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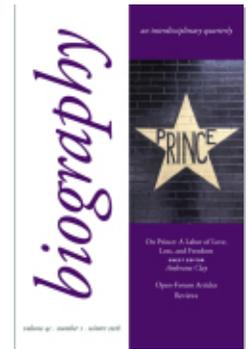
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PRINCE, QUEERNESS, AND THE BOTH/AND OF "OR"

SCOTT POULSON-BRYANT

First some context:

I dropped out of college in the middle of senior year because I wanted to be a writer. I was lucky enough to see that dream through, becoming a music journalist, reviewing records and concerts, interviewing musicians, and trying to dig beyond the surface of celebrity and stardom to locate how they did the things they did, played the notes they played, and wrote the lyrics they sang. The highlight of that life: traveling to Paisley Park to interview Prince as he put the finishing touches on his *Diamonds and Pearls* album. That weekend in Minnesota I knew I was joining a very small fraternity of post-*Purple Rain*-era music journalists; Prince had stopped doing press, allowing his music and shows to tell whatever story needed to be told about him. But there I was, standing in the palatial lobby of the joint, as he walked toward me.

"I'm Prince," he said as an introduction.

The journo in me wanted to simply state my name. But the teenager in me, the closeted fourteen-year-old who'd listened to his albums and mined the notes and lyrics for any hint of the queerness I felt, the queerness I felt emanating from his gender-bending performative mode, from the falsetto, from the mascara, from all of it, wanted to thank him for making me feel safe even as he made me feel confident about the potential for a boy like me living in a world like this. If I could live in a world that allowed Prince to be Prince, I didn't, I thought, have much to worry about.

Flash forward many, many years:

On the eve of my fortieth birthday, I went back to college to finish my BA, not knowing that a return to a place where I'd been young would result in a moment deeper than nostalgia, bigger than myself. Being back at Brown and then, a couple of years later, at Harvard in graduate school, where I lived with undergrads for five years as a resident tutor, I found myself immersed in a heady millennial landscape of Facebook and Twitter, of Spotify playlists

instead of mixtapes, and texting instead of talking. Luckily there were some things I did know about, or rather remembered, from having once been twenty-one years old: weed and beer of course, but mostly the debilitating self-consciousness and the tensions of sexual confusion. I met students there who, like me, found salvation in music, who tried to locate their own narratives in the lyrics of pop stars. I didn't expect to experience loss in those spaces, to emotionally return to my own queer youth as I acted as a guide, a mentor, to a new generation of queer youth. But the deaths of Michael Jackson and Prince forced me to do so.

In the summer of 2009 when MJ died, I spent the entire afternoon sitting on a couch with a twenty-year-old lacrosse player from Baltimore, switching the TV between CNN and MTV, crying like a baby and trying to explain to him why the tears wouldn't stop. Seven years later, one day in April, I walked into the dining hall and was swamped by a horde of twenty-year-olds offering me condolences: they'd heard about Prince before I had, and knowing how news of his death might affect me, they covered me in hugs and hovered over me with concerned looks. It occurred to me in that dramatic moment that I was experiencing the loss of these two icons, not with my buddies from high school or college, people my age with whom I'd danced to Michael's music or skipped class during our junior year of college to play *Sign o' the Times* back to front five times, but with a generation of kids twenty years my junior who did not have much cultural context for these two musical geniuses who'd changed the world, who'd helped to transform blackness on the public stage, who, at least I thought, made the world safe for queer black boys like me trying to get our grooves on in these oh-so-masculinist streets. How was I processing these deaths in this context? Would I process them? How would I mourn these deaths, while also, in many ways, mourning my youth, surrounded by many twenty-first-century versions of, well, twentieth-century me, that is, black queer boys trying like we all did before them to get their grooves? One of the things I did was write them letters. These letters—to a closeted boy terrified of outing himself to his teammates and Final Club bros, and to an out-and-proud genderqueer gay boy—accompanied the playlists of Prince's music they demanded that I make, so that, as one of them wrote to me in an email, "we can love him like you love him; so we can be inspired by him like you were inspired by him."

What follows are excerpts from those letters.

Dear Tony and Kevin,

Do you remember what Tony said to me the first time we talked about Prince at that study break your junior year? I'd told you about seeing Prince's Lovesexy tour with my first real boyfriend and you told me about hearing Prince in the car with your mother, who grew up loving Prince, but that you didn't know how to process his music—which you said sounded very 80s—until you realized that “Prince always sounds like he wants to fuck me. And I'm actually sorta okay with that.” In other words, you were like so many of us adolescents and teens in the 80s who tracked our own burgeoning sexuality through the frame of Prince and his declarations of carnal joy. TWO SONGS MAKE ME THINK OF YOU: listen to the track “Erotic City” and imagine a bunch of 17-year-olds losing their minds at the pluck of that opening guitar lick, coy as a flick of a wrist, blending into the most musical and melodic drum machine we'd ever heard, before Prince doubles, then triple-tracks his voice, switching registers and tones, eventually meshing with Sheila E. until both their voices are neither male nor female, only sexy, sexual, sensual. Then play “Computer Blue.” This one is important as I continue your Prince education with this mix of songs. You all always asked me why I thought Prince was “important”? Well, other than being the best guitarist of his generation, other than refiguring black pop at the heady crossover moment of the 1980s, he did something quite relevant to and for YOUR generation actually: listen to the lyrics of the song. “Where is my love life” he asks. “Where can it be? / There must be something wrong with the machinery.” You see what he's doing there, right? Prince foresaw the app-based ambitions of your generation's search for love and sex and connection through the binary code of 1s and 0s which stretch across your phones and computers, tying you intimately together even as you complain about not knowing how to do intimacy like previous generations did.

And Kevin, I chose some songs specifically for you, too. Since you're a songwriter who knows you're scoring points with me by spending every dinner name-dropping R. E. M. and Stevie Wonder and Rufus and Chaka Khan, to show me that you're not like the OTHER 21-year-olds, that you actually have taste, these songs are yours. And remember, as I do, that you're also the one who asked me who Marsha was and why Prince seriously wanted to fuck the taste out her mouth after I played “Let's Pretend We're Married” at play rehearsal that time. Anyone who'd ask a question like that wants to dive deep, into the logocentric cloister of liner note and lyrics, like any good Prince fan, then or now. So it's important for you to pay attention to “When You Were Mine”—in my eyes, Prince's finest song, arriving on the transitional *Dirty Mind* album. It's built with an acoustic throwback looseness as the supple keyboards flip from the major key to the minor, expertly couching the lyric in a bed of lovelorn melancholy. Listen closely to the way in which our narrator casually drops in the potentially pansexual scenario ultimately at the heart of the song: he lets his girl wear his clothes—Is it that he likes for her to look like a boy? Or does he let her borrow his own gender-bending apparel, the ensembles that might make him look like a girl? And he doesn't care if she brings her other guy into their bed? That dude is now “sleeping in between the two” of them?—Did they just SHARE homeboy, locate themselves in the “every which way” potentialities of a threesome? And the last verse where we discover that the narrator now spends all his

time “following him whenever he’s with” the girlfriend: did that threesome result in a change of course for our horny young narrator? Has it opened a world of possibility for him? Has he discovered something new and different about himself without realizing it? This is the Prince I came to love and abide by, the one who conceived of a lyrical and sonic queerness in the pursuit of freaky communal joy, the Prince who, in “Anna Stesia,” in “Diamonds and Pearls,” in “Pop Life,” provided listeners who needed it a wealth of carnal possibilities, as the search for love and sex in a cold cruel world continued apace. “Was it a boy when U wanted a girl?” he asks in “Pop Life”; and then a few years later: “If I gave you diamonds and pearls / Would U be a happy boy or a girl.” And a few years before that: “Have U ever wanted to play / With someone so much you’d take / Any one boy or girl?” And of course the infamous “Controversy”—for which “When You Were Mine” appropriately became the b-side a year after *Dirty Mind*’s release—“Am I black or white? Am I straight or gay?” I never asked the first question, but I definitely asked myself the second—as many asked about me—as did so many of my closest peeps, wrestling with the future declarations of our sexual selves even as we managed present day teenaged confusion while holding tight to Prince’s powerful and fluid “OR.”

Or.

It was, it is, the queerest word he could use in his always already flamboyantly provocative lyrics. “Would U be a happy boy OR a girl?” “U’d take any one boy OR girl?” Of course it’s possible that this was just Prince’s marketing savvy at work, his way of allowing everyone to imagine themselves into his music. But, selfishly, I wasn’t thinking of everyone. The songs worked because they interpellated my young confusion into the mix, gave it aesthetic attention, a kind of cultural clarity, showed me that I wasn’t alone.

But you know what? Don’t listen to this old former music critic. You’ll play these songs I bequeath to you, that Prince bequeathed to me and my generation, and one day I’m SURE you’ll have your own interpretations of them. And they’ll become part of your genealogy. And you’ll pass them on, as I pass them on to you, you two who let me teach you as Prince taught me. I know it’s dramatic to say but you are the first generation of queer kids to graduate into a world without Prince in it. Which I’m still trying to imagine. And that makes me sad. But the music survives. And because of it, so will you.

So, as all the hippies sing together: Ooh we sha sha coo coo yeah. . . .

Be good,

Scott

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: *Biography* would like to thank Hal Leonard for the permission to reprint Prince lyrics in this essay. This essay quotes from “Anna Stesia,” “Computer Blue,” “Diamonds and Pearls,” “Let’s Pretend We’re Married,” “Pop Life,” and “When You Were Mine.” See the Lyric Acknowledgments in this issue for titles, writer credits, and copyright notices.