

R.I.P. Little Richard



Rock and Roll pioneer Little Richard died today of bone cancer at age 87. Richard was mentored by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the foremother of rock when he was a teenager in the 1940s. She allowed him to open her shows and inspired him to become a professional. Ike Turner's intro on "Rocket 88" gave him the motivation to become a piano player. Richard had a few bands and recording contracts with RCA and Peacock Records before he signed with Specialty in 1955 and that year he had his first hit with "Tutti Frutti." His success continued in the '50s with "Rip It Up," "Long Tall Sally," "Lucille," "Keep A-Knockin'" and "Good Golly Miss Molly." His influence was immediate and The Beatles, Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, Gene Vincent, The Everly Brothers and Eddie Cochran covered Richard's songs. Ray Charles, James Brown, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding and Bo Diddley all recognized Richard's contributions to music. Brown said that Richard put the funk in the rock beat. The screaming, wild hair, colorful makeup and androgynous appearance was an archetype that would later be emulated most famously by Prince.

His rise happened during segregation in America but Little Richard became one of the first Black artists to crossover and reach white and Black audiences in concerts and on the charts. He was recognized for this achievement in 2015 by the National Museum Of African American music. Little Richard's religious beliefs made him leave secular music for a while in the late '50s but he returned in 1962 and the following year he saved a failing tour that featured The Rolling Stones, The Everly Brothers and Bo Diddley. The success of this tour led to him getting his own TV special *The Little Richard Spectacular* that was so popular that fans wrote 60,000 letters and the show was rebroadcast twice. It was during the '60s when Jimi Hendrix joined Richard's band briefly before leaving over money issues.

and competition over the spotlight.Â

Little Richard left music again in the '70s to be an evangelist and released a gospel album *God's Beautiful City*. His interviews revealed a lifelong conflict about his sexuality; he referred to himself sometimes as gay and omnisexual but denounced homosexuality later in life. He would have another comeback in the '80s after Charles White released an authorized biography about Richard's life. Richard appeared in the movie *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* and wrote a song with Billy Preston for the soundtrack.Â He did more television and film and was quick to tell everyone about his influence on the contemporary artists of the time. When Michael Jackson purchased The Beatles' publishing Little Richard's was included and Jackson gave it back to Richard. In 1990, he made a guest vocalist appearance on Living Colour's "Elvis Is Dead."Â

In 2000, Leon played Richard in the biographical film *Little Richard*. He gave his last concert in 2014 and that same year he was portrayed by actor Brandon Mychal Smith in the James Brown biopic *Get On Up*. In 2017, he did a televised interview with Christian Three Angels Broadcasting Network. Although he was in the Rock and Roll Hall Of Fame's first class of inductees and received other awards like the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1993 he was still not as famous as his white contemporaries. Richard's rock blueprint was far-reaching and Andre 3000, Bruno Mars and Chris Cornell are just a few more artists to have been influenced by him. In 2019, Maggie Gonzalez of Macon, Georgia, Richard's hometown, started an online petition to have a statue erected on him. Little Richard also received the Distinguished Artist's Award at the 2019 Tennessee Governor's Arts Awards.Â

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