

Little Richard: I Am Everything Unearths Complex Rock Savant



BXXBFH LITTLE RICHARD at Wrigley Fields, Los Angeles, 2 September 1956

Little Richard: I Am Everything makes the ultimate case for the rock icon's relevance with a story told mostly using his own words. Lisa Cortés' film traces Little Richard's rise as a pioneering Black rock star from his childhood in Macon, Georgia to finally being recognized by the music industry at age 64. Fellow musicians, friends and scholars offer their perspectives on Richard's genius, complicated by a lifelong tension between his sexuality and religious beliefs.

Viewers, find out that Richard had an intense religious life

as a youngster attending both his mother's and father's separate churches. He would take a singing solo at his mother's Macon New Hope Baptist Church and try to turn it into a concert. It was an act that got him banned from taking new solos. Like so many gay kids Richard was kicked out of the family home by his father despite his mother's acceptance of him. Music was a natural vocation but it was also a temporary redemption in his relationship with his father. Richard gets invited back into the family home after his father hears his music on the radio but the emotional wounds are already there. Old interview footage shows Richard telling an interviewer how his father always disapproved of him and he almost breaks into tears. Being a Black gay Silent Generation man on his way to pioneering rock and roll music he was still not without allies. Singers Billy Wright and Esquerita would come into his life and help him get his first record deal, conceptualize his look, and teach him how to play piano. Louis Jordan, who rarely gets credit for being a proto-rock pioneer is also mentioned as an influence on Richard's music.

" I am the emancipator and the architect. I'm the one who started it all."

-Little Richard

There were other defining moments revealed such as the time when Sister Rosetta Tharpe put a teenaged Richard on stage with her at the Macon City Auditorium to sing "Strange Things Happening Every Day." When he finds his own voice years later as a new Black star with "Tutti Frutti" the success of it all is hampered by the rules of segregation. The recording industry quickly found white artists like Pat Boone to cover Black music for white audiences. Boone's lackluster versions of "Tutti Frutti" and "Long Tall Salley" sold more and lessened Richard's creditability in the eyes of the general public.

The outspoken Richard told an interviewer how Boone was a

necessity for the white music industry because whites did not want their children idolizing a Black man. Things get complicated when Richard talks about how white kids discovered him and other Black artists and started attending the segregated Black shows to see them. The formula still applies in 2023 when Eminem is given access to rock radio but other rap acts are left on Black radio. Or when Adele is heard on R&B stations but Jill Scott is never played on pop radio. Richard's dilemma is why bands like Living Colour and Fishbone were given minimal support by the music industry. The 38-year-old community-building Black Rock Coalition was formed in response to this issue.



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Commentators like ethnomusicologist Fredara Hadley talked about the absurdity of Pat Boone and the overall disregard for

Black creatives. Nona Hendryx, Jason King, Billy Vera, Mick Jagger and Richard's bandmates all shared wonderful insight into his genius. But Ricard's accounts of his life are singularly candid, discerning and extremely funny. His laughter when he shares the anecdote about Pat Boone's inability to sing "Long Tall Salley" accurately exposes the ridiculousness of American racism. Richard's naturally effeminate mannerisms endeared him to white America and he was quick to explain how the pancake make-up and straightened hair allowed him to work in white clubs.

Black men wearing permed hair was not new; Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Billy Eckstine, and Ike Turner wore what was called a conk but Richard's look and music were wilder, theatrical and gay. English glam rockers, Alice Cooper, David Bowie, KISS, Sylvester, Prince, Marilyn Manson, Tyler, The Creator, Adam Lambert, Lil Nas X and Saucy Santana all have a debt to Richard's style. Bowie openly acknowledged his connection to Richard as did The Beatles and Elvis Presley.

By the end of the film Richard's contributions as one of rock's forefathers are lauded on a night at the American Music Awards after an introduction by Arsenio Hall. The 1997 event took place 42 years after his first hit record. But since that time his name had faded from the media and so far there has been no discussion on a film about his life. *Little Richard: I Am Everything* is a welcomed piece about an artist who still is not mentioned enough in conversations about American cultural icons. It is also a revelatory portrait of Richard's struggles personally and with society and how these kinds of things always seem to be the catalysts behind great art. ***Little Richard: I Am Everything* is streaming on Amazon Prime.**