

Newcastle Harbour, Little Richard, and the Death of Rock and Roll

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As a child a ferry ride across Newcastle harbour was extra special. Dad and Mum would take us across on the punt - the 'vehicular ferry', as I learnt to say - and show us the sites of Stockton.

But after the visit of Little Richard in 1957, things changed. The now legendary train of events he initiated right there on our punt, gave me a point of difference to my parents' generation. Little Richard and his Upsetters' riotous new music served teenagers - a recent invention at the time - well. I was happy that Newcastle, thanks to Little Richard's gesture, had become part of rock and roll history.

In those days Little Richard was riding the crest of the first wave of Rock and Roll, along with Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and a bevy of other 'Southern Rock' musicians. Southern rockers were attracting huge audiences, massive record sales, and scandalous news reports. While Elvis ruled the cash register, Little Richard brought scandalous behaviour - on stage and off - to new levels of decadence.

Yet, in Newcastle, Little Richard made a decision that took him out of the main thrust of Rock and Roll, and so changed the face of the new music. I remember the hype around those events, and believe they gave Newcastle and its harbour a story that's worth recalling.

The precise sequence of events in Little Richard's Australian tour are difficult to pin down, but my investigation suggests that, as Little Richard and his entourage took the vehicular ferry across the harbour *en route* to the airport on the day after his ground breaking concert at the old Newcastle Stadium, he announced that he'd found God, and was renouncing Rock and Roll and his flamboyantly debauched life. To the horror of his fellow musicians and to members of Johnny O'Keefe's Dee Jays, who travelled with him as one of his support acts, he confirmed his decision by throwing his gold rings into the waters of the harbour. Perhaps Little Richard saw this as an act of biblical purification and cleansing, and a path to redemption and regeneration: his thoughts will remain as mysterious as the location of the rings beneath the waters.

Nine days later Little Richard was due to play a second concert in Newcastle. To the dismay of his prospective audience, the show was cancelled at the last moment with little notice and no explanation. But on that evening he was a star interviewee on Jack Davey's Ampol Show, prerecorded probably a day or two after his Newcastle concert. To Davey's surprise Little Richard declared his commitment to God, and took what was perhaps the Australia's highest rating radio show at the time in an unexpected direction. Davey wanted to talk about Richard's colourful and salacious life, but Richard wanted to talk salvation. He was determined to 'go back to God' - the God he'd learnt about in his Christian fundamentalist childhood in Macon, Georgia.

As good as his word, Richard went to Alabama, enrolled at Oakwood College in Huntsville, and became a preacher. He remained in the church but has continued to make sporadic forays into pop music until the present day.

While Little Richard's behaviour seems bizarre to us more than 50 years later, it seemed even stranger in Newcastle in 1957. *The Newcastle Herald and Miners Advocate* (*The Herald*, these days) reflected a conservative, staid, parochial and economically depressed city. Bland adverts from Hustlers, Winns and Johns department stores listed no-nonsense women's apparel, and Rundles and Lowes offered menswear remarkable for its modest design.

Yet, when we recall the wider world of that time, and when we know more about Little Richard's life and personality, his Newcastle Harbour gesture is seen as one especially outrageous episode in a spectacularly outrageous life, all set against a

slew of world-changing phenomena.

Earlier in that year I was part of a full-house of screaming teenagers at the six o'clock Newcastle concert of Bill Haley and the Comets. While the Haley show opened the door on a new world of experience, I was quick to give Little Richard's concert a miss. News of his camp and maniacal flamboyance, and his kaleidoscopic clothes, suggestive lyrics, and raunchy stage antics had preceded him. He'd arrived in Melbourne wearing a jewelled turban, a canary yellow suit and a crimson cloak. He plastered his face with pancake make-up, wore a huge pompadour hairdo, pounded the piano from a standing position, strutted around the stage, and sang what cultural historian Dr Peter Doyle describes as 'unabashedly carnal songs with a Pentecostal intensity'. News of his on-stage pelvic thrusts suggested a sexual abandon that I did not want to be associated with. What would people think?

Now, more than half-a-century later, I feel miffed about making a bad call here. As it has turned out, Bill Haley's brand of Rock and Roll is now seen as a distinctly tame version of Rock a Billy alongside the superheated, gut-busting ebullience of Little Richard. Even Haley's classic, Rock Around the Clock, now seems sedate, while Little Richard had the grit, the guts, the drive and the stage presence that secured his place as a seminal figure in Rock and Roll.

With Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, Eddie Cochran, and Alis Leslie ('the female Elvis') and importantly to Australians, Johnny O'Keefe and his Dee Jays as support acts, the Little Richard show was a Rock and Roll blockbuster among the 27 or so Big Shows that entrepreneur Lee Gordon toured across Australia between 1954 and 1961.

The *Herald* reviewer wrote that Little Richard practically invited the audience to drag him off the stage as he went through the pantomime of tearing his clothes and throwing souvenir fragments to the audience in a concert which was 'one of the most riotous in the stadium's history'. Well, of course! He did this at every concert!

The *Herald's* disdain was obvious as it breathlessly reported damage to a grand piano when the drummer in a "musical combination known as Gene Vincent and the Bluecaps" 'stomped over it'. A 'singer' called Eddie Cochran caused teenagers to rush forward to catch his discarded handkerchiefs and in doing so pulled down the footlight protection plates. While 'singing' his 'songs' Little Richard himself gestured as if to cast his rings to the audience: an act that foretells his harbour ring throwing.

'It was,' the *Herald* said, 'a night of feet-stamping, whistling, yelling, audience-participation, clapping and singing, essentially juvenile'. Several young Newcastle men wore red pants, and some wore pants with one red leg and one green!

The spectacle of teenagers enchanted by the idea of rebellion, screaming in homage to decadent music idols was foreign to Australia. Parents feared for their children's welfare in the face of the new entertainment with its overtly sexual lyrics and raunchy gestures. The police kept a firm eye on concert audiences, and prevented dancing at some concerts. The Barrier Industrial Council organised a boycott of the Broken Hill shows.

But Richard Penniman - to use his real name - had grown up in Macon, Georgia, in a family committed to conservative southern Christian values. His songs were rooted in the black church music of his youth. Not surprisingly, his life was a constant battle between his religious convictions and the temptations of his life as an entertainer. He sometimes drank too much, and sometimes succumbed to drugs. Details of his sex life would make even seasoned viewers of Friday evening SBS TV blush. His sexual practices and gender preferences covered a wide ambit. Homosexual, group and voyeuristic practices were his faves.

Little Richard's reversion to Christianity can be understood in the context of his life at the time. His three day flight across the vast waters of the Pacific had a profound impact. It was his first long flight and his first visit to a foreign country. Then, on a flight from Melbourne to Sydney he saw the engines glow with heat and thought they were on fire. He saw angels support the wings of the aircraft to keep it airborne.

In Newcastle he did as thousands of Australians did and watched the Russian Sputnik 1 glide across the night sky. The portents were horrific for the Western world and especially for Little Richard, who's personal beliefs were sorely tested. The West was aghast because the Russians had beaten the USA in the race to launch the world's first artificial satellite. 'Satellite' became a buzzword with sinister, hypermodern connotations. People grew fearful of what might be 'out there'. Communism and the unknowns of space fused into one big scare. Religious fundamentalists feared that the lights in the sky spelt the end of the world. While Sputnik had Australians and Little Richard enthralled, perplexed, and amused, the British Government were busy detonating Atom bombs in tests at Maralinga, in the South Australian desert.

In India, wise Pandit Nehru warned that while humankind had demonstrated an enormous technological capacity in launching the satellite, we'd let technical know-how run ahead of our capacity to handle our creations. International policies, Nehru warned, were still at a Stone Age level and wars were endemic. In a lighter moment, a wry advert in *The Herald* announced that Sputnik would land in Dangar Park during the Miss Mayfield competition.

To add to Little Richard's worries, Gene Vincent and his musicians were on a perpetual bender. And Aussie teenagers - many of them newly minted bodgies and widgeys - were, in Doyle's words, 'converging as though summoned by secret signals' to Little Richard's concerts in a period '...of portents and other worldly visitations'.

Little Richard himself was exhausted from constant travel and performance commitments, and was stricken with guilt about the life he was living. The "lights in the sky" - the satellites - were, he told Jack Davey '... a sign that the Lord is coming soon. And I want to dedicate my life to God.'

Little Richard may have found God, but he was not yet quite ready to leave the secular world he so enthusiastically embraced. At the end of the interview he launched into a riotous performance of his song Long Tall Sally, and the audience screamed with delight. But in his second Wollongong show Little Richard took a break to distribute religious tracts and to preach about the need to find God. In Melbourne he stopped the show for 20 minutes of Bible reading. Then, a few days after arriving back into the USA he honoured one last recording commitment in Los Angeles, before settling into a religious life.

Little Richard's legacy is considerable. His songs are Rock and Roll classics and helped shape popular music. His withdrawal from Rock and Roll gave breathing space for others; Elvis especially. And not least among Little Richard's contributions to music in Australia was the leg up his concerts gave to Johnny O'Keefe.

The antics on Newcastle harbour heralded the decline of the first wave of Rock and Roll. Doyle points out that Little Richard was the first of the great 1950s rockers to leave the business, and that others were quick to follow: in March 1958 Elvis went to Germany as a soldier in the US Army; in May 1958 the revelation that Jerry Lee Lewis at age 22 had married his thirteen year old cousin - his third wife - slowed his career somewhat; the Payola scandals in which disc jockeys were paid to promote certain artists brought disrepute; Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens died in February 1959 when their hired plane fell out of the air. At about the same time Chuck Berry

faced charges relating to sex with a teenager. Eddie Cochran died in a car crash in England in April 1960. And so Rock and Roll went into decline. Doyle quips that Rock and Roll died here in Australia. We Novocastrians can stretch the point and claim that it drowned beneath the waters of our Newcastle harbour.

After his conversion, Little Richard opted in and out of the pop music scene for five decades. He made a number of religious records from 1959, but re-emerged for a particularly energetic secular period followed the Beatles' recording of his Long Tall Sally. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986, was the officiating cleric at the weddings of celebrities including that of Demi Moore and Bruce Willis in 1987, and you can watch him sing Good Golly Miss Molly at Bill Clinton's 1993 presidential Inaugural Gala, and Tutti Frutti at Mohammed Ali's fiftieth birthday celebration in 1992 on YouTube.

Some three decades later he told his biographer that he'd thrown his jewellery into 'Sydney harbour'. Georgia boys know Australian geography as intimately as I know Georgia geography: the Hunter was the site of the action. And I know, because I was here at the time and through the fog of the decades I recall the kerfuffle that this action, and the cancellation of his second Newcastle concert in particular, caused.

These days (mid 2013) MBS Fine Music Network's blog features a 'Little' Richard Wagner puppet to accompany its series of radio programs called, in a coincidence that appeals to my sense of the ridiculous, Countdown to The Ring; a promotion not of Little Richard's submarine rings in the Hunter, but of the Australian Opera's coming Melbourne production of Wagner's great operatic cycle. Forces of evil wrested the Rhinegold from the guardianship of Richard Wagner's Rhinemaidens, but the vigilant water sprites of the Hunter ensure that Little Richard's rings remain secure in the depths.

Amid the quagmire of web sites of variable reliability about Little Richard, there's one that dubs him the highest paid singer in the world, and another equally foolish site rates his Long Tall Sally as the greatest song ever written. Among a number of hoax web sites there is one that reports his death in April 2013, but more reliable sites reveal that, despite hip replacement surgery, he is still alive and performing. A proof, you can watch a YouTube clip of Little Richard at age 80 performing Long Tall Sally from his wheelchair, pompadour in place, moustache trimmed to perfection, on stage in Las Vega this year.

Little Richard's symbolic gesture on the waters of the Hunter is now recorded on a wall map at Newcastle Maritime Centre to note a small but critical moment in the tumultuous changes in popular culture of the late 1950s, changes that reflected events in the world at large, and a gesture that connects Newcastle harbour to the world of Rock and Roll and the rise the teenager as a player in the shaping of our world.

And me? These days I'm a retiree and grandfather, and when I take younger family members for a ride on the Stockton ferry, it is the Little Richard story that I feel most compelled to tell.