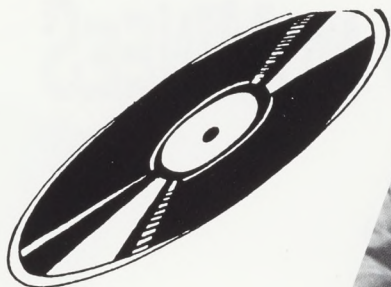




LaVerne Baker



Jackie Wilson



LITTLE RICHARD

Born Richard Penniman
December 25th, 1932 or 1935
Macon, Georgia

Richard Penniman wasn't exactly on top of the world when he sent a demo tape to Art Rupe of Specialty Records in Los Angeles. He'd had his share of breaks, but none of his rhythm and blues sides had captured the public's imagination in a big way or revealed any of the gleefully uninhibited vocal style that would become his trademark. In 1951, as a teenager with gospel training and church-sponsored piano lessons behind him — not to mention the wealth of experience that comes from being thrown out of your own family's home at age thirteen — Little Richard won an RCA contract at an audition sponsored by Atlanta radio station WGST. From RCA, he moved to Houston in 1952 and joined Don Robey's Peacock label.

But Little Richard has said that it was back in Macon, Georgia — labelless again — that he was struck by the inspiration for his legendary work to come. "I was washing dishes at the Greyhound bus station at the time. I couldn't talk back to my boss man. He would bring all these pots back for me to wash, and one day I said, 'I've got to do something to stop this man bringing back all these pots for me to wash,' and I said, 'A wop bop ahu bop a wop bam boom, take 'em out!' and that's what I meant at the time. And so I wrote 'Good Golly, Miss Molly' in the kitchen; I wrote 'Long Tall Sally' in that kitchen."

The actual session, as opposed to that moment of divine inspiration, is easier to pinpoint: September

14th, 1955. Art Rupe of Specialty had been attracted by the hard edges of Little Richard's voice, which he thought would jibe well with a New Orleans R&B sound. He paired Penniman with a rhythm section at a session supervised by producer Bumps Blackwell. What resulted was no more startling than any of Little Richard's previous recordings, except for one song, "Tutti Frutti," a knockoff number with obscene lyrics that had been cleaned up for the occasion by New Orleans lyricist Dorothy La Bostrie. Released as a single two weeks later, "Tutti Frutti" was called a "cleverly styled novelty with nonsense words, rapid-fire delivery" by *Billboard*. It sold 500,000 copies, and Little Richard's voice rocked and rolled through two years' worth of hits on Specialty, including "Long Tall Sally," "Rip It Up," "The Girl Can't Help It" and "Lucille."

In 1957, claiming to have witnessed a vision of the apocalypse while on tour in Australia, Little Richard decided to give it all up for the Lord. He tossed his jewels into the Sydney harbor and abandoned a musical career for a ministerial calling. In 1964, the British Invasion would lure him back to rock and roll. He recut some of his classics, sang the blues and scaled new heights of flamboyance in the early Seventies with his "Bronze Liberace" persona — until the Lord came calling once again.



Bobby Darin