LITTLE RICHARD

It's hard to imagine what rock & roll would have been like without Little Richard, the living embodiment of rock's raucous soul. His maniacal passion and outrageous image presented the *other* extreme from the polite crooning of Pat Boone (who, nevertheless, covered a couple of Little Richard's songs to truly comic effect). In two short years he wrote some of rock's landmark songs and ripped through the remaining boundaries of "good taste" to show what rock & roll could be if you dared to take it all the way. From the opening "WopBopaLooma-beLopBomBom" of "Tutti Frutti" straight through every note he sang, Little Richard fulfilled rock's promise of liberation through sheer energy and audacity. If rock & roll was indeed "nothing but a bunch of noise," as its many critics claimed, then Little Richard showed just how joyous that noise could be.

Little Richard shared many musical traits with Fats Domino: both played piano and wrote their own beatifically childlike songs, both were backed by bass-driven and sax & piano-dominated band arrangements, both hit the pop charts in 1955, and both shared Matassa's recording studio and Studio Band, though the friendly confines became something of a padded cell during Richard's sessions. For all the similarities, Little Richard and Fats Domino were musical and temperamental opposites: where Fats was calm, refined and unassuming, Little Richard was crude, high-strung and outrageous; and where Fats never seemed to strain, Little Richard seemed to do little else. His music had none of the polish and melodicism of Fats' style, and none of its easygoing charm. In fact, Little Richard seemed always on the verge of spinning out of control—just barely able to rein in his energy—and it is that feeling of controlled chaos that made his music so exciting.

Little Richard really had more in common with Jerry Lee Lewis, the other piano wildman, than with studio mate Domino. His music is the R&B equivalent of Lewis' rockabilly: a stripped-down and manic extension of rhythm & blues that shredded R&B conventions just as Lewis bulldozed over his country roots. In addition, the two kindred spirits were both racked by religious crises and inner demons that seemed to fuel the too-late-to-stop-now intensity of their music and the transcendent madness of their live performances. Being black and gay (though that wasn't directly articulated at the time), Little Richard had two big additional strikes against him in the conservative world of Eisenhower America. But everybody loves a clown, as they say, and he demanded and got attention by exaggerating his genuine oddness to the point that the kids cheered and the adults simply stared in disbelief. His mega-watt voice, outrageous image and antics, piled-high pompadour and liberal use of lipstick, mascara and other makeup(!) created a truly bizarre and unforgettable sight—a "Bronze Liberace," as Richard liked to call himself, before he took to introducing himself as "the King of Rock & Roll... and the Queen too!"

Another favorite moniker, the "Quasar of Rock & Roll," seems particularly apt in light of the dictionary definition of quasar: "one of a number of celestial objects... that are powerful sources of radio energy."[1] From the moment the first horrified parent heard "Tutti Frutti" blasting over the airwaves in 1955, Little Richard was rock's greatest source of radio energy. He seemed to suddenly appear from the outer galaxies with a strange new message ("WopBopaLooma!?") and a crazed, alien voice shouting—in coded messages only teenagers could understand—that the Invasion had begun. And it wasn't merely another case of white ears reacting to an R&B crossover: a good many R&B fans

were as surprised as the pop listeners by the ferocity of the onslaught, which owed more to deep southern gospel styles than to the comparatively polished singing styles of R&B. In fact, "Tutti Frutti" must have surprised even Little Richard: "I came from a family where my people didn't like rhythm & blues. Bing Crosby—'Pennies from Heaven'—and Ella Fitzgerald was all I heard. And I knew there was something *louder* than that, but I didn't know where to find it. And I found out it was me."[ii]

Background: **Macon to New Orleans**

Richard Penniman was born on December 5, 1932, in Macon, Georgia, which was also home to James Brown, Otis Redding and, later, the Allman Brothers. He was one of twelve children in a devout Seventh Day Adventist family (though his father did embellish his religious beliefs by selling bootleg whiskey). Richard's earliest musical experiences were in the church, and his gospel roots are clearly evident in his singing. The harsh, frenzied vocal styles of many of the black gospel groups of the forties and fifties are the nearest equivalent to Richard's screaming delivery—much closer than any pop or R&B model. (Richard has often said that his trademark shrieking "woo" came directly from gospel giant Marion Williams, while his shrieking hiccups—like those that punctuate "Lucille"—were inspired by Ruth Brown's "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean.")

Richard was a misfit from the start, and his wild streak, his love for the forbidden blues and his early awareness of his homosexuality kept him at odds with his family. He ran away from home to join a traveling "medicine show," then took to singing on the streets of Macon and finally, at 13, was kicked out of the house. He was taken in by a white couple who encouraged his music and often gave him the stage at the local nightclub they ran. In 1951, Penniman, now "Little Richard," sang in a talent contest sponsored by a radio station and won a recording contract with RCA Records.

Little Richard's RCA releases, recorded in Atlanta, showed few signs of things to come. The standard jump-blues material was sung in a restrained style heavily influenced by Roy Brown and Wynonie Harris. (Richard's own "Every Hour" is the most widely available song from this period, and is hardly recognizable as Little Richard.) He left RCA in 1952 for the Houston-based Peacock label, where his recordings proved a bit more exciting but still fairly run-of-the-mill. He had already developed a flamboyant stage routine, but his recorded music captured little of his personal extravagance and his records failed to sell. By 1955, Richard was back in Macon washing dishes at the Greyhound station and still dreaming of his big break, which finally came in a call to audition for Art Rupe's Specialty Records in Los Angeles.

"Tutti Frutti"

After Specialty's success with Guitar Slim and Lloyd Price, Rupe was anxious to do more recording in Cosimo Matassa's studio, and particularly anxious for the type of pop success recently enjoyed by Fats Domino on Imperial Records. Specialty A&R man **Bumps Blackwell** was signed on as Richard's manager and producer and plans were made for a recording session in New Orleans. Thus Little Richard, from Georgia, became linked with New Orleans through a record label based in Los Angeles. The connection was tenuous but all-important, for in New Orleans Little Richard would

finally find the sound and let loose the voice that had eluded him for four years at RCA and Peacock.

It still took an inspired accident to create Little Richard's first hit. His initial Specialty session, on September 14, 1955, was largely taken up with mediocre R&B recordings similar to his RCA and Peacock material. Blackwell deemed the proceedings so unpromising that an early halt was called to the session so that everyone could retire for afternoon drinks at the Dew Drop Inn. While Blackwell nursed his disappointment at the bar, Richard—visions of dirty dishes at the Greyhound station filling his mind—headed for the piano to vent his frustrations and screamed out some rhyming obscenities in a rowdy voice unlike anything he'd hinted at in the studio. Like Sam Phillips hearing Elvis stumble onto his true voice with "That's All Right," a startled Bumps Blackwell knew he'd just heard the real Little Richard. A local songwriter, Dorothy La Bostrie, was quickly called in to clean up the words, which an embarrassed Little Richard at first refused to sing "in front of a lady. " (He was finally coaxed into blurting them out while facing a wall.) With fifteen minutes of studio time remaining, "Tutti Frutti" was recorded and the blueprint was laid for all the Little Richard hits to come.

The rapid-fire pace and last minute recording of "Tutti Frutti" left little room for subtleties, but the record still captures the freewheeling New Orleans rhythmic drive. The record is propelled by Richard's piano and Earl Palmer's drums, which manage to swing even at ninety miles an hour, and is punctuated by sudden stops & starts and by brief saxophone answers to Richard's voice. As with most of his songs, "Tutti Frutti" is built over a 12-bar blues and features a saxophone as the solo instrument in the lead break. Lee Allen and Red Tyler played most of the solos on Richard's records, in styles far more gritty and clamorous than their work with Fats Domino and other artists. Just as Little Richard was inspired by his excellent sessionmen, they in turn responded to Richard's frenzied style by reaching outrageous heights of their own.

All of this is secondary, though, to the VOICE: a vocal fuzz box punctuated by trademark shrieks and falsetto "whooo's" that shredded microphones and any remnants of a discernible tune. Although the words were sanitized for popular consumption, "Tutti Frutti" still sounds gleefully obscene, with orgasmic whoops giving explicit meaning to the otherwise nonsensical title refrain and "wopbopalooma's." While parents bemoaned the final collapse of decency and good taste, kids bought the record in droves and sent it up to #17 on the pop charts (and #2 on the R&B charts). Although the full impact of "Tutti Frutti" was blunted somewhat by Pat Boone's tepid cover version, the success of Little Richard, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry and other black artists helped break through the racial and musical barriers that separated audiences and provided a rationale for covers. As the consciousness of the record buying public was raised, more rock fans and radio listeners began demanding the genuine article. Richard's next release, 1956's "Long Tall Sally," hit the pop Top Ten and outsold Pat Boone's cover, marking the symbolic end of the era of the cover songs.

The Specialty Years

Little Richard begins "**Long Tall Sally**" by threatening to tell Aunt Mary about straying Uncle John ("he claimed he has the misery but he havin' lotta fun") and the time he's been having with Long Tall Sally ("she's built for speed—she got everything that Uncle John need"). Before long, however, he seems to have forgotten about all of them:

"I'm havin' me some fun tonight!" is the real message of the song, and by the end of the two minute cataclysm there's little doubt about it—Little Richard's having more fun than Pat Boone could imagine in his wildest dreams.

The stop-and-go band arrangement of "Long Tall Sally" mirrors "Tutti Frutti" and keeps the band thrusting forward in its race to keep up with Little Richard. All of Richard's vocal trademarks are present in abundance as well: he works falsetto "whooo's" into every refrain, announces the sax solo with a great lead-in scream and then, at its end, launches into another verse with a measure-long, glass shattering "weeeelll..." Moments like these and the sheer *sound* of his shredding vocal cords are the real "meaning" of Little Richard's songs. The words themselves don't seem to matter and tend to be oversexed utter nonsense, when they're intelligible at all, and little more than vehicles for his incredible voice.

For that matter, his *songs* seem little more than vehicles for his voice and magnificent presence. In isolation, songs like "Tutti Frutti," "Heeby-Jeebies," "Ready Teddy" and "Jenny Jenny" are a blissful noise that make about as much sense as their titles. Considered together, every crazed installment illuminates another tiny corner of the Richard's self-absorbed world. His songs and the characters that populate them—Daisy, Sue, Sally, Jenny, Lucille, Miss Ann, Miss Molly and all the other objects of his delight—seem like interchangeable parts of one long vision and one long, joyous shriek. As Arnold Shaw put it, "Little Richard represents a triumph of style over substance."[iii] More than with any other artist, when you listen to Little Richard you don't hear "songs," you hear *him*. He is the crowing glory of rock & roll's subversion of pop, of the ascendance of the Singer over the Song. He never expounded much on "wopbopalooma," and never needed to: HE was the meaning of every word he sang.

It's hard and rather pointless, then, to single out individual Little Richard recordings, since they are all classics and all so similar to each other. "**Keep A-Knockin'**" merits special notice, as it was recorded in a Washington, D.C. radio station during a tour break and features his touring band, The Upsetters, instead of the New Orleans sessionmen. The furious sound of "Keep A-Knockin'" stands out even in Richard's catalog, and is a good indication of what his tumultuous live shows must have been like. "**Lucille**," on the other hand, stands out for the elegance of its arrangement, shaped by an understated guitar/bass/sax riff, alternating with short stop-start verses and a great, growling sax solo. The piano and drums play the constant duple rhythm (1-2, 1-2) that gives Richard's songs a more assertive drive than the smooth triplets that articulated Fats Domino's slower tempos.

"**Good Golly Miss Molly**" ("you sure like to ball!") is Little Richard's finest moment. It is highlighted by voice-and-drum breaks and dramatic band pauses that keep the song fresh and exciting. The arrangement is driven by an aggressive guitar, bass & sax riff borrowed from "Rocket 88," and by some particularly inspired drumming, piano playing and breathless singing. "Heeby-Jeebies" takes the stop-start arrangements to a hilarious extreme, like a carrousel lurching out of control, while "The Girl Can't Help It," the title song of the 1956 movie, is one of Richard's more involved productions, with responding background vocals and a swinging sax section.

"Rip It Up" and "Ready Teddy" have a cut loose rockabilly feel that inspired Elvis, Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Eddie Cochran, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bill Haley and many others to record their own versions. The raw energy of Little Richard's songs

transcended any particular style and made them favorites of his fellow rockers who, Pat Boone aside, were challenged and inspired to match his exuberance with their own. When "Tutti Frutti" hit, rock & roll was brand new and just starting to build a "tradition" of its own. Along with Chuck Berry, Little Richard gave rock & roll a repertoire of its own that defined it as more than a borrowing or retooling of older styles. Although Berry would outstrip Little Richard in the following decade as rock's most covered songwriter, in the 1950's Richard had that honor all to himself.

"0oh! My Soul"

At the height of his career, Little Richard suddenly announced that he was giving up show business to devote his life to God, or as he put it, "giving up rock & roll for the Rock of Ages." Richard's innate religious qualms about playing the Devil's music were rekindled by a fellow Specialty artist determined to convert him, and they flared into a spiritual identity crisis during a 1957 tour of Australia. Apparently, according to one of the many explanations for his change of heart, a plane that he was flying on between shows caught fire, prompting Richard (understandably!) to promise God he'd give up rock & roll if only He'd make the plane land safely. His decision was reinforced during an outdoor concert when Richard witnessed the ascent of the Russian Sputnik, the first satellite launched into space: "That night Russia sent off that very first Sputnik. It looked as though the big ball of fire came directly over the stadium about two or three hundred feet above our heads. It shook my mind. It really shook my mind. I got up from the piano and said, 'This is it. I am through. I am leaving show business to go back to God.'"[iv]

Little Richard held a press conference the next day to officially announce his decision and then, in a characteristically dramatic gesture, dumped $20,000 worth of jewelry into Sydney Harbor to prove his sincerity. It was widely viewed as a publicity stunt, but he meant it: he turned his back on his fame and riches, enrolled in the Oakwood Bible College in Huntsville, Alabama, and vanished from the music scene for the next six years. (Specialty kept Little Richard on the charts as long as they could by releasing the remaining songs from their vaults: "Keep A-Knockin'," "Good Golly Miss Molly" and his last hit, "Ooh! My Soul," appropriately enough, were all released after Richard's conversion.)

Little Richard finally agreed to perform again on a 1962-63 package tour of Europe and England, providing he sang only gospel numbers. His religious songs received an understandably lukewarm audience response, and before long his pride and fiery competitiveness overcame his convictions. Watching the other acts steal the shows was simply more than Richard could stand, and he finally raged back with "Tutti Frutti" and the rest of his magnificent catalog of classics, fueled to new heights of lunacy by the years of pent-up silence. Nik Cohn describes Richard's plunge back into the Dark Side: "The first time I saw him was in 1963, sharing a bill with the Rolling Stones, Bo Diddley and the Everly Brothers, and he cut them all to shreds. He didn't look sane. He screamed and his eyes bulged; the veins jutted out of his skull. He came down front and stripped—his jacket, tie, cuff links, his golden shirt, his huge diamond watch—right down to flesh. Then he hid inside a silk dressing gown, and all the time he roared and everyone jumped around in the aisles like it was the beginning of rock all over again... When it was through, he smiled sweetly. 'That Little Richard,' he said. 'Such a nice boy.'"[v]

With the Rolling Stones paying him homage, the Beatles covering "Long Tall Sally" and Paul McCartney borrowing his "oooh's" and shrieks every chance he got, Little Richard decided it was time for a full-scale comeback.[vi] Richard recorded "Bama Lama, Bama Loo," his last Specialty release, in classic, raving Little Richard style—a little *too* classic, unfortunately. In 1964, the year of the British Invasion, it simply sounded like an oldie and failed to make the charts. Although his live shows remained exciting, Richard never regained an audience for his recordings. He went through a series of record labels, alternating between ill-conceived new material and uninspired re-recordings of his old hits. The maniacal commitment to a single, self-defining style that made his early music so exciting also left little room for artistic growth. An early seventies stint with Reprise Records yielded some good new material, particularly the album called *The Rill Thing*, but it was still a far cry from the his glory days and the sales were poor.

As his frustration mounted Richard's personality became increasingly bizarre and his live shows lapsed into self-parody. Always something of a rock & roll Muhammad Ali, he had, in his prime, achieved an effective balance between his outrageous behavior and his music. Now, with no new music to bolster his claims to greatness, he generally made a clown of himself onstage and on the TV talk shows he seemed to appear on with alarming regularity.

Little Richard fluctuated between rock and God through the seventies and into the eighties, when the release of his autobiography prompted a return to the talk show circuit and a flurry of movie and media appearances. Today a somewhat calmer Little Richard speaks openly about his crises of religion and sexuality and about his former problems with drugs and money (like far too many of rock's early stars, Richard received only a fraction of the amount due him). He also speaks with justifiable pride about his enormous contribution to rock & roll and his vast influence on so many that have followed him. Besides "teaching Paul McCartney how to sing," Richard directly inspired and helped launch the careers of James Brown, Otis Redding, Billy Preston and Jimi Hendrix, who played guitar in one of Richard's comeback bands (and was later quoted as saying "I want to do with my guitar what Little Richard does with his voice"[vii]). Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Travelin' Band" was clearly a tribute to one of their formative influences, and the list of singers influenced by Little Richard, from Elvis through Mitch Rider and Bob Seger all the way to Prince, would be endless, and would ultimately have to include everyone who's ever gotten crazy and wailed rock & roll. Still, there's only one "rill thing." Little Richard was an original's original and, for sheer energy and excitement, the inspired madness of his rock & roll has never been topped.

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[i]The Random House College Dictionary.
[ii]Shaw, "Honkers and Shouters," p. 191.
[iii]Shaw, p. 190.
[iv]Charles White, "The Life and Times of Little Richard," (New York: Harmony, 1984).
[v]Nik Cohn, "Rock from the Beginning," (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), p. 33.
[vi]The Beatles hooked up twice with their hero and mentor during his European tour: at the Star Club in Hamburg , Germany, and back home in Liverpool at a concert organized by Brian Epstein.
[vii]White, "The Life and Times of Little Richard."