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IN FOCUS

In Focus: Roll over Beethoven — and Chuck Berry

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Beethoven composing.

The Voyager I and II spacecraft were launched in 1977 with a mission to explore the solar system and beyond. Each had in its payload a golden record containing information about the human race for the benefit of any alien civilization that might intercept it. Among the music included was the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 and, a controversial choice, Chuck Berry's "[Johnny B. Goode.](#)" In a 1978 "Saturday Night Live" skit Steve Martin played a psychic who claimed to have received a message from the aliens. It was: "Send more Chuck Berry."

Though Berry also wrote the song "Roll Over Beethoven," there is no reason why anyone, human or alien, can't enjoy the work of both musical giants. Two documentaries screening this week demonstrate why.

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In his 2009 documentary "**In Search of Beethoven**" (at the Museum of Fine Arts to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth) Phil Grabsky begins his quest with a montage of praise from famed musicians and scholars testifying to Beethoven's greatness. "If we had to pick 10 things that are great about humanity," says one, "there probably would be several Beethoven works among them."

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The Voyager people would agree, but which ones to choose? In the course of the 139-minute film there are 60 performances of Beethoven's works by some of today's greatest classical musicians. They range from a concerto he wrote at 13 ("It's amazing that he could write it," says Dutch pianist Ronald Brautigam as he struggles through the piece. "But much more amazing is that he could play it") to the transcendent String Quartet No. 14, Op. 131 written the year before his death, in 1827.

The film begins its search with Beethoven's blossoming as a Mozartean prodigy in his native Bonn and follows him as a young man traveling to Vienna to outdo Mozart and Haydn as the greatest German composer. There he

enjoyed the city's lively social scene, good food, and fine wine — musicologist Giovanni Bietti waggishly says that Beethoven would be high on “the list of the greatest drinking composers.”

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His ambition was keen and sometimes cutthroat, but personal tragedies such as the death of his mother and sister and the early onset of deafness afflicted him. As did the vagaries of history. Napoleon was once a hero of Beethoven; he inspired the Symphony No. 3 (the film shows the manuscript where Beethoven obliterated the dedication to “Bonaparte” after Napoleon declared himself emperor). Napoleon would invade Vienna in 1805, a week before Beethoven's first and only opera, “Fidelio,” was scheduled to open. It played just three performances.

Beethoven was also unlucky in love, drawn to unattainable women from the aristocracy. But his heartbreak often inspired a masterpiece and his bouts of depression and disappointment would rebound into new heights of profound and innovative creation. As his health declined, he became more reclusive and despondent, and the letters and diary entries read in the film reveal a tormented soul often pondering suicide but persevering nonetheless. “I was at the point of ending my life,” he writes at one point. “The only thing that held me back was my art. Thus, I have dragged on my miserable existence.”



Chuck Berry performing "Johnny B. Goode" in 1995. MARK DUNCAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

As can be seen in Jon Brewer's documentary **"Chuck Berry — The Original King of Rock 'n' Roll,"** there's not much of this kind of weltschmerz in the life of Chuck Berry. Probably none of his songs are in a minor key. But like Beethoven he looms high in the music pantheon. As Steven Van Zandt, Joe Perry, Nils Lofgren, and Alice Cooper testify, Berry's fusion of blues and country music, his gift for ingenious lyrics, and a sizzling guitar style shaped the future of rock.

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Unlike Beethoven, his career got off to a slow start. Getting busted in 1944 at 18 for armed robbery didn't help. He served three years in prison ("He was the first gangsta," quips Van Zandt). Not until 1955 did he catch a break, when he met Muddy Waters in Chicago, who referred him to Chess Records. In 1955

the label released his song “[Maybellene](#),” named after a cosmetic ad. It was a hit, establishing Berry as a crossover star and making Chess Records a fortune. As Brewer and his interviewees point out, Berry’s popularity helped break down racial barriers, at least among the black and white teenagers who danced to his music. They suggest this contribution to social change might have antagonized white racists who sought to bring him down.

But Berry was at least partly responsible for his troubles. In 1959 he was arrested for transporting a 14-year-old girl across a state line and was convicted of violating the Mann Act. He served nearly two years in prison. His career never quite recovered, though he got a boost later in the ’60s from adoring bands like the Beatles and Rolling Stones who acknowledged their debt to his music. His last, and biggest, hit was “My Ding-a-Ling,” in 1972. He died at 90 in 2017, performing pretty much up to the end.

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Though mostly laudatory, Brewer’s film doesn’t shy from pointing out his subject’s flaws. The filmmaker also puts his music in its social and cultural context. But he could have cut down on the repetitious talking heads — in other words, less Gene Simmons, more Chuck Berry.

“In Search of Beethoven” screens at the MFA Feb. 16-March 1.

Go to bit.ly/2UvlcBX.

“Chuck Berry — The Original King of Rock ‘n’ Roll” screens Feb. 21-25 at the Regent Theatre, in Arlington.

Go to bit.ly/31zJPPd