

johnnie johnson

By Rob
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ON A FATEFUL DAY in early 1956, Johnnie Johnson and Chuck Berry headed to Chicago for their fourth recording session at Chess Records. Their first three efforts had produced the blues-inflected stylings of “Wee Wee Hours,” “No Money Down” and “Downbound Train” and the cut-time country raveups “Maybellene,” “You Can’t Catch Me” and “Thirty Days.” The results had been impressive, jump-starting Berry’s career with four Top Ten R&B hits, one of which, “Maybellene,” enjoyed similar success on the pop chart. Johnnie Johnson’s piano is all over these songs, contributing rollicking high-end boogie-woogie licks that served as the perfect

counterpoint to Berry’s souped-up guitar on the uptempo tunes, while on the slow blues, such as “Wee Wee Hours,” Johnson laid down triplet-ridden, soulful responsorial fills and a solo that proved him the equal of any blues pianist then current on the Chicago scene. Had Johnson spent the rest of his career simply filling the function of letter-perfect foil on Berry’s subsequent recordings, he would amply deserve to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. But beginning with the duo’s fourth session, which produced “Roll Over Beethoven,” “Brown Eyed Handsome Man,” “Drifting Heart” and “Too Much Monkey Business,” Johnson did so much more. In fact, together with Berry, he created the archetypal rock & roll groove that would influence the sound of virtually every rock musician for the next twenty years. While Berry wrote the lyrics and his guitar solos, it was Johnson who took from earlier boogie-woogie piano players what he referred to as his “chopping bass,” playing chords in either a shuffle groove or straight eighths, every second articulation shifting between the fifth and sixth degrees of the scale. When Berry adapted this to his guitar, the standard rhythm-guitar pattern of basic rock & roll came into existence. One can draw a straight line from Johnson’s playing on that day to the guitar sound of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Beach Boys, Creedence Clearwater Revival and beyond. It is the sound of rock & roll.

Ironically, the group that first recorded Berry’s hits at Chess was originally known as the Johnnie Johnson Trio. Two years Berry’s senior, Johnson had first hired the guitarist for a New Year’s Eve gig in 1952 when one of his musicians had taken sick. Johnson was impressed with Berry’s showmanship and singing ability, so the arrangement stuck, and for the next three years Berry, in effect, was in Johnson’s employ. It was only after the success of “Maybellene” that Berry took over the Johnnie Johnson Trio, turning Johnson and drummer Ebby Hardy into sidemen. Despite the name change, Johnson stayed with Berry, playing on and co-



creating the music for virtually every recording Berry made through 1964 and on intermittent sessions until 1973. One of the few songs Johnson didn't contribute to, 1958's "Johnny B. Goode," was written as a tribute to him. As Keith Richards so deftly put it, in tandem with Berry, Johnson is much more than a sideman; he is "one of the best rock & roll songwriters of all time."

Despite his massive contributions to the music of Chuck Berry and consequently to the very sound of rock & roll, Johnson was never given credit. He would have remained an obscure name known only to historians and ardent rock aficionados had it not been for Keith Richards's decision to hire Johnson to play piano in the all-star band that backed

Berry for the 1986 shows that were the climax of the film *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll*. Since Johnson's "rediscovery," he has recorded six solo albums and played sessions for such luminaries as Richards, Eric Clapton and Buddy Guy. "His musicianship is amazing," emphasizes Richards. "His empathy for who he's playing with is almost saintlike." In 1999, Johnson received a Lifetime Achievement Commendation from the Congressional Black Caucus, and in 2000, he was the recipient of the R&B Foundation's Pioneer Award.

Tonight, justice is at last being served, as Johnson's seminal role in the creation of rock & roll is finally recognized through his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Hail! Hail! Rock & roll indeed. ●