SIGN 'O' THE TIMES
by Michaelangelo Matos
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Hultkrans obsesses brilliantly on the rock legends’ seminal disc—*Vanity Fair*

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  *Let It Be*, by Steve Matteo
Sign ‘O’ the Times

Michaelangelo Matos
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Early evening, March 1, 1988. I’m where I always am on the first of the month: At the Target store near Southdale, the shopping mall in Edina, a suburb south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. I’m helping watch my sisters while my mother shops. Alex is two and a half years old; Brittany is a little over a year; I turned 13 two weeks ago; Mom turned 28 a week after that. My father has been out of the picture since I was a little kid; the girls’ dad is a year removed from our apartment in Richfield, a lower-class suburb that neighbors Edina to the east. During the three or so years my sisters’ father lived with us, he would drive us to and from Target on the first. Since then, we’d either get a ride from relatives or take the bus over and cab back. This, I believe, is one of the latter occasions.

For a long time, I had stayed home while Mom went shopping. Because our welfare check and food stamps came five days apart, and because the mail usually arrived at the same time I came home from school, this ensured me a few hours of free time twice a month. I’m already used to this. From age five, like Mom and my aunts and uncles before me, I would go to my great-grandaunts Loretta and Arlene’s house every weekend. They live near downtown Minneapolis; there, I stay up as late as I can make myself, watching TV, listening to the radio, reading books and comics and back issues of the Minneapolis Star Tribune (they have it delivered), making balls with the rubber bands that bound the newspapers (Red and Arlene put them around the doorknobs throughout the house), drawing, eating nachos and ice cream, and making lists. Mom had pretty much let me do whatever I wanted when I was younger, but then my siblings were born—my brother Jacob, who died at 15 months of a heart condition; Alex was born three months later—and I began babysitting them, more and more as they got older.

Mom carts Brittany around Target, while I watch Alex in the store’s cafeteria and look at leftover newspapers. I glance through the St. Paul Pioneer-Press & Dispatch (later simplified to Pioneer Press and nicknamed “The Newspaper of the Twin Cities,” a nice underhanded slap at the Star-Tribune’s hegemony, a very Minnesota-nice maneuver). Ever since the Twins won the World Series last fall, I’ve become a baseball fan, and I glance through the sports page looking for whatever baseball is there, which since spring training has just begun seems negligible—I’m interested in who won which game and what it means to certain players’ stats, not the overall view of the season—and I don’t pay much attention to major headlines. I’m hardly as well off as a lot of the kids I go to school with.
(my family and I were pioneers! We brought welfare to the south Minneapolis suburbs!), and I go to the city unsupervised on weekends, but I’m pretty much as provincial as you might imagine a 13-year-old Midwestern boy on welfare to be. My instincts are far worldlier than I am.

So I go for the Strib’s Arts & Entertainment section and look for rock critic Jon Bream’s column. In this one, there is an announcement after the main article that the Village Voice—“New York’s arbiter of hip,” as Bream refers to it, a phrase that for me carries an impossibly exotic aura until I start noticing that he uses it all the time in reference to the Voice—had held an annual critics’ poll, and that Prince’s Sign ‘O’ the Times had been named album of the year for 1987, with the title song topping the singles poll as well. I finish the article, pick Alex up, head to the store’s music department, and find a cassette of Sign ‘O’ the Times. Then I locate Mom, ask if I can buy a tape, drop nine dollars and ninety-eight cents worth of merchandise next to Brittany in the cart’s baby seat, and permanently alter the course of my life.

* * *

I had been paying attention to pop music since I could remember. So does nearly every other kid in America—it’s your lingua franca, the air you breathe, what you and your peers have in common besides classes and teachers. I did it a little more obsessively than most of my peers, though. Ever since my grandaunt Loretta had taught me to read very early—I can’t remember not knowing how to—I began absorbing information on pop through my uncle Bob’s record collection. Bob was a DJ in the late Seventies and early Eighties—he had a residence at a club called Duffy’s, where my mom and her friends hung out—and whenever Mom and I went to visit him and his first wife, Ranée, I would sit for hours and look at his record collection. Bob probably had between 750 and 1,000 albums and 12-inch singles, but when I was four years old it seemed like there were five times that many. I wasn’t allowed to play the records themselves, so I’d read lyric sheets and compose tunes in my head to them when I hadn’t already heard the song. I studied liner notes and credits, wondering who Carole Bayer Sager and Rod Temperton were whose names accompanied Michael Jackson’s in the credits of my uncle’s copy of Off the Wall. I listened to Casey Kasem’s Top 40 on the radio and watched his America’s Top Ten on TV every week. I also watched Friday Night Videos on NBC religiously; when we got cable (incredibly basic cable, no MTV), I stayed up till three or four in the morning on weekends and watched Night Tracks on TBS. Once, when I was seven, while staying over at Loretta and Arlene’s, I decided to make a list of
every single song ever recorded; I think I got to number 236 before I got bored and abandoned it.

After awhile I stopped paying so much attention. I went through a series of phases where I began collecting or studying all manner of pop-cultural artifacts: comic books, movies, TV, old radio shows, baseball, *trivia itself*. (My youth coincided with the widespread popularity of the Trivial Pursuit board game; I knew the answers to more of the questions than anyone in my family, which made me a lot more proud than it probably ought to have.) I’d get on kicks where I would absorb everything I could find about certain subjects, making extraordinarily pompous statements about things I basically knew jack shit about except what I’d read, a mini-king of received opinion. My family found my extreme dedication to whatever it happened to be at that moment simultaneously hilarious, bewildering, and irritating.

A friend of Mom’s named Scotty had left a library copy of David Wallechinsky, Irving Wallace, and Amy Wallace’s *The Book of Lists*—the first one, from 1976—at our apartment when I was in second grade, and never retrieved it. We never returned it to the library, either. *The Book of Lists* had all kinds of things in it—the glutinous diets of famous gourmands, details of the sex lives of autocrats, winners of various official prizes, a list of the ten worst movies of all time—of vital interest to the budding media- and trivia-besotted pre-adolescent misfit. I began reading it, and basically didn’t stop for about a decade. Once, Mom attempted to punish me by placing it on the highest shelf of the hall closet, forbidding me to look at it anymore; within three days, I had climbed the shelves, gotten it back down, and flaunted the fact that I was still reading it. She didn’t bother taking it away again after that.

*The Book of Lists* didn’t introduce me to the idea that having a borderline-unhealthy relationship with pop culture could be a way of life. But it certainly helped shape the way I approached mine. There was always some listy aspect to my obsessions from that point on—baseball statistics, Nielsen ratings, box-office draws, rarity/condition/importance. (I remember rooting for *Whiz Comics* no. 1—first appearance of Captain Marvel, a.k.a. Shazam!—to overtake *Action Comics* no. 1—first appearance of Superman and thus the first truly modern comic book—in value, and for *Detective Comics* no. 27—first appearance of Batman—to overtake both. A ranking contest between a populist hero, a cult hero, and a hero that falls somewhere between the two has essentially played itself out in my head for the rest of my life.) Late in fifth grade, I discovered *The Book of Lists*’ forefather: two volumes of *The People’s Almanac*, mountainous tomes from 1975 and 1978 containing impossible amounts of useless
information I could pack my brain with while ignoring my schoolwork, a task I performed as assiduously as possible.

Entering junior high accelerated both cycles. I came very close to flunking eighth grade; as it turned out, watching my sisters all the time was a great way to avoid my schoolwork, not that I needed the help. But the decisive moment came at the end of my first day of seventh grade. (Memory plays tricks on us all, and obviously I’m as prone to romanticizing my past as anyone else; still, I am absolutely certain this really did happen on the first day of seventh grade.) I went into the media center of Richfield Junior High School and headed straight for the reference room, looking for copies of The People’s Almanacs. I found them—and next to them, I also found a copy of The Book of Lists 2. I opened it up, and was drawn to one particular list.

In 1977, Paul Gambaccini, a Rolling Stone journalist and BBC Radio DJ, put together a book called Rock Critics Choice: The Top 200 Albums, in which he polled 48 critics and DJs for their top ten albums. I already trusted critics implicitly; my favorite TV show was Siskel and Ebert’s At the Movies. (I’ve long suspected that, along with the Internet and the sheer explosion of the culture industry, the main reason there’s been so much more criticism, or at least so many more reviewers, over the past decade or so is that Siskel and Ebert was a lot of other kids’ favorite TV show, too.) Gambaccini’s top 20 was reprinted in The Book of Lists 2, and what struck me was that four of the top ten, and five of the top 20, were by the Beatles.¹ Soon I had my best friend, Eric, tape me Sgt. Pepper’s, Rubber Soul, Revolver, Abbey Road, and the White Album, as well as most of the other top 20 finishers. Within a month I was boring everyone in earshot silly with my newfound Beatlemania; even Eric got tired of hearing about it, and he probably liked them more than I did. I taped Beatles albums from the Augsburg public library, right behind RJHS, which had With the Beatles, A Hard Day’s Night, and Help! on compact disc. I also plowed through Eric’s copy of Nicholas Schaffner’s The Beatles Forever, a fan-bio book, twice, and searched for references to the band everywhere I looked. The year being 1987, they were exceptionally easy to find.

As an adult music critic, reading you-are-there accounts of the indie Eighties is a little like walking in on the middle of, say, a Whig political convention. The idea of a knee-jerk rejection of the Sixties as some kind of spiritual victory seems almost comically puerile—why would anyone want to reject riches of any sort, especially those that gave us some of the best music ever made? But remembering the overwhelming nostalgia that suffused the cultural air of the period makes the position a lot easier to sympathize with. In the U.S., the mid-
Eighties generally were saturated in Sixties nostalgia, at least as far as the mainstream media went. The baby boom had ripened into middle age and began overseeing the country’s cultural institutions, and as its tastes calcified the Sixties became omnipresent, less a myth than a carrot dangled in front of the young. The underlying message: “You’ll never have as much fun, be as wild, come as close to changing the world, or be as good as we were. So why don’t you just give up trying?”

Obviously, people didn’t give up trying. In fact, sometimes it seemed like people were trying really hard to replicate the Sixties as exactly as possible—or more to the point, replicate what the Sixties had become in the public memory, with all the false nobility that implied. The phrase “Music doesn’t mean what it used to in the Sixties” (sometimes altered to the more direct “What happened to all the protest songs?”) was—and continues to be—thrown around with impunity, usually by people who didn’t (and don’t) listen to punk, indie rock, or any black music. In the Eighties, if a musician was said to “care”—you know, demonstrate some kind of interest in things that were not themselves or their immediate loved ones and/or groupies—they were said to be “bringing back the Sixties,” typically in the guise of protest music. U2 may have borrowed much of their sound from punk-era bands like Television and post-punks like Public Image Ltd. and Gang of Four and blown it up to arena size, but they were precisely as full of clumsy rhetoric and/or shit as the Jefferson Airplane had been and therefore “cared” and were “bringing back the Sixties” (or something like that—I’ve never understood the logic entirely). Something similar applied to Midnight Oil, too, though to a much lesser degree on the sound. Live Aid, in 1985, was as ur-neo-Sixties as the Eighties got, and if you didn’t dislike the decade of Dylan and democracy-in-the-streets already, hearing Joan Baez announce, “Good morning, children of the Eighties; this is your Woodstock, and it’s long overdue” could have done the job by itself. (One reason I’ve always liked Oliver Stone’s 1991 movie The Doors is that it pays tribute to the Sixties in the most appropriate way possible—by being even more stupid and vulgar than they were.)

1987 was a boom year for this kind of nostalgia. Rolling Stone magazine celebrated its 20th anniversary with a quartet of special issues. One of them featured a Gambaccini-like list of the “Top 100 Albums of the Past 20 Years” led by Sgt. Pepper’s (somewhat amazingly, Never Mind the Bollocks Here’s the Sex Pistols placed second—and Prince’s Dirty Mind came in 20th, with Purple Rain 45th). Another issue, cover-dated November 5-December 12, was filled with interviews with, as Greil Marcus put it, “34 traditional RS favorites: three blacks,
three women, one twofer, and no punks,” whose “leading questions emphasize ‘The Sixties’ as concept and legacy.”

Chuck Berry was a figure more Fifties than Sixties in the public mind (though some of his biggest hits were released in the latter decade), but Taylor Hackford’s feature documentary from that year, *Chuck Berry: Hail! Hail! Rock ’n’ Roll*, certainly added to the effect. (Berry’s amazing, and less than rosy-eyed, autobiography, also published in ’87, should have punctured at least some of that nostalgia, but that’s not how mass culture works.)

Four of Berry’s keenest students didn’t do too badly that year in the nostalgia sweepstakes, either. 1987 was the year the Beatles’ catalog first saw issue on compact disc. It was also the 20th anniversary of the release of that perpetual poll-topper, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and of the Summer of Love—the Monterey International Pop Festival; the “raising of the Pentagon”; the first albums of Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, and the Velvet Underground; Aretha Franklin’s *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You*, *The Who Sell Out*, and Love’s *Forever Changes*; Sam and Dave’s “Soul Man,” James Brown’s “Cold Sweat,” and Procol Harum’s “A Whiter Shade of Pale.” To celebrate it all, Granada Television in England aired a two-hour special directed by John Sheppard titled *It Was Twenty Years Ago Today*; Derek Taylor, the Beatles’ former press officer and a co-producer of Monterey Pop, wrote an accompanying book in which he throws around variations of “But things were different back then—and better” until you want to fucking throttle him.

Naturally, when KTCA, the local PBS affiliate, announced it would be showing *It Was Twenty Years Ago Today* during pledge week, it was a capital-e Event for me. I watched it on the black-and-white Magnavox situated atop my desk in my bedroom closet, my sisters crawling around everywhere, my mom in the kitchen playing bridge with her brothers and sisters. There on TV is Paul McCartney, hair dyed back brown after a brief silver scare, unfailingly chipper and pontificating glibly. There are the Rolling Stones, in staticky black-and-white newsreel, being arrested for possession. There are genuine San Francisco hippies, flashing mirrors at tour buses. There are the Beatles, performing “All You Need Is Love” for a worldwide television audience, marvelously sedate and not a little self-mocking. There’s Abbie Hoffman, claiming that the two most important events in his life outside of his family were hearing about John F. Kennedy’s murder and hearing *Sgt. Pepper*’s for the first time. “There’s not much sense that the Black Panthers had just been launched or that Che Guevara would soon die,” noted Regina Nadelson in London’s *Guardian*. “Or any mention that four days after *Sgt. Pepper* was released on June 1, 1967, the Six
Day War began.” But that wasn’t the Sixties as I understand them, either—or, at 12 years old, particularly care to. To me, the Sixties—and, by extension, pop culture—is watching these larger-than-life people looking back on events too big for my comprehension, things I will never get to do, a period too rich and too good ever to be experienced by anyone else ever again.

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Discovering the Beatles eradicates my unconscious notion that music is furniture, or atmosphere. Previously, they had been the Coca-Cola logo, standing eight feet tall on a sign on 7th and Hennepin in downtown Minneapolis; they were Mickey Mouse; they were Santa Claus. They had been major, well-loved touchstones that nevertheless I hadn’t noticed before as anything other than monoliths that came as part of the territory of living in the modern Western world. The fact that they overwhelmed the Gambaccini poll was a shock to me. It forced the realization that they weren’t just a homogenous glob of culture-goo; they were artists, and their music was meant to be enjoyed and maybe learned from, rather than just accepted as part of the room or the air.

I have never had that problem with Prince. In large part, this is a matter of geography. Prince is from here, from Minneapolis’s north side. Every one of Mom’s six brothers and sisters—and their friends—seems to know, if not him, his associates, either from school or from the local club scene. This is a little bit like living in Metropolis and having lots of relatives who are casual acquaintances with Clark Kent.

Which is one reason why it’s always a bit jarring to read how little-known Prince was in his own hometown until “Little Red Corvette,” because nearly everyone in my family was obsessed with him at one point or another, from his first record on. “I Wanna Be Your Lover” was a no. 11 hit on Billboard’s pop chart in 1979, ahead of his self-titled second album, but you’d have thought it was a seven-weeks-at-number-one smash throughout the globe the way they played it. I remember Mom and I watching American Bandstand the Saturday morning he appeared on it. I was four, she was 19, and I remember her explaining to me how cool he was for refusing to speak to Dick Clark (famously, he held up four fingers when Clark asked how long he’d been a musician). I also remember her hollering at the TV screen when Clark opened the interview by making a comment about how unusual it was that Prince was from, of all places, Minneapolis. “Why wouldn’t he be from there?” she wanted to know. So did I. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world.
That’s because I didn’t realize until I was much older exactly how white Minneapolis was—or still is, despite the expansion of its racial makeup in the 25 years since “I Wanna Be Your Lover” was released. For all basic purposes, my mom’s family lived in the projects, the sons and daughters of an Irish Catholic mom and a Puerto Rican father; their friends were black, Hispanic, and Native American as often as they were white. That’s pretty much the environment I was surrounded by until we moved to Richfield when I was five and Mom wanted to put me in school without worrying too much about my safety; up until puberty most of my friends were black kids who lived in the same apartment complex as us. I have a floury complexion; Mom doesn’t, and when I was young she wore her hair essentially in an Afro. Years later, riding the bus home from downtown with my sister Alex, who was born blonde and blue-eyed, Mom was asked by an old lady whose little girl she was holding. “Mine,” Mom said. “But she’s so light and you’re blaaaaa—” the woman blurted out. “I’m feeling a little blah today,” Mom answered.

Prince was hardly the only thing playing in our house. Michael Jackson was even bigger (Off the Wall was the first album I asked Mom to buy me after Santa Claus got me a Fisher-Price record player for Christmas 1980), and Mom was a Supremes fanatic as well as a fan of the Grease soundtrack. I loved Donna Summer and also managed to be a huge Kiss fan despite the fact that I’d never even heard their music. (I finally heard them when I was seven, when Mom relented and bought me a copy of Destroyer.) My uncles liked lots of things, notably funk and heavier rock; Stevie Wonder’s Songs in the Key of Life was in constant rotation in my uncle James’s room for what seemed like four years. But Michael Jackson and Prince were the glue. I saw Dirty Mind around James’s apartment, but never actually heard it (until I was 15, actually)—I assume it was a conscious decision on Mom’s part, since I ran around the house in my underwear quite enough, pretending to be Prince on the album’s front cover, without actually hearing the songs. (I remember pushing my bed against the wall and standing in front of the box spring in approximation of the cover photo, in my winter coat and a pair of red Spider-Man Underoos, posing in front of a full-length mirror. If our neighbors ever saw it—and it’s likely, we lived in a basement apartment with big windows whose curtains were open as often as not—they must have wondered what the hell I was doing.)

Mom bought Controversy, not for my Fisher-Price but for her own record player after mine had spent some time as the one we both used. It hardly mattered, since I’d come home after school, go into her room, and listen to it on headphones. My favorites were “Sexuality” (“You don’t need no clothes,” he
sang over tribal drums, which considering my whole Dirty Mind dress-up routine hit a little closer to home than it probably should have) and the sinister, and thus intriguing, “Annie Christian” (what were those swirly, menacing keyboards? and those lines about guns and killing children?). This bothered Mom—she primarily liked the album for “Do Me, Baby,” an extended seduction ballad that I enjoyed too, mostly for the way he muttered “What, are you gonna just sit there and watch?” which was funny, and “I’m so cold, just hold me,” which was sad, and for a seven-year-old probably the most identifiable line on the album.

By the time 1999 appeared, there was competition from the one artist who could outrun Prince in my house. When Mom told me she could buy me an album one first of the month in early 1983, I asked if I could have two: 1999 and Thriller. She said she’d pick one, and came home with Thriller, which was fine—I wanted it more anyway, and I also worried that purchasing a double-album would break Mom’s wallet. “1999,” “Little Red Corvette,” “Delirious,” and “Let’s Pretend We’re Married” were on the radio all the time, anyway; Mom also regaled me with details of the live show she caught in March 1983 at the Met Center. (“He played for 70 minutes,” she told me breathlessly, and I was always struck by what an odd, clinical figure that sounded like.) I got excited when I found out he was making a movie, but after Mom and Chris (my sisters’ father) went to see Purple Rain, they said no go—too much sex, too much violence, too much swearing, and never mind that I was watching Lunch Wagon Girls every Saturday on Showtime or that everyone in my house cursed like an angry god, myself included. I saw it a year later at my grandmother’s house, with the family huddled in my aunt Cathy’s room to watch it on her brand-new VCR. The record, of course, was a different matter; this was a genuine cultural phenomenon playing out in my hometown, and as long-standing fans already, we got totally caught up in it. Mom bought me the album the day it was released; not too long after that, I accidentally broke it in half. The problem was that I accidentally broke every album I had in half; I was an extremely clumsy kid. Soon, I just trashed the lot and the no-longer-working Fisher-Price turntable along with it. We had tape players by then anyway; the tape that got the most play in our house was 1999, whose cassette edition had several songs in the wrong order to make even the sides’ lengths.

“Raspberry Parade” and “Kiss” sounded great on the radio, just like all Prince songs had before. But there was another movie, Under the Cherry Moon, which was abominably reviewed and vanished from theaters almost immediately. Prince’s stock was falling hard, but I wasn’t paying all that much attention by then, anyway. The only record I actively cared about between Purple Rain and
my Beatles breakthrough was Tears for Fears’ *Songs From the Big Chair*, a tape of which I’d gotten as a last-minute substitute when Mom refused to purchase the copy of Billy Crystal’s *Mahvelous!* I’d asked for. (“No,” she said, stone-faced. “Get a real album.” I was crushed.) My brother Jacob was born in February 1984 with, literally, a backward heart; he died in summer 1985, during an operation to apply a pacemaker, and the morose, sniffingly dramatic *Big Chair* fit my mood, maybe a bit too exactly. Also, 1985–6 were pretty horseshit years for pop music unless you already happened to be in on rap, indie rock, or any number of under-the-surface styles or movements—which, being a sheltered ten- and eleven-year-old at the time, I was distinctly not. Finding the Beatles made me realize that pop music really was a world unto itself—even if it was 20 years ago today, and had already passed me by.

* * *

Two hours after dropping the tape into Mom’s cart, I’m at home, listening to *Sign ‘O’ the Times*, and hearing … not quite as much as I was hoping to. I already know a quarter of the album. “Sign ‘O’ the Times,” “U Got the Look,” and “I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man” were all hits, and “Hot Thing”—the B-side of “I Could Never”—had gotten played on the local Top 40 station a couple of times as well. My aunt Maria had been a big fan of the album, and I’d overheard bits of it at her house once, but that was during a party and I hadn’t been paying much attention. As usual on Prince albums, the singles are noticeably longer than their radio versions. “Sign” has an extended coda with a little more guitar and a bunch of drum machines that sound like fireworks going off on the Fourth of July or a military execution, and “I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man” has three minutes of long, arcing guitar that make the song into something more curiously dramatic than it had seemed on the radio. There are more horns than I’ve ever heard on a Prince album—it almost sounds like jazz in some parts, especially on the ballad “Slow Love” and the long, live party song “It’s Gonna Be a Beautiful Night”—and it’s all over the place stylistically, just like every other Prince album. “Housequake,” a funny dance song in which Prince sounds like he’s singing through his nose and which contains the funniest utterance of the word “bullshit” I’ve ever heard, wins me over immediately, and so does “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” which sounds like the kind of thing I’d want to say to a girl if I ever get the courage to actually approach one.

But the way some of *Sign* sounds—the arrangements—have me puzzled. However sparse the synth-dominated electroscapes of 1999 or the spartan “Kiss” may have been, they didn’t feel as *bare* as some of these new songs do. “The
Ballad of Dorothy Parker” sounds like it’s waiting to be finished, except the bridge seems to stop the thing in its tracks, turn it around a couple times, and then send it back on its way to … wherever the hell it was going. “Forever in My Life” is a drum machine, multitracked background vocals that anticipate the lead, some acoustic guitar at the end, and nothing else. Hmmm. “The Cross” is totally flat—sonically, instrumentally, beatwise; it trudges, not jumps. None of these things are minuses, but they sound different from the fireworks, the drenched explosion, that I’ve come to expect from Prince albums. Even the sonically thicker “Strange Relationship” feels slight; “Hot Thing” and “It” sound so much alike, and are placed only a couple songs apart, that they seem redundant.

There’s something about the way the album is structured that daunts me. Controversy was shaped in classic LP fashion: Side one contains three killers, the least effective sandwiched by a pair of sure shots; side two has five lesser songs, all very different from each other, the first four of which segue hard into each other to force a sense of cohesion upon them, a surprisingly effective tactic. I may have heard 1999 in the wrong sequence for years (when I dub a copy of Mom’s tape, I rearrange the songs into their original running order), but there was no mistaking that he’d led off with the good shit and put the weirder songs later, and on 1999 the weird stuff (“Lady Cab Driver,” “Automatic”) is snappier and more effectively poppy than most people’s hits. Five of Purple Rain’s nine songs were decent-sized-to-gargantuan hits, two of the others could have been (“The Beautiful Ones” and “Baby I’m a Star”), and just like the movie, the whole thing was so rise-and-fall-and-rise-again that the brashness of the sequencing was a hook in itself.

A good deal of the songs on Sign ‘O’ the Times, though, don’t sound like hits. They don’t even sound like they’re trying to be hits, which for Prince is really unusual. Just as oddly, he doesn’t front-load the album the way he had with his previous double-album, 1999. (Let me mention again that I have not at this point heard either Around the World in a Day or Parade, and that if I had I’d probably have been better prepared for Sign’s sequencing vicissitudes.) Sign doesn’t show off its wares the way the earlier albums do; it meanders, ducks in and out of corners, substitutes feints and jabs for the clean one-two punches of yore. It’s wily, and the first couple times I play it I have a hard time making the adjustment. The Beatles did this kind of thing, too, especially on the White Album, but the give-and-take between John and Paul’s (and George and Ringo’s) personas and vocal styles was easier to grasp. It will ultimately transpire that Prince did something similar on Sign ‘O’ the Times, but right now just trying to
get my head around the thing is frustrating. I can’t dive into it and fish out details the way I did right away with the White Album, which is doubly disconcerting given how big a Prince fan I am already. And the many things I do recognize seem slighter this time around—the slavering fuck-machine of “Hot Thing” and “It,” the balladeer of “Forever in My Life,” the psychedelic popster of “Strange Relationship.” They don’t jump in my face and announce themselves the way “Let’s Pretend We’re Married” or “Do Me Baby” or “Raspberry Beret” did. I’ve never needed to adjust to a Prince record before.

Not that I’m thinking all of this in any sort of linear fashion, of course. But you get the idea. This album is stubborn. It doesn’t keep its shape. The more I put it on, the further away it slips from my grasp. With Prince’s earlier albums, you knew what you were getting every time out; ditto the White Album, with its grouped songs about animals and its built-in Manson mythology. Each of the first few times I play Sign ‘O’ the Times it sounds like a different album. As a compulsive list-maker, a junior high schooler who can’t keep his room clean or do his homework but can recite useless facts in perfect chronology, I need this thing to order itself, to maintain classical form, in order to get a grip on it. I want ego, I need superego, and all I’m getting here is id.

It’s starting to occur to me that my long-faked cosmopolitanism is doing me no good with this album. I can pretend I know more than the people in my classes because I have a firmer grasp on what great music, great art is (because that’s what incipient snobs do), but I really haven’t encountered this sort of thing before. It’s easy to assimilate the Beatles’ experiments, because they’re 20 years old and have been celebrated to death, explained until (you’d think) the life has been drained from them. The miracle there is that they really haven’t been—that life is still there for the finding if you want to look closely enough. Sign, though—Sign is strange. And beguiling. Which are qualities that as an incipient snob I always pretend to like but am actually flustered by when I encounter them—the way a locker-room stud who’s actually deeply afraid of girls might be.

So naturally, I keep playing the thing. And as I do, I keep adjusting. The way the more wildly arranged songs’ bushy playfulness (“Adore,” “Play in the Sunshine”) works against the others’ leanness begins to make a specific kind of sense—in the same way that Prince’s sex-and-God thing, always present to me even as a spiritually uncurious nine-year-old, seems to be manifesting itself in more interesting ways. I stop listening for hits, for solar-plexus punches and buckets full of water in the face, and start noticing flow. And just like the whole thing keeps shifting around, so do the weight values of individual songs—they don’t have to announce themselves anymore, because I’m starting to notice how
confidently they sidle into each other, and the whole. There are all kinds of interesting transitions here—the needle-scratching that bridges “Play in the Sunshine” and “Housequake,” or the ping! that segues “Starfish and Coffee” and “Slow Love,” or the two-note bass count-in of “Adore” ambushing the fading crowd noise of “It’s Gonna Be a Beautiful Night.” As a result, the hits are enriched—engaged in a kind of active call-and-response with the other songs, rooms in a house, pieces of a puzzle.

Within two weeks of listening, a couple of things become apparent. One, Sign ‘O’ the Times is completely modern; the synths and production ensure that, of course, but beyond them there’s a connection to a right-now that feels unlike anything in the classic rock I’ve been listening to or the present I’m living in—something alluring, a world of neon and smoke and dance clubs and the thrill of the city night, the night Mom exists in sometimes except, well, cooler. (Less overtly beery, maybe—Mom isn’t much of a drinker, though lots of her friends are.) There’s an open-endedness, a gaze into the future that hasn’t happened yet, ambition that isn’t wholly tied up in pleasing the elders. (“Sign ‘O’ the Times,” a —you guessed it—protest song, is an exception, though even that seems more like it was done to please its creator and its creator only.) It sounds cutting-edge—which is something of a shock, since that describes basically nothing else I’m interested in. Like most teenagers, I want comfort in my music. It also sounds totally pop. Not only could I be hearing this stuff on the Top 40 radio stations that Rolling Stone and most of my classic rock-loving schoolmates abhor, but I already have.

The other thing I come to realize is that this album is the greatest fucking thing I have ever heard in my life, and that realization has me completely shaken. I live in my head so much that I’ve invented wholly arbitrary rules of conduct for how to like and dislike things, what’s allowed and what isn’t, and in order to allow this opinion I have to shift those rules dramatically. I’m not sure I can do it. There’s something I don’t quite trust about music that doesn’t already seem to have its byways mapped out. Part of it is that I’m 13, of course, but part of it is that I’ve become a serious student of pop music when most of what is venerated about pop music comes from nostalgia merchants. Music is art, sure, but rock is art in a very particular way. It’s become—at least what I know of it, which is what gets major media attention—a music that honors the fathers, that has become neat and tidy and that talks a good deal about disruption but doesn’t actually do a lot of it.

This is fine with me: Living on welfare in the suburbs when no one else I know of does the same doesn’t exactly inspire in me bourgeois fantasies of dope
or guns or fucking in the streets. (Well, maybe the last one.) I talk back to people, speak my mind when not being called upon to do so, am habitually sarcastic, that kind of thing—but I don’t feel particularly rebellious. Except for a protracted, laughable excursion into shoplifting I’ve never actively entertained thoughts of juvenile delinquency. A couple of relatives have had drug problems; my sisters’ father was an alcoholic (“I’ve been drinking every day since I was fifteen,” he once announced, “and I’d know if I had a drinking problem”); Mom’s cigarette smoke seeped into my clothing to the extent that when I was seven, school authorities thought I had a habit. (She quit when I was 15.) So I’m adamantly against smoking, drinking, and drugs. I’m also babysitting all the time. I’m not interested in rebellion, and I want music that reflects this. (Prince may have been a rebel, but for me he was a comfortable rebel.)

So it’s hardly surprising that the mode of appreciation I’ve unassumingly chosen is what is typically called “rockism.” The terms of this are commonly held in music circles, and outlining them will hold no surprises for most of you. Essentially, albums are more important than singles; the artist-as-auteur is better than the producer or background people as auteurs (the exception, lo and behold, tends to be anything that predates the ’70s—Motown is good, disco bad); writing your own songs is paramount, or else you are just a puppet and a phony; the post-Beatles model of self-contained band is the ideological ideal. All of this is held to be self-evident, no explanation necessary, and to think otherwise is to be branded a shallow moron.

My love for Sign ‘O’ the Times doesn’t in itself contradict those beliefs. Few musicians in history have been more “self-contained” than Prince, and Sign is certainly as much an auteurist album-as-album “statement” as any. But it does inherently challenge the idea I’ve come to have that pop music needs to settle, to assimilate itself into the “classics” canon, before we can reasonably judge its true worth. Because I’ve had Sign for a month now and it just keeps getting better and deeper and smarter and more fun, it’s getting me more riled up than anything else, and my self-justifying hemming and hawing about its proper place in the scheme of things is starting to wear down fast. And that’s what’s fucking me up—not the intensity with which I’m digging the album, but the fact that it’s starting to show how limited the way I perceive things are. It’s the opposite of how, to pick an example from the pop-cultural air (of course!), Enid Coleslaw (played by Thora Birch) reacts to Skip James’ classic Thirties blues song, “Devil Got My Woman,” in the movie Ghost World. Though the record would be great no matter when it came from, it seems fair to interpret Enid’s response to it as her being overwhelmed by the richness of the past, of history (especially
considering screenwriter Daniel Clowes and director Terry Zwigoff’s reverence for old music), in light of the bland, depressing present the film is set in.

Playing *Sign ‘O’ the Times* over and over again on headphones, finding new things about it to love with every spin, I have the same epiphany in reverse: I’m overwhelmed by the future, by as-yet-unrealized possibilities, by what could be accomplished—by Prince, certainly (imagine, he’d already soundtracked my entire conscious life and now he’d gone and topped himself), but also other musicians, and, by proxy, myself—rather than what already had been, which (thanks to the omnipresent anti-magic of classic rock radio) was beginning to reveal itself as pompous and stale. Not all of it, of course, and not necessarily as music. But as a way of looking at things? Meh.

There’s another thing, too. The Beatles, like comic books and old radio shows and movies, had been an escape from an unhappy life into the past. Nostalgia is always manageable, even when you’re 13, because it’s a way of fending off the present. I was willing to believe that the music I’d been surrounded by had become less interesting, less challenging, than what had come before. I’d become accustomed to the idea that the only way to get in on pop culture was to participate, willingly or not, in an act of mass nostalgia.

The realization that not only is pop music art, but pop music being made right now is art that can easily trump what came before—the only conclusion I can draw from the fact that the best record I’ve ever heard till now came out only a year ago, by a guy whose impact is all over the radio playing pop music as it exists in 1988 and not prior to 1975, when I was born—is no small thing. Neither is the idea that it’s not stupid to take the pop present seriously. Maybe Jam-Lewis meant as much as Lennon-McCartney. Maybe if music isn’t made by an auteur-type, but instead someone more anonymous—maybe even a puppeteered singer with a savvy hit-machine behind him/her/them—it’s still worth my time and interest. Maybe, if the record is really good, we shouldn’t worry so fucking much about who made it. Maybe pop and rock are not created unequally. Maybe this idea, this entire way of thinking, warrants, *demands* serious reevaluation.

*Sign ‘O’ the Times* may have been every bit as “significant,” especially since everyone seemed to think the dour title track set the tone for the whole thing instead of being the anomaly it is; in 2004, it’s undoubtedly taken on much of the same granola-like “good for you” aspect that the Gambaccini Top 20 had by the time it reached me in the late Eighties, especially now that I’ve written a freakin’ book about it. But it changed my entire way of thinking about the ways music and culture—and, since I still see much of the world through those lenses,
everything else—work. It gave me the notion that the world has not passed me by but is still being made. It made me want more than I had, and made me more grateful when I received it. Not that I thought about all of this in any sort of linear fashion, of course. But you get the idea.
Sign ‘O’ the Times opens with a bare drum machine singing the blues and closes with a wall of sanctified sound fueled by Prince overdubbing himself into a gospel choir. In between, it sums up everything Prince had done up to this point. Even if it weren’t his best album, it would still be his most complete—1996’s Emancipation, which is more than twice as long as Sign, covers less thematic ground.

Which is quite a bit of ground. Prince got his start early. He was born Prince Roger Nelson on June 7, 1958, to pianist John Nelson and his wife, singer Mattie Shaw, and given his father’s stage name (also the name of his group, the Prince Rogers Trio). Prince has credited two concerts—seeing his father in a Minneapolis theater at age five, and a James Brown concert five years later during which the young Prince danced onstage with Brown—with giving him the impetus to become a musician. John and Mattie divorced in 1968, when Prince was ten; when John moved out, he left his piano behind, and Prince, who had always tinkered with the instrument, began playing it in earnest. Soon he began doubling up on guitar, bass, and drums, as well.

After his mother remarried, Prince briefly moved in with his father, who kicked him out after catching him in bed with a girl; he bounced around several relatives’ homes until moving in with Bernadette Anderson, the mother of six children, including Prince’s friend André. Soon Prince and André, along with Prince’s cousin Charles Smith, had started a band together called Phoenix, which later mutated into Grand Central. The group played most of the big R&B hits of the day, as well as songs by Chicago, Steely Dan, and Grand Funk Railroad (whose 1972 album Return of the Phoenix provided the group with its original name).

This points to a crucial distinction between Minneapolis and most other American cities with renowned black music scenes, Not only was the vast majority of the city’s population white (according to www.census.gov, the city’s black population was 19% in 2002 with the population of Minnesota as a state only 4%, and the number was significantly lower when Prince was growing up), but there was little black radio. The city had one black station, KUXL, which went off-air at 8:30 p.m.; growing up, Prince and his peers would tune into the KQRS, which programmed progressive rock before calcifying into the city’s classic-rock monolith. Prince would credit his early love for Santana, Boz Scaggs, Joni Mitchell, and Maria Muldaur to the station, and his affinity for Jimi
Hendrix, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones would logically seem to stem from there as well.

The city’s club scene, too, was less than supportive of young black musicians. Small community centers like the Elks’ Lounge, the Cozy Bar, and the Nacirema ("American" spelled backward) catered to Minneapolis’s African-American community, but black musicians were shut out of the downtown clubs. As local activist Spike Moss told City Pages’ Peter S. Scholtes, “What ended up happening was, the bands had to perfect the latest record like it sounds. We didn’t even have Soul Train—it didn’t come on [in Minneapolis] until the Eighties. So you had to be a good musician, because you had to play those records.” \(^5\) Local musician Bobby Vandell noted to Scholtes, “That’s largely why people like Prince and Terry [Lewis] and Jimmy [Jam] got to where they got, because they weren’t able to make this meager living that we [white musicians] made. We could work. The black groups had one of two choices: Either hang it up, or transcend that scene. Move ahead and say, okay, fuck you. You won’t let us play your club? We’ll own your club. It’s a double-edged sword. It was racist, but it kicked a lot of people in the ass.” \(^6\)

This meant Minneapolis’s teenage black bands of the Seventies—Grand Central (who soon renamed themselves Champagne after Charles Smith was replaced by Morris Day), Flyte Tyme, Cohesion, the Family—had to book and promote their own shows, often at hotel ballrooms and YMCAs. By the time Prince and the Time—whose members were largely drawn from that pool of local talent—began making waves in Minneapolis during the early Eighties, they’d been part of a DIY scene that paralleled the recently minted new wave and punk audiences—who, not surprisingly, enthusiastically embraced Prince and his proteges when both scenes converged at First Avenue, a downtown club.

That was a few years away, though, when Prince made his first recordings in 1975, as a session guitarist for his cousin’s husband, a songwriter named Pepé Willie. Soon after, Prince cut a series of demos with Champagne, and his multi-instrumental ability caught the ear of Chris Moon, an English ex-pat who ran one of the studios where Champagne recorded. Moon offered a deal: If Prince would write and record the music for Moon’s lyrics, the Englishman would give the young man free studio time in exchange. Champagne balked, but Prince accepted the offer. Among the songs he and Moon wrote together was the chirpy “Soft and Wet,” a bubblegum R&B song with a stop-start rhythm, insistent little rhythm riff, and googly-eyed soft-porn lyrics that were pretty difficult to resist when Prince sang them in his breathy falsetto.

Not long thereafter, Warner Bros. Records signed Prince to a three-album
contract that allowed him an eyebrow-raising amount of artistic freedom, including the right to produce himself. For You, released in April 1978, took five months to make and cost almost as much as his contractual budget for three albums. While “Soft and Wet” did decently as a single, hitting no. 12 on Billboard’s Soul charts, the album sounded thin and fared worse, pushing up to the mid-20s on the Soul album chart before collapsing, and barely making the Top 200 pop chart. His reluctance to make personal appearances or do interviews didn’t help, either.

1979’s Prince was made in six weeks for a lot less. Money well spent: “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” the first single, not only went no. 1 Soul but no. 11 pop—hardly unusual during the high season of disco crossover, but impressive nevertheless. So was the song, hooked by a guitar-and-synth figure that sounded like a pop-funk clarion call, cool and insistent both at once. The lyric was disarmingly direct, but its bravado was funny, too: “I wanna be your mother and your sister, too/There ain’t no other/That can do the things that I’ll do to you.” There’s also a bit of conscious image-tweaking: In retrospect, lines like “They say I’m so shy, yeah/But with you I just go wild” sound like an embryonic version of guessing-game lyrics like “Am I black or white?/Am I straight or gay?” from later songs like “Controversy.” The follow-up, “Why You Wanna Treat Me So Bad,” didn’t do as well, missing the pop charts and going to no. 12 Soul, but its art-rockish keyboard furbelows, sneaky funk bass, soul falsetto, and steady rock beat hinted at fusions to come. So did “Bambi,” an outright heavy metal number in which Prince attempts to convert a lesbian to the joys of good old-fashioned heterosexual intercourse. It doesn’t seem to work, though, probably because he saved the “I’ll be your mother and your sister, too” line for someone else. Perhaps he should have told her, “I’m not a woman, I’m not a man/I am something that you’ll never understand,” but it would be five years before he thought of that one. Nevertheless, it’s heartening to realize that there were in fact women who the young Prince did not actually sleep with.

Prince, and particularly “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” made Prince a hot R&B star, but his disdain for press rigmarole—not to mention his habit of necking his keyboardist onstage (originally Gayle Chapman, then Lisa Coleman) while wearing underwear and heels—created a serious mystique about him that seemed better suited to a messianic rock idol than a teen R&B star. So did some of the new songs he was performing on tour, like “When You Were Mine,” which alluded to a threesome, and “Head,” which was not about a psychedelic supply shop; ditto the way he played these and his more familiar material, with a rocked-out edge that startled many fans anticipating a straightforward R&B
“When You Were Mine” and “Head” appeared on Dirty Mind, released in October 1980, and so did the rocked-out edge. In fact, “When You Were Mine” was essentially the new wave song to end all new wave songs, tethered to a synthesizer hook that, rumor has it, Blondie keyboardist Jimmy Destri took one listen to and had to be restrained from chopping off his own middle and index fingers with a kitchen knife. Prince sang it—like everything he did up until Controversy—in a falsetto so candied it took a few listens to realize exactly what the “he” of the song was doing there, “sleeping in between the two of us.” The rest of the album’s songs followed suit, except they were a lot less shifty about it. “Head,” in which the singer disrupts a wedding in progress in the rudest fashion imaginable, climaxes with Prince ejaculating upon the bride-to-be’s gown, was the most overt funk song on the album; “Sister,” which was not about a convent, was a rushed minute-and-a-half that sounded, from the frenzied vocal to the testy beat and occasional guitar twang, like a fantasy Prince was embarrassed to be having, but that was too compulsive to keep hidden away. It’s the one time on the album he sounds overwhelmed; the pause in the phrase “My sister was 32, lovely and—loose” snaps in the ear like a twig. Elsewhere on Dirty Mind, he pronounces himself against war and in favor of the back seat of daddy’s car, which is to say, he’s been studying his rock-hero texts and is putting himself in line.

Dirty Mind is the coming-out party for Prince’s shock-the-squares persona, and its fusion of new wave with funk and R&B made him the first black artist with a potentially huge white audience since Jimi Hendrix; it also helped set the stage, directly or indirectly, for much of the best black music of the Eighties, from Living Colour to Public Enemy to Rick James (who, to be fair, had already been heading in the same direction for a while but who didn’t crystallize it until 1981’s Street Songs). The same year’s Controversy pushed many of the same buttons, amplifying the politics implicit in Dirty Mind with direct references to Abscam and the Atlanta child murders. But its greatest song, “Do Me Baby,” was the kind of lush balladry he’d never quite perfected on the first two albums; here, he’s delicate, assured, and in a way every bit as audacious as he is on Dirty Mind, because for the first time he wields his vulnerability like a machete: The earlier ballads sound tentative in comparison. It’s easy to overlook Prince the singer, especially for critics and biographers more comfortable with discussing Prince the auteur or Prince the persona or Prince the has-been. But as brilliant an instrumental set piece as it is, the success of “Do Me Baby” lies entirely in the singing; to this day, it may still be his single greatest vocal performance.
1999 followed in 1982, and with all due respect to *Dirty Mind*, *Purple Rain*, *Parade*, and *Sign ‘O’ the Times*, it remains the most widely imitated record of Prince’s career. It’s one of the earliest, and most complete, meldings of electronic textures and dancefloor-oriented, blood-and-sweat funk, and it should come as no surprise that a childhood 1999 fan like myself would eventually dive deep into rave culture. Playing ancestor-worship can be a tired exercise, and God knows dance music hasn’t exactly stood still for the past 20 years. But 1999 is every bit as important as the handful of other late ’70s/early ’80s records—Parliament’s “Flash Light,” Kraftwerk’s *Trans-Europe Express*, Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love,” Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock,” Larry Levan’s remix of Instant Funk’s “I Got My Mind Made Up,” and New Order’s “Blue Monday”—that carved the path for the next 20 years of house and techno. As the most down to earth, immediately accessible, and song-savviest of those records, it’s hardly surprising that 1999 had (and has) the broadest appeal—three million copies sold within its first two years of release, four million total in the U.S.

Given how densely electronic and dance-oriented 1999 is, there’s something ironic about it having turned Prince into a rock star. That had less to do with the album, though, than with MTV. Looking at Prince’s early videos, it’s amazing how ungainly he is. The “I Wanna Be Your Lover” clip is straightforward enough—multiple medium shots and close-ups of Prince playing all the instruments and singing—and his 1981 appearance on NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* finds him and his band exuding a frenzied, bug-eyed energy. But the “Dirty Mind” clip—Prince and group performing onstage, wildly costumed, in front of a typically mixed audience of black funkateers and white new wavers—is jarring to look at today for anyone who grew up watching Prince execute some of the most intricate choreography in rock. His dancing is extremely sloppy; he flounces around, full of a nervous energy that’s appealing but also a little unsteady. This improves in the “Controversy” video, and by the “1999” video, with its stylish camera angles and priceless reaction shots (Prince’s mugging after the screen-whitening flashpots that accompany the line “We could all die any day” demonstrate him at his most openly goofy), he had shed some of that on-camera mania.

In the anthology *O.K. You Mugs: Writers on Movie Actors*, art critic Dave Hickey describes a television appearance by Robert Mitchum in which Mitchum explains the difference between stage and movie acting:

> When you’re acting in a film … everything will be moving. There will be this hurricane of pictures swirling around you. The projector will be rolling, the camera will be panning, the angle of the shots will be changing, and the distance of the shots will be changing, and all these things have
their own tempo, so you have to have a tempo, too. If you sit or stand or talk the way you do at home, you look silly on the screen, incoherent. On screen, you have to be purposive. You have to be moving or not moving. One or the other. So a lot of times, in a complicated scene, the best thing to do is stand absolutely still, not moving a muscle. This would look very strange if you did it at the grocery store, but it looks okay on screen because the camera and the shots are moving around you. Then, when you do move, even to pick up a teacup, you have to move at a speed. Everything you do has to have pace, and if you’re the lead in a picture, you want to have the pace, to set the pace, so all the other tempos accommodate themselves to yours.  

To watch the video for “Little Red Corvette” after seeing the earlier clips is to see Prince having learned Mitchum’s lesson. Shot on film, not videotape, “Little Red Corvette” finds Prince rock-still behind the microphone while his hands move in slow, dramatic arcs, at a speed. The music gears up, and Prince gears up with it; it backs down, and he backs down. A deaf person could figure out what he’s singing about. Of course, so could a chimpanzee; Prince is always singing about sex, more or less. But like the song itself, the video is more playful suggestion than horny-toad come-on, pocked with cheetah-quick flashes of aggression when the song calls for them. During the guitar solo, Prince executes a quick, breathtaking series of dance steps that seem to harness all the energy he expended so carelessly in the “Dirty Mind” video. Then he gets back behind the mic to sing the bridge. His eyes don’t dart around anymore; he’s in command. And he’s teasing us; there are glimpses of this in the “Controversy” and “1999” videos, but nothing as sustained as the 30 seconds in which his lips curl into a sneer, then a moue, then an outrageously lubricious leer before the final chorus revs back in. In that short space, Prince completely sells the image he’d spent five albums propagating—to the viewer, and just as importantly to himself. So of course he made the semi-autobiographical feature film Purple Rain next. After a demonstration of self-belief that overpowering, what else could he do?  

*Purple Rain* may be the ultimate good-bad rock movie, which is saying something, considering how good-bad the genre is as a whole. Our hero, the Kid—who sidesteps his real-life counterpart in at least one way, by continuing to live with his parents into adulthood—is the domineering-but-sensitive bandleader of the Revolution, whose two female members, Wendy and Lisa, want greater songwriting input. Their rivals on the Minneapolis scene are the Time. In reality, the Time were originally a puppet band Prince created in 1981 around ex-Champagne drummer Morris Day but, when he staffed their stage counterpart with several members of the bands Prince ran with as a teenager—keyboardists Monte Moir and Jimmy “Jam” Harris, bassist Terry Lewis, drummer Jellybean Johnson, and guitarist Jesse Johnson—they turned into a live unit every bit as fearsome as Prince’s own. The same cannot be said for Vanity 6,
whose self-titled 1982 debut might have been the blueprint of Canadian electroclash pseudovixen Peaches’ entire career if Peaches had an ounce of wit or funk in her. But before filming, Vanity—or Vanity’s drug habit, depending on whom you read—began believing her own name and split, to be replaced by the more docile Apollonia, whose recorded output can make you long for Peaches. Apollonia isn’t much better in the movie, either, but at least there we have the advantage of seeing what Prince saw in her, especially during the topless scene.

The plot stuff—the Kid and Morris rival each other for Apollonia’s affections, the Kid’s black father beats his white mother, the Kid himself starts demonstrating his father’s less salubrious traits—is pure soap opera. The music stuff is, too, but in the best possible way. “When Doves Cry” opens with Van Halen fuzz guitar, slides into the most distinctive Linn drum machine pattern Prince has devised yet, contains some of the boldest lyrics he’s ever written (from a psychological standpoint, not a sexual one, unless you want to read even more into “Maybe I’m just like my father, too bold/Maybe you’re just like my mother/She’s never satisfied” than is probably healthy), and has no bassline. It spent five weeks at no. 1 and was easily the biggest single of 1984, the best year for hit singles in America since the Sixties and possibly ever. And in a year of sales blockbusters like Bruce Springsteen’s Born in the U.S.A., the Jacksons’ Victory, Lionel Richie’s Can’t Slow Down, Cyndi Lauper’s She’s So Unusual, and Tina Turner’s Private Dancer, Purple Rain ruled the charts for half a year. Prince’s most overtly rock album aside from the 1996 quickie contract-ender Chaos & Disorder, Purple Rain sold over ten million copies and figures largest in the Prince mythology. To middle America, it’s the first and last word on the man; and considering that in nine songs the album manages to hit nearly every crucial button on his music and persona, middle America may have a point.

* * *

The path to Sign ‘O’ the Times proper begins with 1985’s Around the World in a Day, one of the more outlandish auto-backlash albums in pop history, but not one of the more effective. Prince had already made people wonder when he appeared at the Academy Awards wearing a black lace shroud; an altercation with an invasive photographer who jumped into a limousine with Prince the night he had declined to attend the “We Are the World” session garnered a minor press hubbub. (Prince later addressed the incident on “Hello,” the B-side of “Pop Life.”) And his former bodyguard, Chick Huntsberry, a giant former wrestler who had shadowed Prince whenever he attended a public event, had given an interview to the National Enquirer, in which Prince was portrayed as even more
of a freakish hermit than his records had indicated. That *Around the World in a Day* appeared at this time did Prince’s increasingly eccentric public image no favors. Now that he had what amounted to the world by the ear, Prince was deliberately moving away from what had made him popular in the first place.

*Around the World* is mostly straight-up psychedelic-flavored pop, from the cover (a mosaic-looking drawing of what we can safely assume is the Paisley Park of Prince’s fantasies, occupied by himself, the Revolution, and assorted hangers-on, with an oh-so-symbolic ladder occupying the middle) to the music. The rhythms of “Paisley Park,” “Pop Life,” and the totally irresistible “Raspberry Beret” hint at funk, but land on the one with a twinkle-toed bounce better suited to a lazy body-shuffle than getting on up like a sex machine. “Tambourine” is a strikingly minimal exception, but it’s also slapdash. Even when Prince concocted body-workouts out of spare parts, like “When Doves Cry” or 1999’s “D.M.S.R.,” the thickness of the drum machine sounds (usually the somewhat reedy Linn machine sent through effects pedals to change and broaden the tone) ricocheted around the speakers and the listener’s cranium enough to make up the difference, but on “Tambourine” the drums are live (and frantic), the bass pops, the tambourine shakes, and except for the vocal that’s just about all. Like much of *Around the World*, “Tambourine” points in intriguing new directions without actually taking us there. The psychedelic touches feel tentative; they lack the wigginess that the music of derangement calls for.

Yet there’s a throwaway quality to *Around the World* that’s rather appealing in theory if less than satisfying in fact. The album is split between big production numbers (“America,” “Temptation,” “The Ladder”) and fripperies like “Tambourine” and “Paisley Park,” which, for all the busyness of its arrangement, sounds like something Prince concocted in an hour after listening to *Magical Mystery Tour* for the first time. On *Around the World* and 1986’s *Parade*, the funk got sparer, sharper, more willful; the rock songs seemed thinner and more spacious, even when he was using more instruments. Compare the use of guitar distortion on *Purple Rain* with *Around the World* or *Parade*. “Let’s Go Crazy,” “When Doves Cry,” “Purple Rain”—the album’s three biggest hits—and “Computer Blue” all utilize it to notable effect. The other, keyboard-dominated songs have the same kind of blaring mid-range that a distorted electric guitar provides; listen to the fat-toned synths underpinning “The Beautiful Ones” and “Darling Nikki” and “I Would Die 4 U.” Then play *Around the World in a Day* or *Parade* and notice how little electric guitar there seems to be, on the surface or under it. The rhythm guitar of *Parade*’s “Kiss” is distorted, yes, but it’s thin, brittle, and metallic, closer to a Doppler-effect synth than to a traditional six-
string. The same album’s “Girls & Boys” contains a fuzzy single-string riff rather than thick, bunched chordal riffs, and its presence here doesn’t set the tone but instead acts as a Greek chorus to the vocal line. Eric Clapton’s demonstration, in Hail! Hail! Rock ’n Roll, of the difference between Chuck Berry’s playing with the blues and R&B players before him—Berry would double notes or truncate chords to thicken the riff’s tone as opposed to playing single-note runs—comes to mind here.

Synthesizers predominate 1999 and half of Purple Rain, but if an instrument can be said to be the “lead” on Around the World and Parade, it’s acoustic piano. This is in large part due to the heavy influence of Revolution keyboardist Lisa Coleman, who along with Wendy Melvoin was Prince’s major collaborator during the time. (“Around the World in a Day” was initially written by David Coleman, Lisa’s multi-instrumentalist brother, with Prince adding his own contributions later.) It also seems safe to guess that Prince—a born contrarian with the patience of a gnat—would likely have been interested in switching directions after something as successful as Purple Rain anyway. Wendy and Lisa’s interest in the Beatles and Joni Mitchell (Lisa’s Joni fandom seems to have redoubled Prince’s own—shortly after she joined the band, during the Dirty Mind era, he began thanking Mitchell in album credits, made “Joni” one of the headlines on the newspapers on the cover of Controversy, named the Time’s Ice Cream Castles after a line in her song, “Both Sides Now,” and invited her to the debut playback of Around the World in a Day), as well as road manager Alan Leeds and his brother Eric’s love of jazz, gave him some definite directions to move in.

The video for “Raspberry Beret” is one of the clearest examples of Prince’s nonchalance about potentially decimating his audience. Right before the song’s first verse begins, Prince has a lengthy coughing fit; Wendy Melvoin, smirking in the background, can barely contain her laughter. Prince had always brazenly fucked with public perception and expectation, from the hard left turn of Dirty Mind to the simple fact of being a black musician playing rock and roll during a period when the FM radio format AOR, or album-oriented radio, stood for, as many wags put it, “apartheid-oriented radio.” But his older public toying had a purpose: He was a relative unknown, and he wanted to make sure you remembered him. Now, with the exception of Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen, Prince was the biggest pop star on the planet, and he was willfully screwing with people—not tweaking them as he gave them what they essentially wanted, but outright challenging them. He was already a fairly unlikely star, going mega during a period where black performers made nicer than at any point
since before Chuck Berry. (The other biggest black stars of the period were Jackson and Lionel Richie, neither exactly paragons of bold sexuality.) Purple Rain had succeeded by softening the edges of his persona and bolstering the rock. Now he was … a hippie who bullied people with his bodyguards?

Some damage control was attempted. Prince did a pair of rare interviews, with Rolling Stone’s Neal Karlen, a Minneapolis native then on the magazine’s staff, and on-camera with MTV. Neither interview was particularly revealing, but they did help humanize him a bit. In both, Prince was adamant that he was a regular person who didn’t live in a walled-off castle, isolated from the world. At one point during the MTV interview, Prince was asked, “Speaking of movies, tell us as much as you can about Under the Cherry Moon.” His reply: “Ooooh.”

A whole lot of people responded in kind, though the tone of their “ooooh”s was a lot less polite.

Bad publicity was one thing, critical drubbing another. Around the World in a Day was criticized as uneven, but Under the Cherry Moon was the first unmitigated disaster of Prince’s career, savaged critically and doing just as badly at the box office. But if the movie showed Prince as, to put it kindly, overly self-interested (“An outrageous, unmitigated display of narcissism” as the San Jose Mercury News put it, was a more typical response), so did its soundtrack, Parade—it’s just that the album worked and the movie didn’t.

Parade will always mean more in Europe than in America. Here in the States, Parade was widely received as another frustratingly uneven collection that nevertheless showcased more sides of him than any other of his albums. This view has been amended over time; Parade is now considered an avant-garde funk masterpiece. (It was reported that D’Angelo and the Roots warmed up for the recording sessions of D’Angelo’s 2000 album Voodoo by playing Sly & the Family Stone’s 1971 masterpiece There’s a Riot Goin’ On and Parade straight through, in order.) In Europe, though, Parade announced Prince as a man of the world, getting his quirks across more fully, and with more nuance, than any of his previous albums, without flattening them out with Purple Rain’s stadium-ready “big sound.” It seesaws from minimalist funk and bare-bones ballads to thicker, almost orchestral numbers. Clare Fischer, the string arranger who had first worked with Prince on 1985’s The Family, an ill-fated side project meant to be a kind of white, new wave Time (“We’ve got to go after some of that Duran Duran money!” he is quoted as telling engineer David Rivkin in Alex Hahn’s 2003 bio, Possessed: The Rise and Fall of Prince), is all over Parade, and his ornate, cross-cutting style both sweetens and adds dissonance to the songs.

Here, Prince has a firm hold on that which slipped just away on Around the
“Mountains” is bright-eyed psych-pop grounded by a chunky acoustic guitar and lifted by a supple, Stax-y horn chart played by Eric Leeds and Matt Blistan (whom Prince renamed Atlanta Bliss). The grooves nudge away from Prince’s usual flat, declarative style, the most jagged of his career: “New Position” rocks the funkiest steel drum motif ever, “Girls & Boys” is so loopy it almost tips over, and “Kiss” is the greatest single Prince or damn near anyone else has ever made, freeze-dried funk that defrosts one mouth-watering drop at a time; listening to it is like finding a strip of sheet metal that’s actually a strawberry Fruit Roll-Up, and chowing down. The ballads are ethereal, fitting the French locale of Under the Cherry Moon, but they’re also pure Prince—“Do U Lie?” pirouettes on a coy, assured melody; “I Wonder U,” sung by Wendy, has flutes and strings that circle around each other, music-box-like, over deep-tuned percussion; and “Sometimes It Snows in April” is melodramatic bullshit that Prince’s subtle, arcing, totally committed vocal sells like ice to penguins.

But once “Kiss” went to No. 1 and Under the Cherry Moon died its death, Prince was in trouble. Parade didn’t sell very well (one million as opposed to Around the World’s three million as opposed to Purple Rain’s ten). He was also beginning to generate a lot of soundalikes (maybe another reason he switched gears so quickly, completely, and readily): Records like Ready for the World’s “Oh Sheila,” Teena Marie’s “Lovergirl,” Sly Fox’s “Let’s Go All the Way,” Jermaine Stewart’s highly ironic “We Don’t Have to Take Our Clothes Off,” and the Jets’ “Crush on You,” all more or less aped Prince. Then there was the fact that the biggest and best of these hits were coming from ex-Time members turned writer-producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. Jam and Lewis, along with former Time keyboardist Monte Moir, had accepted an assignment to produce the third album by Michael Jackson’s TV-star kid sister, Janet. The bristling, angular, synth-dominated funk of 1986’s Control soon dominated black pop the way Purple Rain had in 1984 and Thriller had the year before that, and it made Jam and Lewis the hottest producers in pop. It was sort of like Prince—only without the knottiness, the willful obscurity, the titanic ego that kept tripping over itself, and therefore a lot easier to sell.

He’d also managed to piss off a significant portion of the black audience. He’d long expended his more self-consciously “black” material on the Time, who were now finished. With the exception of bassist Mark Brown and Prince himself, the Revolution was white, and increasingly, the charge went, so was his music. And the most infamous moment of his second movie (besides its star’s death scene) was the moment he fled his character’s idea of a nightmare—a dark-skinned black woman. “Vernon Reid saw Cherry Moon in Brooklyn with a
theater full of gaga black teenage women,” Greg Tate wrote in the *Village Voice*, quoting Reid as saying of that scene, “It was like watching Prince tell them, ‘Y’all ain’t shit to me.’” Increasingly, the audience Prince spent half a career cultivating seemed to be saying the same thing to him.
Side Three: Play

The cover of *Sign ‘O’ the Times* depicts an ornately decorated stage. In the middle, on a raised platform atop a Cadillac’s front grille (with a Minnesota license plate; the right headlight has been removed, the left apparently painted over in yellow), there’s an enormously kitted-out drum set, obviously belonging to Sheila E., who’d replaced Bobby Z in Prince’s band when he broke up the Revolution, and who had already recorded two albums under Prince’s watch. The drums are vaguely peach-colored; if it weren’t for the fact that the colors of rest of the images come through perfectly you’d be forgiven for mistaking the cover photograph for having been run through a peach tint. A large pink plasma ball, the kind you see in old science fiction movies—you put your hand on it, colorful electricity patterns follow your touch—sits between the kit and a Hammond organ with bench; a white, horizontal neon lamp glows over the keyboard. Tall plants and flowers festoon the platform, and there’s a giant bouquet in the bottom left corner. In the bottom center is a bright peach guitar with an elongated, spermatozoa-looking fin that rests against his body when he plays, and a matching strap; it’s laying on the floor, the neck facing downward at a 45-degree angle, very phallic. A large guitar amplifier, about three-quarters of the way on the right, is decorated with what looks like a face carved in stone, surrounded by leaves—very Roman Catholic.

In the background, there’s a nighttime city-lightscape. The middle is solid peach, and it moves up and out from the middle of the drum kit like a cartoon lightning bolt, à la old Captain Marvel/Shazam! logo. Surrounding it are a crazy-quilt of signs—BAR GRILL, ARCADE, Rx DRUGS, HOTEL ROOM, SNOOKER, LOAN, GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS, POOL, ALL NITE, TANGO—each dotted by light bulbs and arranged on top of each other in arresting Art Decoish patterns. The signs themselves look like they’re from the Thirties and Forties; so are the curiously old-fashioned street lamps on either side of the tableaux, with their crooked, sloped-overhanged lights. It isn’t until you concentrate your eye on it that you realize that the signs are false, and that the entire background has been screened onto a curtain.

In the bottom right corner, we see Prince, cleanshaven for the first time in his career, his hair in roughly the same pompadour as on the cover of *Controversy*, only a bit shorter. He’s wearing a peach turtleneck under a collarless black leather jacket; big, round, gold framed eyeglasses (I vividly remember reading Jon Bream saying they were nonprescription in the *Strib*); a dangling earring;
and a stone stare. He’s looking straight ahead, i.e. not at the camera, and crucially, he is turned away from the visual bounty behind him. The implication seems to be that he’s had enough of the party lifestyle and is walking away from it all—that, unlike the hedonist who partied in the face of the impending apocalypse, he’s stepping away from the center of celebration in favor of let-us-assume something more mature. Which turned out to be both true and untrue.

* * *

*Sign ‘O’ the Times* underwent a busy production history. At one point or another, five different albums—two of them doubles, one a triple—were set for release containing part or all of the music that would eventually make its way onto the final *Sign*. According to Per Nilsen’s *Dancemusicsexromance: Prince: The First Decade* (London: Firefly, 1999), an exhaustive sessionography/professional history, the first, eleven-song version of *Dream Factory* was pieced together in April 1986. On June 3, he re-sequenced it into a 19-track double LP. After another furious round of recording, he remade the double set with 18 songs.

During a European tour on which his already rocky relationship with the Revolution deteriorated, Prince taped a soundcheck and concert at Paris’s 6,000-capacity Le Zenith with a mobile truck; this is the source of “It’s Gonna Be a Beautiful Night,” a white-hot big-band jam that would end up on the final *Sign* after being considerably overdubbed. He also recorded some miscellaneous cuts—including the drop-dead gorgeous “Crucial,” a ballad that, according to *Dancemusicsexromance*, was intended not for an album but for a stage musical Prince was working on, whose “plot” would later be recycled for the 1990 movie *Graffiti Bridge*, the soundtrack of which also made use of the hypnotic, dirgey “Joy in Repetition.” But according to the liner notes for the 1998 NPG Records compilation, *Crystal Ball*—which contained the first official release of “Crucial”—the song was going to be included on the album Prince was working on, and was pulled in favor of “Adore.” That makes sense: In many ways, “Crucial” sounds like a dress rehearsal for “Adore,” which was recorded two months later. It’s a terrific ballad, sort of “The Beautiful Ones” minus the anguish, a show-stopper on which Prince uses the growlier side of his falsetto, shrieking and belting more than crooning, and it ends with a lengthy, though not especially inspired, guitar solo. (No wonder it was meant for a stage musical.) (For simplicity’s sake, *Crystal Ball* will refer to the aborted 1987 album enumerated below and “the NPG *Crystal Ball*” to the 1998 compilation.)

On October 7, Prince fired most of the original Revolution—Wendy Melvoin,
Lisa Coleman, drummer Bobby Z. Rivkin, bassist Mark Brown—retaining keyboardist “Dr.” Matt Fink. By this point, Prince had expanded the band’s live lineup by appending several members of the Family (saxophonist Eric Leeds, dancers and backing vocalists Wally Safford, Greg Brooks, and ex-Time man Jerome Benton), Sheila E. guitarist Miko Weaver, and trumpeter Matt Blistan. These new members, save Jerome Benton, were added to his band, as were dancer/backing vocalist Cat Glover, Sheila E. bassist Levi Seacer, Jr. and keyboardist/vocalist Boni Boyer, and, on drums, Sheila E. herself.

The day after firing the Revolution, October 8, Prince went back into the studio by himself and recorded “Housequake.” Like “Shockadelica,” which he’d recorded three weeks earlier as a love tap aimed at former Time guitarist Jesse Johnson, who had recorded an album of the same title but neglected to write a song to go with it, “Housequake” utilized an odd, sped-up vocal that turned his voice into an androgynous twitter, less a woman than a neuter. (“Shockadelica” became the B-side of “If I Was Your Girlfriend” and was included on The Hits/The B-Sides box set.) Prince liked the effect so much that within a month he recorded more material like it and sequenced an eight-song album credited to and titled Camille. With the Family broken, the Time run out, and Vanity 6/Apollonia 6 gone the way of all old lingerie, Prince needed a side project; here was one without the bother of other folks’ egos getting in the way. He also recorded a jazz-funk fusion album with Sheila E. and Eric Leeds around this time, under the name Madhouse, titled 8.

Soon Prince decided to incorporate all the sides of his newly (musically) single self and put together a triple album that incorporated all but one of the Camille songs (“Feel U Up,” later the B-side of the 1989 single “Partyman” and included on The Hits/The B-Sides) as well as—you guessed it—even more new material. The new album was called Crystal Ball, and was front-loaded with more recent material—the kicky rock number “Play in the Sunshine,” the drop-dead gorgeous ballad “Adore,” the mournful gospel-rock “The Cross,” a downbeat electro-blues called “Sign ‘O’ the Times”—that pushed out many of the tracks that bore Wendy and Lisa’s direct prints. The new disc was sequenced on the last day of November, 1986.

Aside from the astonishing amount of first-rate material he had put together since wrapping Parade, Prince wanted Crystal Ball to be a three-disc set out of sheer cussed embattlement. After Under the Cherry Moon’s hard belly-flop, mass-media backlash, sliding album sales, and declining fortunes with music critics, he wanted to prove his mettle. Releasing Crystal Ball would certainly have been ballsy; no major rock artist had released a three-disc set of original
studio material since 1981, when the Clash put out *Sandanista!* Unfortunately for Prince’s ego, Warner Bros. refused the gamble—the album would have to be a double, or nothing. (Thank you, I’ll be here all week.)

Cutting seven of *Crystal Ball*’s tracks away—including the title track and “Dream Factory,” as well as four of the *Camille* numbers—Prince was left with fifteen songs. Soon there was a sixteenth. In Los Angeles on December 21, Prince recorded “U Got the Look,” which according to Alan Leeds’s *The Hits/The B-Sides* liner notes was a calculated exercise in commercial songwriting: “[The song] was conceived as a private test for a Prince companion whose taste was usually determined by how familiar a record was. Curious to see if she’d take to a commercial sounding song before it actually became well known, Prince labored for hours over the structure and tempo of ‘U Got the Look.’ Finally reworking the vocals as a duet with Sheena Easton, he produced as mainstream a record as any in his career. I suspect the friend still didn’t like it until the rest of the world showed its approval.”

Easton, with whom Prince was already acquainted, had walked into the studio while he was working on the song, and he invited her to sing. “U Got the Look” had originally been recorded at a slower tempo, but when Prince sped up the tape he got the tempo he desired, and it took his voice up with it, giving the song a semi-cartoony quality that enhanced its pop appeal. (See also Bruce Springsteen’s “Hungry Heart” and James Brown’s “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag.”) “Camille” is credited on the final album as co-lead vocalist, even though “U Got the Look” was never intended for the *Camille* album.

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Some of the outtakes from this period point in a direction that *Sign ‘O’ the Times* in its finished form hints at but doesn’t quite take. “Dream Factory” was the first song Prince recorded for the project, in December 1985, and like most of the material he was cutting around this time (including the finished *Parade*), the song was a collaboration with the Revolution. As with “Around the World in a Day,” “Dream Factory” seemed to signal a new direction for Prince’s next album. It opens with a minute of droning organ, backward female vocals that take on a quasi-Arabic cast, and a smattering of backward electric guitar that sounds a bit like a revving motorcycle playing the “Let’s Go Crazy” solo before moving into an electronically modified Prince, whose voice is sped up till it sounds like Donald Duck. The first half-minute of “Dream Factory” would later be recycled for the opening of the *Sign ‘O’ the Times* concert movie; the song
itself would eventually show up in remixed form on the NPG *Crystal Ball*.

Prince also began recording solo again at his home studio. The first song he cut was the murky, cryptic, entrancing “The Ballad of Dorothy Parker,” whose unusual sound was due to a blackout caused by a snowstorm: the power failure had disabled the tape machine, causing it to run at half-speed and robbing the song of its high end. Prince liked the results and left the song alone. Soon after, the Revolution gathered at his house and cut “Power Fantastic,” a jazzy ballad co-written with Wendy and Lisa (they wrote the music, Prince the lyrics) that has a heavy, muted-Ellington feel. (The brief solo-piano “Visions,” written and performed by Lisa, is similarly ruminative.) According to Alan Leeds’s liner notes to *The Hits/The B-Sides* box set, on which the song eventually appeared (minus Wendy and Lisa’s writing credit),

Lisa Coleman found herself playing the grand piano in the upstairs living room while the rest of the band huddled into the crowded basement studio. Connected only by mics and ear phones, the Revolution still managed to pull off the exquisite song in a single take—even the jazzy intro that Prince suggested just as the tape was ready to roll. “Power Fantastic” also serves to introduce the newest dimension in Prince’s music—the only instrument that he couldn’t play himself—horns.19

The most immediately striking thing about *Sign ‘O’ the Times* is the jazzy sensibility running through it. Prince’s father was a jazz musician, his mother a vocalist; he’d been a fan of chops-heavy jazz-fusion as well as rock and R&B growing up. But when Prince began recording for Warner Bros., he abjured the brass sections that dominated groups like Earth, Wind & Fire and Parliament-Funkadelic, opting instead for stacked synthesizer patterns and a spare, cold feel that markedly contrasted with lush, overarranged disco and the wild, thick underbrush of the era’s giant funk ensembles; Rickey Vincent, author of *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One*, dubbed it “naked funk.” Getting away from traditional R&B instrumentation is an underappreciated aspect of Prince’s crossover success; Prince is also said to have actively disliked the sound of horns early in his career.

Like most things with Prince—his musical direction, his name, the sense-to-words ratio of his public statements—this changed. His first significant dabbling with horns came on Sheila E.’s 1984 single, “The Glamorous Life,” where they seem like a nod to Sheila’s background in Latin jazz, where she, like her father Coke Escovedo, was a star percussionist, playing with Azteca and George Duke. But they don’t feel tacked on: The horn figures are as Princely as the bounding synth runs and quirked-out lyrics, and fit the busy, hooky music like a lace glove. Ditto the sax/trumpet lines on *Parade*’s “Mountains.” *Sign ‘O’ the Times*
is where he dives in completely, and he has continued using horns in his music: With the exception of Najee’s treacly saxophone, which helps torpedo 2001’s already torpid *The Rainbow Children*, Prince’s writing for horns is probably the most consistently intriguing feature of his post-Sign work, particularly on 1996’s *Emancipation* and 1992’s *I’m Gonna Change My Name to the Title of This Album*.

Eric Leeds and Matt Blistan appear on five *Sign* tracks: “Housequake,” “Slow Love,” “Hot Thing,” “It’s Gonna Be a Beautiful Night,” and “Adore.” 15 years after first listening to the album, I’d guessed the number was higher until I actually sat down and counted. But five songs are enough to color our perception of the rest of the album. Excepting “Adore,” where the trumpet and sax help thicken the overall sound without necessarily differentiating themselves from it, the *Sign* tracks with Leeds and Blistan feature horns as both foundation and icing: It’s impossible to imagine “Housequake” or “It’s Gonna Be a Beautiful Night” without their stuttering James Brown-redux riffs; “Hot Thing” takes off during Leeds’s hot-and-sleazy soloing, and “Slow Love” is practically a duet between Prince and the horn charts. The easy fluidity of *Sign*’s bulk might not necessarily by itself suggest jazz, but add those four songs and the album is colored differently, the same way that Moby’s *Play* works off the strength of its blues and gospel vocal samples even though they’re only used on about a third of the album.

Much of the discarded Revolution material from this period is even more overtly jazzy—see the horn charts that dot “Last Heart,” “Train,” and “Witness 4 the Prosecution.” But those songs are also more overtly rocky, overly funky, and overtly experimental, all at once. Simon Reynolds once wrote, “Prince doesn’t so much build bridges between categories as create music that exceeds each category simultaneously,” and that’s a lot of what’s happening here. Take “Crystal Ball,” which starts as a tightly wound funk jam in the “Kiss”/“New Position” mode, then gradually turns into something looser and more overtly P-Funky, only with Prince’s coyly coded apocalyptic/spiritual concerns in the place of George Clinton and co.’s alien or underwater fantasies. It also once again features Prince’s voice sped up to a semi-androgynous twitter, this time a little closer to his real voice than on “Dream Factory.” “Crystal Ball” is a multipartite, nine-and-a-half-minute epic, but it’s also endlessly playful, taking the bite-sized quirks of *Parade* and expanding them without losing their snap.

“And That Says What?” was a live jam session given a title and slated for inclusion on the first version of *Dream Factory*. “A Place in Heaven,” like “Starfish and Coffee” and “Pop Life,” has a sing-song melody and childlike,
open-hearted lyrics, only they’re sung entirely by Wendy. “All My Dreams” is similar, seven minutes of schoolyard-ready kiddie psychedelia (“Don’t ever lose your dreams,” Prince sings impassionedly at the end) that had originally been meant to be the final track on Parade. According to the liner notes of the NPG Crystal Ball, “Movie Star” was a Time demo—and it sounds like one, with Prince in total Morris Day mode both vocally and lyrically (“Everybody at the club freaked/When I stepped out my limousine/They said, ‘Ooh, it’s good to see you’/I said, ‘It’s good to be seen, you know what I mean?’”), complete with spoken-word asides between verses: “Man, I hate making movies, but I like that money.” (Wishful thinking ahoy!) These are the kind of songs Prince would have given to other artists or saved for side projects earlier and later on; it’s a measure of how open the give-and-take between Prince and band was at this point—how willing he was to flux his own identity with others’—that he’d even have considered putting them out on his own album.

“Strange Relationship” is another case in point. Prince first tried the song in 1982; in 1985, he gave that song and another, “Teacher, Teacher,” to Wendy and Lisa to revamp. “Strange Relationship” already had a bluesy feel, and in Wendy and Lisa’s hands it took on a downcast, heavily psychedelic tinge with overdubs of wooden flute, hand-drums, and sitar; the droning intro led into a darkly etched, hard-downbeat groove; 40 seconds in, the main riff enters, played on high-pitched synthesizer and echoed by a squelching bass that sounds like it’s being dragged through the mud. The melody is as bright and pop as any Prince had written, but his vocal, sung in his lower reaches (even his falsetto registers as a growl), sounds mournful. That’s appropriate, since the lyrics are about how the singer willfully fucks up his relationship with passive-aggressive behavior. As the song trails off, with Prince muttering “What’s this strange relationship,” the hand-drums and sitar regain their earlier prominence; the song conveys a muddled confusion, an interior dialogue that’s as desolate as the lyric.

* * *

That’s not how the song appears on Sign ‘O’ the Times, though. The final version of “Strange Relationship” tones down Wendy and Lisa’s contributions considerably, refocusing the track on melody and rhythm rather than harmonic color. The results have an appealing sonic crunch—the chomping bassline sounds like Pac Man eating one on-the-beat pellet after the other, or a slow-and-low record scratch. Minus the aural clutter, Prince gets an amazing amount of propulsion from rudimentary rhythms; except for the occasional cymbal splashes and hand-drums, the beat basically doesn’t get modified much here; everything
stays in lockstep.

The biggest change to “Strange Relationship” is the vocal, which is completely different from the Dream Factory version—the lead is slightly tweaked, somewhere between Prince’s normal voice and Camille’s (the original vocal tracks remain in the background). There’s a slight lyrical difference, too, with the still-unrepentant “I’ll take the blame, but I’m only human/I didn’t like the way u were so I had 2 make u mine” changed to the far more remorseful “I’ll take all the blame, yo, baby, I’m sorry.” That switch sums up the difference between the vocals’ emotional import as well. On the earlier “Strange Relationship,” Prince sounded like he was in the midst of his cruel actions; now he sounds like he’s stepped back from them, is slightly horrified at the monster he’s become, and his determination to find his way out of it has given him a spiritual lift—or a sense of panic, depending on how you hear it. Earlier, the line, “Honey if you let me, I just might do something rash,” registered as a blunt statement of fact; now, it comes across with a mixture of schoolmarm tut-tutting that he’d think such a thing and pure, upbeat performance.

The vocal’s incongruous brashness is what makes it work, by complicating the song’s emotional tone. Paradoxically, he makes the song more serious by making it more pop. The singer—the song’s narrator—is a creep who wants to hurt you out of nothing but sheer boredom and habit, and worse, he knows you’ll let him get away with it until he finally dumps you. That in itself doesn’t change. What does change is that the new vocal makes this creep attractive and charismatic; you can understand why someone might be drawn to this guy, despite his bad habits, because the melody is so bright and Prince’s singing is so emotionally identifiable. He’s a fuckup who wants to do better—anyone can relate to that. The doo-woppish scatting near the fade redoubles this effect—a happy-go-lucky bit of vocalese stuck at the end of a searching lyric, signaling that things are going to get better. Except the lyric signals the exact opposite—it never resolves itself, just keeps on going in circles, the cycle of abuse continuing nonchalantly along. Prince scrunches up his voice for a final “I think you and I got a”—pause, reverts to a mannered (pseudo-English accented) speaking voice—“strange relationship”—then dips into the same low tenor he’d mostly sung the song with the first time around—“What’s this strange relationship?” The song’s ultimate kick comes not from some kind of denouement but from the fact that its singer ends up just throwing his hands in the air. He’s sung his sad song unsadly, and it hasn’t done him a damn bit of good.

A lot of critics, then and now, saw Sign ‘O’ the Times as Prince’s most serious album, and it is, but what a lot of them seem to have meant was that the title cut
was a semi-protest song. “Strange Relationship” is far closer to the nut of Sign’s maturity: It deals with relationships—sexual and otherwise—with more nuance than anything Prince had done before, and it does so with the canniest music he’d ever devise. Sign is certainly kaleidoscopic, moving from minimalist funk to big-band ballads to raw, gut-level rock to whatever the hell “The Ballad of Dorothy Parker” is. But it’s emotionally prismatic as well: even the fuck-machine stuff is shaded deeper than his previous work. Not so much something like the “I could read you poetry” line from “Hot Thing,” either—more like the way his vocal in that song moves from cocksure monotone strut to overwhelmed craving. Check the way he sings the opening verse against the way he sings the third: “Maybe you should give your folks a call/Hot thing—tell them you’re going 2 the Crystal Ball/Hot thing—tell them you’re coming home late/If you’re coming home at all/Hot thing—tell them u found a brand new baby doll.” In that space, he moves from impatiently beseeching her to melting with desire. He’s working every conceivable angle, partly out of his hustler’s instinct, partly because of the old sexual-spiritual twinhood he’s spent so much of his career outlining and falling into and back upon.

“Hot Thing” is hardly new territory for Prince, which may be one reason it’s so good: He knows the terrain so well he can work new changes on it at will. One of the things that lends Sign ‘O’ the Times its coherence is its recurrent thematic pairings, of which “Hot Thing” and “It” is a prime example. Both are versions of Prince as funky erotomaniac, an obsessive cocksman exercising his libido the way a Berklee School of Music grad practices her scales. On the surface, neither song seems all that remarkable. “Hey, everybody,” they proclaim, “I sing about sex all the time, quite often in the exact way I’m about to right now. Two, three, four …” “It” certainly begins predictably, with stiff funk drums and an even stiffer eight-note bassline straight out of the 1999 songbook.

But in truth, having lived through Diamonds & Pearls and Rave Un2 the Joy Fantastic, not only do we know what Prince listlessly copying himself is really like, but “It” is more like a generic exercise that sums up and stands in for the genre. (Rough rock-geek equivalent: the Rolling Stones’ “Monkey Man,” from 1969’s Let It Bleed.) There’s more juice in “It” than you’d expect at first, and again, that’s because of the singing. On paper, the lyric is perfectly blunt—“With you, I swear, I’m a maniac, all right/You see it ain’t no joke, just a natural fact-uh, all right”—but there’s a sweetly hesitant edge to Prince’s singing that’s enormously appealing. He sounds like he’s at the end of his tether, confessing his sins, real and perceived, to his lover, coming clean, a kind of Sexaholics Anonymous meeting set to a machine beat; he gets caught up in the moment and
falls into it, the drama accentuated by a brief, piercing guitar solo. And the song’s rising-tide arrangement slowly but steadily piles on parts—sampled orchestral “hits” from the Fairlight sampler, deadpan background vocals droning “I could be guilty for my honesty” with robotic coldness before taunting “Think about it all the tiiiiime” gong splashes—while Prince in the foreground gives into his libido, with the odd effect being that instead of getting it up he slowly recedes in the face of his sex-addict dilemma. His singing gets softer, feyer, finally dropping to a whisper, lost in a prison of his own making; by the end, he’s tunneled so deep into his neuroses (and groove) that he comes out the other side, quietly. It’s like James Brown’s old cape-and-suitcase routine, except Prince never returns to the stage.

“Hot Thing,” on the other hand, is like “It” taken past the point of no return. “It” cops to the singer’s sexual obsession, and even indulges it a little (vocally, I mean—the groove embodies it). What “Hot Thing” does is accept that obsession as a precondition of existence, and work from there. Although I thought differently at first, “Hot Thing” ’s placement three songs after “It” is a programming masterstroke: The two very different songs separating them give Prince-the-sex-machine time to marinate in his own juices. (A more minor but equally crucial programming stroke is putting “Hot Thing” after “Slow Love,” for reasons obvious from the titles.)

Marinate he does, and even better, he takes the sax player with him. Nothing Eric Leeds plays on “Hot Thing” breaks any ground—you wouldn’t even get any argument out of me for saying all he does is recapitulate every honking R&B sax cliché in the book. What matters is how much, and how evidently, he savors those clichés, the thoroughness with which he utilizes them. Contrast this with the album’s contemporaries. R&B’s approach to saxophone in the mid-Eighties can generally be summed up in a series of terrifying two-word combinations: David Sanborn, Kenny G, quiet storm. I’m about to praise the lyrics of “Adore,” so you’d better believe I have a high threshold for this type of shit. But even the lover in me has his limits. Then there is what we shall call beer-commercial saxophone, or BCS, which dominated the decade’s rock/pop starting from Foreigner’s “Urgent” (1981) on, and consisted of either Staxish “punch” (Peter Gabriel’s “Sledgehammer,” Steve Winwood’s “Roll with It”) or “Me and Mrs. Jones”-style noodling (Simply Red’s “Holding Back the Years”). BCS was yet more Sixties nostalgia, for, you know, a time when real music reigned supreme. Which has never explained why everything else on these records sounds canned and big-drummy just like every other Eighties record, but hey.

Leeds’s sax model is Maceo Parker, just as, throughout Sign ‘O’ the Times,
more than on any Prince album before it, the purple guy’s model is Parker’s old paymaster, James Brown. He wasn’t alone. If 1987 reached me, as a suburban Midwestern teenager, as a Sixties-redux kind of year, it reached urban America —particularly black New York—the same way, only different, because hip-hop was spearheading a full-blown J.B. revival. In 1986, hip-hop was coming out of its drum machine era, and producers were starting to rely heavily upon digital samples of pre-recorded funk nuggets. Take Eric B. & Rakim’s debut single, “Eric B. Is President,” on which producer Marley Marl utilized snippets of Fonda Rae’s “Over Like a Fat Rat,” Mountain’s “Long Red,” the Mohawks’ “Champ,” and James Brown’s “Funky President” to construct the track. Overnight, every rap producer who wanted to make a hot record ran to their crates and began cutting up beats. And nobody’s beats, then or now, were funkier than James Brown’s.

Brown’s label, Polydor, had already begun its massive (and still in progress) J.B. reissue series with some period compilations, but they caught the wave and, with the 1986 compilation In the Jungle Groove, rode it. The bulk of Jungle Groove—eight tracks averaging eight minutes apiece, spread over two pieces of thick-grooved vinyl—was enticement enough for DJs, but the real bait was “Funky Drummer (Bonus Beat Reprise),” three cut-up minutes of that classic’s infernally elastic percussion breakdown that essentially did the sampling for you. “Funky Drummer” would have been well on its way to being a sampling cottage industry even without the Jungle Groove bonus, but it certainly didn’t hurt: at press time, www.the-breaks.com lists 183 songs that sample it.

James Brown, of course, had a profound impact on the young Prince, from the show he saw (and briefly participated in) at age 10 forward; he would later mention in several interviews bicycling to Minneapolis record shops as a kid every week to pick up new James Brown singles. Prince’s 1986 “Hit & Run” shows—sporadic, last-minute-announcement concerts in a handful of American cities—and the subsequent Parade tour in Europe and Japan were heavily modeled on Brown’s revue-style shows. And he’s long thrown Brown covers into his live concerts, frequently jamming on “Mother Popcorn” and “Cold Sweat” during after-show club gigs and, during the Sign ‘O’ the Times tour, incorporating “Cold Sweat” into “It’s Gonna Be a Beautiful Night.”

So it makes sense that “Housequake” is, in content, the most direct J.B. homage Prince had recorded to that point (five years later, “Sexy MF” would sound even more Brownian). But “Housequake” is a meta-James Brown record in a different way from, say, Public Enemy’s “Rebel without a Pause” or Eric B. & Rakim’s “I Know You Got Soul” or Rob Base & DJ E-Z Rock’s “It Takes
Two.” Hip-hop’s take on Brown was micro-as-macro. Those records find the ultimate James Brown grooves by taking the most explosive portions of already existing ones and isolating and magnifying them till they shatter the windows. What Prince does is macro-as-micro, filling in the basic casing of a James Brown song—all-subsuming funk beat, chicken-scratch guitar, guttural utterances about dance crazes, call-and-response of simple phrases with his backup singers, post-bop horns rubbing against and pushing the groove, organ rumble—with stuff that’s intrinsically his: the B-3 is replaced by an ever-present uncanny unsteady synthtone in the background that undulates like a rock about to fall off a cliff, the warmth is replaced by brittle, electronic atmosphere, the squeals are done by a neuter eunuch (this is one of the Camille songs), the backing vocals overdubbed and slowed down into near-parodies of R&B masculinity. Even the titular dance craze is artificial. (Brown sang about real dance crazes like the Mashed Potato and the Popcorn, damn it.) In a way, Prince’s version of J.B. was far more up-to-date than the rappers’; the problem is that theirs was the way of the future, and Prince’s methods, in hindsight, are pretty time-bound.

This hardly matters when “Housequake” is playing, though. One of Prince’s underrated traits is how funny he is, a perception he hasn’t helped by suing fans who put up websites about him and generally being a humorless prick in other areas. But as I began to prepare this book, I put Sign ‘O’ the Times on for the first time in what had probably been two or three years and was surprised to find myself laughing out loud, especially during “Housequake”—usually at specific lines (his cries of “Bullshit,” and the “Shocka-locka-boom!” “What was that?” “Aftershock” exchange between lead and background vocal), but moreover at how audaciously energetic it was. For instance, there’s a saxophone squiggle about three-quarters of the way through the song (following “And the saxophone is the fault, check it out”). Clearly, the shout-out and responsive lines are a nod to Maceo Parker’s solos on James Brown’s records, though here the odd, almost Eastern tonality is more like a (probably accidental) tribute to Robert McCollough’s squawking blurs on 1970’s “Super Bad.” (“‘Trane, brother!” J.B. shouted in encouragement, but, as Robert Christgau pointed out, McCollough’s gusts were closer to Albert Ayler.) The squiggle is only a couple of bars long, but it’s long enough to function as both homage and parody. So is the song’s intro and outro, a record scratch with Prince shouting, “Shut up, already! Damn!” The first time it’s an announcement that the singer and band are here (a nice touch after the busy, bustling “Play in the Sunshine,” which winds down into an odd little dialogue that sounds like it wandered in from the movie constantly playing
in Prince’s head). The second time, it’s Prince-as-listener, sounding older and haggard, yelling at the neighbor’s kids to cut the racket out—he’s trying to get some sleep. (For a nice recent analogue to this, see the ending of Sean Paul’s “Get Busy” video.)

Is Prince yelling at the kids with their that’s-not-music-that’s-noise rap? You could certainly suspect so. “Housequake” ’s singer could just as easily be heard as a piss-take of a young MC (though not, haha, Young MC, who hadn’t started yet) or a twittery-voiced J.B. clone. And Prince was a vocal critic of hip-hop: “Dead on It,” from *The Black Album*, set for release in late 1987 and shelved until 1994, was a rather dim-witted rap parody in which Prince claims that “The only good rapper is one that’s dead—on it” (rimshot!) and that “The rapper’s problem usually stems from being tone deaf/Pack the house then try 2 sing, there won’t be no one left,” which misstates—and misses—the point completely. (Phrasing like “the rapper” doesn’t help Professor Prince’s case, either. And what’s this “usually”? What about the rest of the time?)

Apparently, Prince’s attitude didn’t extend to his own music—shockah! “It’s Gonna Be a Beautiful Night” counts among its many parts a rap by Sheila E.—specifically, she recites Edward Lear’s poem “The Table and the Chair,” in hip-hoppy cadence. Shelia rapped it over the phone while on tour in Tennessee, across the Mississippi River from Minnesota, which is why the album credits her vocal as “Transmississippi Rap.” But that’s probably unfair: “Beautiful Night” is Prince’s bravura come-one-come-all aural party, and Sheila E.’s rap is less a sop to hip-hop than another feather in the song’s boa.

It’s also crucial that “Beautiful Night” was recorded live, or is at least presented as such, because it takes the outreach effect of the album as a whole all the way to the world outside Paisley Park. This is Prince as showman to an audience of many, not just an audience of one (his engineer, the lucky lucky lady currently quivering in anticipation in his canopy-framed bed, the mirror). It’s also Prince-as-bandleader, a wondrous thing in itself. After all those demo tracks, there’s something reassuring about a bounty of jazz horns, a *Wizard of Oz* chant, a spinning-on-one-leg bass hook, and big-band brio, particularly the interplay at the end—the piano during the last three minutes is one of the great undersung moments in the Prince catalogue. The razzmatazz ending amounts to icing on icing.

“Beautiful Night” ’s twin on the album is “Play in the Sunshine.” “Sunshine” is closer than any other track here to sounding like *Sign ‘O’ the Times* in miniature. It’s a snappy party rocker that opens with random street noises: a convenient bridge-building tactic, giving songs using it a sense of “life”—you
know, as lived outside the Princely Kingdom. “Turn all the lights up to ten,” he sings over the stiffest “rock” syndrums imaginable; they hem the piece in a bit, which isn’t to say it would have been all that unfettered without. Who else could make a song this busy essentially a throwaway? The ideas are pretty good ones: the title is appropriate because he’s being extremely playful here, from the lyrics ("We’re gonna love all r enemies/Till the gorilla falls off the wall”—ho-kay) to the little curlicuing synth doodle that comes right after “We’re gonna teach him that love will make him tall/So tall” (that would be the gorilla that falls off the wall). There are lots of art-rock flourishes throughout (try the breakdown before and during the “Drummer, drummer, drummer” chant, not to mention the breakdown following the guitar solo … they festoon the whole thing, all the way to the end of the song). Only instead of a Rick Wakeman-esque wankathon, it’s a playground for Prince. If he ever comes around to admitting that the lyrics make absolutely no sense, he’ll make himself seem even more like a normal human being than the Oprah interview, the acoustic tour, and the Ani DiFranco backing-vocal guest appearance combined.

Critic Rob Sheffield’s theory is that Sign ‘O’ the Times and Bob Dylan’s Blonde on Blonde are secretly the same album. The parallels are striking: both were recorded by Minnesota musicians at the height of their creativity and popularity, both are double albums that define their creators’ golden era, both were the final albums each made before heading off into the wilderness in one way or another (motorcycle accident for Dylan, Lovesexy and beyond for Prince). What Sheffield was primarily referring to, though, is the fact that each album leads off with its two worst songs, and that each of the leadoff cuts were hits that didn’t really deserve to be as big as they were. No Eighties Prince single is more overrated than “Sign ‘O’ the Times.” According to the Acclaimed Music website, “Sign” is his third-most highly celebrated single after “When Doves Cry” and “Little Red Corvette,” and its very-Sixties significance undoubtedly played a factor. That’s one reason the album cover could seem charged when you first saw it—the song, the album’s first single, was widely praised for the way it turned its back on Prince’s usual, um, earthy concerns in favor of something that, on the surface, was a little more substantial.

“Sign ‘O’ the Times” is certainly heartfelt. But its solemnity doesn’t fit the rather simple-minded lyric: “Is it silly, no/When a rocket ship explodes/And everybody still wants 2 fly?” is dumb enough—adding “Some say a man ain’t happy unless a man truly dies” on top of it is embarrassing. The song’s placement as the album’s primary statement was something of an accident, though: “Sign” was originally going to end side five of Crystal Ball, another
dimension in his mega-masterpiece but hardly its center. After Warner Bros.
passed on the three-disc package, Prince cut away both “Dream Factory” and
“Crystal Ball”—rather symbolically, since they had both been central to his
concepts for the works-in-progress—and reworked the collection to two albums
that he felt could no longer carry the burden of their previous title tracks. With
its taut beat and low-slung bassline, “Sign” on Crystal Ball might have been the
kind of deep cut that hardcore fans treasure and adventurous radio programmers
play. Instead, it became the title track and first single off the album, released
February 18, 1987, and reaching no. 3 that spring.

“Sign ‘O’ the Times” is a ruminative, angry, hopeless-cum-hopeful talking
blues with cracking drum programming and an insta-catchy low-slung bass riff,
a kind of streamlined version of Sly & the Family Stone’s “Thank You
(Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin).” What was surprising about “Sign” wasn’t its
social commentary—Prince had been doing that since Dirty Mind’s “Partyup.” It
was the tone. This time it actually sounds like it bothers him—like maybe it
actually means more to live to see the mundane afternoons following the party
than to simply expire at its end.

It’s not just the hedonist in Prince who takes five in “Sign”—it’s the go-getter
whose most overtly political song post-1999 had been Around the World in a
Day’s “America,” a “straightforwardly patriotic” (his words) song about the land
of opportunity, et. al., a move certainly in step with his vocal backing of Reagan
early in the decade. (See also 1999’s “Free,” a more veiled version of the same
sentiment: “Be glad that u r free/There’s many a man who’s not/Be glad 4 what u
have and what u got.”) In contrast, “Sign ‘O’ the Times” deals with the other
side of that dream: AIDS, crack, heroin, the Space Shuttle disaster. Almost
everything else on Sign ‘O’ the Times mocks the idea that he’d renounced
hedonism with this one song, but even with that groove, there’s not much fun to
be had here, an effect redoubled on the album by the drum-tattoo fusillade that
drives it home. Following a hard blues guitar solo, the drums evoke machine-
gunfire, and it doesn’t sound like an accident.

What’s most effective about “Sign ‘O’ the Times” is that for all the cold-hard-
facts-of-life aspect of its lyrics, it doesn’t seem to be striving for nobility nearly
as ostentatiously as, say, U2 were during the same time. (1987 was the year of
The Joshua Tree, that fraught-with-significance monument.) Or just gander at
“Sign ‘O’ the Times’” runner-up in the Pazz & Jop Singles Poll: Suzanne Vega’s
“Luka,” an impressionistically sketched portrait of child abuse. While the non-
folkie in me thinks it’s probably a little too delicate for its own good, the song
(and record) still pulls it off better than it has any right to.
1987 was, in pop terms, an excellent year to be pissed off at the Man. Even R.E.M.—chiming, bucolic-dream-state, fantasia-dazed R.E.M.—released *Document*, the most strident (and directly political) record they’d ever made. But no one communicated it better than Prince’s new nemesis, rap. Records like Public Enemy’s “Rebel without a Pause” and “Bring the Noise”; Boogie Down Productions’ *Criminal Minded*; Kool G Rap & DJ Polo’s “Rikers Island”; MC Lyte’s “I Cram to Understand U (Sam)”; Schoolly D’s “Saturday Night”; N.W.A’s “Dope Man”; and Eazy-E’s “Boyz-N-the Hood” weren’t necessarily “protest records,” but they transmitted hard truths that made “Sign ‘O’ the Times” sound like “Starfish and Coffee.” They also projected images that would eventually make mincemeat of Prince’s androgynous-and-proud public figure. For instance, the widespread rumor was that the “Sign ‘O’ the Times” 12-inch cover—dancer Cat Glover in a peach-colored, off-the-shoulder dress whose skirt is cut diagonally, her face obscured by an enormous apparently cardboard heart—was in fact Prince in drag. “He looked good,” the *Village Voice*’s Greg Tate reported a female friend who fell for the rumor telling him. “The legs were working, the tummy was tight. I wish my body looked that good.”

Post-hip-hop’s aesthetic takeover, it’s harder to imagine something like that flying in R&B circles.

Tate also heard “Housequake” as a swipe at Chicago house, then rising to subcultural prominence, and while I’ll stand by my reading of it as neo-J.B., I can see his point. Because if Prince’s place as black pop’s premier sonic architect would be swamped in the late Eighties by Marley Marl et. al., his position as pop’s most radical dance maestro would be in just-as-serious trouble by the decade’s end as well, from both Chicago and Detroit. 1987 was the year that “Acid Tracks,” a 12-inch by a trio of Chi-town DJs calling themselves Phuture, introduced the sound of the Roland TB-303 bassline synthesizer, an instrument that sounded dinky … until you raised the volume and started playing with the knobs, at which point it could be utilized for squelching, wobbly riffs capable of supreme head-fucking power. The “acid” sound would help revolutionize dance music *qua* dance music, which moved further away from the song and closer to grooves-for-their-own-sake. So would Detroit techno records like “Strings of Life,” a plangent, heart-in-mouth instrumental created by a sharp-edged young producer named Derrick May and credited to Rythim Is Rythim. Released in 1987 to little fanfare, two years later “Strings” would be a nascent rave anthem in England, its devilishly patterned hi-hats, salsa-ish piano, and knife’s-edge string samples divining the chemical rush of thousands of Ecstasy-high dancers in fields and illegal warehouse parties. Prince certainly kept tabs on this stuff:
The rap from J.M. Silk’s 1987 house hit “Music Is the Key” shows up whole cloth in *The Black Album*’s “Cindy C,” and as an inveterate clubgoer he’d undoubtedly heard tracks like that one and Steve “Silk” Hurley’s “Jack Your Body,” a British No. 1 in early 1987, not to mention sample-collage records that split the difference between hip-hop production and house functionality, like M/A/R/R/S’s “Pump Up the Volume” (No. 1 in England and a surprising Top 5 hit in America) and Bomb the Bass’s “Beat Dis.” The house and techno that would soon overshadow Prince aesthetically if not commercially was made—of course—by some of his biggest fans. Early Chicago house tracks like Jesse Saunders’s “On and On 122” and Frankie Knuckles and Jamie Principle’s “Baby Wants to Ride” (which contains a shout-out to the Purple Guy) were basically the work of gay, black Midwesterners who wanted to be Prince real bad, and didn’t let the cheapness of their equipment—and the skimpy budgets of the bulk of early Chicago house can shame even the most lo-fi rock—stand in their way. As for Detroit, Prince was probably bigger there than anywhere else in the U.S. —in a city where black folks routinely got down to Devo, the B-52’s, and Kraftwerk, as well as P-Funk and Rick James, he might as well have been a native son.

* * *

The “twin” of “Sign ‘O’ the Times” on the album is “The Cross,” which opens side four. Both possess the same kind of solemn gravity, from lyric to vocal to arrangement; both use similar imagery, invoking ghettos, poverty, and desolation. On “Sign,” hope glints through at the end, with Prince rushing to “fall in love, get married, have a baby,” “before it’s too late.” On “The Cross,” hope glints through at the end, the very end, Judgment Day: “Black day, stormy night/No love, no hope in sight/Don’t cry, he is coming/Don’t die, without knowing/The cross.” It’s a gospel song sung and played like a rock song, and it’s one of the most intensely committed things Prince has ever recorded. It also explodes, or rather implodes, in a way “Sign” doesn’t. The rhythm and production are flat on purpose: He’s pushing our face in those ghettos, and the grime makes the flowers to the right all the more vivid even if he’s still showing everything in greyscale. The sitar is an unusual and rather apt touch; he’s going for psychedelia here (as with “Strange Relationship”) but with a bluesy angularity, a way to fill out the sound-picture without resorting to synths. He means it, and he wants to stay as “real” sonically as possible—all the better for the ethereal harmonies that pop up near the end to sound like angels rising out of the concrete.
The most common description of “The Cross” is “the Staple Singers fronting the Velvet Underground.” Who knows how much Prince listened to the Velvets: maybe more than I’d suspect, maybe never at all. It doesn’t matter, because if you replace Pops Staple’s voice with Otis Redding’s that description is dead on. It’s not just the you-are-there production; it’s the grimly determined, monolithically beat-wise way Prince-as-rhythm-section goes at it, at least until he starts pinging on the ride bell near the end (Velvets drummer Maureen Tucker famously never played a full kit, and it’s impossible to imagine her doing much with one anyway) and throwing in a military snare roll that echoes the drum machine barrage at the end of “Sign.” And, especially, it’s the way he plays guitar.

Prince is proficient on many instruments, and he may be the most inventive drum programmer ever, but in pure instrumental terms he’s best remembered as a guitarist, partly because Purple Rain posited him as a classic guitar hero, partly because some of his greatest moments have come while playing it. Since you asked, my favorite guitar moment in the Prince catalogue is his widely bootlegged cover of the Temptations’ “Just My Imagination,” recorded August 18, 1988, at an Amsterdam club date following a show on the Lovesexy tour. It opens with icy block synth chords that evoke Joy Division’s “Atmosphere”; when Prince enters in his frailest falsetto, it’s like hearing two kinds of soul music at once. The drums tap out a rhythm quietly in the background; the synth dances distractedly under him as Prince twists the lines into a curl. He sings a verse, a chorus, another verse, another chorus; the song is adrift, hovering in midair. Then Prince’s guitar enters, slightly echoed and even more plaintive than the vocal, and before you can register what happens the drums kick in like a torpedo nailing a sailboat, and for the next three minutes he harnesses all his techniques, utilizes all his tricks, indulges all his mannerisms. He also sounds like he’s ripping his fucking guts out.

“The Cross” is just as gutty, except there’s none of the bravado of the 8.18.88 “Imagination”—the playing is almost anti-technique, the scrappiest rhythm playing of his career. By contrast, “I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man” is Sign’s most straightforwardly guitar-heroic song, only here the heroism is more sculpted, woven into the fabric of the composition instead of disrupting it completely. What makes the “Just My Imagination” solo so delicious is the way it steps in and enacts the heartbreak of the lyric, aggressive where the vocal is passive; what’s great about the “I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man” solo is its anthemic rah-rah-ness, which matches the song’s cheerleader melody and chorus. Like in “Strange Relationship,” he gets mileage out of the upbeat
music/downcast lyrics incongruity. Here he’s someone who can help the woman he’s singing to shoulder the load of “A baby, and another one on the way.” She’s lost her man—“She couldn’t stop crying ‘cause she knew he was gone to stay”—and wants a new one in no uncertain terms: “I asked her if she wanted 2 dance/And she said that all she wanted was a good man/And wanted 2 know if I thought I was qualified.” The chorus is his rebuff: “We wouldn’t be satisfied with a one night stand/And I could never take the place of your man.”

“No, but for the last minute he takes the place of Duane Allman,” Greil Marcus wrote. He was talking about the single version, where the solo is all showpiece, ecstatically moving in and out of the rhythm and finally touching ground again as the riff reemerges. On the album, though, the solo becomes a coda, slowing down and gathering steam—some jazzy filigrees here, some comping there, a little quiet backtalk merging into the kind of slow-burn intensity his playing can take on when he really wants it to, before the beat comes back and the riff returns. Prince told Neal Karlen in Rolling Stone that his guitar playing owed more to Carlos Santana than to Jimi Hendrix; this is one of the places you can really hear what he meant. “I Could Never” ends on a somewhat unsettling synth pad drone, leaves the listener … stranded, and leaves Prince the option of going anywhere he wants—a perfect way to end the third side of a double album.

* * *

Side three ends as it begins. The opening of “U Got the Look,” the side’s opening song and the album’s biggest hit (it reached No. 2), is a mysterioso keyboard drone like butterflies in the stomach that sets us right in the middle of the song’s anticipatory milieu, a crowded nightclub where our singers (Prince is joined by Sheena Easton, the Scottish soft-pop singer for whom he had written “Sugar Walls” in 1984) meet before going home and fucking one another senseless. The electronic reggae downbeat (copyright Dave Marsh) leads into an absurdly visceral groove whose distorto-guitar riff is pure pelvic thrust, somewhere between a Led Zeppelin riff or a hardcore-rave synth hook—put “U Got the Look” between “Whole Lotta Love” and Second Phase’s “Mentasm” on a mix-CD sometime and you’ll see what I mean. It’s a kind of aural frottage, rubbing up against the eardrum. The only music from 1987 to match it for sheer libido isn’t an R&B record—it’s Guns N’ Roses’ Appetite for Destruction, cock-rock metal with a disco rhythm section.

Prince may have written better come-ons than “I’ve never seen a pretty girl
look so tough,” but not many. “Color u peach and black” is his most forthright declaration of racial preference, women-wise, ever. The second verse’s lyrical turnaround (“Did I say an hour?/My face is red/I stand corrected”) exists solely to show how cute he is, how smitten. The bridge’s “Well here, we, are” sounds like he fed his voice into a sampler and played each word back in a different key; it nods back to the way first Lisa Coleman, then Dez Dickerson, then Prince takes a line at the top of “1999.”

In short, this is Prince doing Prince—the man himself making a “Prince record.” He’s being meta-himself, and why not? Everyone else was. Rewriting Prince was the great pop pastime of the Eighties, and there may have never been a better year for it than 1987: Jody Watley’s “I’m Looking for a New Love,” Robbie Nevil’s “C’est La Vie,” the Whispers’ “Rock Steady,” Lou Gramm’s “Midnight Blue.” (Listen to the lyrics! “I won’t apologize for/The things I’ve done and said/But when I win your heart/I’m gonna paint it cherry red”—Prince didn’t write that?) The number goes even higher when you factor in how many people were rewriting Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis’s productions, which were themselves second-generation Prince … and, of course, when you factor in Jam and Lewis themselves: the singles from Janet Jackson’s Control were still asserting themselves, as were those from fellow Minneapolitan Alexander O’Neal’s Hearsay, especially its biggest hit, “Fake.” (“Fellas! Can I get some nasty bass?” O’Neal shouts at the top, in perfect Morris Day-ese.) Then there’s George Michael’s Faith, the year’s best-selling album, whose “I Want Your Sex,” “Father Figure,” “Monkey” (which would be remixed by Jam and Lewis), and “Faith” all swiped somewhere between a handful and a truckload of Prince’s moves: the title and concept (and beat and lyric) of “I Want Your Sex” would be unthinkable without him, and “Faith” echoed Prince in rockabilly mode (i.e. “Jack U Off” and “Delirious”).

There’s something awe-inspiring about Prince deciding to be Prince, though. He’d do it again on 1991’s “Cream,” which put everything irresistible about his coy act (up to and including the guitar solo) all in one convenient spot, and on 1995’s The Gold Experience, particularly “319” and “Billy Jack Bitch,” which resuscitated his Controversy-era synth sound. “U Got the Look” is probably the greatest, though, and it underlines how entrenched Prince’s production and songwriting styles had become by 1987 that he could, in effect, pastiche himself. If “Play in the Sunshine” is Sign ‘O the Times in miniature (except not as great), “Look” does the same for Prince-the-public-persona, but more powerfully. Even the 12-inch “Long Look” extended mix, which appended three minutes of groove to the album version and open the song up into something more
widescreen, was a nod back to the extended groovescapes of 1999. Dave Marsh referred to it as “a full-blown tour of art-funk possibility, Pink Floyd jammin’ on the one,” though it feels more Floyd than it actually sounds.²⁵

It makes perfect sense that someone would come along and brazenly rip it off. Roxette was a Swedish duo who’d put a record out in 1986 that no one cared about, so in 1988 they released Look Sharp! and, by applying concentrated doses of the most shameless hooks they could think up and/or steal, made people care—especially the people who programmed radio. With the exception of the 1990 ballad “It Must Have Been Love,” they never cared more than with “The Look,” whose platinum (the substance, not the sales figure) guitar hook, door-slam drums, and naggingly catchy hook sounded an awful fucking lot like … “U Got the Look.” Hmmm.

All of which ignores the real question behind “U Got the Look”: What the hell is Sheena Easton doing here, and why does she sound so good? The song wasn’t originally planned as a duet, and certainly the lyrics aren’t written that way: What Easton sings is an extension of what Prince sings, not a counterpoint or response to it. Easton was in an adjoining studio when Prince was recording the song, and was invited to sing on a whim. Like most of Prince’s great records, the spontaneity helps account for the song’s freshness.

It’s also because we’re not really hearing Sheena Easton, the person. We’re hearing Sheena Easton, the interchangeable Prince Girl—like the lyric, she’s an extension of him. The “U Got the Look” video, which takes up the middle of the Sign ‘O’ the Times concert movie, sums it up: During the song’s chorus, Prince stands center stage, playing guitar with a cocky, impassive expression, while Easton stands directly in front of him, a few feet away. The camera switches between Prince framed in a tight medium shot, and Easton from Prince’s point of view. When Easton appears, she alternates between wearing a peach pantsuit with very dated shoulder pads and a kind of genie outfit, with tassled headgear and a push-up bra that accentuates her ample bust. In the suit, Easton is haughty, her hands on her hips, her nose in the air, her face disdainful; in the genie getup, her expression is hungry and willing, and she waves her arms up and back, pushing her chest out further. When Easton sings “Your face is jammin’/Your body’s heck-a-slammin’,,” it’s followed by a shot of Prince, playing rhythm guitar, and wearing the biggest smirk you have ever seen in your entire life. Maybe it’s because he knew he was actually going to get a line as deeply nuts as that one on the radio.

Radio was not so enamored of “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” at least in America. Prince undoubtedly saw himself as the new Beatles—a mass phenomenon who
was also a committed artist, an innovator with the juice to make his innovations sell. Releasing “If I Was Your Girlfriend” as Sign’s second single—just like releasing “Mountains” as Parade’s—was his way of pushing the boundaries of just what could be popular. Unfortunately, he was dealing with an extremely conservative pop radio environment. A downbeat tune whose title signaled sexual confusion (even if the lyric didn’t), to which you couldn’t quite dance, was going to be a tough sell to fans of Tiffany and Bon Jovi no matter what. Since that bare description also applies to the Smiths, who were golden gods (or at least grey ones) in England yet barely troubled the charts in America, it’s no wonder “Girlfriend” was a bigger hit over there, going to No. 20 in the U.K. charts (only a matter of weeks before the Smiths would reach No. 13 with their own “Girlfriend” song). In the U.S., it short-hopped to No. 67 (No. 12 R&B), almost killing the album’s chart momentum until “U Got the Look” came along and revived it.

“If I Was Your Girlfriend” is one of the most honest songs Prince or anyone else has written about the give-and-take of relationships, right down to its musical setting: The beat sounds simultaneously exhausted and unable to sit still, the aural equivalent of a 3am lovers’ spat-cum-serious discussion, with an organ hook that sounds like it’s being played backward, muted turmoil in action. This is a Camille song, but the shock of the line “When I was your man” comes not from the vocal’s androgyny so much as its bluntness. He’s flippant, wounded, tense; there’s nothing light about it, and the ending (“Then I’d hold you tight and hold you long and together we’ll stare in the silence”) is breathtaking; compared to it, even the poise of an outwardly autobiographical song like “The Holy River,” from Emancipation, falls a little flat in comparison.

“Girlfriend” thematically pairs up with “The Ballad of Dorothy Parker,” the most sui generis thing on an album studded with one-of-a-kinds, and probably the most singular thing he’s ever created. In a lot of ways, both “Girlfriend” and “Dorothy Parker” sound as much like precursors for what would come to be called trip-hop (or downtempo, or blunted beats) as any of the straight-up rap music of the same period that did more or less inspire it. They’re wiry, though, in a way that most trip-hop isn’t. Part of this is due to the songs’ arrangements—drum machines instead of fussied-over hip-hop breakbeats—and massive technological changes that affected musical recording. In the four years between Sign and Massive Attack’s Blue Lines, it became a lot easier to get brilliantly detailed sounds with a cheap setup; DJ Shadow’s endlessly inventive Endtroducing …, from 1996, was done in its creator’s bedroom with an eight-track recorder and a sampler.
What’s surprising about “Dorothy Parker” (which is not about the famous American humorist/poet/short story writer; according to Alex Hahn’s Possessed, Susannah Melvoin told Prince about her after he’d already written the song) is that its drum part sounds through-composed rather than programmed; it keeps twisting around, upending and then righting itself, keeping a constant groove without subordinating itself to a monolithic beat the way “When Doves Cry” or “1999” or “It” do. The rest of the track mutates in the same way; the oddly detuned-sounding spider-web clavinet patterns and fluid bassline work in tandem with the drums. The groove twists and turns without ever seeming to resolve itself. When the radio’s on and Joni Mitchell sings “Help me I think I’m falling” and the phone rings and it couldn’t be as cute as you, the beat’s stop-starts shadow the lyric perfectly.

It’s waking-daydream music, just like DJ Shadow or Tricky or Portishead; psychedelic funk not in the sense of Funkadelic or Hendrix’s Band of Gypsys, but in the sense that its rhythms and textures achieve a molten-lava sense without surrendering the groove; they continually shape, undercut, and right-angle it. (Think, too, of Timbaland’s jitter-funk, which works the same way only, only faster.) The whole thing seems to crinkle in the air, hovering between tones and keys even though they don’t veer completely off tone or key, and it’s engrossing. Another modern parallel is the minimalist “microhouse” of dance producers like Luomo, Pantytec, Jeff Samuel, and Superpitcher, whose output (mostly on German labels like Perlon, Kompakt, Areal, and Boxer Sport) tease a panoply of possibilities out of cut-up vocal snippets, staticky clicks and whirrs, and found sounds, mating them with lusciously detailed beats and basslines for some of the most swoon-worthy dance and headphone music around.

There’s a brittle instability to “Dorothy Parker” that’s close to derangement, and the lyrics—with their nod to “Norwegian Wood,” another song about the singer’s infidelity that dances around its actual topic—match it. Prince’s singing on this track is beautifully controlled; despite the fantasia aspect of the lyrics, the way he sings them—in a relaxed, almost bluesy manner—becomes the song’s reality principle.

The arrangement of “Forever in My Life” is similarly inventive, and like the high-range-free “Dorothy Parker,” it came about by accident: Prince mistimed his background vocals, which came in ahead of the lead. As a result, they convey his thoughts for him, like they’re written all over his face before he even says a word, so it’s the way he says it, not what he says, that surprises you. The deadpan background vox of “It” are replicated here, mocking him in advance rather than after the fact, which makes his pleas sound even more urgent, the
lover’s impassioned communiqué (“There comes a time in every man’s life/When he gets tired of fooling around … I’m at that road/And I’d rather walk it with u than walk it alone”) elbowing aside his doubts. Besides, without them, he might have felt the need to arrange the song for something other than drum machine and sprinkled-in acoustic guitar at the end.

A similarly whimsical use of the studio marks “Starfish and Coffee,” whose rhythm is set by a tape-reversed drum machine pattern that darts right speaker to left. “Starfish” doesn’t really pair up with anything else on the album, so let’s call it “Strange Relationship” ’s evil twin: It’s unambiguously playful, almost a kids’ tune, with a sing-song chorus, harp-swirls that evoke a magician’s glitter cascading to the ground, an opening alarm-clock bell, and a declarative acoustic piano riff that sounds something like the niece of “1999.” In my mind’s ear, the song slots right in with Carole King’s Really Rosie, a children’s album King released in 1975 with lyrics by author Maurice Sendak, whose books The Sign on Rosie’s Door and Nutshell Library the album (and the animated television special it soundtracked) was based upon.

“Starfish” ’s follow-the-bouncing-ball lyric depicts Prince as an elementary schoolkid who’s intrigued by his classmate, Cynthia Rose: She wears different colored socks and describes her daily lunch as, “Starfish and coffee/Maple syrup and jam/Butterscotch clouds, a tangerine/And a side order of ham.” Prince and his friend Lucy don’t believe her, so they sneak a look, and what do you know—she wasn’t lying. The moral of the song: It’s OK to invade other people’s property, kids; I’ve been doing it for years!

Oh, fine. That isn’t the moral at all—the moral is to open your mind because you never know what’s behind the magic curtain and/or in your schooolmate’s lunchbox. Or even, let us imagine, that certain pop stars’ whimsies might carry in them some kind of universal truth. I still like my version better.

The very best segue on the album occurs when “Starfish” ends on a hand-cymbal semi-splash and is followed hard by the slow downbeat of “Slow Love.” There’s a buzz on Prince’s voice on “Slow Love,” a kind of parody of lounge singer smoooveness; he modulates the changes so carefully it’s almost a put-on. But it’s not—just Prince-as-seducer in a more old-fashioned guise than usual, crooning like he was Sinatra or Bennett or Eckstine—or maybe Cory Daye, the female singer in Dr. Buzzard’s Original Savannah Band, a great ’70s group that combined disco rhythms with big-band arrangements and salted the whole thing with some of the archest lyrics ever written. There’s some of that going on in “Slow Love,” too—“U can see the race car driver/Let me show u what I’m made of” means what exactly? That he’s letting you date someone else, but first he has
to demonstrate how much better he is in bed? As “U Got the Look” also demonstrates, one of Prince’s most pronounced habits is to throw in a weird lyrical twist that doesn’t so much derail the song as bend its internal logic a bit. During a period when homogeneity was running rampant through pop culture, a little of that went a long way toward sustaining a fervent cult within the mainstream audience. The archness of “Slow Love” just gives it an extra wrinkle. Is he sincere? Anytime Prince is trying to seduce you, no matter how odd his methods, you can count on him meaning it.

“Adore” means it. All of it. Every last fucking dappled, gold-embossed, spangled, dewy-eyed, iridescent, opalescent (that’s right, this song emanates light and diffracts it), incense-permeated, sweet-time-taking, defenses-breaking, manifest-destiny-of-love-sweet-love second of it. If I had a dollar for every woman who’s told me that the fastest way to get into her pants was to play her “Adore,” I’d have almost enough money to buy me a clue that they were trying to maybe hint at something and I should have registered it then instead of after the fact. No matter. I know for next time.

Or maybe I’ll just start screaming, “Without u there is no sea! There is no shore!” like the lines are a velvet cape with my name stitched on the back and I’m throwing them down onstage so you cannot possibly doubt that I mean it—all show, all sincerity. The problem is I won’t have a self-made choir behind me. When Prince sings “When we b making love/I only hear the sound/Of heavenly angels crying/Tears of joy pouring down,” it’s as if he’s cueing the swelling phalanx of voices that rise up and form the wall of sound the song ends with. He’s a conjurer here; there’s none of the pencil-mustache standoffish veneer of “Slow Love.” It’s just as mannered—passion is, or can be, as much a mannerism as anything, especially in pop music—but you never doubt for a second that he wants you, he needs you, and if, as he puts it, “Love is 2 weak 2 define how much I adore u,” he certainly craves you something fierce, and will crawl on his belly in order to get to you.

And yet, he remains relatively sane. We know this because about halfway through the song he stops his train of thought in the middle of an undying-devotion tirade for one of the all-time iconic slow-jam moments: “U can burn all my clothes,” he snarls, wounded at the very thought of losing you, “Smash up my ride”—and then he pauses and considers. “Well,” he says (not sings, says), “well, maybe not the ride.” He can get carried away; he wants to get carried away; he is getting carried away. Prince’s beloved might be capable of taking away “all of [his] cool attitude,” and that may be exactly what he’s looking for—someone who can see right through him, or at least make him feel like he can be
seen right through. (Transparency is very sexy indeed.) He may want someone to lavish, to get compulsive over. But every fantasy has its limits, and this one has found its.
Side Four: Strained Relationship

Every reality has its limits, too, no matter how privileged yours is. It’s late 1996, and I’m where I always was on a Saturday night: Sitting at an all-night coffeehouse in Seattle’s Lower Queen Anne neighborhood, back from clubbing and too late to catch the bus home. I’d come out here in August after bailing on a botched road trip with a couple of friends and taking the Greyhound from Bozeman, Montana, with no money, no job, no luggage. (My belongings had been stolen in Idaho.) I’m living in a heatless basement bedroom in a house on 100th and Aurora, out where motel rooms rent by the hour; I stay away from the house as much as I can, because the one roommate who’s always there, a short, black, semi-professional dominatrix, is extremely annoying, though her four-year-old son is nice. I still prefer it to the six-to-a-room hostel-cum-flophouse I’d stayed in during my first couple months in the city. I work at a pizzeria in Lower Queen Anne, so I know the neighborhood pretty well, and the downtown clubs are easy to walk to from here, so the all-night place is perfect: They let me do what I want, including fall asleep on their easy chairs, and I don’t disturb them too much. Usually I bring my headphones and play tapes of new CDs a coworker makes for me, and the tapes I play most frequently contain Prince’s new album, *Emancipation*.

I’ve been geared up for *Emancipation* since it was announced this summer. I’ve been paying close attention, keeping up, since *Graffiti Bridge* came out when I was in tenth grade. Mom bought *Diamonds and Pearls*, which I disliked intensely: Prince sounded like he was trying too hard to be himself; the thicker sound of his band, the New Power Generation, didn’t seem to fit him; the title song was the worst single he’s ever released; and Tony M, the group’s rapper, sounded like something Prince won at an arcade. In a season where Nirvana was hitting, hip-hop was peaking, MTV and the radio sounded better than they have in ages, and the house and techno music I’d been reading about in British magazines was starting to make its way over to the U.S., I had time for “Cream” and “Gett Off” and little else.

Nevertheless, I bought and loved his 1992 album—lots of folks jocularly typed its title out as $O(\text{+g})$, so I will too—deciding it was his best since *Sign ‘O’ the Times*, maybe because the grooves are so tight, maybe because the album’s feel is so loose. Even Tony M sounded like he’d gone to remedial school, or at least had learned to stay out of the way. But membership on the Prince bus had been dwindling precipitously; *Diamonds and Pearls* had reversed it somewhat.
(it’s his second-best-selling album after Purple Rain), but instead of bleeding it
dry he released O(+) almost exactly a year later.

That’s essentially what he’d done with Sign ‘O’ the Times: The album was
full of potential hits, but he refused to release sure shots “Housequake” and
“Adore” as singles (though “Housequake” got some play as the B-side of “U Got
the Look” and black radio played the shit out of “Adore” anyway) and didn’t
tour behind the album in the U.S., opting instead to go to Europe in the summer
of 1987. A couple of the shows there were filmed and, after extensive audio
overdubbing and re-shooting at Paisley Park (the new studio complex Prince had
built in the distant Minneapolis suburb of Chanhassen) were released as an
exciting, if somewhat fraudulent, concert movie also titled Sign ‘O’ the Times,
which was released to short runs in art houses that winter, making little money,
garnering little publicity, and doing its namesake album no favors.

Then Prince had decided to release a “surprise album” at the end of 1987.
Warner Bros. went ahead with plans to release The Black Album, a loose
collection of hard, often weird funk that would be released without any publicity,
in an unmarked black sleeve. Prince shelved The Black Album at the last minute,
shortly before its scheduled December 1987 release, after a religious epiphany—
said to be induced by a night spent tripping on the drug ecstasy—during which
he began to see the album as a dark, evil creation. Lovesexy, created in seven
weeks in early 1988, was by contrast, deliberately light—it comes across as the
soundtrack to that epiphany, or an attempt to recreate it, and while he’d always
written weird, cutesy, coded lyrics, here they ran rampant, from the title on
down. Not only were people beginning to suspect it unwise to continue placing
stock in a man who calls the devil Spooky Electric, he programmed the compact
disc as one continuous track instead of breaking it up among its nine individual
songs. This meant that if you accidentally hit the wrong button you have to start
the entire thing all over again, which might have been interesting had half the
album not sucked. Most folks, preferring their playback devices not to dictate
terms, said sayonara.

So when Prince announced in 1993 that he was changing his name to—say it
along with me!—O(+), a lot of the people for whom Lovesexy hadn’t already
been the last straw, decided this was. When The Hits/The B-Sides was released
that fall, it felt like the end of an era. What it took longer to realize was that the
era had ended several years earlier—with Sign ‘O’ the Times.

Actually, Sign signaled the end of a couple other eras as well. It was the last
great double album that was largely heard, or understood, as four sides of vinyl,
as a quartet of ministructures that coalesced into a whole. The compact disc
became the standard unit of the late Eighties, changing the way albums were structured and how long they lasted. The compact disc was still unable to hold much more than 70 minutes at the time, so *Sign* was two CDs as well as two records (and is still made that way, actually, even though it can fit onto one if you shave a few seconds between songs).

Artists began adding “bonus tracks” to regular-sized cassettes and vinyl—notably, George Michael’s *Faith*, which would win the 1988 Grammy Award for Album of the Year. The 1987 winner was U2’s *The Joshua Tree*, whose victory visibly stung Prince, who was nominated for *Sign ‘O’ the Times*. I watched the ceremony on a five-inch black-and-white TV in the spare bedroom at my grandaunts’ house; and I will never forget Bono delivering his astounding acceptance speech: “We set out to make soul music. It has nothing to do with being black or white. It’s a decision to reveal and not conceal. Without it, people like Prince would be nothing but a song and dance man, and he’s much more than that.” The camera cut to Prince, who, correctly, looked like he wanted to punch Bono square in the mouth. At a July 1997 press conference, Prince would say, “I have problems with any sort of business that is going to dictate what success is. I mean, right down to the award shows. I mean, I got a good taste of that when U2 beat me for *Sign ‘O’ the Times*. That was kind of a rude awakening.”

*Sign* was also the last great R&B album before hip-hop became black American pop’s dominant form—the last great R&B album that wasn’t, couldn’t be labeled retro-nuevo and yet was generally untouched by hip-hop. (For argument’s sake, let’s not count the Sheila E. rap on “Beautiful Night” or the hip-hop leanings of “Housequake.”) 1988 was the year that, critically at least, hip-hop began its decisive overtake of R&B, first critically, then aesthetically, and eventually commercially.

It’s not surprising that the Nineties saw Prince becoming, essentially, a muso: Chops began to matter more than style, and while he’d long commanded both with equal flair, the one began to outweigh the other. Listening in the all-night coffeehouse to *Emancipation*—a very good, very ambitious album—Prince still sounds like someone who could make something like “The Ballad of Dorothy Parker” again if he wanted to. The problem, I will later realize, is that the chances of him retracing “Dorothy Parker”’s steps had come to outweigh the chances of him making something equivalent to it. Style becomes mannerism. It’s human nature, but it’s death to artists with revolutionary ambitions.

Still, pleasure is where you find it. Having grown up with Prince, I’d been accustomed to hearing his music as a style within itself, and the pleasure of his
Nineties material was in hearing him work changes within his self-made continuum. The Nineties were, among many other things, a reissue decade, during which all manner of recorded sound was given the opportunity to find a new audience. Prince’s Nineties output is ripe for that kind of rediscovery; in total volume, he probably made as much good music as he did in the Eighties, and while little of it was as great as his best Eighties work, there’s a lot to be said for it. On a purely personal level Emancipation as well as Chaos & Disorder and The Gold Experience, the two albums that preceded it, were lifelines to me in late 1996. They helped keep me grounded when I was alone and adrift; especially when, in early January 1997, I lost my job and my apartment on the same afternoon and, the next day, landed in the hospital after throwing my back out while running to catch a bus carrying my belongings in an army bag.

In the end, no one seemed more haunted by Sign ‘O’ the Times than Prince himself. Certainly, many have evoked it. Terence Trent D’Arby’s Symphony or Damn, from 1993, reached me as the perfect substitute for Prince not releasing an album that year; in the late Nineties and early Oughts, the Soulquarians—a loose conglomeration of musicians revolving around Philadelphia hip-hop band the Roots, including Erykah Badu, Common, and D’Angelo—took plenty of cues from its skewed, purple funk. In 2000, Oakland underground hip-hop producer Madlib released the spare, dark, quirky The Unseen under the moniker Quasimoto; it sounded like a cross between 3 Feet High & Rising-era De La Soul and Camille. And Rooty, the brilliant 2001 release by London house duo Basement Jaxx, sounded like their attempt to condense all of Sign’s pleasures into 43 minutes. (Their 2003 follow-up, Kish Kash, does a similar thing, only even more so: call it their attempt to condense Crystal Ball into 52 minutes.)

But as the consensus that Sign was his best album began to take hold, Prince seemed to realize it was his benchmark, and began trying to equal or top it. Graffiti Bridge is studded with Sign-era outtakes (“Joy in Repetition,” “We Can Funk,” and “Can’t Stop This Feeling I Got” were all recorded or rerecorded around the same time as the rest of the album); Emancipation was something like Prince’s revenge for not getting to release Crystal Ball the first time. The paradox of Sign ‘O’ the Times is that, by the testimony of many people in Hahn and Nilsen’s books, its creator considered it as unfinished while everybody else thought it his most complete work: It’s his Pet Sounds and his Smile both at once. In the past few years, as on his self-released One Night Alone live set, he’s made a kind of peace with it, incorporating several Sign tracks into the set, played with new arrangements.

One of the great thrills of pop fandom is romance, and I have never
romanticized any artist more than I did Prince. I’ve already said that growing up with him in my midst was like having a superhero around. That’s a powerful thing—you never totally escape its shadow, and you never really want to, either. But the advantage of such proximity is that, sooner or later, you’re going to see him around town, and no matter how many bodyguards surround him, no matter how otherworldly his aura, you’re going to figure out he’s just another human being. The Nineties albums accelerated the humanization process for me, but *Sign ‘O’ the Times*, crucially, began it; it lifted some of the veil off the myth and exposed some of its inner workings, and gave me the impetus to do the rest.

* * *

I’m out of the hospital five hours after I entered, with a large bottle of painkillers. I grab my army bag, go back to the pizzeria, pick up my final check, and cash it. I take the bus downtown and put my bag in a Greyhound locker; then I head to the waterfront and eat an expensive dinner. I’m going back home, and I’m treating myself before I leave. At 1:40am, I board a bus, girding myself for the 40-hour ride from Seattle to Minneapolis. Prince rotates frequently, along with every other tape I have; I decide that when I get back I will restructure my life—stop drifting, or at least start drifting toward something more definite, maybe start trying to write more. I get two jobs: A Monday through Friday daytime position making waffle cones for a local ice creamery, and a night gig waiting tables and doing security at First Avenue, the downtown nightclub Prince made famous in *Purple Rain*.

One summer night in 1997, the Ohio Players play the club; shortly before showtime, I see a group of security guys hustling up the stairs in formation. “What’s going on?” I ask, concerned. “Oh, it’s just Prince,” my manager says with a laugh. I laugh, too. We both understand.

The Ohio Players sound terrific. The crowd isn’t huge, but it’s decent-sized, mostly older black folks dressed to the nines, like a lot of the R&B shows we host, and I’m selling a lot of drinks. About halfway through the show, during a lull, I’m picking cups up off of abandoned tables and wiping them down, and I look up at the DJ booth, which hovers over the main bar in front of the stage, the best seat in the house. Prince is sitting there, grinning madly, watching his old heroes go through the moves. It takes a second to realize it, but I’m transfixed; I’m staring, unable to take my eyes off him. It lasts about a minute. Then, suddenly, Prince looks down and directly at me. Busted. I quickly turn my head—embarrassed but also exhilarated. I smile broadly, and then I go back to work.
I’m extrapolating from the numbers provided by the City of Minneapolis’s 2000 Census Report, archived online at www.ci.minneapolis.nm.us/dtywork/planning/Census2000/docs/2000-Census-Rpt-One-l.pdf, which show that Minneapolis’s non-white population in 1970 was 27,986 (6.4% of 434,400 total population); in 2000, it was 133,432 (34.9% of 382,618 total population). The bulk of the city’s non-white population has traditionally been black or African-American.
5 Peter S. Scholtes, “First Love,” City Pages, 3 September 2003.
6 Ibid.
Note: This may not be an actual rumor, but something the author made up for fun.
Actually, how “typical” the crowd was depends on when the video was made. If it was made after Prince’s groundbreaking early tours, where he was booked in rock clubs as well as on R&B bills, opening for Rick James, and began cultivating the crossover audience he craved, then the “Dirty Mind” video is a terrific snapshot of a moment where the pop marketplace seemed up for grabs and rock and funk’s underground audiences were converging, a golden subcultural era. If it was made before then, the video is one hell of a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Transcript of MTV interview, *Blues and Soul* magazine, April 1986.


17. “Critical favor seems to be something of an obsession for Prince. 1999 contains a snide song titled “All the Critics Love U in New York,” while he has taken repeated shots at them in his interviews. It does not seem a coincidence that a full-page ad for the “Sign ‘O’ the Times” single—consisting of the song’s lyrics printed in large type—appeared on page two of the Village Voice’s Pazz & Jop Critics’ Poll supplement on March 3, 1987. A year later, the song would top the same poll’s singles list, beating Suzanne Vega’s “Luka” by a single vote, 54–53; the album, meanwhile, defeated Bruce Springsteen’s Tunnel of Love by the widest margin in the poll’s history to that point, 118 mentions (out of 226 critics) and 1491 points to 81 mentions and 912 points. (The albums lists are weighted, with participants allowed to award between five and 30 points per album.)
Leeds, ibid.
Three of them belong to Prince: 1991’s “Gett Off” and “Gangster Glam” (a remix/B-side of “Gett Off”), and 1992’s “My Name Is Prince.”
Acclaimed Music—http://hem.bredband.net/bl32682/—is the totally insane, and rather amazing, brainchild of Henrik Franzon, a Stockholm statistician who gathers data from nearly every rock best-of list he can get his hands on and boils them down into über-lists ranked by year, decade, and all-time. Franzon’s methods are imperfect, but as indicators of overall critical appeal go, it’s hard to beat. At press time, “Sign ‘O’ the Times” was ranked as the no. 1 single of 1987, ranking 14th for the Eighties and 127th overall. “If I Was Your Girlfriend” was no. 12 for 1987, no. 83 for the Eighties, and no. 540 overall. “U Got the Look” b/w “Housequake” was no. 27 for 1987, no. 192 for the Eighties, and no. 1089 overall. And Sign ‘O’ the Times was ranked as the no. 1 album of 1987, no. 2 for the Eighties, and 23rd overall.
23 Tate, ibid.
Dr. Buzzard’s would later mutate into Kid Creole & the Coconuts, for whom Prince would write “The Sex of It” in 1990.