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Review of Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll

Michael Adams

City University of New York

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Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll
(Image Entertainment, 6.27.2006)

With a long string of hits beginning with "Maybellene" in 1955, Chuck Berry helped create rock and roll. The legacy of one of the genre's greatest innovators is celebrated in Taylor Hackford's 1987 *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll*. To commemorate Berry's sixtieth birthday, Hackford and music producer Keith Richards arranged for an all-star tribute to the musician in his hometown of St. Louis in the fall of 1986. The documentary combines the concert with rehearsals, Berry's reflections on how it all began, and interviews with his contemporaries and fans.

The concert, staged in the same Fox Theatre where young Chuck had been denied admission to *A Tale of Two Cities*, alternates between Berry's renditions of such hits as "Memphis" with performances by such guests as Eric Clapton, Robert Cray, and Linda Ronstadt. The low point is Julian Lennon, invited because of Berry's admiration for John Lennon, offering a half-hearted version of "Johnny B. Goode." The highlight is Etta James' rousing "Rock and Roll Music," after which a sincerely impressed Berry exclaims, "Wow!"

The interviews with Bo Diddley, Little Richard, Willie Dixon (who worked as producer and musician on Berry's early Chess recordings), Jerry Lee Lewis, the Everly Brothers, and Roy Orbison accentuate the place of the era's greatest guitarist in rock history. Bruce Springsteen recalls how his band backed Berry at a Maryland date in the early seventies. Springsteen praises Berry's ability to write like people talk and his eye for detail. A clearly exasperated Richards laments about how difficult it was to get Berry to rehearse, only for the legend to depart from the agreed-upon arrangements during the concert. Despite all this, Richards admits, "I can't dislike the guy."

Both the documentary and the extensive extras do an excellent job of explaining how original Berry was as a songwriter and guitarist as well as showing how difficult it was growing up as a black man in St. Louis. Also captured is Berry's contradictory nature. Witty, charming, and poetic, he can also be obstinate and pugnacious, with both Lewis and Richards recalling fistcuffs with the star. Berry held up the production of *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll* several times until more money was paid, always in bags of cash. Nowhere, of course, is it written that artists must be saints. For those of us who don't have to deal with him, Berry's music is all that matters.

At the other extreme is Hackford himself. His lovely introductions and codas to each of the extras paint him as knowledgeable about rock and as a kind, thoughtful man. Maybe this is why his fictional films, from *An Officer and a Gentleman* to *Ray*, are so conventional. He's too nice to be a true artist.

Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll presents a dilemma for us consumers because it's available in two versions. The two-disc package offers the original concert film, with, as Hackford proudly points out, picture and sound improved over the original theatrical release, the one-hour "The Reluctant Movie Star," in which Hackford and the producers describe the petulant behavior of this "conflicted genius," and fifty-four minutes of unused rehearsal footage. In the latter, James performs Dixon's "Hoochie Coochie Gal" so wonderfully that Berry is almost ashamed he doesn't remember when the teenaged Etta was one of his backup singers.

The four-disc package includes a candid conversation between Berry, Diddley, and Little Richard, reminiscing about rock's beginnings and the racism of the fifties, "Chuckisms," a collection of Berry remarks, "The Burnt Scrapbook," in which the Band's Robbie Robertson, a creative consultant on the film, chats with the singer while pouring over his scrapbook, and uncut versions of the conversations with Diddley, Dixon, Lewis, Orbison, and the Everlys, together with interviews with Sun Records' Sam Phillips and Atlantic Records' Ahmet Ertegun.

The best moments from these interviews appear in the film, with many dead spots as the interviewees try to gather their thoughts. Orbison is the most insightful and articulate of this lot, Phillips the most egotistical, and Lewis the most vague. "Why am I talking about women?" he wonders. "I must be horny." Robertson's is the best of these extras. He knows how to handle the volatile Berry, who comes across as more likable here than anywhere else. Overall, the extras on the two additional discs are mainly for hardcore fans of Berry or early rock.

A final extra is a pamphlet by Ray Charles biographer Michael Lydon. It offers little of interest and makes errors such as mistaking a relative seen in *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll* for Berry's mother rather than his sister.

The overall image of Berry, who turns 80 on October 18, is as more devoted to commerce than to the art or even craft of rock. He does it because he can do it well. We learn that he originally wanted to be a jazz crooner in the manner of Nat King Cole but felt his voice wasn't right for this style. One of the most touching moments in *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll* occurs during the rehearsal footage when Berry, sitting alone, strums a guitar while plaintively singing "A Cottage for Sale" and "I'm Through with Love." There is a sadness and tenderness here that appears nowhere else.—Michael Adams