

BREAKING

Little Richard, Flamboyant Wild Man of Rock 'n' Roll, Dies at 87

Delving deeply into the wellsprings of gospel music and the blues, and screaming as if for his very life, he created something new, thrilling and dangerous.

By **Tim Weiner**

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Richard Penniman, better known as Little Richard, who combined the sacred shouts of the black church and the profane sounds of the blues to create some of the world's first and most influential rock 'n' roll records, died on Saturday morning. He was 87.

His death was confirmed by his son, Danny Jones Penniman, who said the cause was cancer. He did not say where his father died.

Little Richard did not invent rock 'n' roll. Other musicians had already been mining a similar vein by the time he recorded his first hit, "Tutti Frutti" — a raucous song about sex, its lyrics cleaned up but its meaning hard to miss — in a New Orleans recording studio in September 1955. Chuck Berry and Fats Domino had reached the pop Top 10, Bo Diddley had topped the rhythm-and-blues charts, and Elvis Presley had been making records for a year.

But Little Richard, delving deeply into the wellsprings of gospel music and the blues, pounding the piano furiously and screaming as if for his very life, raised the energy level several notches and created something not quite like any music that had been heard before — something new, thrilling and more than a little dangerous. As the rock historian Richie Unterberger put it, "He was crucial in upping the voltage from high-powered R&B into the similar, yet different, guise of rock 'n' roll."

Art Rupe of Specialty Records, the label for which he recorded his biggest hits, called Little Richard "dynamic, completely uninhibited, unpredictable, wild."

"Tutti Frutti" rocketed up the charts and was quickly followed by "Long Tall Sally" and other records now acknowledged as classics. His live performances were electrifying.

"He'd just burst onto the stage from anywhere, and you wouldn't be able to hear anything but the roar of the audience," the record producer and arranger H.B. Barnum, who played saxophone with Little Richard early in his career, recalled in "The Life and Times of Little Richard" (1984), an authorized biography by Charles White. "He'd be on the stage, he'd be off the stage, he'd be jumping and yelling, screaming, whipping the audience on."

An Immeasurable Influence

Rock 'n' roll was an unabashedly macho music in its early days, but Little Richard, who had performed in drag as a teenager, presented a very different picture onstage: gaudily dressed, his hair piled six inches high, his face aglow with cinematic makeup. He was fond of saying in later years that if Elvis was the king of rock 'n' roll, he was the queen. Offstage, he characterized himself variously as gay, bisexual and "omnisexual."

His influence as a performer was immeasurable. It could be seen and heard in the flamboyant showmanship of James Brown, who idolized him (and used some of his musicians when Little Richard began a long hiatus from performing in 1957), and of Prince, whose ambisexual image owed a major debt to his.

Presley recorded his songs. The Beatles adopted his trademark sound, an octave-leaping exultation: "Woooo!" (Paul McCartney said that the first song he ever sang in public was "Long Tall Sally," which he later recorded with the Beatles.) Bob Dylan wrote in his high school yearbook that his ambition was "to join Little Richard."

Little Richard's impact was social as well.



Little Richard in the mid-1950s, around the time his first hit record, "Tutti Frutti," was released. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

"I've always thought that rock 'n' roll brought the races together," Mr. White quoted him as saying. "Especially being from the South, where you see the barriers, having all these people who we thought hated us showing all this love."

Mr. Barnum told Mr. White that "they still had the audiences segregated" at concerts in the South in those days, but that when Little Richard performed, "most times, before the end of the night, they would all be mixed together."

If uniting black and white audiences was a point of pride for Little Richard, it was a cause of concern for others, especially in the South. The White Citizens Council of North Alabama issued a denunciation of rock 'n' roll largely because it brought "people of both races together." And with many radio stations under pressure to keep black music off the air, Pat Boone's cleaned-up, toned-down version of "Tutti Frutti" was a bigger hit than Little Richard's original. (He also had a hit with "Long Tall Sally.")

Still, it seemed that nothing could stop Little Richard's drive to the top — until he stopped it himself.

He was at the height of his fame when he left the United States in late September 1957 to begin a tour in Australia. As he told the story, he was exhausted, under intense pressure from the Internal Revenue Service and furious at the low royalty rate he was receiving from Specialty. Without anyone to advise him, he had signed a contract that gave him half a cent for every record he sold. "Tutti Frutti" had sold half a million copies but had netted him only \$25,000.

One night in early October, before 40,000 fans at an outdoor arena in Sydney, he had an epiphany.

“That night Russia sent off that very first Sputnik,” he told Mr. White, referring to the first satellite sent into space. “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.’”

He had one last Top 10 hit: “Good Golly Miss Molly,” recorded in 1956 but not released until early 1958. By then, he had left rock 'n' roll behind.

He became a traveling evangelist. He entered Oakwood College (now Oakwood University) in Huntsville, Ala., a Seventh-day Adventist school, to study for the ministry. He cut his hair, got married and began recording gospel music.

For the rest of his life, he would be torn between the gravity of the pulpit and the pull of the stage.

“Although I sing rock 'n' roll, God still loves me,” he said in 2009. “I’m a rock 'n' roll singer, but I’m still a Christian.”

He was lured back to the stage in 1962, and over the next two years he played to wild acclaim in England, Germany and France. Among his opening acts were the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, then at the start of their careers.

He went on to tour relentlessly in the United States, with a band that at one time included Jimi Hendrix on guitar. By the end of the 1960s, sold-out performances in Las Vegas and triumphant appearances at rock festivals in Atlantic City and Toronto were sending a clear message: Little Richard was back to stay.

But he wasn’t.

‘I Lost My Reasoning’

By his own account, alcohol and cocaine began to sap his soul (“I lost my reasoning,” he would later say), and in 1977, he once again turned from rock 'n' roll to God. He became a Bible salesman, began recording religious songs again and, for the second time, disappeared from the spotlight.

He did not stay away forever. The publication of his biography in 1984 signaled his return to the public eye, and he began performing again.

By now, he was as much a personality as a musician. In 1986 he played a prominent role as a record producer in Paul Mazursky’s hit movie “Down and Out in Beverly Hills.” On television, he appeared on talk, variety, comedy and awards shows. He officiated at celebrity weddings and preached at celebrity funerals.

He could still raise the roof in concert. In December 1992, he stole the show at a rock 'n' roll revival concert at Wembley Arena in London. “I’m 60 years old today,” he told the audience, “and I still look remarkable.”

He continued to look remarkable — with the help of wigs and thick pancake makeup — as he toured intermittently into the 21st century. But age eventually took its toll.

By 2007, he was walking onstage with the aid of two canes. In 2012, he abruptly ended a performance at the Howard Theater in Washington, telling the crowd, “I can’t hardly breathe.” A year later, he told Rolling Stone magazine that he was retiring.

“I am done, in a sense,” he said. “I don’t feel like doing anything right now.”

Complete information on survivors was not immediately available.



Little Richard onstage at Wembley Stadium in London in 1972, on a bill that also included his fellow rock 'n' roll pioneers Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry. David Redferns/Redferns

Richard Wayne Penniman was born in Macon, Ga., on Dec. 5, 1932, the third of 12 children born to Charles and Leva Mae (Stewart) Penniman. His father was a brick mason who sold moonshine on the side. An uncle, a cousin and a grandfather were preachers, and as a boy he attended Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist and Holiness churches and aspired to be a singing evangelist. An early influence was the gospel singer and guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe, one of the first performers to combine a religious message with the urgency of R&B.

By the time he was in his teens, Richard's ambition had taken a detour. He left home and began performing with traveling medicine and minstrel shows, part of a 19th-century tradition that was dying out. By 1948, billed as Little Richard — the name was a reference to his youth and not his physical stature — he was a cross-dressing performer with a minstrel troupe called Sugarfoot Sam From Alabam, which had been touring for decades.

In 1951, while singing alongside strippers, comics and drag queens on the Decatur Street strip in Atlanta, he recorded his first songs. The records were generic R&B, with no distinct style, and attracted almost no attention.

Around this time, he met two performers whose look and sound would have a profound impact on his own: Billy Wright and S.Q. Reeder, who performed and recorded as Esquerita. They were both accomplished pianists, flashy dressers, flamboyant entertainers and as openly gay as it was possible to be in the South in the 1950s.

Little Richard acknowledged his debt to Esquerita, who he said gave him some piano-playing tips, and Mr. Wright, whom he once called “the most fantastic entertainer I had ever seen.” But however much he borrowed from either man, the music and persona that emerged were his own.

His break came in 1955, when Mr. Rupe signed him to Specialty and arranged for him to record with local musicians in New Orleans. During a break at that session, he began singing a raucous but obscene song that Mr. Rupe thought had the potential to capture the nascent teenage record-buying audience. Mr. Rupe enlisted a New Orleans songwriter, Dorothy LaBostrie, to clean up the lyrics; the song became “Tutti Frutti”; and a rock 'n' roll star was born.

By the time he stopped performing, Little Richard was in both the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame (he was inducted in the Hall's first year) and the Songwriters Hall of Fame and the recipient of lifetime achievement awards from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences and the Rhythm and Blues Foundation. “Tutti Frutti” was added to the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry in 2010.

If Little Richard ever doubted that he deserved all the honors he received, he never admitted it. “A lot of people call me the architect of rock 'n' roll,” he once said. “I don't call myself that, but I believe it's true.”

Peter Keepnews and Ben Sisario contributed reporting.