

LITTLE RICHARD

b. December 5, 1932

d. May 9, 2020

ROCK & ROLL PIONEER

Little Richard was a musical pioneer, called the “architect of rock and roll.”

“Elvis may be the King of Rock and Roll, but I am the Queen.”

Richard Penniman, “Little Richard,” was a musical pioneer of the 1950s and one of the first Black crossover artists. Known for his legendary hits — such as “Tutti Frutti,” “Long Tall Sally” and “Good Golly Miss Molly” — and flamboyant, gender-bending style, Little Richard has been called the “architect of rock and roll.”

Born in Macon, Georgia, during the Great Depression, Richard was one of 12 children of evangelical Christian parents. His father was a church deacon, a moonshine bootlegger and a nightclub owner. Richard’s love of music began as a child, singing in the church choir.

Richard’s early years were rife with abuse. Peers bullied him and mocked his walk. Richard’s father would strip him, tie him up and dispense “bloody beatings” for his effeminate behavior and deliberately androgynous appearance. His father “wanted seven boys,” Richard once said, and he “was messing it up.”

When Richard was 19, his father was murdered. Richard took a job as a dishwasher to provide for the family. He wrote some of his first and most celebrated tracks at that time, including “Tutti Frutti,” the song that launched his career.

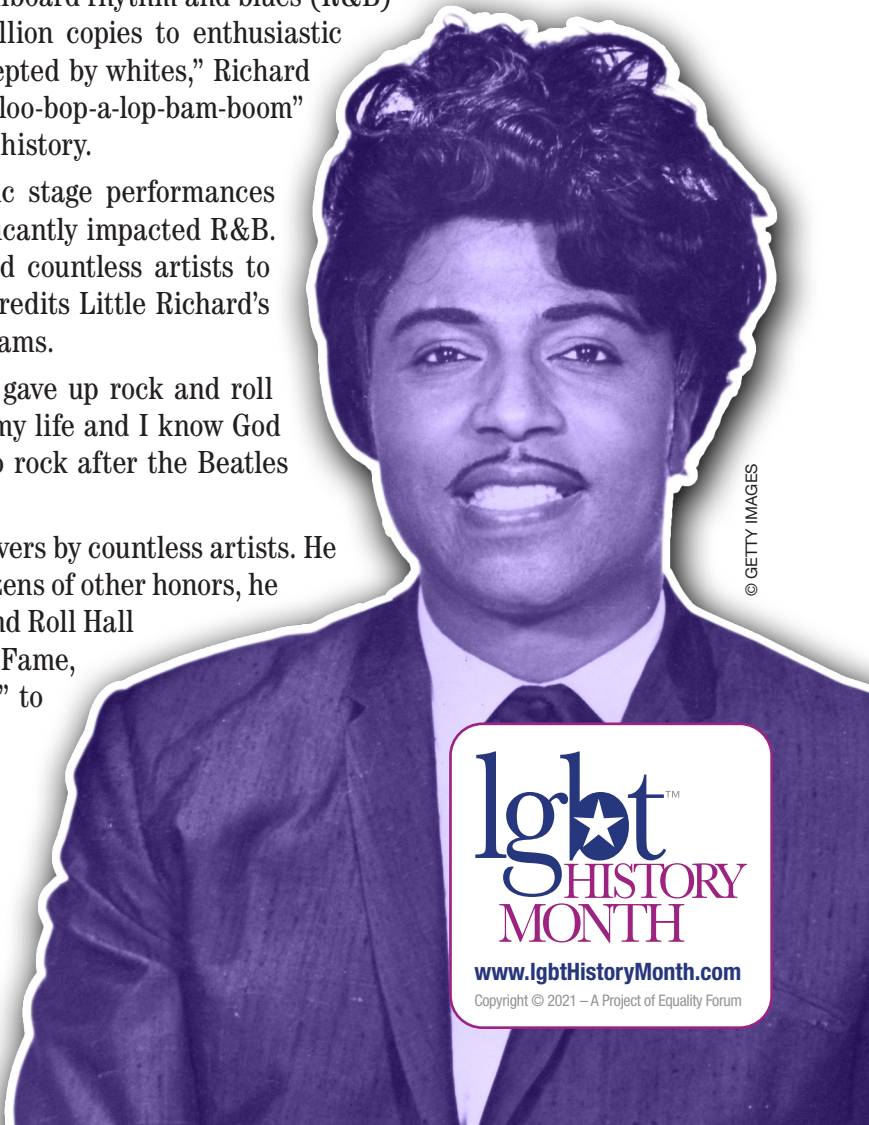
Released in 1955, “Tutti Frutti” rose to No. 2 on the Billboard rhythm and blues (R&B) chart and climbed the pop chart. It sold over a million copies to enthusiastic interracial fans. “From the get-go, my music was accepted by whites,” Richard said. The song’s introductory phrase, “A-wop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-lop-bam-boom” became one of the most iconic in contemporary music history.

Richard’s backbeat rhythms, vocal style and frenetic stage performances helped give rise to the rock and roll genre and significantly impacted R&B. His long pompadour hairdo and eye makeup inspired countless artists to come, from David Bowie to Prince. Paul McCartney credits Little Richard’s signature shrieks with informing his own singing screams.

Richard became a born-again Christian in 1957 and gave up rock and roll for gospel music and the ministry. “I’ve been gay all my life and I know God is a God of love, not of hate,” he said. He returned to rock after the Beatles recorded a rendition of “Long Tall Sally” in 1964.

Over the years, Little Richard’s songs have inspired covers by countless artists. He later appeared in movies and TV shows. Along with dozens of other honors, he was one of the first 10 artists inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and the U.S. Library of Congress added “Tutti Frutti” to the National Recording Registry.

Little Richard died in Tennessee from bone cancer. He was 87.



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