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Prince's Last Decade

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The sudden death of Prince (*b* Prince Rogers Nelson 7 June 1958) on 21 April 2016 shocked music fans worldwide, and prompted a celebration of his artistry. In the wake of his passing, many commentators took a new look at his best-known and best-appreciated recordings, released roughly from 1978 to 1989, and praised the artist for his transgressive approach to visual performance, politics, and music industry structures. Prince's public works from his first decade as a recording artist, commonly discussed as the "*Purple Rain* era," have been the subject of monographs such as Per Nilsen's *Dance Music Sex Romance: The First Decade*,¹ documentary films such as *Prince: A Purple Reign*,² and numerous interviews and articles. In contrast, his vibrant later years are less considered. This is especially true of Prince's last decade, a period in which he was engaged in a prolific recording career, committed political activism, and innovative business practices outside the intense public spotlight he generated during his best-known performances.

It's a situation where people want me to go back and do what I used to do. They have to understand that it's my body of work and I'm trying to put in that body of work things that I haven't done. So that, when I finish and I look at all of it, it represents the whole complete pie as opposed to the same thing over and over again.³

2004 was Prince's last stand as a hit-making popular artist. After years of scarce public appearances, he performed with Beyoncé at the Grammy Awards in February and in March, entered the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and released his *Musicology* album with major label distribution to a robust wave of positive press coverage and record sales. However, he continually sought to transcend traditional music industry structures as an early digital music entrepreneur.

While he was no longer in the pop spotlight by 2006, Prince's last decade is an intriguing period of his career. Reviews became tepid despite the release of more content. The media gave him less attention but he appeared everywhere, with everybody. Perceived as greedy and ungrateful, he promoted a prudent model for artist ownership and revenue generation and put his money, time, and energy toward social justice. Without having to consider existentially

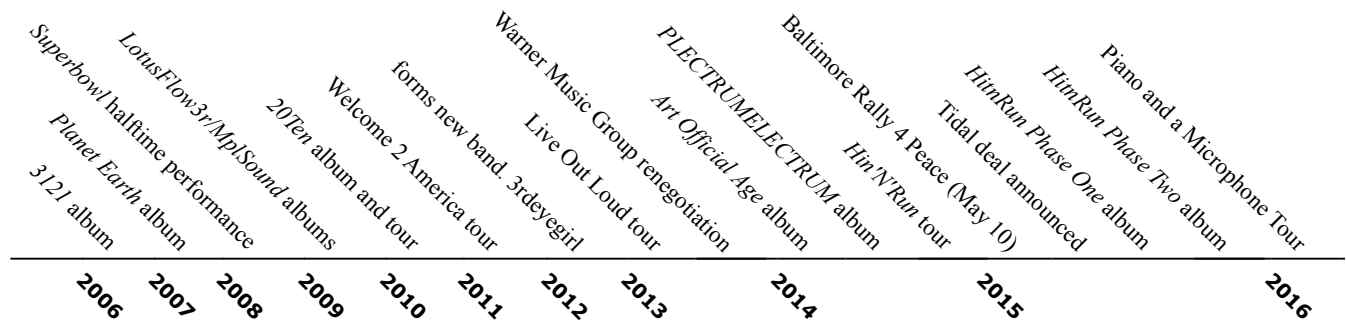


*Prince, curtain call following final concert performance
Fox Theatre, Atlanta GA, 14 April 2016
Photo by Evan Carter; evancarterphotography.com*

Prince's Last Decade (cont.)

record sales or concede to standard music industry procedures, Prince, in his final years, used his music and his platform to explicitly challenge and appease his dedicated enthusiasts, provoke socio-political thought, innovate the music marketplace, and pay homage to the black music foundations upon which his first decade was built.

Prince's last decade began with the release of *3121* (2006), his last gold-selling album or single. With an extensive catalogue and an inimitable command of popular music performance and songwriting, Prince spent



Timeline of Prince albums, tours, and events, 2006–2016

his final decade expanding the diversity of this body of work by engaging contemporaneous aesthetics while highlighting the rich history of black music. “Black Sweat” was the second single released from *3121*. The single represented Prince's attempts to carve a space in the twenty-first century pop landscape with production inspired by current hitmakers like the Neptunes, whose minimalist, synth-heavy, and rhythm-privileging aesthetic echoed *Parade*-era Prince. For the next three years, without significant recognition, he released music that continued to add to his body of work, while giving his core supporters flashes of his earlier sound.

Although he worked with various major labels and companies over the next few years, Prince continually sought alternative ways to get the attention of listeners. For his next album, *Planet Earth* (2007), he once again contracted Columbia for distribution support, but the relationship soured when he came to a separate agreement with Britain's *The Mail on Sunday* to distribute the album inside newspapers. In 2009, the triple-disc release *LOtUSFLOW3R* was only sold in Target stores in the U.S. and certain online outlets in Europe. Then, in July of 2010, Prince released *20Ten* solely in periodicals in England, Belgium, and Germany. He did consider issuing an expanded version of the album later that year, but his frustration with the music business and dealings with American corporate entertainment conglomerates precluded a traditional CD or digital release. He had become wary of how his music was positioned and consumed in traditional and digital music outlets.

Regarding his earlier music, Prince has enigmatically stated, “I’m not interested in what happened yesterday” but that “to me, time folds back on itself.”⁴ The *20Ten* album is an example of Prince's nostalgic reflection during his last decade. The title itself recalls a process of revisiting the past—it could be read as both a description of the year of release or as a quip-like follow-up to *1999* (1982). If approached as the latter, the album displays several fragmented elements of his first decade output, as if time folded “back in on itself.” The 1982 LinnDrum drum machine was prominent on several songs and evocatively used for the synthetic drum fills on ballads “Future Love Song” and “Sea Of Everything.” Pulsating low ends of a Moog bass synthesizer propelled “Compassion” and “Everybody Loves Me,” and the horn-section-turned-synthesizer riffs that he popularized on *Dirty Mind* (1980) enlivened “Beginning Endlessly” and “Lavaux.” Prince's distinct aesthetic had sonic cues that communicated to long-time listeners, and on *20Ten* he delivered a continuation of his archetypal production style. Ironically, the record was not commercially available to the vast majority of fans during his lifetime.

Sonic signatures on *20Ten* establish continuity with the *Purple Rain*-era sound. However, an important shift in political engagement is evident. “Free,” from the album *1999*, was a hyper-patriotic, anti-communist ballad

Prince's Last Decade (cont.)

featuring the chorus “be glad that you are free/free to change your mind/free to go most anywhere anytime.” In sharp contrast, *20Ten*’s “Lavaux” illustrated Prince’s explicit engagement with racial injustice during his last decade. The song expresses exasperation with America and the longing for escape that was vocalized in several songs from his last decade: “Life back home depresses me/another form of slavery/the cost of freedom’s anything but free.”

In June of 2010, Prince made a second appearance on the BET Awards to accept the Lifetime Achievement Award, and spoke optimistically about the state of black music and the coming “change” in the future in which America would be a “beacon to the world.”⁵ The testing of this optimism unfolded over the next six years in wake of what President Obama referred to as the “slow rolling crisis” of police killings of unarmed black people.⁶

In late 2010, Prince commenced the international *Welcome 2 America* tour. It was the last major tour in



*Prince performs at Madison Square Garden during the Welcome 2 America tour, December 2010
Photos by Christopher Kornmann; www.spitandimagedesign.com*

the U.S. in which he performed his catalogue of hits in large venues. With the exception of the opening pre-recorded song, the unreleased “Welcome 2 America,” the tour set list was almost entirely greatest hits material. The opening track was suspenseful—far from an idyllic “Welcome”—and disseminated his overt race-based, socio-political perspective to those that knew him most for his transgressive approach to gender and sexuality. The lyrics cautioned: “We still got a lot 2 learn about race relations, if ur in the mood 4 drama/in between 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina and the election of Barack Obama.” The song also features the haunting line “where the most famous is dead,” a reference to Michael Jackson, who had passed away in June of 2009. Notably, Prince incorporated Jackson’s 1979 breakthrough “Don’t Stop ‘Til You Get Enough” into the set list on this tour and in later performances. *Welcome 2 America* was a concession and a celebration. He gave the general public what they wanted to hear and revealed his increasing engagement with black cultural politics.

Prince toured extensively from 2011 to 2013, but did not release another album for four years after *20Ten*—his longest break since 1978. The hiatus was due to a renegotiation with Warner Music Group, a label he had

Prince's Last Decade (cont.)

been estranged from since 1991, as well as the forming of a new band, 3rdeyegirl (comprised of Hanna Ford on drums, Ida Nielsen on bass, and Donna Grantis on guitar), in late 2012.

Performing with 3rdeyegirl in small clubs with approximately 1,000 capacity on the 2013 *Live Out Loud* tour allowed for Prince the rare, coveted opportunity for an older popular performer: the chance to showcase new material for a captive audience and shake off the expectations of performing as a classics-driven nostalgia act. Just as David Bowie formed the rock band Tin Machine in 1988 as a way of casting off the burden of performing his standard greatest hits revue, Prince's new band performed a range of new songs and reenvisioned his catalogue without the expectation that he would perform his greatest hits. Many of the new songs premiered during these concerts appeared on Prince's next two albums, *Art Official Age* and *3rdeyegirl: PLECTRUMELECTRUM*, each released in late 2014 through his new deal with Warner Music.

Announced in April 2014, the deal gave Prince rights to his master recordings and was linked specifically to an expiring copyright. This renegotiation inspired similar actions by a number of recording artists whose contracts were similarly impacted by expiring copy-

rights. Given his stance against the music industry and the history of label ownership and control (frequently using "slavery" to describe label contracts), the significance of Prince acquiring his master recordings cannot be overstated. The renegotiation was announced alongside a planned special edition re-release of Prince's best-known work, *Purple Rain*, and previously unreleased recordings. These would not appear during his lifetime.

In March 2014, Prince unveiled his new band, 3rdeyegirl, and new-yet-old look (a natural, blown-out afro like the one he wore on his first album), with a performance on the revived *Arsenio Hall Show*. His first song, "Funk'N'Roll," highlighted several larger themes of Prince's career. The title and lyrics offer an anthem to the breaking down of racialized industry genre categories of "black" funk and "white" rock. During the performance of the song he stated "I don't really care what y'all be doin'."⁷ This phrase, though surely not an original idea in the history of lyrical braggadocio, succinctly sums up Prince's later career. He wanted to make an impact on the popular music zeitgeist with 3rdeyegirl, but there was no real financial imperative to do so. In terms of commerce and respectability, he didn't really *need* to care what other musicians were doing anymore, or worry about his new recordings being competitive in the marketplace. However, perhaps craving relevance, he still engaged with contemporary artists and production styles, particularly for his *HitNRun* albums of 2015.

For a recording artist who had come to prominence with the album credit "Produced, Arranged, Composed, and Performed by Prince," the choice to hire an unknown producer to craft tracks for the majority of his new recordings was surprising. Producer Joshua Welton, husband to 3rdeyegirl drummer Hanna Ford, was twenty-



Concert posters for Prince's *Live Out Loud* 2013 and *Hit 'N' Run* 2014-15 tours

Prince's Last Decade (cont.)

four at the time, and more closely connected to newer production styles heard in R&B and pop that were distinguished by techniques culled from EDM, trap music, and dubstep. Most *HitNRun* tracks were created by Welton. Prince added voice and guitar before allowing the young producer to finish the mix and production of each recording. In a significant shift, Welton had greater control over Prince's sound than any previous creative partner. His engagement with Welton as a younger protégée was part of the ongoing project of his later years, promoting and anointing select contemporary black artists as well as being a generational conduit of black cool and protest.

Among the more politically charged artists that Prince connected with during his last decade was rapper Kendrick Lamar, whose album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Interscope, 2015) is seen as representative of the zeitgeist of the Black Lives Matter movement. During Lamar's process of recording the album, he went to Paisley Park in September 2014. Although Lamar's goal of recording a duet with Prince for *To Pimp a Butterfly* did not come to fruition, during the meeting the two created and performed a version of Prince's 1993 song "Say My Name" (one of Prince's ventures into rapping), with Prince emphasizing in lyric: "you never would have drank my coffee/if I hadn't served you cream." Prince later praised Lamar and his latest album, particularly the track "Alright," which remains a public anthem in Black Lives Matter protests: "He just has something he has to say. It's pure. ... You're not taking 'Alright' off my playlist!"⁸

By the summer of 2015, in the wake of gaining control of his masters, Prince removed all of his music from every streaming service with the exception of the recently launched Tidal. Prince's self-removal of his music from Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube (through threat of lawsuits), by far the three largest media outlets for digital music distribution at the time of this writing, was an extraordinary move for a major recording artist. For the vast majority of music consumers that had shifted from purchasing recordings to streaming music, Prince's withdrawal from popular digital music services in 2015 made his music virtually invisible.



Kendrick Lamar, 3rdeyegirl guitarist Donna Grantis, and Prince perform at Paisley Park, 30 September 2014⁹

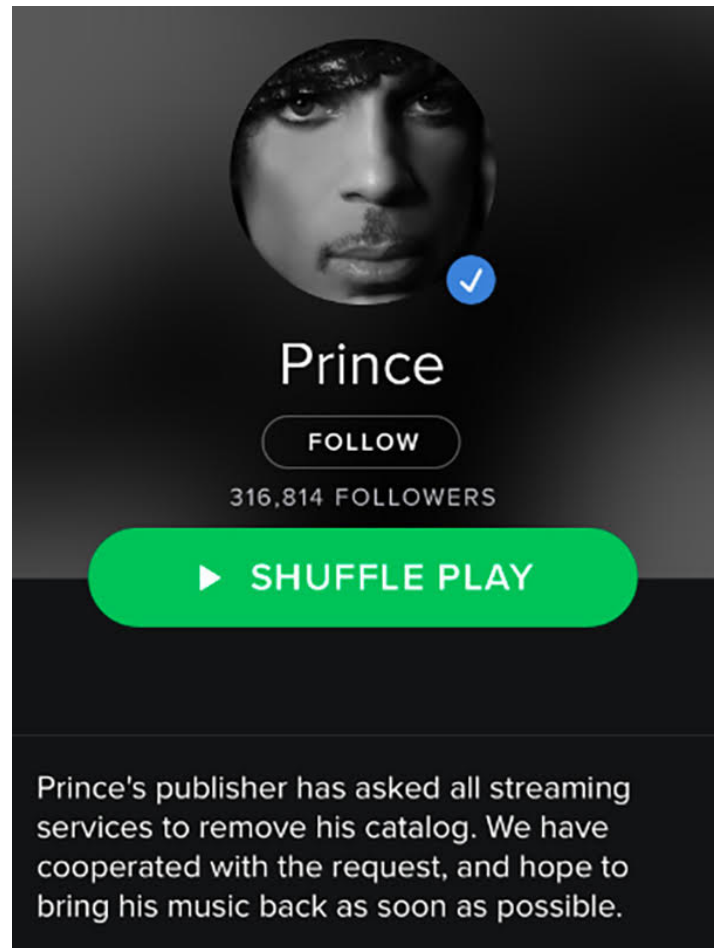
Tidal is a subscription-based streaming service purchased in summer 2015 by artist and executive Jay-Z who, like Prince, owned his master recordings. They each sought to create a black-owned, artist-controlled music platform, and each has been seen as greedy and out-of-touch for his efforts to wield control of the music.

Prince's Last Decade (cont.)

In interviews, Prince likened Tidal to Oprah Winfrey's OWN network as a symbol of black ownership and empowerment. His relationship with the service also offered Prince something further, an on-demand delivery format for his recordings that he had initially envisioned with the NPG Music Club, his own digital music venture, in the early 2000s.

For Prince, the multi-instrumentalist who had learned in the 1970s how to craft complete recordings by himself in the studio, the concept of an immediate delivery service like Tidal offered such a solution. Ideally, the fan experience would mirror the studio environment with as little industry mediation as possible, as Joshua Welton describes: "That's how we wanted this music to be heard—the way it sounds inside [the studio]." ¹⁰ The inspiration to create music went hand in hand with the sense of freedom from record label politics. Reacting to a Welton production in the studio during a 2015 interview, Prince offered:

I mean, you can't hold something like that back! That's the sound of someone not restricted by anything—not the matrix of a record deal or a contract or a system that's not dedicated to the music. ... That's a sound that has to come out! ¹¹



*Spotify announcing Prince's removal from the service
Notice sent by email by schuremediagroup.com, July 2015*

The partnership facilitated Prince's goal of having a direct studio-to-audience conduit without the troublesome mediation of the "matrix" of the traditional music industry. Prince released singles on Tidal throughout late 2015 and early 2016. Some of these appeared on the service with very short notice, including the live version of "Black Sweat," recorded at a concert just seven days before his passing, and released on Tidal days later.

There is no evidence Prince thought April 2015 to April 2016 would be his last year. Unlike David Bowie, who by all accounts wrote and recorded his final album *Blackstar* in the months before his 10 January 2016 passing as a swan song during his battle with cancer, Prince died in the midst of ongoing, vibrant, artistic, and social activity as well as future planning. Still, his last year did include a solo piano tour that amounted to a career retrospective, and comments from Prince about a forthcoming memoir which has yet to materialize.

Prince's last year began with a moment of overt political engagement. Following the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody on 12 April 2015, and the pursuant rioting and turmoil in Baltimore, Prince responded with the single "Baltimore" two weeks later. The song, which powerfully concludes with an aural march scene and chant of "If there ain't no justice, then there ain't no peace," and the subsequent Baltimore concert and music video, were an apex of Prince's overt political activity in his public works. The release of the song preceded news that Prince would perform in Baltimore on Mother's Day in a *Rally 4 Peace* concert. The announcement occurred during a time marked by social unrest and rioting, when curfews were still in effect. Prince's concert per-

Prince's Last Decade (cont.)

formance, part of which was livestreamed on Tidal, included a somber version of “Baltimore,” as well as a review of classic hits. Far more important than the lyrics of the song was the significance of the concert as a locus for community organizing and the promotion of social justice. Prince centered the event around a celebration of mothers, families, and peace, creating an environment to celebrate, mourn, and promote community activism.

The music video for “Baltimore” was released in July 2015 and was Prince’s last. Images from the *Rally 4 Peace* concert, though scant of Prince himself, are featured in the video and juxtaposed with images of Black Lives Matter protests and print media accounts of Freddie Gray’s death and the unrest in the city. For a popular artist whose image and body were such a prominent iconographic focus of his career, the near-absence of Prince in his final video is significant. While commercial popular music releases often incorporate protest into their marketed products, by all accounts Prince was more concerned with using “Baltimore” and the *Rally 4 Peace* concert to promote awareness of racial inequity and social change rather than to capitalize on the tragedy. Former White House Green Jobs czar Van Jones, who Prince hired in 2010, revealed Prince’s extensive activism in his last years. During his life, Prince made it a condition for partners and employees not to discuss his actions, but Jones asserted that Prince’s public works beyond music needed to be known:

[Prince said] “Everything that you want to do that you think will help the [Black] community. ... I will help you do it.” So I went from working for a president to working with Prince. And every single thing that I said—I said “we’ve gotta go to Chicago and do something about violence,” we did three concerts in Chicago, three. And every community group there he let in. There were no vendors, only community groups to help. We went to Baltimore, we went to New Orleans. There were so many things that he did. Those concerts he was doing were a *cover* for him to be able to go into cities and help organizations, to help leaders, and touch people. ... He said, “I don’t need any more attention, but I can’t be in this world and see all this pain and all this suffering, and not do something.”¹²

In the context of Jones’s revealing statement, Prince’s March 2016 Oakland concert should be understood as occurring in conjunction with the performer’s funding of Oakland nonprofits Solar Tech and YesWeCode, a nonprofit technology education company for underprivileged students. That he staged shows for many of his 2014–2016 concerts in cities with dense black populations (Baltimore, Oakland, Atlanta, Inglewood) supports Jones’s statement—Prince was using his celebrity, and the “cover” of the concerts, to create sites for community

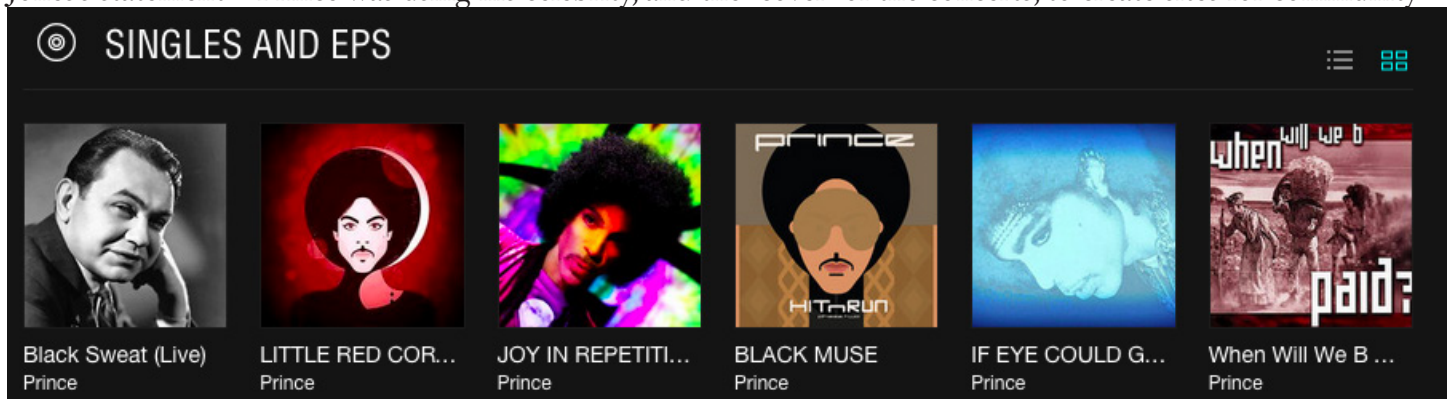


Image from Tidal digital music service of Prince singles released Nov. 2015–April 2016. Chronology right to left: “When Will We Be Paid” Nov. 2015; “If Eye Could Get Your Attention” Nov. 2015; “Black Muse” Feb. 2016; “Joy in Repetition” Piano and Microphone tour, live from Sydney, Australia Feb. 2016; “Little Red Corvette/Dirty Mind” Piano and Microphone tour, live from Sydney, Australia, March 2016; “Black Sweat” Piano and Microphone tour, live at Fox Theatre, April 2016

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activism and development.

Prince's *Piano and a Microphone* tour commenced in January of 2016. In *The Guardian* he discussed what would become his final tour:



Rally 4 Peace concert poster

Prince performing in Baltimore, 10 May 2015

Courtesy of Warner Music publicity; <http://press.wbr.com/prince>

So I'm doing it to challenge myself, like tying one hand behind my back, not relying on the craft that I've known for thirty years. I won't know what songs I'm going to do when I go on stage, I really won't. I won't have to, because I won't have a band. Tempo, keys, all those things can dictate what song I'm going to play next, you know, as opposed to, "Oh, I've got to do my hit single now, I've got to play this album all the way through," or whatever.¹³

The last concerts Prince performed were an early and late show on 14 April 2016 at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta. His last single "Black Sweat (live)" was drawn from this performance and released on Tidal. A week after his passing, an unauthorized audience recording was briefly posted online. This last concert recording shows Prince as a performer in peak physical condition in terms of his technical abilities as a vocalist and pianist. At fifty-seven, an age when most popular music performers would show vocal strain and even transpose their youthful hits to lower keys to accommodate a worn larynx, both Prince's full voice and falsetto appeared effortless as he performed a range of songs from his thirty-eight-year recording career. As a pianist, he easily alternated between thumping dance grooves (occasionally recalling bop, stride, and ragtime syncopations) with florid runs during ballads.

His two sets of that evening were disparate challenges for the artist. Notable in his second set was the theme of black empowerment intertwined with his catalogue of love songs that deal with heartbreak and complicated relationships. The set dramatically opened with a dirge-like rendition of "When Will We Be Paid," a 1969 reparations hymn by The Staple Singers that Prince covered and released as a single the previous year. During the set he fluidly merged lesser known songs from his catalog with hits, and gave the crowd classic,

Prince's Last Decade (cont.)

sensual Prince with his boogie-woogie-like rendition of “Black Sweat,” peeling back the synth-pop sheen of the original and emphasizing the black heritage at the core of the song. In continuing his black music as activism that his shows had become, he addressed black struggle and culture when he demanded that the crowd, “Sit down. We going to have a family meeting,” and began singing “Black Muse”—a song about the perseverance of black people and culture through perpetual turmoil and the prospects of the dawn of a “new day”: “Black muse/ we gon’ make it through/surely people that created rhythm and blues/rock’n’roll and jazz, so you know we’re built to last/it’s cool.”¹⁴ Prince’s overt political celebration of black music in his last decade is striking, particularly for an artist who often purposely obfuscated his relationship to African-American culture in early interviews and iconography.

The third encore of the Fox Theatre concert concluded with a peerless “Purple Rain”/“The Beautiful Ones”/“Diamonds and Pearls” medley that extended Prince’s reflection of his career, as well as his historical celebration of black music’s icons. Following a repeated interpolation of Bob Marley’s “Waiting In Vain,” the medley climaxed with a return to the sing-a-long chorus from “Purple Rain.” As the crowd serenaded the end of the show he improvised slightly while decelerating and descending to the final chord. Adorned by a linear spectral gradient of purple, Prince uttered, “thank you,” and arose from his piano with a raised, cane-holding right fist in the air.¹⁵



Poster for Paisley Park Gala

Promotional poster for Fox Theatre Concert

The night after the April 14th Fox Theatre performance, it was reported that Prince was rushed to a hospital after being found unresponsive on an airplane. He made one brief public appearance at Paisley Park a few days later before passing away at Paisley Park on April 21st. During the following celebration of his music, one of the outcomes was the deluge of unauthorized audio and video recordings that appeared on YouTube. Since Prince limited access to his music by removing it from the largest streaming services, Google-owned YouTube profited and became the public’s primary method of hearing Prince’s music. Although the extraordinary convenience of YouTube has made it an integral part of modern media, the case of Prince highlights that YouTube’s business profits from evading the legal rights of individuals.

While Prince had been able to exert some control over the unauthorized distribution of his music, his death made it possible for the music to be exploited freely. For followers of Prince’s ongoing quest to wrest control of

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his music from record companies, the fact that he died without an apparent legal will was shocking. As a result, his estate, including the vast collection of unreleased music housed in Paisley Park's vault, is currently under the control of Bremer Trust and his immediate family.

The story of the recordings Prince made during the last decade of his life will continue to be told in the posthumous releases to come. Warner Music announced the first two posthumous albums—a greatest hits album *Prince 4Ever* and a special edition of *Purple Rain*. Rather than presenting a career-long retrospective, these releases continue to highlight the focus on Prince's most popular period, his earliest decade. The cover photograph for *Prince 4Ever* features a racially ambiguous image illustrative of his 1990s appearance instead of the natural afro that he donned in his final years. Whereas Warner had re-partnered with Prince for three albums and several singles in his last three years, the decision to present Prince as he was in his early years serves as a reminder of the extent to which his initial hit-making era frames the public's perception of him.

As the posthumous construction of Prince's legacy commences, the authors are optimistic that his last decade will be acknowledged as significant in the public's perception. It is possible to be skeptical and cynical of his late stage pivot, especially his more unambiguous engagement with the black community and his negotiation of his legacy. It is also possible, and more responsible, to see his last decade as a new stage of his life and career that was abruptly contracted. With black musical heritage planted in Joshua Welton, Janelle Monae, Kendrick Lamar, and others, advocacy for musicians' rights impacting the recording industry, and grassroots activism that will perhaps spark the next agents for social justice, Prince's last decade could be the most enduring legacy he entrusts to us—an epilogue that will be beginning endlessly.

NOTES

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2. *Prince: A Purple Reign*, directed by Rhodri Huw (BBC, 2011).
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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUVZW6-rZKw>, accessed 1 October 2016.

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11. Prince quoted in Fontaine, "All Day, All Night, All Prince."
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14. A link to the audio from the performance was posted in Nicolas Parco, "HEAR IT: Prince's Final Concert in its Entirety," *Daily News* 22 April 2016. <http://m.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music/hear-prince-final-concert-entirety-article-1.2611446>, accessed 1 May 2016. The audio has since been removed.
15. Quoted from Parco. See also Rich Eldridge, "This Might Be the Very Last Prince Concert Photo. Here's the Amazing Story Behind It." <http://www.eldredgeatl.com/2016/04/27/this-might-be-the-very-last-prince-concert-photo-heres-the-amazing-story-behind-it/>, accessed 1 October 2016.