

Electric Word Life

I was fourteen when Prince shot to superstardom in a shower of *Purple Rain*. The movie debuted in the summer of 1984—the same year Marvin Gaye’s father gunned down his famous son the day before his forty-fifth birthday; Bruce Springsteen released *Born in the USA*; Madonna writhed on stage like a virgin in heat at the first MTV Video Music Awards; and pyrotechnics torched Michael Jackson’s hair during the filming of a Pepsi commercial. Smack in the midst of that Orwellian year, a diminutive man in velvet and lace zoomed across movie screens on a purple motorcycle and claimed his place in the kingdom of Pop Music Royalty.

But at fourteen, I didn’t go crazy for Prince, and 1999 seemed a lifetime away. I didn’t get what all the fuss was about. I didn’t get *him*.

I’m a Gen Xer, but I wasn’t a devotee of the three icons of my formative years: Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Prince. Having grown up with three siblings who are considerably older than I, I was a bit of an anachronism, a connoisseur of ‘60s and ‘70s music and culture. The Stones and The Beatles blasted from my stereo instead of Boy George and Duran Duran. Picturing myself on a boat on a river seemed far more alluring than listening to doves cry. Still, it was impossible to ignore the ubiquitous Gang of Three, especially Prince, with his eyeliner and ruffles and three-inch heels and cryptic claim in “I Would Die 4 U”:

I’m not a woman. I’m not a man. I am something that you’ll never understand.

In 1984, I didn't understand *myself*, let alone Prince. I knew I wasn't a man, but what kind of woman did I want to be? What choices did these three icons offer? I was awkward and self-conscious of my chubby thighs and thick waist, so fondling myself on a gondola while a guy with a tiger head watched was out. So was cavorting with chimps and prepubescent boys. I wanted mystery and, despite my straight-laced demeanor, danger. Prince seemed a little *too* dangerous to me, though, a little too ambiguous, and the lyrics to "Darling Nikki," with its references to masturbation and grinding sex, *a lot* too shocking. The song even inspired Tipper Gore to cofound the Parental Music Resource Center to place warning labels on records containing "obscene or violent" content. It was easy for me to dismiss Prince as another flamboyant pseudo-artist and stash him in a *Just Say No* '80s time capsule with Wham! and Frankie Goes to Hollywood while I moved on to Led Zeppelin and Bob Dylan. Which is why my profound reaction to Prince's death on April 21, 2016, befuddled me.

The morning he passed away I was staring bleary-eyed at the deluge of ungraded freshman composition essays awaiting my red-pen verdict. As I am wont to do when subject-verb agreement errors and sentence fragments and tautological arguments begin to short circuit my synapses, I took a Facebook break to catch up on the latest political rants and the perpetual array of photos of friends' children and dogs. My Madonna friend, who regularly posts videos of the Material Girl, broke the news with a memorial Madonna had posted on her homepage:

He Changed The World!! A True Visionary. What a loss. I'm Devastated. This is Not A Love Song.

My immediate reaction was that it was a hoax. How many times has the Internet killed Cher and Macaulay Culkin? The illogic of a Prince passing seemed obvious: Keith Richards is *still* alive, idling in a haze of Marlboro smoke, a pint of Jack Daniels in tow; there was no way Prince, a teetotaler vegan who fines his guests for cursing and looks half his age, could possibly be dead.

I scrolled to the next post, one by a former colleague of mine:

can't even, can't, just can't. oh prince.

My whole Facebook feed had turned purple, crowded with post after post of official news reports and memes featuring famous Prince quotes and excerpts from the preamble of “Let’s Go Crazy”:

Dearly beloved

We are gathered here today

To get through this thing called life

Electric word life

It means forever and that's a mighty long time . . .

And if the elevator tries to bring you down

Go crazy, punch a higher floor

If the *elevator* tries to bring you down?

CBS News has learned that Pop legend Prince has died alone in an elevator at his Paisley Park compound in Minneapolis.

TMZ reports that Prince, idol of millions, passed away in an elevator at his

home this morning.

Sources tell NBC News that Prince was found unresponsive in an elevator at . . .

The BBC reports . . . elevator . . .

The Guardian . . . elevator . . .

The irony, unspoken by the media, was eerie, mysterious. *So* like Prince.

On June 25, 2009, I was in an airport waiting for my connecting flight to Ireland when I heard Michael Jackson had died. That news was shocking. But not surprising. He'd struggled with a plethora of problems for years. After the *What????* subsided, the *Well, you knew that was coming sooner rather than later* set in. MJ was fragile, pruriently childish, and weird. Prince was weird, but he never seemed fragile, or childish. He was formidable, eminently in control of his image and mystique. He even spoofed it, putting Dave Chappelle, dressed as Prince from his famous *Chappelle Show* sketch, on the cover of his 2013 single "Breakfast Can Wait" and appearing as a caricature of himself in a 2014 episode of the *New Girl*. The bombshell of his demise spurred the same *What????* reaction, but the second was *What the fuck????* Once rumors of a Prednisone overdose surfaced, I added exclamation points.

I'd had my own complications with opioids in the early 2000s. Migraine headaches, grief over losing my mother to cancer, and the separation from my first husband, which occurred within months of my mother's death, precipitated my abuse. The speculation swirling around Prince was that hip replacement surgeries, necessitated by years of dancing in high heels, had led to his addiction and ultimate overdose. The tabloid rumor mill went into overdrive: one anonymous source claimed to have supplied Prince with

drugs for years to ameliorate the artist's crippling stage fright. Anyone who watched him perform "Get Off" in assless yellow pants at the 1991 MTV Video Music Awards would never put *Prince* and *stage fright* in the same sentence, but that doesn't mean it wasn't true. No one imagined that someone like me would succumb to the pain-numbing allure of drugs either. The perception of addiction as a moral failing rather than a chronic disease prompted me to avoid treatment for years. I can only imagine the pressure Prince must have felt to mask his own demons. KISS front man Gene Simmons promulgated Prince's rumored drug-related death as the pathetic act of a weak person, a statement for which Simmons later issued a public mea culpa. But his initial judgment validated the fear of exposure many addicts face. It validated their need for camouflage. Prince once told Tavis Smiley on his talk show that at the beginning of his career, he'd compensated for years of schoolyard abuse at the hands of bigger boys by cultivating an uber flashy alter ego. I never saw evidence of that kind of vulnerability in Prince. I only saw the flash.

In the days following his death, I spent countless hours soaking up every detail of his life, devouring his old interviews and live performances, downloading album after album on iTunes. I became a Prince junkie. I posted mournful comments on my Facebook page. I changed my computer desktop background to a cool picture of Prince in all his afro, eyeliner glory. I marveled at my discovery that he'd written every song and played every instrument on his early albums *and* produced them. I blew through my monthly WiFi data allowance studying his electrifying rain-soaked performance at the 2007 Super Bowl Halftime show and his wailing solo on "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" at the 2004 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony. At the end of the song, he tossed his guitar into the audience, then walked off stage with a *My name is Prince, and I am funky* swagger. He

was part Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, and something else—something elusive and mystical and transcendent. He wasn't a cover version of his influences; his influences propelled him to a place uncharted, and in that sense, he was unique.

Unlike David Bowie, whose death a mere three months before had also inspired tributes, and rightfully so, Prince's gender-bending was aggressive and wonton, his Love Symbol guitar phallic. Androgyny never looked so masculine—even in ruffles and feather boas. That was part of the genius of Prince: he showed the Puritanical public of the '80s that machismo need not look like Dirty Harry. Gender need not be black and white. It could be purple. It could be anything he wanted it to be. *I could be anything I wanted to be.* Not just a name or a symbol. I could define myself. Within and *without* the perimeters of propriety.

Of course, I wasn't the only one ruminating on the meaning of Prince. In the midst of the public outpouring, Eric Clapton posted the following on his Facebook page two days after Prince died:

I'm so sad about the death of Prince, he was a true genius, and a huge inspiration for me, in a very real way . . . In the eighties, I was out on the road in a massive downward spiral with drink and drugs, I saw Purple Rain in a cinema in Canada, I had no idea who he was, it was like a bolt of lightning! . . . In the middle of my depression, and the dreadful state of the music culture at that time it gave me hope, he was like a light in the darkness . . . I went back to my hotel, and surrounded by empty beer cans, wrote Holy Mother . . . I can't believe he's gone . . .

But he wasn't entirely gone. The week after he died, movie theaters across the country screened *Purple Rain*. I finally saw it—twice. The timing was apt. For the last couple of years, I'd been in a downward spiral not unlike Clapton's decades earlier. My beloved second husband had died of cancer in the spring of 2014, and I was struggling to make sense of the loss of the love of my life. I was drinking heavily, palliating my pain, just as I had after my mother died. My yearning for the security and stability of my childhood was palpable—palpable enough to drive me to that cramped movie theater on a humid April evening. I sat in the flickering light and let the experience happen to me. Yes, the acting was abysmal, the plot trite, the screen awash in '80s poufy hair and Jerry curls. But the camera loved Prince—his doe eyes and angry guitar licks, his vulnerability and power. He was a paradox cloaked in purple and white, pure physicality when he took the stage, his lithe body carnal and ethereal. He was Salome with a six-string, offering sex on a plate and musical virtuosity through the speakers.

It was in the middle of "When Doves Cry" that epiphany struck like a keening guitar: this is what it feels like when the legends of your youth die. They take with them a part of your formative years. The illusion of immortality shatters like a glass idol, which is all idols really are.

I finally *got* him.

Fandom reveals far more about the fan than it does the idol, and as such, it isn't fatuous. "What's all the fuss about?" many people asked in the wake of the explosive media coverage surrounding Prince's death. My response is that he was an artist, and art shapes you; it becomes part of you; it offers portals to paths you may not have otherwise explored; it becomes part of the soundtrack of your life, and, often without your even noticing, it

defines the mores by which you live and, in some cases, against which you rebel (just ask the PMRC). Either way, you're affected. Certain artists tap into those areas of us that we may not have realized existed or been too afraid to acknowledge. That's what Prince gave people; it's what he's now given me: a portal to self-exploration and self-actualization and a greater understanding of my formative years.

That's why his death has affected me, and so many of my fellow Gen Xers. We were there when he ruled the airwaves. We were there to see him crowned.

His life was electric, but he was wrong about one thing: life doesn't mean forever; it's not a mighty long time. His was over far too soon. No rumor, scandal, or coroner's report changes that. Two of the Gang of Three of my youth are now gone. Only Madonna remains. At forty-six, I'm still mustering the courage to make the rules and then break them, to learn how to act my age and not my shoe size, take a look around and be glad I've got friends, smoke them all with an intellect and savoir faire, laugh in the purple rain, and accept that times are changing and it's time to reach for something new.

Of course, this is the complex conclusion I've drawn from Prince's death.

The simpler one is this: I miss my fourteen-year-old self and the musician formally known as *pseudo-artist* that she might have known had she not been so myopic. I miss the purple and lace and weirdness and bravado of 1984.

I miss His Royal Badness.

Even in the afterworld, he's still not a woman; he's not a man. He remains something that we'll never understand.

But then, he wouldn't want us to.

He wouldn't be Prince if he did.