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Little Richard, rock's flashy founding father, dies at 87

Little Richard, whose outrageous showmanship and lightning-fast rhythms intoxicated crowds with hits like "Tutti Frutti" and "Long Tall Sally," has died. He was 87 years old. Reverend Bill Minson, a friend of the legendary musician, told AFP Little Richard died Saturday morning following a battle with cancer. With a distinctive range from robust belting to howling falsetto, Richard transfixed audiences and inspired artists including The Beatles as he transformed the blues into the feverish new style of rock 'n' roll alongside Fats Domino and Chuck Berry.

His raunchy 1955 song "Tutti Frutti" became a sort of opening salvo of rock 'n' roll's entry into American life, starting with his nonsensical but instantly thrilling first line: "Awop bop a loo mop / Alop bam boom." Richard stunned buttoned-down post-World War II America with an otherworldly look of blindingly colorful shirts, glass-embedded jackets, a needle-thin moustache and a six-inch (15-centimeter) high pompadour. A consummate entertainer, he would play piano with one leg hoisted over the keys and, in one legendary concert in Britain, played dead on stage so effectively that the venue sought medical help before he resurrected himself to an astounded crowd. Richard's lifestyle — he spoke fondly of bisexual parties — became the epitome of rock 'n' roll decadence. But he never became an obvious icon for the African-American or gay communities.

Once openly — by standards of the time — attracted to men, Richard became a born-again Christian and renounced homosexuality as a temporary choice, anathema to the modern gay rights movement and psychologists. And while he was one of the first African-American artists to cross the racial divide, a younger generation of black DJs had little interest in an artist seen as embedded in the white mainstream.

Mentor to rock's greats

But his influence was incalculable. Early white rockers including Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley all pursued Richard's sound. The upstart Beatles and Rolling Stones served separately as opening acts when Richard toured England, and a young Jimi Hendrix and members of Earth, Wind and Fire played in his back-up band. "He was the biggest inspiration of my early teens," Mick Jagger tweeted Saturday. "His music still has the same raw electric energy when you play it now as it



In this file photo taken on July 3, 2011, Little Richard performs during the annual PBS "A Capitol Fourth" concert at the US Capitol in Washington, DC. —AFP photos



In this file photo taken on June 07, 2005, Little Richard performs on the stage of the Olympia Concert Hall in Paris.

did when it first shot through the music scene in the mid 50's."

Bob Dylan called Richard "my shining star and guiding light back when I was only a little boy. His was the original spirit that moved me to do everything I would do." "Of course he'll live forever," he said in a series of tweets. "But it's like a part of your life is gone." David Bowie was mesmerized when he saw one of Richard's movies, with the then nine-year-old deciding to learn the saxophone and later saying, "If it hadn't have been for him, I probably wouldn't have gone into music." The superstar was aware of the debt his successors owed him. "Prince is the Little Richard of his generation," he told Joan Rivers in 1989. He then turned to face the camera directly and said: "I was wearing purple before you was wearing it!" The estate of Prince, who died in 2016, said Saturday that Richard "didn't just open doors, he smashed entire walls to pieces to make way for all who would come after him."

'Tutti Frutti' reborn

Born Richard Wayne Penniman on December 5, 1932, he was raised in grinding poverty in Macon, Georgia. His father sold bootleg liquor and owned a tavern, where he was shot dead in a dispute when Richard was starting his career. Richard, despite his stage name, stood a skinny five-foot-10 (1.8 meters)

and was born with different sized legs. A mischievous child, he lingered in churches for their music and was noticeably effeminate.

In his 1984 authorized biography, Richard recalled his father telling him, "My father had seven sons and I wanted seven sons. You've spoiled it, you're only half a son." "And then he'd hit me. But I couldn't help it. That was the way I was," Richard said. A key break came in 1947 when gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe spotted him singing at the Macon City Auditorium, where Richard sold soft drinks. Richard had developed a low-key career singing around Georgia, including in underground drag performances, when he was approached by record labels. Success was not immediate. Early recording ventures with RCA Victor and Peacock Records fell flat.

Richard never thought to record "Tutti Frutti," a staple of his live performances driven by frantic piano. But the song caught the ear of Bumps Blackwell, a producer from Specialty Records, which had reluctantly signed Richard after he persistently phoned its office. Blackwell asked young songwriter Dorothy LaBostrie to quickly pen some more radio-friendly lyrics. Within 15 minutes and only three takes, Little Richard had recorded his defining hit, now with the tame lines: "Tutti frutti / Aw rootie... I've got a girl named Sue / She knows just what to do."

'True king'

The song — with its infectious rhythm, high decibel level and lingering sense of naughtiness — triggered an unprecedented reaction. In a 1956 Baltimore concert, women threw underwear as police prevented fans from rushing the stage or leaping from the balcony in euphoria. "Richard arrives and he's attacking the piano; he's banging on it. He's not crooning; he's screaming," said Chris Morris, a music scholar who remastered his 1957 album "Here's Little Richard." "There had never really been a figure who came out of R&B who was that extroverted or loud or wild."

Richard followed with 1956's "Good Golly, Miss Molly." But then he abruptly canceled a tour and became a missionary for the evangelical Church of God. His turn to religion complicated his relationship with the music world — but his legacy as a titan who ushered in a new musical age held. Tributes poured in Saturday, with Chic co-founder Nile Rodgers mourning "the loss of a true giant" and former president Bill Clinton hailing his "unforgettable charisma." Questlove of The Roots was more emphatic: "LITTLE RICHARD IS THE TRUE KING. LONG LIVE THE KING." —AFP



Cape penguins walk past a keeper taking their video images at an aquarium of Hakkeijima Sea Paradise.



Cape penguins walk past seals in an aquarium at Hakkeijima Sea Paradise. —AFP photos

Inter-species lockdown meet-up at Japan aquarium

A Japanese aquarium has come up with a wild idea to entertain the public during its temporary closure due to the coronavirus outbreak — introducing sea animals to each other and sharing the results online. A group of eight penguins at Yokohama Hakkeijima Sea Paradise near Tokyo regularly waddle around inside the aquarium and now they have a new stop — a tank of seals they had never met before. "They're not actively trying to get to know each other, but I'm sure they're interested in each other," aquarium spokesman Naoya Goto told AFP. "They're both really cute, so we decided to let them see each other, film it and share it on social media," he said.

Museums, zoos and aquariums remain closed as a nationwide state of emergency is in place in Japan until the end of May. Penguins at the aquarium stroll for up to 20 minutes regularly — a routine in place even before the pandemic — as they need more exercise, Goto said. And they need to experience some variety from time to time so that they "do not get bored," he added. "We want to increase the quality of life for these penguins." Sea Paradise has also introduced an otter to a beluga, two of their most popular animals. Aquarium keeper Nagomi Sato said she posts their videos, "hoping they will offer healing and relieve stress" for those stuck inside due to the virus. —AFP

Skopje artists pierce humdrum of confinement

Before kicking off a recent rock show in Skopje, the leader of the band Funk Shui did something he had never done before: apologize for the noise the group was about to make. That's because the musicians were jamming in an urban courtyard surrounded by apartment blocks, as part of a city initiative to entertain citizens — and help struggling artists — hemmed in by coronavirus curfews. When concert halls, bars and clubs shuttered after North Macedonia went into lockdown in early March, performers were suddenly starting at blank calendars and empty wallets, while fans were robbed of their entertainment fix.

But the country's artists and cultural institutions have been quick to adapt. With backing from city hall, they have launched the "Culture in the time of Corona" program to save Skopje's entertainment scene. During the nightly curfews and over several weekend-long lockdowns, some 200 artists have put on more than 40 open air shows on rooftops, parks and playgrounds around the capital, with something for everyone in genres ranging from pop, rock and jazz to alternative and electronic music. The shows have reached some 50,000 people in their homes and also garnered more than 500,000 views online, said Nikola Naumoski from the mayor's office. And in addition to easing the boredom of the apartment-bound, unemployed artists are getting 235 euros — the country's minimum wage — to help them survive the dry spell, he said.

Neighbourhood dance parties

The small Balkan country, where some 90 people have died from COVID-19, has issued some of the tightest restrictions in the region to curb the virus spread,

including one holiday weekend curfew that topped 80 hours of confinement. On a recent Saturday when families were hunkered down around the clock, members of the alt-rock band Funk Shui hung up their face masks before letting loose for their outdoor show. As their funky guitar riffs echoed around the neighbourhood, fans turned out on their balconies and windows to watch and dance along.

"It is a little bit strange, to have bands perform in a place like this, and I understand that there can be both complaints and joy. However, I hope that we brought some joy to the people in this neighbourhood," the group's singer and guitar player Luka Gorgievski, 26, told AFP. Other Macedonian artists have also found creative ways to connect. One high school group organised a three-day online festival of movies, exhibitions, interviews with artists and music performances. And Jovan Petreski, who performs under the name DJ Babura Junior, has been giving live electronic music concerts from his home since the start of the confinement.

After confirming his neighbours didn't mind the noise, the popular 27-year-old DJ installed his speakers and other equipment on the balcony of his apartment, replete with a colorful strobe light. At one recent session scores of apartments across the neighbourhood added to the strobe affect by flickering their lights on and off to his beats. "My parties were accepted way beyond my expectations," the DJ told AFP. "It was not easy at the beginning when I thought that as an artist I won't be able to work as usual," he explained. "That's how I got the idea to start parties from my studio and entertain people the same way I did before the crisis." —AFP



North Macedonian band 'Funk Shui' perform in Skopje, as part of the event "Culture in Time of Corona". —AFP photos



Macedonian band 'Eye Cue' perform in Skopje, as part of the event "Culture in Time of Corona".

Indian tigers find lockdown grrreat Kolkata



In this file photo a male Royal Bengal Tiger leaps into the water after it was released from a forest department boat on the River Harikhal in the Sundarbans delta forest, some 150 kms south of Kolkata. —AFP

With the humans of West Bengal under virus lockdown, tigers in the Sundarbans mangrove forest in the eastern Indian state are coming out to play, with park rangers Thursday reporting a jump in sightings of the big cats. The Sundarbans, straddling West Bengal and neighboring Bangladesh, is the world's biggest mangrove forest and home to the majestic and endangered Royal Bengal tiger. "Sighting of tigers has gone up... after the lockdown," said Sudhir Das, director of the Sundarbans tiger reserve, referring to the nationwide restrictions in place since late March. In normal times, forest officials catch a glimpse of the big cats no more than twice a week, Das said.

But with the lockdown ending tourist traffic and grounding the noisy motorboats and launches that usually ply the region's waterways, they are now sighting tigers "up to six times" a week, he added. The number of the big cats at the UNESCO World Heritage site has also gone up to 96 in the Indian

part of the territory, up from 88 in 2018, according to the West Bengal state forest department which unveiled the latest headcount on Wednesday night. Officials counted as many as 43 female tigers and 11 cubs using over 700 pairs of all-weather night-vision camera traps.

The Sundarbans is spread over 10,000 square kilometers (around 4,000 square miles) and derives its name from Sundari trees found abundantly in the region. India is home to around 70 percent of the world's tigers. Last year, the government said the tiger population had risen from 2,226 in 2014 to 2,967 in 2018. The government credited the increase in numbers to a strict ban on hunting and awareness drives in villages. Despite the uptick, the increasing number of human-tiger conflicts due to shrinking habitats remains an area of concern for conservationists. —AFP