



From Kevin Reynolds' collection: print-portrait of Little Richard signed by Little Richard and the painter, Dave Oxtoby
Print © Dave Oxtoby
Image photograph © Kevin Reynolds. Used by kind permission.



Little Richard's performance at the Gaumont, Bradford in 1963 (Musicians for the evening included Bo Diddley).

Poet's Note

The poem takes the form of a chart of colours for Dave Oxtoby's portrait-painting of Little Richard. These are colours I've invented and imagined (marked in **bold**) each one referencing an aspect of Richard's personal, or ancestral narrative. In the 1979 Arena Documentary *The King and I* (2020)¹ Oxtoby states that "Royal International Blue" is the secret to correctly printing his work (0.12.55 - 0.13.00). Thus, the naming of colour is a thread throughout this poem; colour as in paint and colour as in race and sexuality. Colour here is a double pun: first, it is a reference to his sexuality and his oft-referenced flamboyance; the term "colourful" is used as colloquial-code for camp (meaning effeminate) - often perceived as a signifier of male queerness. Second, as an African American, Little Richard's performances are considered "raced" performances existing within the segregation era and the Black American civil rights' movements of the fifties and sixties.

Paint charts often contain evocative paint names; a kind of heightened sales-pitch poetics, promoting a lifestyle choice or hiraeth (a nostalgia for an imagined past): "Sulking Room Pink" "Borrowed Light" and "Slipper Satin"² (Farrow and Ball, 2020). Anyone who has witnessed paint being mixed knows that a paint's final colour never entirely reveals the secret of its composite colours, and this idea is the key idea in this poem. Of course, what I describe in this poem aren't colours one could ever purchase – any more than one can ever procure a life or a soul (no matter what supremacist history has decreed). And that's the point: these hues are garnered through each of our unique human journeys. And the colours I present here, I suggest, form part of Little Richard Penniman's substance, spirit and history. His

¹ Ironically in reference to Elvis Presley as the white mainstream's appointed King of Rock n Roll rather than Little Richard, though Richard contested Presley's crowning. This poem refocuses the gaze upon Little Richard as the Architect or "Quasar" of Rock n Roll – as he liked to be known.

² These are current colours in the Farrow and Ball paint collection (2020).

colours were steeped in his being an African-American, working class, Queer man and Entertainer - even if all those colours weren't always visible to the naked, indeed white, or straight, "mainstream" ear or eye.

Little Richard was a Black, Queer, Working Class, activist. At times this status was both complex and conflicted. He was Out (by degrees). He was loud. He was connotatively proud before the official white-led American Gay Rights Movements of the 60's and 70's. He was a forerunner of Prince, before Paisley Park, Purple Rain and Little Red Corvette. Then - given societal, religious and thus internalised homophobia - he hid. He renounced Rock n Roll. In 1982, in an America under the cloven-foot of Senator Jesse Helms' draconian, anti-gay, anti-Black, underhand and on the dotted-line policies, Little Richard told chat show host David Letterman: "I'm not gay now. I was gay all my life. I believe I was one of the first gay people to come out [...] I'm a man for the first time in my life. I know how you feel now" (Don Giller, 2016, 0.08.16-0.08.39). But in 1985 (in an edition of the Southbank Show devoted to Richard's life and work), in reference to his sexuality and the 1950's he stated:

"in those days I just loved whatever came, I didn't refuse nothing. If you knocked on my door and I wanted more.. for sure [...] I think gay people are so artistic, they're so loving, they're so kind, and they've been so discriminated against too. People gotta remember that God, Jesus died for the gay people, he lives for them today, he came out of the grave for them, and they have a right to the tree of life just like anyone else" (Myrrh Further, 2014, 0.20.10 - 0.20.40).

As a theatre and performance scholar, my passionate interest is the performative utilisation of joy as a mode of resistance. Little Richard engaged with joy, desire, spectacle and camp as modes of resistance; central tenets of what Queer performance scholar Ezra Berkley Nepon terms "Dazzle Camouflage" (2016). Joy - in performance terms - can erroneously be written off as lightweight, frivolous and marginalised as fluff. I'm fascinated by the aspects of Little Richard's Queer identity that were hidden - but sometimes spoken - in plain sight and in defiance of the numerous and various forces of anti-gay oppression.

In reflecting upon Little Richard as a muse for the painter Dave Oxtoby, I came to a creative understanding: Oxtoby was painting more than Richard's immediate physical image, he was painting the backstory – and thus the *history* - of Little Richard Penniman.

Rommi Smith, June 2020

Palette for a Portrait of Little Richard

© Rommi Smith (2020)

“My pictures are a response to the music – they’re not really portraits [...] the main point of the picture is the feeling that one gets from it emotionally [...]” Dave Oxtoby in: Emma Matthews. 2020. *Arena: The King and I*. [Online]. [Accessed 15th May 2020]. Available from: <https://vimeo.com/396467824>

“Although the crossover from this rhythm and blues to rock’n’roll might have meant the loss of an audience that knew the song Lucille was about a drag queen, or that Tutti Frutti began as an ode to anal sex, the frank and exuberant world from which they – and Little Richard – sprang, has left plenty of evidence for black feminist, queer, and trans musical histories to uncover (and for motivated digital crate-diggers to seek out).” Tavia N’yongo. 2020. Too black, too queer, too holy: why Little Richard never truly got his dues. *The Guardian* [Online]. 12th May. [Accessed 15th May 2020]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/may/12/too-black-queer-holy-why-little-richard-never-truly-got-his-dues-turbaned-drag-queen-sexual-underworld>

“I loved him [...] he had the guts to be king and queen all at the same time!”
Etta James cited in: Gayle F. Wald. 2007. *Shout Sister Shout: The Untold Story of Rock n Roll trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*. Boston: Beacon Press, p.88.

“Little Richard, King of the Blues ... and the Queen, too!” Little Richard (introducing himself at the Club Matinee in Houston, Texas, in 1953) cited in: Tavia N’yongo. 2020. Too black, too queer, too holy: why Little Richard never truly got his dues. *The Guardian* [Online]. 12th May. [Accessed 15th May 2020]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/may/12/too-black-queer-holy-why-little-richard-never-truly-got-his-dues-turbaned-drag-queen-sexual-underworld>

I

Pitch -

the wish in a sharecropper's holler
sung across midnight.

II

Tubman's Moon ³

searchlight for a key
in the form of a treble clef.

III

Joy -

the colour of the sun
the dawn Du Bois' *Souls* ⁴ were born.

IV

Counter Reading -

that shade of red
which seduces the eye
to read Little
as lift, or life
instead –

V

Daddy Wanted Seven Boys ⁵ -

Richard messed that up.
Can't stay in *his* house
and play the Devil's music.
Shimmy, shimmy, shimmer –
shimmy shadows Out:
brother shake your tail feather,
wear your colours proud!

³ Harriet Tubman, leader and strategist of the Underground Railroad: the network of safehouses and escape routes for runaway enslaved Africans.

⁴ reference to W.E.B. Du Bois (pronounced Doo Boyce), Africanist, eminent scholar of Black American experience and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is his seminal book of critical essays reflecting on race, racism and examining Black protest. The book intertwines critical and cultural philosophical thinking with references including spirituals, hymns and songs. The second chapter is entitled: Of the Dawn of Freedom.

⁵ Aged sixteen or seventeen, Little Richard was made homeless due to paternal homophobic abuse. In a 1985 Southbank Show documentary about his life and work, Richard stated: "My daddy put me out. He say he wanted seven boys and I was messin' it up because I was gay [...] he told me I had to do what he wanted me [to do]. I didn't do what he said. I got out" (Myrrh Further, 0.05.38 – 0.05.55).

VI

“Sissy-Boy!” -
haunts Little Richard Penniman
all the way down Pleasant Hill
past the “Coloreds Only Waiting Room.”
He’s on the next train Out
of Georgia’s Macon Station
and he’ll never quite return -
though *Lucille* may will him home again.

VII

1. **Pancake Thirty-One** ⁶
2. **Slicked-Back Ebony Conk** ⁷
3. **A White House for Mother** ⁸
4. **A Lavender Cadillac
on the Drive** ⁹ –
just four shades of Liberty
in his handbook called:
How to Survive.

VIII

Enough to Make Ripe Fruit Blush:
that thought
of what this Macon guy
might do
with you
under the spell
of a Memphis moon.

⁶ The name of the foundation makeup Little Richard and other entertainers wore.

⁷ A conk (a derivative of the term Congolene, a type of hair-straightener) was the name of Richard’s coiffured hairstyle.

⁸ When Richard became famous the first home he bought his mother and siblings was a white house, the type of house he stated only “white folks could afford to live in.” The White House, as the official home of American presidents, holds a potent status. Given that Richard was the descendent of enslaved Africans who were regarded by white supremacist American law to be chattel and denied human rights (legislation which will have been discussed and debated within the white house as the presidential home), I relish the subversive protest of Richard buying a white house – a place where decisions are made - for himself and his family.

⁹ Richard owned a lavender Cadillac. Lavender, as a colour, holds a particular status within Queer activism. The Lavender Panthers and the Lavender Menace are Gay and Lesbian civil rights’ groups.

IX

hue of **Secret Rooms**

where *Long Tall Sally* testifies:

“*Tutti-Frutti [...] alop-bam-boom*” –

“*There’s a Whole Lot of Shakin’ Going On!*”

X

Old Time Blues

“The system didn’t want it [...] I was not supposed to be the hero for their kids [...] they wanted a white image.”
Little Richard, 1985, *The Southbank Show* (2014)

Little Richard crosses the “Sonic Color Line”¹⁰
preacher of the Mainstage,
teaching Paul and John¹¹.
Here, history writes on white pages,
archives what *it* remembers,
so, if memory don’t
then contracts won’t -
and justice will not either.

¹⁰ The Sonic Color Line (2010) is Jennifer Stoeber Ackerman’s sound-based critical engagement with Du Bois’ examination of the Color Line in his 1903 book *Souls of Black Folk* (1994). The Color Line refers to racially-decided dividing lines and privileges (or lack of).

¹¹ Paul McCartney and John Lennon.

XI

Revelations

Evangelist of fine-tuned, feather-tailed flamboyance.
Gospeller of bare-chested, hot-pant-hipped hoodoo.
Preacher of the inner-thigh
of the groove
your mama made you to.

“Premonitioner” of Prince,
Sing[ing] [his] Body Electric:
joy as spark and vein as current;
ignition to the engine of the Red Corvette.

A paintbrush’s arc of orange, amber, ochre
can only hope to capture
the clues between War Hawk’s¹² holler
in thirties Macon, Georgia
and a burning Minnesota skyline
filled with risk,
as it’s expressed -
through Fire.

XII

Moving Star¹³

night lends her moon,
so history
will see him clearly.

¹² Little Richard’s childhood nickname.

¹³ Interviewed for a 1985 edition of The Southbank Show, Richard states: “[...] I always wanted to be a movie star in my home town and I felt that I was when I was moving from city to city - a *moving star* [emphasis my own]!” (0.30.08” – 0.30.14’).

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