

Throughout 1954 and into 1955, as Berry and Johnson held forth at the Cosmo, Berry became interested in going into the studio to record. Johnson and the band were more interested in their live shows, but didn’t object to Berry pursuing recording their music. Not finding a suitable studio in St. Louis, Berry convinced Johnson and drummer Ebby Hardy to pack up their gear and head to Chicago in May of 1955. Following on a chance meeting with blues legend Muddy Waters, the band went to a small recording studio then located at 4750 S. Cottage Grove Ave. in Chicago.

There, brothers Phil and Leonard Chess first heard what the eager crowds at the Cosmo had been hearing for over a year. One of the songs they recorded at Chess Records on May 21, 1955 had debuted at the Cosmo. It was Berry’s reworking of a 1938 cover of the song “Ida Red” by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. With some lyrics changes and new title, the song became “Maybellene,” a song that would help to propel Berry to stardom.

As the years passed, the memory of those early gigs at the Cosmo began to fade. They were revived briefly for the filming of Hail! Hail! Rock ‘n’ Roll!, a documentary chronicling two concerts celebrating Berry’s 60th birthday in 1986. Released in 1987, the film features scenes at the Club Cosmopolitan, which was abandoned at the time. The building was demolished in the 1990s, leaving no physical memory of the momentous happenings there.

Today, 1644 Bond Ave, is a vacant lot, bearing silent witness to the intersections that changed American music in the twentieth century. It seems that this site should not be silent, keeping its amazing story to itself. It seems only right that this Illinois place should bear witness to its role in our musical heritage. Commemoration is the responsibility of the living. How will we remember the place where Chuck Berry rocked and rolled and changed our culture? 

William P. Shannon IV has served as the Curator of the St. Clair County Historical Society since 2012. He has served on the ISHS Advisory Board since 2018. He lives in Belleville.

For further reading:

Chuck Berry: The Autobiography (Fireside, 1987)