

# Holy Hell! Crystal Ball Turns 20

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October 30, 2018



Fuck the Vault: the material Prince released is enough of a pain in the ass. Have you heard *Chocolate Invasion*? How about *The Slaughterhouse*? Did you know he made a straight-to-DVD movie to accompany the *Love Symbol* album, with his wife-to-be Mayte Garcia as an Egyptian princess? The lines between what Prince released and what's technically still Vault material isn't always clear; *The Black Album* is on Tidal but nowhere else, and it's pretty easy to reconstruct his legendary "lost" album *Camille*. Dead in the middle of this ungainly morass sits the 150-minute compendium *Crystal Ball*, the Marianas Trench of the Prince discography.

*Crystal Ball* was released in 1998, when not many people cared about Prince, or at least not as many as during his brilliant '80s or the postmortem rush of adulation that will soon yield a flood of Vault releases. It's an album of apocrypha from a period that, to most fans, is already apocryphal: his new-jack '90s, specifically 1994's *Come* and 1995's *The Love Symbol Album*. It even comes with its own apocrypha: its original release was bundled with *The Truth*, a largely acoustic album featuring Prince's ode to veganism (*I don't eat no funky, funky blue cheese!*), and *Kamasutra*, a cassette of easy-listening orchestral music made for his wedding to Garcia.

It was as easy then as now to miss the older gems buried neck-deep in this stuff, which might be classics were they released at any other time in his career. "Good Love" is a missing piece of *Camille* featuring perhaps Prince's weirdest LinnDrum pattern ever, no mean feat; the beat seems to expand and contract like liquid metal as Prince's pitch-shifted voice oozes through the machinery. "Crucial" could've ended *Sign o' the Times* instead of "Adore" and might have even been the better ending, its angelic harmonies providing the bulk of the texture. "Sexual Suicide" and its dopey synth lead could've been one of the stronger songs on 1986's *Parade*.

And then there's "Cloreen Bacon Skin," from 1983. If *Crystal Ball* is Prince's Marianas Trench, this is Challenger Deep: sixteen minutes of bass and drums (the latter by Morris Day), with the Purple One grousing in his dirty-old-man voice about his ugly wife and her brother. The voice and some of the ad-libs ("*Cheesy! Breezy!*") are almost identical to those used on "Cold Coffee and Cocaine," from this year's inaugural Vault release *Piano & a Microphone 1983*. It was recorded around the same time and performs a similar function for the listener: to hear Prince spin something wacky in real time. Here was a genius who worked best through improvisation.

The newer material isn't all bad. "Movie Star" shows off a wicked sense of humor Prince still isn't given enough credit for. A few songs on the second disc, like "Da Bang" and "Calhoun Square," indicate Prince could've had a great heavy funk album in him around the time he was doing pale Teddy Riley retreads. But songs like a Shock G remix of "Love Sign" or the hopeless anti-rap screed "Days of Wild" are more the norm. (The latter features the lyric "A woman every day should be thanked/ Not disrespected, raped or spanked despite being intended for *The Gold Experience* – on whose "I Hate U" Prince rapes a woman as punishment for leaving him.)

Not a lot of people heard *Crystal Ball* when it came out. One person who was listening took it to heart. D'Angelo has cited "Movie Star" as his favorite Prince deep cut, and on 2014's *Black Messiah* we hear the same heavy wah guitar, fucked vocals, and mid-tempo swagger as the aforementioned Disc Two cuts. "Ain't That Easy," which opens that album, sounds especially like *Crystal Ball*'s "Interactive," minus embarrassing computer references. It's easy to see how a young soul journeyman could love something like *Crystal Ball*. Quality control was never at the core of Prince's genius, but his unbridled, try-it-all freedom is as frustrating as it is inspiring.