

PRINCE

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No other musician can compare to Prince. Perhaps a peer could match him for an individual skill, whether it was as a singer or guitarist, but no individual could match him as a package: a vocalist and instrumentalist of distinctive vision, an inventive songwriter and innovative producer, and a pop conceptualist with an expansive, idiosyncratic vision. At his popular and artistic height in the '80s, this vision seemed to crystallize on *Purple Rain* — the 1984 juggernaut that turned him into a superstar — but he couldn't contain his imagination to the confines of his own records, either with or without his backing band the Revolution. He masterminded albums by the Time and Sheila E, and gave away hit songs to the Bangles and Sheena Easton, shaping the sound of popular music in the process. There wasn't an area of pop music that didn't bear his influence: it could be heard in freaky funk and R&B slow jams, in thick electro-techno and neo-psychedelic rock, and right at the top of the pop charts. Prince's reign continued into the early '90s, a time which found him swapping the Revolution for the jazz-funk New Power Generation, but by the middle of the decade, he entered a cold war with his record company that contributed to a slow slide down the charts. Once he received emancipation from his contract, he seized the opportunity to release as much music as he could record, but he occasionally took the time to aim at the mainstream, scoring such hits as 2004's *Musicology* in the process. Prince never slowed down, and even when he was no longer pioneering new sonic territory, he never rested on his laurels, which is what made his death in 2016 such a shock: his music was ceaselessly, endlessly alive and full of possibility.

Prince's first two albums were solid, if unremarkable, late-'70s funk-pop. With 1980's *Dirty Mind*, he recorded his first masterpiece, a one-man tour de force of sex and music; it was hard funk with catchy Beatlesque melodies, sweet soul ballads, and rocking guitar pop all at once. The follow-up, *Controversy*, was more of the same, but 1999 was brilliant. The album was a monster hit, selling over three million copies, but it was nothing compared to 1984's *Purple Rain*.

Purple Rain made Prince a superstar; it eventually sold over ten million copies in the U.S. and spent 24 weeks at number one. Partially recorded with his touring band the Revolution, the record featured the most pop-oriented music he has ever made. Instead of continuing in this accessible direction, he veered off into the bizarre psycho-psychedelia of *Around the World in a Day*, which nevertheless sold over two million copies. In 1986, he released the even stranger *Parade*, which was in its own way as ambitious and intricate as any art rock of the '60s; however, no art rock was ever grounded with a hit as brilliant as the spare funk of "Kiss."

By 1987, Prince's ambitions were growing by leaps and bounds, resulting in the sprawling masterpiece *Sign 'O' the Times*. Prince was set to release the hard funk of *The Black Album* by the end of the year, but he withdrew it just before its release, deciding it was too dark and immoral. Instead, he released the confused *Lovesexy* in 1988, which was a commercial disaster. With the soundtrack to 1989's *Batman* he returned to the top of the charts, even if the album was essentially a recap of everything he had done before. The following year he released *Graffiti Bridge* (the sequel to *Purple Rain*), which turned out to be a considerable commercial disappointment.

In 1991, Prince formed the New Power Generation, the best, most versatile, and talented band he ever assembled. With their first album, *Diamonds and Pearls*, Prince reasserted his mastery of contemporary R&B; it was his biggest hit since 1985. The following year, he released his twelfth album, which was titled with a cryptic symbol; in 1993, Prince legally changed his name to the symbol. In 1994, after becoming embroiled in contract disagreements with Warner Bros., he independently released the single "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," likely to illustrate what he would be capable of on his own; the song became his biggest hit in years. Later that summer, Warner released the somewhat half-hearted *Come* under the name of Prince; the record was a moderate success, going gold.

In November 1994, as part of a contractual obligation, Prince agreed to the official release of *The Black Album*. In early 1995, he immersed himself in another legal battle with Warner, proclaiming himself a slave and refusing to deliver his new record, *The Gold Experience*, for release. By the end of the summer, a fed-up Warner had negotiated a compromise that guaranteed the album's release, plus one final record for the label. *The Gold Experience* was issued in the fall; although it received good reviews and followed a smash single, it failed to catch fire commercially. In the summer of 1996, Prince released *Chaos & Disorder*, which freed him to become an independent artist. Setting up his own label, NPG (which was distributed by EMI), he resurfaced later that same year with the three-disc *Emancipation*, which was designed as a magnum opus that would spin off singles for several years and support several tours.

However, even his devoted cult following needed considerable time to digest such an enormous compilation of songs. Once it was clear that *Emancipation* wasn't the commercial blockbuster he'd hoped it would be, Prince assembled a long-awaited collection of outtakes and unreleased material called *Crystal Ball* in 1998. With *Crystal Ball*, Prince discovered that it's much more difficult to get records to an audience than it seems; some fans who pre-ordered their copies through Prince's website (from which a bonus fifth disc was included) didn't receive them until months after the set began appearing in stores. Prince then released a new one-man album, *New Power Soul*, just three months after *Crystal Ball*; even though it was his most straightforward album since *Diamonds and Pearls*, it didn't do well on the charts, partly because many listeners didn't realize it had been released.

A year later, with "1999" predictably an end-of-the-millennium anthem, Prince issued the remix collection 1999 (*The New Master*). A collection of Warner Bros.-era leftovers, *Vault: Old Friends 4 Sale*, followed that summer, and in the fall Prince returned on Arista with the all-star *Rave Un2 the Joy Fantastic*. In the fall of 2001 he released the controversial *Rainbow Children*, a jazz-infused circus of sound trumpeting his conversion to the Jehovah's Witnesses that left many longtime fans out in the cold. He further isolated himself with 2003's *N.E.W.S.*, a four-song set of instrumental jams that sounded a lot more fun to play than to listen to. Prince rebounded in 2003 with the chart-topping *Musicology*, a return to form that found the artist back in the Top Ten, even garnering a Grammy nomination for Best Male Pop Vocal Performance in 2005.

In early 2006, he was the musical guest on *Saturday Night Live*, performing two songs with a new protégée, R&B singer Tamar. A four-song appearance at the Brit Awards with Wendy, Lisa, and Sheila E. followed. Both appearances previewed tracks from 3121, which hit number one on the album charts soon after its release in March 2006. *Planet Earth* followed in 2007, featuring contributions from Wendy and Lisa. In the U.K., copies were cover-mounted on the July 15 edition of *The Mail on Sunday*, provoking Columbia — the worldwide distributor for the release — to refuse distribution throughout the U.K. In the U.S., the album was issued on July 24.

LotusFlow3r, a three-disc set, arrived in 2009, featuring a trio of distinct albums: *LotusFlow3r* itself (a guitar showcase), *MPLSound* (a throwback to his '80s funk output), and *Elixer* (a smooth contemporary R&B album featuring the breathy vocals of Bria Valente). Despite only being available online and through one big-box retailer, the set debuted at number two on the *Billboard* 200 chart. A year later, another throwback-flavored effort, *20Ten*, became his second U.K. newspaper giveaway. No official online edition of the album was made available.

From mid-2010 to the end of 2012, Prince toured throughout Europe, America, Europe again, Canada, and Australia. In 2013, he released several singles, starting with "Screwdriver" and continuing with "Breakfast Can Wait" in the summer of that year. Early in 2014, he made a cameo appearance on the Zoey Deschanel sitcom *The New Girl*, appearing in the episode that aired following the Super Bowl. All this activity was a prelude to the spring announcement that Prince had re-signed to Warner Bros., the label he had feuded with 20 years prior. As part of the deal, he wound up receiving ownership of his master recordings, and the label planned a reissue campaign that would begin with an expanded reissue of *Purple Rain* roughly timed to celebrate its 30th anniversary.

First came two new albums: *Art Official Age* and *Plectrument*, the latter credited to 3rdEyeGirl, the all-female power trio that was his new-millennial backing band. Both records came out on the same day in September 2014. Almost a year to the day, he released *HITnRUN: Phase One*, with contributions from Lianne La Havas, Judith Hill, and Rita Ora. A sequel, *HITnRUN: Phase Two*, was released online in December 2015, with a physical release following in January 2016. In early 2016, Prince set out on a rare solo tour, a run of shows he called “Piano and a Microphone.” The tour was cut short in April due to sickness, however, and Prince flew home to Minneapolis. On April 21, 2016, police were called to Paisley Park, where they found Prince unresponsive; he died that day at the age of 57. On June 2, 2016, his death was ruled by the Anoka County’s Midwest Medical Examiner’s Office to be the result of an accidental overdose of fentanyl. His early death and incredible achievement prompted an outpouring of emotion from fans, friends, influences, and professional associates. On the following week’s *Billboard* charts, he occupied four of the Top Ten album positions and four of the top singles positions. As the particulars of his estate were sorted out by the courts — the singer didn’t leave a will, which complicated matters — his Paisley Park complex was opened to the public in the autumn of 2016. That holiday season, NPG and Warner released *4Ever*, a double-disc hits collection that contained the unreleased 1982 outtake “Moonbeam Levels.” Upon its November 22, 2016 release, it debuted at 35 on *Billboard*’s Top 200. The long-promised expanded reissue of *Purple Rain* appeared in June of 2017, featuring a disc’s worth of previously unreleased music from Prince’s vaults. *Anthology: 1995-2010*, a double-disc compilation of highlights from Prince’s latter-day recordings, appeared in August 2018 in conjunction with the digital re-release of his post-Warner catalog; it was part of a deal with Sony Legacy, which also masterminded physical reissues of these latter-day records in the subsequent years.

The archival *Piano & A Microphone 1983* appeared in September 2018; it debuted at 11 in the U.S. and 12 in the U.K. The next major reissue was *Originals*, a collection of Prince’s original versions of 15 songs he gave to other artists. Featuring his versions of “Manic Monday,” “Nothing Compares 2 You,” “Jungle Love,” and “The Glamorous Life,” *Originals* arrived in June of 2019; it debuted at 15 in the U.S. and 21 in the U.K. A deluxe edition of 1999 — containing two discs of unreleased material from Prince’s vault, a live show from 1982, and a disc of single variations — appeared later that November.