

Tutti Frutti: Little Richard, Sex, Gender, and Transgression in America and Europe

Since the passing of rock musician Little Richard on 9 May 2020, numerous individuals at the University of Konstanz have reached out to extend their condolences to me. It warms my heart, and it tickles me, that I am indelibly associated with the self-proclaimed ‘King of the Blues ... and the Queen, too!’, as a result of the fact that my two-year Zukunftscolleg Fellowship is predicated on a historical study of Richard’s career and legacy. I feel extremely fortunate that I have been led to Konstanz and the Zukunftscolleg by this unlikely figure.

What follows is a little glimpse at my developing research on Richard and an overview of my project’s aims. If you are interested in seeing my brief response to posthumous retrospectives on Richard, please see my recent article ‘Renegade or Retrograde: Questioning Little Richard’s Legacy’ [here](#).

I first developed an interest in Little Richard while undertaking my PhD research on the history of male cross-dressing performance in modern Britain. Richard, as a not-quite-drag but drag-adjacent effeminate male performer, did not figure into my PhD research in a strict sense, but this indefinite status made him all the more fascinating. Even more intriguing was how this black, theatrically effeminate man, whose gender presentation broadcasted homosexuality or at least some form of sexual difference, emerged as one of the most consequential figures in modern popular music in the 1950s; a period defined by racial bigotry, as well as pervasive repression of sexual and gender expression.

As I carried out more cursory research on Little Richard after submitting my thesis, my interest grew. The more I researched, the more unlikely it seemed that Richard was chosen as the 1950s’ first major black crossover star. I learned that Richard was a drag performer in the early days of his career, performing under the sobriquet Princess Lavonne. The young Richard surrounded himself with a milieu of gender-variant men both onstage and offstage. These individuals included: Patsy Valdalia, a moustachioed female impersonator who shared a bill with Richard at the Dew Drop Inn in New Orleans (‘He looked like a woman who had been hit with a board and didn’t get well,’ recalled Richard); a female impersonator named Bobby known for his frequent sexual rendezvous with soldiers (‘He looked just like a lady ... He would walk by the dressing rooms leading his boyfriend by the penis’); and an ensemble of drag artists who performed alongside Richard in Southern minstrel shows (‘People would come and see these girls roll their bellies and stuff’).¹ His 1955 breakout hit ‘Tutti Frutti’ was originally a tribute to anal sex (the original lyrics read: ‘Tutti Frutti / Good booty / If it don’t fit / Don’t force it / You can grease it / Make it easy’), while ‘Long Tall Sally’ (1956), in its description of a tall, ‘bald-head[ed]’ individual named ‘Sally’ surreptitiously providing gratification for ‘Uncle John’, can be interpreted as a song about sexual relations with a cross-dressed man.² This did not sound like the kind of figure who gelled with popular perceptions of 1950s popular culture. Even if we consider that rock and roll was, to some, a symbol of rebellion, this does not sufficiently explain Richard’s widespread mainstream popularity in the U.S. and abroad.

¹ Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard* (London: Pan Books Ltd: 1985), 36, 41, and 46; Lauterbach, *The Chitlin’ Circuit and the Road to Rock ‘n’ Roll* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 137-8, 216.

² David Ramsey, ‘Prayers for Richard’, *Oxford American: A Magazine of The South* 91, 11 December 2015.

Almost as surprising as Richard's apparent transgressive nature is the dearth of scholarship available on the singer. Charles White's biography *The Life and Times of Little Richard* (1984) provides an entertaining, and often pearl-clutchingly salacious, overview of the musician's career, but there are few discussions of what observers made of Richard beyond broad-brush narratives. My research as a Zukunftskolleg Fellow considers the various strands of Richard's career and legacy that present-day critics have highlighted – Richard as a musician, as a crossover star, as an African American, as a queer man, as a celebrity, as an American export – and illuminates these concepts by investigating in depth, for the first time, how contemporary consumers of music, white people, black people, queer people, non-Americans, and other relevant observers perceived the singer. In doing this, I draw upon newly discovered contemporary accounts of Richard from sources such as the mainstream press, the African-American press, music industry publications, scandal sheets, responses by LGBT groups, and other material, including British and German reports of Richard's recordings and international tours. Through an investigation of these sources, I will provide authoritative insight into the aforementioned strands of Richard's life and career, including the crucial question of how a gender-variant black performer became the most prominent artist of his day in a seemingly hostile cultural environment.