

"What mattered was, that all eyes were on Little Richard"

By Billy Vera



Little Richard, influenced by singer Billy Wright, who "piled his hair up in a high pompadour." Promo photo circa early 1950s. From the B&R Archive.

Not long ago, when I was writing my book, 'Rip It Up: The Specialty Records Story', at lunch one day with company founder Art Rupe, he opined that: "Richard was, and is, the most dynamic entertainer I've ever seen, right up there with Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong and the rest." A few moments later, he added, wistfully: "If he'd only listened to me," and trailed off onto another thought about another subject.

At 102 years of age, Rupe has now outlived just about all of the artists he discovered and recorded, with the exceptions of Roddy Jackson and Lloyd Price. Price did listen to the record man, and lives quite comfortably today in the wealthy suburb of Pound Ridge, New York, having expanded his fortunes in a number of varied businesses.

But Lloyd was a different kind of man, one with his eyes always on the prize, that rare performer who thinks like a businessman and is less given to the impulsive and emotional behaviour which marks most artists, and which is so often their downfall.

That is not to say that Richard Wayne Penniman reached the end of his 87 years in poverty or anywhere near it. He did quite well for himself, often despite himself, having crafted a public personality that was eminently watchable and, often as not, outlandish in the extreme. A personality that had little to do with his musical ability.

On a late night talk show, he would take over any and all conversations, making himself the centre of attention, with off-the-wall claims and utterances, rendered loudly and with conviction. "Shut up!" he would tell the audience and they would hoot and howl with laughter. Whether that laughter was with or at him, did not matter to the man who called himself 'The Originator', "the prettiest sissy in the universe."

What mattered was, that all eyes were on Little Richard. The mind reels at the thought of what might have transpired had Richard and Muhammed Ali ever been booked on the same show. The power of those two enormous egos in one room might have triggered an electrical outage on television sets all over the world.

As of 9th May 2020, only one of the Big Four of Rock'n'Roll's outsized personae remains. Headliners all, Fats, Chuck and Richard are now gone, leaving only the Killer. And who would have thought of crazy Jerry Lee might have been the last one to survive?

But the subject at hand is Little Richard, so let us now speak of him. The details of his life and career are well-known, memorised by readers of this magazine, yet they deserve to be gone over once again, like a shaman delivers an oral history to pass it along to the tribe, to be ingrained in the minds of generations to come. Our editor has assigned me that role, so let's begin.

At his birth on 5th December 1932 in Macon, Georgia his father Charles 'Bud' Penniman named him Ricardo but somehow the name Richard ended up on his birth certificate. His mother, Leva Mae, delivered numerous children, so many that she often had trouble remembering how many, fourteen or fifteen, she thought.

At ten pounds, Richard was the largest, with one leg shorter than the other. "I had this big head and one big eye and one little one," he often said. "I was a cripple and the kids thought I walked all feminine."

He loved to sing the songs of Brother Joe May, Professor Alex Bradford and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, once even joining her onstage at the Macon City Auditorium, after which "She gave me a handful of money ... about thirty-five or forty dollars. I ain't never seen so much money in my life!"

Before long, he hit the road with Dr. Hudson's Medicine Show, one of those shows that traversed the South selling snake oil, claiming to cure anything that ailed the rubes, from migraines to constipation to impotence. He joined the B. Brown Orchestra, singing the popular ballads of the day, and then a minstrel show called 'Sugarfoot Sam from Alabama', where for the first time he performed in drag.

In Atlanta, at the Royal Peacock club on Auburn Avenue, in 1951, he met Billy Wright, who'd made a few hits for Savoy. Richard made note of Wright's act, in which he wore a lot of make-up, dressed in wildly coloured suits and piled his hair up in a high pompadour.

There, local disc jockey Zenas Sears introduced him to RCA Victor A&R man Steve Sholes, who signed him to a contract and, over the next year, did two sessions with the young singer. The four resulting records reveal a commonplace blues vocalist, along the lines of Roy Brown or Clyde McPhatter.

But careful listening shows a greater influence, that of Little Esther. In addition to her vocal licks and filigrees, one might speculate that she also influenced his choice of stage name.

Regardless, the records failed to light up the charts and Richard continued to sing anywhere he could, including fraternity house parties, where college boys drank beer and enjoyed hearing loud music with dirty lyrics.

Along the line, he met Eskew Reeder, Jr., a singing piano pounder who called himself Esquerita. S.Q., as he was also known, taught him the rudimentary skill of how to make a piano sound as though he could play it. Esquerita was no singer, but wore more make-up and piled his hair up even higher than Billy Wright, encouraging Richard to work in an even more campy style.

In Nashville, he ran into Billy Brooks and the two formed the Tempo Toppers, with a backing combo, the Deuces of Rhythm. Working around the South, they wound up in Houston, recording four sides for Don Robey's Peacock label. Nothing happened and Johnny Otis convinced Robey to let Richard cut four more sides with his band. But these didn't come out until after Richard's success on his next label,



Happy Moment—Hollywood recording proxy, Art Rupe, presents Little Richard (dig that hair) with gold record of "Long, Tall Sally," for having sold over a million copies of the platter. A virtual unknown six months ago, Richard skyrocketed to overnight fame with his "Tutti Frutti"

From the Billy Vera Collection.



Little Richard, Sheffield City Hall, 23rd October 1962. Photo: Brian Smith.

Specialty.

On the advice of Lloyd Price, he next made a demo tape and sent it to a number of labels, including Atlantic and Specialty, pestering receptionists for the next ten months until Art Rupe finally relented and dispatched his A&R man Bumps Blackwell to New Orleans to meet Richard at Cosimo Matassa's little studio.

The morning's session resulted in nothing special, so a lunch break was taken at the Dew Drop Inn, where the hammy singer hopped up on the piano and sang one of his dirty songs that the college boys loved: "Awop-bop-a-loo-mop a good God damn - Tutti Frutti, good booty."

Blackwell heard a hit but, realising those lyrics would never pass muster on the radio, he asked local songwriter Dorothy La Bostrie to clean it up. She did so, and a career was born. The nation's teenagers went crazy for it.

The song was covered by bandleader Art Mooney, vocal by Ocie Smith, by Pat Boone and by Elvis Presley on his first album, bringing in some nice royalties for the songwriters and Rupe's Venice Music. Elvis would do three more Little Richard songs on his next album and both Richard and Boone each would sell over a million copies of the follow-up, 'Long Tall Sally'.

The hits kept coming: 'Rip It Up', 'Ready Teddy', 'Lucille', 'Jenny Jenny', 'Good Golly Miss Molly' and 'Keep A-Knockin''. There were the movies, 'The Girl Can't Help It', with Jayne Mansfield and a pair of rocksploitation flicks with Alan Freed, 'Don't Knock The Rock' and 'Mr. Rock'n'Roll', which were virtually unwatchable, except to teens who sat through the bad acting and lousy scripts in order to see their idols on the big screen.

These would comprise Richard's filmography until 1986's 'Down And Out In Beverly Hills', which starred Nick Nolte, Bette Midler and Richard Dreyfuss. A single from the film, 'Good Gosh A Mighty' reached the middle of the charts, his final chart appearance.

In person, Little Richard, always the headliner, was putting on incredible shows, causing mayhem wherever he appeared. In the latter part of 1957, it all came tumbling down. In one version of the story, on a flight home from Australia, Richard saw the Soviet satellite Sputnik and panicked, believing it to be a heavenly sign telling him to quit show business in order to save his soul.

In another, a 'missionary' named Brother Wilbur Gulley, along with former Specialty act, Joe Lutcher, convinced him to give up the Devil's music in exchange for a free pass through the Pearly Gates.

Rupe attempted to explain that refusing to record, only eighteen months into a three-year commitment, would put him in breach of contract, to no avail. "I don't want to sing the Devil's music and I don't care about the money," he said, when told of the consequences that he'd have to give up all future royalties. Years later, he would change his tune.

In the meantime, he preached and sang the gospel, until

fiscal need drove him to return to rock'n'roll. In Europe he found a young British quartet called the Beatles and phoned his old friend Art Rupe, urging him to sign the act that could "...copy anybody, even me!" But despite the fact that Paul McCartney did the closest imitation of Little Richard of anyone, Rupe demurred and instead took Richard back in the studio, producing Specialty's last chart appearance with 1964's 'Bama Lama Bama Loo'.

He made one great record, Don Covay's 'I Don't Know What You've Got But It's Got Me',



From Galen Gart's 'First Pressings'.



From the Billy Vera collection.

followed by a lot of junk for Vee-Jay in 1965.

In 1966, his former labelmate, Larry Williams, signed him to Okeh Records, where he cut an album and several singles, including the title song to the motion picture, 'Hurry Sundown'.

There was an oldies revival in 1970 which resulted in him signing with Reprise for two minor chart singles, 'Freedom Blues' and 'Greenwood, Mississippi'. From that point forward, he played the role of Little Richard, con brio, appearing before wildly enthusiastic crowds around the world.

In June of 1990, he received a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. I was there, representing Specialty Records, for whom I produced the Little Richard box set and was shocked to see that of all the rockers who'd been influenced by him, I was the only one present. We chatted and were photographed together. Once away from the fans, I found him calm and even somewhat thoughtful, not the diva he presented to the public. Later, I recalled the eleven year old self who first heard that voice and how it dictated the course of my life.



Billy Vera with Little Richard, getting Richard's Star on the 'Hollywood Walk Of Fame' in 1989. From the Billy Vera Collection.