

This is What It Sounds Like On Prince (1958-2016) and Interpretive Freedom

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Abstract

Prince leaves an invitingly “messy” catalog—a musical cosmos, really—just as rich for those who knew it well as for those encountering it with fresh ears. He avoided interviews like he avoided conventions. He made few claims. Read him as you will. We are free to interpret Prince, but not too free. Yes, art is open, and perhaps Prince’s art especially.

Keywords

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*Can you imagine what would happen if young people were free to create whatever they wanted?
Can you imagine what that would sound like?—Prince, in a [2015 interview by Smokey D. Fontaine](#)*

Prince leaves an invitingly “messy” catalog—a musical cosmos, really—just as rich for those who knew it well as for those encountering it with fresh ears. He avoided interviews like he avoided conventions. He made few claims. Read him as you will.

We are free to interpret Prince, but not too free. Yes, art is open, and perhaps Prince’s art especially. And yet many eulogies have described him as indescribable, as if he were untethered by the politics of his world; he wasn’t. Some remembrances assume (or imagine) that Prince was so inventive that he could escape stultifying codes and achieve liberation, both as musician and human being. For example, [Prince has often been called “transcendent”](#)—of race, of musical genre, even of humanity itself. This is overstated; he was rooted in all of these. Better to say, maybe, that he was a laureate of many poetics, some musical and some not. He responded to race, genre, and humanity, all things that he and we are stuck with. He was a living artwork, and these, by way of sound, were his media.

Prince was not transcendent. He was just too much for some to assimilate.



Since Prince’s passing last month, I’ve been struck by the idea that his career might have been, deliberately or not, an elaborate quotation of the career of Little Richard, who anachronistically has outlived him. Or, a sonic version of what [Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls “signifyin\(g\)”](#) in the African American artistic tradition in [The Signifying Monkey](#): repetition with a difference, a re-vision—and, especially appropriate here—a riffing (66). Both Prince and Richard in their way *defined* rock music, even as rock—as a canonized form—held them at a distance. They were simultaneously rock’s inventive engine and its outer margins, but never, seemingly, its core—at least from the perspective of its self-appointed gatekeepers.



Rock and race have, to put it mildly, an awkward history. African-American rock artists rarely get their due from labels and taste-making outlets, in money or posterity, a phenomenon not at all limited to the well-known pinching of Elvis and Pat Boone. One might consider, for example, [Maureen Mahon's anthropology of the Black Rock Coalition](#), a group home to Greg Tate, Living Colour, and others dwelling on rock's periphery. Canons are one way to understand how this denial works.

To be sure, some black artists have been canonized in rock, but always with a handicap, as [Jack Hamilton has explained lucidly](#). In, for example, best-of lists (which I have browsed obsessively since Prince died, as if enshrinement there might confirm something about him; he is usually #40 or #50), there are only so many slots of color: Hendrix is the black guitar god; Little Richard the sexual sentinel rising in a repressed era; James Brown the lifeline to funk; Big Mama Thornton the grandmaternal footnote. Best-of lists published by major magazines and websites such as [Rolling Stone](#) and [VH1](#), tend to name about 70% white artists, as well as 90-95% male ones. These lists have become just a smidgen more inclusive in the past decade or so. Still, only the Beatles and Rolling Stones are regular contenders to be named history's greatest rock band.

We are free to interpret greatness, but not too free.

For those who care about lists enough to comment on them, much of the point is in the arguing, the freedom to declare an opinion that cannot be challenged on logical grounds. I certainly wouldn't argue for more "correct" best-of lists, either for aesthetics or inclusivity. Lists have every right to be subjective. But they are also fascinatingly unmoored by any explicit standard for judgment. As a result, the debates that surround their ordering are full of unvarnished pronouncements of truth (and falsity), even for those who acknowledge the subjectivity of lists, which I observed first hand as I joined and posted on a [Beatles forum](#) and an [Eagles forum](#) to research this article ("...putting the Police and the Doors ahead of the Eagles is absurd, IMHO"). But why would anyone declare certainty about a question such as the best rock artist of all time, when it is so plainly open to personal interpretation?

Yes, lists are subjective. But who are the subjects that invest in them?



Prince's career began in the late 1970s, a musical moment deeply reflective of what Robin DiAngelo calls "[white fragility](#)." The Beatles were gone after the 1960s and guitar music stood under their long shadow. Led Zeppelin were bloated and breaking up. Disco was in ascent. Rock had somehow convinced itself that it was neither rooted in nor anchored by queer, female, and racially marked bodies, as it indeed was and in fact had always been. White male rock critics and fans were busily constructing the "rock canon" as a citadel—impenetrable to "four on the floor beats" and diva-styled vocals—and there was nothing in its blueprint to suggest that there would be a door for someone like Prince.

Just one month after Prince finished recording his [breakthrough, self-titled album in July 1979](#)—the record gave us "[I Wanna Be Your Lover](#)" and "I Feel For You," which [Chaka Khan would take to chart topping heights](#) in 1984—[Chicago "shock jock" Steve Dahl](#) staged an infamous event at Comiskey Park called Disco Demolition Night. The fascistic spectacle, which took place between games of a White Sox doubleheader, asked fans to bring disco records, which would be demolished in an explosion and ensuing bonfire on the field.

<https://youtu.be/o98PcPvS-54>

It was a release of pent-up frustration and a wild-eyed effort to rid the world of the scourge of disco, which many listeners felt had displaced rock with plastic rhythms, as Osvaldo Oyola discussed in a 2010 SO! post "[Ain't Got the Same Soul](#)," a discussion of Bob Seger, who famously sang in 1979, "Don't try to take me to a disco/you'll never even get me out on the floor." Excited, drunk defenders of the "rock canon" rioted around the fire. The nightcap was cancelled.

These are the subjects who invest in lists.

Many who witnessed the event, both in person and on television, experienced its personal, racially charged, and violent implications. Aspiring DJ Vince Lawrence, who worked as an usher at the Disco Demolition Night game, was later interviewed for a BBC documentary entitled [Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music](#): [see 9:00-10:15 of the clip below]:

<https://youtu.be/Y1HpY65cXDA>

It was more about blowing up all this 'nigger music' than, um, you know, destroying disco. Strangely enough, I was an usher, working his way towards his first synthesizer at the time, what I noticed at the gates was people were bringing records and some of those were disco records and I thought those records were kinda good, but some of them were just black records, they weren't disco, they were just black records, R&B records. I should have taken that as a tone for what the attitudes of these people were. I know that nobody was bringing Metallica records by

mistake. They might have brought a Marvin Gaye record which wasn't a disco record, and that got accepted and blown up along with Donna Summer and Anita Ward, so it felt very racial to me.

Lawrence notes that blackness was, for rock's canonizers, part of a mostly inseparable bundle of otherness that also included queer people, among others. Although the disco backlash is often regarded as mainly homophobic, in fact it points to even deeper reservoirs of resentment and privilege.

When music companies decided to mass-market the black, queer sound of disco, they first called it "disco-rock"; two words that American audiences eventually ripped apart, or demolished, perhaps. Black and queer people—and women too, of all races and sexualities—represented the hordes outside of rock's new citadel, whose walls were made from the Beatles' cheeky jokes, Mick's rooster-strut, Robert Plant's cucumber cock, and Elvis's hayseed hubris.

Little Richard, for example, was black and queer like disco; what to do with him? His drummer invented the straight eight rhythm, perhaps the genre's most enduring motif. *Here's Little Richard* was rock incarnate, total frenetic energy; Richard's brilliant, singular approach to the piano would launch a thousand rock tropes in imitation. But in canonization he could only be the nutrient-rich soil of rock—say, #36 on a best-of list—never its epitome, somehow.

<https://youtu.be/LVlttmFAzek>

I don't know if Prince—a lifelong resident of Minneapolis, who came of age in the volatile Midwestern American milieu of white disco demolitions AND underground [black electronic music culture](#)—cared to consider this history, but he floated in it. He effectively signified on Little Richard not so much by quoting his music (though he owed a debt to him just like everyone who played rock), but by reproducing his position in the music industry. He was a queer nonconformist, never in the business of explaining himself, obsessed with control, whose blackness became a way of not flinching in the face of an industry that would never embrace him, anyway.



I interpret Prince's musical personae as queer, not in the sense of inversion, as the anti-disco folks had it, but as a forever-exploration of sexual life. Prince's queerness was not, strictly speaking, like Little Richard's, but Prince took it on as an artistic possibility nonetheless. If Richard dwelled on this particular fringe as a consequence of his body, his desires, and the limits of social acceptance and religious conviction, Prince chose it as his identity. But Prince also lived and worked within limits of morality and, also like Little Richard, religion.



Image by Flickr User Ann Althouse, 2007

Touré writes in a *New York Times* obit of Prince’s “[holy lust](#),” the “commingling” of sexuality and spirituality. Jack Hamilton [writes of the doubt and moral uncertainty](#) that coursed through songs like “Little Red Corvette.” Holy lust is arguably the central pursuit of rock; the term “rock and roll” is etymologically linked *either* to intercourse or worship, appropriately, emerging in both cases from African-American vernacular. Prince’s queer play with sex, sexuality identity, and religion is as rock and roll as it gets.



As punk sputtered, Simon Reynolds writes in [Rip it Up and Start Again](#), funk appeared to rock fans as a racially tinged, politically and sexually charged savior. Bass, the heart of funk, was key to punk becoming post-punk around 1980. The instrument was suddenly charged with new symbolic and structural importance. During the same period, it is remarkable how many of Prince’s songs either have no bass, or rework bass’s role entirely. “[When Doves Cry](#),” from [Purple Rain](#) (1984), Prince’s 6th studio album, is the best-known example of an ultra-funky track that withholds bass entirely, but “Kiss” lacks it, too, as well as “[Darling Nikki](#).”

<https://youtu.be/DFxI61jTYJY>

Earlier on *Purple Rain*, the bass on “Take Me with U” plays almost as a drone, buzzing like a minimalist’s organ. “Kiss,” from 1986’s *Parade* and Prince’s second-biggest hit—yet only #464 on the [Rolling Stone](#) list of the [500 Greatest Songs of All Time](#)—is so tight, so locked in, so populated by alluring timbres that suggest an alien plane of instrumentation, that you forget it’s even supposed to have bass by rock top 40 convention. On much of 1980’s *Dirty Mind*, it is difficult to know which carefully tweaked synthesizer tone is supposed to index the bass, if any. [Prince’s funk was even funkier for being counterintuitive](#), as Questlove notes. This gesture wasn’t rejection, of course, it didn’t “transcend” funk. Prince was still playing inarguably funky music, and the lack of bass is so unusual that it’s almost even more apparent in its absence. Free, but not too free.



Prince approached rock iconicity much as he approached bass, which is to say that he embraced clichés, but performed them inside-out, calling attention to them as both limits and possibilities, as constraint and freedom. “Raspberry Beret,” from 1985’s [Around the World in a Day](#), is a boppy “girl group” song with sly allusions to anal sex, that uses exotic instruments and is written in an obscure mode. The virtuosic riff on “When Doves Cry,” instead of going where guitar solos go, comes right at the beginning of the track, before the drums, both seemingly isolated from the rest of the song and yet heralding it, too.

All of this worked very well, of course. His songs are just idiomatic enough to give listeners a foothold, but brave enough to evoke a world well beyond idiom. In retrospect, this is precisely what Little Richard had done. This is also what Hendrix and George Clinton and Tina Turner and OutKast have done, from where they rock out—way beyond the citadel, mastering many idioms, then extending them, at once codifying and floating away from genre.



Andre 3000 of OutKast rocking outside the box at Lollapalooza 2014, Image by Flickr User Daniel Patlán

Prince's career calls back to the personal and artistic concerns, as well as the innovations, of Little Richard and other artists' sonic expressions of blackness that both built rock's house *and* sounded out the tall, white walls of the citadel that would exclude them. All of these artists, I suspect, find little point to hanging out near the citadel's gates; there are other, funkier places to live. Prince himself was perfectly comfortable working athwart Warner Brothers, the press, stardom. He did more than fine.

We are free to interpret Prince, but not too free. Creative as he was, he lived in his time; he was no alien. The greatest testament to his genius is not that he escaped the world, nor that he rendered a new musical landscape from scratch, but rather that he worked in part with rock's sclerotic structural materials to create such beautiful and fluid work.

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