

Berry not ready to roll over, but show short

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It's hard to do the duck walk when you're a jailbird.

That may help to explain why legendary rocker **Chuck Berry**, in legal straits once again, made a rare club date at the Bacchanal on Thursday night.

Stripped of a large sum of money -- impounded, in his absence, from his St. Louis-area compound after allegedly being found with quantities of drugs and footage of underage, overexposed women -- **Berry** has seen his familiar proclamation of "Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll" diverted to something along the lines of "Bail! Bail! Hock and Bankroll."

But if **Berry** had any cynical intent, he certainly didn't hint at it in the first of his two San Diego shows. The 63-year-old singer-guitarist never lost that gleeful, almost devilish grin, and he gave the hired three-man band his trademark peek-a-boo glance.

Berry didn't sacrifice his irreverence when he sang "Every Day I Have the Blues," and his delivery on the line "Bad luck and trouble, you know I've had my share" was met with shouts of sympathy.

Looking lean and limber (yes, he executed the celebrated duck walk), **Berry** also appeared to be in a generous mood -- but not too generous. He pared his set down to a mere 45 minutes, waiting until virtually the last moment ("I just learned we've got five more minutes," he said, unconvincingly) before reeling off some of his rockiest material.

But the guitar licks were wicked once they came, and he peeled them off while performing "Reeling and Rocking" amid a horde of fans he had invited on stage. Even at the walk 'n' stroll tempos he often adopted, **Berry's** blues-based picking and ever-inspired wordplay -- "As I was motorvatin' over the hill," which he wrote in the opening to "Maybelline" -- came through loud and clear.

After all, as **Berry** himself so eloquently delineated in "Rock 'n' Roll Music," you can play the style "any old way you choose it," because if "it's got a backbeat, you can't lose it." **Berry** put that early philosophy to the test on a slowed-down "Roll Over Beethoven" that put less emphasis on his guitar than on his piano player -- tell Tchaikovsky the news -- before settling in with a marvelously low-key version of "Sweet Little 16."

Playfully, **Berry** quickly ran through versions of the Harry Belafonte hit "Jamaica Farewell" and Nat "King" Cole's "Ramblin' Rose" ("That's what was music when we was coming up," he said), as well as two verses of his own "Too Much Monkey Business." On the impromptu "Business," a request from the crowd that nearly filled the 750-seat Bacchanal, he proved that he can still handle the song's jam-packed lyric content.

He also proved that he could still rock it out almost as well as he had in the '50s. **Berry** closed his all-too-brief set with a triple-play of "Carol," the bell-ringer "Johnny B. Goode" and "Reeling and Rocking."

Opening for **Berry** were the Trebels, an instrumentally impressive local band that mixed roots-rockabilly with vintage Brit-beat-style R&B -- Carl Perkins meets Van Morrison and Them in 1964. The Trebels justified their spot on the bill with their closing number, "That's You," which was clearly motorvated -- er, motivated -- by **Berry's** "Nadine" ("... honey, is that you?").

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Caption: Legendary singer-guitarist **Chuck Berry**.