

# Music history made in Illinois

## Chuck Berry at the Cosmo: East St. Louis and the birth of rock 'n' roll

By William P. Shannon IV

The author would like to thank Gary Kreie of St. Louis for sharing his research into Chuck Berry's connection to East St. Louis.

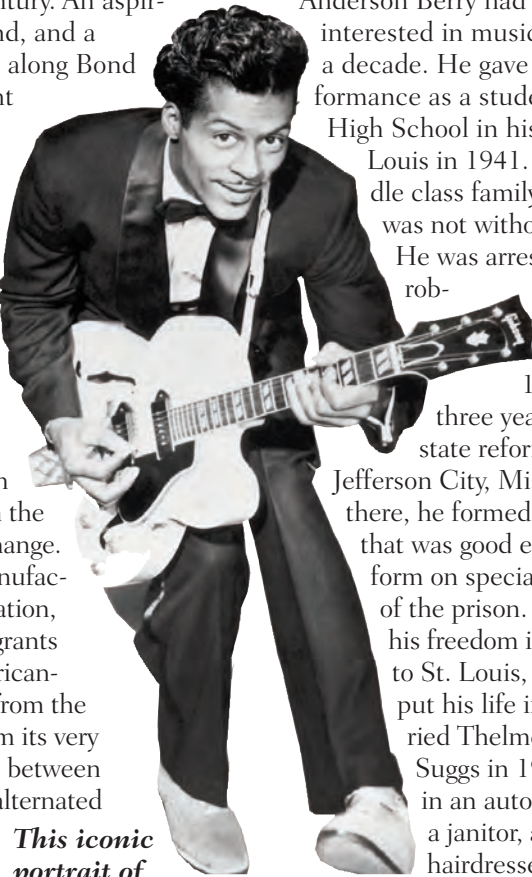
Where was rock 'n' roll music born? The most honest answer to that question is both somewhere and nowhere. The origins of any cultural phenomenon involve many intersecting influences coming together, often coincidentally. This notion holds true for music, where influences play off of each other, taking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



*This iconic portrait of Charles Edward Anderson "Chuck" Berry dates to 1958.*

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



*St. Louis Argus 1954 advertisement for Johnny Johnson and Trio--"featuring Chuck Berry and his guitar"--appearing at Club Cosmopolitan in East St. Louis. The Argus is an African-American weekly newspaper.*



**Chuck Berry performing at the Club Cosmopolitan in 1954. These photographs appear in Bruce Pegg's 2002 autobiography, *Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry*.**

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 Cosmo-



**Chuck Berry holding forth at the Club Cosmo in 1954**

politan, 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? 

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### For further reading:

- Chuck Berry: The Autobiography* (Fireside, 1987)
- Christgau, Robert, "Chuck Berry," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll: The Definitive History of the Most Important Artists and Their Music* (Random House, 1988)
- Collis, John. *Chuck Berry: The Biography* (Aurum Press, 2002)
- Pegg, Bruce. *Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry* (Routledge, 2002)