

# LITTLE RICHARD



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1951-1992</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Jenny Jenny (1957)</i>

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*Only Solitaire*

Artist: *Little Richard*

Years: *1955-1958*

George Starostin's Reviews

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# HERE'S LITTLE RICHARD

Album released:

March 4, 1957

V A L U E  
2 4 4 5 5

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Tutti Frutti; 2) True, Fine Mama; 3) Can't Believe You Wanna Leave; 4) Ready Teddy; 5) Baby; 6) Slippin' And Slidin'; 7) Long Tall Sally; 8) Miss Ann; 9) Oh Why?; 10) Rip It Up; 11) Jenny Jenny; 12) She's Got It.

## REVIEW

Unlike quite a few of his contemporary colleagues, Little Richard wasn't about the LP market at all — meaning that all (both) of his early LPs are largely collections of singles, and this is cool, because something tells me that if there was going to be serious filler on Little Richard albums, that filler would probably have sounded like his pre-Specialty material from 1951 to 1954: decent, but absolutely not outstanding, conventional jump blues and doo-wop, occasional echoes of which you can still witness on the Specialty era B-sides. For the most part, though, **Here's Little Richard** should be called **Here's THE Little Richard** — the one and only Little Richard whom we recognize as one of the principal fathers of rock'n'roll, and whose classic tracks still sound every bit as exuberant and exciting more than half a century later as they did back in the mid-Fifties. And I really mean it — look up 'exuberant' in Wiktionary and you should be seeing a YouTube link to a video of Little Richard punching out 'Tutti Frutti' on his piano.



Anyway, I am not being entirely correct when I say that **Here's Little Richard** is just a collection of 45"s: more precisely, 6 out of 12 songs are taken from previously issued A- and B-sides, 2 more would be issued as another single several months *after* the LP ('Jenny Jenny' / 'Miss Ann'), and 4 more are album-only numbers. Of these, no fewer than four numbers are bona fide classics — four pop music cornerstones, inextricably etched into the public conscience: 'Tutti Frutti', 'Ready

Teddy', 'Long Tall Sally' (notice the rhythmic coherence of the titles?), and 'Rip It Up', mostly credited to Little Richard himself or his most loyal and devoted court songwriter Robert Blackwell. What can I say that has not already been said about this stuff? How it invents pretty much everything about rock'n'roll — the furious tempo, the minimalistic melody, the hyper-energetic punch, the scream-your-ass-off wild vocalist, the swaggy rock'n'roll lingo? (That last bit, by the way, is the only one which became dated fairly fast, due to "sock hop balls" and "dungaree dolls" no longer a major part of teenage existence). The only thing it does not invent is rock'n'roll electric guitar: Little Richard himself is strictly piano, and his preferred soloists are in the brass business, most notably tenor sax player Lee Allen who delivers all the most exciting parts and is a bit of a legend by his personal self.

The key word here is probably «stamina»: few of these numbers last longer than two minutes and a handful of seconds, not because this was the maximum length of a 45" (it wasn't), but because it was hard to maintain the maniacal level of energy from the first to the last second without dropping down for one bit. This is indeed the key difference between Little Richard and everybody else: all these classic songs are «bangers» from top to bottom — the rule is that you can try and wind up the excitement dial, but you can *never* turn it back down. There is no quiet-to-loud dynamics *à la* 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin On'. There is no settling down into a powerful, but steady, repetitive groove (I love Bo Diddley, but I cannot deny that sometimes I actually find myself in danger of falling asleep to the lulling monotony of the Bo Diddley beat). Instead, you get hit right on the head with an opening wop-bop-a-loo-mop-alop-bom-bom or a ready-set-go-man-go, and it never friggin' stops until you run right out of gas.

Nobody in the rock'n'roll business could exercise these crazy 100-yard dashes better than Little Richard — Elvis did come close with his covers of 'Tutti Frutti' and 'Ready Teddy', as well as other material, but when you play them back to back, I think you will be able to feel how, to Little Richard, this style comes totally naturally and how he manages to slice through the tunes without breaking a sweat (figuratively speaking, of course — in the literal sense, he was probably dripping buckets), whereas Elvis, so it seems, actually has to work real hard to achieve a similar effect. The one song that might best illustrate this is 'Jenny Jenny': a great, catchy tune which was *never* covered by any of Little Richard's contemporaries, simply because, I think, he was the only one to be able to have enough breath to deliver its rapid-fire lyrics at top volume, although even *he* sounds literally out of breath in a few places — it is quite a gargantuan vocal achievement (the only cover version I know is one by the Sonics, and there is a reason why these guys are known as arguably the wildest band to come out from America's entire garage-rock movement).

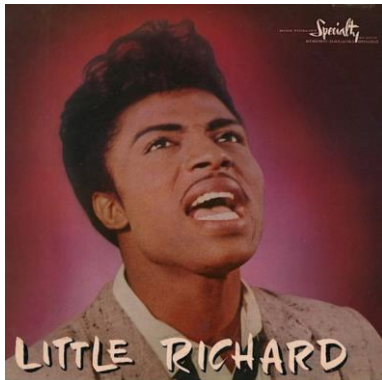
Ironically, this madhouse rush, I think, is the principal reason why Mr. Penniman was able to easily get away with so much blatant sexual innuendo in his lyrics: when you are driving along at top speed, your words assume the blurred shapes of blinking telegraph poles, and by the time you actually start wondering about the true nature of Uncle John's relationship with Long Tall Sally, you are already well into the next song. (If you ever even start wondering in the first place, that is.)

One other thing worth an explicit mention is that, despite a unified overall mood, all of these classics actually have their own melodies rather than being pure re-writes of each other. Slightly different chord sequences, significantly different vocal hooks; when you put it all together, only Chuck Berry could beat Little Richard and his team at early rock'n'roll songwriting. In mood terms, though, there are precisely two types of euphoria: the dance-your-head-off type (best exemplified by the double punch of 'Ready Teddy' and 'Rip It Up') and the drool-your-tongue-off type ('Tutti Frutti', 'Long Tall Sally', 'Jenny Jenny' — perennial anthems to primal, uncontrollable lust). But then again, what *other* types of euphoria are there in early rock'n'roll? Cars and guitars were hardly Little Richard's forte — leave that stuff to Chuck.

That said, one should also be able to acknowledge that, for all his greatness when it comes to delivering rock'n'roll headbangers, Little Richard was decidedly a one-trick pony. The non-single material here, while not nearly as boring as his songs from the early 1950s, is decidedly forgettable next to the hits, ranging from OK-level jump blues ('Baby') to New Orleans-style R&B better left to the likes of Fats Domino ('Oh Why?') to OK-level balladry ('Can't Believe You Wanna Leave'). There is some nice sax work to be found ('Baby' has a couple of cool descending riffs), and Little Richard's voice is always strong and in control, but time has not been kind to these songs not just because they weren't singles — rather because they weren't so brilliantly reflective of Little Richard's unique artistic persona.

Essentially, a Little Richard song has to be fast, loud, screechy, and overwhelmingly C-R-A-Z-Y. Anything less than that, and it's like the Ramones covering a Joni Mitchell ballad or something. Fortunately, **Here's Little Richard** is genuinely crazy for more than half of its running time, and at least the slower songs could be justified for giving the listener some time to catch your breath before moving on to the next headbanger. All in all, with its overall short length (12 songs in fewer than 30 minutes), there's enough musical dynamite here to blast a hole that tunnels well into 2020, and, hopefully, will still be resonating long after all of us are dead and gone.





# LITTLE RICHARD

Album released:  
July 1958

V A L U E  
2 4 4 4 5

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) *Keep A-Knockin'*; 2) *By The Light Of The Silvery Moon*; 3) *Send Me Some Lovin'*; 4) *Boo Hoo Hoo Hoo*; 5) *Heeby Jeebies*; 6) *All Around The World*; 7) *Good Golly Miss Molly*; 8) *Baby Face*; 9) *Hey Hey Hey Hey*; 10) *Ooh! My Soul*; 11) *The Girl Can't Help It*; 12) *Lucille*.

## REVIEW

The second and last truly indispensable album by Little Richard, released on the Specialty label, was even more of a compilation than the first one: at the time of its release, all but one of the tracks ('By The Light Of The Silvery Moon') had been issued as A- or B-sides, and even 'Silvery Moon' would also be issued as an A-side half a year later. Furthermore, by the time **Little Richard** came out, the man himself no longer played the Devil's music: having seen the light in October 1957 after a very special plane flight, he was touring the country not with a backing rock'n'roll band, but with the Little Richard Evangelistic Team, something which might, perhaps, explain why the LP failed to chart, despite featuring fully authentic rock'n'roll.



In any case, God may have possessed Little Richard, but it was Specialty Records who possessed the rights to Little Richard's recorded output, and as long as rock'n'roll was not dead (and in 1958, it was still hanging on), the option to just sit on it was a non-option. The best stuff always gets rolled out first, and for this 12-song collection, the label diligently put together most of the A- and B-sides they had released up until July 1958, not forgetting even the three singles which had not



originally been included on **Here's Little Richard**, though they could have: 'Heeby Jeebies' (October '56), 'The Girl Can't Help It' (December '56), and 'Lucille' (February '57). These were later followed by 'Keep A-Knockin' (August '57), 'Good Golly Miss Molly' (January '58, though recorded as early as October '56), and 'Ooh! My Soul' (May '58).

These are, almost naturally so, the best songs on the entire album; my only problem with them is that I do not really have any illustrious insights to explain what makes them delightfully different from 'Tutti Frutti' and 'Ready Teddy'. Well, except for 'Lucille', perhaps. 'Lucille' is different — of all of Little Richard's early singles, it is the most musically intriguing, since its major hook comes neither from the vocals nor from the lead instruments, but from Frank Fields' iconic train-style bassline. This makes the song feel unusually deep and heavy for Richard — hardly a coincidence that Deep Purple loved to cover it on stage — yet at the same time, it has a flying feel, due to the bassline's steady rising-and-falling pattern. In contrast with the wild and noisy sound of most of the other hits, 'Lucille' feels sharp, collected, almost a little mystical, all because of that bass power. (Do not laugh, but I think that my very first childhood acquaintance with the song was through Paul McCartney's 1988 cover on his **Back In The USSR** album — and even in that Eighties-colored context, it managed to sound distinctly different and more threatening than any other song on that record). There's also the deal with its bridge section, whose "I woke up this morning, Lucille was not in sight..." *does* sound like a distant, yet personalized, threat, as if the wildman whose wildness used to be fairly abstract suddenly began to focus his attention on somebody in particular. All in all, this goes farther than innocent party fun.

The others really don't. 'Good Golly Miss Molly' also calls a girl by name, but merely to express admiration at her crazy dancing skills, and there is no creepy bassline to spoil the atmosphere, either. Lyrically, it is more innocent than 'Long Tall Sally', though, of course, not being able to "hear your momma call" does bring on certain implications anyway. Just how many Miss Mollies were seduced by these devilish howls into selling their souls (and their parents) for rock'n'roll remains statistically unclear, but I'd bet anything that their number by far exceeded the number of souls Father Pennyman was trying to bring closer to the Lord at the very same time his latest single hit the stores.

'The Girl Can't Help It', a song that ended up as a lustful ode to the allure of Jayne Mansfield in the famous rock'n'roll movie of the same name, slows down the tempo just enough for us to be able to make out each single word — "if she smiling, beefsteak they come well done" (how the hell did this ever make its way past censorship?). And the old joke tune 'Keep A-Knockin', which Richard re-credited to himself on the formal basis of new and improved lyrics, put Louis Jordan to sleep forever, as it whipped up Richard's already classic frenzy to even higher levels — this is rock'n'roll madness incarnate

right from the opening «knocking» drum fills, which even John Bonham saw fit to eventually incorporate into Led Zeppelin's 'Rock'n'Roll' — as if saying, «You say *rock'n'roll*, you think *keep a-knockin' but you can't come in*».

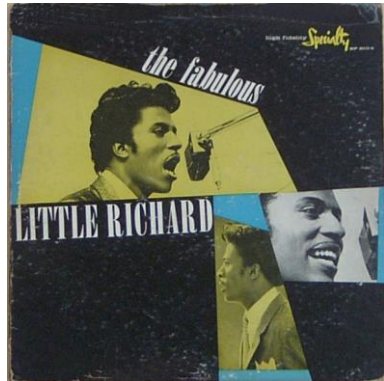
That said, already here a few of the entries are marginally less hot than classic competition. For some reason, every once in a while Little Richard chose — or was forced to choose? — to perform old show standards, such as 'Baby Face' and 'By The Light Of The Silvery Moon'; one theory says that this was the record company's evil plan to make peace between the terrifying rock'n'roller and the terrified parents of his fans, while another theory says that this was essentially a joke on Richard's part, since the numbers would be recast in his wild rock'n'roll mood anyway. There is no denying that he does a solid singing job on both tunes, but they do come across as comical rather than exciting, especially if you are familiar with the source material — and, therefore, cannot really hold a candle to the «genuine» stuff.

There are also a couple strangely softer numbers, such as 'All Around The World', written by the trusty Robert Blackwell but cast in a poppier style, with kid-friendly sax riffs and a rather bland approach to belting out those blues triplets. 'I'll Never Let You Go (Boo Hoo Hoo Hoo)' is also a bit of a throwback to Little Richard's earliest days of R&B singing, though still worth experiencing just to hear the unique vocal register juggling over all the "boo-A-hoo-A-hoo-A-hoo"s. For the record, this is also where you will find 'Hey Hey Hey Hey', which, I think, most people believe always comes bundled with 'Kansas City' after the Beatles did the bundling, but in reality they are quite different entities — 'Hey Hey Hey Hey' begins with "going back to Birmingham, way down in Alabama", which the Fab Four might have found a tad too... *localized* to sing about (or perhaps they did not want any unnecessary political connotations, given the situation in 1963–64).

Anyway, the simple truth is that fast Little Richard is almost always preferable to slow Little Richard, and not the least because, somehow, all the fast songs on this album sound different, while most of the slow ones sound exactly like 'Miss Ann' and 'Oh Why?' from the previous record. But then again, there was a good reason why most of the slow songs were B-sides and most of the fast ones were A-sides — and, fortunately for us and for Specialty Records, **Little Richard** puts together enough of the latter to still produce a terrific, awe-inspiring impression.







# THE FABULOUS LITTLE RICHARD

Album released:

1958

V A L U E  
2 3 2 1 2

More info:

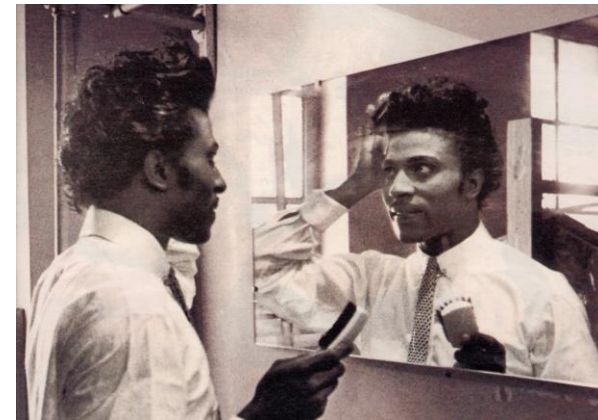


**Tracks:** 1) Shake A Hand; 2) Chicken Little Baby; 3) All Night Long; 4) The Most I Can Offer; 5) Lonesome And Blue; 6) Wonderin'; 7) She Knows How To Rock; 8) **Kansas City**; 9) Directly From My Heart; 10) Maybe I'm Right; 11) Early One Morning; 12) I'm Just A Lonely Guy; 13) **Whole Lotta Shakin'**.

## REVIEW

Little Richard's third and last LP before he gave himself to God and switched his gender to Gospel... oh, wait, **The Fabulous Little Richard** actually came out *after* he did that, so does that mean being obliged to change the lyrics of 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On' to "come on over baby, we got the Bible in the barn?" No, of course not. The answer is simple: Little Richard may have abandoned the devil's music, but Little Richard's fans most certainly did not, and that meant Specialty Records were not simply going to sit on the dozen or so outtakes that were archived from the man's recording sessions. Instead, all through 1958 and 1959 they managed to keep up a steady flow of singles, and at some particular date on the border of 1958 and 1959 (data sources are in conflict here) they even put most of them together on one great big LP, which should have born the honest title of **The Dregs Of Little Richard**, but they ultimately chose the next best thing and called it **The Fabulous Little Richard** instead.

Unless you are already a Fifties' historian, chances are that you won't recognize *any* of these titles by name, with the obvious exception of 'Kansas City' — because everybody knows 'Kansas City', and it is this particular version of 'Kansas City', with but a snippet of the actual song written in 1952 by Leiber and Stoller segueing seamlessly into a reprise of 'Hey



Hey Hey Hey', already released earlier, that would later be covered by the Fab Four on **Beatles For Sale**. Amusingly, the call-and-response vocals which we all remember so well ("hey baby — HEY BABY!") have nothing to do with Little Richard as such and everything to do with the production work by Sonny Bono, who was asked by Specialty to «commercialize» these outtakes a little — so what he did was hire a bubblegum girl group called the Stewart Sisters to overdub backup vocals, both on this song and a number of others. Actually, on 'Kansas City' it works well, because all those "hey baby", "hey child", "hey now" vocal taunts almost screamed to be replied to already in the original, and the girls do a good job taunting the lead singer back (with the Beatles, it turned out to be different since the backing vocals were left to the guys, which gave a bit of a gang-stalking impression). On the more soulful numbers, the effect is different — too much of a discrepancy between Little Richard's monumental vocal tone and the Stewart Sisters' teenage bleating.

However, the main problem with the album is certainly not the overdubs, but the simple fact that most of these songs were originally left out for a reason: they are all fairly generic, formulaic, and inferior to the similar, but better tunes that had already been published. At least half of the tracks are based on the exact same 'Send Me Some Lovin' chord progression — 'Shake A Hand', 'All Night Long', 'The Most I Can Offer', etc. — and the only way to distinguish them is by noting the subtle changes in Little Richard's own emotions, or, to put it simply, remember on which songs he screams his head off and on which ones he consents to a bit of soulful crooning (before screaming his head off).

The problem is, Little Richard as a *soul* singer is simply of little interest to anybody. What comes naturally and uniquely to Little Richard is being the madman of rock'n'roll — whenever he slows down and tries to outbalance the madness with seriousness, soulfulness, and sentimentality, it's like he is leaving his native turf. A song like 'Shake A Hand' does not really work, because the way he belts out "just leave it to me, don't ever be ashamed, just give me a chance, I'll take care of every thing" does not convey any genuine feeling — you can sense it is still the raving madman calling, and who would be stupid enough to "leave everything" to a raving madman? This is the sphere in which the teacher — Little Richard — comes off as a sore loser next to the student — James Brown. James Brown could never be enough of an aggressive madman to beat Little Richard in singing 'Tutti Frutti', but Little Richard could never muster enough subtlety and humility to beat James Brown in singing 'Please Please Please'. And *this* is why most of these songs were outtakes; *this* is why he never had a big hit in this particular style; *this* is why you never recognize any of these titles.

It is only the last track on the first side of the record that actually begins to remind us why Little Richard was unique in the first place — although, truth be told, 'She Knows How To Rock' is nothing more than a tiny variation on the formula of

‘Tutti Frutti’ and ‘She’s Got It’, even regurgitating some of the same lyrics, so it is only a relief in the context of all the same-sounding slow soul ballads on this LP, but hardly a song worth mentioning otherwise. Slightly more interesting is Richard’s take on Jerry Lee Lewis’ ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On’, a song which he probably wished he’d written himself — however, unlike Jerry Lee, Little Richard knew or cared nothing about the powers of loud-and-quiet dynamics: his own songs had always been 2 minute-long outbursts of non-stop energy, and so in the case of ‘Shakin’ he simply rips out the titillatingly «teasing» "all you gotta do honey is stand in one spot, wiggle around just a little bit" part of the song, depriving it of its main attraction and, ironically, making it ever so much «safe» and «polite» than Jerry Lee’s version in the end. Curious, instructive, and, once again, fairly disappointing.

Actually, if there is a genuine «surprise» on the entire record, the award should rather go to the slow blues ‘Lonesome And Blue’, the only song here that switches to a minor key, with the singer actually trying to switch his mood to frightened and paranoid — even when he takes these high-pitched sustained notes, they feel like trembling with subtle horror. It would be interesting to know more about the context of this recording — again, not that it is an atmospheric masterpiece or anything, but it is the only song on the LP and, in fact, one of the very few songs in the entire pre-gospel era Little Richard catalog, on which Richard Wayne Penniman seems to be playing somebody other than «Little Richard». This one at least might be worth checking out of genuine curiosity.

To add yet another injury, the tracks date from several different sessions stretched all the way from 1955 to 1957, meaning that the sound quality is vastly uneven — the extremely stupid ‘Chicken Little Baby’, for instance, sounds like a lo-fi demo, particularly in regard to the piano playing, while the recording of ‘Kansas City’ is totally in line with Specialty’s finest production samples. But it is not so much the sound quality itself that is the problem as the fact that those early 1955 songs were still deeply rooted in Little Richard’s early, pre-‘Tutti Frutti’, R&B career. Imagine a Beatles album where half of the songs date back to their Decca audition days, and the other half are outtakes from the **Rubber Soul** sessions, and the tagline goes «The Fabulous Beatles!»... and the Beatles themselves have only just accepted Jesus in their hearts and singing "I read the news today oh boy, about a lucky man who saved us all", and there you have it — 1958 in a nutshell.

