

MAR 20, 2017 @ 12:00 PM 76 VIEWS

Chuck Berry And The Curse Of The Founders



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Chuck Berry performs during the 2012 Awards for Lyrics of Literary Excellence at The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library And Museum on February 26, 2012, in Boston, Massachusetts. (Marc Andrew Deley/Getty Images)

When Chuck Berry passed away at age 90 this past Saturday, the world reacted with the reverence reserved for the loss of a true legend. The news of the departure of the man known as the Father of Rock 'n' Roll quickly soared to the virtual front pages of publications from *Rolling Stone* to the *New York Times* as bars across the country shifted to Berry-centric playlists for the evening and superstar musicians sent condolences.

"The Rolling Stones are deeply saddened to hear of the passing of Chuck Berry," the group [wrote](#) in a statement. "He was a true pioneer of rock 'n' roll and a massive influence on us. Chuck was not only a brilliant guitarist, singer and performer, but most importantly, he was a master craftsman as a songwriter. His songs will live forever."

For all the attention from artists and publications, though, Berry's reputation in life--and now, in death--dwarfs his financial success. It's an issue encountered by the founders of many different genres of music that have gone on to enrich others to an incredible degree.

Berry, a man whose influence has led [some](#) to suggest his inclusion among the faces on American money, never landed on any FORBES wealth list; the Rolling Stones [earned](#) \$66.5 million last year alone. The reasons behind Berry's limited financial success in comparison to the acts he inspired are a complex stew whose ingredients include persistent legal troubles, racism, personal demons, professional habits and the whims of youth.

"Chuck's influence on younger artists often made these other artists more popular than Berry himself," says veteran entertainment attorney Bernie Resnick. "Especially when the younger artists were perceived as more dangerous or cool than the kinder, sweeter original artist they emulated."

Berry continued to play gigs well into his 80s, performing roughly once per month through 2014 at the 340-capacity Blueberry Hill Duck Room near his home in Missouri. According to Pollstar, the room grosses an average of \$5,452 per show. A look back his prior decade of touring reveals a list of similarly-sized venues, mostly theaters and casinos.

Contrast that to the touring habits of aging rock acts inspired by Berry--who, in some cases, borrowed heavily from him--early in their careers. Paul McCartney's average nightly gross sits at \$3.5 million, while the Rolling Stones' number is roughly double that, thanks to recent gigs at stadiums around the world that can often fit 60,000 people or more for a single show.

"Chuck's legal troubles, which required numerous court appearances and several periods of incarceration during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, interrupted his performance career, and hampered his ability to travel," adds Resnick. "Chuck tended to travel alone, with just a guitar but not a band, and would hire pick-up musicians when he arrived in town. As he often performed with these new accompanists without rehearsal, this led to inconsistent musical quality and occasional audience disappointment."

Berry's relative lack of financial success mirrors that of other genre founders like DJ Kool Herc in the hip-hop world and the late Frankie Knuckles with house music. Neither performer ever came close to landing on the hip-hop and electronic music earnings lists compiled by FORBES every year; Herc rarely plays shows these days and Knuckles appeared even less frequently in his later years than Berry did in his 80s.

There may be something of a silver lining: last fall, Berry [announced](#) that he'd been working on a new album, *Chuck*. Though it's unlikely to land Berry on any FORBES list, the record could provide his heirs with a modicum financial security--and rock 'n' roll fans with one last chance to hear from the man who started it all.

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