Deconstructing Little Richard

A Roundtable Discussion

On Thursday, July 16, 2020, a group of scholars, artists, and community members came together, virtually, for “Deconstructing Little Richard,” a free, online teach-in panel event hosted by the Pop Conference in conjunction with the Museum of Pop Culture and The Apollo Theater Education Programs.

The panel was hosted by professors Jason King and Tavia Nyong’o. It featured Ian Isiah, contemporary R&B musician; Nona Hendryx, artist and industry veteran; Alisha Lola Jones, ethnomusicologist; Uri McMillan, cultural historian; Madison Moore, professor and critic; and Zandria Robinson, writer and sociologist.

The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

JASON KING: Tonight we’re here tonight to deconstruct Little Richard—to offer critical reflection on his life and work. Little Richard passed away three months ago on May 9 at age 87, and he is sorely missed. But it seems like nobody lived more while they were alive than Little Richard. Born Richard Penniman, in Macon, Georgia, in 1932, Little Richard wasn’t just a rock star: he was a particle-colliding explosion of kinetic energy, bursting onto the 1950s music scene and transforming it from the inside-out.

As a teenager in the 1940s, he was already a seasoned performer—working on the vaudeville circuit and doing drag shows. But by 19 years old, his father had been...
killed, and he ended up as a dishwasher at the Macon Greyhound station to support his mother and eleven brothers and sisters. Little Richard drew on the style and sounds of R&B acts, like Louis Jordan and Esquerita, and gospel singers, like Mahalia Jackson. And he refashioned himself into the very template that we know today of the rock star as a scandalous and provocative wild child.

Beyond all the camp and outrageousness, Little Richard was first and foremost a stone musician, singer, pianist, and songwriter. He updated Fats Domino’s cool New Orleans R&B, and he gave you boogie-woogie bass shuffle in his left hand piano playing. And on the right hand, he gave you hard-driving, percussive, eighth-note octaves—a sort of ‘pounding’ on the keys. And those two things together helped create a unique sound. Add to that his gritty gospel voice, and you have the recipe for a heart-shaking, rib-quaking, high-voltage rock ‘n’ roll. It literally made you rock.

Little Richard transformed his stigmas—his skin color, effeminacy, his queer sexuality, his physical disability—and he turned those stigmas into strength in the face of extreme cultural arch-conservatism. Then, in the late 1950s, Little Richard abandoned rock ‘n’ roll, became born again, and didn’t return until 1962. By the 1980s, he had a comeback, being recognized as one of The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame’s inaugural class in 1986. All told, Little Richard had a seven-decade career in the spotlight.

We’re in the midst of what feels like a cultural reckoning. We stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter as a movement, and with those around the world who are speaking out against the legacy of aggressions and violence perpetrated against Black people. We are especially in support of the notion that all Black lives matter, including the lives of trans, gay, and lesbian Black folk. Little Richard experienced racism, homophobia, industry exploitation, and he helped usher in conversations about royalties and industry reparations. These are reminders that today’s discussions have long roots, and that Little Richard is foundational to some of our most urgent social concerns. Little Richard remains part of the essential DNA of contemporary music, culture, and style. And nearly every road seems to lead back to him, one way or another.

TAVIA NYONG’O: Not only did Little Richard influence Elvis, the Beatles, David Bowie, and Elton John, he set a crossover template for the likes of Prince and Michael Jackson. He played with Jimi Hendrix and James Brown, and yet his contributions to Black music are only now being reckoned with. This event is long overdue. And that it is happening only now speaks to something exceptional about Little Richard’s career: There is the exceptional talent and accomplishment, of course, but on the other hand, there is also the way that he has been seen as an outlier, eccentric, and exception to the rule. This has made it harder for those who might want to claim him, to do so. And of course, Little Richard himself never made it easy to get behind the cultivated exterior. But tonight, we are making that attempt.

JASON KING: I want to start with Nona Hendryx. What does Little Richard mean to you, personally, professionally, and artistically?

NONA HENDRYX: I think, you know, it’s really people like Little Richard and James Brown and Etta James and Ruth Brown and artists like that—they were very individual. And they brought to the world and to music a life, a lifeline. Because before that, there was jazz-influenced orchestra music, but you didn’t have the rhythm. You didn’t have—you had it in blues, but blues was a little different. You didn’t have the roll, you know, which Richard brought to it. And I think that he also
brought a lot of the musical influences together that influenced him. He synthesized them. The music that Little Richard made did not really exist until he made it. There were other forms of music, other creative people making music, but the music specifically that he made would not have existed without him.

**JASON KING:** Can you talk to me about him personally? What are your recollections of him—any particular memories that stand out?

**NONA HENDRYX:** The first time I met Richard was at the Apollo Theater, which was the sort of like the jewel in the crown of the Chitlin’ Circuit. He was really so different off-stage in a way than he was on stage. He could be the character, but he also had this sort of like—you know, he had a normal voice. It was his normal voice that was also a part of him. He also had this thing that we knew he was a star; you knew he was the star. So you didn’t overstep your line between you and the star, because he would let you know that he was the star.

**JASON KING:** Ian, I interviewed you for *Pitchfork* a couple of years ago, and I was really surprised when we did the interview, you kept talking about Little Richard. I had not heard younger artists talk about Little Richard in that way. So, I want you to tell me why you think of Little Richard as your ‘spirit animal.’

**IAN ISIAH:** Well, you know, “The Girl Can’t Help It.” He just means everything. I’m just grateful to be a descendant of it—to be a descendant of that sort of greatness. And I just want to be able to make sure that these voices continue to be heard throughout my generation. Every time I explain him, I feel like I’m explaining myself.

**JASON KING:** Tell me about his sound, his style, his image—what aspects are you particularly attracted to?

**IAN ISIAH:** I also came from church, as well. I’m Pentecostal, raised in church, so I also know the whole “let’s transition from Pentecostal to singing R&B and make money from it.” Where did that come from? That came from him. Musically, it’s the coloring—what he’s singing—and how Mahalia Jackson was flowing in “Precious Lord” with the same runs and riffs that he was doing in R&B. And to me, growing up, I did the same thing with Karen Clark and the Clark Sisters with R&B. It was the same thing that happened with Little Richard. And I just felt like it was just so parallel.

**TAVIA NYONG’O:** That’s a great transition to the question that I wanted to ask to Alisha, actually. Alisha, you recently released your book. It is called *Flaming?: The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance*, in which you discuss the complex presence of Black queer men in the church and in gospel music. Can you give us a sense of what the book is about? Maybe a little bit about theopolitics and how it might be a useful frame for which to think about someone like Little Richard?

**ALISHA LOLA JONES:** *Flaming?* really is about the Little Richards that we know; about following the trope of the “flamboyant choir director” who ushers us into worship, who is skilled, who “has the oil,” as we say in the Pentecostal church. And, as many of you know, especially in Pentecostal settings, we have terminology that we use to describe folks who leave us with many questions and commentary. And that term is “flaming.” And so, the title of the book, *Flaming?*, is really questioning why their demonstrativeness matters.

Little Richard was the iconic sort of symbol of that idea. The way that he would use his upper range—and even how he talked about how his upper range was a way
that he was read and heard in particular ways. And there are even interviews where he is referred to as “flaming,” “peculiar,” “strange,” “a problem.” Four terms that are not only associated with ideas of queerness, but particularly Black experiences. You know, W.E.B. Du Bois, “How Does It Feel to be a Problem?;” “Strange Fruit,” Billie Holiday. And so this book actually follows in the line of what Little Richard gave to us as being rock ‘n’ roll and as being a true believer, as well.

TAVIA NYONG’O: I love the connection that you’re making to the whole Afro-American cultural tradition into which he is making an intervention. Could you talk more about the transition between the sacred and the profane? Clearly the way you’re describing and talking about Little Richard’s “flaming” iconicity, this is something that he brings both to the church and also to his secular music. Could you talk more about that [what?] is navigated in his work and in the work that you study?

ALISHA LOLA JONES: His register—the register that he would pop in and out of, the higher register. And the voice. Also, the sort of ad libs that he would do, similar to descants, the sort of soaring ad libs that remind us of that one church soprano that we have that loves to tell us that she is going into a piece by going up high within choral pieces in a Pentecostal service. But then also the use of the piano. The sixteenth notes, which are an important pulse within Black vernacular musics. His ability to meld vocal prowess with pianistic agility are actually the two chief sounds within Black sacred music of the mid- to late-twentieth century. All embodied in Little Richard.

TAVIA NYONG’O: I want to turn now to Zandria, because I know that any conversation about Little Richard can’t proceed without really positioning [him] as a figure who emerges out of the Black American South in a very specific moment in its history. Can you elaborate on his importance and importance of thinking of Little Richard as a figure who emerges out of the Black American South?

ZANDRIA ROBINSON: The South is a peculiar space. The South is the home of all queer things. Because it’s a space where you had total and absolute racial repression in terms of laws, in terms of structures, and in terms of informal ways that people engage with one another. But also an excess that burst forth from this violent binary. And Little Richard is just a manifestation of what happens when you put this significant amount of repression and people have to figure out how to be human beings beyond the binary in a space that is structurally Black and white. Or front porch and backwoods. Or plantation and bathhouse. Little Richard is a manifestation of all of these contradictions that come out of the South.

And to think about performing in the Brown v. Board-era South when there were still segregated sections. I just imagine being in that space, Black folks in the balcony, white folks on the floor, and Little Richard on the stage. He is the future, that breaking of the binary, that breaking of racial barriers, that breaking of sexuality barriers. He is the future there up on the stage. And I think we still haven’t reached the possible Black queer Southern future—the non-binary, fluid, effortless and excessive Southern future—that Little Richard was manifesting.

TAVIA NYONG’O: I love that. I love that idea that Little Richard is still the future, right? JASON KING: I’d love to talk more about the female influence in his work. I wonder if you might talk about his—the clear matrilineal influence in his work, right? Hearing
women, seeing women—that becomes a big part of how he constructs his own image and sound.

ZANDRIA ROBINSON: Yeah, I think the mother in his work is Sister Rosetta Tharpe. She is our iconic rock ‘n’ roll mother. And he is the son/daughter, the king/queen, the royalty inheritance of that. Sister Rosetta Tharpe gave us this deep roaring sound that included, of course, gospel traditions. We can hear it in the runs. We can hear it in the rhythm. He’s doing on the piano what she’s doing on the guitar.

And then—I think the Clara Ward Singers are kind of genealogically related to the vocalizations in a similar way that Mahalia Jackson is. Imagine Little Richard having those influences, having the Rosetta Tharpes and the Clara Ward Singers and Esquerita and all these other folks. But these mothers who kind of affirmed for him his ability to move beyond the restrictions and the boundaries. And to push. To keep pushing.

JASON KING: Let’s turn to Uri McMillan. I want to ask you about the period after the 1950s. Most people know Little Richard in the 1950s, that’s his—that’s the era in which he has most of his hits. Then there’s this period where he’s gone from the industry. And then there’s this era in the ‘60s where he’s on TV shows and doing some films and he’s still releasing a lot of music. But he’s no longer the kind of central icon that he was in the 1950s, in a certain way. And then we get into the 1970s. Now, you’re working on a book project on Grace Jones in the 1970s. And so, I’d love for you to maybe talk about him in that period a little bit. How do you think of his career and his work in that moment in which there’s all these other kinds of narratives going on? You know, it’s kind of like post-Black power movement, post-Civil Rights moment. Can you contextualize him for us?

URI MCMILLAN: I think often what happens too much is that people like Little Richard and Grace Jones are often peripheral figures in multiple different histories—particularly when we think about Blackness—because they don’t represent prototypical notions of Blackness. They’re not overtly political. They’re not “loud” in the way that we want certain figures to represent.

So, I think in the ‘70s, particularly, you know I think one of the reasons that Little Richard kind of falls out is because of these kinds of binary understandings. In the late 1970s, there’s this kind of divide between rock and disco, and that divide is raced and gendered in particular ways. So, rock is understood to kind of be the domain of heterosexual white men, and disco is understood to be the domain of African Americans, gay men, and women. So of course, in a kind of binary understanding like that, you know, Little Richard completely falls out. I think in some ways, that’s one reason why I think he’s not as present.

There’s someone like Nina Simone who, you know, is a very classically trained pianist, but then kind of falls into the movement because she starts performing songs that are overtly political. I was also thinking of that comment that was made by one of Malcolm X’s daughters in the movie about Nina Simone, where the person says, “You know, we thought of Nina Simone as somebody from a different time, but we didn’t recognize that she actually was ahead of her time.” And I think there’s something really similar about Little Richard.

JASON KING: Madison, your book *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* is on the history and the culture of fabulousness in Black culture. So, how would
you put Little Richard into that context, considering his use of camp, Black exceptionalism, and so on?

MADISON MOORE: I spend a lot of time thinking about fabulousness—what it is, what it does, the possibilities around it, and the kinds of contradictions and worlds it builds. When I’m thinking about fabulousness, I’m thinking not about designer labels or expensive clothes, but instead the kinds of aesthetics of survival or even a survival strategy that largely Black queer people enable. And all of this thinking about kind of the politics of style, as a world-making practice.

There’s an essay by Joseph Beam called “Making Ourselves from Scratch” that I think really gets to the heart of it. He talks about style as a kind of attitude or a reaction to oppression, a way of seeing, being perceived as less oppressed or being attractive when you’re deemed unattractive. And I think this sense of like—this Black queer way of making ourselves from scratch—is so deeply connected to understanding the power of Little Richard.

It’s really focused on taking up space and not—and moreover, not asking politely for that space. But demanding it. Little Richard took up that space. And when you think about how he connects to fabulousness and camp—the pompadours, the turbans, the sequins, the shine. We’re talking about a strategy of using the aesthetic to seize the spotlight in a cultural role and social and economic system—a matrix that works tirelessly to discredit, erase, and dispose of Black bodies and cultural innovations.

JASON KING: This kind of profound self-assertion in the face of disposability and erasure is really instructive in a lot of ways, right? It’s the way in which he showed us a model for how to assert yourself in the midst of so much potential repression, conservatism, and so on.

I really want to talk about that moment that happens to him in the late 1950s, where he says that he is leaving the music industry because he needs to take time for himself for spiritual reasons. He’s going to be born again, which he was. But it’s clearly also because he was commercially exploited by his record labels. They defiled him in a lot of ways that must have been extraordinarily disturbing. That’d be disturbing in any moment, but particularly that moment when you are someone who is that foundational. He called himself the originator, the emancipator; I wonder if we might talk about those titles. The “architect of rock ’n’ roll.” I wonder if we might think about what those terms mean in relationship to his exploitation, broader racist exploitation by the music industry in the late 1950s, and how he was asserting himself.

NONA HENDRYX: A lot of the times looking back, you see things through a different lens than at the time that it was being created. The artists—some just before me, some during the time of my early career with the Bluebells—weren’t thinking like, “I’m doing this” or “I’m doing that.” We were just being. And making. And creating. And not really caring what anybody thought, really. You know? We didn’t have designer clothes. We made our own clothes. We didn’t even use the word “creativity.”

It was like, you know, what you had to do and what you wanted to do to be who you wanted to be and how you wanted to be, right? I think a lot of the discussion is hard to put down in writing. Because it was really about experiencing life.
TAVIA NYONG’O: I think that’s really an important point to think about the indirect power of his music and performance is his capacity to be in the moment. And I guess I wanted to pick up on the reasons why he might have needed to come to claim his legacy in the 1980s. He did so literally in terms of reclaiming copyright, as there was a lawsuit involved in regaining ownership over music he had recorded, which he won, and that set him up comfortably. But really, his performance itself modelled a way of refusing to be written out of history. He himself in his fabulous presence was able, particularly later in life, to open out an opportunity for him to tell a different story or get others to look at him a different way than they might have otherwise been prepared to. His way of being in the world itself contains lessons for how to hold the space for yourself.

ALISHA LOLA JONES: Little Richard mentioned that a part of how he navigated what Zandria mentioned with regard to the South and to the era in which he lived was the use of makeup. And this is something that I’ve seen in my research: the ways in which men have been described as gracious or soft. Or have softened their stature in order to survive, in order to move about in ways that was not experienced as threatening. He mentions the use of makeup in the Jim Crow era as a device to be able to play and perform before a white audience. To have the attention, the gaze, while doing basically kink.

I think here it’s appropriate to place them in a constellation of Black religious pluralism. We see many people of conscious Black thought who dabble a little in Judaism, who dabble a little in Pentecostalism. He was raised in a Baptist home. Said he was always religious. And wrestled with this very heavy gravitation towards mysticism. And so, I think Black religious pluralism is important here.

ZANDRIA ROBINSON: Southerners are super mystical people. And I hate to be the Southerner on the panel saying that, but we believe in the mystics. And capitalism is fundamentally incongruous with the art of the spirit. And so, having your art—you put it out there, you’re being present, you’re giving what’s coming through in the spirit, in the moment. And then this white man steals it. That will send anybody back to the church! It will send you to the river.

Because this is what happens when you give your art to the world, and from a very authentic, present space. The spirit comes forth. You give it to the people. You be yourself. And then there’s this whole other system that doesn’t line up with that. Not only do we see that with Prince, we see that with so many other people. I look to the sort of boss move that Frank Ocean made in those last two albums in terms of trying to get out of his contract and owning his work. That is the legacy of Little Richard. Little Richard was fortunate that he was able to have this lawsuit and then be able to be comfortable. But sometimes the emancipator is not the one that gets free. And I just think it’s so important to think about the incongruousness of capital valuation in the music industry. Exploitation. And the beautiful, make-it-yourself, make-it-from-the-spirit art that the lovely people who are artists in this world, musicians in particular, give us.

URI MCMILLAN: What all of this underscores is what Alex Weheliye says in Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity. The story of the record industry in America is Black innovation/white appropriation. And I think if there was anybody who was aware of that, I mean I think it was Little Richard.
So I think this idea of owning your masters, which is something really common for us now, was something that he was very much aware of. And I think with things like resolving his denunciation of homosexuality...I think that Little Richard—like Grace Jones, like some other people—is a contradictory figure, you know? And I think in this moment of thinking about his legacy, I think one of the things we have to recognize is that, for people like him, we shouldn’t try to resolve the contradictions. The contradictions are actually part of who he was.