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## "My Name is Prince, and I am Funky!" Prince's Funk and How He Helped Bring It to a New (Power) Generation

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# **My Name Is Prince, and I Am Funky: Prince's Funk and How He Helped Bring It to a New Power Generation**

*Andrea Foy*

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Acknowledgments: This paper would not exist without two books: *Funk* by Dave Thompson and *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of The One* by Rickey Vincent. Both books are must-reads for any funk fan.

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Before discussing Prince's funk influences, I want to acknowledge his Dayton connections in honor of the Second Annual Funk Symposium. Prince made several visits to Ohio. Dayton, Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, and even nearby Detroit, Michigan, were regular stops on his early tour schedules. His last appearance in Dayton was in 1997 at Wright State's Nutter Center. In 2004, he brought the Musicology tour to Columbus and Detroit.

## **The First Time**

Prince Rogers Nelson's first appearance in Dayton was opening for funk legend Rick James at the University of Dayton Arena, April 1980. Since I was a teenager and too young to drive, my mother, Lois Foy, took me and five of my friends and family to the concert. While I was able to see Prince perform for the first time, my mother was having no part of Rick James. He came out spewing profanities, and that was

enough for her. So, while I was fortunate enough to see the debut of Prince, I regret never seeing the legend of Rick James.

### **Prince and Roger**

December 27, 2021, marks the 40th anniversary of Prince's second visit to Dayton. At Hara Arena, The Time, and Dayton's own legendary Zapp and Roger (Zapp Band), opened for Prince. Zapp was on their Computer Love tour and The Time and Prince were on their Controversy Tour. "Warner Brothers began to promote Prince and the P-Funk spinoff band Zapp as purveyors of the 'New Black Funk' in 1980," according to Dr. Rickey Vincent in his book *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of The One*.

Roger's girlfriend, Meta Collins, snapped the once-in-a-lifetime picture of the two superstars backstage at Hara. The image, frequently shared on social media without any credit to her, shows Prince in a cap with a beard drawn on his face, staring straight at the camera, and Roger in a suit, looking down. I tracked Meta through Facebook and interviewed her about the rare opportunity. She shared that Prince just walked up to them, gave her a look, Meta took the photo, and Prince headed to the side of the stage to watch The Time perform. According to Meta, the cap and beard were a disguise, so he would not be recognized as he watched the Time.

Other than that appearance, I could not find any other connection or pairing between Prince and Roger; Meta says he did come to a few other Zapp performances during that time. Still, we do not know of any collaborations.

### **The Ohio Players**

After Prince passed in 2016, the *Dayton Daily News* interviewed James "Diamond" Williams of The Ohio Players and Keith Harrison of Faze-O and the Dazz Band. The following are quotes from the 2016 interviews:

"The Ohio Players—the internationally known funk act from Dayton—crossed paths with Prince many times through the years. In fact, they performed several times at Prince's Minneapolis venue Glam Slam in the 1980s

and early 1990s,” said James “Diamond” Williams, drummer and leader of the Ohio Players, Prince, in particular, had a connection with the late Ohio Players frontman Leroy “Sugarfoot” Bonner. “He used to hang around Sugarfoot,” Williams recalled. “We like to think he had some influence on Prince’s music. ... We would often talk about how we admired each other’s songs. He loved ‘Love Rollercoaster’ and would cover it. There was such back-and-forth admiration.” <sup>1</sup>

### **Keith Harrison**

A songwriter and singer best known for his work with the funk bands Faze-O and Dazz Band, Keith Harrison also crossed paths with Prince. He recalled a time when he was touring with Morris Day and The Time in the mid-1990s and had a special opportunity to jam with Prince while in Las Vegas. That was a moment he will never forget. “After shows, he would go to a club and jam with musicians,” Harrison said. “He happened to jam with us one night at the Boulder Station Casino in Vegas.”

### **The Dayton Philharmonic**

On September 30, 2017, the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra premiered *The Music of Prince: A Rock and Symphonic Tribute*, with vocalist MacKenzie Green, music director Nisan Stewart, and others. It was a fantastic performance with orchestral renditions of his biggest hits. Watching conductor Neil Gittleman jamming to Prince was a pleasure. Based on these performances, Green was discovered by Prince associates and is now the front lead singer for one of the versions of the New Power Generation currently touring the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Fong, Michelle. “Dayton funk legends on what Prince meant to music.” *Dayton Daily News*, April 21, 2016.

## **Dave Chappelle**

Even though he is a Dayton, but not a funk, connection, Prince and Dave Chappelle knew each other well. I witnessed Chappelle doing a comedy bit for Prince at a Paisley Party in the '90s, around the time employees began talking about the pancake story Chappelle and Charlie Murphy have made into legend. Chappelle filmed a video dressed as Prince, and in return Prince used a picture of Dave, dressed as him, for the cover of one of his singles, "Breakfast Can Wait."

Now, let's look at some of Prince's other Funk connections.

## **In the Beginning ...**

Prince's immense popularity has been studied all over the world. After he died, several landmarks lit up in his signature color purple to honor him. I was fortunate enough to be chosen to speak at the first-ever interdisciplinary Prince Conference, entirely dedicated to his life and legacy, in the United Kingdom in 2017.

Funk music is a popular genre of the 1970s and 1980s, technically defined by a combination of African American soul music and a strong syncopated beat.

But the definition offered by musical legend Prince hits closer to home: "If you can describe it, it ain't funky."

This quote is from chapter three of *The History of Funk Music*, a University of Northern Colorado humanities course textbook.

Prince is being studied in Colorado, but also in Poland...

## **The Origins of the Minneapolis Sound**

In the research paper "The Sound of Purple: Prince and the Development of Minneapolis Sound" by Maciej Smółka, Smółka, a student at the Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, tells us a few essential details about Prince's early music life.

In the 1970s, 1.7% of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and Saint Paul) area was black. My research found that by the 1990s, the population had

doubled to 3.4%, and most recently, in the 2020s, it has risen to nearly 20% (Census.gov).

Smółka found that a lack of black music in radio made other genres influential as Prince grew up in the '70s. Born in 1958, he was a teenager by 1970 and already immersed in music. Prince's father was a jazz musician and a member of The Prince Rogers Trio; his mother was a singer. He grew up surrounded by music. Prince listened to Santana, Fleetwood Mac, and Joni Mitchell on the radio. Smółka notes that Prince also discovered Sly Stone and James Brown, although he does not identify how.

Minneapolis has had a small but vibrant R&B scene since the mid-'60s (Smółka). Prince eventually met childhood best friends Andre Cymone (guitar) and Morris Day (drums) in high school. In interviews with *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone*, Cymone revealed they named their first band Grand Central after Grand Funk Railroad (GFR). Cymone recalls playing the music of GFR, Earth, Wind & Fire, The Ohio Players, and Tower of Power in the early '70s.

This diversity of influences led to the birth of the Minneapolis Sound, which includes New Wave, funk, R&B, pop, rock, synthesizers, and processed drums. This distinct sound has influenced many artists since the 1980s.

Before discussing the many funk influences in Prince's life, I would like to pay homage to Prince's funkenstein creation: The Time.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen ...**

In 1978 a few short years after Prince formed his first band, he signed with Warner Brothers Records. He was described as a 19-year-old virtuoso, and because Warner Brothers was so impressed with his talent, they agreed to his desire to produce other acts. The first act was one of his biggest competitors, Flyte Tyme, comprised of Jimmy Jam, Terry Lewis, Morris Day, and others, and was renamed The Time. Prince played almost all the music on their first three albums. In a recent 2021 Jam and Lewis podcast, Jimmy Jam, Terry Lewis, and Morris Day reminisced about The Time being the much funkier version of Prince.

Vincent's book has this to say about The Time:

Incorporated from various Minneapolis bands to support the image of a hot opening act for Prince, The Time proved to be more than even *The Star* bargained for. The Time produced a scorching brand of tight, clean, synthesized dance funk that was accented (or ruined, depending on your point of view) by the egotistic rantings of lead vocalist Morris Day—“somebody get me a mirror, hoohaah,” cool!

Their first three albums—the Prince-produced debut *The Time* in 1981, the more self-defined *What Time Is It?* in 1982, and *Ice Cream Castles* in 1984—were slick, funky soul events in the music industry. Nothing so tight had been heard on the radio, but the talented rhythm musicians slithered around the beats to make nasty, naked funk at its best. Scorching groove hits like “Cool,” “Get It Up,” the particularly percussive “777-9311,” the monstrous “Wild and Loose,” and their slick funk masterwork “Jungle Love” all set the standard for tightness in the naked funk lock.

Prince, who was as competitive as he was virtuosic, made a rare admission of vulnerability in a 1990 interview with *Rolling Stone*: “To this day, [The Time] is the only band I’ve ever been afraid of.”

So, it should be noted that Prince—even though his early influences were more rock, pop, jazz, and soul—at his heart, he loved funk. So much so that he created The Time to be the funkier side of him and Morris Day his funkier alter ego. His admiration and collaborations with many funk idols also made him funky. He shared many of his heroes with his audience, exposing them to the funk of the ’70s firsthand.

### **Prince’s Funk Influences**

The best way to discuss Prince’s influence on funk is to let him tell of those he was influenced by and those he influenced. Even though he is not here to personally tell us, he shows us his preferences via his Paisley Park Studios, now a museum in Minnesota. In 2009, Prince commissioned Sam Jennings to create a mural (now known as the “Influence Wall”) in Paisley Park. The mural lines a hallway and consists of two sides. The right side has musicians that influenced Prince, and on the left, musicians he influenced. According to Jennings, Prince picked

all the performers featured on the mural and was very involved in the design. There are twelve musicians to whom Prince paid tribute. They are Jimi Hendricks, Miles Davis, Santana, George Clinton, Grand Funk Railroad, Earth, Wind & Fire, Larry Graham, James Brown, Tower of Power, Sly and the Family Stone, Chaka Khan and Rufus, and Stevie Wonder.

For this presentation, we will look at a few of the funkiest.

### **Stevie Wonder**

On June 13, 2015, Prince performed a surprise private show for President Barack Obama in the White House. After holding a benefit concert in Baltimore, he was asked to perform. Prince, in turn, called Stevie Wonder to appear as a special guest. They sang “Signed, Sealed, Delivered I’m Yours.” Wonder later appeared with Prince again at the latter of his Sunday shows in the D.C. area, performing “Superstition” with the musician. This was an extremely generous attempt to show his love and respect for Wonder, whom Prince had admired his whole life.

### **James Brown**

In a 1985 interview with MTV, Prince acknowledged the Godfather of Soul:

James Brown played a big influence in my style. When I was about ten years old, my stepdad put me on stage with him, and I danced a little bit until the bodyguard took me off. The reason I liked James Brown so much is that, on my way out, I saw some of the finest dancing girls I have ever seen in my life. And I think, in that respect, he influenced me by his control over his group.

In 1983, Prince and Michael Jackson performed with Brown at a concert in Los Angeles.

Charles Smith, Prince’s cousin and original drummer before he was replaced by Morris Day, remembers Prince saying this: “I’m going to practice my behind off like James Brown’s band, and I’m going to have everything so tight that you’re not going to be able to say anything about



it.”<sup>2</sup> Anyone who has seen Prince in concert can see an undeniable JB effect.

### **Maceo Parker**

Brown’s saxophonist, Maceo Parker, toured and recorded with Prince from 2002–09 and worked with Prince on seven albums. Once, when Prince was asked in an MTV interview if he still enjoyed playing live, he answered, “Are you kidding? I get to say: ‘Maceo, blow your horn!’” (*Forbes*).

### **George Clinton**

George Clinton and Prince enjoyed a long and close relationship. Prince wrote the mega funk hit “Erotic City” after hearing a Parliament song at a concert. Clinton loved it so much, he covered “Erotic City.” Clinton appeared in the movie *Graffiti Bridge* and signed with Paisley Park Records in the late ’90s. In 1997, Prince helped induct Clinton and P-Funk into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by showing up and speaking about their impact on his career.

Prince also loved to make his entrance into his Paisley Park parties in the ’90s.

### **Sly and the Family Stone**

Alan Leeds, Prince’s former tour manager and president of Paisley Park Records, was quoted as saying, “[Prince] understood the segregation of the industry. He said, ‘I have to have white people in the band and girls in the band. Sly had the right idea. I’m gonna do what Sly did and they’re gonna cross me over, otherwise, I’ll forever be the Black artist.’”

Prince loved to cover “Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)” in performances. According to the book *Funk*, by Dave Thompson, Stone band members Jerry Martini and Cynthia Johnson were invited to appear with the New Power Generation (NPG) and Graham Central Station in the late ’90s.

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<sup>2</sup> Touré. *I Would Die 4 U: Why Prince Became an Icon*. Atria Books, 2013.

## **Larry Graham**

A former Sly and the Family Stone member, Larry Graham became a massive influence in Prince's life. In 1998, he recorded a collaboration with Prince under Graham Central Station, *GCS 2000*. While Graham wrote all the songs, except one cowritten by Prince, the album was co-arranged and co-produced by Prince, and most of the instruments and vocals were recorded by both Graham and Prince. Graham also played bass on tours with Prince from 1997–2000. He appeared in Prince's 1998 VHS *Beautiful Strange* and 1999 DVD *Rave Un2 the Year 2000*. He was an even more significant influence on Prince's spiritual life, recruiting him to become a Jehovah's Witness.

## **Earth, Wind & Fire**

Thanks to Andre Cymone, we know that Earth, Wind & Fire was an early musical inspiration. In 2020 the band appeared in *Let's Go Crazy: A Grammy Salute to Prince* and performed a beautiful rendition of "Adore." The event, produced by Jimmy Jam, Terry Lewis, and Sheila E, scored an Emmy nomination.

## **Chaka Khan and Rufus**

My favorite story of their unique relationship happened at the very beginning. Chaka received a phone call from Sly Stone one night in San Francisco in the late '70s:

"I was completely fooled," Khan said. "He said, 'this is Sly; I'm down at Electric Ladyland.' 'OK, I'll be right down!' And that's how he got me down to the studio. I get there, and there's nobody there except for one little guy in this room with a guitar. And I said, 'Do you know where Sly is?' He said to me, 'Hi, I'm Prince, I called you.' I was very pissed. And that's how we met."

Billboard.com

Prince fell hard for Rufus and its lead vocalist, Chaka Khan:

Prince and Chaka go way back. As a teen, he'd been "a fan and a fanatic," he told the *Philadelphia Daily News* in 1998. "I used to run home and see everything she was on" (Pendleton 1998). According to biographer Jon Bream, the apartment where Prince lived around the time of his signing to Warner Bros. had "45 rpm records nailed to the wall next to a poster of Chaka Khan" (Bream 1984). During the recording of his 1978 debut album *For You*, he would listen to records by Chaka and her group Rufus to get in the right mood for his vocal sessions; "He absolutely loved that girl," assistant engineer Steve Fontano recalled to biographer Per Nilsen (Nilsen 1999 37).<sup>3</sup>

Prince did a home recording of Rufus's "Sweet Thing" in 1976; Khan's cover of Prince's "I Feel for You" hit No. 3 in 1979, and her 1998 disc *Come 2 My House* was released on NPG Records.

### **Prince and Me!**

Before I close, I want to talk about the unique experience I had getting to know Prince and orbiting outside of his inner circle for a few years. It all started in 1992 when I attended a Prince fan convention in Minneapolis. MTV was there to cover the events and picked me for an interview, which was included in their news segment and played worldwide for a week.

I have brief cameos in two different video recordings. One was the Rave Un2 the Year 2000 concert where I caught a glimpse of myself in the audience, and the second was in the video for a song called, "The Max." There are two glimpses of me wearing a handmade dress of his album covers.

In 2016, I published *Prince and Me: His Number One Fan: My Minneapolis Memories*, a memoir of my lifelong admiration of Prince.

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<sup>3</sup> Zachary Hoskins, "'Sweet Thing': Prince Doesn't Shy Away from the Song's Ostensibly Feminine Qualities; He Accentuates Them," *Princesongs.org*, June 22, 2016, <https://princesongs.org/2016/06/22/sweet-thing/>

Finally, as mentioned earlier, in 2017 I was fortunate enough to fly thousands of miles to the United Kingdom to present on Prince. My presentation was how much he loved his fans and all the things he did do to and for his fans, and I believe this paper is an extension of that. As I said, in the beginning, he brought The Funk to a new generation of his age and younger, and introduced the funk legends of the '70s to us in a way we may not have known had he not.

### **Paying It Back**

Prince loved to shout out his idols in song and on stage. “Musicology” (2004) houses a funky bass and guitar hook against a solid groove designed to shift feet and raise spirits. The track closes out with a channel-surfing radio tuning in to a vast array of purple hits. It acted as a reminder if such a thing was needed as to why people drew *en masse* to Prince in the first place. Extolling the virtues of The Funk he grew up with, Prince name-checks James Brown, Sly and The Family Stone, and Earth, Wind & Fire as he kicks “old school joints for true funk soldiers” (Albumism.com):

I wish I had a dollar  
For every time you say  
Don't you miss the feeling  
Music gave you  
Back in the day?  
Let's Groove “September”  
Earth, Wind and Fire  
“Hot Pants” by James,  
Sly's gonna take you higher.

He made a point to honor and appreciate where he came from, who helped him, and how he arrived.

### **Conclusion**

Chuck Zwicky, who was an engineer at Paisley Park from 1987–89, cited many of Prince's musical inspirations in an interview in Touré's *I Would Die 4 U: Why Prince Became an Icon*, including Tower of Power,

the horn-driven R&B band which formed in Oakland in 1968: “When he sits down at the drums, he hears Dave Garibaldi (Tower of Power). When he plays his guitar parts, he’s thinking about James Brown’s guitarists (Jimmy Nolen and Catfish Collins); those guys had the definitive funk chord approach to the guitar. When he plays the bass, he’s thinking like Larry Graham (Sly and the Family Stone). When he’s at the keyboards, he’s either thinking like a horn section or like Gary Numan. ... So, like, he’s got this band in his head of all these unique individual musicians. But the sum of it is Prince music. It doesn’t sound like obviously influenced.”

This paper found that Prince’s funk was carved from different influences to form the Minneapolis Sound. He was able to play with many of his idols and introduce many of them to his legions of fans.

In an interview with *Guitar World* in 1998, Prince enthused about his collaborations: “One of the pleasures of my life is being able to work some of my musical heroes, and in doing so pay back some dues and have a great time.”

His name is Prince, and he is funky.