



Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry

By Bruce Pegg

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Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry draws on dozens of interviews done by the author himself and voluminous public records to paint a complete picture of this complicated figure. This biography uncovers the real Berry and provides us with a stirring, unvarnished portrait of both the man and the artist. Berry has long been one of pop music's most enigmatic personalities. Growing up in a middle-class, black neighborhood in St. Louis, his first major hit song, "Maybellene," was an adaptation of a white country song, wedded to a black-influenced beat. Thereafter came a string of brilliant songs celebrating teenage life in the '50s, including "School Day," "Johnny B. Goode," and "Sweet Little Sixteen." Berry's career rise was meteoric; but his fall came equally quickly, when his relations with an underage girl led to his conviction. It was not his first (nor his last) run in with the law. He scored his biggest hit in the early '70s with the comical (and some would say decidedly lightweight) song "My Ding-a-Ling." The following decades brought hundreds of nights of tours, with little attention from the recording industry. Bruce Pegg offers the definitive, though not always pretty, portrait of one of the greatest stars of rock and roll, a story that will appeal to all fans of American popular music.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Elvis might still reign as the king of rock'n' roll, but Chuck Berry clearly invented the form. Strangely, not much has been written about the seminal songwriter ("Maybellene," "Johnny B. Goode"). Berry himself had the last word in his rather explicit 1986 autobiography. Here Pegg (writing, Syracuse Univ.) attempts to clarify his often troubled life, chronicling Berry's childhood in a segregated and racist St. Louis, successes and failures with Chess Records, run-ins with the law, and ultimate icon status. Interviews with friends and associates shed light on the shadows that Berry was reluctant to reveal in his autobiography (e.g., he was arrested under the Mann Act for allegedly having sex with a minor). Pegg also examines each of Berry's records in depth, tracing the development of his groundbreaking blend of blues, hillbilly, and jazz. Well-known as a gifted guitarist, Berry is also revealed to be a serious businessman. Pegg alternates between hagiography and harsh judgments of Berry, making the book feel off-balance. In spite of this shortcoming, Pegg provides an often-engaging portrait of a musician so devoted to his music that he is duck-walking his way into his eighties. The only biography on Berry in print, this is recommended for most libraries. (Photos not seen.) Henry L. Carrigan Jr., Lancaster, PA
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Review

"Pegg reminds us that if Elvis led the youthquake of the 1950s, it was Berry who became its unlikely poet laureate."

-Shepherd Express, January 9, 2003

"A measured, carefully constructed tome built upon meticulous research, yet it avoids the sort of dense, impenetrable style of so many scholastic rock bios."

-St. Louis Riverfront Times

"The staggering amount of research Pegg has done into Berry's southern roots and St. Louis makes its own statement about Berry's stature as an artist, while the analysis of individual songs...places Berry in a historical continuum while still conveying his out-of-the-blue uniqueness."

-Montreal Gazette

"Pegg's scholarship is tidy, his writing is clear and straightforward."

-The Los Angeles Times

"Ambitious."

-Mojo

About the Author

Bruce Pegg teaches in the writing program at Syracuse University. He has received numerous grants to research the life of Chuck Berry, and has spent several extended periods in St. Louis conducting interviews and doing archival research. He lives in Canastota, NY.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jolie Browne:

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Ruth Frye:

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John Martindale:

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