Why the title? Rock stars were uncommon people. They came from the masses and got to the top without the help of education, training, family ties, money, or other conventional ladders. They came from ordinary lives and had no reason to expect that they would ever be special. At the same time they refused to accept that they would ever be anything but exceptional. Most surprising of all, a lot of them had careers that lasted far longer than they had any right to expect, because long after the hits stopped coming their legends continued to endure. The legends endured because, like the stars of the great cowboy films of that earlier age, they were playing themselves and, at the same time, they were playing us.

September 14, 1955
Rampart Street, New Orleans, Louisiana

Enter the first rock star

Little Richard was unusual. He had always been unusual. He was one of ten children of Leva Mae Penniman. She said he was more trouble than the rest put together.

According to Richard, who began burnishing his legend from an early age, he was born deformed. One leg was certainly shorter than the other. One eye was clearly bigger than the other. Hence Richard walked with short steps, which gave him a mincing gait. In the Pleasant Hill section of Macon, Georgia, during the Second World War, at a time when sympathy for difference was in short supply, he came in for rough treatment. They called him faggot, sissy, punk, and freak. And those were his friends.

Among his classmates he had a reputation for being happy to do the thing they were too sensible to do. At the age of twelve he placed one of his bowel movements in a shoe box, presented it to an elderly neighborhood woman as a birthday present, and then hid to witness her reaction as she opened it.

He had his first homosexual experience with a local man known as Madame Oop. Madame Oop was a friend of the family. Sometimes white men would pick Richard up in their cars and take him out to the woods.

His father, Bud, would beat him, say he wasn't a real boy. Bud ran moonshine whiskey and was eventually shot and killed in front of Macon's Tip In Inn.

The young Richard was excited by the gospel acts who came through Macon. Because they worked on the Lord's behalf, these people seemed to be licensed to act crazy. Sometimes it wasn't possible to tell whether they were singing about heavenly or earthly reward. They were clearly moved by the spirit of free enterprise. Richard ingratiated himself with Sister Rosetta Tharpe when she played Macon. She allowed him to open her show and then crumpled $30 into his hand. This was a life-changing moment.

In 1949, at the age of seventeen, Richard went on the road with a snake oil salesman. Like many features of Little Richard's early life, this is not a metaphor. This is the reality in which he was raised. He performed with Doctor Nobilio, who carried with him "the devil's child," allegedly a dead baby with the feet of a bird. He joined the minstrel show of Sugarfoot Sam from Alabam, who introduced him as Princess Lavonne. He performed in a dress.

As a teenager Richard had a job washing dishes in the diner in Macon's Greyhound bus station. Interesting trade would pass through, particularly in the nighttime hours. This is how he met a fifteen-year-old from South Carolina named Eskew Reeder, who styled herself Esquerita, sported a pompadour so high there was snow on the top, and was camp enough to make Richard seem like a longshoreman.

Richard took Esquerita home, copied the hairdo and his hammering right hand on the piano. In fact, Richard, who was to spend the rest of his life complaining that other people had stolen his style, picked up something from almost everybody he encountered. He played in the band of Billy Wright, who also piled his hair up high and impressed upon him the value of a makeup shade called Pancake 31. He observed a mountainous woman called Clara Hudmon, who performed in shimmering raiment and went by the name of the Georgia Peach.

In the same week in September 1955 that Richard arrived for his record date in New Orleans, two men went on trial in Money, Mississippi, for having brutally beaten and murdered Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who had been visiting relatives down south and made the mistake of addressing a white woman in a way she took to be fresh. The only reason there was a trial was because his mother had insisted his appallingly damaged body be flown back north and displayed in an open coffin. The killers were acquitted, as was the custom of the South, but the trial pricked the national conscience.

Even in the rest of the country, which didn't have the same history of slavery, the best that black people could hope for was indifference. It wasn't until 1950 that *Life* magazine considered it acceptable to put a black face on its cover and even then it was Jackie Robinson, whose entry into the big leagues of baseball had taken place against a background of abuse. Music was becoming integrated more quickly than the wider society. In January 1955 the white disc jockey Alan Freed had opened the doors on his "Rock 'n' Roll Jubilee Ball" at Saint Nicholas Arena in New York and been amazed to see seven thousand kids flocking in. He was even more amazed to see they were white as well as black. It had never occurred to him that white kids might be listening to the rhythm and blues records he played on the radio.

In the South sensitivities were greater. In 1954 the boy Elvis Presley had made his first broadcast appearance on the Memphis radio show of Dewey Phillips. Dewey made sure that the listeners knew he went to Humes High School. That way, they would know that he was white.

The color blindness worked the other way as well. Up in the far North, in Hibbing, Minnesota, fourteen-year-old Bobby Zimmerman had taken advantage of the nighttime ionosphere effect to tune in to Frank "Brother Gatemouth" Page, who was playing rhythm and blues records on a station out of Shreveport, Louisiana, fully a thousand miles away. Page talked the jive and played the blues, but he was no blacker than his pale Jewish listener in the frozen north. On the air you could be whoever you wanted to be.

Everybody involved in the music business knew rock and roll was happening but only Freed had seen with his own eyes the people it was happening among. Few had much hope it would turn out to be more than a fad, much as calypso and Latin had been in the previous year.

When Specialty Records sent producer Bumps Blackwell from Los Angeles to New Orleans to make a record with Little Richard, a boy who had already been recorded a handful of times but had never had a hit, he didn't have anything particular in mind.

The most-played record on American jukeboxes that week in September 1955 was "Maybellene," the first one by Chuck Berry, a former ladies' hairdresser from Saint Louis. Berry was offering something that sounded

like a comical country song but with a heavy backbeat. Blackwell didn't know exactly what he had to come up with, but he was alive to the possibility of doing something similarly dramatic.

The studio they were in that day was the size of a motel room. The band squeezed into the room contained a number of the regulars in Fats Domino's outfit. When the twenty-two-year-old Richard appeared, wearing a shirt of a violent hue with a high collar that made him look like a pantomime queen, with his pompadour kept in place by industrial-strength lacquer, his natural skin tone concealed beneath a full inch of Pancake 31, the band rolled their eyes at one another but then got down to work.

"We recorded 'Kansas City' and 'Directly from My Heart to You,'" Blackwell recalled later. "They were okay. Good songs and he was a good singer. But we weren't really getting anywhere."

They took a break and went across the street to the Dew Drop Inn, a famous New Orleans spot where musicians hung out. According to a city ordinance, it was supposed to have a partition separating the white drinkers from the black drinkers, but the owner couldn't be bothered. The Dew Drop Inn made its own law.

"All the boosters, rounders, pimps, and whores were sitting around," remembered Blackwell. "And there was a piano. Well, all you need to do with Richard is give him an audience and the show's on."

Richard approached the piano and called the patrons of the Dew Drop Inn to attention with a yelp that rent the frowsy lunchtime air, a yelp pitched like a cross between a football chant and an order barked across a parade ground. Like a stone skimmed across the profound stillness of a vast pond, that yelp went on to echo around the world.

It went as follows: "Awopbopaloobop."

It continued: "Alopbamboom!"

That's all it was. It was just a little riff, an imagined percussion fill that Richard was in the habit of beating out on the lunch counter of the bus station in Macon. This time it tumbled without interruption into a sort of song, a song that was greeted throughout the Dew Drop Inn with the knowing smirks of those whose chosen lifestyles meant they were not readily given to indignation.

The song, if song it could be called, was a selection that could only be sung, if singing it could be called, in front of the kind of people who spent

their lunchtimes in the Dew Drop Inn, an establishment louche even by the standards of Planet New Orleans. Its title, if it could be said to have one because nobody had ever considered it fit enough for publication, was "Tutti Frutti."

Its subject matter was, not to put too fine a point on it, anal sex.

It began, "Tutti Frutti, good booty." It then added, "If it's tight, it's all right." It developed that idea further with "If it's greasy, it makes it so easy."

As Little Richard hammered at the high keys of the piano in the way he'd learned from Esquerita, howled in the way he'd borrowed from Rosetta Tharpe, and made show in the way he'd seen so many artists do out on the Chitlin Circuit, Bumps Blackwell found himself wondering if it might be possible to take some of "Tutti Frutti" 's fetid energy back into the studio and clean it up a bit.

He put the idea to Richard. Now Richard was a strange combination of libertine and prude. He'd run wild in the streets during the week but submitted to the discipline of the church on Sunday. He said he didn't want to record the song "because it's dirty." Blackwell reckoned they might be able to fix the words. Which is where Dorothy LaBostrie came in. Dorothy was twenty-seven at the time and was working as a waitress in New Orleans while raising a couple of kids. She was tall and thin and fancied herself as a poet and songwriter. She'd been bombarding Blackwell with lyrics for some time.

Blackwell called her over to the studio and instructed Richard to sing his "song" to her. Richard agreed to do so but only if he could sing it with his back turned. He ran through it a couple of times as she took notes. She didn't want the job but Bumps said she owed it to her children. Fifteen minutes later she returned with a clean version, in which the references to buggery had been replaced by the slang term of approval "aw rooty" and a girl named Daisy had made an appearance, who apparently drove the singer of the song crazy.

It took them three takes but by the end of the session they had a record that sounded like no record had ever sounded before.

"Tutti Frutti" began like a stickup, built up to a riot, and stopped as suddenly as it had arrived. It was like a jet plane passing over your head close enough to part your hair. It was hilarious if you thought about it. The important thing was not to think about it. When it came out a few weeks later, the only people who didn't find it meaningless were

teenagers, for whom its delirious exuberance meant more than mere words ever could.

"Tutti Frutti" got to number two on the rhythm and blues chart and as high as number seventeen on the main pop chart. It wasn't as big a hit as the inevitably pallid cover version served up for white radio by Pat Boone. Nevertheless the record they'd lashed together in such unseemly haste at the end of that session on Rampart Street reached around the world and electrified the people who mattered.

Richard recorded further smashes with Bumps Blackwell over the next two years: "Lucille," "Long Tall Sally," "Rip It Up," "Keep A Knockin'," "Good Golly Miss Molly," and "The Girl Can't Help It," which he also sang in the movie of the same name. That run of successes made Little Richard into the first true rock star. He was a few months ahead of Elvis into the national spotlight, which gave him first mover advantage. Whereas Elvis took the conventional idea of male beauty into almost Venusian hyperreality, Richard remained the runt of the litter, a limping, one-eyed grotesque who seemed to turn himself into a star by dint of sheer force of will. Richard's unrestrained sexuality was doubly threatening because it wasn't clear whether it was directed at your daughter or your son. Where Chuck Berry's records seemed to be about rock and roll, Little Richard's records were the embodiment of the simultaneous rage and joy of the music itself. That opening shout of "Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom" seemed like the answer to a question nobody had yet thought of posing.

Richard was young enough, unsettling enough, and clearly invested enough in the revolution announced by "Tutti Frutti" to be the first star of the music. It helped that he looked the way he did, acted the way he did, and had a name and a persona that placed him in the appropriate category of otherness.

Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, and Bill Haley were all too old and too detached from the world of their music to be the standard-bearer of this new crusade. With Little Richard you finally had a personality who lived up to the sound. It was this new combination of mayhem and personal magnetism, this marriage of walking and talking, the intimation that even though the record may have reached its end the consciousness from which it sprang was alive out there in the world, carrying itself in a certain way and behaving in a way that the fans would dearly like to have had the permission to behave, that made Richard the first rock star.

Richard called and many answered. They answered from all over the world. "Tutti Frutti" was covered by Elvis Presley for his first album the following year. It was in the vast white audience, which neither he nor Blackwell had ever given a moment's thought to when they had made the record, that his sound had its most profound effect.

It was released in the UK in 1957 on the B-side of "Long Tall Sally." David Jones, a nine-year-old at Burnt Ash Junior School in Bromley, later recalled that "my heart burst with excitement." Keith Richards, who was twelve and attending Dartford Technical High School for Boys, said, "It was as if, in a single instant, the world changed from monochrome to Technicolor." And Bobby Zimmerman, the boy who'd been tuning his radio to the sound of Shreveport from up there in the Iron Range of Minnesota, led a group called the Golden Chords, who appeared at a school concert with their own pallid attempt at mimicking Little Richard. It was an unimaginably hot, exotic sound to be attempted by anyone other than the people who made it that day in New Orleans, let alone a bunch of Jewish adolescents from the frozen north.

But the die was cast. The high school yearbook entry in Bobby Zimmerman's final year at Hibbing High in 1959 announced his ambition. He didn't want to run for president. He didn't want to write the Great American Novel. He wanted one thing. "To join Little Richard."

1955 Playlist

Little Richard: "Tutti Frutti"
Chuck Berry: "Maybellene"
Frank Sinatra: *In the Wee Small Hours*
Bill Haley and the Comets: "Rock Around the Clock"
Lonnie Donegan: "Rock Island Line"
Fats Domino: "Ain't That a Shame"
The Platters: "The Great Pretender"
Perez Prado: "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White"
Elvis Presley: "Baby Let's Play House"
Fess Parker: "The Ballad of Davy Crockett"