



GILES MARTIN
REVEALS ALL ABOUT HIS
PET SOUNDS REBOOT



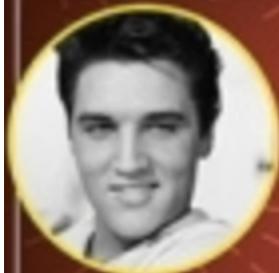
TEENAGE IDOLS
BREAKING HEARTS
AND TOPPING CHARTS



THE BIG BOPPER
"A WIGGLE IN THE WALK,
A GIGGLE IN THE TALK!"

VINTAGE*ROCK

HAIL! HAIL! ROCK'N'ROLL! THE MUSIC, THE CULTURE, THE LIFESTYLE, THE MEMORIES...



ELVIS
HIS BIG-SCREEN
TRIUMPH IN
KING CREOLE

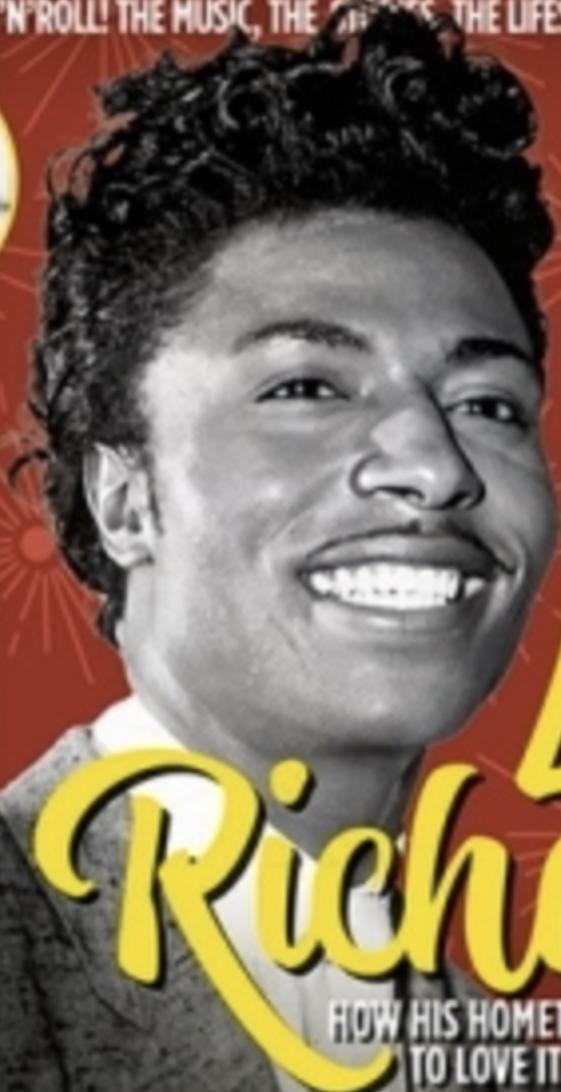


**DONNA
PRESLEY**
MY LIFE AT
GRACELAND



PLUS!

FURIOUS ★ ISAAC WEBB TRIO ★ ROY ORBISON
★ INDEPENDENT RECORD LABELS ★ THE HEY LAS



Little Richard

HOW HIS HOMETOWN FINALLY GREW
TO LOVE ITS MOST FAMOUS SON



**CLASSIC
ALBUM**
JOE TURNER:
ROCK & ROLL



Hometown GLORY

Little Richard had a complicated relationship with his birthplace of Macon, Georgia. Now, with a slew of renewed interest in his raucous rock'n'roll, the late piano pounder is finally receiving his due. *Vintage Rock* makes the pilgrimage to Atlanta to find out more...

WORDS BY JORDAN BASSETT

“THE KING OF ROCK AND ROLL IS A GAY BLACK MAN FROM MACON, GEORGIA.”

So reads a sticker proudly displayed in the window of The Society Garden, an outdoor bar in the aforementioned city deep in the American South. That attention-grabbing caption is accompanied by a black-and-white image of Little Richard screaming his lungs out, while the venue itself is adorned with a huge mural of the Georgia Peach in three stages of his life: the stately 50s, the flamboyant 70s and twinkly twilight years.



The striking Little Richard mural at The Society Garden

Having written an upcoming book about the star's sensational debut album *Here's Little Richard*, I'm on the trail and searching for the spirit of the man I've adored for as long as I can remember. And where better to start than with a bit of Southern hospitality in the much-loved piano pounder's hometown? A fitting tribute to a rock'n'roll giant, the mural was painted by the sought-after graffiti artist Jeks, who created the oversized image a month after Richard's sad death at the age of 87 in May 2020.

The Society Garden is located at the top of Ingleside Village, a bohemian strip of restaurants and independent shops in the city's north-west. Residents raised the artist's \$4,500 fee through a GoFundMe page, which implored: "Historic Ingleside Avenue is the burgeoning gateway to downtown, and the entrance to Pleasant Hill, where Little Richard grew up. Let's do something amazing for our Village and community!"

It's part of a wider posthumous reassessment of the pioneer's rich legacy, which has come to a head in 2023 thanks largely to *Little Richard: I Am Everything*, a fittingly fabulous new film from director Lisa Cortés. My trip will culminate with a special screening of the movie at the historic Douglass Theatre, where I'll meet fellow fans and even some of Richard's relatives. Amazingly, there hadn't been a major

Macon, hometown of the Georgia Peach, for many the true Architect Of Rock'n'Roll

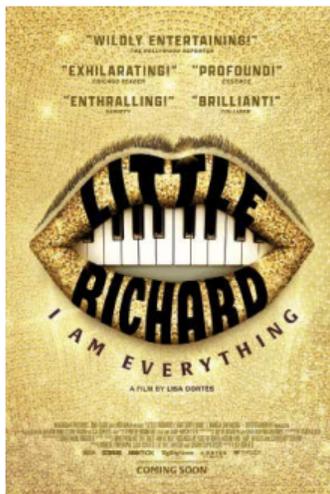


Little Richard

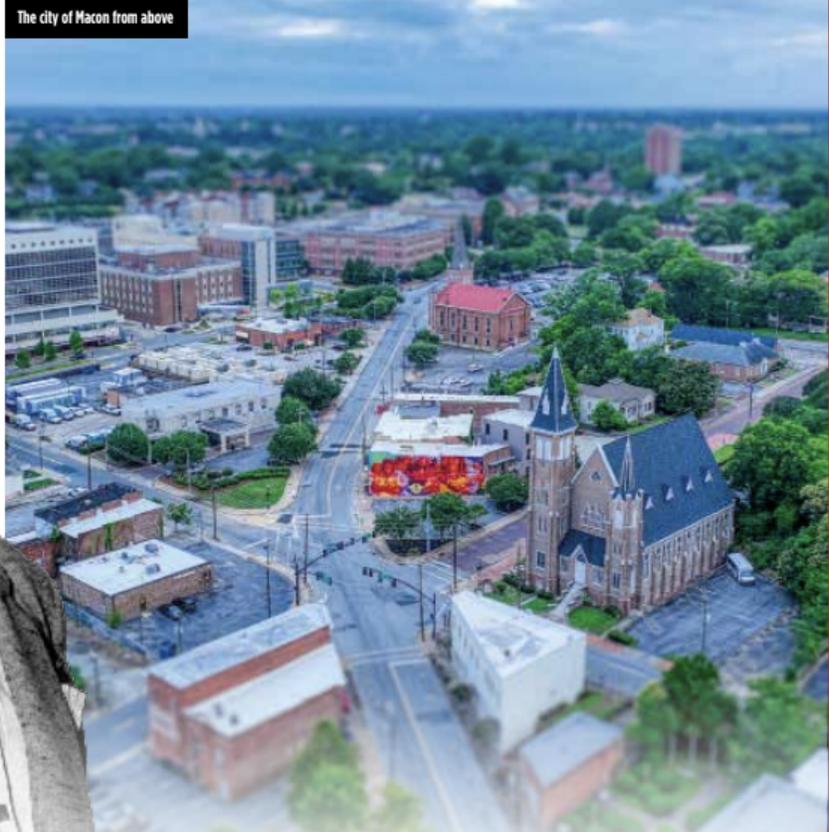


Little Richard circa 1956, the year he ascended to megastardom

documentary about the self-proclaimed Architect of Rock'n'Roll before this year. "That was a big part of the catalyst in doing this," Cortés tells *Vintage Rock*, "because it's like, 'Wait, what? OK – off to the races'. Whenever someone dies, you're hearing their music everywhere and people are making tributes. It was the pandemic and it really just hit me in a major way... When Bob Dylan says how important you are and



The city of Macon from above



that he wanted to be Little Richard, you start to not take [Richard] for granted."

Featuring other famous fans including Mick Jagger and Tom Jones, as well as academics who summon the necessary historical context, the documentary explores Richard's roots in Macon and subsequent rise with Specialty Records, whom we have to thank for his first smash-hit *Tutti Frutti* and everything that happened in its wake.



Lisa Cortés, director of *Little Richard: I Am Everything*

The film offers the Quasar the credit he was denied in life, suggesting the world is finally beginning to catch up with an artist who was way ahead of his time.

When it comes to the fact that Richard was so underrated, says Cortés, "you can't take out issues of race, you can't take out issues of sexuality. We live in a world that elevated Elvis and erased Richard. And I'm not being anti-Elvis because even Elvis was like, 'I owe him so much!'".

Richard notoriously quit rock'n'roll for the church at the height of his fame in 1957 and spent the rest of his career battling between musical extravagance and religious evangelism. While Cortés acknowledges that this hurt his career, too, she also counters: "I definitely feel it's in the background of the story that he didn't have the consistency of continuing this hot streak, but there's also Bob Dylan, who leaves and makes a gospel record... Richard left and made a gospel record and then he came back, but he was not given a seat in the rock'n'roll Gods' pantheon."

A CITY ON THE RISE

Our rock god's hometown, of course, is much changed since he grew up here as Richard Penniman, one of 12 children, in the 1930s. An hour-and-a-half by car from Atlanta, this traditionally working-class city now

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Ringo Starr called Richard "one of my all-time musical heroes"...



...while for Nile Rodgers, the icon's passing was "the loss of a true giant"



Putting The King And Queen On-screen

In further proof that Little Richard is back (and there's a whole lotta shakin' goin' on!), the release of *I Am Everything* coincided with another documentary, the BBC's *Little Richard: King And Queen Of Rock'n'Roll*. "There's been an increase in interest in films that deal with race and sexuality," its director James House tells *Vintage Rock*. "Race [in particular] since Black Lives Matter became a more mainstream movement... The way that the mainstream also thinks about gender and sexuality has moved on in the last 10 years – hugely."

Little Richard: I Am Everything director Lisa Cortés, meanwhile, points out: "There is always, in the cultural history, numerous tales of Black artists not being accredited for their

tremendous contributions to global cultural movements. And Little Richard is just another more striking example of this."

Both documentaries boast big names who help to reappraise Little Richard's music (the BBC film features Nile Rodgers and Ringo Starr). Yet James House explains that the real challenge was in speaking with people who knew the man behind the make-up – those who met Richard Penniman, perhaps, rather than Little Richard. "This is the last period of time where we could have made this film," says House, who interviewed the likes of the star's valet Charles Moore. "In 10 years' time... it sounds dark to say it, but a few people probably won't be around to tell the story any more."

Indeed, the filmmaker planned to feature Lee Angel – a former burlesque dancer who became the bisexual Richard's girlfriend in the 50s – but she sadly died the day before the intended interview. Cortés, who *did* manage to interview Angel for *I Am Everything*, says the biggest challenge she faced was in representing all sides of Richard's enormous personality, given that he broke social boundaries but also publicly renounced his sexuality in the 80s.

"I love him," she explains, "and I think my love for him comes through, but I don't want to tell stories that are about hagiography – 'he's the first to do this and isn't he great because he did that'. The complexity of telling this story began with the construction of it, with finding the archival materials

where Richard is narrating his story and he's narrating not only the high points, but he's also highlighting those moments of despair."

This full reckoning with Richard's legacy results in a very modern film about an historical figure. As Cortés puts it: "What I think is important is this idea of the past is always in conversation with the present."

Yet it's important to remember that Richard's music was ultimately about spreading joy. "He was just such a fun person to spend time with," says House. "I learned how amazingly talented he was, but also how complicated he was. I felt, at times, sad for him. And then I felt really proud of him for doing the things they did. I felt very complicated – probably like he felt about himself."

houses around 150,000 residents and has undergone a radical transformation even in the last decade.

Within five years of its unveiling in 2015, the city-backed Macon Action Plan had helped to funnel more than \$400 million into rejuvenating the downtown area. I'm staying at the Forty Five, a former government building that's become a music-themed boutique hotel (you can hang a sign on your door that reads: "I'm working on my next big hit – do not disturb"). In an inspiring instance of old-meets-new, the Forty Five's rooftop bar overlooks the Macon Auditorium, where a 14-year-old Little Richard performed with his hero Sister Rosetta Tharpe in 1947.

The area now boasts swanky restaurants such as Dovetail, which serves up deliciously fancified takes on southern staples (try the curry catfish), as well as the ultra-hip record store Fresh Produce. Despite being a music lover's mecca with over 25,000 titles in its inventory, the shop has only a handful of

Little Richard discs on offer when I drop by. This is because the well-preserved original vinyl is so hard to acquire, says tie-dye-clad proprietor Willie Dantzler, who explains that these much-loved "party records" are often worn out through excessive use. "You can always tell," he grins. "It'll be one or two tracks, too, that are just blown out."

Luckily, there's plenty of indigenous music history for the city to draw on. Southern

by the late Louise Hudson. According to Macon lore, 'Mama Louise' allowed the Allman Brothers to run up a tab in her restaurant during their broke early years. A large mural of the group and the matriarch decorates the building's exterior; it's a reminder of how meaningful a friendship between a Black woman and a racially integrated band was in a city that had been scarred by segregation for almost a century.

A rangy dude with a long white mane, Rex drives us around town for hours, pointing out the James Brown Memorial Bridge and summing up the city's transformation in neat

soundbites: "Macon's on the rise again – but as you see, there's not a lot of yacht owners and stuff. This ain't Florida or California and so on. This is little old Macon. Back in the day, you had to sing or fight your way to get out of Macon."

Little Richard might not have been renowned for his fisticuffs, but he certainly fought his way to the top of the

"We live in a world that elevated Elvis and erased Richard. And I'm not being anti-Elvis, because even Elvis was like, 'I owe him so much!'" LISA CORTÉS

Rock pioneers The Allman Brothers Band formed here, operating out of their hippie nerve centre The Big House, while local boys Otis Redding and James Brown cut their teeth on the city's live circuit, too.

This rich heritage is honoured by Rock Candy Tours, whose guide Rex Dooley meets me at H&H Soul Food, a traditional southern breakfast joint that was co-founded in 1959

Chris Veal's Little Richard mural for Triangle Arts in Macon



Little Richard had a complicated relationship with his hometown, but he always made sure to immortalise Macon by namechecking it in lyrics and interviews

rock'n'roll pile – and the city is studded with quasi-religious sites for any mega-fan who has made the pilgrimage to worship the ground he walked on. We roll through his old stomping ground of Pleasant Hill, which is dotted with small wooden homes and has remained a predominantly Black neighbourhood. During Richard's childhood, this was a relatively comfortable and well-off part of town.

From there we cruise along to the Tic Toc Room, a boujie steak restaurant that's currently closed due to fire damage. If it weren't for a small plaque that reads "Little Richard often performed at Ann's Tic Toc", you might miss its historical significance entirely. In the early 50s, the venue was an LGBT+ club run by Richard's friend Ann Howard, whom he immortalised in the song *Miss Ann*. The rocker reportedly decamped here when his domineering father, Bud, threw him out over his sexuality – the club, says Rex, "was a place where gay men could come and find sanctuary".

To reach the Tic Toc Room from Pleasant Hill, you pass through none other than Little Richard Penniman Boulevard, which offers a grand view of downtown Macon. The street was renamed from Mercer University Boulevard in 1990 and is indeed still backed by the titular school, a prestigious institution that Rex credits with helping to drive the city's rebirth. "There's been millions pumped into that area," he drawls. "If it weren't for Mercer, Macon wouldn't be so well-off."

It's perfect that Little Richard Penniman Boulevard should literally be linked to an

emblem of the next generation, given that his influence continues to echo through the years. Later, I catch a gig at Grant's Lounge, a 250-capacity venue where funk and soul

honour Richard with a rootsy rendition of his 1972 deep cut *Southern Child*: "I'm a Southern child, Southern child/ From down in Macon, Georgia/ Everybody know where I was born..."

put on the weekly Macon Music Revue, performing songs by the artists who've made the city. Tonight, they



The Architect lines the walls of Macon's Visitor Information Centre



Little Richard

Keep-A-Lookin': Little Richard Deep Cut Picks

1 TRUE, FINE MAMA (1957):

It might seem odd to include a track from the classic *Here's Little Richard* in a list of a 'deep cuts', but this self-penned R&B smoothie is often overshadowed by the album's mega-hits. Featuring a rag-tag 'road band' Richard wouldn't record with again, it's perfectly pitched: romantic but rockin'.



2 JOY, JOY, JOY (1961):

Richard's gospel output is well overdue reappraisal. On this Quincy Jones-produced hymn, he faces down Satan himself with rock'n'roll defiance: "I've got that joy down in my heart... I know the Devil doesn't like it, but it's down in my heart!"



3 I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'VE GOT BUT IT'S GOT ME (1965):

This is one of Elton John's favourite Little Richard tracks. No wonder! Thanks to Richard's righteous delivery and his then-protégé Jimi Hendrix's swooning licks, the slow-burning torch song proved that there was still gas in the tank, climbing to No.12 on Billboard's R&B chart.



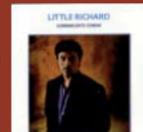
4 GREENWOOD, MISSISSIPPI (1970)

If there's a contender for 'hipster pick' of favourite Little Richard albums, it's his steamy Southern rock gumbo *The Rill Thing* on Reprise Records. *Freedom Blues* was the (minor) hit, but this funky number, written by FAME Studios guitarists Travis Wammack and Albert 'Junior' Lowe, really gets the juices flowin'.



5 SOMEBODY'S COMIN' (1986)

Lifetime Friend, the King and Queen's final proper album, is a point of contention among fans who are repelled by its slick production and long for something more rugged. Yet his last-ever single finds Little Richard fulfilling a lifelong ambition to combine religious music with rock'n'roll. Amen to that.



the weekly
a Music Revue,
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MACON THE BEST OF IT

Little Richard had a complicated relationship with his hometown. He was arrested for 'lewd conduct' in 1955 and banished as part of his punishment; Richard might not have returned until the early 60s – and seldom after that – but he always made sure to immortalise Macon by namechecking it in lyrics and interviews. In my experience, the city repays him in kind: everywhere I go, people want to talk about the prodigal son, who moved out to Hollywood pretty much as soon as *Tutti Frutti* became a hit.

As I leave Sid's, an all-American lunch spot, a woman chases me across the car park. Sue has overheard that I'm writing an article on Little Richard and feels compelled to share her story. A musician herself, she says with the sunny disposition of a children's TV presenter: "He's in my mind, my heart. When I start to play, it's like, 'Hey! It's a hymn – but let's rock it like Little Richard!'"

Curiously, unlike every late rock star from Elvis Presley to Amy Winehouse, the King and Queen of Rock'n'Roll seems to have no public-facing and easily contactable estate that's helping to preserve his legacy. I was unable to locate anyone performing that function for my book and *Vintage Rock's* attempts to do so for this feature, via an email address for Richard's adopted son Danny Jones Penniman, were unsuccessful. Happily, the people of Macon have stepped into the breach.

The moment I walk into the Tubman Museum, a fascinating centre of African-American art and history, I chance upon artist-in-residence Charvis Harrell, who is soon showing me around some private Little

Richard exhibits. This wasn't a prearranged visit: I turned up, we started chatting and, like Sue, he just wanted to share. The artefacts in question, which are sometimes on display but are now in storage due to another exhibition, include the piano that Richard played at the Tic Toc and sparkly garments drawn from his personal collection. "We like to keep him around, in a sense," beams Harrell, "because he's so special to Macon, you know?"

On display to the public is a photo of the one-bedroom abode that our hero was born into on 5 December 1932. In disrepair for decades and originally situated at 1540 Fifth Avenue, it was moved across Pleasant Hill to 416 Craft Street and renovated in 2019, when it became the Little Richard House, a museum dedicated to his life and legacy. Tellingly, the project was – and continues to be – funded by the city of Macon, rather than his own estate.

The building had to be moved because it blocked the expansion of Interstate 75, which first ploughed through Pleasant Hill in the early 1960s, decimating the area economically. "One thing about Georgia and America," asserts Charvis, "is when the highway Interstate system came about, they deliberately ran it through profitable Black neighbourhoods to kind of break 'em up – you know, to take away Black businesses and wealth."

In 2021, the Biden administration seemed to acknowledge the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 harmed Black communities when it pledged that \$20 billion from a \$2 trillion infrastructure improvement plan would help to "reconnect neighborhoods

Eats And Backbeats: *The Vintage Rock Guide To Macon*

Eat

The critically-acclaimed Dovetail, with its Southern gothic drawing room decor, is the upmarket option, but Macon is a down-to-earth city. Head to Famous Mike's for greens 'n' grits, while Ingleside Village Pizza serves by the slice in a setting lifted straight from *American Graffiti*, the walls adorned with gold discs, neon signs and even an Elvis Presley clock whose legs shake by the second.

Sleep

Hotel Forty Five in downtown Macon is a universe unto itself. As well as its sixth floor Hightales Rooftop Bar, this boutique hotel boasts a no-frills breakfast joint called Reckon and a restaurant, Loom, which offers posh Southern grub to rival Dovetail's. There's also a vinyl copy of *Here's Little Richard* on display behind the front desk, just to let you know that you're in the right place.

Drink

Loom's tequila-based 'Ready Teddy' cocktail is a must for the Little Richard nut, even if its jalapeño-chili syrup leaves you sounding rawer than he does on the titular track. After something a little more easygoing? Sip a Fall Line beer – brewed in downtown Macon – at Reboot Retrocade and Bar, which is crammed with vintage arcade games (the Dolly Parton pinball machine is a hoot).

Rock

JBA and the Hummingbird Stage and Taproom host local jam bands and national talent alike (Wednesday is karaoke night at the latter – bring earplugs). The Capricorn Sound Studios and Museum – an homage to Southern rock phenomenon Capricorn Records – and the Otis Redding Foundation, meanwhile, remember homegrown icons who bore more than a hint of Little Richard's influence.

cut off by historic investments and... advance racial equity". Almost a decade before this, the Macon-Bibb Community Enhancement Authority (CEA) was founded to address the city's poverty, with a focus on tackling the damage done in Pleasant Hill. In conjunction with that initiative, \$100,000 was spent on moving and renovating Richard's former home, which has become a local community centre as well as a museum.

The next day after my visit to the Tubman, I meet Robert Banks at the Little Richard House, where he's worked as administrator since it opened. In what was once the Penniman family's living room and is now his modest office, my host, flanked by a pop art-style painting of 60s-era Little Richard and a photo of the star in later life, explains: "We provide a lot of the neighbourhood with resources that they need. Like, we do a lot of resume-writing workshops and help people find jobs through a group called Labor Finders."

Robert's calm demeanour belies that hunger for change. In addition to being a force for local good, however, the Little Richard House is simply a fantastic tourist destination. It might only consist of two rooms, a hallway and a small conservatory that was added in the renovation, but these four walls pack in a whole lot of Little Richard (including a framed copy of the December 2020/January 2021 issue of *Vintage Rock*, with him on the cover). Artworks, photos, records, plaques, clothes and videos of the singer in his pomp: all of these jostle for attention amid a celebration of the man considered by many – including this writer – to be the real creator of rock'n'roll.

Above a photo of Richard Penniman as a young boy, who surely cannot have imagined

the seismic impact that he would have, there's a quote attributed to the man he became: "I was always my own person."

It's astonishing to consider what he went on to achieve, especially given that, according to Robert, he and his siblings used the hallway as a bedroom: "They slept in bunkbeds. Some of them slept with the parents because they had a regular bed and a day bed in that room."

From the humblest of beginnings, Little Richard reshaped the entire music world. It's about time this often-overlooked icon received his due.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The crowd outside the Douglass Theatre edges towards the vibrations within. The venue was founded in 1921 by the Black

entrepreneur Charles Henry Douglass and continues to celebrate African-American art. Tonight, that means raising a glass to Macon's most influential son with a sold-out pre-release screening of *Little Richard: I Am Everything*. In the foyer, a DJ spins choice cuts by the Georgia Peach while Robert hands out leaflets and merch from the Little Richard House. It's enough to make you shout, "Hooo!"

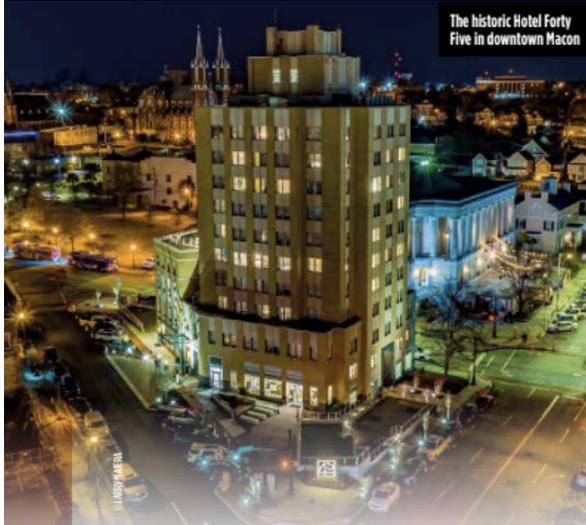
Prior to the screening, I had a rummage through the Little Richard archive at the nearby Washington Memorial Library. There were masses of press clippings but only a couple of pictures. "Unlike Otis Redding, whose family donated a lot of photos" said James, a friendly, shaven-headed librarian, "Richard got the hell out of Dodge and took it all with him."

If the Architect was hurt by his banishment from Macon, which would explain his infrequent presence here, the city is certainly showing up for him tonight. The crowd whoops and laughs throughout *I Am Everything*, which pays tribute to Little Richard with all the swagger and verve he deserves. In addition to academics and celebrities, the film features intimate recollections from his cousins Newt Collier and Stanley Stewart, who are in the audience tonight. It also boasts a bold visual style that illuminates key moments in the tale – the instant the world heard *Tutti Frutti*, for example, is recreated with an expressionistic montage of flowers in bloom and lipstick unfurling.

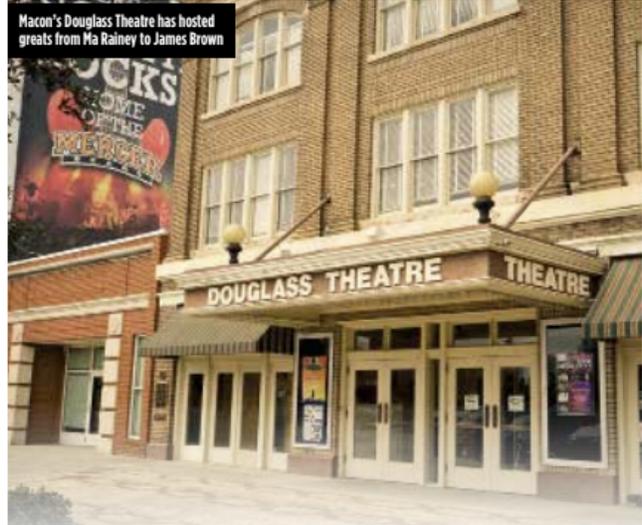
After the movie, 47-year-old Roger Riddle rhapsodises about that sequence, telling *Vintage Rock*: "That's *exactly* what you feel like when you hear that song. I have never seen a visual representation like that. It was amazing to see.



Richard in 1965, the year a young Jimi Hendrix appeared in his band



The historic Hotel Forty Five in downtown Macon



Macon's Douglass Theatre has hosted greats from Ma Rainey to James Brown

27-year-old Kiara Jackson is similarly ecstatic. "The way it was crafted was amazing, thoughtful, insightful," she says. "The fact that they included his family and close friends, as well, to drive home that personal connection..."

When I'm introduced to Newt and Stanley, I'm amazed to find they represent both sides of Little Richard: the former a louche musician and the latter a stately figure who reminds me of our subject during his religious awakening. Once the theatre clears out, amid the crushed popcorn, Stanley reflects on his cousin's love for this city: "He was the greatest brand ambassador for Macon that we've ever had."

Of the fact that Richard visited his hometown only sporadically after he found fame, though, Stanley says: "I think it was two-fold. I think

there was probably some trepidation in terms of him not wanting to come back having had to leave the way he left. And maybe feeling like he wasn't as honoured as he should be in his own hometown. Even from a Biblical standpoint, sometimes your hometown is the last place you're gonna be welcome."

Yet Stanley fondly recalls Richard's blockbusting 2005 comeback concert at the 9,000-capacity Macon Coliseum, which he feels began to heal relations between Richard and his hometown: "[It] really sparked a lot of things." This, he suggests, includes the Little Richard House, which almost didn't come to fruition when its funding wobbled – until Stanley had the man

himself call into a crucial council meeting: "[I said], I want you to tell them – not in a braggadocious manner – what you've done for the city of Macon... And sure enough, they voted for affirmative to get it done because he called in."

Stanley's warm words about this enduring totem of his ever-relevant cousin, whose spirit is all over this city, bring to mind an interview Little Richard granted the *Macon Telegraph* in 2012, which I uncovered at the Washington Memorial Library. "I've been living in California for about 50 years," the rock'n'roll icon admitted, "but you still can't beat your home. You still love your home better than anywhere you've ever been." *

"I've been living in California for about 50 years, but you still love your home better than anywhere you've ever been"

LITTLE RICHARD (1932-2020)

Jordan Bassett's book *Here's Little Richard*, part of Bloomsbury Publishing's 33 1/3 series, is published on 2 November



Richard in 1984, the year he filed a lawsuit against Specialty Records



Little Richard performs at the 2005 TV Land Awards in Santa Monica

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