

Prince

By Rob Bowman

CONCISELY SUMMING UP THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF Prince is a nearly impossible task. The undisputed heir to the funk crown worn by James Brown, Sly Stone and George Clinton, he is equally capable of writing and playing mind-melting rock & roll and concocting some of the greatest pop anthems of all time (can anybody say "Purple Rain"?). Impressive as his mastery of these three übergenres are, funk, rock and pop are just the tip of the iceberg. In the past quarter century, Prince has proved himself an alchemical genius, drawing on a wealth of vernacular American traditions including blues, gospel, soul, folk and jazz while forging one of the most distinctive, rich and diverse bodies of recordings in American popular music history. Perhaps that was what Miles Davis had in mind when, in 1987, he stated that Prince had the potential to be "the new [Duke] Ellington of our time."

Prince Rogers Nelson was born June 7, 1958, in the unlikely location of Minneapolis. Prince's father was a jazz pianist and bandleader, and his mother was the band's vocalist.

At the age of seven, Prince taught himself to play the piano and wrote his first song, "Funkmachine." Soon thereafter, he began to play guitar and drums, and six years later he formed his first group, Grand Central (renamed Champagne when the band members entered high school). In 1976, Prince offered his prodigious multi-instrumental and vocal skills to local studio owner Chris Moon in exchange for free studio time. The resulting four-song demo was strong enough to generate interest from a number of major labels. Supremely confident and bent on artistic control from the word go, Prince ultimately chose to sign with Warner Bros., the only company willing to let him produce himself.

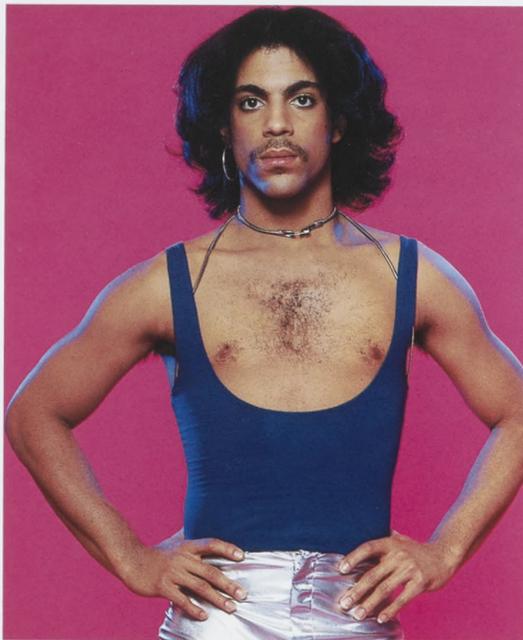
The title track of Prince's 1978 debut album, *For You*, featured any number of falsetto voices singing in counterpoint, sounding much like Queen at its most rococo fused with the trademark soulful falsettos of the Del-fonics. The album's single, "Soft and Wet," a keyboard-driven, hook-laden, funk-infused paean to the joys of sex, stormed its way to the Number Twelve spot on the R&B charts and pointed indelibly toward the future. Incredibly enough, Prince wrote, performed, arranged and produced every note of the album's nine tracks. In so doing, he earned the distinction of being the youngest producer in Warner Bros.' history.

Prince's next three albums, *Prince*, *Dirty Mind* and *Controversy*, were similarly falsetto-dominated dance-oriented affairs on which he played, sang, arranged, composed and produced every single note. Despite the success of his first four discs with black radio and black consumers (collectively, they generated nine R&B chart singles, three of which, "I Wanna Be Your Lover," "Controversy" and "Let's Work," penetrated the R&B Top Ten), Prince scarcely made a dent on the pop charts. In fact, when he opened for the Rolling Stones in Los Angeles in 1981, to his everlasting mortification, he was pelted with debris and roundly booed.

All this began to change in 1982 with *1999* and even more dramatically two years later with *Purple Rain*. Prince's fourth single, "Why You Wanna Treat Me So Bad?," had clearly displayed his extraordinary talents as a lead guitarist. But up to the release of *1999*, his music had been dominated by multiple layers of synthesized keyboards, falsetto vocals and drum machines as Prince situated himself squarely within the soundscape of contemporary R&B. On *1999* and *Purple Rain*, and with singles such as "Little Red Corvette" and "Let's Go Crazy,"







One of the most dazzling R&B singers of all time

Prince began to broaden his horizons, manifesting a serious interest in rock-guitar playing and rhythms. He also stopped relying exclusively on his falsetto, instead bringing to the fore a rich and supple baritone voice capable of generating seemingly unlimited emotional depth. The result was massive crossover success with singles such as "1999," "When Doves Cry," "Let's Go Crazy," "Purple Rain," "Raspberry Beret," "Pop Life," "Kiss" and "Alphabet St.," reaching the upper levels of both the pop and the R&B charts, providing much of the soundtrack for the rest of the decade.

In the same way that the Beatles and the Rolling Stones dominated the 1960s, Prince's music, alongside that of Michael Jackson and Madonna, absolutely dominated the airwaves and clubs of the 1980s. His concerts developed into fantastic affairs: equal parts Broadway spectacle, sexual exorcism and communal celebration of the life force of black and white dance music as Prince brilliantly tapped into the zeitgeist of the era. His videos for "1999" and "Delirious," alongside Jackson's *Thriller* clips, were instrumental in breaking the color barrier on MTV.

Not content to merely write, produce, play and sing the hippest and edgiest pop music of the day, in 1984 Prince ventured into the world of celluloid, completing four feature films by the end of 1990. The first of these, the semi-autobiographical *Purple Rain*, is generally regarded as the finest rock film since *A Hard Day's Night* and was instrumental in spurring sales of the album of the same name to the thirteen-million-plus mark. Riding high on his newfound success, Prince proceeded to build an empire, producing, writing the majority of songs, singing backup and playing numerous instruments on albums by Vanity, Apollonia 6, the Time, Sheila E., Jill Jones, Madhouse and Mazarati. He would later produce albums on his Paisley

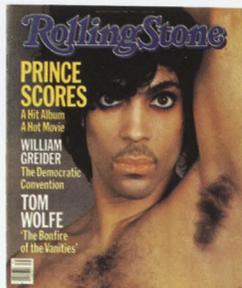
Left: Prince models an early look. Right: Reigning in purple. Park and NPG labels for a number of his musical heroes, including George Clinton, Mavis Staples, Larry Graham and Chaka Khan.

Propelled into the rarefied world of superstar status, Prince let his creative muse range in a multitude of directions. Rather than building on the success of *Purple Rain* with a similar-sounding work, he chose to confound many critics and some fans by following it with the supremely psychedelic-tinged *Around the World in a Day* and the equally obscure *Parade*. While the albums may have been left of center, they generated heavy sales on the strength of decade-defining hit singles such as "Raspberry Beret" and "Kiss." Whatever direction he chose to pursue on his albums, Prince appeared eminently capable of writing monster hit singles at will, each containing a distinctive, instantly memorable melody and/or a bone-crushing groove.

Purple Rain, *Around the World in a Day* and *Parade* all featured the talents of his live band the Revolution, an ensemble that was, à la Sly and the Family Stone, integrated both racially and sexually. For his magnum opus, 1987's *Sign 'O' the Times*, the shockingly brutal *The Black Album* (scheduled for release in December 1987 but shelved until 1994) and 1989's *Batman* soundtrack, Prince opted to return to recording as a one-man band.

Over the course of these and subsequent albums, Prince displayed remarkable stylistic growth and musical diversity. Release after release was simultaneously shocking and riveting. Fascinated with both timbre and texture, Prince was never afraid to follow his intuition. Consequently, "When Doves Cry" was recorded without a bass instrument, while "Kiss," one of the starkest recordings ever released, was mixed sans reverb. Both textures were absolutely unprecedented in the world of mainstream hit singles. Prince's use of strings was similarly radical: Recordings such as *Parade*'s "Sometimes It Snows in April" sported wholly unorthodox, albeit gorgeous, string arrangements, usually courtesy of Clare Fischer. Other cuts, such as the title track on *Around the World in a Day*, employed the timbres of non-Western instruments such as the Arabic oud and darbuka. If it made a sound, in Prince's mind it was potentially a color to paint with.

In addition to his facility with timbre, during his first decade in the studio Prince routinely made ingenious use of the earliest drum machines, concocting innovative grooves and sounds. Later releases that featured traditional drum kits, such as "Housequake" and "Gett Off," unleashed monstrosously deep funk grooves, the equal of anything James Brown, Sly Stone or George Clinton ever recorded. And on funk numbers such as "Kiss" and ballads such as "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," Prince proved himself to be one of the most inventive, daring and dazzlingly virtuoso R&B – and, by extension, American – singers of all time.



Photographed for 'Rolling Stone' by Richard Avedon





Prince was never afraid to follow his intuition

By the end of the 1980s, Prince had traded the Revolution for the demonstratively funkier New Power Generation (NPG). He had also begun to feature rapping in a number of songs on both his 1991 and 1992 releases – his use of rap being consistent with his interest in and ability to integrate virtually any style into his oeuvre. He introduced psychedelia on *Around the World in a Day*, gospel on numerous songs including *Sign 'O' the Times*' emotional tour de force “The Cross,” blues on *Crystal Ball*'s down-and-dirty “The Ride,” industrial on *Emancipation*'s “The Human Body,” folk on much of 1998's *The Truth* (“Circle of Amour” providing evidence of how Joni Mitchell had influenced him) and jazz on much of his last two studio albums, *The Rainbow Children* and *N.E.W.S.* A voracious listener and evidently an astute historian of popular music, Prince has in concerts in

Sign 'O' the Times: Prince preaches to the converted

recent years covered everything from Led Zeppelin's “Whole Lotta Love” to the Staple Singers' “When Will We Be Paid,” Joni Mitchell's “A Case of You” and Duke Ellington's “Take the ‘A’ Train.” Perhaps no other artist since Ellington has been able to so successfully incorporate so many diverse styles into one overriding aesthetic.

Always prolific, Prince seemingly lived to make music, and like Jimi Hendrix, he recorded incessantly. While his contemporaries of the 1980s and 1990s carefully orchestrated the release of new albums every three or four years with marketing plans that included a series of singles and massive world tours, Prince issued a new album year in and year out, and by the early 1990s, he had reportedly amassed an unreleased body of work totaling some 500 songs.

Prince's workaholic nature eventually lead him into conflict with his record company, and he spent much of the 1990s attempting to reconcile his musical goals and personal proclivities with those of the record industry. He initially became disenchanted with Warner Bros. in 1987, when the company refused to allow him to issue a three-CD set. After he re-signed with the label in 1992, in a deal reportedly worth \$100 million, things deteriorated further. While Prince wanted to release

ever more material, as sales began to slip, Warners thought it wise to cut back. In protest, in April 1993, Prince announced he was no longer going to record new material and instead rely on his treasure trove of unreleased tracks to fulfill his contract. In June of that year, he changed his name from Prince to the unpronounceable glyph that had been the title of his 1992 album.

In 1994, unhappy with its increasingly disaffected artist, Warner Bros. pulled the funding from Prince's Paisley Park label, effectively undercutting Prince's ability to produce other talent. In 1996, while ostensibly promoting what would turn out to be his last Warners album, *Chaos and Disorder*, Prince began making public appearances with the word *slave* written on his cheek, protesting the fact that he felt that his contract enslaved him to Warners. With *Chaos and Disorder* selling just under one hundred thousand copies in the U.S. and staying on the album charts a scant four weeks, by mutual agreement, Warners and the Artist Formerly Known as Prince (the Artist, for short) parted ways. He would continue to be known by the glyph until the end of 1999, when his publishing contract with Warner-Chappell finally expired.

After severing his ties with Warner Bros., in late 1996, Prince recorded and released a three-CD set titled *Emancipation*, which was distributed by EMI, followed in 1998 by the independently distributed four-CD set *Crystal Ball* (five CDs if purchased over the Internet directly from the Artist). While both sets were critical successes and displayed the Artist's ever-widening musical interests (one of the CDs in *Crystal Ball* was an all-acoustic disc titled *The Truth*), *Emancipation* fared much better on the charts, thanks largely to

its major-label distribution. While 1999's *Rave Un2 the Joy Fantastic* was similarly distributed by Arista, his last three albums, 2001's *The Rainbow Children*, 2002's live box set *One Nite Alone . . . Live!* and 2003's *N.E.W.S.*, were released on Prince's own NPG label and independently distributed to stores, as well as sold on the Internet.

In recent years, Prince has attempted to pioneer alternative ways of marketing himself and his music through his Internet-based NPG fan club. In exchange for a yearly fee, members can download a number of recordings. They also receive members-only CDs and are given access to Prince sound checks and after-show performances. In the meantime, Prince has remained very vocal about artists maintaining ownership of their masters and economic and aesthetic control of their own careers. In concert, he has become increasingly disparaging about the dire state of contemporary, narrowcasted radio.

In the first few years of the twenty-first century – in the third decade of his recording career – Prince seems content to play smaller venues under his own rules, featuring his new material and offering fascinating covers and exploring and imploding every corner of his back catalogue. No longer encumbered by major-label expectations, the pressures of superstardom or the constraints of arena-size spectacles, Prince, both on his recordings and in live performance, has increasingly blended jazz sensibilities into his already heady mixture of gospel, funk and rock. The result has been some of the finest music of his career. In 1965, Bob Dylan wrote the line “He not busy being born is busy dying.” Prince is an artist who, twenty-five years after recording his first album, continues to define the very essence of that maxim.

“There was always an air of mystery”

Vicki Peterson on the Perfectly Princely Way to End an Evening

A rehearsal hall in the San Fernando Valley in October 1986. We Bangles are learning “Manic Monday,” preparing to go in and record this gift of a pop song. The demo that had mysteriously appeared at our manager’s office was a fully fleshed-out production with a female vocal (Apollonia, I think!) and a distinct keyboard intro. Prince had offered the suggestion that we keep the tracks and simply record new vocals, but we were adamant about doing our own version. So here we are, going through the song on guitars with our producer, David Kahne, and in walks His Princeness, accompanied by Miss Wendy Melvoin. He wants to hear the song.

More than a little nervous, we play it for him, with Susanna still unsure of the lyrics and me doing a poor faux-harpsichord arpeggio on guitar. As soon as we finish, I launch into excuses: “We’re still figuring it out, and we don’t have any keyboards yet . . .”

“Doesn’t need it,” Prince says quietly. He’s smiling, and so is Wendy. He points upward. “It’s gonna go.”

As usual about such things, he was right, and “Manic Monday” shot straight up the charts.

Whenever Prince appeared in our world, there was always an air of mystery about him. We would run offstage after a show and find the backstage buzzing with Prince sightings. We’d

look around, and then suddenly he’d just be there in the wings, ready to join us for an encore. True, in reality, this happened maybe twice, but since these visits were never planned or expected by us, they seemed to be a perpetual possibility. And when he did come to a Bangles show, it was a magical thing indeed.

One night onstage in Los Angeles, Prince picked up one of my Les Pauls and played a gloriously psychedelic solo on “Hero Takes a Fall.” After the show, he invited us to a recording studio where he’d blocked out some time. Beginning a jam session at three o’clock in the morning was apparently nothing new to him, but we were pretty

damned excited about it.

When I arrived, I found my band mates there all plugged in and Prince at the piano. The Bangles are not exactly anyone’s definition of a jam band (although we had once faked our way through a Jerry Lee Lewis song onstage with Prince), and we were feeling a little out of our element. Prince resolved this by proclaiming that he only wanted to play our songs. Surreal as it was, we sat in a room with Prince in the early-morning hours and played Bangles songs, with him jumping from piano to drums to guitar. At one point he left the room, as if to make a phone call. He never returned. This was, in all its oddness, a perfectly Princely way to end an evening. □