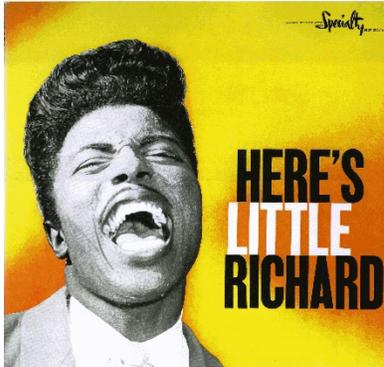


“Tutti Frutti”—Little Richard (1955)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Susan Masino (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Little Richard

The day the song “Tutti Frutti” by Little Richard hit the airwaves in October of 1955, was the day that music slowly started to disintegrate segregation in the United States. In September of 1955, Little Richard recorded “Tutti Frutti” in a session at J&M Studio in New Orleans. Richards on piano and lead vocals was backed by Fats Domino’s band. Produced by Robert “Bumps” Blackwell, the musicians included Huey Smith on piano, Lee Allen and Alvin “Red” Tyler on saxophones, Frank Fields on double bass, Justin Adams on guitar and Earl Palmer on drums.

Written by Little Richard and Dorothy LaBostrie, the song features the signature phrase, “A wop bop a loo bop, a lop bamboom!” which was something Richard came up with while working in a restaurant in Macon. Disgusted that he had to wash dishes but wasn’t allowed to eat off of them, and knowing he couldn’t curse at his boss, he came up with this phrase to vent his frustrations.

Hailing from Macon, Georgia, Little Richard was born Richard Penniman on December 5, 1932, the third of 12 children. Growing up listening to gospel music in church, Little Richard became one of the pioneers of rock and roll. Learning to sing in church, sometimes his performances would be so over the top, his siblings nicknamed him “War Hawk.”

Although when Little Richard first hit the stage back in 1955, his look, persona, and his sheer energy on the stage lit the trail for many to follow in his footsteps. His bouffant hairdo, black eyeliner and flashy clothes were not what audiences were used to. His second single, “Tutti Frutti,” entered the Billboard charts in November of 1955 at #12 on the “Best Sellers in Stores” and #17 on “Most Played in Juke Boxes” list in 1956.

Due to the sexual connotations of the song, producer Blackwell helped Little Richard tone down the lyrics and “Billboard” reviewed it stating it was a song with “a cleverly styled novelty with nonsense words delivered rapid-fire. The singer shows a compelling personality and an

attractive vocal style.” Selling over 200,000 copies in the first week and a half, the song stayed on the R&B charts for 22 weeks and, by 1968, it had sold over three million copies.

Little Richard’s undeniable contribution to the world of music would influence the likes of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and even Bob Dylan. James Brown and Otis Redding, both future musical giants, started as impersonators with Little Richard’s band. Macon became a hotbed of talent starting in the fifties, with Little Richard, Otis Redding, James Brown, and continuing with Bill Berry and Mike Mills from R.E.M. the Allman Brothers and Jason Aldean.

Little Richard also inspired Prince to push the boundaries of how male rock musicians could be portrayed. Richard’s music brought people together, and much to the horror of the mainstream music industry at the time, he was black! In fact, for many years the white singer Pat Boone would record Richard’s hits and chart successfully with his own predominately white audiences. Defying conservative expectations, Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti” crossed over from the R&B charts to the Pop charts, and Elvis Presley performed the song twice on television in February of 1956. Elvis and the Beatles would both go on to record their own versions of Little Richard’s classic song.

Commenting on the popularity of Boone’s version, Richard stated, “I felt I was pushed into a rhythm and blues corner to keep out of rocker’s way because that’s where the money is. When ‘Tutti Frutti’ came out... they needed a rock star to block me out of white homes because I was a hero to white kids. The white kids would have Pat Boone upon the dresser and me in the drawer ’cause they liked my version better, but the families didn’t want me because of the image that I was projecting.”

Walking a fine line between male and female, Little Richard also performed in drag as Princess Lavonne. During that time, he was inspired by Billy Wright and Esquerita. Wright was a successful blues singer, gay and wore Pancake 31 makeup, which Richard embraced. The singer Esquerita taught Little Richard how to throw his voice into a falsetto leap that he called an “obligato holler.”

Working with Wright’s band, Little Richard first recorded for RCA in 1951, and his song, “Every Hour,” made it onto his father’s jukebox at his Macon club, The Tip In Inn. In February of 1952, his father, Bud Penniman, was shot dead during a dispute at his club. Taking away the possibility of making amends with his dad who threw him out of the house because he wasn’t willing to accept Richard’s flamboyant lifestyle. Possibly fueling his desire to become the star he was destined to be.

Three years later, in the studio with Blackwell, everyone knew that Little Richard was gay, and his performances even in the studio were unparalleled. Blackwell remembered Little Richard, “[He] was the only guy I knew who would beat the piano so hard he’d break an 80-gauge piano string. He did it several times.”

Over the next 16 months, Richard cut nine Top 40 hit singles for Specialty Records, and also appeared in three movies. He toured constantly always filling the venues to capacity. Little

Richard stated, “It would be standing-room-only crowds, and 90 percent of the audience would be white. I’ve always thought that rock and roll brought the races together!”

Little Richard did bring the races together. His music, his performances, and his persona, which was impossible to categorize; he is now known as the Father of Rock and Roll. His last public appearance was on March 30, 2013 at the Orleans Hotel in Las Vegas. Living his final years at the Hilton Hotel in downtown Nashville, with his adopted son, Danny, Richard was known to stop and play the piano in the lobby when he was feeling up to it.

Once having taught Paul McCartney of the Beatles his trademark “obligato holler,” Little Richard passed away from bone cancer on May 9, 2020, at the age of 87. After his death, McCartney was quoted as saying, “I owe a lot of what I do to Little Richard and his style; and he knew it. He would say, ‘I taught Paul everything, he knows.’ I had to admit he was right.”

Little Richard loved to proclaim that he was “the Architect of Rock and Roll” and “the King and Queen of Rock and Roll.” *A wop bop a loo bop, a lop bam boom!*

Susan Masino is an author and rock and roll historian. She has written six books including the updated edition of “The Story of AC/DC: Let There Be Rock” and “Family Tradition: Three Generations of Hank Williams.” Her books and more information can be found at www.susanmasino.com.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not be those of the Library of Congress.