Prince is on the radio!
On-air influences and online legacies

Key words: Prince, Minneapolis radio, KUXL, KQRS, MTV, PMRC, music podcasts,

Abstract

Although Prince's relationship with the music industry was tempestuous, he maintained an affection for radio broadcasting which spanned his life and artistic career. This essay explores Prince's associations with traditional radio as well his presence on digital audio platforms. While there were aspects of the radio industry he disliked, I suggest he had affinity for the medium and an innate understanding of how it works. This was demonstrated through spontaneous live calls to DJs, the provision of exclusive on-air previews of new material, and the early development of his own *3121 Radio* station. American radio in the 70s was moving towards more tightly formatted, segregated programming policies. However, while playlists were becoming more conservative, the young Prince managed to find inspiration on late-night Minneapolis radio. As Matt Thorn (2001) comments, much has been made of his early radio listening, especially the combination of "white and Black music that may have shaped his sound" (17). I argue that the impact of eclectic radio programming at an early age should not be underestimated and left an indelible impression on Prince's subsequent artistic output. The self-curated playlists of radio DJs such as Kyle Ray, Thornton Jones, and Jack Harris exposed him to disparate artists, and helped form his unique amalgam of influences. This essay also considers the censorship of Prince on the radio along with his relative successes and failures in gaining airplay. I explore how his presence on terrestrial radio was complemented by new forms of online audio. I apply Henry Jenkins theories on participatory fan culture to the creation of Prince related podcasts; fan endeavours which offer analysis and insight into his remarkable life and career.

Abridged Abstract (150 words)

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listening, especially the combination of "white and Black music that may have shaped his sound" (17). I argue that the impact of eclectic radio programming at an early age left an indelible imprint on Prince's subsequent artistic output. The self-curated playlists of local Minneapolis DJs exposed him to disparate artists and helped form his unique amalgam of influences. This essay also considers the censorship of Prince on the radio and his successes and failures in gaining airplay. I apply Henry Jenkins theories on participatory fan culture to the creation of Prince related podcasts; fan endeavours which offer insight into his remarkable life and career.

Introduction

The relationship between popular music and radio has been long and productive. As Tara Brabazon (2012) notes, radio airplay played a crucial role in the transmission of popular music. Yet, as time and technology moved on, this partnership became more distant. The rise of online platforms and mobile technologies drew young audiences away and overtook radio's former status as the "natural voice of popular music and youth culture" (Chignall 2008, 4). However, in the context of Prince's early influences and the imperial phase of his career, radio was still a powerful media presence. This essay unpacks Prince's relationship with radio, including his early listening, his on-air presence, and as the subject of numerous podcasts. To do so, I consider literature relating to both radio and Prince, including biographies, critical essays, magazine articles, and interviews. In the opening section I explore the impact of radio listening on Prince's early musical development within the framework of cognitive development. Section two discusses the influence of the radio stations and DJs that caught Prince's attention as a young man. I then consider Prince's transition from radio listener to playlisted artist and assess how radio programmers responded to his developing career. This section examines how the radio industry was challenged by the rise of MTV and film and explores the censorship of Prince's music on radio. The final section consider Prince's engagement with online radio and his representation as the subject of numerous podcasts. Despite his many criticisms of the medium, I argue that Prince had a regard for radio that lasted throughout his life. His objections, I suggest, came from disappointment in the medium's development, while simultaneously revealing his hopes for what it could be. I hold that Prince demonstrated a subtle understanding of radio formats and programming and used this knowledge to inform his output, without compromising his integrity. I suggest Prince had an awareness of podcasting as a new form of radio and understood its potential as a means of connecting with fans.

Childhood memories

In January 2016 Prince began his *Piano and a Microphone* tour at Paisley Park. It was a surprisingly revealing performance. Seated alone at his piano, Prince played an introspective set, interspersed with anecdotes and memories that offered insight into his early life. The show began with Prince reminiscing about his childhood and the impact of listening to local radio station KUXL. Although he was entranced by his father's piano playing, he commented that he was not allowed to touch it. Instead, he came up with an alternative, "…maybe I should just listen to the radio!" At this point, the audience starts booing. Prince counters by reminding them of a time when radio was held in higher esteem, "back then radio was cool though! Back then radio was localized." Picturing Prince as a toddler, tuning the dial of a radio in search of music, is an entertaining scene to imagine. However, the radio was only a substitute. As he was forbidden to play an instrument, he had to passively absorb the household music his parents chose or actively use radio to discover his own music. Radio provided an inexpensive, accessible gateway to the sounds and sonic structures that would become essential elements in his future career. It is telling that in a *Rolling Stone* interview, when asked what music he was listening to, he replied, "I don't like a lot of popular music. I never did. I like more of the things I heard when I was little" (Karlen 1985, 29). While most people tend to cling to the music of their teenage years, Prince suggests his musical passions were forged far earlier.

The music we hear when young can leave an indelible imprint. Studies show that musical aptitude is an implicit feature of the human brain. At an early age children can detect musical dissonance and ambiguities, while recognising and appreciating surprises which challenge their expectations (Koelsch et al. 2000). Daniel Levitin (2007) states that, by the age of five, children learn to recognise chord progressions in the music of their culture and begin to form schemas. While an ability to discern and respond to melody and harmony is hardwired into all infants, some have a heightened ability. The simplest explanation for why a particular child might demonstrate a high level of music prowess at an early age is that they possess an innate gift. Yet Piero Melograni (2007) claims it is improbable that a person could be born with such a high degree of congenital musical talent, preferring to believe that "certain predispositions can be developed from childhood by familiarity with music and early training" (4). As Jason King (2016) notes, Prince did not "jump out of the womb as a fully-formed rock star." He was a product of the musical context which surrounded him. Prince grew up exposed to musical stimuli since birth. He heard his father practicing on the piano, correcting his

mistakes, and creating sonic moods. Yet, Prince's interest in music was not actively supported during his early years. According to Neal Karlen (2020), John Nelson would inflict physical abuse on Prince if he tried "to sneak a few scales on John's off-limits piano" (69). Instead, the artists featured on local Minneapolis radio helped build his primary appreciation of music. King (2016) suggests Prince's listening habits were formed in "a moment of unprecedented access to musical diversity." He was fortunate to be born in an age when radios were becoming more accessible. Indeed, the booming popularity of transistor radios in the 60s helped forge the medium's close association with popular music (Brabazon 2012). As Mark Stern (2014) notes, "no matter how sophisticated our tastes might otherwise grow to be, our brains may stay jammed on those songs we obsessed over during the high drama of adolescence." In the following section I consider Prince's ongoing exposure to radio as a young man growing up in Minneapolis.

Early radio influences

According to Jan Hemming (2013), "taste formation for mainstream popular music occurs during a certain critical age (late adolescence/early adulthood) and remains stable throughout one's lifetime" (294). Therefore, it is conceivable that the music Prince heard on local radio while growing up stayed with him and helped shape his artistic output. Mick Wall (216) claims Prince grew up switching between KUXL and KQRS. This section considers the output of these two radio stations and the context in which they broadcast. The airwaves of Minneapolis have tended to reflect the city's long struggle with segregation and inequality. Black radio audiences were not well served in the 60s and 70s, and it was unusual to hear soul and R&B and on local radio. A core reason for this was the city's small Black population, which in 1960 was only 2.4%, rising to 4.4% by 1970 (Campbell and Kay 2005). As Jon Bream (1984) notes, Minneapolis radio lacked diversity and major commercial stations were resistant to Black music, "Black-oriented radio stations just don't exist as in the rest of urban America" (26). If white radio did play Black artists, they were largely Top 40 hits from Stevie Wonder, The Supremes, and The Temptations, among others. According to Wall (2016) "music held no colour barrier" when it came to Prince's early radio listening (19). He would scan the dial to satisfy his musical curiosity, finding R&B, soul, and funk on the AM Black community station KUXL, then tune to the predominantly white sound of KQRS to hear bands like Fleetwood Mac, Led Zeppelin, and contemporary solo artists.

Dave Hill (1989) referred to KUXL as "a small-time operation" and he was not wrong (60). The station broadcast from an old motel in the Golden Valley suburb of Minneapolis and was a low wattage community station with a limited AM signal. As KUXL was solar-powered, it finished broadcasting at sundown. Consequently, listeners could hear up to eight hours of music in summertime, but only a few hours during the darker days of winter (Gilbert et. al. 2012, 27). Once the day's programming was over, Prince would have to tune to another station. Andrea Swensson (2017) questioned Prince about his early radio listening, and he answered that he used to listen to KXUL "a lot" (193). Mark Brown, former Prince bass guitarist, also acknowledged its influence. His memoir begins with recollections of the station, "I lived for those sunny days when my transistor radio would pick up KUXL" (1). The station was the only Minneapolis broadcaster to regularly feature Black music and became known for its blend of R&B, funk, and soul. It was also responsible for promoting many of the leading R&B shows that came through Minneapolis and St. Paul in the late 1960s (Gilbert et. al. 2012, 28).

Aside from KUXL, Prince pointed to the formative influence of the white rock station KQRS. When Swensson (2017) asked Prince whether he ever listened to KQRS, he replied, "I used to listen to it all the time" (193). In his interview with Keller (1997) for the *Minneapolis Monthly* Prince commented, "The old KQ after midnight, that was the bomb station. I'd stay up all night listening to it. That's where I discovered Carlos Santana, Maria Muldaur, and Joni Mitchell. Was I influenced by that? Sure I was." It was these rock and folk influences that Prince fused with his love of funk, soul, and R&B, to create his wholly unique style.

Specialist DJs can often make the best radio presenters. While the music they play is enjoyable in its own right, "half the value of the program is derived from hearing authoritative, possibly provocative, comment from someone who knows the field well" (McLeish 2005, 69). For Prince, there were several specialist DJs whose talent and influence stayed with him. In his Paisley Park *Piano and a Microphone* show, Prince specifically referenced three Minneapolis DJs, including KUXL's Thornton Jones, otherwise known as "Pharaoh Black." He also recalled listening to Kyle Ray, a presenter on KMOJ, another low power community station aimed at a predominantly Black audience. Prince reserved special praise for KUXL's Jack "Jackie" Harris, commenting, "Jack Harris had his own band. That's how funky he was. His band was as tight as James Brown's band, or close. I always used to hear his music. He would choose what we would listen to, and he had great taste." Soon after his arrival in Minneapolis, Harris became a "multitalented scene champion" (Swensson 2017, 87). He began hosting a show on KUXL in 1968, under the name "Daddy Soul," and soon became the station's program director. He also promoted groups and shows and established *Black & Proud Records*, the first African

American run record label in Minnesota. KUXL DJs had traditionally promoted Black music events but, according to drummer and vocalist Herman Jones, "Harris came in and took it to another level" (Gilbert et. al. 2012, 9). Harris' energy and wide-ranging talents of made him a potent role-model for the young Prince.

As Karlen (2020) memorably wrote, Prince was a man who tossed a lot of "bullshit" into the "hopelessly muddied waters of his truthful history" (37). It is, therefore, unsurprising to find contradictions in Prince's relationship with radio. At times he would show regard for the medium's impact on his formative years, yet he would also distance himself from it. In his interview with Charles Johnson, the Detroit DJ otherwise known as The Electrifying Mojo, Prince reflected on growing up in Minneapolis, commenting, "The radio was dead" (Hill 1989, 195). Conversely, former Prince bass-player André Cymone recalled spending hours listening to progressive rock on KQRS, "Growing up in Minneapolis the radio was amazing, because at the time they just played really amazing rock 'n' roll" (Swensson 2017, 163). Nevertheless, in a *Rolling Stone* article from the early 80s Prince turned his back on local radio and the influence of KUXL, "The white radio stations were mostly country, and the one Black radio station was really boring to me" (Adler, 1981). William Doughty, a member of Prince's early band Grand Central, expressed a similar view, stating that Black people growing up in Minneapolis had to rely on occasional visits from touring artists, or recorded music, to access Black music, "we didn't even listen to radio stations. Just listened to records" (Hill 1989, 18). Yet, Thornton Jones began his *Pharaoh Black's Soul 'til Sundown* shows in 1975, and KMOJ was first established in 1976, which indicates Prince was still actively listening to these stations at around the age of 18.

Prince often commented on his dislike of formulaic radio which consistently played the same songs, "listening to the radio there [Minneapolis] really turned me off a lot of things that were supposedly going on. If they did pick up on something they'd just play it to death, and you'd end up totally disliking it" (Wall 2016, 19). This practice, known as high or heavy rotation, is a common radio technique which plays a limited list of popular songs more often than others, to build audiences. Roger Sadler (2005) accuses high rotation programming policies of causing radio to sound less diverse. It certainly annoyed Prince. In *Ebony* magazine, he spoke of his desire to hear "more colorful radio stations" which played a greater variety of grooves and distinctive music styles (Norment, 1986). In this instance, he does not criticize radio for the uniformity of its programming. Instead, Prince lays the blame at musicians for their lack of creativity, "everyone just jumps on what they think are the hottest sounds." He

reiterated this view in *Rock & Folk* over a decade later, when commenting on the uniformity of 90s radio, "everything you hear on the radio today sounds the same" (Dahan 1997). This dissatisfaction stayed with him, as Prince told Jeff Jensen (2004) that he never listened to radio, "When I want to hear new music, I go make some". The blame for radio's supposed decline can be largely attributed to the deregulation of international radio markets in the 80s and 90s, which led to the consolidation of many stations (Stoller 2010). This resulted in a narrowing of station formats and developed an industry culture that was averse to risk and "obsessed with demographics" (Walker 2011, 214). Michael Keith (2007) also attributes a lack of on-air diversity to industry consolidation, citing interviews with industry practitioners who blamed multiple station ownership for a dearth of new programming ideas and limited creativity. The comments Prince made during his *Piano and a Microphone* Paisley Park concert specifically recognized the strength of localization. This underscores his distaste for the networking practices of major US radio conglomerates, such as Clear Channel (who later rebranded themselves as iHeartMedia) and Infinity Radio. In his posthumous memoir, Prince directly addressed Clear Channel's programming policies, "It's all about competition, how can we outsell … With Clear Channel it becomes like Soylent Green – people feeding people to people. We need to tell them that they keep trying to ram Katy Perry and Ed Sheeran down our throats and we don't like it no matter how many times they play it" (Prince 2019, 98). This dissatisfaction with the medium can be seen as an idealistic desire for the radio of his youth. Prince was disappointed in what the industry had become, yet optimistic for what it could potentially be. His dominance of 80s radio could never last, and perhaps he begrudged the lack of airplay that followed the release of 1994's *Come* album, his lowest selling to date. Radio had moved on, chasing instead the zeitgeist of grunge rock and gangsta rap (Keller, 1997). Swensson (2021) believes that, in later life, Prince had "a very romantic recollection" of radio. Yet, as time went on, he became deeply skeptical of how the music and radio industries had become more corporatized. Nevertheless, Prince still championed local radio in practical ways throughout his career. In 1993 he allowed several hundred tickets to be sold for the final rehearsal of his tour of Europe, to benefit local radio station KMOJ (Light 1994). Prince was also a firm supporter of The Current, a non-commercial radio station based in the Twin Cities. Swensson (2021), a former station DJ, spoke about Prince's relationship with the station, which dated back to 2009.

> It's something that was really important to us when he was alive… He came to one of our big birthday parties at First Avenue. He was a member [of the station]. He supported

> us publicly on Twitter and gave The Current songs to debut … I think he saw independent radio as one of the last vestiges of a way to push back [against corporate radio] and create a conduit directly from an independent artist to people who are tuning in[1].

Air Play and Censorship

Having explored Prince's relationship with radio, I now consider how the radio industry viewed Prince and his artistic output. I assess his presence on radio, the issue of censorship, and how the evolution of other mediums reduced his need for traditional radio airplay. I also examine his identity as a "cross-over artist." Joseph Vogel (2018) makes the case that, alongside Michael Jackson, "no one influenced the sound of the 80s more than Prince" (31). It was a decade when his own music and associated acts were heard across US radio, alongside countless imitators. Yet, his conquest of US radio was not straightforward. While Prince's first two albums impacted on the soul and R&B charts, they did not crossover to white audiences. He even found it hard to gain airplay in his hometown. In the late 70s it was difficult to find Prince on Minneapolis radio, as the predominantly white audience were more interested in the experimental punk bands like Hüsker Dü and The Replacements (Swensson 2017, 186). Concerns about his early subject matter, which I return to later, also posed a problem. As Dave Hill (1989) points out, many radio stations found his lyrics unacceptable, especially in Reagan's age of conservative politics. As a result, airplay for Prince's early music was "restricted not only by 'race' but also by 'good taste'" (47).

Prince's quest for mainstream success raises questions about the willingness to let his songwriting be influenced by a desire to gain radio airplay. Was the supposed purity of his artistic output swayed by the pressure of conforming to radio's expectations? For Vogel (2018), Prince did not need to "sell out" to become a mainstream artist. Instead, it was about "being commercially ambitious and having artistic integrity" (5). Prince was certainly aware of what worked best on certain radio formats and crafted content that reflected his vision while simultaneously matching market requirements. I argue that Prince demonstrated an instinctive understanding of radio programming and deployed this insight to best serve his career. In an interview for the *Los Angeles Times* Prince spoke about his intentions for the *Dirty Mind* album,

[1] Andrea Swensson, Zoom conversation with author, May 19, 2021.

"I wanted a hit album. It was for radio rather than for me" (Hill 1989, 94). Ultimately, the album did not sell in large numbers on its release, although it garnered good press reviews and positive word of mouth. The subject matter was simply too provocative to gain wide support from radio. Undeterred, Prince continued to hone his ability to write for radio and by his fifth album, *1999*, had almost perfected the art. When discussing the track "Delirious" keyboardist Matt Fink commented, "To some extent, he was trying to make the music sound nice, something that would be pleasing to the ear of the average person who listens to the radio yet send a message" (Sheffield 2017). He succeeded in this, as the song followed "Little Red Corvette" into the US Top Ten. As Hill (1989) states, Prince managed to achieve crossover success without "blanding out" (88). The track "Adore" offers a similar insight into his intuition for radio airplay. On its completion, Prince identified it as being for Black radio. Interestingly, this song was not released as a single, but his instincts were correct, as Black radio did indeed pick up on "Adore". In 2019, music industry executive Lenny Waronker recalled how the Urban Department at Warner Brothers questioned whether there was a song on the *Diamonds and Pearls* album that would suit their specific format.

> I get him [Prince] on the phone, and he said, "Maybe I could take so-and-so and turn it around." Then he stopped and said, "It's a marketing problem. You guys deal with it." And he hung up. That was on a Friday. On Monday, I get a call from him, and he says, "You've got yourself a new baby." It was an amazing new track, "Gett Off." It turned out to be a big hit (Star Tribune 2019).

These examples reveal Prince's understanding of radio formats and his ability to create content for the industry's needs. I suggest this skill had more to do with his understanding of radio audiences, rather than simply pandering to radio programmers. It was done on his own terms, without compromise.

The expression "cross over artist" usually refers to artists of color who manage to reach broad mainstream multiracial audiences (Vogel 2018). Prince was often labelled as a crossover artist and, according to Robin Kelley (1996), he moved this notion to "another level of sophistication" (92). Lionel Richie had enjoyed crossover success with his group The Commodores, in the late 70s, and then into the 80s with a succession of solo "middle of the road" (MOR) ballads. In some respects, his achievements paved the way for a new breed of crossover 80s artists, such as Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson who, alongside Prince, reached new heights of mainstream success. Jackson's music largely worked in the field of

R&B and mainstream pop within the conventions of popular Black music, but with "occasional nods towards, and incorporation of, rock-based gestures" (Brackett 2012, 179). Prince, on the other hand, roamed wherever the muse took him. His 80s output drew on disparate musical genres to connect with diverse radio audiences, from punk and heavy metal to rhythm and blues and soul, "his appeal reached beyond urban Black audiences to the white suburbs" (Kelley 1996, 92). It was the *Purple Rain* album that finally connected him to a wider "white mainstream market" (Hawkins and Niblock 2016, 11). According to Vogel (2018), the album was calculated to be an accessible crossover success "loaded with hits" and purposely designed for FM radio in an effort to "reach audiences across genre, race, gender, and age" (38). The accompanying music videos helped, too.

The arrival of MTV in 1981 had an immediate and powerful influence on popular music and culture (Jones, 2005). It heralded a new era in music broadcasting and challenged radio's position as the preeminent provider of new music releases. Bob Pittman, MTV's cofounder who later became the network's CEO, had previously worked as a radio programmer for NBC. He quickly put his understanding of music radio to good use as MTV's programmer. A Nielsen survey in 1982 found that MTV was having a sizable influence on the public's exposure to new artists and record buying decisions. Significantly, 68% of respondents identified MTV as being important or very important, while radio only managed 62% (Denisoff 2017, 100). This development was not lost on Prince, who clearly recognised MTV's growing strength. In December 1982, "1999" became Prince's first song to be broadcast on MTV. Yet, while the video was played on high rotation, the single still fell short of the top 40 as it only received limited radio airplay. The following year, MTV added "Little Red Corvette" to their artist rotation, helping its ascent into the US top ten. By this stage, MTV's leverage had increased, and radio was finding it increasingly hard to complete with its nation-wide reach. It soon became clear that the network was now able to "break" an artist in much the same way as radio. With the combination of MTV and radio now firmly behind him, Prince was able to capitalize on his newfound crossover status.

Aside from the threat of MTV, the 80s provided radio with another competitor. At a New Music Seminar held in 1986, Neil Portnow, the vice-president of A&R for EMI America Records, spoke about the increasing importance of movies in breaking new acts and promoting established artists. Portnow noted that radio programming was no longer the "primary exposure source" for new music, claiming that movies were the "wave of the future" (Bessman 1986, 56). Films from the 80s, such as *Ghostbusters*, *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, and *Top Gun*, all produced number one hits on the Billboard Hot 100 charts and their accompanying soundtracks

had dominated the album charts. While there had been successful film soundtracks in the 70s, most notably *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, this synergy was amplified in the post-MTV era. According to Portnow, there was a significant shift in the 80s, as music videos and films had essentially replaced radio in breaking new music. Of course, Prince was fully aware of this development, as the *Purple Rain* film, videos and soundtrack had helped establish the model, resulting in two US number one hits and a near miss. This approach was further exploited with the *Parade* album which accompanied the film *Under the Cherry Moon*, the *Batman* soundtrack, and *Graffiti Bridge*. Prince no longer needed radio quite so much. He had other ways to reach new audiences.

Considering the taboo subject matter found in much of Prince's early work, the initial reticence of radio programmers is understandable. That said, he was still able to infiltrate the airwaves with numerous examples of risqué content. Tracks like "Irresistible Bitch", "Head", "Dirty Mind", and "Private Joy", gained limited traction on Black radio and more daring urban pop stations who, according to former Warner Bros chairman/CEO Russ Thyret, were more permissive (Hill 1989). Prince was sometimes coy when discussing his subject matter, but there was little subtlety to be found in tracks like "Do Me Baby and "Jack U Off". When Bream (1979) asked Prince about the meaning of "Soft and Wet", he commented, "They asked me about it on the radio, and I told them it was about deodorant. I don't think they believed me." Apparently not. Without broad radio support, "Soft and Wet" only reached 92 on the Hot 100 charts. As Hill (1989) succinctly put it "Black hit. White miss" (45).

The supposed lewdness of his lyrics was brought to the public's attention due to the 1985 Senate hearing about obscenity in music. In June that year a *Washington Post* article, titled "Filth on the Air" (Raspberry, 1985), outlined how Tipper Gore's 11-year-old daughter had come home with a copy of *Purple Rain*, "She bought it because she liked "Let's Go Crazy", but then I heard the words to "Darling Nikki" … I started paying attention". Gore and Susan Baker helped form The Parents Music Resource Center, with the aim of establishing a rating system to warn consumers about explicit or dangerous material. Vogel (2018) offers a detailed analysis of how Prince's work was represented in the hearing, but it is worth noting how radio was portrayed as a gateway to the corrupting influence of "objectionable material". When Senator Paula Hawkins asked the PMRC's Susan Baker where her children first discovered the music in question, she replied, "my 8-year-old hears music on her clock-radio. I mean, she does not have tapes and records at this stage in her life, but she does listen to the radio" (Record Labelling, 1985). Baker then cited Sheena Easton's "Sugar Walls" as an example of how explicit content was regularly featured on mainstream radio, "It is played 10 to 12 times a day".

The ensuing hullabaloo prompted the recording industry to voluntarily issue contentious albums with Parental Advisory labels, while The National Association of Broadcasters requested that record companies provide lyric sheets with any records sent to radio stations. This was already standard practice for Prince's record label, as copies of *Dirty Mind* had been sent to DJs with the message, "Programmers: please audition prior to airing" (Hill 1989, 87). Vogel makes the point that while Prince's critics may have considered him to be "unpredictable, deviant, and dangerous" these were the same reasons why his fans loved him (123).

Online legacies

I now want to reflect on Prince's presence and continuing legacy via online audio. For all his supposed skepticism of digital platforms, Prince was quick to embrace technology. As Adrian Bautista (2017) notes, he moved rapidly from "radio to television and MTV to online radio, digital downloads and mobile devices" (370). I explore Prince's interest in online radio before considering how podcasting has interrogated his life and work.

The *NPG Music Club*, launched in 2001, was a prescient online subscription service. Designed to side-step corporate middlemen, the website distributed exclusive new music directly to fans and provided members with preferential access to concerts. While it never quite lived up to its aspirations, its initial promotion announced weekly, fan-hosted radio shows amongst its many offerings. Between 2001 and 2002 the site featured a series of 11 NPG Ahdio episodes, presented in the style of radio programs with presenter links. These shows, described as the NPG's "only official, authorised radio", often rallied against the corporatisation of music, with comments such as "this is what freedom sounds like" and "there ain't no middleman" (C.L. Community 2018). The episodes built on Prince's earlier *WNPG Radio Show*, broadcast on BBC Radio 1 in April 1995. This 26-minute program featured Prince as a digitally altered radio presenter, using his "Tora Tora" pseudonym. The fictitious *WNPG* call sign was first mentioned in the opening to the 1994 "Love Sign" video, in which Prince appears as a DJ working for a radio station.

His interest in developing radio shows suggests Prince still saw merit in the medium. In 2005 he was in talks with satellite radio provider SiriusXM to create an artist-designed show. Around this time, Prince made a demo with DJ Rashida which showcased their vision for a Prince radio station called *3121 Radio*, to coincide with his 2006 album. While the idea did not eventuate, it was finally realized fifteen years later when SiriusXM launched a dedicated Prince

radio channel which featured the demo. Writer Dan Adler (2020) called the show "a sly and vibrant slice of Prince's life and personality at the time." Five years after this initial concept was aborted Prince was evidently still interested in the concept of starting his own station, as the *Peach and Black* podcast team was approached for advice on how to set up a Prince radio station (Ford 2018). While this project also never materialized, the ongoing attraction of starting his own station demonstrates a certain faith in radio and an appreciation of its potential in online environments.

Academics question whether podcasts can be defined as radio. Hugh Chignell (2009) states that distinctions between the forms are "splitting hairs" as "no medium can be defined by the technology of its delivery: a podcast remains radio because of the way it is produced" (2). However, Richard Berry (2006) believes that podcasts have certain characteristics which are distinct from radio, "enough for us to consider them alongside radio, rather than purely as part of radio" (666). Both share similar approaches to production and consumption. Therefore, I have chosen to include Prince podcasts within the scope of this study. Podcasting has been embraced by Prince's fan community as a convenient and meaningful way to explore his life and work. Liberated from the constraints of traditional broadcasting models, fans quickly harnessed this relatively low-cost medium, which is largely free from legal considerations (Markman 2011). According to Henry Jenkins (2006) the emergence of a new participatory culture challenged established notions of passive media spectatorship. Media producers and consumers no longer had separate roles but were participants, able to "interact with each other according to a new set of rules" (3). Fans could now create the content they wanted to hear, without having to seek permission from corporate gatekeepers.

The relatively simplicity and immediacy of podcasting, along with its potential to reach international audiences, made it an ideal platform for people to "communicate about the things they love" (Cochrane 2005, 30). While the Prince podcasting community is largely amateur, it is possible to identify the emergence of "Pro-Ams" who Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller (2004) describe as amateurs who work to professional standards. These podcasts may take the form of a simple conversation, a monologue, or interviews with experts and Prince associates. A notable example is *Peach and Black*, an Australia-based podcast which started in October 2009. This long-running series is of particular interest as Prince reached out to the hosts. Founding *Peach and Black* podcaster Rob Esse received an email from Prince's management, which read "Prince really likes the show, he's heard it and is a fan. Keep it up" (Ford, 2018). This awareness implies Prince engaged with podcasts and understood how they could be used to connect with fans. Among numerous other examples is Michael Dean's *Podcast on Prince*

which, aside from its entertainment value, acts as a valuable online repository of Prince related oral histories. I also draw attention to Chris Johnson's *Purple Knights* podcast and *Muse 2 the Pharaoh*, hosted by Darling Nisi, which offers in-depth discourse on "the life, work, legacy, and impact of Prince from a woman's perspective" (Nisi, n.d.).

Kris Markman's (2011) study into the motivations of podcasters underscored a passion for the subject matter a key driver. Producers of music podcasters often claimed their inspiration came from "their love of music, or the desire to share and promote the music and musicians they featured to a wider audience" (556). However, the next example arguably falls under Tiziano Bonini's (2015) category of commercial "for-profit" podcasting (23). Minneapolis radio station The Current, in partnership with the Prince Estate, produced three seasons of podcasts which covered the *1999*, *One Nite Alone* and *Sign of the Times* albums. These podcasts were presented as official companions to the deluxe reissues of each album and were launched to coincide with their release dates. These episodes, presented by Andrea Swensson, were hybrid productions, functioning as both radio documentaries and podcasts. By serializing these stories into episodic form, unrestrained by traditional radio schedules, they allowed for a more discursive approach with greater in-depth analysis. In 2021 the "Prince: The Story of Sign of the Times" series won the prestigious *Webby* awards for best *Arts & Culture Podcast* and *People's Voice* award. This success was followed by a further 4-part podcast series, "The Story of Welcome 2 America", created by the Prince Estate. We can only theorize about how Prince might have interacted with podcasting as it grew in popularity. Yet, as indicated, there is evidence that he recognised its potential and possibly appreciated the way podcasting shifted power away from traditional radio programmers.

Conclusions

On the day Prince died, radio paid tribute to an artist who had featured prominently on its playlists through the years. According to Mediabase (2016), his music on North American radio spiked by 1585%, as DJs played their favourite tracks and listeners called in to share their recollections and request his songs. Given the span and quality of his output, Prince's status as heritage radio artist is unsurprising. Radio writer Sean Ross (2016) refers to Prince as a staple artist on certain US "greatest hits" stations, yet he acknowledges programmer Chris Huff's assertion that most posthumous airplay can be found on Adult R&B stations. When tracks are played on traditional radio today, they are predominantly Prince's biggest commercial hits from the 80s. Nevertheless, the ongoing presence of his music via traditional radio and online

platforms stand as a testament to the quality of his song writing, while the depth of critical analysis found in Prince radio documentaries and podcasts reflects the complexity of the man and his output.

The accepted narrative suggests the broad appeal of Prince's music was borne from his listening to a wide range of music on the radio while growing up. But this simplistic assessment does him a disservice. His ability to connect with diverse audiences was not happenstance. Prince developed a sophisticated understanding of how the radio industry functioned and used this knowledge to reach audiences throughout the 80s and beyond. Prince was always interested in building connections with his fans, and he often used radio as a conduit for these interactions. While he recognized weaknesses in the medium, he also appreciated its strengths and looked back fondly on radio's early influence and the opportunities it provided.

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