

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Quiet Genius in Purple Rain

Robin Gearson · Thursday, April 20th, 2017

I saw *Purple Rain* last week, in a theater. We've reached the first anniversary of Prince's death, so it's playing in New York (and probably elsewhere) as a midnight movie. Seeing any footage of him is bittersweet. Prince's love of privacy ensured that his life offstage was not widely accessible; this leaves fans "only" his talent, and our stories of witnessing this talent. Aside from the music and performance, there's some cringe-worthy material in *Purple Rain*, but this is understandable in a movie so exquisitely *au courant*: it's a near perfect teleport to 1984, in fact. But beneath the surface, key details also function as an important gateway into Prince's early and enduring understanding of himself and the meaning of music in his life.

If you're not fresh on the lowlights, *Purple Rain* offers some good acting but also some porn-star-bad acting and has major issues with women. Apollonia's girl group are basically strippers—complete with grabby men who throw singles at them. A woman is literally tossed into a dumpster. The only woman in the movie who's not wearing stilettos is Prince's mother, who is unknown to the audience but seems to exist only to cry over her overwrought and abusive but teary husband.



Prince was famous before *Purple Rain*, and every song he performs in the movie is great, so it's tough to buy a plot that Prince is a kid living in his parents' basement, fretting whether he can cut it in the music biz. Warner Brothers, who distributed both film and soundtrack, clearly wanted the movie to be a showcase of Prince as the funky, sexy motherfucker he was. Acting was not Prince's strength, though, and actually has little dialogue. Warner Brothers got its superstar, but *Purple Rain* was **darker and more complicated than Warners wanted**.

In fact, for much of *Purple Rain*, Prince's "Kid" comes off as an irredeemable narcissist and asshole—even assaulting his girlfriend, twice. Equally terrible, he's mad at her because she told him she wants her own career—this is, after all, the dream that brought her to town in the first place. Yet he's asking her, aren't *I* enough for you? Well—no.

The meaning of their fight, it turns out, has little to do with her at all. Apollonia suffers abuse and derision only so the Kid can spot the danger of becoming his father. At the end of the movie, Apollonia seems not just happy that her boy has found *his* voice, but she is unconflicted enough about their altercations to join his adoring fans. When she beams, she obliterates herself as a performer and partner. (But, after all, he is playing his new song on the guitar *she* gave him!) When she becomes just another face among many, we know Apollonia is forsaking her dreams and

will follow him anywhere.

In the music scene, the power dynamics have never been great for women. Here, the Apollonia and Kid storyline has a happy ending—but this is because the star scores a victory—he was, in fact, competing against her—and her happiness is contingent on his. I think many more of us would boo Apollonia today for such wide-eyed hero-worship.

The *Purple Rain* plot relied on the clichés of struggle and stardom while attempting to deal with issues much deeper than the genre, and the movie was criticized at the time for this unevenness. Given the later battles Prince had with Warner Brothers over control of his master recordings, and given the way Prince’s career and life evolved, I would argue that *Purple Rain*’s choppiness is perhaps an artifact of the struggle between Prince (and the filmmakers) and marketers and managers who didn’t want the star to come off like an abusive, narcissistic shithead.

Oh, but he does.

At least to my 2017 eyes, he’s relentlessly awful throughout the movie, especially to women who are not his mother. The film redeems Prince’s character in the end, but it leans on the music-making itself as the source of this redemption, and I see this as a key to Prince himself. *Purple Rain* suggests the Kid has learned from his mistakes, but what’s gained was not intellectual insight. He’s made a commitment, and that makes the difference. Any changes for the better in the Kid’s life result from this renewed dedication to music-as-life-force. Narcissism comes from ego, from self, while music originates in the spirit. In the tradition of all Hollywood endings that involve massive soundtracks, the performance of the title song, “Purple Rain,” is the climactic moment that reveals everything Prince’s character is supposed to have learned.

The moral? Art, with a capital-A, can forgive everything.

This ending makes perfect sense for a studio-backed movie. In its 1984 review, the *New York Times* called *Purple Rain* “[probably the flashiest album cover ever to be released as a movie.](#)” But what about Prince? Was he trying to make Art for Art’s Sake, but still color inside the lines of capitalism?

There is a difference between the story of an underdog struggling to overcome the odds and a story of redemption, where you are basically struggling against yourself and your sins, and *Purple Rain* imperfectly mashes these together. Of course a studio wants to sell a local-boy-makes-good underdog story, and the simpler the better to showcase a star performances. I am arguing, then, perhaps Prince himself wanted to tell—and did tell—a redemption story. Was it his own?

Swag Connection



I was always a Prince fan but not a superfan, and the first time I saw him perform was in 2007, when I saw a few shows at the Rio Hotel in Las Vegas. I was blown away, an instant fangirl, and I wrote a blog post to that effect. The music was great—energizing, funky, everything you hope a Prince concert can be. But what I saw, and what I wrote about, was my experience witnessing someone becoming this music and performance they were giving. For his Las Vegas residency, Prince had also opened a late-night supper-club, 3121, that probably seated 100 people. After his concerts, if and when he wanted to jam, some guests could attend these special after-shows. He

might play a song, he might not show up, and he might play till dawn. You just didn't know. On one of these nights, I was seated at the front of the room. As he strolled past me, I felt the breeze.

On my long drives between Los Angeles and Las Vegas on consecutive weekends, I had time to reflect on what I'd seen. I wrote that he seemed sort of like a messenger, so immersed in his joy that he seemed to be transcending life back on earth. Okay, I did *not* say Prince was an alien, exactly. But this was my takeaway: he has followed his own gifts and in doing this so fully, he is teaching us. All of us have this little something that our muse knows we are born to do. By following his excellence, I wrote, Prince is pointing us to look inside ourselves and find our own. Watching him was a mystical act, is what I was trying to get at.

My post ended by expressing the idea that following the muse is the only way. I did not say, "the only way to redemption," but if I had a religious background, perhaps I would have noticed the connotations. There is an unspoken "or else," "or suffer the consequences" implied in making anything less than full commitment to most things we do. I did not consider myself "a writer" at this time, not for lack of desire but more likely this lack of commitment. I had never seen *Purple Rain*. If you were Prince, reading my essay, you could probably pick up on that.

Fun fact: Prince used to read what people wrote about him on the Internet, and so he came across my fangirl blog post. A cryptic email reached me that said something like, "We like her essay, she speaks the truth." I had been imagining what I thought Prince believed about the world, so this was a pretty remarkable note to receive. Later there was a phone call from a woman, she said she would like my permission to print the essay in Prince's fan newsletter. I said yes. She asked for my address, I assumed so she could send me a copy, so I gave it to her.

A couple of days later, a giant package showed up at my door with stuff inside. Merchandise from his store at the Rio Hotel. No note, no explanation. Just a gift.

Graffiti Bridge

I only watched *Purple Rain* for the first time last year, after Prince died. Watching it again this week, I was amazed how much of his spirituality quietly permeated this kind-of-cheesy movie that was basically an advertorial for its soundtrack. Setting aside the underdog plot as the hook that probably sold the studio on the movie, what's beneath it, in the margins, are details that suggest a more interesting story of whether a character will betray himself and do what others want him to do, or reach within himself—no matter the consequences. As the movie ends, of course, this is what the Kid does, and when he sings "Purple Rain," a song his bandmates wrote that he has ignored throughout the movie, you understand that he's not just going to be a commercial success—which resolves the underdog story; he's not just going to get the girl—which resolves the romantic plot; but he's gaining all of this success because he's achieved what is essentially spiritual redemption. When the Kid embraces his music (and writes "Purple Rain"), perhaps the meaning of the climax is not that he has learned from his mistakes but that music-making provides deliverance from his sins against others.



There is a moment in *Purple Rain* when Prince is riding his purple motorcycle under a bridge. Graffiti is written on the bridge supports. On the left support is the symbol he later took as his name, and the word Love. On the right, the word God. In the dramatic, misogynist *Purple Rain*—a movie that *throws a woman in a dumpster*: Love God. This is not atmospheric set dressing but a

hint, pointing at this other story, I believe. Subtle cues like this one make *Purple Rain* a mystery worth watching again for fans who are now looking at Prince's legacy and trying to locate him within his art.

As I said, I was not a Prince superfan, so while I remembered that Prince made a sequel to *Purple Rain*, I forgot that it was called *Graffiti Bridge*. The NYT review suggested the title came from the structure, but doesn't offer an explanation. I think it was a clue. Yesterday, thinking over the movie, I thought to myself that if Prince had directed *Purple Rain*, this theme of finding and keeping faith with yourself would have been more explicit. Watching him perform, I was witnessing this commitment, although I did not have the vocabulary to place this in a context of religious faith. In reading a 1990 [review of Graffiti Bridge](#), I learned that Prince did, in fact, infuse his directorial debut with spiritual themes and religious imagery that I spotted as whispers within *Purple Rain*. It would be interesting to learn from director Albert Magnoli what other small, quiet choices Prince made to help the film take shape. If *Purple Rain* is reconsidered as a story of Prince's own faith, is it anything but testament to his genius that the writer of "Darling Nikki" was slipping spiritual lessons into a bubble-gum pop-star movie?

I never got to meet Prince, I never heard from anyone connected to him after his gifts arrived. I don't know if there is a newsletter somewhere in Paisley Park with my essay in it. Not-quite-meeting Prince is a non-sequitur I share once in a while. But over the years I have spent time thinking about what it meant that this person I'd never met seemed to be reaching out to say: Thank you for seeing me.

We all want to be seen, and accepted, and forgiven, and ultimately, loved. Millions of fans around the world loved Prince unconditionally, but that is not the same love as the work of relationships. And yet Prince, in working throughout his career to keep his private life private, made it hard for most of us to see or know the person behind the art, the one who was struggling with an addiction, the one who could be difficult to work with, who was fragile, mysterious.

If Prince believed in music as redemption, as I see the true theme of *Purple Rain*, then in 1984 he was already committed to this vision of music as source, music as redemption. The addiction that killed Prince stunned his fans, because his dependence had been such a closely held secret. Perhaps he believed he had betrayed them. (Us.) It hurts to listen to Prince now. It's not that I am angry. I just really, really wish he was noodling away on a guitar somewhere in Minnesota, reading what people are saying about him on the Internet.

Prince left no legal will, but fans know he gave away his true wealth: his talent finds form in our joy; the love in his heart now dwells in our dancing. In consequential ways, Prince will live forever. What hurts, I think, is that if Prince believed in Art as deliverance, then in the struggle against himself, like the Kid at the end of *Purple Rain*, the work he's produced is a question, but not one we expected Prince to ask. *Am I forgiven?*

Such a question lingers in the air like the last note of a concert, a hum that continues to vibrate long after the final song. Grief is the distance we have traveled, to make our answer. Stumbling through the longing of his absence, offended by the weight of the emptiness and the ache of quiet where sound used to be, we find we are all Apollonias. Yes, Prince. Of course the answer is yes.

(Featured image by [Johnny Silvercloud](#), used through CC attribution)

This entry was posted on Thursday, April 20th, 2017 at 12:22 am and is filed under [Film](#), [Music](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.