

Chapter 28

Berry Mansion

I SIGNED MY LIFE AWAY one cold rainy afternoon in a lawyer's office in Manhattan. Or so I thought at the time. It was 1974, and I had just bought out my boss, Herman Edel. I was now president and owner of HEA Productions.

It had been a contentious negotiation with threats of criminal action on his side countered by the *I'll just walk away and hang out my own shingle* attitude of mine. It was a five-year payout, and I signed all the papers in red ink with a rebellious flourish. My worries that I wouldn't be able to make the payments were short-lived. Company profits would soon skyrocket, and I paid him off early.

Eliot Scheiner, engineer extraordinaire, was waiting outside. We headed straight for La Guardia, on our way to St. Louis to record Chuck Berry for a Dr Pepper radio campaign.

At the gate we met up with the team: Dennis Powers, freelance producer and former Y&R employee; Jim Desmond, cinematographer for *Monterey Pop*, straight man on TV's *Candid Camera*, and successful actor/comedian; Jim's new sound guy, (a source of worry because he had never before flown on an airplane); and suave Bernard Drayton, salesman and producer at HEA.

The film crew was an unusual component for a radio campaign. They were creating a documentary that would be screened at the upcoming Dr Pepper Bottlers' Convention. They had been filming and

interviewing every Dr Pepper artist as I recorded them. There had been more than 20 already: legends like Loretta Lynn, Muddy Waters, Doc Watson, Ike and Tina Turner, Eubie Blake, B.B. King — the list went on and on.

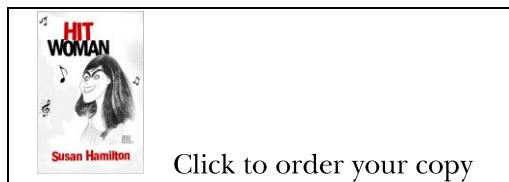
For this session, Bernie had handled the personal communications with Chuck and his people. We felt honored: they had arranged for us to stay at Berry Mansion. Apparently, Chuck had insisted we stay there instead of a more conveniently placed hotel in downtown St. Louis, where his studio was located.

Bad weather, heavy turbulence and a major backlog on the runways caused us to be thoroughly late to St. Louis. We also had to deal with the weird freak-outs our sound guy pulled. I'm surprised the pilots didn't make an emergency landing somewhere. He wasn't violent, just scared, standing in the aisle mumbling, stumbling, and flailing about. We babied him, got him calmed down, and everyone managed to survive the flight.

It was close to midnight when we finally landed. The airport was deserted: not a soul in sight. Amazingly, we retrieved every bit of luggage and equipment from baggage claim. At the Hertz counter, a sleepy, uncooperative agent professed to have no reservation for the two large station wagons we had requested. In fact, he had no cars at all.

Perfect. We were thoroughly screwed. I looked down the long empty concourse and spotted two distant figures. One looked familiar. Leaning against an escalator wall lounged the tall, lanky black man with his arm draped across the shoulders of a blond waif of a girl. I don't think she could have been much more than fourteen.

We hurried toward them. At the last moment he straightened up, flashed the familiar Chuck Berry grin, and said, "Howdy, I've been waiting for you folks."



The blond waif had on tight jeans, a tie-dyed shirt, tall shoes, and almost no makeup. She was very shy. She kept turning and burying her face into his shoulder. He was dressed like a lounge lizard and slouched appropriately: shiny slacks, polyester semi transparent short-sleeved shirt, little black hat. Clean-shaven, he looked amazingly young for the years I knew he had to have on him.

All smiles and charm, he took us back to the Hertz counter and, after a few words with the clerk, we had our station wagons. Chuck told us to follow him out of the garage. It wasn't long before a giant pink pimpmobile Cadillac exploded out of the tunnel. We pulled out behind it, and sped off into the night.

We drove on and on for the better part of an hour. Mostly on an expressway, or interstate; whatever. I was exhausted. After the confrontational day I had endured in Manhattan and the endless flight, all I wanted was a semi-decent hotel room and a bed without bedbugs. But no, no, no; we had to stay at Berry Mansion. I cursed Bernie in my mind.

All of a sudden, the pink monstrosity screeched into a Denny's parking lot. Chuck jumped out. "Thought you folks might want to eat. God knows I'm hungry for something tasty." With a wink, he led us into the restaurant. It was filled with young people out after some kind of sports event. The boys wore uniforms with colorful sewn-on corporate logos and embroidered names. Bowling, Baseball?

They were all white people, and we certainly got the steady stares as we sat down. We received zero attention from the wait staff. Other customers around us were being served promptly. It didn't take long before Chuck got up; he must have had a word with the right somebody because suddenly waiters were stumbling all over themselves to get us whatever we wanted.

I was beside myself. It was now almost two am. All I needed was a bed. But no — off we went into the darkness. This time on side roads. It was another 10 minutes before we got our first glimpse of Berry Mansion.

Now, I had envisioned rolling green lawns and tall alabaster pillars in front of a gracious plantation manor. Instead we saw hundreds of feet of cyclone fencing topped with triple barbed-wire strands under a peeling billboard sign which read "*Welcome to Berry Mansion, Summer Camp for Inner City Children.*"

We followed the Caddy down the long driveway and pulled into a deserted parking lot. Chuck and his chippie disappeared immediately. We never saw her again, and didn't see him until the following morning.

Piling out of the station wagons, we found ourselves in a dark, unlit wasteland of broken glass and cracked asphalt. Poking up through the cracks, stalks of dead weeds topped by dried seed pods

rattled in the night breeze. I had been thoroughly pissed at our situation, but now I was also a little scared.

We were startled when a strange figure appeared out of the black. In all my life I have never encountered a weirder-looking person. Very slight, with short black hair and wearing mismatched disco clothes, she held her head down and off to one side whenever she spoke, never once making eye contact with any of us. Asymmetrically formed, she had a pronounced limp and sideways crablike shuffle. Sneaking a glance at sexy Bernie, she exclaimed, "ooh la, la!" The name 'Igor' came to mind, but we settled on 'Lola.'

Lola ordered us to follow her and led into one of the dark buildings. When she turned on a light, we were greeted by a line of rusted, open-lidded freezer chests, broken soda machines, and ancient cracked Formica counters, all set before a full-sized, decrepit stagecoach on exhibit behind a wrecked stretch of corral fencing.

Lola led us down a motel-like corridor with numbered doors on one side only. She said, "You can have whatever rooms you want" and left.

The rooms were filthy and appropriately hideous. They had deep shag carpets and long-haired, fuzzy lime green bedspreads with the kind of stains you wouldn't want to think about. I'd rather not describe the bathrooms. Use your imagination. Eliot and I just stood there and looked at each other. What was there to say?

Before we had time to gather our wits and figure out where and how we were going to get some sleep, there came a *rap, rap, rap, - rap, rap, rap, - rap, rap, rap* on each door in succession. Everyone yanked open their doors. *What the hell now?*

Lola stood sideways at the end of the corridor. "Just wanted to warn you guys. Don't open any windows. Don't leave your rooms. I've let the dogs out."

Chuck's Cadillac pulled up beside our rent-a-wagons about nine a.m. There was no sign of the waif. With no coffee, no showers, and no food, we were all sleep-deprived, grouchy and jumpy. But it was a sunny, beautiful Friday (and we were all professionals).

It took well over an hour before we swung into the parking lot of the warehouse that held his studio in downtown St. Louis. As we rolled to a stop, Jim Desmond jumped out with the big Arriflex camera on his shoulder to get an establishing shot of Chuck's arrival at the studio. That didn't go over well. The resulting footage shows Chuck leaping

from his car and charging the camera with snarling ferocity. His huge hand reaches forward to cover the lens and wrench the camera away. He is yelling, “*No pictures! No pictures!*”

I was new: still quite naive about the business of dealing with celebrities. I couldn’t believe Chuck was pulling this stunt. I had personally negotiated the filming as well as the recording details with his manager. I had a *signed contract*. Yeah right. Meant nothing. Live and Learn.

We followed Chuck into his studio complex. Eliot and the rest of



the team went about trying to figure out how to record or film anything. The place was dark and dirty. In the cramped control room, there were no faders, just left-to-right knobs. A few of them didn’t work at all. I guessed it had originally been a radio station studio.

At his request, Chuck and I settled down on a couple of wooden crates for a talk.

At the time I was not yet familiar with the infamous Chuck Berry ‘\$5,000-more-at-the-last-minute’ rule, but that’s what was in play. After a couple of calls back to New York, I managed to get agency approval for the extra money.

Further negotiations then proceeded.

In pencil, I hand wrote the new contract he dictated to me on the backs of several blank envelopes. There were no regular sheets of paper around. We both signed it. His signature was about three times larger than mine. I never bothered to discuss this development with either the agency or Dr Pepper. I figured the contract was probably non-binding. I certainly was no lawyer, and we already had a signed contract from his manager that bebies of Y&R lawyers had gone over with fine-toothed combs. Now I just wanted to get the damn job done and get home.

Chuck’s smiles now returned and the legendary charm was switched on full force. We had already recorded tracks, so we only needed to add his guitar and vocals.

When he started playing his guitar, I suggested a bit of tuning up. He didn’t like that. He pretended to agree and fiddled with a peg or two, but when I asked for a little more, said, “Look lady, that’s part of my sound. Live with it.” All with another toothy smile and a wink.

(He was always winking.) I lived with it; and in truth, I was dead wrong. In the end it sounded great. Definitely authentic.

The vocals were a pleasure to record. The guy was really a pro. Tons of personality and attitude, and he knew the song cold. We got a bunch of takes and in a very short time. I knew I had plenty of material to be able to compile a great performance. Of course it was a little difficult to judge because we didn't get to hear some of our previously recorded instruments. They just wouldn't play from the 24 track machine through the broken faders. Oh well. We just imagined them.

The on-camera interview was also a breeze, and just terrific. His face had a Jim Carey kind of elasticity, and he oversold the product with humorously broad grimaces and lots of winks. It was highly amusing. I knew everybody – including the bottlers – would just love it. And they did.

It was late afternoon and we all wanted out of there. I thanked Chuck profusely while Eliot and the film crew packed up. We were ready to head for the airport. As I turned to go, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Chuck held out his free hand, palm up. He said, "Where's my money?"

I laughed because I thought he was joking.

He wasn't.

When I realized that he was deadly serious, I explained that, as was customary, the monies would be sent to his manager's office within a week or two.

That was not going to do it for Chuck. Patiently, he explained he was only talking about the extra \$5,000. He wanted it now, and he wanted it in cash.

He explained further. "You're not leaving here until I get it. The tape is not leaving here, and your people ain't leaving here, neither."

I was dumbfounded. *What the fuck?!*

I thought fast. It was late on a Friday in St. Louis, even later back East. I wouldn't be able to find anyone at Young & Rubicam. Explaining the situation to the client – Dr Pepper in Texas – was out of the question. On the bright side, at least I didn't have to run it past Herman Edel anymore.

I picked up the phone and dialed my office. God was merciful, and someone was there. I had them wire the money out of our account to the Western Union facility in downtown St. Louis. I told them it was ransom money. I was serious.

Chuck ushered my people and the tape into a back room of the storage building. Pulling out his key-ring with a flourish, he locked them in.

I'm not kidding.

Given the circumstances, they took it in stride. They probably thought it was a charade, a joke. I was a lot more nervous than they were. What would happen to them if something happened to me? No magic cell phones in those days...

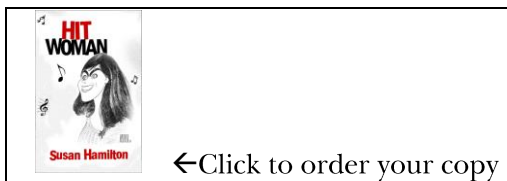
Chuck and I rode Downtown in style in the pimpmobile. He waved to quite a few local fans as we went. He was certainly well known in this city.

I had to wait at least 30 minutes in the grimy, run-down Western Union office with its barely moving line of beaten-down customers – but eventually, the money arrived. I came back to the car where Chuck was double-parked. He wanted the money right then, but I wouldn't give it to him until I had the tape and my people.

I got to count it out into his hands with them watching, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

It wasn't over. He absolutely insisted that we all go out with him for some soul food. I was toast; no fight left in me. Just gave in, so off we trooped in the station wagons and the pink Cadillac to a cafeteria in one of the scariest parts of town. There he was treated like the rock star he was, a true icon, a symbol to everyone of aspiration and extraordinary success.

And damn, the food was good!



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