This concerns one of the most influential guitarists of all time – Chuck Berry. From fellow rock’n’rollers like Little Richard, through the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Beach Boys, 70’s rockers like Ted Nugent & Steve Gibbons, Blues rockers like George Thorogood and Z.Z. Top, even new wavers and punk rockers like Eddie & The Hot Rods and the Sex Pistols, it’s probably more difficult to find guitar-based rock bands that haven’t been influenced by Chuck Berry’s distinctive playing.

Chuck’s own influences came from early electric guitarists such as Charlie Christian, T-Bone Walker, and Carl Hogan, as well as his Chess Records label-mate Muddy Waters.

I’ve shown all of these licks in the key of A. Actually, Chuck Berry hardly ever used guitar-friendly keys like E, A and D. Most of his songs were played in piano-friendly flat keys like Bb, Eb, Ab, Db. This may be a testament as to how much Chuck’s song writing owed to his piano player Johnny Johnson.

The first of these five licks derives from the intro that Carl Hogan played on “Ain’t That Just Like A Woman”, by Louis Jordan. Chuck Berry simply turned some of the single notes into double-stops, and used this as the intro to classics such as Johnny B. Goode.

The second lick is a variation on the first. In this one Chuck adds the sort of fast, impressive sounding descending single note run that shows us why it’s so important not to neglect your little finger when you practice.
Our third Chuck Berry lick is the one that he used to answer some of his vocal lines in “No Particular Place To Go”. The notes E and G are the fifth and minor seventh in the key of A. This is a very common combination of notes in the Blues. I would say there’s a definite nod to the style of Muddy Waters in this lick, but as always, Chuck makes it his own.

We’ve already established that Chuck Berry favours double note playing, as well as descending melodic lines, and the fourth lick is no exception. This one uses thirds. You may recognise it from Sweet Little 16.

Like many Blues and Jazz-influenced guitarists, Chuck often uses chromatic approach notes in his playing. In our fifth lick, see how he hammers on to the notes that resolve the tension in this descending sixths run, which is similar to what he played in Memphis Tennessee.
So that’s our five essential Chuck Berry licks. I hope this helps you with your own rock’n’roll playing. At the time of writing (October 2013), Chuck is touring Europe at the age of 87, an inspiration to us all.