

Prologue: Grand Avenue

In the middle of a bright fall morning on October 10, 1986, a small camera crew assembled in front of the Fox Theater on Grand Avenue. They had come to midtown St. Louis to shoot a short, yet critical piece of footage for an upcoming documentary about one of the city's most well-known, controversial, and secretive individuals. A slender black man, sharply dressed and looking much younger than his impending 60th birthday, stood in their midst, the focus of their attention. Chuck Berry was back on Grand Avenue to revisit his past and savor his present.

The scene, which was to eventually appear midway in the documentary about Berry's life, titled *Chuck Berry: Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll*, began with Berry walking up to and stopping at the Fox box office window. As the camera zoomed in, Berry, in a slow, deliberate voice, began a tale all-too-familiar to blacks who had lived through the Jim Crow America of the early twentieth century. "Boy," he began, staring down the camera with piercing brown eyes, "does this box office bring back a memory, a real particular memory. You know, when I was 11 years old, I came up to this very box office to get a ticket to see the *Tale of Two Cities*. My father wanted us to see it because it had a lot of artistic qualities about it. Lady said, 'Come on, we're not selling your ticket. You know you people can't come in here. Go away!'" As an afterthought, he added, "You know, it took two years for that to come to our theater in our neighborhood."

The camera followed the solitary figure of Berry as he pulled open the theater door and moved inside. Over his shoulder, on the opposite side of the road, the lens briefly picked out the imposing gray silhouette of the Third Baptist Church. Beyond that, just out of the camera's view, lies Powell Symphony Hall and a nondescript blacktopped parking lot. There, on a cold December night some quarter of a century earlier, Berry had been arrested amid allegations of sexual impropriety with a 14-year-old girl, exposing to the world the weakness that even now lay at the center of his character. It was a moment that many around him said had changed him forever.

The crew moved quickly into the theater's ornate lobby to set up the next shot of the solitary Berry, moving slowly over the marbled floor, continuing

his monologue. "It made me think someday I would come back," he mused. "I'll be back. What inspired me to play here is what this represents, not what it is. It could be a corner bar. It's what it represents. Elegance. Decency. A strive for a better manner of life. In the theater where I saw *A Tale of Two Cities*," he continued, "we didn't have such elegance. I don't mean the decor, I mean the clientele. There was hollering from the balcony; when a scene came on you expressed your feelings. Here, you get a [and here, he mimed polite applause for the camera] and that's enough."

At that, the crew wrapped up shooting for the day. A week later, however, they returned for the main event, a concert to honor Chuck Berry and the widely important musical legacy left by this controversial man. The whole of St. Louis had been buzzing about it for weeks, and it promised to be a night of great celebration. Once more, however, controversy followed Berry along Grand Avenue. The trouble started about the same time as the first day of shooting at the theater, when plans to add a second show to the already sold-out first one were announced, angering ticket holders for the original show, who now were told to expect a shorter show than had been previously announced. Then, members of Local 6 Stagehands of the International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees complained that Delilah Films, which was scheduled to film the concert as a part of the documentary, was using nonunion stagehands in their production. On the night before the two shows, tensions between Berry and musical director Keith Richards, which had been severely tested since rehearsals began the previous Monday, came to a head; at an open rehearsal, in front of invited guests from the media, Richards stormed off-stage mid-song as Berry shouted, "It's me up there in front. . . . So I've got to be in charge." The tensions, evidently, had already led one guest star, Robbie Robertson, to drop out several days before rehearsals had even begun. An appearance by Bob Dylan also was canceled at the last minute; the official reason given was illness, although some in the media speculated that Dylan, too, did not want to be a part of such acrimonious proceedings.

The first show itself was equally mired in controversy. First, there was Berry's performance, which was described by Daniel Brogan of the *Chicago Tribune* as "a flood of missed cues, sloppy solos and fumbled lyrics"; worse, Brogan reported, the crowd was "walking out and booing." Susan Hegger of the *St. Louis Riverfront Times*—the alternative weekly that, since its inception in 1977, had been highly critical of Berry's musical career—went much further. In a piece entitled "The Hottest Ticket to the Worst Show of the Year," she described Berry's performance as "off-key, off-tempo and off the mark. At times it was almost embarrassing." Then there were the frequent interruptions caused by the film crew and director Taylor Hackford, who, after having directed such Hollywood successes as *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Against All Odds*, seemed to treat the event like a movie rather than a

concert. One audience member, Denny McDaniel, angered by the decision to add the second show and the constant delays in the first, walked around the theater with a handwritten sign that read, "Revolt! Don't stand (up) for this ripoff. Keep your seats after the first show."

It is not hard to understand their disappointment. In the weeks leading up to the show, rumors about guest star appearances had become as bloated as the flooding Mississippi, which a week earlier had reached its second highest crest in recorded history just a few miles to the east. With names such as Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen, Tina Turner, Mick Jagger, and Berry's 1950s contemporaries Bo Diddley, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis being bandied about by the local media, anything short of the Second Coming would have seemed an anticlimax to the St. Louis audience. And much of the criticism of Hackford's handling of the proceedings reveals a lack of understanding about making movies and about the particular subject being filmed. The audience, in other words, should have accepted delays—although Hackford could have kept them to a minimum.

But Brogan, Hegger, and McDaniel seem to have constituted a small yet vocal minority. Others, including the influential *New York Times* music critic Robert Palmer, saw a different show; while admitting that the first show was "derailed" by Hackford, Palmer praised the "flawlessly chosen" songs and Berry, who "danced, sang, and played guitar with . . . lean, tensile grace." And veteran St. Louis journalist Harper Barnes even found some virtue in the film crew's interference. "It was a rock 'n' roll spectacle of the highest order," he wrote in a lengthy piece the following Sunday in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, adding that "for those who may have been disappointed by the fits and starts of the performance caused by movie making delays, there must also have been a sense of something very special happening." It was a sentiment echoed by Wesley Jennings, a fan who told Bill Smith of the *Post-Dispatch*, "this is not just a rock 'n' roll show . . . this is *the* rock 'n' roll show. There'll never be another. Twenty years from now, 10 million people will have said they were here."

Few critics and audience members, however, complained at the quality of the second show. Robert Palmer went on to call it "inspirational," and Daniel Brogan described it as "cruising like the hot-rod Fords and custom Coupe de Villes Berry so often sings about." Even the St. Louis journalists who stayed for the second performance were impressed: Harper Barnes saw the audience "on its feet, cheering [and] clapping along with the music," and C. B. Adams, writing for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, remarked on the "much higher energy level for audience and performers alike."

At 3 A.M., an exhausted Chuck Berry walked back into the lobby of the Fox, where fans and journalists greeted him with a birthday cake. C. B. Adams noted that the singer, "visibly touched, uttered a quiet 'thank you'

and left.” Physically, the process of making the movie, the arduous rehearsal schedule, and the two shows had left him spent. Mentally, however, the day must have exacted a far greater toll. He had lived his whole life in one day, journeying from the Jim Crow indignities of his youth, through his ambitious adult years and his desire to work his way out of the Ville—the historic black neighborhood a little over a mile to the north, where he was born and raised—to his present position as rock music’s honored elder statesman. Along the way, there were the controversies, musical and personal, that dogged him through the years and that would resurface even after this night of celebration. But in the end, the shadowy figure left as he had come, alone, oblivious to the turbulence generated by his own wake.