



Purple Majesty

Just before Prince became a movie star, 'Rolling Stone' took a long look inside the life of rock's most fascinating enigma

By Kurt Loder

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PRINCE HAS COME. IT IS A WARM SUMMER MORNING IN THE Minneapolis suburb of Eden Prairie, and a black-clad rider on a purple Honda has pulled up to a nondescript modern warehouse on Flying Cloud Drive. A photographer has flown in from Toronto with an assistant to photograph Prince for the cover of this magazine. A standard rock-star shoot, he figures, scoping out the concert-size rehearsal stage, the costume room, the banks of musical equipment. ♣ When Prince walks in, the first thing the photographer notices is how small he is: He seems slight even in his five-inch stiletto-heel boots. He is wearing a dramatic black hat, a skintight black shirt open to the navel and tight black trousers ringed with ruffles from the knees down. He seems to be saying something: Hi? He speaks so softly that the photographer actually has to lean down to within several inches of his face to hear him. He is making it quietly clear that, while he has agreed to pose for the cover, he will not pose for any photos for the magazine's inside pages. ♣ It is decided to wheel in the purple Honda, a perfect prop. The motorcycle is a central visual ornament of *Purple Rain*, Prince's custom-tailored movie debut — a picture with so much prerelease “top spin,” as they say in Hollywood, that the media, anticipating a major sleeper, have been abasing themselves for weeks in the hope of wangling interviews with the recalcitrant star. But Prince does not do interviews anymore. ♣ Quickly, the photographer snaps off some preliminary test shots with a Polaroid. Prince seems to approve of the results, then slips away. An assistant appears and carefully confiscates the seven Polaroids. When Prince returns, he seems restless and even more remote. He's decided he doesn't like the original setup, so they do another Polaroid, a full-length shot. Prince disappears again. The photographer hears the sound of drums and cymbals being bashed in another room. Then



EROTIC CITY
Onstage in
Chicago, 1984



silence. After half an hour, the assistant reappears and announces that he's just driven his employer home. Prince, he says, is extremely sensitive: "He actually gets physically ill at having his picture taken."

On his way out, the photographer can't help but hurl a silent curse at the warehouse walls. They are lined with photographs, all studies of the same smooth, unsmiling features, the same inscrutable sensuality and unfathomable flamboyance. All of them dominated by those liquid, Keane-kid eyes. All of them pictures of Prince.

JUST WHO IS THIS SELF-ENVELOPED STAR? And how is it that he is outselling both Bruce Springsteen and the mighty Jacksons in the record racks? The picture one acquires of this 26-year-old wonderkid from scanning his songs and canvassing his colleagues is murky and uncertain – which is just the way he wants it to be.

To most of the record-buying public, Prince was, and remains, essentially a mystery. In fact, about the only thing on which his friends – and even his foes – agree is that Prince appears to be the genuine article: a musical genius. And not since the Fifties, when that accolade was applied to Ray Charles, has the term seemed so attractively apt.

Prince has been riding a rocket to the top. Though his debut, 1978's *For You*, was not a commercial triumph, it included a carnal classic called "Soft and Wet." His next three albums all went gold, and then, in 1982, came the dazzling *1999*, a double-record set that is still on the pop charts more than 90 weeks after its release. In the view of Warner Bros., it marked the long-awaited point at which Prince's fusion of white rock & roll and black dance-funk became commercially undeniable, and it was seen as setting the stage for Prince's next album to create the kind of cultural explosion that traditionally heralds the arrival of a true superstar.

But there was one unknown and slightly troubling factor in this commercial equation: Along with his sixth album, to be titled *Purple Rain*, Prince would have to deliver a feature-length movie of the same name. Filming had begun in Minneapolis last November 1st, and details of the project were not such as to excite keen anticipation among music-biz money-men. The director, Albert Magnoli, had never been in charge of a feature before. The cast, including all five members of Prince's band in key roles, had, with only two exceptions, no acting experience. The tight budget (\$7 million) and rushed shooting schedule (seven weeks) did not augur well for stellar production values. And, of course, who ever heard of making a movie in Minneapolis? In the winter, yet? In addition, the script was said to be... autobiographical?

WILLIAM BLINN KNEW NOTHING ABOUT PRINCE, REAL-ly, when he was approached roughly two years ago about writing the script for a very vaguely conceived movie in which the singer would star. But Blinn, a mild, middle-aged man who'd written such Emmy-winning tube fare as *Brian's Song* and a *Roots* segment, had reason to be interested in the task, proffered by Prince's management company, Cavallo, Ruffalo and Fagnoli. At the time, Blinn was executive producer of the *Fame* series, and there was some doubt as to whether it would be renewed for a third season. A screenplay would be a handy diversion. What did the managers have in mind, exactly?

That was unclear. Prince had been jotting down ideas in a purple notebook for some time, and one night out on the road,

he told Steve Fagnoli: This is great and all, but there must be something else. He wanted to do a movie. The managers would finance the film themselves. But they needed a script.

Blinn first met with Prince at an Italian restaurant in Hollywood. He immediately knew there'd be strange days ahead. "I never met anyone in the world who ordered spaghetti with tomato sauce and orange juice to drink," he recalls. "As they talked about the movie, Blinn found that Prince was "not conversationally accessible. It was as if I asked someone what they wanted for dinner, and they said they weren't sure, but they'd like it to have some tomatoes in it, and some beef, and some onions. And I'd say, 'I think we're talking about beef stew here.'"

During a meeting at Prince's home – a purple but otherwise unremarkable two-story affair situated on a lake in a well-to-do suburb several miles southwest of Minneapolis – Blinn realized that an important part of the story Prince was trying to formulate concerned his father, John L. Nelson, a piano player who led a Minneapolis jazz trio in the Fifties under the name Prince Rogers. Nelson separated from his wife, a singer, when Prince was seven, leaving a piano behind for his son to learn to play. The father, who reportedly still lived in Minneapolis, obviously remained a troubling figure.

"He was semicomunicative about his dad," says Blinn. "He played me his father's music on the piano, and when he talked about his father's life, you could tell that his father is very key in what he's about. It was as if he were sorting out his own mystery. He saved all the money on shrinks and put it in the movie."

Blinn began pounding out a script called *Dreams*, a dark story in which the parents of the Kid – the character to be played by Prince – were both dead, the mother dispatched by the father, who in turn killed himself. Prince's Minneapolis music scene was in there too, and so was the beautiful Vanity, lead crumpet of Vanity 6 and Prince's girlfriend – or one of them. In *Dreams*, she was to play the stabilizing influence in the Kid's otherwise chaotic life.

Blinn's story was beginning to sound very much like Prince's life. Following his parents' breakup, Prince had been bounced from mother to father to an aunt and, finally, at age 13, of his own volition, into the home of Mrs. Bernadette Anderson, the mother of his best (and at the time, she says, only) friend. Prince and André Anderson had both attended a local Seventh-Day Adventist church as young children, and they shared an interest in music. It was with André (and a young drummer named Morris Day) that Prince organized his first band, Grand Central. "Music is obviously a cloak and a shield and a whole bunch of things for him," says Blinn. "It's a womb."

Halfway through the second draft of *Dreams*, Prince told Blinn he wanted the word "purple" in the title. "At first, I thought it was a kind of strange request," Blinn says. "But he really identifies with purple. There's a whole dark, passionate, foreboding quality to the color and to what he does. Yet there's a certain royalty to it, too."

After finishing a second draft of the script, Blinn got word that *Fame* had been renewed for a third season, and so he returned to television-land, leaving the Prince management team

ETERNAL REIGN

- (1) Playing "the Kid" in *Purple Rain*, 1984.
- (2) With keyboardist Lisa Coleman, 1983.
- (3) Vanity in 1984.
- (4) Prince and the Revolution at a photo shoot for the 1999 album at their rehearsal space in Minneapolis, 1982.





with a script of sorts, but no director. After seeing a film called *Reckless*, they approached its young director, James Foley, and asked if he'd be interested in *Purple Rain*. He wasn't, but he recommended his friend, Magnoli, who had edited *Reckless*.

At first, the 31-year-old Magnoli wasn't interested. Nevertheless, he agreed to meet with Bob Cavallo for breakfast one morning. Cavallo asked him what he thought the Prince team should do. "I said, 'This is what I would do' – and right there I told him the entire story. I knew they had this character Prince, the script had introduced me to this other character, Morris, and I knew that there was a girl in the middle. So it was like: Where do you go with this? And I said Prince should do this, and Morris should do this, and Vanity should be this kind of girl and not this other thing in the script... Within 10 minutes, I had convinced myself that this would be an extremely exciting film to make."

Cavallo liked what he heard, and Magnoli felt the stirrings of a buzz. He agreed to fly to Minneapolis. "The minute I met Prince, I realized that I hadn't gone far enough. We had dinner, and he let me speak for about 25 minutes, and I began working off what was emanating from him... The father became a musician, the mother became sort of a woman wandering the streets, things like that. And at the end, he said, 'OK, let's take a ride.' So we took a ride, and he looked at me and he said, 'I don't get it. This is the first time I've met you, but you've told me more about what I've experienced than anybody in my life.'"

Magnoli told Prince that if he was willing to reveal the emotional truths of this material, then the movie could be made. Prince agreed, so Magnoli went to Minneapolis and hung out with the people who would populate the film: Prince and his band (now called the Revolution), Day and his group, the Time, the women in Vanity 6. Then he locked himself in a room for three weeks and completely rewrote Blinn's script.

In the completed *Purple Rain*, the Kid is an up-and-coming attraction at the First Avenue & 7th Street Entry Club, where he revels in his burgeoning musical powers despite the derision of the club's manager and the petty humiliations inflicted by a hilariously snide headliner, played (to near perfection) by Day. Offstage, though, the Kid is miserable, plagued by his parents' incessant domestic rows, increasingly alienated from his own band members and awkward and inarticulate in his pursuit of a beautiful new arrival on the scene called Apollonia (the part originally intended for Vanity). When Apollonia announces her intention to join a girl group being assembled by Day – for the express purpose of dislodging the Kid from his slot at the club – the Kid, like his bitterly abusive father, lashes out at the woman he loves. Meanwhile, Day and Billy, the club manager, keep up a steady assault on the Kid's fragile ego, chorusing just the sort of criticisms that have been directed at Prince himself over the years. ("Nobody digs your music but yourself," says Billy. "Ya

longhaired faggot!" screams Day.) Following an explosive encounter with his father, the Kid redeems himself with Apollonia and blows away all competition at a climactic concert. It's not a happily-ever-after ending, exactly, but when Prince and his band dig into the luminous title tune at the end, a definite feeling of uplift is imparted.

PATTY KOTERO – OR PATTY APOLLONIA KOTERO, AS SHE CURRENTLY CALLS HERSELF – IS KNEELING ON THE FLOOR OF HER TIDY WEST HOLLYWOOD APARTMENT, PICKING THROUGH A PILE OF CASSETTES. SHE REACHES UP TOWARD A STACK OF STEREO EQUIPMENT, AND SUDDENLY THE ROOM IS FILLED WITH THE SOUND OF COOL, AUTUMNAL PIANO CHORDS. IT IS "FATHER'S SONG," A HAUNTING INSTRUMENTAL COMPOSED BY PRINCE'S FATHER AND PERFORMED BY PRINCE. DURING THE SHOOTING OF *Purple Rain*, Kotero had trouble getting to sleep each night. At five o'clock one morning, Prince appeared at her door.

"He said, 'I've got something for you.' I said, 'Yeah?'" She pops her eyes in mock suspicion. "He said, 'You've been having trouble sleeping. Here.' And he gave me this tape. It's better than a glass of milk and honey."

Until last summer, Kotero was just another young L.A. photo model. Then, across the country in Minneapolis one day, a woman named Vanity walked away from her projected part in *Purple Rain*. No one will say why she left – rumors range around money, ego and a faded relationship with the film's diminutive star – but it was Kotero who was chosen as her replacement. A casting call had gone out for a woman who met certain requirements, some of them physical. Through her agent, Kotero obtained an audition and quickly hied herself out to Minneapolis.

Vanity/Apollonia is a walking *Penthouse* wet dream of billowing breasts and plushly upholstered contours, her sultry face, framed by gleaming cascades of raven hair, a frank invitation to frolic.

One criticism of *Purple Rain* is that it's insufferably sexist. All of the young women in the picture are inexplicably addicted to décolleté and in

many cases wear nothing but the skimpiest lingerie. In one scene, Apollonia is subjected to considerable humiliation in the course of a skinny-dipping interlude at a lake, and in another sequence, Day has a troublesome girlfriend chucked into a trash dumpster by his fawning aide, Jerome.

Though Prince's female fantasies obviously run in the direction of impossibly pliant sex cookies, in *Purple Rain*, this attitude toward women is condemned through the character of Day, for whom the women in Apollonia 6 (nee Vanity 6) are simply "the bitches," assumed to be sexually available after taking a few slugs from his silver hip flask. Since it was actually Prince who invented and produced Vanity 6, the film indicates that he is at least aware of his own worst concept of women.



GET WILD
Performing in Philadelphia on the *Purple Rain* tour, 1984.

There are also two women in Prince's band, and while they tend to hang out of their dresses a lot, their main purpose is musical. Keyboardist Lisa Coleman and guitarist Wendy Melvoin are lifelong friends, the daughters of two veteran L.A. sessionmen (their fathers both played keyboards on the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations"). Coleman is a classically trained pianist, and Melvoin is a longtime jazz student who attracted Prince's attention when she peeled off an elaborate jazz chord in his presence after a show one night, and later won her funk wings jamming with the man on James Brown's "Body Heat."

"The idea of integration is important to Prince," says Coleman. "To me and the rest of the band too. It's just good fate that it's worked out as well as it has – you know, the perfect couple of black people, the perfect couple of white people, couple of girls, couple of Jews. Whatever. He's chosen the people in his band because of their musical abilities, but it does help to have two female musicians who are competent." Five of the nine songs on the new album were recorded by the full band, and Coleman and Melvoin even get co-writing credit – the ultimate rarity, even though it's noted only in the film credits, not on the LP – for "Computer Blue."

"He loves those people," says Kotero. "He cares for them, and they care for him." She crosses the room to a small couch. In her black slacks and plain white top she seems prettier, her

sage from Prince: "Hello. How are you? I'm fine. Because I know the Lord is coming soon, coming soon."

The strange dichotomy between Prince's compulsive carnality and his spiritual yearnings isn't puzzling to those who've gotten close to him. "He's a man apart in many ways," says Blinn. "But his whole sexual attitude is positive. It's: This is good, this represents growth, life."

Not everyone is convinced that Prince is cognizant of his own contradictions. One New York actress who auditioned for the Apollonia role (and who asked that her name not be used – a common request in the Prince universe) expressed shock at what she was asked to do. "It was way too pornographic," she says. "I mean, they had stuff in the script that I wouldn't even let my boyfriend do to me in my own bedroom."

Prince looked up the actress during a subsequent visit to Manhattan, and she found him alternately brilliant and pathetic. "He's got a lot of hang-ups," she says. "He means well, and he's genuinely talented, but he's got a lot of problems. He's really hung up on God, for one thing. I think he thinks he's related to God in some way."

"There is a real dichotomy between his sexual hang-ups and God and the Bible," the woman concludes. "I mean, he's not leading a godly life. But that is the most important thing in his life, God."

"It was as if Prince were sorting out his own mystery. He saved all the money on shrinks and put it in the movie."

face softer, than in the movie. But her dark beauty – both her parents were born in Mexico, but she describes herself as "a Latin-German Jew" – and extravagant figure would seem to suit Prince just fine. Has she also replaced Vanity in the little guy's affections?

"I don't kiss and tell," she says with practiced coyness. "He loves his women, but music comes first. He is married to his music. You can't compete with it."

With music, Prince seems to find his most perfect union. Kotero remembers seeing him in the recording studio, her oblivious mentor, lost in sound. "It looks like he's in there in his own spaceship, his own capsule, just taking off, and the sky's the limit," she says. "I still pinch myself every morning and say my prayers at night, and thank the good Lord someone's breathing in my direction."

RELIGIOUS IMPULSES IN ROCK USUALLY have taken the form either of woozy Easternia or grating fundamentalist harangues. The musicians in Prince's orbit share an unlabored though still deeply felt faith in God. Prince himself has dedicated all six of his albums to the deity; and out on the road, before each show, he joins hands

with his musicians in prayer. When *Purple Rain* the album appeared, Bill Aiken, a production staffer at MTV in New York, noticed a snippet of backward dialogue tacked onto the end of the song "Darling Nikki" – the record's most brazenly sacrilegious track. Reversing it on tape, Aiken discovered a mes-

EVEN WITH GOD ON HIS SIDE, PRINCE SEEMS A STRANGELY solitary figure. In his pursuit of the success his talents so richly justify, he has ruptured a succession of once-important personal relationships. Bassist André Anderson, his closest boyhood friend, was the first to leave Prince's band, followed by guitarist Dez Dickerson. Prince fired bassist Terry Lewis and keyboardist Jimmy Jam from the Time, and keyboardist Monte Moir soon left of his own accord. Recently, it's been rumored that Day – whose comic persona is more charismatic than Prince's own – may be leaving the Time.

"I maintain we came out better in the end, for all we went through," says former Minneapolis studio owner Chris Moon, who started Prince off by giving him keys to Moon Sound studio and getting a manager for him. On the other hand, Moon adds, "He's gotta be one very lonely guy. He's left a long trail of broken hearts and broken egos behind him."

Who's to say the trade-off hasn't made him happy? After both Prince and Michael Jackson joined James Brown onstage at L.A.'s Beverly Theatre, the Godfather of Soul was heard to exclaim, "Look out, Michael!" This is what's called arriving. Whether or not that big limo in the sky he's pursued for so long has turned out to be otherwise empty is a matter for Prince to ponder in the splendid isolation to which he's now entitled.

"It's hard to have that much power and have close friends," Blinn reflects. "But if he does not have close friends, then neither do I feel that his solitude is threatening or harmful to him. Some people... well, you know, the four-in-the-morning phone call: 'I'm alone, what do I do?' Prince might make that phone call, and he might be alone. But he knows what to do." ☪