

Richard Penniman (December 5, 1932 – May 9, 2020)--Michael's Rock and Roll

Posse

My Geek Squad tech came today, dressed and protected like he was handling Los Alamos nuclear waste, but it turns out not only had my screen died, but so had the PC itself. That is what I get for force-feeding the computer's memory so much rock and roll and other stuff. So I am still working off a smaller portable that is Tina's backup, but I will have this whole thing replaced soon, and then I'm off to the races.

As I wrote you when I sent you the Little Richard snack, you should now understand just how long I have followed my heart in this glorious enterprise of rock music. Listening, as I have, to a steady diet of rock since about 1960 allows me to be like the Beach Boys—planning a reunion tour to celebrate their 60th anniversary since they debuted with their first album, *Surfin' Safari*, in October 1962. I saw them on their 50th anniversary tour, when the two current BB strands reunited, and we saw them in Albuquerque's best venue, the Sandia pueblo Casino Amphitheater, where we also saw my best James Brown concert years after, and many other great shows.

But I digress, and I only want to say that I shared my little piece on a Ritchie Valens book as a *tapa*. As it happens, the 1988 *It's Only Rock 'n Roll, Pero Me Gusta* review was among my first forays into this genre, and it seemed a natural fit for this memorial to Little Richard, who died this week at the age of 87, from bone cancer. At least a dozen of you either called or wrote me, wanting to know what my thoughts were about the late Little Richard. It may not always seem so, but I actually put a great deal of time and reading into preparing the Posse Postings. So, as my “review of literature,” I read over 3 dozen articles and listened carefully to the rush of tv and radio tributes, virtually all of which pointed out his clear role as a progenitor of what became rock and roll. “Race” music is one of the many musical streams that flowed into the Rock and Roll river, along with country & western, folk, jazz, gospel, doo wop, and pop music, certainly by 1960 or so. And among the most important “race” artists were Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard. Most interesting to me was how his music and equally importantly, his persona both had lasting effect on the music that followed.

Because so much has been written about his musical influence and social standing, I have selected about half a dozen of the very best articles and news stories on his life and legacy. The usual suspect trade press and general circulation news stories truly rose to the occasion for coverage of his life and musical influence—New York Times, Billboard, The New Yorker, Rolling Stone, NPR (which always covers more musical journalism than most people realize, ahem, including my radio show), and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, where he was an inaugural member—chosen in the first year. Each of these shows a different bent: his actual music, his style and personal performance influence (the enthusiastic and animated piano-playing brio and unbelievable vocal style—both of which were fresh, and without easy characterization, then and now), and his legacy in other performers who followed and were steeped in his special brew of affect (Michael Jackson, Prince, Elton John, Freddy Mercury, and many others). In the more modern argot, his sexual persona (male and female vocal range, his fey mannerisms, and his alternately homoerotic and pansexual style) has drawn excellent analysis of gender-bending and queer sensibilities and his incontestable ground-breaking role, regarding sexuality in modern music performance. Here, I still recall the near-sexual mood that came over the women in my clandestine Albuquerque Civic Auditorium adventure, as they all broke ranks, and danced in the aisles and side of the stage. His backing horns and other instruments were synchronized and seductive, and I just had no clue. (And inasmuch as I entered the cloistered world of the Catholic seminary for high school and seminary, would have no formal insight into writhing women dancers.) I just knew it wasn't American Bandstand or Shindig, my afternoon tv musical library, where the dancing was tame in contrast. A number of books have explored Little Richard's religious roots, which seem orthogonal to his music but were deeply ingrained. Given my own religious experience and background (a mother who grew up deeply Baptist in rural Mississippi, and converted to Catholicism, and a father who had attended high school seminary but never pressured me into following his footsteps), we came from parallel religious universes.

I could go on, but I urge you to read and listen to these excellent sources for yourselves. The piece by another of my loves, Brenda Lee, speaks of her 60+ year friendship with him, and her final event with him, last Fall, when she knew he was frail and not long for this world. It reminded me of how much I have admired her

for her wonderful songs that gave me so much pleasure when I was a child, and how she was one of the few successful child stars who has prevailed over a long musical career. And if you only have the time—at the end of the semester, with grades due—check out my favorites, one by The New Yorker’s David Remnick, who situates Little Richard as well as anyone not named Ben Sisario can, and “Little Richard, The 'King And Queen' Of Rock And Roll, Dead At 87.” That is a great title, one I wish I’d written. The body of the recording lovingly touches on this duality, the chitlin’ circuit, and other surprising touches. Hidden deep in one of the articles is the surprising news (to most), that Jimi Hendrix played in Richard’s band—a truffle I knew, because I had been to the Seattle Jimi Museum, which had a great picture of pre-Experienced Jimi in the chitlin’ circuit band.

I hope all of you have as good a time plowing through these materials as I have had sharing them with you. Best wishes, stay safe, and think of how lucky we all have been to have lived when Little Richard lived.

Love and Respect,

Michael

Santa Fe, NM, May, 2020

- https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/little-richard-the-great-innovator-of-rock-and-roll?utm_source=onsite-share&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=onsite-share&utm_brand=the-new-yorker

Little Richard, the Great Innovator of Rock and Roll

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/arts/music/little-richard-songs.html?smid=em-share>

Little Richard: An Ecstasy You Couldn’t Refuse

He was a challenge to 1950s proprieties, wrapped in a package of pleasure and freedom. Hear 17 of his essential songs.

- <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/brenda-lee-little-richard-final-public-appearance-998351/>

Brenda Lee on Little Richard’s Last-Ever Public Appearance

- https://info.rockhall.com/remembering-inductee-little-richard?ecid=ACsprvuU6sMpKtTXKv8RNGgFTIyKLi_J6JZjb0Qbp5Zt0gjjmlOOSvvp9VLdDBIA6XoNUYXmKal7&utm_campaign=Marketing&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=87744983&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--fxQHiYWGE2N1QgfuhmXSyYTg4WkL8uyHxoiD61wD6yr5V611ckkYAZvp0X_5xjyyF39p0CBSZnPY0rZTfx6cWOPaviQ

In Memoriam, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

- <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/09/523627004/little-richard-obituary?origin=NOTIFY>

Little Richard, The 'King and Queen' Of Rock and Roll, Dead At 87

- <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/obituary/9375211/little-richard-embodiment-of-rock>

Little Richard: Sexual Shaman and Embodiment of Rock 'n' Roll at Its Most Incendiary

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/opinion/little-richard-queer.html>

Little Richard's Queer Triumph - The New York Times

- <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/little-richard-johnny-cash-get-rhythm-996775/>

That Time Little Richard Ignited Johnny Cash's 'Get Rhythm'