

# Why I like Prince

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I like Prince, and the rest of the world hates him, I think, for basically the same reason: he doesn't stick to a genre any more.

It all began around 1992, which is also the year when he started shaving the word 'slave' into his facial hair and being generally overexpressive in public. He put out the symbol album, which included the pop single 'Seven' and any of a number of other tracks, all in different genres: an R&B tune (Sweet baby), a rave tune (Wanna melt with U), a reggae tune which I don't recall because I always skipped it, and even Prince doing a decent job of kind of rapping (My name is Prince). His subsequent album, which remains my favorite Prince album, gets still more divergent, including rave, blues, plain old pop, and artsy sort-of-spoken-word stuff. Allmusic.com gave that album (Come) two stars. "it's a record fulfilling a contract, nothing more and nothing less." Silly me; there I was putting half the songs on repeat for a month.

Compare this to Prince at his five-stars-and-a-little-check-mark pinnacle, Purple Rain. That album is wonderfully consistent, ranging from synth pop to guitar pop and everything in between.

Of course, all results based on a time series are suspect, but I think his loss of popularity stems from his boredom with doing just pop all day long. Mr. GK of San Diego, CA and I saw him in Madrid in 1999, and he played the song Purple Rain; the solo matched his improvisation on the album from fifteen years before note-for-note. The audience loved it.

There are a few people that I would class with Prince, including They Might Be Giants and of course the Magnetic Fields. These people are explicitly not of one genre, which sort of bends one's conception of what music is supposed to be.

I had a friend many years ago, Mr. Carter Green, who could play anything with strings. He studied music at the University of Chicago, the most theoretical music school around, and could strip away the fashion and break any of it down for you. 'Oh, you like the bossa nova? That's all diminished seventh chords' and he'd play a few diminished seventh chords (or something) and it'd be like Brazil in 1967 right then and there. He's the one who pointed out to me that surfer rock is just sephardic oud music played double-time. [See, Dick Dale, author of Pipeline and other tracks that defined the surfer genre, was a Middle Eastern immigrant.] He had a menu of techniques at his disposal for playing to

evoke mood or place or time. He understood not just rock or classical or blues, but music.

People like Carter challenge our conception of what music is supposed to be about, because the hard part becomes not about evoking a certain mood—‘cause that’s easy—but about something deeper and more ineffable. It’s that part of music in which the musician expresses something that the listener understands and feels. Gee, I can’t describe it, because if I could describe it with an essay it wouldn’t be uniquely musical, now would it, but it’s what distinguishes the technically apt from the really valuable, and it’s something that’s different to every person, and it’s something that most of us (myself included most of the time) don’t consciously look for in music.

Because true expression-in-a-sympathetic-way is so hard to gauge, and technical aptitude is so much easier, we grade our performers on how well they execute the technical requirements of a chosen genre. Those that eschew one set of tricks in search of that part of music which is not moored to a genre have thus chosen a hard path in life. Whether they succeed in their search is up for debate, but simply choosing the search over just playing Purple Rain over and over again is admirable.