

In The Beginning Was The Word...

...And the word was A-wop-bop-a-loo-mop-a-lop-bam-boom! A torrent of filth wailed by a bisexual alien, **Little Richard's Tutti Frutti** smashed down the doors of culture and ushered in an attitude we still call rock'n'roll. Elvis, Keef, Dylan, McCartney and Bowie were electrified and the world was remade in an instant. **Bob Mehr** investigates...

BEFORE HE WAS THE ORIGINATOR, THE INNOVATOR, THE EMAN-
cipator, before he could claim his throne as the King, Queen or Quasar of
Rock'n'Roll, Little Richard stood before a microphone in a cramped New
Orleans studio and delivered his masterwork. The audience on this day was no
more than half a dozen or so souls: an enterprising young Italian engineer, a
conservatory-educated black jazz producer, and a gang of hep Crescent City
studio cats, none of whom knew quite what to make of Richard, this physically deformed, bi-
sexual singer from Macon, Georgia. But as he screamed and shouted his way through the inspired
gibberish that would become known as Tutti Frutti – a thinly veiled and hastily rewritten ode to
the joys of backdoor sex – he did so with the unmistakable gospel fervour of a holy roller.

One can only imagine how it must've sounded when the song exploded across the airwaves of
Eisenhower's America in early 1956. Yet the invention of rock'n'roll as mass-culture subversion,
outsider art turned showbiz, so nearly never happened. An X-rated novelty used to enliven
Richard's nightclub sets, Tutti Frutti wasn't even scheduled to be recorded and was only cap-
tured as time was ticking away on the final moments of a failing session. An accident, then, or
providence, for as The Rolling Stones' Keith Richards would
note after hearing the song, it was as if, in a single in-
stant, the world had transformed from workaday
monochrome into glorious Technicolor.

WHEN RICHARD WAYNE
Penniman came mewling
into the world on December
5, 1932, there was no doubt he was a re-
markable creature. Of the 12 children
born to Bud and Leva Mae Penninman of
Macon, Richard was the biggest and loud-
est baby of the bunch. His father sold
bootleg liquor and owned a bar called
the Tip In Inn. His mother ran a rap-
idly growing household. Theirs was a
middling existence, neither rich nor
poor, but full of fun and promise – at >



Michael Ochs Archive/Redferns, Geoff Brown Archive





"Whooooo!" The originator, Little Richard with his legendary road band The Upsetters in the Alan Freed film *Mr Rock 'n' Roll*, 1957.

THE BIGGEST BIG BANG IN POPULAR MUSIC, BY DR JOHN



LITTLE RICHARD

Tutti Frutti

(Specialty single, 1955)

"When Little Richard was cutting Tutti Frutti, I was standing right outside Cosimo Matassa's studio. I was always hanging out there during Specialty sessions, trying to sell Art Rupe some songs.

Some people say Richard bummed his act from Esquerita, but to me, S.Q. was more gospel-sounding, and Richard was straight up hip. His style was a revelation, a really good sound that could rock the house without fail. This is what made Richard special: as Fats Domino told me, 'I couldn't tell you what's the difference between rock'n'roll and R&B.' But Richard changed something in the New Orleans groove. Instead of a shuffle, he could play that 8th-note thing on the piano. He used it from that first record on, and a



"RICHARD WAS A TOTALLY ORIGINAL CAT. EVERYTHING ABOUT HIM WAS OFF THE HOOK."

lot of other people started using that shit. They use it today.

"The idea for Tutti Frutti was probably already floating around New Orleans. I bet Richard heard something like it from Eddie Bo: 'A gal named Sue/She knows just what to do' – that shit was nasty! Some New Orleans songs, like Tee-Nah-Nah, are Creole. Your tee-nah-nah is your ass cheeks, your tee-nah-noon is your asshole. But Tutti Frutti isn't

Creole, and I don't think it had anything to do with no ice cream flavour. You know what a fruit is, right?

"Richard was a totally original cat – everything about him was off the hook. Seeing him and S.Q. hanging out wearing men's suits, topped off with lipstick, high hair, and women's shades, would catch people off guard. Plus nobody else played piano standing up, and he had some smoking bands with badasses like Billy Preston and Jimi Hendrix. Richard always worked the house and he's always been controversial. That's why I love his ass!"

Without this, no... Nothing!

◀ least as much as could be mustered in the Jim Crow South.

The church loomed large in Richard's early life. His paternal grandfather was a minister and as a child Richard sang with gospel group the Tiny Tots and with the family Penniman Singers and dreamed of becoming a preacher himself. But his first significant on-stage experience, at the Macon City Auditorum with guitar-wielding gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe, changed all that. "She was the one I got the 'whooo' from," he later recalled.

Richard always knew he was different. Born with one leg noticeably shorter than the other, he endured vicious teasing: "The kids didn't realise I was crippled. They thought I was trying to twist and walk feminine. The kids would call me faggot sissy, freak, punk. They called me everything." Pushed to the fringes, he was sexualised early in his adolescence by older women in the neighbourhood and predatory men. Soon, he began to drift away from church and

X-rated songs of 1920s blues mamas like Lucille Bogan, Tutti Frutti offered an unusually graphic description of sex – specifically, as the original lyrics suggested, the pleasures of the anal variety ("Tutti Frutti, good booty/If it don't fit, don't force it/You can grease it, make it easy"). In fact the term "Tutti Frutti" had long been slang among Southern gays, its roots traceable back to camp icon Carmen Miranda, "The Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat".

Finished with RCA, Richard signed to Don Robey's Houston-based Peacock Records in 1953, but once again his recordings failed to capture any of his on-stage charisma. Worse, Richard clashed with Peacock's owner Robey, a domineering black gangster type with a volatile temper who, angered by Richard's insolence during a meeting, gave the singer a beating that left him with a painful hernia for years.

After staying out of the studio for over a year, Richard crossed paths with New Orleans R&B sensation Lloyd Price in late 1954.

"THE KIDS WOULD CALL ME FAGGOT, SISSY, FREAK, PUNK. THEY CALLED ME EVERYTHING."

family and into Macon's gay demi-monde. Shunned by his father for being "less than a son", he ran off with a medicine show to sell snake oil at carnivals. This led to his first professional musical gigs, touring the chitlin circuit as singer with B. Brown And His Orchestra and later a minstrel troupe called Sugarfoot Sam's Traveling Show.

He eventually landed up in the gay district of Atlanta, falling in deeper with an odd assortment of transvestites. It was there that he came into contact with singer-pianist Billy Wright. Known as the 'Prince of the Blues', Wright was a flamboyant figure who coiffed his hair up to fantastic heights, slathered his face in Pancake 31 makeup, and shouted a "crying" brand of gospel blues – elements that Richard would eventually incorporate into his own act. Another important encounter was with Esquerita (aka S.Q. Reeder), a flashy pianist and outsize personality who would help define Richard's signature playing style. "He got on the piano and played One Mint Julep way up in the treble," Richard recalled. "It sounded so pretty. The bass was fantastic. I said, How do you do that? And he's says, 'I'll teach you.' And that's when I really started playing."



Price suggested he send a demo to his Los Angeles-based label, Specialty. Richard cut a pair of fairly straight gospel-flecked numbers – He's My Star and Wonderin' – at a radio station studio in Macon and shipped them off. "So I sent the tape to Specialty and they waited one year before they wrote me back," he recalled. When Richard's tape arrived at Specialty's offices in February 1955, the company was at a crossroads. Founded in 1945, by Arthur N. Rupe, Specialty had enjoyed several years of small-time success recording black gospel and R&B music, hitting the big time in 1952 with Price's Lawdy Miss Clawdy. But the black music marketplace was changing rapidly, and Specialty's crack A&R/producer Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell – a formally trained musician from Seattle who'd played a pivotal role in shaping the early careers of Quincy Jones and Ray Charles – was on the lookout for an act who could compete: specifically, a "gospel singer who could sing the blues."

"Our office began to get calls from Richard about every two or three weeks, anxious to know about his tape," recalls Rupe today. "Our secretaries, as per procedure, always informed him that he would get our decision soon. Because Richard was so persistent, a secretary eventually told me that a Little Richard insisted on talking to a 'Mr. Root'! It was technically a poor recording, [but] I detected an emotional, churchy sound in Richard's voice. We were looking for qualities similar to those of B.B. King and Ray Charles, so we signed [him]."

Specialty loaned Richard \$600 to buy his way out of his Peacock contract and a date was set for his first Specialty session in New Orleans, site of the label's previous successes, for mid-September 1955.

THROUGH A CONNECTION WITH WRIGHT, Richard signed to RCA's Camden imprint. His first session produced a small regional hit called Every Hour, but a second, February 1952, session proved unsuccessful. Two weeks later Bud Penniman was killed – shot dead outside the Tip In Inn during a dispute with an unruly patron. With his older brother Charles off fighting in Korea, Richard assumed the role of breadwinner, washing dishes at the Greyhound bus station in Macon to make the family's ends meet. It was there, Richard claims, that the first stirrings of Tutti Frutti came to him. "I was washing dishes... and I couldn't talk back to my boss man. He would bring all these pots back for me to wash, and one day I said, I've got to do something to stop this man bringing back all these pots to me to wash, and I said, A-wop-bop-a-loo-mop-a-lop-bam-boom, take 'em out! and that's what I meant at the time."

A slightly more profane version of Richard's phrase – "A-wop-bop-a-loo-mop-a-good-goddamn" – was used to kick off a bawdy, half-improvised novelty song that he'd begun singing during his nightclub sets with his new band, the Tempo Toppers. Similar to the

IN THE FALL OF 1955, J&M RECORDING SERVICE IN New Orleans was located on the corner of Rampart and Dumaine, near the city's historic Congo Square. Founded a decade earlier by Cosimo Matassa and Joe Mancuso, the studio was an outgrowth of the pair's record store and appliance business. At first Matassa, who handled the engineering duties, had hoped to tap into the rich pool of local talent. Within a couple years, the studio was attracting interest from independent labels across the country, cutting Roy Brown for Deluxe Records out of New Jersey and Professor Longhair for New York's Atlantic. The studio hit its stride in 1949 with the first of several hits by local talent Fats Domino. By

"I've got to stop this man bringing me all these pots to wash!" Little Richard has a plan; (inset opposite) influences Esquerita (top) and Billy Wright.



the mid-'50s J&M had also developed a successful relationship with Specialty through their work with Lloyd Price and Guitar Slim. Matassa, who received a lifetime achievement Grammy earlier this year, was a skilled but subtle engineer, whose modest nature helped define J&M's sonic aesthetic. "My philosophy, if you want to use a big word, was to be transparent," says Matassa. "I thought my job was to go out in the studio and listen, and what I heard there, put on tape. So if you never knew I was involved, then I did my job."

The other key element to the J&M recordings was a core group of session musicians who'd become the cornerstone of the "New Orleans Sound". This collection of players included drummer Earl Palmer, pianists Huey Smith and Melvin Dowden, saxmen Lee Allen and Alvin 'Red' Tyler and bassist Frank Field. "Those guys were really terrific sidemen," enthuses Matassa. "They didn't just sit there and say, 'Tell me what to play', they participated. They did a lot of what were called head arrangements, where they came up with parts on the spot. We had a great thing going there."

This close and convivial atmosphere was suddenly interrupted when Little Richard arrived at the studio on September 13. With his strange look, garish clothes and hyper manner, the crew of vet-

eran musicians considered Richard a "kook". "He walked into J&M like he was coming off-stage: that thick, thick powder makeup and the eyeliner and the lipstick and the hair everywhere in big, big waves," recalled drummer Earl Palmer. "Walked in there like something you'd never seen. I don't remember exactly what I said; something like, 'What the fuck is this? Not who, *what*.'"

The musicians' reticence certainly had something to do with Richard's sexual flamboyance. "At that time, everybody was a little concerned about being seen with somebody that looked and acted so gay," noted Palmer. But it wasn't long before Richard's natural enthusiasm had won over the suspicious studio hands. "Richard was so infectious and so un hiding with his flamboyancy, he sucked us right in," said Palmer. "We got laughing with him instead of at him."

As the musicians mingled and Matassa adjusted mikes, producer Blackwell surveyed the scene. As Palmer notes, Blackwell was a company man ("He was afraid of Rupe") but one with an air of authority and purpose in the studio. "Bumps gave the distinct impression that Bumps was in charge," says Matassa. "Now, he didn't flaunt it or act imperious about it — he was one of the guys — but there was no question that the buck stopped with him." ➤



BUT A HIT IT WAS. “WE HAD EIGHT SELECTIONS, maybe nine, from Richard’s first session but Tutti Frutti stood out,” says Art Rupe. “After it was initially played on a New York City radio station, the response was immediate. We were flooded with orders as other stations followed suit.”

Tutti Frutti sold a half million copies in its first few months, and reached Number 2 on the R&B chart, Number 17 on the pop chart. Pat Boone soon offended God and man with his Teutonic cover, Elvis offered a less objectionable version, while dozens more – from the MC5 to Queen to Sting – would offer their own interpretations over the years. While it wasn’t the era’s biggest seller – white radio stations were still leery of playing unvarnished ‘race’ records – the song’s impact was utterly profound. Tutti Frutti was not wholly without precedent. Louis Jordan’s shrieking on Caldonia and the scat-jive of Louis Prima had already hinted at such things, while the ‘40s most virile R&B stars such as Wynonie Harris had sung equally risqué material like I Like My Baby’s Pudding. Yet Richard was something else entirely: he was dealing in sex, all right, but a deviant brand couched in the rolling rhythms of the church. And no one in popular music has ever mingled the two in such measure, or as well. “I think it’s the rhythm, the pulse of the song itself that made it such a success,” says Cosimo Matassa. “But white kids dug what was happening beneath the surface. They knew what was going on. They weren’t stupid.”

The song would strike a chord with hungry young listeners everywhere. It inspired Paul McCartney and John Lennon in Liverpool, it made David Bowie take notes in Bromley and affected everyone

from Otis Redding and James Brown to Bruce Springsteen half a world away. In his high school yearbook, one Robert Zimmerman’s declared ambition was to join Little Richard’s band. The influence of Richard’s music remains strong six decades on – it’s a line that runs, uninterrupted, from Tutti Frutti, through Rick James’ Superfreak, Prince’s Little Red Corvette to Justin Timberlake’s Sexy Back.

There would be more hits for Richard throughout 1956 and 1957 – Long Tall Sally, Lucille, Good Golly Miss Molly – most of them cut at J&M until he decided and he didn’t want to travel to New Orleans to record any longer. A few months after his final session there he abandoned rock’n’roll to take up the Lord’s cause.

In a way, Tutti Frutti would prove characteristic of Richard’s life and career, as defined by the twin influences of sex and the church. Unlike his fellow religious piano man Jerry Lee Lewis, who struggled with the push and pull of God and the devil, Richard had no qualms about mixing the two. He always kept a Bible on hand, even during the orgies and post-show bacchanals. And he would vacillate between rock’n’roll excess and religion for the rest of his life.

These days, at the age of 75, Richard flirts with self-parody, yet the power coursing through Tutti Frutti, the record, is undiminished. “I always did have that thang,” Richard has said. “I had my own thang I wanted the world to hear.” The world is still listening today. **M**

Quotes from new interviews by the author and sources including The Life and Times of Little Richard by Charles White, Temples Of Sound by Jim Cogan & William Clark, I Hear You Knockin’ by Jeff Hannusch, and Backbeat: Earl Palmer’s Story by Tony Scherman. Special thanks: Charles White, Cosimo Matassa, Art Rupe, Scott Bomar