# [Obituaries](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/)- Prince – The Guardian

Prince, [who has died aged 57](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/21/prince-feared-dead-as-police-investigate-death-on-stars-paisley2/), was to the pop music of the 1980s what David Bowie had been to that of the previous decade, its sole authentic genius.

Certainly, there were singers who sold more records or gained more awards, although his sales would top 100 million and he won seven Grammys as well as an Oscar. There were contemporaries of his who dominated their genres of music to a greater extent, among them Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson and Madonna. Yet none had as much influence or creativity as he, none broke as many rules as he, nor did so with such effortlessness and such showmanship.

* [Neil McCormick on Prince's death: 'It's hard to accept we'll never see him on stage again'](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/news/prince-its-hard-to-accept-well-never-see-him-on-stage-again/)

Albums such as Purple Rain and Sign O’The Times, and singles which included When Doves Cry, Kiss and Let’s Go Crazy made him a superstar. As astonishing as the often operatic intensity of the music was his versatility, for he frequently played most of the instruments himself.

He was also a writer of songs for others, notably with Manic Monday for The Bangles and Nothing Compares 2 U, with which Sinead O’Connor had a worldwide hit. His live performances, with the petite Prince – he only stood 5ft 2in and often wore high-heeled shoes – writhing, preening and out-dancing James Brown were were pure theatre in little need of Viagra.

There were of course familiar elements to this success. Sex and religion featured heavily in his musical repertoire, and he deliberately cultivated a mystique by avoiding giving interviews. But what was original to him was his irresistible fusion of black and white music – “technofunk”, fusing funk with synthpop, soul with rock – and his harnessing of dance beats to serious themes like nuclear war and Aids.

Not for nothing was the best of his backing bands called The Revolution. Prince’s fusing of white and black pop idioms, with its sheer elan and originality, managed successfully to surmount racial barriers in the highly conservative American rock industry of the 1970s.

Prince Rogers Nelson was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in June 1958. He would later distort the facts of his early life, dropping years from his age and claiming to be from a multi-racial family. In fact both his parents were African Americans.

His father John Nelson was a pianist and the leader of the Prince Rogers jazz trio, after which the boy was named. “I named my son Prince because I wanted him to do everything I wanted to do,” said his father. His mother Mattie, who was 16 years her husband’s junior, was the band’s singer. The couple divorced, however, when Prince was 10 and thereafter he and his sister were shuttled between the homes of relatives.

Prince’s relationship with his parents was both complex and influential. The first verse of Purple Rain – “I never meant to cause you any trouble, I never meant to cause you any pain” explored that with his father. “My dad's real serene,” he once observed, “it takes the music to get him going. My father and me, we're one and the same.” Nevertheless, there was still much tension between them in the boy’s earliest years.

 “He left the piano behind when he left us behind,” recalled Prince. “I wasn't allowed to touch it when he still lived with us.” Once he did, he taught himself to play by ear, later becoming proficient on dozens of different instruments from the electric guitar to the concert harp. He wrote his first song when he was seven, and would go on to write thousands more, many of them never released and kept in the vaults of his mansion-cum-recording complex in Minnesota, Paisley Park.

By contrast, revealed Prince, “My mom's the wild side of me; she's like that all the time.” His encounter with her collection of pornography when he was nine was to prove formative, to understate it. Sex – “Boy versus girl in the World Series of love” – was to inspire much of his music, as well as his image.

Like Bowie, he changed that frequently, originally dressing like a more lascivious Little Richard (whose falsetto he could match), moving through an eye-catching phase of ruffs and pompadours at the time of Purple Rain (with purple becoming his signature colour) to the androgyny of Kiss in 1986.

He released his first album, For You, at 20, steadily building a following over the next few years with records such as Dirty Mind (1980) and 1999 (1982).  By the early 1980s his style had already begun to mature, combing diverse musical styles from gospel to funk into a seamless whole in a way rarely matched. Part of this was due to his upbringing in what was the white-dominated Mid-West, which meant his influences included rock stars as well as black role models such as Sly Stone and George Clinton.

Although he had had substantial hits in 1983 with Little Red Corvette (not really about a car) and 1999 (which was about the end of the world), his breakthrough came the next year with Purple Rain. The film, loosely based on his life, introduced wider audiences to his flamboyant style of entertainment, as well as to a musical vision at once recognised as unique.

Remarkably, the extraordinary, ethereal title song was recorded live in a club. The soundtrack went on to win an Oscar. The hits from it included Let’s Go Crazy and When Doves Cry (about his parents break-up). And when Tipper Gore (the future Second Lady) found her 12-year old daughter listening to the masturbatory Darling Nikki, it prompted her to begin her campaign against explicit lyrics.

“Women and girls, they rule my world,” sang Prince, unabashed. He went on to have liaisons with stars including the actress Kim Basinger, his protegée Vanity 6 (who died earlier this year) and Madonna herself (he played the guitar on her hit Like a Prayer).

No doubt these relationships inspired his paeans to pan-sexuality and it was notable that even those projects that were not entirely successful, such as 1986’s film Under the Cherry Moon (starring Kristin Scott Thomas), would contain something irresistibly sexy – Kiss – or simply lovely – Sometimes It Snows in April.

As with Michael Jackson, Prince’s ability to put on a show made him well suited to the new video age. The growing importance of MTV meant that a hit single, such as Raspberry Beret (1985), would keep an artist in the public eye even if the album from which it came – Around the World in a Day – was a flop.

By 1987, however, Prince had mastered the longer form, reaching his critical and commercial peak with the double LP Sign O’The Times. The hits from it included U Got the Look (Prince used distinctive abbreviations long before texting) and the title track, arguably his only important piece of social commentary. Not since Marvin Gaye sang What’s Going On in 1971 had a black American caught so well the state of the nation.

Thereafter he continued to make the charts for several years with songs such as the theme to the Batman film in 1989, with Diamonds and Pearls, and Cream, his fifth and last US No 1 in 1991. But his eccentricities were becoming more marked.

Essentially a very shy introvert, he began to shun the media – famously he would later declare that the internet was “finished” and never owned a mobile telephone – and he became embroiled in contractual disputes with his record label, Warner Bros. In 1993, he scrawled ‘Slave” on his cheek and changed his name to that of a male-female symbol. Unable to print it, newspapers took to calling him The Artist Formerly Known as Prince, or TAFKAP.

It was relief to all when he reverted to his given name in 2000. However, he had seen out his contract by releasing half a dozen albums in as many years, and while these had contained the odd gem, such The Most Beautiful Girl in the World in 1994, they had tried the patience of most of his fans. And music, as ever, had moved on.

Arguably, too, so had he. While Prince remained a workaholic, recording reams of music that remained unheard, he also became a committed vegan and in 2001 a Jehovah’s Witness. “The Bible,” he declared, “is a guide to social interaction.”  Nonetheless, he continued to play live regularly, and in 2004 was still the highest paid recording artist in the world following his Musicology tour.

 He was admitted to the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame that year, and in 2007 was watched by 140 million viewers when he gave a typically memorable half-time concert at the Superbowl, Earlier this month he had announced that he was writing his memoirs, The Beautiful Ones.

He married first, in 1996, Mayte Garcia, formerly a dancer and singer in his group. They had a son, Boy Gregory, Prince’s only child, who died a week after birth. The marriage was dissolved in 1999. He married secondly, in 2001, Manuela Testolini, a Canadian businesswoman 19 years his junior. The marriage ended in divorce in 2006.

**Prince, born June 7 1958, died April 21 2016**