



'Purple Rain' at 30

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Just over a year ago, Adam Tod Brown wrote a great article for Cracked called "[4 Classic Albums That Get More Praise Than They Deserve](#)."

[\(http://www.cracked.com/blog/4-classic-albums-that-get-more-praise-than-they-deserve/\)](http://www.cracked.com/blog/4-classic-albums-that-get-more-praise-than-they-deserve/)" Though it contained as

much Yoko Ono-bashing as you'd expect from a website as frequently fratty as Cracked, it made a great argument for Ringo's self-titled as the best solo '70s Beatles album and contributed substantially to the

recent critical revival of Neil Young's *On The Beach*. The thing that interested me most, however, was Brown's citation of Prince's *Purple Rain* as a "flawless album" that gets as much press as it deserves, "no matter how many other great Prince albums there are."

I instantly disagreed with the implication that his 1984 soundtrack to the film of the same name was Prince's greatest album, but his article didn't elicit a cynical "nahh" from me as much as a bolt of surprise. Sure, *Purple Rain* is the Prince album random people on the street will be most likely to name. But I'd been raised alongside *1999* and *Sign O' The Times* as well -- albums that both get well-deserved five-star ratings but still don't place quite as highly on critical lists as *Purple Rain*. I always presumed these albums were just as famous, and I wasn't sure why this meek 9-track album was getting all the praise.

I still agree it's not Prince's best. But it's his most solid -- meaning the fewest indulgences, the highest masterpiece-to-crap ratio, the most content per its running time. *Dirty Mind* is two-thirds as long and lacks a single bad song, but its structure is a bit uneven; in my opinion, this adds to its carefree appeal, but it's still an imperfection. Meanwhile, *1999* contains some of the most ambitious and daring pop music made during the 1980s, but a lot of its songs are about twice as long as they need to be -- though not necessarily as they should be.

Purple Rain takes everything Prince does best and puts it together into a cohesive whole that's easy to listen to front to back. All of the contradictions in Prince's personality show up here side by side. We see the conflicted Christian Prince ("Let's Go Crazy") alongside the hypersexual Prince ("Darling Nikki"), then the pop-visionary Prince ("When Doves Cry") alongside the pop-conservative Prince ("Take Me With U"). There's Prince the introverted studio whiz ("I Would Die 4 U," "Computer Blue") and Prince as the all-devouring, mic stand-humping frontman ("Baby I'm A Star").



Happy birthday.



And then there's "The Beautiful Ones," the ultimate workout for what might be the best vocal sound in all of music -- Prince's scream, a throat-shredding release of ecstasy that its owner wields with the same control of any of the many instruments he's mastered. It's as simultaneously sexy and disturbing as...well, Prince's whole persona. It's the thing that cemented my obsession with Prince, and only on *Purple Rain* does it have its own song.

Elsewhere on the album we see Prince fleshing out some of his later obsessions. "I Would Die 4 U" and "Purple Rain" both find Prince using his trademark Linn LM-1 drum machine to create that very '80s sense of retro-futuristic isolation exemplified by *Blade Runner*; *Sign O' The Times* would expand on this mood for the duration of a 78-minute opus. Because of how much of Prince's personality we get on this album, it's tempting to single *Purple Rain* out as the best introduction to Prince.

But it's also the one least likely to blow a newcomer's mind. As bold and stylistically diverse an album as it is, it's one of the least interesting of Prince's major albums, and the least representative of his aesthetic. It's his least eccentric major album, its most meticulously produced, and the most in line with the "rock" ideal -- perhaps a reason why the guitar-obsessed *Rolling Stone* staffers praised it and continue to praise it so much more highly than anything else in the man's oeuvre.

If you took out the vocals and the awesomely detuned synth, there wouldn't be much in "Let's Go Crazy" to signify it as a Prince song. The production is too meticulous, too arena-rock to really be representative of the eccentricity that makes Prince so endlessly fascinating. "Purple Rain" suffers from the opposite problem. There are a million slow-burning ballads like it, and that plaintive Linn drum is the only thing really tying it to his aesthetic.

This is Prince working in a pop setting. It is worth remembering *Purple Rain* is first and foremost the soundtrack to a film, and much like the Beatles' film albums, it's an artist being as creative as possible within the medium of a stocking-stuffer item designed chiefly to promote another work of art and make some extra cash from it. Prince is one of those artists who usually scores hits on his own terms, who makes no compromises but just happens to make audacious music that people really like. Here, it's the other way around -- the desire to make something people will like is the box in which Prince's creativity freely bounces around.

It is perhaps for this reason that "Take Me With U" is the most effective song here. Prince's co-star Apollonia guests on this song; her vocals fit so well into the song that her presence merges with that of Prince until it's unclear whose song it really is. Prince takes into account all the hallmarks of a great lovebird duet -- playfulness, chemistry, and above all else, romance. This song isn't explicitly sexual, but it's incredibly sensual. Both vocal performances are bursting with excitement beneath the functional cool required of pop vocals, and by the time they reach the ecstatic bridge ("I don't care if we spend the night in your mansion"), they're barely able to control themselves. It's brilliant.

Yesterday was the 30th anniversary of *Purple Rain*, and in mentioning this, most news outlets have inevitably mentioned the massive amount of praise this album has received. As such, people who have not previously heard Prince will be drawn to that album. But as undeniably fantastic as it is, I'd maintain that *Purple Rain* is not the album most likely to convince a newcomer of Prince's genius -- *Sign O' The Times* is more eclectic, *1999* more diverse, *Dirty Mind* more did-he-just-say-that sexual, *The Black Album* more bizarre. If you know Prince first and foremost as that skinny pop star with

the high voice and need convincing of his genius, any of those albums would work better.

Which is not to say you should overlook *Purple Rain* by any means. Though I would argue it's not his most essential work, it's the album that does the best job of proving he's capable of just about anything.

[Ed. note: Prince makes it notoriously difficult to find his music online, so here's a recent interview instead. But really, if you don't own a Prince album by now, there are worse things you could spend money on.]