



2000s

THERE'LL NEVER BE another LIKE M ³

AS THE NEW MILLENNIUM DAWNED,
PRINCE RE-EMERGED FROM THE SIDELINES TO
RECLAIM HIS RIGHTFUL CROWN AS THE GREATEST
LIVE PERFORMER OF HIS GENERATION

STEVE HARNELL



Resplendent in red at the 10th Anniversary Essence Music Festival at the Superdome in 2004

PRINCE

was an artist whose career was run defiantly on his own terms. He played the long game, unafraid of digging his heels in to

stand by his principles, even if it meant commercial suicide. Quixotic, stubborn, petulant even, some of Prince's business decisions may have seemed absurd and self-destructive to outsiders, but they were driven by the fundamental belief that the singer clung to resolutely throughout his life – that musicians should be free of record-company control and always deserved to be paid for their work.

At best, Prince viewed his industry paymasters as a necessary evil. He was continually searching for ways to cut out those he viewed as meddling middlemen cashing in on his talent.

As with

George Michael's acrimonious legal battle with Sony in the mid-1990s, Prince's fight with Warner/Chappell had almost torpedoed his

career. But as his publishing contract with the record company lapsed, the star made an announcement that would prompt a collective sigh of relief from his fans across the globe. As of 16 May 2000, he would return to his birth name. 'The Artist Formerly Known as Prince' was no more. Prince, plain and simple, was back in business.

He spoke at a press conference in New York to mark the name change, where it was clear that bitterness and anger about the record company dispute was still very much at the forefront of his mind. He told the assembled throng: "I always get journalists saying to me: 'You don't sell as many records as you used to.' I always tell them, 'I don't sell the records, I only make 'em. You gotta talk to the accountant firm about that.'"

"I think my old record contract was unlawful. The moment other artists get together and challenge [their

recording companies], the contracts are going to go right out of the window."

MY NAME IS PRINCE (ONCE AGAIN)

After a time in the shadows – literally as well as metaphorically, as he adopted ever-more elaborate ways to shield his identity in public – Prince was now keen for fans to take a peek into his inner sanctum where the magic happened: "People who supported my music over the years never got to look inside Paisley Park if they didn't see any film of it, and a lot of changes have happened there recently. It's now a more public-friendly place. I'd like for them to see what they helped to create."

He also showed his social conscience – with a little eccentricity thrown in for good measure. "I want to build a food facility right next to Paisley Park in the

shape of an egg so the people in our community and those who work for me get food from this place for free. These are meals designed for families. That means they don't have to go to the grocery store, all of their food bills are taken care of. If you take money out of the equation in people's lives, it's interesting what happens."

To the delight of the assembled press (and Prince himself, who declared it his favourite question of the day), one interviewer cut to the chase and asked if Prince was "trying to change the public's perception of him and come across as a little less weird".

"I've never thought of myself as weird," the singer said. "And the people who really know me don't think so, either. Everybody has their own perception about me and my music, but if you really put everything back-to-back in a linear fashion, you'll see that *The Greatest Romance* is saying the same thing as *P Control* or *Sexy MF*. What people get out of it, is what they get out of it. What I got out of the music business was that if you don't own your masters, ▶

"JOURNALISTS SAY, 'YOU DON'T SELL AS MANY RECORDS AS YOU USED TO'. I TELL THEM, 'I DON'T SELL THE RECORDS, I ONLY MAKE 'EM'"

POP_UP Foo Fighters drummer Taylor Hawkins was unsure what to make of Prince's cover of the band's *Best Of You*. "Maybe he was doing it as a sort of 'f---k you' to us," he said. "Or maybe he really likes the song."



When Prince met the Queen Bee: his performance with Beyoncé at the 2004 Grammy Awards was a defining moment



Prince and his wife
Manuela Testolini
attending the 2004
Academy Awards at
the Kodak Theater
in Hollywood



In 2005, Prince played
a set at the 36th
NAACP Image Awards
in Los Angeles

your masters own you. Some people just find fame and fortune and they're cool with that, but I'd like to see an alternate system. There's no way right now that an artist can be seen or heard until someone who was not part of the creation of the music gets paid. That's just absurd."

Prince still had plenty of material in the can and the steady flow out of Paisley Park showed no signs of drying up. As he told the press conference: "What we are seriously considering is, because I play so many different styles of music, maybe putting out numerous records during the year. Rather than trying to put so many styles on the same album, I'd then have a jazz record then a ballad record. I could do so many wonderful marketing things with my own music if I had complete control over it. That's what I have been fighting for over all these years, and will continue [to fight] until the battle is won."

The reversion back to Prince was a sensible move. Records sales were now less than stellar and his reputation as a Howard

Hughes-style eccentric was doing him a disservice. As with his musical rival Michael Jackson, tales of his odd whims and lavish lifestyle were taking up column inches in the tabloids, to the detriment of his art.

However, the famous love symbol was not gone for good. It still appeared on album covers and throughout Paisley Park. Prince also used striking symbol-shaped guitars on stage for years to come.

NPG MUSIC CLUB

Despite moving on from the 'Slave' saga, Prince's view of record companies was essentially unchanged. He steadfastly refused to adopt that old business model and was convinced there were superior and more efficient ways to serve up his music.

Private performances at Paisley Park took up the majority of 2000 until the Hit N Run Tour at the end of the year. The hit-laden show was a brazen attempt

at crowd-pleasing, but Prince's bitterness towards the record industry still wriggled to the surface. His stage announcements often descended into hectoring; he told audience members who were not 'self employed' that they were all effectively slaves.

New albums from the star were now to be released through his own internet subscription service NPGOnline Ltd (later NPGMusicClub.com). Opening in February 2001, with a \$7 monthly subscription fee, basic membership entitled users to a minimum of three fresh New Power Generation songs each month, accompanied by a music video. Subscribers were also promised a free one-hour radio show hosted by members of the group, including Prince himself. For \$100 a year, Premium Annual Membership ramped up the benefits to include top-class gig seats as well as VIP passes to all aftershow gigs and parties plus a

free copy of remix album *Rave In2 The Joy Fantastic*.

On paper, the deal looked great, but the website was hamstrung by technical difficulties with its ticketing

section as well as Prince's inability to serve up the much-vaunted exclusive material to a deadline. When fans got restless, Prince slashed the fees to \$2.50 a month with a lifetime membership set at just \$25.

Although the website had its faults, it was still testament to Prince's ongoing desire to change the traditional relationship between artist and fan. By cutting out the record company middleman, he felt more connected to his fanbase. It was undoubtedly an inspiration to Radiohead in later years, when they launched their 2007 album *In Rainbows*.

Prince's unique relationship with his fans was further refined by invitations for NPG Music Club members to studio tours, pre-concert soundchecks, listening sessions and yearly celebrations at Paisley Park.

In the first few years of the 00s, Prince still produced albums at a prolific rate – an average of one per year. Now without major-label backup,

"AN ARTIST CANNOT BE SEEN
OR HEARD UNTIL SOMEONE
WHO WAS NOT PART OF THE
CREATION OF THE MUSIC GETS PAID"

POP UP Amy Winehouse appeared as a special guest during Prince's run of O2 gigs. When she left the stage after a duet of her *Love Is A Losing Game*, Prince told the crowd: "I got tears... I'm gonna have to get my shades on."





BETTER WITH TIME

KEY ALBUMS 2000 TO 2009

MUSICOLOGY

NPG/COLUMBIA, 2004

MusicoLOGY, the Purple One's most commercially successful LP since *Diamonds And Pearls*, found him reining in his indulgences. The songcraft was more disciplined and the grooves funkier. It wasn't without its off-kilter moments, though. *Illusion*, *Coma*, *Pimp & Circumstance* finds Prince revisiting his high-pitched feminine register similar to alter-ego Camille. *If Eye Was The Man In Ur Life* and *A Million Days* have also been plucked from the top drawer of his love-song collection. Two Grammy Awards to add to the trophy cabinet underlined the fact that he'd returned to the frontline of pop.



3121

NPG/UNIVERSAL, 2006

Confident, knowing and occasionally funky ("It's going down y'all / Like the wall of Berlin," smirks the singer on the opening title track), *3121* could compete with contemporary R&B and hip-hop. This was an album that positively reveled in the playboy lifestyle. *Incense And Candles*, *Te Amo Corazón* and *Satisfied* all played up his loverboy image, but it was the nimble funk of *Black Sweat* that stole the show. An album very much within Prince's comfort zone, but none the worse for that.



PLANET EARTH

NPG/COLUMBIA, 2007

This album was one of Prince's most laid-back. This insistent riff of lead-off single *Guitar* seemed to be channelling U2's *The Edge*. The title track was a piano-led ecology ballad, while *Somewhere Here On Earth* boasts Miles Davis-like trumpet. There was a playfulness to the knockabout strumalong *The One U Wanna C*, but the syrupy *Future Baby Mama* and *All The Midnights In The World* should have remained in the vaults. The exuberant disco stomper *Chelsea Rodgers* was much better.



LOTUSFLOW3R

NPG, 2009

If nine albums over the space of as many years in the 00s wasn't enough for you, then how about this to close out the century? *LOTUSFLOW3R* was a sprawling triple-album set containing two Prince records (*Lotusflow3r* and *MPLSound*) and a separate solo effort from his protégé and then-girlfriend Bria Valente (*Elixir*). Recorded over three years, the album shone brightest when Prince flexed his guitar-playing muscles. Some of the solos were astonishing — the best cuts on *MPLSOUND* were those that harked back to his early-80s phase. Meanwhile, the easy-going Valente tunes were attempts at sweet Sade soul, but they rarely hit a home run.



he was operating alone, releasing records as fan club-only affairs or via indie distributors. *The Rainbow Children* was the first album released under his own name since 1993, but the sprawling nature of its lyrics was hard for the masses to grasp. Trademark themes such as the battle between spirituality and sexuality were all in place, but Prince expanded his palette here to include more explicit references to his conversion to the Jehovah's Witness faith.

Brought up as a Seventh-Day Adventist, Prince was converted to the Jehovah's Witness faith by former Sly & The Family Stone bassist Larry Graham. Graham became a father figure and spiritual teacher for the star and the pair remained close friends for the rest of the singer's life. Prince later told *The New Yorker*: "I don't see it really as conversion. More a realisation. It's like Morpheus and Neo in *The Matrix*." The religious conversion coincided with Prince's marriage to his second wife Manuela Testolini.

SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW

Arion Berger was far from convinced by *The Rainbow Children*. His *Rolling Stone* review in January 2002 said: "Whatever compels Prince to continue expounding on his idea of a spirito-sexual musical revolution remains a mystery all these records away from his greatest, most populist work. He's digging in his high heels harder than ever on the busy, portentous *The Rainbow Children*. It cops jazz forms without swinging, gets James Brownishly funky minus the urgency, and offers church interludes that are too mystical to carry earthly convention."

Hardcore fans claimed the album could be seen as a musical and spiritual evolution for the star, and the record was by no means a flop. It eventually went on to sell more than 500,000 copies.

The steady stream of Prince releases — in various forms — continued unabated. May 2002 saw the arrival of *One Nite Alone...*, a stripped-back record featuring Prince mostly on piano. Released online through the NPG Music Club and never commercially available in record stores, it is most notable for a cover of Joni Mitchell's *A Case Of You*, complete with delicate falsetto. In Prince's hands, the song is decidedly more soulful than the stark original.

Welcoming in New Year's Day of 2003 was *Xpectation* — an album of jazz instrumentals featuring classical violinist Vanessa Mae that was available as an mp3 download for NPG Music Club members. Another record that has slipped off the radar for all but the most faithful of fans, it was recently uploaded to Jay Z's Tidal streaming service.

Prince hit his commercial nadir in July 2003 with *N.E.W.S* — another instrumental album, comprising four 14-minute tracks (*North*, *East*, *South* and *West*), which were recorded over the course of a single day. To date, it remains Prince's lowest-selling album, shifting just 30,000 copies. The man himself was hardly shouting from the rooftops, describing it to *Billboard Magazine* as: "one for dinner parties. I'm not trying to shock the world with every record." Despite its weak performance in the charts, it was still nominated for Best Pop Instrumental Performance at that year's Grammy Awards.

RETURN OF THE KING

If there was a landmark moment where Prince transformed from a sidelined former legend to an elder statesman of pop, it could well be his duet



Pretty in pink: live at the Good Morning America Summer Concert Series in June 2006, at Bryant Park in New York



In 2007, Prince played 21 nights at London's 20,000-capacity O2 arena

with Beyoncé at the 2004 Grammy Awards. The pair ripped through four songs in a frantic five-minute medley. In what was no doubt a knowing nod to the great George Clinton in his Parliament heyday, Prince descended to the stage through billowing smoke from a spaceship and launched into a stunning version of *Purple Rain* before he was joined by the former Destiny's Child singer.

Beyoncé was still riding high on the success of her debut solo album *Dangerously In Love*, which had been released the previous summer, and this performance could have been seen as a handing over of the torch. But Prince wasn't ready to be consigned to relic status just yet. He couldn't resist the urge to compete as both stars tried to upstage each other. After a quick teased vamp of *1999* the pair tore through *Baby I'm A Star, Crazy In Love* – complete with a searing Prince lead-guitar solo – and a final victory lap of *Let's Go Crazy*. It was a sensational reminder of his undimmed star power.

BACK WHERE HE BELONGED

Prince was now back in mainstream consciousness across the globe. It was the perfect platform for him to reassert himself as one of the most audacious live performers of all time and he fully capitalised on that opportunity. In an interview, Prince discussed the time he spent with Beyoncé leading up to the performance.

"I was really curious as to how much she knew musically," he responded. "I was pleased to find out that she knew a lot about scales – Mixolydian scales and Egyptian styles." He added that he showed her some chords on the piano to reinforce the fact that knowing the instrument was a skill that had helped singers such as Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles. Within a month, the comeback had begun in earnest. His 28th studio album, *Musicology*, was released in April 2004 and proved to be his biggest hit in years. Reaching the Top 5 in the UK, United States and Germany, among others, it was his most successful long-player since 1991's *Diamonds And Pearls*.

The record still divides opinion among Prince's more devout followers, who viewed it as a cynical exercise in rewriting his own history rather than pushing things forward. It may be Prince by numbers, but the public finally seemed to be coming around to his way of thinking again.

For once, the album wasn't wholly recorded at his Paisley Park compound. Instead, sessions took place



Prince indulging in a jam session with his musicians following a sold-out concert at the Montreux Jazz Festival, 2007

in Mississauga, Ontario. At its launch, the singer declared that there was a back-to-basics vibe about the record: "I am really an artist and a musician at heart, that's what I do. *Musicology* has no boundaries or formats. It is long overdue to return to the art and craft of music, that's what this album is about. School's in session."

ALL THE CRITICS LOVE U

The album, which was a deft mixture of taut funk and more playful psychedelic pop, found Prince in retrospective mood on the title track. Its video shows a young boy – undoubtedly meant to be Prince – learning to play guitar along to Jimi Hendrix records and there are also nostalgic hat tips to perennial Prince heroes James Brown and Sly Stone.

It garnered decent reviews. Anthony Decurtis from *Rolling Stone* thought it "as appealing, focused and straight-up satisfying an album as Prince has made since who can remember when. It's open, easygoing and inclusive, the sort of album anyone might like. Most notably, *Musicology* restores a refreshing sense of songcraft to Prince's writing. Rather than seeming like mere sketches, as so much of his recent work has, each track on the album is distinct, coherent and rigorously uncluttered."

The *Guardian's* Alexis Petridis gave it a similarly warm welcome, with a few caveats: "Someone, somewhere will always suggest that [Prince's] latest offering is a return to mid-80s form, even if, as in recent years, his latest offering is a jazz concept album about the Jehovah's Witnesses.

"This time, however, even Prince seems convinced he is back in shape. At its best, *Musicology* has music to match his confidence [and] strongly suggests he's finally roused himself from a decade-long self-indulgent torpor."

Barry Nicolson from the *NME* was rather less kind, calling the album a 'flawed redemption': "It's neither inspired enough to be a true classic, nor insipid enough to make it unworthy of your attention. There are moments on here, however fleeting, that prove Prince Rogers Nelson will never lose the ability to surprise and astonish, and there are moments that likewise suggest he'll never lose the ability to frustrate and confound his audience."

Less than a month after *Musicology's* release, Prince made a surprise appearance on the Jimi Hendrix tribute album *Power Of Soul*, contributing a version of the legendary guitarist's old blues workout *Red House*, cheekily retitled *Purple House*. Prince performed a vamped-up version that added synthetic horns to the original arrangement and a stellar guitar solo. The remaining stars on the record included an array of heritage acts including Santana; Eric Clapton; Earth, Wind & Fire; Sting and Lenny Kravitz.

The accompanying *Musicology* Tour – also known by the rather more cumbersome moniker of *Musicology Live 2004ever* – saw Prince reassert his pulling power during an impressive 96-show North American trek. The shows took in more than \$75 million. Gate receipts for the *Musicology* Tour meant that *Rolling Stone* crowned Prince the highest-earning musician for that year, beating the likes of Madonna, Metallica and Elton John. "Prince has returned to centre stage after a decade in the commercial wilderness," the magazine reported.

And the accolades kept on coming for Prince. Influential US magazine *Spin* named him the

THE ONE U WANNA C LIVE HIGHLIGHTS 2000-2009

ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME

2004

Sensational and downright hilarious, Prince blew all manner of rock royalty off the stage on a cover of *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* during this tribute to George Harrison at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The show also included Tom Petty, ELO's Jeff Lynne, Steve Winwood and Harrison's son, Dhani. Prince threw in every trick in the book into his performance, including playing with his teeth and pretending to fall into the crowd before totally upstaging his auspicious company with a shredding solo. Prince ended the set by throwing his guitar into the air. Somewhat mysteriously, it still hasn't come down. It was a little disrespectful in the circumstances perhaps, but at least Dhani looked amused at his antics.



BRIT AWARDS, EARLS COURT, LONDON

2006

Booking His Royal Purpleness for the Brit Awards in 2006 was a major coup for the organisers. Even more newsworthy was the fact that the performance saw Prince reunited with Wendy & Lisa from his former backing band The Revolution, as well as percussionist Sheila E. After a decent rendition of *Fury*, the mini-set really caught fire when they launched into *Purple Rain*. By the time the band started to play *Let's Go Crazy*, Prince was rolling around on a rose petal-strewn stage. A dazzling solo at the end of the song topped off 10 minutes of controlled carnage. Fellow performers at the show – including Kanye West, Paul Weller and Coldplay – could only look on in awe.



COACHELLA

2008

People still talk about Prince's performance at the Californian Coachella festival in hushed tones – his 2008 set has frequently been voted the greatest ever seen at the prestigious event. It was a set packed full of highlights, from the nostalgic thrill of him being reunited with Morris Day, Sheila E and Chaka Khan to his total reinvention of Radiohead's *Creep*. As well as playing his own 80s classics, Prince also threw in covers of The Beatles' *Come Together* and The B-52's *Rock Lobster*. "His Coachella set wasn't exactly a miracle," wrote the *Los Angeles Times*. "But by the time he added apocalyptic party anthem *Let's Go Crazy* as an addendum to a glorious *Purple Rain*, the artist had reached his goal of making the festival 'Prince's house'." The hipsters didn't know what had hit 'em.



DIGITAL GARDEN

VIDEOS 2000 TO 2009

MUSICOLOGY

2004

Packed with references to the likes of Marvin Gaye; Burt Bacharach; Jimi Hendrix; Sly Stone; Earth, Wind & Fire and James Brown, *MusicoLOGY* is a homage to the influences that remained with Prince throughout his working life. Flipping between scenes of a young boy—presumably Prince as a whippersnapper—in his bedroom learning how to play guitar and the main man himself performing a raucous live show that ends in a riot, this showed that a major label still backed Prince enough to spend some serious cash on his videos.



TE AMO CORAZÓN

2005

Directed by Hollywood actress Salma Hayek, no less, and shot in Marrakech, the title of this Latin-tinged ballad roughly translates from Spanish as “I Love You, Sweetheart”. The video’s hugely romantic and just a tad pretentious: Prince dives into his rhiad’s swimming pool fully clothed before acrobats twirl in the rafters overhead for no apparent reason while he plays his guitar. The object of the Purple One’s affections here is actress Mia Maestro, a friend of Hayek.



SO WHAT THE FUSS (WITH STEVIE WONDER)

2005

Okay, so the shadowy guitar player in the video may or may not be Prince, but that’s definitely him on the record. The Purple One provides an understated and funky guitar line that underpins one of Stevie Wonder’s best songs since his 70s pomp. The pair are also joined in this video by the original four members of En Vogue. Wonder’s 2005 album *A Time To Love* may have slipped under your radar, but this video is well worth checking out. Prince and Wonder also reunited in July 2010 for a superb live version of *Superstition* in Paris that you can find on YouTube.



BLACK SWEAT

2006

Prince’s most memorable video of the noughties, this promo for a top-drawer slice of stripped-back funk was suitably minimalist and a rather classy affair. The black-and-white clip features the singer in playful mood as dancer Celestina Aladekoba—previously best known for her appearances on the Jennifer Lopez reality show *DanceLife*—writhes suggestively around him. Sometimes a simple, well-executed idea and a whole heap of star power is all you need to make a great video.



greatest frontman of all time, leaving Mick Jagger, Robert Plant, James Brown and Elvis trailing in his wake. By 2004, the NPG clearing house was still running at full steam.

The Chocolate Invasion and *The Slaughterhouse*, two compilations of various tracks dating back to the start of the decade, were released on the same day in March, to little fanfare. These were explicitly presented as compilations though, not structured albums. Perhaps Prince was now finally resigned to the new breed of music fans brought up on iTunes, who stripped out their favourite tracks from a record and ditched the remainder, riding roughshod over any sense an artist may have had about running orders and narrative themes.

While these new releases kept the hardcore fanbase happy, the public at large viewed it an exercise in treading water. It was time to change things up once more.

THE NUMBERS GAME

Prince’s second major release of the decade was *3121*, a coherent and disciplined affair where he once more played the traditional promotional game. Boasting no less than three singles and distributed by Universal Music, it was a satisfying blend of funk, soul and pop. The opening title track features all the classic Prince tics—slap bass, lurching rhythms, retro keyboards, weird treated vocals and, of course, a healthy dose of double entendres. There’s even a little nod, perhaps, to The Eagles’ *Hotel California* with its refrain, “You can come if you want to, but you can never leave”.

Navigating swiftly past the rather dubious lyrical concerns of *Lolita*, the remainder of the album builds on the promise of the title track with the likes of the pretty Spanish ballad *Te Amo Corazón* and the crackling funk of *Black Sweat*, the latter sporting a remarkable transformation from its roots as an acoustic-blues track.

Typical of the period, the smooth R&B of *Incense And Candles* features vocodered vocals, while *Satisfied* is a return to the old-school 70s soul of Teddy Pendergrass and Al Green. *Te Amo Corazón* had a slick video directed by Hollywood actress Salma Hayek and shot in Marrakech, Morocco, and the stripped-back black-and-white promo clip for *Black Sweat* was nominated for Best Cinematography at the MTV Video Music Awards.

The campaign for the record went from strength to strength with a successful appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, with performances of *Fury* and *Beautiful, Loved And Blessed*.

Taking a cue from *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*, another cunning marketing ploy was to place seven winning tickets inside CDs worldwide. The top prize was a star-studded private party and performance at Prince’s own home.

The *Guardian*’s Alexis Petridis, although noting stylistic similarities to earlier classics such as *Let’s Go Crazy* and *Little Red Corvette*, was impressed by the songcraft and Prince’s commitment to the album. “There’s more to *3121* than the prickle of nostalgia,” he wrote. “Amid the title track’s murky, unsettling groove and the grinding techno noise of *Love*, Prince sounds thrillingly alive, a veteran throwing down a cocky, confident challenge to any young pretenders. The polymath genius of legend seems to be reasserting himself in the album’s casual stylistic

shifts from *Lolita*’s pure pop to *Te Amo Corazón*’s Latin smooch and *Satisfied*’s southern soul.”

WEB OF INTRIGUE

Prince’s love-hate affair with the internet shape-shifted throughout the latter part of his career. He welcomed its ability to cut out record company bureaucracy and get his music directly to his fans, but was a constant critic of file-sharing and free content.

In June 2006, he received a Webby Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his ‘visionary’ use of the internet. After all, he was the first major artist to release an entire album (1997’s *Crystal Ball*) exclusively online.

Prince’s reaction to winning the award was typically perverse. Within weeks he had shut down his NPG Music Club website after more than five years and declared all life memberships null and void. “The future holds nothing but endless opportunity and we plan on seizing it wholeheartedly. Don’t u want 2 come?” said the closing email sent to members.

BOWLING THEM OVER

After the success of *MusicoLOGY* and *3121*, Prince’s status as the elder statesman of US pop was cemented at one of the country’s most iconic events—the half-time show during 2007’s Super Bowl between the Indianapolis Colts and the Chicago Bears at Dolphin Stadium in Florida. It had never rained in the 40 years of the Super Bowl’s history, but the elements opened on Prince on an almost biblical scale.

Bruce Rodgers was production designer for the half-time show. He explained: “On the morning of the game I opened the curtains of my hotel room and it was like a scene from *Moby Dick*. The winds were blowing the palm trees and it was one of those Miami rainstorms that just would not relent. When we spoke to Prince on the phone beforehand, he said ‘Can you make it rain harder?’. I thought, ‘right on!’”

Half-time show producer Don Mischer added: “Prince’s set wasn’t about promoting a new project or a new single. He wanted it to be something a gigantic audience would love. He covered the Foo Fighters, John Fogerty, Bob Dylan. He was selfless in that sense. He just wanted to make it a great show.

“We were so worried about the rain, because the stage was designed in the shape of his symbol, and it had a very slippery floor on top; when it got wet, it was almost treacherous. His two dancers, The



Prince’s stunning 2008 Coachella set became the stuff of festival legend

Live at LA’s Conga Room in 2009



Giving a colourful performance on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* in 2009

Twinz, were wearing eight-and-a-half-inch heels. We were terrified of the rain and [hoped they] would all be able to stay on their feet."

Prince's astonishing medley included *Let's Go Crazy*, *Baby I'm A Star* and *Purple Rain*, but also went against tradition by throwing in a clutch of covers including Queen's *We Will Rock You*, Dylan's *All Along The Watchtower* (in the electrified Hendrix style), the Foo Fighters' *Best Of You* and Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Proud Mary*.

Jon Pareles, senior music critic on *The New York Times*, explained "Prince's set was just so wild. He did other people's songs. He wasn't promoting himself. He was just making music. It was profound, loud and funky. Just one performer shaking the entire world."

Last year, *Billboard.com* rated it the greatest Super Bowl performance ever. And quite rightly so.

LONDON CALLING

With his profile at its highest for more than two decades, Prince effortlessly managed to sell out 21 nights at London's 20,000-capacity O2 arena in August and September 2007. In keeping with his album's title, ticket prices were capped at £31.21. The three-hour shows were an absolute triumph and often directly followed by further secret gigs at tiny clubs across the capital that went on well into the small hours.

Neil McCormick of the *Telegraph* reviewed the first O2 show and was overflowing with praise: "One of the greatest performers of the modern age, Prince has an arsenal of musical weaponry at his disposal and he's not afraid to use it all. His guitar playing – whether rhythmic, soulful funk chords or flaring heavy rock leads – is some of the best you'll hear anywhere. His singing switches between seductive whisper, raw-throated scream and impossibly sweet falsettos. And when he is neither singing nor playing, he is executing nimble dance moves... He genuinely seems to be having fun with both audience and band."

WITH HIS PROFILE AT ITS HIGHEST FOR OVER TWO DECADES, PRINCE SOLD OUT 21 NIGHTS AT LONDON'S O2 ARENA

With Prince headlines in the UK not seen since his mid-80s pomp, the *Mail On Sunday* announced that it would be releasing Prince's latest album, *Planet Earth*, free with a copy of the newspaper in July 2007. The move sent shockwaves through the music business, with the UK arm of his distributors, Sony BMG, even threatening to withdraw stocks in stores nationwide once it became available. The album itself was a steady mix of rock, disco, R&B and pop, and was most notable for its appearances by percussionist Sheila E and Wendy & Lisa.

Despite the heavy workload of the live shows, Prince showed no signs of taking his eye off the ball when it came to his constant bugbear of internet piracy. In September 2007, he hired the British-based company Web Sheriff to track down illegal uploads of his music that had been placed online. He had a

variety of internet companies in his sights, including the BitTorrent tracking site The Pirate Bay, eBay and YouTube.

At the time, Web Sheriff's president John Giacobbi

explained that the star had already had 2,000 of his clips removed from YouTube only to find several hundred uploads taking their place within a handful of days. "Very few artists have ever taken this kind of action over their rights," said a spokesman for Prince. "But he has shown time and time again that he is ready to challenge the system in new ways to put artists and music first."

If his 21-date residency at the O2 had left UK audiences in thrall to his live act, fans in Ireland were left in the lurch when Prince cancelled a date at Croke Park in Dublin on 16 June 2008 with just 10 days' notice. The case was eventually settled out of court with Prince being forced to pay almost \$3 million. But the fact this 55,000 capacity stadium had sold out – even if the show didn't actually materialise – had shown just how far the artist had come since the time when it seemed the world had stopped listening. ■

POP UP Prince's dislike of YouTube extended to covers he performed. He issued takedown notices for videos of his live cover of Radiohead's *Creep*. Thom Yorke was dumbfounded: "He's blocked it? Tell him to unblock it. It's our... song."

