

[ E S S A Y ]

# SIGNS AND WONDERS

PETER DOYLE REFLECTS ON THE PORTENT-FILLED TOUR OF LITTLE  
RICHARD IN AUSTRALIA DURING 1957

‘I had never been so far on a plane before. It worked on my mind.’

—Little Richard Penniman, speaking in 1984 of his 1957 Australian tour

IN late September 1957 Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran and a now forgotten female singer named Alis Leslie, along with their various backing bands, touched down in a Pan-Am Constellation at Sydney airport. They were accompanied by two of the hardest-playing, hardest-living groups of musicians in the business—Richard by his road band the Upsetters, Vincent by the Blue Caps. The ragtag bunch of pompadour-sporting, tiger-stripe-jacket, black-jeans-and-satin pants-wearing delinquent lookalikes were scheduled to perform an extended circuit of stadium shows around Australia for high-flying promoter Lee Gordon. It was the height of the rock’n’roll craze.

Rock’n’roll wasn’t the biggest news that week, however. A few days earlier the Soviets had launched *Sputnik 1* from a remote cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, comprehensively trumping the USA in the space race, and edging forwards in the Cold War. ‘Satellite’ became an instant buzzword, and its sinister, hyper-modern

shape—like a Second World War ocean mine with antennae—became a trademark of the decade. Even the most dispassionate commentators in the West were freaked by the launch of Sputnik. To people of already overheated fundamentalist religious conviction, the new light in the sky was a clear and unmistakable sign of the imminent end of worldly existence.

A few days into the tour, Sputnik's orbit happened to traverse eastern Australia, and Little Richard, along with millions of astonished Australians, watched it pass overhead. Little Richard was on the verge of burnout after years of touring and partying. But the hard grind had recently paid off, and that year Little Richard was the biggest, loudest, wildest star rock'n'roll had yet produced. They were calling him 'the Black Elvis'. He was married to a stripper named Lee Angel, but his preferences were homosexual and voyeuristic. Life on the rock'n'roll road provided many opportunities. Raised in a devout Southern Baptist household, however, he was also chronically guilt stricken. Before leaving for Australia he had been visited by various evangelist friends, including reformed rhythm and blues star Joe Latcher. Richard had been deeply affected by their testifying. But not quite enough to quit the wild life, not yet.

Australia was the furthest he'd ever been from home, and we can only imagine how strange Australia in 1957 must have seemed to him. The long flight across the Pacific shook him up profoundly—he hallucinated that the plane's engines were on fire but held aloft by golden-haired angels.

So when *Sputnik I* passed overhead Richard was ready. 'It really shook my mind,' he told his biographer Charles White. 'I got up from the piano and said, "This is it. I'm through. I'm leaving show business to go back to God"'. He broke his contract with Gordon and announced that he was quitting rock'n'roll. A few days later he sealed the new arrangements with the Almighty by throwing his jewellery into the Hunter River—or into Sydney Harbour, as he was to make out later in his autobiography.

Ever since rock'n'roll music had broken out in 1954 or 1955, commentators had been predicting its demise. Of course it never really died, but the excitement of the first-wave rock passed, and the pop rock'n'roll that replaced it was a relatively denatured, normalised commodity. Years later, rock historians would look back and try to pinpoint the death of first-wave rock'n'roll. There would be nearly as many such moments as writers: Buddy Holly's plane crash, Elvis's induction into the army, Jerry Lee Lewis's disgrace in London (after it was revealed that he was bigamously married to his thirteen-year-old cousin), Chuck Berry's imprisonment on vice charges and the payola scandals are a few. But Little Richard's

encounter with the apocalypse here in Australia was the first. All the others came later. Rock'n'roll died in Australia.

The story of rock'n'roll's breakout from the chitlin circuits, juke joints and dance-halls of the US South to the broader USA and to the world beyond has been told mainly by British and US writers. By their account, rock'n'roll is born in the USA and travels to England, causes upset, riot, shock and delight. 'The world' encounters rock'n'roll first in England and then Europe. According to this history Australia gets rock'n'roll—as it later would rhythm and blues and beat music—as a hand-me-down of Brit pop culture. Various 'corollaries' go with this account, such as the assertion that Australian delinquent youth culture, the 'bodgies' and 'widgies', were a local adaptation of the British 'Teddy Boys'.

In fact, rock'n'roll tours generally moved westwards from North America across the Pacific to Australia and then on to Europe and England. Australia was usually the first port of call. Bill Haley and the Comets' riotous tour of England in 1957 is often cited as a landmark moment in rock history—the first tour outside the USA of an explicitly *rock'n'roll* act. Yet Haley and the Comets visited Australia before that tour, in January 1957, as headliners on Lee Gordon's first rock'n'roll 'Big Show'. They were supported by rhythm and blues legends Big Joe Turner and LaVerne Baker, smooth doowoppers, the Platters, and Freddie Bell and the Bellboys. The show was a great financial and popular success. Over the next four years Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly, Duane Eddy, Johnny and the Hurricanes, Santo and Johnny, Johnny Cash, Bobby Day, Lloyd Price and various now forgotten one-hit-wonders all toured Australia.

The Little Richard show of late 1957 was Lee Gordon's second rock'n'roll promotion, and was of an entirely different order to the Haley tour. Little Richard's was probably the most excessive act to make it to the top level of popular entertainment till that time—on a different planet from that of Haley and even Joe Turner, wilder by far than Elvis Presley's. He sang unabashedly carnal songs with a Pentecostal intensity. He sported a high pompadour haircut, wore make-up and jewellery, and was uncompromisingly queer (even though in the 1950s that was never mentioned publicly). His road band the Upsetters were probably the toughest saxophone and guitar combination of the day—when there were many tough acts. Gene Vincent was a greasy-haired, pockmarked former seaman from North Carolina, who with his band the Bluecaps looked like they'd sauntered straight off the cover of a juvenile delinquency exploitation paperback. His guttural, echo-laden vocals, stinging rockabilly guitar accompaniment and the generally raucous hi-jinks from the band made his records a particular object of hatred with the old-school

music industry types. Eddie Cochran was still a relative unknown, but before he died in a car crash two years later he was to become perhaps rock'n'roll's first studio auteur, and as a composer of youth-culture anthems was second only to Chuck Berry. It was the dream assembly of early rock'n'roll stars.

By 1957 rock'n'roll had been around just long enough for everyone to have heard of it, but not long enough for it to have been pinned down, packaged, polished and made predictable. The facade of niceness had also faded, and rock'n'roll was now showing the world what it was really about. So, here in Australia, in October, with *Sputnik 1* beeping overhead, Little Richard in extremis, young Gene Vincent and his boys on a wild bender, and with hundreds of thousands of Australian teenagers converging as though summoned by secret signals, it was a month of portents and otherworldly-visitation.

YOU would expect Little Richard to be all over the newspapers of the day. Not so. The tour was run on the cheap, and by modern standards the promotion bordered on the non-existent (a few small ads in the entertainment sections of the paper, at best). There was nothing much in the local music press, which generally reflected the tastes and interests of the broader constituency of professional musicians—still a strong occupational group in the 1950s. They generally despised rock'n'roll (although they were frequently fanatical jazz lovers). There were a few reports of the shows in big-city and small-town newspapers, and they make fascinating reading. They tell of tens of thousands of young people turning out for every rock'n'roll session, of which there were sometimes four a day. Nearly everywhere the tour was attended by an air of wild celebration, turning frequently into violent excess. The reporters' attention was taken up by the audiences as much as by the visitors.

To the Australian commercial media, entertainment and theatrical establishments of 1957, rock'n'roll, its performers and its devotees were unspeakably weird. There was little conception of *any* sort of 'youth culture' beyond the decade-old tabloid discourse surrounding the 'bodgie menace'. Local radio hadn't yet switched to Top 40 programming, and theatrical promoters, dance-band leaders, dance-hall proprietors, publishers and television broadcasters were still a couple of years off *focusing on* the new youth market. Even the rock'n'roll clothes were difficult to source—more often than not, the punters had to modify their own sports coats, shirts, skirts and blouses.

In his autobiography, Little Richard is vague on details of that tour. He recalls the jewellery going into Sydney Harbour, and he remembers Sputnik as 'a big ball

of fire ... two or three hundred feet above our heads'. (This author, who was then six years old, remembers a tiny dot moving slowly across the night sky.)

An extraordinary document from that time has come to light, however, in the form of a CD entitled *Rock'n'Roll Radio: Australia 1957* (2001). It features live radio performances by the artists on the Bill Haley tour of January–February, and the Little Richard September–October tour. The recording also features extended on-air interviews of the stars by the charismatic compere Jack Davey.

Davey was the unquestioned king of Australian broadcasting in the 1950s, the best-known and most-liked public figure of his day. He *owned* a certain sector of Australian public life then, in a way that has no modern equivalent. He was a big time bon vivant—an owner of fast cars and luxury yachts, a drinker and gambler, a close associate of both the business elite and elements of the criminal underworld. He was also notorious for his bad debts and a frequenter of illegal gaming houses. Publicly he was quick-witted and raffishly good-natured. Privately he was driven, addicted to alcohol and pain killers, and according to the biography released after his death, written by his personal assistant Lew Wright, he was doing anything up to sixty ampoules of amyl nitrate a day. Not surprisingly, he was subject to wild mood swings. He worked prodigiously, mainly in radio (although he also did the voiceovers for the ubiquitous Movietone newsreels). Typically he broadcast five different programs a week on Sydney's 2GB, each named for a different sponsor (for example, 'The Lux Show', 'The Wool Show', 'The Colgate Show'). Davey was not in any way religious.

In the 1950s Davey and his radio programs provided the most important single point of access to the Australian public, and so tour promoters worked hard to get their acts on one of Davey's programs. On air Davey was genial and quick-witted, and generous in sharing the spotlight. Bob Hope, Nat King Cole, Abbott and Costello all appeared on Davey programs. He was enough of a pro to play the straight man with his guests, setting up their jokes and one-liners, all the while slipping his own self-deprecating quips into the interstices. It was a shrewd tactic for Australian audiences: he kept himself in the spotlight at all times, and without ever seeming too big-headed about it. But he always remained in control, the absolute mediator between the visiting star and the local crowds. Nat King Cole considered him a stage genius.

Davey was the fifties version of a jet-setter, and he travelled frequently to the USA. When the foreign acts came here, Davey typically played the part of interlocutor, gently offering his audiences background information about the stars, in whose orbit he appeared to move. In turn he would explain local customs to the visiting stars, sometimes with more than a touch of cringe.

In January 1957 Bill Haley and the Comets, the Platters and the Bellboys all appeared on Davey's show. On the CD we hear Davey and Haley having a chummy, six-minute on-air exchange before the performance. Haley, a show biz pro, plays his part perfectly. He says that rock'n'roll is for anyone 'from eight to eighty', and Davey agrees. Davey so approves of Haley-style rock'n'roll, it's as though he, Davey, discovered it. The interview finishes and Davey, in announcing 'Rock around the Clock', tells the audience, 'Relax, let yourself go. That's what you *must* do', like an old-style MC, completely in control of his stage. One point to Davey.

When Little Richard, Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran perform on the program in October that year the audience is younger, louder and more unruly. Gene Vincent mumbles, hiccups, shouts his way through the lascivious 'Lotta Lovin'. The band's guitar-driven musical texture is abrasive, with none of Haley's nice-guy adult-friendly inclusiveness. This is nasty rock'n'roll, coded for a young audience. Davey commences the interview as the wild applause is dying down. Vincent speaks softly, in the shy-polite-aggressive mode of the Southern white underclasses. He addresses Davey as 'sir', even after Davey explicitly asks him to desist. A rattled Davey adopts a headmasterish tone, but then reverts, with difficulty, to his more usual bonhomie—which sounds false and showbizzy alongside Vincent's downhome authenticity. Strange sounds and yelps start coming from the bandstand, drawing nervous, conspiratorial laughter from Vincent, and excited laughter from the auditorium crowd. Davey hangs on, but only just. When he presents Vincent with the standard gift—a merino wool travelling rug—he is clearly embarrassed by the offering.

The next guest is Little Richard. This is just days after Sputnik has passed overhead, and Richard's conversion has been reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. (Richard had agreed to do a few last shows before leaving.) Davey is still a little shaky from the Gene Vincent interview.

It starts well enough though. Richard is polite and friendly, and has none of Gene Vincent's shook-up, white-trash persona. Then it all goes blooey. If there was one cardinal rule of public communication in Australia in the 1950s, it was: never discuss religion. We can feel Davey's despair as his talk with Little Richard suddenly veers into fundamentalist metaphysics.

Jack Davey: *Now tell us something about yourself. You've been in music a long time?*

Little Richard: *Yes, a lot of years. Wonderful.*

Jack Davey: *We hear so many tales about you.*

[Little Richard and audience laugh good naturedly.]

Jack Davey: *Just the nicest things. Now, how true are they? I understand you're leaving*

here pretty soon because you're anxious to get back to America.

Little Richard: Yes, I, I'm anxious to get back to America, but I'm, I'm coming out of show business.

Jack Davey: Out of show business?

Little Richard: That's right.

Jack Davey: You're going back for that reason?

Little Richard: That's right, I'm going to be an evangelist.

Jack Davey: An evangelist?

Little Richard: That's right.

Jack Davey: That's, that's ... your heart is set on that, apparently?

Little Richard: Yes, ah ... the reason ... I would like to say this—I'm glad that you asked me— but the reason I want to come out of show business, you see all these different kind of lights going up in the sky?

Jack Davey: You mean the ... [some audience laughter]

Little Richard: Hmm-hmm ...

Jack Davey: ... the satellites?

Little Richard: Thaaaaaat's right, that's it. And that's a sign that the Lord is coming soon. And I want to dedicate my life to God.

Jack Davey [quietly]: I see, Little Richard. Well, that, that's a very good thought. It's worried you a little, this?

Little Richard: Ohh, [absently] yes. [Pause] Duh ... what?

Jack Davey: I say, it's worried you, this satellite?

Little Richard: Oh, no, it don't worry me so much, but I know that if I don't get right, I know that the, the plans that the Lord is gonna put on the world, they're gonna worry me, so I might as well be worried one way or the other. So I'm going back and I'm gonna study so I can help the other people that are doing wrong, [that] way they can be saved too.

Jack Davey [nervously]: Yes, I dare say, I, I really agree with you. [Brightening] Music is pretty close to that sort of thing, actually. I suppose you throw so much into your music that it gives you a feeling of goodness. You think it brings good in people?

Little Richard: Yes, I think that the music do a lot of good to the people in one way, but I can't serve the Lord while I'm doing this because He said you either love one or hate the other, you either hold to one or turn loose the other, so I got to get completely from this to dedicate my life directly to God.

Jack Davey: [quietly] Well, that's very nice, and I think so sincere.

[A deathly hush has descended upon the auditorium.]

The interview finishes and Richard and the Upsetters perform a thoroughly riotous 'Long Tall Sally', to screaming audience acclaim.

THE Little Richard in Australia story is a series of unscripted encounters with weird others. From the performers' Northern Hemisphere perspective, Australia in the 1950s was a little-known continent, reached only via three days of taxing flight. For the straight, square, adult Australia the weird others were both foreign and domestic. Over the next few years, as a subsequent wave of managed and media-friendly stars appeared, the Australian press's reporting of pop-music matters quickly became routine. But Richard's tour was without precedent. Nowadays spiels in the media, on newsgroups, blogs and websites generally reach us well ahead of new music styles, carefully placing them in context. While the writing surrounding the Little Richard Big Show is often inaccurate and naive, there's a degree of agitation and excitement in even the stodgiest press reports, as the writers struggle to describe and appraise the new and unscripted happenings. The papers made much of the concert-goers, their black jeans and red shirts, the loud jackets with their leopard skin and tiger-stripe lapels. And their numbers—thousands and thousands of ecstatic, brawling, unruly boys and girls. It was the largest, most strident public manifestation till that moment of a new collective: young consumers. It was the birth of youth as spectacle.

The encounters between the performers and the audiences on the other hand are characterised by delighted mutual recognition and acceptance. Richard, only minutes after performing a mock striptease act, for example, would typically deliver a bible reading. The rowdy stadium audiences greeted these strange moments with accepting quietude.

Then there is the wholly collective encounter with the weird cosmic other—all of us in Australia in October 1957, brought together to witness the space-age other, *Sputnik 1*, crawling across the night sky.

Cultural movements identify themselves by mythologising their primal moments and their terminal moments. It takes Christmas *and* Easter. Rock historiography has produced more such moments than nearly any other movement. But there's another moment—the instant just before the amps blow, before the singer flips, before the audience has time for second thoughts, before the dominant culture can quite make sense of what's happening, before anyone has learned to pull their punches, or cover their arses. It's the instant at which all the contradictions are fully expressed and fully co-present. It's unsustainable, but it's also the moment of greatest honesty. Little Richard in Australia, October 1957, in extremis, is that moment.

Yet it happened beyond the reach of most Northern Hemisphere journalists, and so has gone relatively unchronicled. The people who attended the Little

Richard show in Australia—mostly working-class teens—did not generally go to university, did not later write their own cultural histories (with themselves heroically located at the centre) the way the 1960s generation did. The bodgies and widgeys of 1957 were spectacular, boisterous and hedonistic, and their willingness to mark themselves as *different* set the template for all the youth subcultures that followed—the sixties counterculture, the seventies new agers, and the waves of punks, queers, glam rockers, goths, metalheads, ravers and so on. Unlike those groups, though, fifties rockers mostly settled down in trades and working-class domesticity. Despite a few books—music-biz biographies and one amazing novel, William Dick's *A Bunch of Ratbags*—the fifties rock'n'roll experience in Australia remains mostly unwritten and uncelebrated, other than in nostalgia-oriented club shows and a few pop package tours. Television, brand new in 1957, had a way of obliterating the non-televised events that decade. Jack Davey was a radio star who failed to make the switch to television. Two years after the interview with Little Richard, he was dead from lung cancer.

Little Richard left Australia and did indeed quit rock'n'roll, for a while at least. Pictures published in *Ebony* a few months later show him kneeling in a church, his face upturned in rapture, and evangelising door-to-door. The massive hiccup in the industry that his departure caused gave Tin Pan Alley a chance to catch up. Over the next year, as Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Richie Valens and Eddie Cochran all left the scene for various reasons, hardcore rock'n'roll generally retreated to the juke boxes, juke joints, dives and truckstops whence it came, and where it was to remain until the Beatles emerged with a new blend of lightweight pop and Little Richard-styled gutbucket rock'n'roll.

THE story of Little Richard in Australia offers a possible template for other close encounters of the rock'n'roll kind: the aliens have landed in our town, but in those outlandish others we see ourselves, and thus, in ourselves, we find a hitherto unrecognised otherness. Little Richard working the chitlin circuit in the early 1950s might appear as a specimen of an intense downhome culture—in-the-know music played for in-the-know people—but rock'n'roll may also have come to many cities and small towns in middle America as an outrageous exotic, met with the same blend of comical ineptitude, official misunderstanding and delighted mutual recognition that it received in Australia in 1957.