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His name was in lights: Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode'

TIMOTHY D. TAYLOR

Introduction

Chuck Berry recorded 'Johnny B. Goode' in December 1957 and it has since become one of his best-known songs. The reasons for its lasting popularity are varied, and one of the goals of this article is to elucidate and discuss them. But the main purpose is to raise 'Johnny B. Goode' as an example of the choices and problems Berry faced in his career as an African-American musician in the 1950s and 60s and the ways he dealt with them in this tune.

In short, he made compromises, but these changed over time. To appeal to a white audience Berry made certain career moves early on – the decision to play 'white' hillbilly music is the most important – but later in his career he attempted to court a broader white audience. Two recorded versions of 'Johnny B. Goode' point out those changes, and I will consider them, the original one for Chess, and another, nine years later, for Mercury.

To discuss the song's popularity and longevity I will examine the many meanings evoked by the lyrics, which include three powerful myths Berry taps into, myths that are not specifically African-American or white, but that all Americans can share. Despite Berry's courting of a broad audience with the material of his lyrics, some elements of an African-American identity remain, as do some distinctly African-American traces in the music. The African-American aspects of Berry's music, while not always on the surface, none the less helped contribute to the improvement of race relations in America.

The story told and the story not quite told in the lyrics

Since I will be discussing the lyrics of 'Johnny B. Goode' at length, I will first quote them below (transcribed from the original Chess recording, re-released in 1984 on *The Great Twenty Eight* MCA CHD-92500).

'Johnny B. Goode'

verse 1 Deep down in Lou'siana close to New Orleans
Way back up in the woods among the evergreens
There stood a log cabin made of earth and wood
Where lived a country boy named Johnny B. Goode
Who never ever learned to read or write so well
But he could play a guitar just like a ringin' a bell.

chorus 1 Go, Johnny, go, etc.
Johnny B. Goode.

verse 2 He used to carry his guitar in a gunny sack
 Would sit beneath the tree by the railroad track
 Engineer could see him sittin' in the shade
 Strummin' with the rhythm that the drivers made
 The people passin' by they would stop and say
 'Oh my but that little country boy could play.'

chorus 2 Go, Johnny, go, etc.
 Johnny B. Goode.

verse 3 His mother told him, 'Someday you will be a man
 And you will be the leader of a big old band;
 Many people comin' from miles around
 To hear you play your music when the sun go down.
 Maybe someday your name will be in lights
 Sayin' "Johnny B. Goode tonight."'

chorus 3 Go, Johnny, go, etc.
 Johnny B. Goode.

To begin my discussion of these lyrics I turn to the cultural critic John Fiske, who writes that television programmes must be polysemic in order to be popular, and those multiplicities of possible meanings must be negotiable, or appropriable by the viewers (Fiske 1987, p. 267). In other words, many resonances, meanings, must be activated in order for a diverse range of people to respond. This is necessarily true of all forms of popular culture; otherwise they are not popular. 'Johnny B. Goode' is popular and polysemic, and the many potential meanings contribute to its continuing popularity. These meanings are achieved, in this text and others, by the use of puns and *double entendre* in the lyrics,¹ and so I will discuss the lyrics of 'Johnny B. Goode' in depth.

Berry's title, hinting at several meanings, activates two explicit ones and implies another. The pun on Johnny's name causes some: he is a good musician, and it is his name as well. Another meaning could be in African-American dialect: 'Johnny be [is] good'. Finally, the title contains a couple of autobiographical elements: Berry was born on Goode Street in St Louis.² And Berry's great-grandfather was John Johnson, a slave who lived for a time in a log cabin in Ohio after becoming free.

Acknowledging that 'Johnny B. Goode' is partly autobiographical, Berry writes in his autobiography that he was inspired by his first visit to New Orleans, a city with which he had long been infatuated because of his love of Muddy Waters' 'Going Down in Louisiana, Way Down Behind the Sun', and his father's stories of the city. Berry himself is Johnny, although at first he intended this song to be about Johnnie Johnson, a pianist with whom he collaborated sporadically for many years and from whom he may have learned his best licks. Despite that original plan, 'Johnny B. Goode' quickly became a song which told Berry's story.

The subsequent Johnny songs confirm their autobiographical nature, which Berry continues in songs which are obscure compared to this first Johnny song. 'Bye Bye Johnny' (1960) picks up where 'Johnny B. Goode' left off: Johnny is now heading out for California to make movies. 'Bye Bye Johnny' starts *in media res*, which makes it clear that it is a continuation of 'Johnny B. Goode', which provides the listener with background information.³

'Bye Bye Johnny'

verse 1 She drew out all her money at the Southern Trust
 And put her little boy aboard a Greyhound Bus
 Leavin' Lou'siana for the golden west
 Down came her tears from her happiness.
 Her own little son named Johnny B. Goode
 Was going to make some motion pictures out in Hollywood.

Berry thus continues the rags-to-riches myth-making from the first song (which I shall discuss later) and again Johnny's humble early existence is noted, since it takes all of Johnny's mother's money to put him on a bus; he does not have a car like the people driving by and hearing him in 'Johnny B. Goode'. The story also sustains the autobiographical nature of the Johnny songs, since Berry himself went to California (Culver City, not Hollywood) to make a film, *Rock, Rock, Rock*, released in 1956. Two years later, Berry made a movie entitled *Go, Johnny, Go*, about a rock musician named Johnny Melody whom Alan Freed (playing himself) was promoting to become a star.

The third Johnny song is 'Go Go Go' (1961) which portrays Johnny/Chuck as a star, looking back on his achievements with some humour:⁴

'Go Go Go'

verse 4 Backed up by a jazz band, layin' on the wood
 Mixin' Ahmad Jamal in my 'Johnny B. Goode'.
 Sneakin' Erroll Garner in my 'Sweet Sixteen'
 Now they tell me Stan Kenton's cuttin' 'Maybellene'.

Two more songs, 'Tulane' (1969) and 'Have Mercy Judge' (1969) also tell of Johnny/Chuck's exploits, this time of trouble with the law, continuing the explicitly autobiographical nature of the Johnny songs. Berry, however, says that 'Tulane' is about a different Johnny (Salvo 1972, p. 42). Because these depart from the themes of Johnny/Chuck's music and musical development, I will not discuss them further.

An autobiographical element originating in 'Johnny B. Goode' is the rags-to-riches story, which Berry's mother predicted for him. Berry writes that she

constantly proclaimed she knew I would become lucky in my life and urged me on to get an education (which I fumbled around with until I was grown) to aid me in maintaining that fortune that I would likely come into (Berry [1987] 1988, p. 155).

A powerful reason for the lasting success of 'Johnny B. Goode' is that Berry's lyrics effectively and succinctly tap into three compelling American myths: genius, the notion that talent will prevail, and one I have already discussed, the American dream of financial success.⁵ I want to consider these myths in some depth, beginning with the idea of genius.

Not only is Johnny a musician, but his talent is natural, untrained. Johnny is such a good guitarist that he can even pick up rhythms from passing cars.⁶ He 'never, ever learned to read or write so well', but playing the guitar was for him as easy as ringing a bell.

Tied to the idea of genius is Johnny's climb to success, which he achieves because of his gift. In order to emphasise Johnny's ascent, Berry carefully and deliberately humbles Johnny's background; Berry writes in his autobiography that

it was his intention to write a rags-to-riches story, and some of the words he uses are extremely effective and telling in this way.

For example, from the start we know that Johnny grew up in the country, by Berry's using the words 'deep down'. Johnny's home was a log cabin in the woods, a cabin 'made of earth and wood'. The word 'earth' carries connotations. 'Dirt' might have worked as well, but by using 'earth' Berry enhances the idea that Johnny's talent is natural, perhaps even divine; for 'earth' I would argue, is a trope, a momentary swerve in the discourse, evoking poetic or even biblical associations.

The word 'earth' also generalises outward, making universal Johnny's talent and appeal. Johnny is neither black nor white, but everyone (every male, anyway); Johnny, with such a common name, is everyman. Berry purposely made the listeners' identification with Johnny possible by altering him, away from the singular, autobiographical and toward the general. Berry writes

My first thought was to make [Johnny's] life follow as my own had come along, but I thought it would seem biased to white fans to say 'colored boy' and changed it to 'country boy' (Berry [1987] 1988, p. 157).

Berry also said in a 1972 interview that the reason he changed 'colored' to 'country' is so that it would be played on the radio (Salvo 1972, p. 42).

A shift away from autobiography also occurs since Berry's upbringing was neither rural nor poor; his was a solid working-class family. Such a portrayal of one's background is a common autobiographical device, however: by lowering one's early life, the heights eventually attained appear higher.⁷

The second myth, the idea that talent cannot be suppressed, is subtler. The chorus of 'Johnny B. Goode' contains a double meaning. 'Go, Johnny, go!' sounds at first like an encouragement to Johnny/Chuck to play a guitar solo. Berry, however, intends this to be in the imperative. He writes in his autobiography that if you have talent you must prove yourself, and asks "will the name and the light . . . come to you? No! You have to "Go!" (Berry [1987] 1988, p. 158).

Berry's idea that genius will prevail is only partly borne out by his own career, and there is some irony in that. Johnny 'never, ever learned to read or write so well', but solely by virtue of his talent he comes out of nowhere and makes a huge career for himself. Berry on the other hand spent nearly a decade playing minor gigs in clubs around St Louis and was rejected by several record companies before being signed by Leonard Chess of Chess Records in 1955. And Berry experienced many setbacks in his career, some because of his race. In obscuring Johnny's race, Berry made his hypothetical career far smoother than Berry's own.

'Johnny B. Goode' carries strong racial overtones. I have talked about the alteration from 'colored' to 'country', but many cultural or racial clues remain. The first is in the title: Johnny's surname with its terminal 'e' seems to be spelled like old English, signifying white culture generally. And the lyrics are filled with rural African-American imagery, such as gunny sacks and railroad tracks.

Except for a possible meaning of the title which I already discussed, little evidence of African-American dialect remains. Further examples are 'sun go down' and 'a ringin' a bell'. Berry could have disclosed his race with his diction as he does in other songs, but since 'Johnny B. Goode' is aimed at a broad audience his diction is extremely clear, i.e. intended to appeal to the white audience. He writes about his varying of diction in his autobiography:

The songs of Muddy Waters impelled me to deliver the down-home blues in the language they came from, Negro dialect. When I played hillbilly songs, I stressed my diction so that it was harder and whiter. All in all it was my intention to hold both the black and the white clientele by voicing the different kinds of songs in their customary tongues (Berry [1987] 1988, p. 91).

In his autobiography Berry often characterises hillbilly music as white and the blues as black, and admits that his use of hillbilly music was part of his bid for achieving popularity with a broad audience ('Anglopinionated' is his word to describe music that will appeal to whites). Berry's use of such music marks a tension between the African-American identity he was attempting to assert in 'Johnny B. Goode' and other songs, and the white music with which he was making his statement. I will talk more about this conflict in the last section of this article.

An interesting aspect of the lyrics of 'Johnny B. Goode' is their structure, which is a Faulknerian *tour de force* of cadential denial. The first stanza (six lines) is all one sentence; it works by employing 'there', 'where', 'who' and 'but' as conjunctions in lines 3 through 6 (see verse 1 above). The second stanza is less clear; the published sheet music may well be correct in making a sentence out of the first four lines and one out of the last two lines; this certainly seems correct for the third stanza. What all this means is that Berry's long sentences contribute to the tension, the forward motion of 'Johnny B. Goode'. Berry's voice, ensemble and music all create an atmosphere of great excitement, and the lyrics which rarely come to a full stop add to that impression.

Retention and subversion in the music

The music of 'Johnny B. Goode' bears many resemblances to the blues. Berry's tune is the familiar speeded-up twelve bar blues which he used so frequently, with some small variations. The opening guitar lick and entrance of the rest of the band follow the chord progression considered to be within the normal bounds for that form in the rhythm and blues tradition: I-IV-I-V-IV-I. The rest of the verses and choruses all use the more common twelve-bar I-IV-I-V-I pattern, except for the two instrumental choruses before the last verse: here the chord progressions are the same except that the opening four bars on the tonic is replaced by a foray to IV for a bar, then back to I.

But this is not to say that 'Johnny B. Goode' is a blues because it has the blues chord progression, but that the differences between 'Johnny B. Goode' and a traditional blues do not occur at a formal level. While keeping the harmonic progressions of the blues essentially intact, Berry varies other blues conventions, which I will consider below.

Berry's use of the twelve-bar blues form is significant because of its heritage, its association with so many previous African-American performers, some of whom Berry idolised as models. Berry's employment of the form makes an important link with past African-American music, and the way he uses the twelve-bar blues is similarly significant because the continuity is maintained. As an African-American inheritance, the form is a sign of the African-American condition, a sign of covert protest against white domination. George Lipsitz, arguing from a Bakhtinian dialogic standpoint, says that African-Americans' retention of traditional forms were a way of preserving collective memory about a place where they

were free, and that this retention also serves as a protection against white hegemony (Lipsitz 1990, p. 111). Even though Berry altered the blues form and conventions, that repository of meanings remains; in borrowing the form Berry borrowed the ideology as well.

A deviation from the traditional blues is that Berry's stanzas are twice as long (i.e. six lines instead of three), for Berry speeds up not only the tempo but the delivery as well, and eliminates all melismas (except a small one on 'name') which are a common feature of a blues. Other blues conventions remain unchanged. Jeff Todd Titon (1977) writes that the typical line in a blues lyric tends to consist of two sub-phrases, with a break or a rest in between, while the third line often does not have the rest. The expanded stanzas of 'Johnny B. Goode' do just this: there are breaks between lines one and two, and then between three and four, but not between five and six.

Melodically, 'Johnny B. Goode' behaves typically for a Berry song. It occupies a more limited range than many blues songs but within its range of a perfect fifth Berry's song is like a blues, with the bending of the third degree. The melodic contour also falls into Titon's categories of melodic contours for the blues as one of the most common: start on the highest note, end on the lowest note. (This is Titon's 'Specific Contour Case IA', which he discusses on pp. 162–5.)

And the melody has features of many oral musics: formulaic repetitions of melodic fragments. Titon's typical blues line, with its division into sub-phrases, is accurate for 'Johnny B. Goode', in which the first part of each phrase is an antecedent to the second part. While Berry's a, c and e sections vary somewhat (the opening portions of each phrase), the b, d and f parts (closing portions) are similar (see Example 1).

Such variation on b, d and f parts with different, but related, a, c and e sections is a common feature of the blues. Berry's tune, however, is constrained by tempo which prohibits extensive ornamentation or melismas, and is varied less than a blues would be. Titon discusses this formulaic phenomenon at length, saying that in any one stanza, 'phrases b, d, and f are usually identical, or nearly so; and that phrases a and c are very close', while phrase e is most likely to be independent of the other phrases (Titon 1977, p. 166).

In 'Johnny B. Goode' however, the a and e parts are related; c is the independent one, with the brief shift to minor. Example 1 is a transcription of the melody in which the similarities and differences just discussed are visible. Berry thus maintains many of the structural and melodic features of the blues (after compensating for the changes caused by his up-tempo rendition) while adding a few twists of his own.

Berry's tune differs from traditional blues more in its text than in its form, in its turning of the blues from a reflective form into a narrative one. 'Johnny B. Goode' tells a story; Berry's propensity for telling stories with his music is another of Lipsitz's (1990) characteristics of African and African-American culture. Alfons Dauer writes that the blues 'reflects events or situations, it does not use narrative means: the Blues is a presentation – not a narration' (Dauer 1979, p. 10). David Evans makes the same point, characterising the blues as lyric, distinct from narrative songs (Evans 1982, p. 27). Since early rock and roll is usually thought to be a hybrid between the blues and hillbilly music, it is important to ask if hillbilly music tells stories. Some do, some do not; it is not easy to generalise. At any rate it is clear that Berry did not follow the reflexive convention of the blues.

The image displays five staves of musical notation for the guitar licks in 'Johnny B. Goode'. Each staff is in 4/4 time and has a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The licks are labeled as follows:

- a**: The first staff, starting with a quarter rest followed by a series of eighth notes.
- b**: The second staff, continuing the rhythmic pattern with eighth notes and quarter notes.
- c**: The third staff, featuring a variation with a dotted quarter note and an eighth note.
- d**: The fourth staff, showing another variation of the eighth-note pattern.
- e**: The fifth staff, continuing the sequence of eighth-note licks.

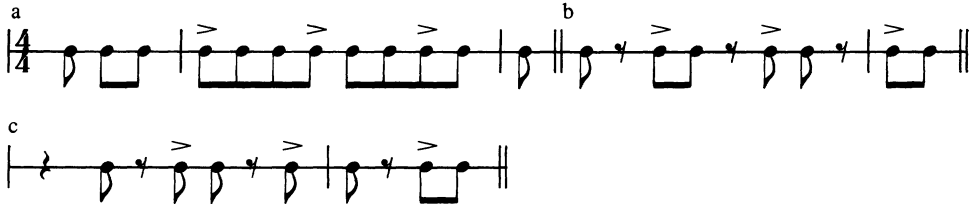
The notation includes stems, beams, and flags to indicate the eighth-note groupings. The licks are presented as single-line guitar notation.

Example 1. 'Johnny B. Goode', verse 1

Berry uses a catchy rhythmic figure in the opening bluesy guitar lick of 'Johnny B. Goode', sort of an 'inverted hemiola': groups of three quavers in a duple meter instead of groups of two or four (a hemiola is a group of two when three are expected, and occurs usually in triple meter).⁸ This recurring figure provides the strongest musical analogy to the words in this song. Berry uses it frequently in different ways, and the resulting fabric of rhythms in 'Johnny B. Goode' is complex. This figure occurs first at the opening of the song, so there is no mistaking its importance. Also, Berry's 'Let it Rock', recorded in July 1959, is essentially the same tune, and this figure is missing, since it is not important for the message Berry is making in that tune (an ambiguous song about a railroad worker who panics because of an out of control train). For ease of discussion I shall label this rhythmic figure 'inverse hemiola'.⁹ Some of the permutations of this inverse hemiola appear below in Example 2. The first is the opening guitar figure, a Berry trademark, which I have labelled as 2a; the others are variations of this rhythm that Berry uses in his guitar solos in the choruses; 2b is also from the introduction; and 2c is from the instrumental chorus preceding the last verse. The accents indicate the groupings of three.

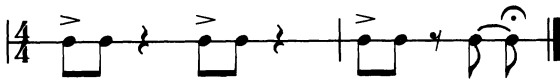
Akin to this figure and its variations is the backbeat (accented second and fourth beats), another salient feature of Berry's music. And that backbeat (and almost any pop music backbeat) has ideological implications, since it is a deliberate thwarting of western European musical conventions, where 'natural' accents tend to fall on the odd-numbered beats in duple meter. John Shepherd (1987) writes that the backbeat in popular music is a sign of the marginalised in western European and American culture attempting to win back cultural space which had been previously occupied by the dominant culture.

I think he is right. An unvarying 4/4 metre, with nearly constant quavers is



Example 2. 'Johnny B. Goode', guitar rhythmic gestures

homologous to the socio-political-cultural status quo, which in Berry's time was white. His music often subverts this hegemonic norm. The backbeat in 'Johnny B. Goode' constantly upsets the first and third beat accents normally found in 4/4. And the inverse hemiola does likewise. This polarity is never resolved, for at the end of the song we hear unusually in 'Johnny B. Goode' – accents on beats one and three in the penultimate bar, then the inverse hemiola in the final bar, not, I think, to show that Berry's (and, by extension, all African-Americans') disenfranchised view prevails, but to maintain the rhythmic/ideological tension to the end, unresolved.



Example 3. 'Johnny B. Goode', guitar rhythm of final two bars

The backbeat and inverse hemiola have further political implications because they are homologous to the many oppositions in the song: white and black, country and city, old and young and, finally, poverty and wealth, the rags-to-riches story.¹⁰ These tensions are less strong in 'Bye Bye Johnny', which makes use of a subdued backbeat but no groupings of quavers other than the usual groupings of two, and are absent altogether in 'Go Go Go'. The oppositions thus dissipate over the span of the three songs, as does Berry's tripartite tale itself: 'Go Go Go', unlike the earlier two songs, fades away.

At this point a digression is necessary, for such claims for ideological meanings need to be supported theoretically. Steven Connor, like Bruce Tucker (1989), writes that rock music is a postmodernist phenomenon because it is an attempt by the disenfranchised to 'articulate alternative or plural cultural identities, of groups belonging to the margins of national or dominant cultures' (Connor 1989, p. 186). George Lipsitz (1990) makes a similar point, as does Jean-François Lyotard, who writes in *The Postmodern Condition* that, in the most general terms, postmodernism is 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard [1979] 1984, p. xiv), or, for my purposes, incredulity to points of view held by the dominant culture. My reading of the backbeat, then, is one of the ways that African-American musicians mapped out their own music and their own space.

Musical and ideological discussions such as this rely heavily on constructing homologies between perceived social, cultural and political attitudes and musical events; sometimes the connections are difficult to make, and even more difficult to

verify. Claiming that Berry's backbeat or 'inverse hemiola' have political implications means that other musicians' uses of these devices are also political, and that is a complicated issue; musical devices which were originally political or ideological can be aestheticised, and their meanings changed or erased.

The backbeat is a good example. Because of Berry and other early rock musicians, the backbeat became a feature of the rock and roll style, and as such could be borrowed by other musicians and made to mean other things, if anything. Elvis Presley, for instance, could use the backbeat and instead of signifying African-Americans striving to create their own subculture, it is usually taken to indicate an assertion of male sexuality.

Deciding specific musical meanings is difficult. Susanne K. Langer ([1942] 1979) writes of music as an unconsummated symbol; music means, but just what it means we can never know. She is right in that we cannot know the meaning, but what she does not say is that her position allows that music can have a multiplicity of meanings. George Lipsitz writes of the same problem in popular culture: 'It is impossible to say whether any one combination of sounds . . . innately expresses one unified political position' (Lipsitz 1990, p. 13).

I am thus deliberately shying away from assigning a more specific meaning to Berry's backbeat in 'Johnny B. Goode'; if it had a specific meaning, it would not be reused by so many other musicians, black and white. It is more productive to view the backbeat in the terms outlined by Fredric Jameson in 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture' (1979). Jameson forwards a relevant analysis of *Jaws*, in which he argues that one of the reasons the film was so powerful is that the shark could be viewed as a symbol for all kinds of tensions, depending on which meaning the individual viewer mapped onto the shark.

Finally, the work of John Fiske (1989) is useful in this context as well, and he echoes Jameson's idea. Fiske argues that consumers of popular culture can form numerous alliances, sometimes dependent on age, gender, race, religion or whatever. In other words, one person can receive popular culture in different ways, depending on how they identify with the product. Fiske's model works in the other direction, too: producers of popular culture can use the same device – such as a backbeat – to fight against the various aspects of dominant culture. For Berry, it was whites; for Elvis, it was the dominant culture's suppression of the sexual; for an African-American woman rock musician like Tracy Chapman it is the dominant culture in general and male hegemony in particular.

Two recordings, and their ideological implications

Berry recorded 'Johnny B. Goode' more than once, so a comparison of his recordings is revealing. The two most interesting are the original Chess version and the Mercury version recorded in 1966, which is essentially a cover by Berry of his own tune. Like so many covers by white artists of tunes by African-American artists, Berry's rendering of 'Johnny B. Goode' is sanitised, the rough edges smoothed off. None of the Mercury tunes, incidentally, made any *Billboard* chart, probably because the fans whom Berry and Mercury thought that they were aiming at were more interested in the British Invasion than Berry reruns.

A major difference in these two recordings is the amount of reverb used. The first recording features a stripped down, ready for action ensemble consisting of Berry on guitar and vocals, Lafayette Leake on piano, Willie Dixon on bass and

Fred Below on drums. The lack of reverb highlights the extraordinary clarity of the ensemble; it sounds as if the listeners are right there with Berry and the other musicians. In the later version, the ensemble is augmented, and the reverb turns the listeners into voyeurs, detached from the visceral directness of the first version.

This last point is important. In the original version the listeners are close to the musicians; in the Mercury version they are much further away. In a sense, Berry's first version of 'Johnny B. Goode' is functional, the ideological message clear. He is telling a tale with a moral and political message, and everything about his performance contributes to this: his voice quality, the rhythms used, the back-beat, the use of an African-American form and the clarity of all of these devices.

In the later version for Mercury, one of the six major recording companies, this functional aspect is less noticeable. The ideological aspects of the lyrics and music are undermined by the various ways Berry has souped up the music and recording. 'Johnny B. Goode' has been aestheticised – it is now an aesthetic object whose social meanings have been suppressed by the distance between the producers and the receivers, and Berry's distance between relative poverty and affluence.¹¹ His switch from a small independent record label to a much larger one is partly responsible for this change. His earlier statement which had clear political implications was co-opted by the dominant culture, represented by the major label.¹²

This argument is derived from Pierre Bourdieu's writing about aesthetic distancing in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* ([1979] 1984). His main point in the first chapter is that a person's freedom or distance from economic necessity plays a direct role in his or her aesthetic taste. People with low educational capital (as he calls it, relating this state with economic class, somewhat problematically) have tastes that tend to be functional, and those with higher educational capital have tastes which are more aesthetic. That is, poor people view objects, and art, as functional objects, while wealthier people are more capable of aestheticising that object: its use is less relevant to them because of their relative economic freedom.

I am probably using Bourdieu's ideas differently than he intended, since he was concerned with consumers of culture, not producers. But John Fiske (1989) has convincingly problematised the notion of mass culture and consumers: he argues that everyone makes their own meanings out of popular culture, and they do this so consistently that to characterise them as consumers ignores the fact that they produce their own meanings. Fiske goes so far as to label popular cultural texts 'producerly': for Fiske, such a text is one from which the receiver can produce their own meanings, and he intends his idea to apply to most popular culture texts. The upshot of all this is that the placement of consumers and producers of popular culture at opposite poles is too simple a model, and so to use Bourdieu's ideas as I do here acknowledges the blurred distinction between consumer and producer.

Berry himself experienced a distancing from economic necessity between the recordings of these two versions of 'Johnny B. Goode'. Although he was a major star by the time of his switch to Mercury in 1966, the change in labels was prompted by a huge fee of \$150,000. After that Berry was freer to experiment with music as an aesthetic, formal entity, not a functional one expressing political ideas, and so in the Mercury version we hear changes.

There is little written evidence for Berry's aestheticisation. But I think the changes made in the Mercury version of 'Johnny B. Goode' argue for this point of

The dominant culture's posing of choices to the marginalised – ghettoisation or integration – is one of its greatest achievements. It effectively removes clearly attractive options for marginalised artists and replaces them with various forms of betrayal: betraying your community in order to make it big, or betraying the American Dream in order to remain in your community.

Writers with Marxian inclinations offer a solution to this structure of cultural hegemony. Jacques Attali argues in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985) that the capitalist mode of production and distribution of music can only be broken if people start to make their own music for their own reasons, and if they want to sell it, to do that themselves. He cites an example relevant to this discussion: free jazz, produced by African-American musicians who were finding that their music was being monetarily censored by some American record companies. These musicians organised, and eventually attempted to make and market their own recordings, splitting an equal share of the total earnings.

This sort of self-organisation and distribution is the kind of solution to the exploitation of African-Americans by the dominant cultural music industry that Harold Cruse demands in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, published in 1967. Cruse writes:

No social movement of a protest nature in Harlem can be successful or have any positive meaning unless it is at one and the same time a *political, economic and cultural movement*. (Cruse 1967, p. 86)

If Berry had formed his own record company or established his own method of distribution, he probably would not have had access to a mass audience and so enjoyed less of a career, but, on the other hand, his covers of his own tunes for Mercury would not be so limp when compared to his earlier, more ideologically-charged work for Chess. Nonetheless, Berry managed to communicate his African-American viewpoint in 'Johnny B. Goode' and many other songs, and his widespread popularity helped to break down racial barriers in America. The sanitised covers, by Berry himself and others, cannot obscure the sheer exuberance and directness of his earliest and best songs.

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Endnotes

- 1 George Lipsitz (1990, p. 111) writes that one of the continuations of African or African-American traditions into popular culture is word-play, an important feature of much of Berry's music. 'You know, poetry is my blood flow' says Berry in *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll* (1987).
- 2 Richard Crawford points out that there may also be a pun on George Gershwin's 'Lady be Good'.
- 3 Transcribed from the original recording, released on *The Great Twenty Eight*, MCA CHD-92500.
- 4 Transcribed from *Chuck Berry: More Rock 'n' Roll Rarities from the Golden Era of Chess Records*, Chess 9190.
- 5 Howard A. DeWitt (1985) writes that there have been more covers of 'Johnny B. Goode' than any other Chuck Berry tune except for 'Memphis Tennessee'. And there are some versions which were released after he compiled his list, such as one by Judas Priest, among others. Berry himself writes, 'For a long while, "Memphis" was the song covered most by other groups, until the sleeper, "Johnny B.

- Goode", caught on to take precedence'(Berry [1987] 1988, p. 161). There are currently forty-nine versions commercially available, including those by Berry himself.
- 6 The French jazz critic, Hugues Panassie, contributes to the mythologising of the African-American musician's 'natural' talent when he tells a strikingly similar anecdote about Louis Armstrong, who, he says, picked up a rhythm and melody from a passing horse and carriage while walking with Panassie in Paris (Panassie 1971, p. 24).
 - 7 The rags-to-riches myth is the strongest one in evidence in this song, and it is for this reason that it was borrowed for the 1985 hit movie *Back to the Future*. The plot follows predictable lines. The main character, Marty McFly, because of his ingenuity and talent, realises the rags-to-riches myth, and enriches his parents, just as Chuck Berry was able to do for his parents. Marty identified with Johnny (or Berry) in that song in the movie, and the few minutes when he sings 'Johnny B. Goode' in *Back to the Future* are a microcosm of the entire film.
 - 8 Berry says in *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll* that he borrowed the opening lick from guitarist Carl Hogan's music, and goes on to acknowledge Walker, as well as Charlie Christian as his great guitar influences. Guitarist Rick Vito (1984) notes that this lick is similar to other openings of Berry songs: 'Carol', 'Little Queenie' and 'Roll Over Beethoven' are examples he offers.
 - 9 'Inverse hemiola' is my term; there is no accepted label for this figure. A similar figure occurs in ragtime and is called 'secondary rag', which John Hasse (1985) writes was so common that it became a cliché after 1906. Hasse links this and other ragtime rhythmic figures to African music's additive rhythms. I would say that this figure in ragtime represents, like Chuck Berry's use of it, an assertion of Otherness, an attempt, to borrow John Shepherd's (1987) words again, to win back cultural space.
 - 10 Bruce Tucker (1989) noticed many of these oppositions in other Berry songs, and many are equally applicable here.
 - 11 Berry's versions of 'Johnny B. Goode' after the one for Mercury vary. His version recorded live in London returns the backbeat but not the inverse hemiola. The version in *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll* has the backbeat, but the inverse hemiola is less prominent than the first version.
 - 12 George Lipsitz makes a similar point about Elvis Presley's move to RCA from Sun in 1955: he says that RCA 'smoothed off the rough edges of his style for mass distribution' (Lipsitz 1990, p. 124).
 - 13 Berry said in an interview with Patrick William Salvo that he was involved with all aspects of production: 'As far as producing, let me tell you for the last time that since the very start, when I first signed with Chess, I have been in total creative control' (Salvo 1972, p. 23).

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