

The Law and Business of Prince, RIP—Michael's Rock and Roll Posse

How to memorialize the remarkable life that was Prince—entertainer, fashion icon, gender-bending trendsetter, movie star and producer, record producer, and business man? Business man? Yes, and like David Bowie who also passed away recently, a full length course could be taught on The Law and Business of Prince. I have decided that others have and will cover his unrivalled musical outpouring, so I will expiate my own grief by concentrating on his business acumen. While it was a mixed bag of successes and failures, Prince early on became enmeshed in many attempts to control his musical fate. Like many others, indeed most entertainers, he entered into a contract that he spent over a decade trying to get out of—joining many other acts, not the least of whom was Van Morrison, who tried to shed his Bang contract for years. He finally prevailed, but only after many years of wrangling, public posturing, and complaining in his epic way (writing “slave” on his cheek, eschewing his trademarked and branded name and taking on the unpronounceable Glyph, and many other transgressive corporate/artistic acts to try and wear down the deep-pocketed Warner Records). He bought back his own masters, and began to exercise full control over his output. In a Law of Rock and Roll Radio Show last year, I described how U2, Houston's Beyoncé, Prince, and others had revolutionized the “Law of Releases” by skipping record companies all together and no longer just cutting an album and touring to support it, as it had been done since the whole industry blossomed:

U2 was not the only group to break away from the traditional release practices. Beyoncé's self-titled cd was released late in the year—with 17 videos in the package—and then almost a year later with a “platinum edition” that also included new songs. These were all released digitally to the iTunes Store without any announcement or promotion; the cd sold over a million copies in its first week, even though her many fans had not prepared for its release. Prince, who has issued sporadic singles but no fresh studio album in over 5 years, re-emerged with two new cds on the same day, without any announcements: his “Art Official Age” and “PlectrumElectrum,” playing with the all-woman rock group, 3rdEyeGirl, in an analog, live-in-the-studio format. Prince also figured in a lawsuit when he gratuitously passed on to Live Nation subscribers an email about Judith Hill's forthcoming work and a free download to her debut album “Back in Time.”
[I have attached the show, above]

I do not know what has happened in the Judith Hill matter, which did strike me as inconsistent with his ethos that artists themselves should control their own cultural productions and musical means of music, but I also cannot help but think he believed that this odd and unauthorized form of a shout-out to the wickedly talented Judith Hill would help her. Hill has inexplicably-to-me never really broken out as her extraordinary voice promises, and it was probably the case that he believed this would surprise and help her, as he helped nurture so many other women performers. There is surely a story in his support for women, not only those with whom he performed such as Sheila Escobedo (Sheila E), but his generosity in writing so many songs covered by women, most notably "Stand Back" (Stevie Nicks, 1983), "Manic Monday" (The Bangles, 1985), "Sugar Walls" (Sheena Easton, 1985—also showing an amazingly-erotic mastery of titles and imagery), "Love Song" (Madonna, 1989), and my own favorite, "Nothing Compares 2 U" (Sinéad O'Connor, 1990).

In *Prince: The Music and the Masks*, (St. Martin's Press, © 2011), the great music reporter Ronin Ro writes authoritatively about Prince's legal battles with Warner Brothers, the convoluted pathways he attempted to get out of the contract, and the insider-narrative about these travails. (Ro has also written fascinating books on Sean "Puffy" Combs, Death Row Records, Run-D.M.C., Dr. Dre, and others.) During this period (1993), which slowed the release of Prince material but not his treasure trove of unreleased songs, estimated to be over 600 at his death, Warner released two discs of his greatest works, "The Hits 1 and The Hits 2" with hit singles, and a third cd "The B-Sides," with, well, B-sides (these used to be the second side of a hit 45 which is no longer an accurate term with CDs, downloads, and streamed music), unreleased tracks, and the previously-unreleased "Peach," "Pope," and "Pink Cashmere." It is this 3 CD package that I have been listening to over the last few days. As a function of the bad blood, Prince barely cooperated with the production, and did not tour in support of the project, likely leaving millions of dollars on the table.

As a useful summary of the extraordinary outpouring of surprise and grief and *carino*, I have listed several of the best here in URLs. I draw your attention to this unbelievable rendition by Prince of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," the exquisite George Harrison song played here by his son Danni, Tom Petty, and Jeff Lynne (who reveals himself to have been a better singer than I remembered from his ELO work, as good as that was). Watch Danni Harrison's face when Prince takes over at the end, and watch Prince simply take off the guitar and walk away.

Also buried in these tributes is a grainy copy of an appearance by three gifted and troubled singers, James Brown, Michael Jackson, and Prince, all at once.

I just wish all of them had not flamed out, but gawd, they all enriched our lives while we had them. May their souls rest in peace.

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<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/prince-live>

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/remembering-prince>

<http://wpo.st/UnfW1> (Billy Gibbons)

http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/princes-lost-rolling-stone-interview-i-dont-think-about-gone-20160422?utm_source=newsletter&utm_content=daily&utm_campaign=042216_15&utm_medium=email (RS interview, 2014)

<http://nyti.ms/1SwK5UW>

<http://nyti.ms/26i5OXT> (Ben Sisario, NYT)

<http://nyti.ms/26i0wvh>

<http://nyti.ms/1T1DAa4> (Jon Pareles, NYT)

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