



Jan. 10, 2010---

ST. LOUIS, Mo.---Chuck Berry is loyal to his monthly appearance at the Blueberry Hill nightclub because it reminds him of the cranberry-size rooms of his early days.

On New Year's Eve 1952, Johnnie Johnson and his Sir John's Trio headlined the tiny Cosmopolitan Club in East St. Louis, Ill. When a band member called in sick, Johnson turned to an unknown guitarist named Charles Edward Anderson Berry.

"I like these shows because everyone is close," the 83-year-old icon said in a very rare interview before last month's show in the basement Duck Room of Blueberry Hill in St. Louis' Delmar Loop district. "I do one-third as much as I used to. I used to do two weeks, 14 shows. I choose now. Any time I go on an airplane, I think, 'This could be it.'

"I've made 400 and some odd journeys."

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People from all over the world crowd the 340-seat club. Fans set their drinks on the stage. Berry is cool with people taking as many still photographs as they want. At the end of the hourlong set, he invites mostly young women on stage to dance to his hit "Reelin' and Rockin'," although a few years ago Joe Perry of Aerosmith joined the onstage fray.

"He took a detour off the Aerosmith tour to come here and salute Chuck," Blueberry Hill owner Joe Edwards said before Berry's set. "When Bob Dylan played the Pageant a 2,000-plus seat venue also owned by Edwards, he asked all kinds of questions about Chuck."

I asked Berry what he listens to in his Toyota when he makes the 40-minute commute from his home in suburban Wentzville, Mo., to St. Louis. "Football and baseball," he answered. "I love the St. Louis Cardinals. I try not to listen to the structure of music."

Edwards took Berry to the Major League Baseball All-Star Game held last summer in St. Louis. "He listens to every game he possibly can," Edwards said. "He'd only gone to four games until the All-Star Game. Its hard for him to enjoy the game because people bother him. There's been summer nights he plays here when he sits in the car and listens to the Cardinals game right up until a minute before show time."

Berry has incorporated his love of baseball into his American poetry. This is the end of his hit "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man.":

... Two, three count with nobody on

He hit a high fly into the stand

Rounding third he was headed for home

It was a brown-eyed handsome man ...

And true-blue Cubs fans remember the summer of '84 when the team actually tried to encourage fans to hang around Wrigley Field after a game. Former Cubs marketing guru John McDonough booked Berry to play on a makeshift stage in right field after a Friday game. "I remember we couldn't find Chuck Berry," McDonough told me in a 2005 interview. "He was sitting on the front porch somewhere on Waveland Avenue, taking in the whole scene."

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Berry's eyes lit up when the conversation shifted to Louis Jordan, one of his musical mentors.

"I sang a lot of his songs," Berry said in genuine tones. "He never said anything about 'rock 'n' roll.' I liked the way he used words: '*This chick's too young to fry.*' And one song didn't sound like the other."

Edwards added, "Chuck has incredible wordplay and his ability to manipulate the English language in a positive way. To consolidate several words into one word. His most famous one is probably 'motor-vating' (as in motivating). That's the genius of him."

That's in "Maybelline," where Berry does not mince words. In a hard driving rock variation of the country standard "Ida Red" he writes:

... As I was motor-vating over the hill

Saw Maybelline in a Coupe de Ville

A Cadillac rolling on old Glen Road

Nothing outrun my V-8 Ford ...

What may be most impressive about talking to Berry one-to-one is his sense of diction. He does not mumble. He speaks with the appointed and precise phrasing you hear in his recordings.

"Diction is respect," Berry declared. "I learned that from Nat King Cole and Louis Jordan. Even if you can't hear the beat, the words will get you where you want. It is like poetry. I have heard that before."

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Berry rolls through all the hits during his perfunctory hourlong set at Blueberry Hill. He's more on target with measured blues numbers like "Wee Wee Hours" instead of trying to keep up with "Roll Over Beethoven."

His band consists of guitarist Charles Berry Jr. (a ringer for R. Kelly), bassist Jim Marsala, who has been with Berry for 35 years, Bob Lohr on keyboards (and lawyer during the day) and Keith Robinson on shake-it-up drums.

Daughter Ingrid Clay Berry plays harmonica and helps with vocals, especially when the

senior Berry forgets lyrics. Ingrid did not appear at December's set where Berry included his last major hit, 1972's "My Ding-A-Ling," which regulars said he rarely performs at the Duck Room.

St. Louis blues legend Billy Peek was in the house. He joined Berry onstage for an extended blues instrumental. Outside of St. Louis, Peek is best known as a member of the "Rod Stewart Group" circa 1976. Peek laid down the hard licks on the Stewart hit "Hot Legs."

After the show, Berry conducted a meet-and-greet with the fans, which observers said is a rare occasion. About 75 fans lined up onstage with photographs and vintage Berry vinyl to hold backstage court with the real King of Rock 'n' Roll.

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Berry said he has new material, but he's been saying that a long time.

"There's at least six good songs from the past 16 years laying around," he said. "I don't want to give my songs away. Everyone wants to own half your song. I want 51 percent."

At one time, Lou Whitney of the Springfield, Mo.-based Morells was rumored to produce and play with Berry. The Morells were the perfect backup band for the late Bo Diddley during his final swing through the Midwest. Berry's pianist Lohr has described the songs as "black gospel meets country."

Edwards has heard the new material.

"About three are Chuck Berry rockers," he said. "There's several gorgeous ballads and a couple of instrumentals. There's a duet with his daughter. He's getting closer and closer. He goes into the studio every few weeks. He's not one to collaborate. Some huge names have offered to work with him. It's never come to pass."

How did Edwards earn Berry's trust?

"He is very cautious," Edwards said. "I learned to understand him and he learned to understand me. A trust built over 25 years. When you have that door open, he becomes such an enjoyable person. He is incredibly clever and fascinating. If he had not become a rock 'n' roll star, he probably would have become a stand-up comedian."

For sure.

"The Official Site of Chuck Berry" (www.chuckberry.com) lists Lucille Ball as his favorite comedian.

And Favorite Hobbies: "Playing music, softball, twenty questions, chess, croquet, highway driving."

Highway driving of course. Chuck Berry has spent a lifetime motivating into the heart of rock 'n' roll.

You can see more of Chuck Berry on his website: <http://www.chuckberry.com/>