



Group 3 Country Music Influences

Source 1 Chuck Berry's Experimentation With Country-Western Music

"A piano player named Johnny Johnson phoned me, asking me to join his Sir John's Trio for a gig on the eve of the year of 1953. . . . Johnson was the leader and the pianist, Ebby Hardy was the drummer, and I replaced somebody to play guitar and sing. . . . By the Easter holidays we kept a steady packed house on weekends with a well-rounded repertoire programmed to the varied clientele.

"The music played most around St. Louis was country-western, which was usually called hillbilly music, and swing. Curiosity provoked me to lay a lot of the country stuff on our predominantly black audience and some of the clubgoers stared whispering, 'Who is that black hillbilly at the Cosmo?' After they laughed at me a few times, they began requesting the hillbilly stuff and enjoyed trying to dance to it. . . . It could have been because of my country-western songs that the white spectators showed up in greater numbers. . . . sometimes nearly forty percent of the clients were Caucasian."

-- From *Chuck Berry: The Autobiography*, by Chuck Berry

Discuss:

- According to this passage, why did Berry begin incorporating Country and Western influences into his music?
- How did black audience members react?
- How did it affect who came to Berry's shows?

Source 2 Chuck Berry's Country Music Influences

"The fusion of country and the blues can be found at the crux of Berry's technique. The country-influence in his songs can be heard in the beat, the vocals, and the guitar. The drums play a swing beat in songs like 'Sweet Little Sixteen' and 'Roll Over Beethoven.' The beat, one that Chuck loved, is derived from the country-swing of artists like Hank Williams or Bob Wills."

-- Bob Gulla, *Guitar Gods: The 25 Players Who Made Rock History*, 2008

Discuss:

- According to the author, who were some of Chuck Berry's musical influences from the Country music world?
- What specific techniques did Berry borrow from Country music, according to the author?

Source 3
Video Excerpt, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, "Ida Red," 1951

Discuss:

- "Ida Red" is a traditional Country and Western song that was recorded by many artists over the years. How would you describe the overall mood and tone of this version?
- What are the primary instruments?
- How are the performers dressed?
- Who do you imagine the main audience for this song was?

Source 4
Video Excerpt, Chuck Berry, "Maybellene," 1955

Discuss:

- Is this song similar to "Ida Red"? In what ways?
- In what ways is the song different?
 - In terms of the primary instruments used?
 - In terms of the overall mood and tone?
- "Maybellene" was Chuck Berry's first hit. Can you identify the influence of Country and Western music in general, and "Ida Red" in particular, on the song? (Think about the swing beat identified in Source 2.)
- How does the electric guitar influence the sound of the song?

Source 5
Radio Host Clive Anderson on Chuck Berry

"While Elvis was a country boy who sang 'black' to some degree ... Chuck Berry provided the mirror image where country music was filtered through an R&B sensibility."

-- Radio host Clive Anderson

Discuss:

- How does this quote reflect what you heard in "Maybellene"?

Summary Question:

- Chuck Berry is often cited as one of the Rock and Roll pioneers who brought Rhythm and Blues to a mainstream audience. How did the influence of Country and Western help give him a unique style?