Little Lulu Meets Chuck Berry

Chris Rahn

Al Kopetski, breath trailing like jet vapor, trudged up the snowy steps to our mailbox.

I opened the front door, “Anything for me?”

Al had been our mailman my entire life—fourteen years. He knew everything about everybody in town. Not by reading mail, of course, but he could tell a lot from return addresses and postcards.

“Hmm. What’ve I got for you today?” He thumbed through a stack of envelopes with ease, despite wearing fat woolen mittens. “Bills from Piggly Wiggly, Standard Oil, and a Saturday Evening Post, and here’s your January issue of Little Lulu. You sure been getting that comic book a long time.”

“My Aunt Susan from California sent me a subscription when I was little and she’s renewed it every year. She thinks I’m still a little kid. Like I got frozen in time.”

“Wait,” Al said. “Here’s a letter to Miss Christine Oswald from WDGY, Your Minnesota Music Source.”

“Yes!”

“What’s that all about?”

“It’s a contest. Did I win?” I ripped open the quivering letter. “Yes! Two tickets to The Big Beat Concert—rock and roll music!”

Al shook his head. “You call that noise music?” He hoisted his leather pouch over his shoulder and slid down the steps in a flurry of snowflakes.

I ran to the kitchen. “Mom! I won!”

Mom was washing dishes and listening to her favorite radio program, The Romance of Helen Trent. “What did you win?”

“A contest!”

She dried her hands on her apron and sat down to read my letter.
January 12, 1958
Dear Christine:

Congratulations! You are a winner in our “Why I listen to WDGY” contest. WDGY is proud to host Alan Freed’s Winter Big Beat Tour at the Minneapolis Auditorium on Friday night. I’m looking forward to seeing you at the concert!

Yours truly,
Bill Diehl “The Real Deal” at WDGY

“Can I go? Please, please?”
Mom bobby-pinned a wayward curl behind her ear. “We'll have to ask Mr. Oswald.” She called my father Mr. Oswald instead of Arnie or Ossie, the names his friends called him. After I saw Blackboard Jungle, I called him Daddio, but he didn’t like it and told me to stop.

I read my new issue of Little Lulu while I waited for Dad to come home from work. Lulu, Tubby and Iggy were in a snowball fight with the Westside guys. It was winter, but Lulu wore her short red dress. She never changed. Over a hundred issues wearing the same red dress, the same pigtails and the same little red hat.

Tires scrunched on the frozen driveway. “Dad’s home!” I met him at the door and buttered him up by blowing snow off his cap and grabbing a hanger for his jacket. “Want a hot chocolate?”

“What’s got into you?”

“I need a favor. Can you take Connie and me to Minneapolis Friday night? I won tickets to a music concert.”

“Pretty far to drive for a concert.”

With much cajoling, a little deception—“Pat Boone might be there”—and faithful promises to finish my chores for the rest of my life, my unsuspecting dad gave in.

The next day my best friend Connie and I raided our babysitting savings and bought our first ever matching skirt-and-sweater sets, pink for me and green for her. Neither of us had ever been to the Minneapolis Auditorium before. Or, for that
matter, to a real rock and roll concert. But we watched *American Bandstand* at Connie’s house after school, so we’d seen the latest fashions and heard the hottest hits. Her family had a Zenith TV the size of a bomb shelter.

On Friday night my parents drove us to the big city, a two-hour journey through stubbled cornfields and crusted snowdrifts. The prairie’s bleak landscape gave way to thickets of barren trees as we approached the Twin Cities. We passed miles of flat suburban homes in Bloomington before the spires and cupola of St. Mary’s Basilica came into sight. Blinking red and white beacons on top of the Foshay Tower guided us through a crescendo of lights to the city center, ablaze with neon.

Dad pulled our wheezing Desoto up to the entrance of the auditorium, a colossal structure with columns of speckled marble, grand as a Roman ruin. Connie and I jumped out of the car to join the other teenagers waiting for the doors to open.

“Look at all the Negroes,” Connie whispered.

Black people were rare in rural Minnesota. We saw them once a year working the rides at the County Fair carnival. But I’d seen pictures in the newspaper of the National Guard (with guns!) escorting black students to Little Rock High School, and I’d seen photos in *Life Magazine* of civil rights marches. But I’d never seen so many people of all colors mixed together in one place before.

“Gee, Connie,” I said, “our whole hometown could fit in this auditorium with seats to spare.”

Ushers in gold-fringed red coats opened the doors to the lobby and the crowd surged forward shoving us through the arched doorways down the aisles to the orchestra pit. The brass railing around the pit had been removed to make room for folding chairs and the usher led Connie and me to the front row with the other contest winners. The front row! Screaming like grade school girls, we held hands and jumped up and down to our seats.

I checked the *Big Beat Program* to see if anyone would be performing songs I knew. “I hope Buddy Holly sings *That’ll be the Day*.”

“Of course he will. That’s his biggest hit,” said Connie, who owned a fantastic collection of 78s, 33s and 45s with every song Buddy Holly and the Crickets ever recorded.
My suitcase portable only played 45 singles. I had Bill Haley and The Comets’ ‘Rock Around the Clock’, Elvis Presley’s ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ and Jerry Lee Lewis’ ‘Great Balls of Fire’. Most of the time I played the records in my bedroom with the door closed, but when Mom and Dad weren’t home, I cranked up the volume until Fred, my dog, pricked his ears, threw back his head and howled like a wolf.

The warm-up acts kicked off the concert with guitar medleys and synchronized dance steps, The Diamonds, Danny and the Juniors, The Chantels, The Pastels, and finally, Buddy Holly. He and the Crickets wore identical tan suits with high-water pants and short jackets. They stood in the middle of the stage and played their best hits while everyone in the audience clapped in time to the music, in unison, as if we were one, big, pulsating mass. The drafty auditorium heated up. Blue smoke drifted above our heads like a thick summer fog. It smelled funny. Sweet. The tinny speakers blasted the lucky winners in the orchestra pit.

After Buddy Holly’s set, Jerry Lee Lewis came on stage in a bright yellow suit and a string tie. He started off slow and easy, then, picking up speed, he kicked the piano stool away and played standing up, shaking his head and jerking, jumping on the piano, playing upside down and backwards until the fans joined in, a boy in the second row jumped up on his seat, the whole crowd followed, flimsy folding chairs crashed to the floor and were kicked aside. My chair tipped over. The hot mass surged forward and pinned Connie and me to the stage. The bass drums thumped. Boom boom boom boom boom boom. Or was that my heart?

After his set, Jerry Lee took several bows and then slipped behind the velvet curtains. The crowd hushed. A tall man strutted on stage in a shiny purple tuxedo and ruffled shirt. His black skin glistened with sweat before he’d even begun his performance.

“Who’s that?” I said.

“I don’t know.” Connie paged through the program. “I don’t have any of his records.”

“Here he is.” I pointed to his picture. “His name is Larry Williams.”

A pencil-thin mustache lined Larry’s pink upper lip, sideburns swooped down his cheeks all the way to his chin, and black hair, greased with thick pomade, added four inches of loft to his height. He picked up the fat extension cord and
plugged his guitar into the socket with a deliberate thrust. His guitar lit up with lights. He turned on the speakers and strummed several tune-up chords before launching into a bone-rattling rendition of *Bony Maron*. Without a pause he slid into *Short Fat Fanny*. In the middle of the song, he pulled off his bow tie, swung it over his head and tossed it in the orchestra pit. Frenzied female fans shoved and grabbed. With each bump and grind, Larry tossed his clothes to the squealing girls—his purple satin jacket, patent-leather shoes, socks, belt and finally his ruffled shirt. Fights broke out. Hair pulling, nail scratching, teeth biting fights. “Motherfucker!” “Bitch!” Connie and I couldn’t believe our ears.

Or our eyes. Except for his snug trousers, Larry was naked. He unplugged his guitar and backed off the stage to shouts of “Take it off! Take it all off!”

I could hardly breathe. My ribs hurt from being squashed against the stage. When I finally managed to suck in a deep breath, a puff of sweet-smelling smoke filled my lungs. The room spun in a dizzy swirl.


The other performers left their clothes on, but they mopped their brows with hankies and tossed the sweat-soaked rags into the crowd. I grabbed Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’ hanky. A buxom girl with a bubbly bouffant and bright red lips snatched it away. I snatched it back. “Bitch!” Oh, no. Did I say illat?

By the time Chuck Berry appeared in the finale, Connie and I were close to collapse. He duck-walked across the stage a few feet from us, then stopped to swipe his face with the sleeve of his silk shirt, sending a shower of sweat into the pit. He winked and smiled. I swooned. I kicked off my shoes, hiked up my skirt and crawled onto the stage. A dozen front-row girls followed and we headed straight for Chuck, but a flank of thick-necked men burst from behind the curtains and pushed us back. Through it all, *Johnny B. Goode* never lost a beat. We screamed for encores until our throats burned.

I stuffed my prized hanky, worth an untold number of jealous squeals from my girlfriends in junior high, in my coat pocket, then Connie and I searched under the chairs for our shoes. It was after midnight when we arrived at my parents’ car.
“Where have you been?” Mom said. “We were worried.”
We stumbled into the back seat.
Mom turned around. “How was Pat Boone?”
“He couldn’t make it,” I said in a hoarse whisper. Our sweaters reeked of sweet smoke and raw sweat.
Dad drove home in the bitter cold with his window rolled down.
I woke up the next morning, my eardrums still ringing, my throat still burning. Each step jolted my brain. I put on jeans, a sweatshirt, and fuzzy slippers and carefully padded down the stairs to the kitchen.
“About time,” Mom said. “It’s noon.”
Everything irritated me——the radio blaring Brushe Brushe Brushe, Use the new Ipana. Fred’s tail thumping on the linoleum, thump, thump. Mom clanging a frying pan on the stove. I poured a glass of tomato juice and sat at the table holding my head. A scraping sound sent shivers through me. “What’s that?”
“The trash cans. Mr. Oswald’s putting them on the curb for pickup. Go tell him his coffee’s ready. The fresh air will do you good.”
I opened the door just as Al Kopetski was handing Dad the mail. “Not much today, Ossie,” he said. “Just bills from Dannheim’s Dairy and the Red Owl. A postcard from your sister Susan in California. Looks like she’s been to that fancy new Disneyland park.” He pawed through his pouch. “Whoa! Almost forgot the Monkey Ward catalogue.” Then he slung his bag over his back and picked his way down the icy steps.
Dad came in, handed Mom the bills and sat down to read his postcard. Mom cleared a spot at the kitchen table for coffee cups and the catalogue. Fred yawned, stretched, and scratched a flea. I trudged upstairs to my bedroom. On the closet floor, next to my Keds, saddle shoes and white bucks, my Little Lulus lay in neat piles. I stacked them together, lugged them downstairs out to the curb, and dropped them in the trash.