

The West Virginian that helped invent Rock ‘n’ Roll

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CLARKSBURG, W.Va. (WBOY) — “It’s very difficult for me to talk about Chuck Berry ’cause I’ve lifted every lick he ever played. This is the gentleman who started it all!” said Rolling Stones lead Keith Richards when he inducted Chuck Berry as the first entrant to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. And like Richards, many others credit Berry as the inventor of the genre. However, there was one often-forgotten West Virginian who helped Berry make his ascent to stardom.

A music legend in his own right, Johnnie Clyde Johnson was born on July 8, 1924, in Fairmont, West Virginia. Playing piano since the age of five, Johnson grew up around a variety of music, including jazz, boogie-woogie, “hillbilly” and big band, according to wvencyclopedia.org.



Johnnie Johnson at the 1996 Riverwalk Blues Festival in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (Carl Lender photo shared under CC BY-SA 3.0)

He left West Virginia to work in a Detroit defense plant in 1941 and later became a Montford Point Marine in 1943, “one of the first 1,500 African-Americans admitted to the Corps,” joining a servicemen’s jazz orchestra called The Barracudas.

ADVERTISING

After completing his service, Johnson performed in Chicago from 1946 to 1952, later moving to St. Louis and forming his own R&B band, the Sir John Trio.

Then, on New Year’s Eve, 1952, Johnson hired an unknown Chuck Berry to fill in for an ill member. Berry eventually became the star of the ensemble, and after playing for a while as the house band at the Cosmopolitan Club in East St. Louis, the band was renamed the Chuck Berry Trio, according to the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame.

“Fellow musician Muddy Waters introduced Berry to Chess Records, where Johnson and Berry recorded the song *Maybellene*. It became an instant hit and some cite this as a pivotal moment for the birth of rock ‘n roll,” according to wgpfoundation.org

Despite leaving the band in the 1960s, Johnson continued to collaborate and play with Berry on-and-off through 1973, creating hit songs such as “Sweet Little Sixteen,” “School Days,” “Roll Over, Beethoven” and Berry’s big hit “Johnny B. Goode,” which was reportedly written as a tribute to Johnson.

After leaving Berry’s band, Johnson continued to find work into the 70s and 80s, leading Albert King’s rhythm section for a time, playing with top St. Louis blues artists and releasing several solo albums.

However, Johnson saw little recognition for his work and had to turn to driving buses to support himself. But, that all changed after the release of the 1987 Chuck Berry documentary “Hail! Hail! Rock and Roll,” which brought new attention to the blues pianist.

“Johnson went on to work with many prominent musicians across multiple genres, including: Eric Clapton, Aerosmith, Keith Richards, Bo Diddley and George Thorogood,” according to wgpfoundation.org. He also played at both of Bill Clinton’s presidential inaugurations.

In 2000, Johnson sued Berry, claiming that he co-wrote around 50 of Berry’s biggest songs during their time together, but the case was dismissed due to the amount of time that had passed since the release of the songs.

Johnson was inducted by Keith Richards into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2001 in the sidemen category, and on April 13, 2005, he passed away in St. Louis. He was posthumously inducted into the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame in 2007, with the honor being accepted by his daughter, Connie Whiting.

In recognition of Johnson's achievements, an annual Johnnie Johnson Blues and Jazz Festival is held in Fairmont, W.Va. A marker was erected in 2019 in memory of Johnnie Johnson and can also be found in Fairmont.