

Prince (1958-2016)

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Music icon Prince died April 21 at the age of 57. His body was found in an elevator at Paisley Park, his home studio compound in Chanhassen, Minnesota. Conclusive autopsy results are not expected for several weeks and no cause of death has been reported at the time of writing.

Only days before his death, a private plane carrying the singer home to Minnesota was forced to make an emergency landing in Illinois after pilots were alerted to an “unresponsive passenger” on board. Prince was reportedly treated for “flu-like symptoms” at a local hospital before returning home. Rumors of a possible drug issue or an undisclosed illness have spread through the media, though nothing has been substantiated. Whatever the cause of his death, the loss of Prince at such a young age is a sad occasion.

Seemingly at home in any genre of music and on virtually any instrument, Prince Rogers Nelson (born June 7, 1958 in Minneapolis, Minnesota) was among the more electrifying performers of his generation. The albums *1999* (1982), *Purple Rain* (1984) and *Sign o’ the Times* (1987), in particular, contain some of the best pop music made during that period. His live shows were second to none.

When Prince first gained widespread recognition with the albums *Dirty Mind* (1980) and *Controversy* (1981), he almost seemed a force of nature. He had already released two albums of above average but not especially earth-shattering disco music in the late 1970s. But by the 1980s, he had reinvented himself.

Now he looked like Little Richard, danced like James Brown and played the guitar like Jimi Hendrix. He somehow synthesized all of these influences, creating something new and hard to describe. It was an exciting hybrid of rock n roll, R&B, funk and pop.

Purple Rain, the soundtrack album to the 1984 film of the same name, in which Prince also starred, was a genuine phenomenon. Today the album plays as though

it were a greatest hits collection, so strong and familiar are the songs contained on it. “Let’s Go Crazy,” “When Doves Cry” and “I Would Die 4 U” are just a few of its many popular tunes.

The album’s pained and pleading title track remains Prince’s best-known work. It is a superbly crafted piece of pop songwriting. The guitar solo which concludes the recording is justly regarded as among the best in rock n roll.

A performance of “Baby I’m a Star” at the 1985 Grammy Awards ceremony, recently posted online, reveals Prince and his band the Revolution at the height of their powers. Prince leads the band in an extended version of the song, incorporating several new passages not in the original recording. He lets loose a volley of those falsetto screams that only he could do and delivers his lyrics with real fire: “Hey! I ain’t got no money, but honey I’m rich on personality!” As he sings, he performs a series of splits and does tricks with the microphone stand. He calls for accents from the band with a wave of his arm. Dancers suddenly appear on stage to join him in brief choreographed routines before they disappear and he cuts the song’s tempo in half long enough to perform another dance with members of the Revolution. This lasts a few measures before the music explodes again at full tempo. By the time he leaves the stage, the auditorium is in a frenzy. Prince was, among other things, the greatest bandleader of his day.

With his sexually charged lyrics and on-stage theatrics, Prince often courted controversy and both politicians and the media were more than happy to oblige him. When the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), made up of the wives of the Washington elite, launched its campaign of censorship against musicians in the mid-1980s, Prince was one of their primary targets. Of the “Filthy Fifteen” songs condemned by the PMRC in 1985, Prince wrote two—his own “Darling

Nikki” and Sheena Easton’s “Sugar Walls”—and a third was recorded by the singer Vanity, one of his musical protégés. At the forefront of the PMRC campaign, which culminated in witch-hunt style hearings before the US Senate, was Democrat Tipper Gore, the wife of Senator and future Vice President Al Gore.

Sex was indeed a major preoccupation for Prince. At his best, he was capable of translating passion and desire into something musically exciting. At his worst, he made straining, contrived attempts to shock audiences. Some of it seemed juvenile and gratuitous. It’s not an accident that Prince has so often inspired parody. Some of his music and his more eccentric behavior (the stories are apparently endless) was ripe for it.

As shy and soft-spoken as he was in interviews, Prince often managed to be terribly irritating as well. He could be full of himself, pretentious and cryptic, and his head seemed always to be planted in the clouds.

Already a little too aloof for his own good, Prince spent much of his life isolated from the real world and from ordinary people. He was a musical perfectionist who spent most of his time at Paisley Park working away at his music. Only a fraction of what he produced was ever released to the public. The rest was stored in a vault on the compound.

That Prince was so preoccupied with sex and gender—he maintained an androgynous appearance for much of his career—and little else speaks to the difficulties of the period in which he worked. In his own way, Prince was probably rebelling against the wretched greed and conformity of the 1980s and the hypocritical promotion of “family values” by the far right, but there was something vacuous about the character of his response.

After the string of successes in the 1980s, Prince’s work could be terribly uneven. He spent much of the 1990s at war with his record label, Warner Brothers, which wanted nothing but steady commercial fare. Prince had ambitions, for better or worse, that came into conflict with the well-laid plans of company executives. Famously, at one point, he temporarily changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol and was most often referred to as “the artist formerly known as Prince” (another source of jokes at his expense). He rapidly released a series of less than stellar albums in an effort to run out the clock on his

contract with the label.

Freed from Warner Brothers by the end of the 1990s, Prince, his name restored, began to release music through the NPG Music Club, an online community of subscribers. Albums like *The Rainbow Children* (2001), *Musicology* (2004) and *3121* (2006) were not at the level of his earlier work, but their best moments are worth hearing.

Whatever the status of his recording career, Prince appeared to go from strength to strength as a live performer. Even some of his very recent performances, including a 2007 appearance during the Super Bowl halftime show, have come to be considered career highlights.

At the time of his death, Prince had just completed a tour in which he performed solo, accompanying himself on the piano. He was also reportedly working on a memoir to be called *The Beautiful Ones*.



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