

## Little Richard - 'Tutti Frutti, Oh Rooty'

Written by Andy Owen



### ***"Whop bop b-luma b-lop bam bom"***

When you first heard those words, the energy that came through that little speaker, literally knocked you off your feet.

It still does. Little Richard. They only made one like him.

Tutti Frutti was his most famous song, recorded in 1955.

In Italian, Tutti Frutti means 'all fruits' and he allegedly wrote it with the help of a lady called Dorothy LaBostrie.

I say allegedly, as there is a fair bit of controversy not only about the song, but who actually wrote it. The lyrics we have all sung along with, are these:

*Whop bop b-luma b-lop bam bom  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
A wop bop b-luma b-lop bam bom*

*I got a girl named Sue, she knows just what to do  
I got a girl named Sue, she knows just what to do  
She rocks to the east, she rocks to the west  
But she's the girl that I love best*

*Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty, whoo  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty,  
A wop bop-b-luma b-lop bam bom*

*Got a girl named Daisy, she almost drives me crazy  
Got a girl named Daisy, she almost drives me crazy  
She knows how to love me, yes, indeed  
Boy, you don't know what she do to me*

*Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty, whoo  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
Whop bop-b-luma, oww*

*Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty, whoo  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
A wop bop-b-luma b-lop bam bom*

*Got a girl named Daisy, she almost drives me crazy  
Got a girl named Daisy, she almost drives me crazy  
She knows how to love me, yes, indeed  
Boy, you don't know what she do to me*

*Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty, whoo  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty, Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
Tutti frutti, oh rooty  
A wop bop-b-luma b-lop bam boom*

Yes, those are the words we have all sung many times. But, those were not the original lyrics, written by Little Richard.

The original lyrics were a bit more colourful than that.

The original lyrics, in which "Tutti Frutti" referred to a homosexual man, were:

*Tutti Frutti, good booty  
If it don't fit, don't force it  
You can grease it, make it easy*

*Tutti Frutti, good booty  
If it's tight, it's all right  
And if it's greasy, it makes it easy*

Clearly the song was originally written about sex, specifically, anal sex.

Little Richard had been at times open and at times vague about his sexuality, but he had certainly enjoyed gay relationships.

He did once say *"Elvis may be the king of rock and roll, but I am the Queen."*

To underline this, in American Pie, Don Maclean wrote:

"When the Jester sang for the King and Queen", he was talking about the King being Elvis and the Queen being Little Richard.

(The Jester, incidentally, was Bob Dylan).

So, we can be pretty confident that the song started out being about gay sex.

A song on that subject and using pretty graphic language like the original, wouldn't get you a record deal in 1950's America - or anywhere else in the world at that time.

Little Richard had recorded for RCA and Peacock Records since 1951, but with little commercial success.

In February 1955, he sent a demo tape to Specialty Records in New Orleans.

The owner Art Rupe liked the tape and, seven frustrating months later, arranged a recording session for him at Cosimo Matassa's J & M Studio in New Orleans.

Robert "Bumps" Blackwell was the producer and Fats Domino's backing band were hired for the session. The band included Lee Allen and Alvin "Red" Tyler on saxophones, Huey Smith on piano, Frank Fields on double bass, Justin Adams on guitar and Earl Palmer on drums.



As the session wore on, Little Richard became frustrated that his typical energetic performance style was not being fully captured on tape.

During a lunch break, he started pounding a piano and singing a ribald song that he wrote and composed - and which he had been performing live for many years, across clubs and bars in the South.

The initial phrase "Whop bop b-luma b-lop bam bom" was Richard's interpretation of a drum fill he wanted for the intro.

Blackwell was in the booth and heard the song and was blown away, He wanted desperately to record it, as he felt it was going to be a smash. But he knew something had to be done about the lyrics - and they needed toning down into a more acceptable but vague song about girls.

This is where it all starts to get a bit cloudy, as details of the story vary.

Dorothy LaBostrie - a lady who was well known in the clubs and bars of New Orleans - was asked by Blackwell to tone down the lyrics of the song.

LaBostrie apparently went to the studio where Little Richard was recording, and reportedly rewrote the words of the song in 15 minutes.

Blackwell said time constraints prevented the development of a new arrangement, so Little Richard recorded the revised song in three takes, taking about 15 minutes, with the original piano part.

LaBostrie was credited as co-writer of the song with Little Richard, but later claimed that she had written it in its entirety. She later laughed at Little Richard's claim to have written the song by himself and that he has been cheated out of royalties for years, saying "*Little Richard didn't write none of 'Tutti Frutti'.*"

I seriously doubt that.

But, she was still receiving royalty checks for the song, at an average of \$5,000 every three to six months, in the 1980's - so whatever the truth may be, it's fair to say she did very well out of it.



One of the funnier aspects of Tutti Frutti, is that Pat Boone recorded it.

Boone was whiter than white, a real family man and hugely religious.

Just the thought of him recording this song, is hilarious.

But, the lyrics he sang, were, of course, far removed from the original.

The phrase 'Tutti Frutti' comes from an ice cream, and Richard stated that it was a name that caught his eye and sounded like a good phrase for a song.

I seriously doubt that, as well.

In those days, Tutti Frutti was another name used when someone was gay - and 'fruit' or 'fruity' used to be a derogatory slang term for gay. So now I'm curious as to which came first, the song or the slang?

However it started out, it ended up as a song about girls and sex, extracted from a song about boys and sex.

It's not the only song that disguised its true meaning. There have been many over the years. "Keep a knockin' but you can't come in", is another example.

Many people have sung that song, without realising what it was really about.

In my research for this article, I read a very funny comment from a guy about Tutti Frutti, when he found out about the original lyrics.

*"This was the very first song I ever learnt, because my Dad didn't know any nursery rhymes.*

*I was singing a song about gay sex at 2 years old. I can't wait to bring this fact up with Dad at our next Sunday lunch".*

The sheer energy of the song, with its hard-driving sound, wild lyrics and powerful vocal style, was a sensation. Many believe it represented the birth of rock n roll.

It's hard to disagree.

Tutti Frutti was recorded on September 14th 1955.

It was a slow burner, but entered the Billboard Rhythm & Blues chart at the end of December 1955 and rose to No. 2 early in February 1956.

It also reached No. 21 on the *Billboard* pop chart.

In the UK, it was only a 'B' side, being put on the back of the single release of Long Tall Sally.

But, Little Richard had well and truly arrived. And his influence on popular music was to become gigantic.

Many iconic individuals and groups point to Richard as a major influence.

The Beatles and The Stones for example, both held him in the highest esteem.



Paul once stated that he learned *"everything he knows"* from Little Richard.

*"From 'Tutti Frutti' to 'Long Tall Sally' to 'Good Golly, Miss Molly' to 'Lucille', Little Richard came screaming into my life when I was a teenager," McCartney said.*

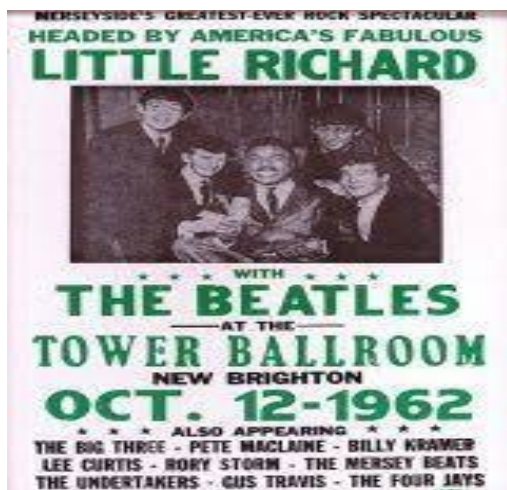
*"I owe a lot of what I do to Little Richard and his style; and he knew it. He would say, 'I taught Paul everything he knows'. I had to admit he was right."*

McCartney added, *"In the early days of the Beatles we played with Richard at The Star Club in Hamburg in 1962 and got to know him.*

*He would let us hang out in his dressing room and we were witness to his pre-show rituals, with his head under a towel over a bowl of steaming hot water, he would suddenly lift his head up to the mirror and say, 'I can't help it cos I'm so beautiful.'*

*And he was."*

Richard remembered those days. *"We spent two months in Hamburg. John, Paul, George, and Ringo. They would stay in my room every night. They'd come to my dressing room and eat there every night. They hadn't any money, so I paid for their food. I used to buy steaks for John."*



Little Richard and McCartney developed a tight friendship and he was very fond of George Harrison too.

For a moment in time, he called The Beatles his apprentices.

The group supported Richard when he toured the UK later in 1962.

The Stones were just getting started and were struggling financially - and Richard remembered Mick Jagger watching him onstage.

*"I had never heard of the Rolling Stones before I went to England. Mick Jagger used to sit at the side of the stage watching my act. Every performance. They had a little record out, a cover of Chuck Berry's "Come On," but had never done a tour before.*

*Mick opened the show with the Rolling Stones. They were making fifty dollars a night. He couldn't even pay for his room. Mick used to talk to me all the time. He'd sit there and talk all night if I let him. He and the others used to sleep on Bo Diddley's floor in the hotel".*

Jagger remembers those times with great affection.

*"I couldn't believe the power of Little Richard on stage. He was amazing.*

*Chuck Berry is my favourite, along with Bo, but nobody could beat Little Richard's stage act. Little Richard is the originator and my first idol."*



Keith Richards felt the same way, *"The most exciting moment of my life was appearing on the same stage as Little Richard."*

In 2007, an eclectic panel of renowned recording artists ranked "Tutti Frutti" at No.1 on Mojo's "The Top 100 Records That Changed The World" and hailed the recording as "the sound of the birth of rock and roll".

In 2010, the U.S. Library of Congress National Recording Registry added the recording to its registry, claiming the "unique vocalizing over the irresistible beat announced a new era in music".

In April 2012, Rolling Stone magazine declared the refrain "the most inspired rock lyric ever recorded".

Richard Wayne Penniman died on May 9th, 2020, in Nashville, Tennessee, aged 87. His son and brother were by his side.

Little Richard was a rock pioneer and a musical giant - unique and without equal.

We all owe him a lot.

