

APOLLO

EDUCATION



APOLLO THEATER
WALK OF FAME
LEGEND

LITTLE RICHARD

LITTLE RICHARD



With his electrifying music and breathtaking performances, Little Richard is the self-proclaimed “innovator, originator, emancipator, and architect of rock and roll.”

Born December 5, 1932, Richard Wayne Penniman grew up in a large, middle class family in Macon, Georgia. The third oldest of twelve children, Richard displayed a passion for music early on. He loved the soulful singing and infectious rhythms of gospel music he heard in church. The music’s energy and excitement inspired him to sing, holler, and bang on just about anything he could get his hands on, from tin cans to the front steps.

At eight, Richard formed a vocal gospel group with two of his younger brothers. They called themselves the Tiny Tots and played for church events around Macon. At 14, he left home to join a traveling **medicine show**. Richard’s job was to sing popular songs that attracted customers to buy “snake oil”, a fake medicine, which claimed to cure an assortment of illnesses.

One night in Fitzgerald, Georgia, Richard visited a local **jook joint** to catch a rhythm and blues act named B. Brown and His Orchestra. Before they were to begin, the group’s vocalist had fallen sick and Richard was encouraged to sit in. His powerful, wailing voice seized everyone’s attention, including B. Brown’s, who after the show asked Richard to join his band. The 15 year old singer accepted and soon became the group’s feature act, taking the stage name “Little Richard” on account of his youthful age and size. The blossoming young entertainer dazzled audiences throughout the southern **chitlin’ circuit**.

By the age of 18, Little Richard was leading his own band, recording his own music, and developing his own identity. As his popularity grew, he became more outgoing in his performances. The larger than life personality he displayed on

DO NOW!

Little Richard Jam Session

Grab an instrument and let’s have a jam session. Not just any jam session though, a Little Richard Jam Session! Before we get started, like Little Richard, let’s get dressed for the big show. Style your hair in a wild way and wear your most outrageous clothes!

Here are some suggestions for instruments you can play:

- Make a drum set out of tin cans and shoeboxes, pretending you are Little Richard banging on his home’s front steps as a boy.
- Play piano with your arms behind your back or with one leg over your arms!
- Wail, scream, and holler with your strongest singing voice... “Wooooooh!”
- Like Little Richard’s good friends Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, plug in a guitar to an amplifier and electrify your performance!

You’re all set, now let’s rock and roll!



DID YOU KNOW?

Before being called rock and roll, Little Richard and other musicians produced what were called **Race Records**, a category of music that marketed African American artists to predominantly African American audiences. Little Richard's passion to perform and record music for anyone, regardless of skin color, generated wider interest and popularity for black music amongst white teenagers.

In late 1964, Little Richard hired a young guitar player named Maurice James. James toured with Little Richard and the Upsetters for six months before his final show with the band at the Apollo Theater in the summer of 1965. It just so happened that the guitarist had won Amateur Night at the Apollo the year before. After performing with Little Richard, James went on to become one of the most influential guitarists and pop figures in rock and roll history, later changing his name to Jimi Hendrix.

LISTENING & VIEWING

“Lucille” (1957), “It’s Little Richard” (TV Special, U.K., 1964), “Didn’t It Rain” (Live at the Apollo Theater, 1985)

stage complimented his music; a sound which was as loud and exciting as his appearance. In addition to wearing flashy costumes and makeup, he sported an extravagant hairstyle called a “pompadour,” inspired by his friend and former piano teacher, Esquerita.

In 1951, a disc jockey from Cleveland, Ohio named Alan Freed first broadcast the term “**rock and roll**” over the radio. He was referring to the new sound sweeping the nation, a blend of **blues, rhythm and blues, and country music**. During this time, teenagers came out in masses to the Apollo to catch early rock and roll pioneers such as Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, and Bo Diddley. Riding on a string of successful hit recordings including “Tutti Frutti,” “Long Tall Sally,” and “Good Golly Miss Molly,” Little Richard sold out the Apollo on nearly a dozen occasions between the years 1956-57.

In 1957, Little Richard took a break from show business. Inspired by the desire to be a preacher, he retired to his home in California and spent his days studying the bible and writing gospel music. Rock and roll in the meantime, exploded in popularity to become a global phenomenon. After five years out of the spotlight, Little Richard was ready for a comeback.

While rock and roll was big in the U.S., Little Richard was looking elsewhere to mark his return. Between the years 1962-64, he set out on three major tours of the United Kingdom. Rock and roll swept through the U.K. in the 1950s, with British fans looking to Little Richard as a defining figure of the music and culture. By 1977, Little Richard was considered one of the originators of rock and roll.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Little Richard continued to perform, tour, and appear on television and in movies. He received numerous honors recognizing his contributions to rock and roll and American culture, including the GRAMMY Lifetime Achievement Award in 1993. Future rock icons including Paul McCartney and John Lennon of The Beatles, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley, James Brown, Otis Redding, and Jimi Hendrix; all claim Little Richard as a major influence on their music and development as musicians.

As recently as 2006, Little Richard stepped onto the Apollo stage and brought down the house, just as he had done in decades past. With his signature vocal “Wooooooh!” and pounding away at the piano, the crowd poured into the Apollo’s aisles to shake, rattle, and roll along with the thrilling performer. In the year 2016, having paved the way for countless acts to follow, Little Richard is without question an American legend; an original “architect of rock and roll.”

Richard “Little Richard” Penniman was inducted into the Apollo Walk of Fame in 2006.

LITTLE RICHARD
SOLD OUT THE
APOLLO ON NEARLY A
DOZEN OCCASIONS
BETWEEN THE YEARS 1956-57.



WORDS TO KNOW

“The innovator, originator, emancipator, and architect of Rock and Roll”

An **innovator** is one who expands upon an already existing idea. An **originator** is one who thinks of an original idea. An **emancipator** is one who frees something so to make it new. In addition, an **architect** is a designer of something new, most often a building.

Little Richard expanded upon, thought of, and freed new ideas during the 1950s. Doing so, he helped build a foundation for rock and roll music, which developed into one of the most important cultural phenomenon of the 20th century. Like Little Richard, each of us is unique. Every one of us has the potential to innovate, originate, and emancipate something new.

What makes you original? What sets you apart from everyone else?

Medicine Show, Jook Joint, & Chitlin’ Circuit

Medicine shows were traveling acts common during the 1800s and early 1900s. Singers, dancers, and magicians entertained crowds in attempts to sell “snake oil,” a fake medicine, which claimed to cure an assortment of illnesses. The shows were frequently found along the **chitlin’ circuit**, a route of performance venues safe for African American entertainers to play during otherwise racially unstable times. Stretching throughout the southern, eastern, and midwestern United States, the chitlin’ circuit also developed a culture of **jook joints**, informal entertainment venues that presented music and dancing.

Rock and Roll

Coming out of the largely African American musical traditions of the South, being the **blues, rhythm and blues, and country music**, rock and roll transformed the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Influenced by the 12 bar musical form and expressiveness of the **blues**, vocal howls and subject matter of **country** music, and instrumentation and driving beat of **rhythm and blues**; rock and roll represents a crossroads in American culture. Blending tradition and technology, the increase in home television sets during the 1950s, led to audiences first seeing the musicians they had been listening to on the radio for some time. This presented an opportunity for African American artists to promote their music to audiences previously unaware of their work.

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