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“I’m not a woman, I’m not a man”: The Effect of Prince’s Music, Voice, and Dress on Views of
His Gender and Sexuality

Prince was a straight man who became a queer icon. The 1980s were a time of glamour, and Prince carried every bit of it. From the lyrics he wrote, to the falsetto he sang in, and the clothes he wore, Prince oozed sexuality and androgyny. In the present article, I will look at four specific songs– “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” “I Would Die 4 U,” “Controversy,” and “Diamonds and Pearls”– and how the lyrics and performance of these songs contributed to Prince’s androgynous persona. At a time when Prince’s contemporaries, like Michael Jackson or Def Leppard, dressed for hyper-masculinity, Prince took the opposite approach. His androgyny was part of his sex appeal, and it was found throughout his lyrics and performance.

In “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” Prince’s androgyny is obvious even in the title. Simon Reynolds claims the song is “the plaint of a man whose yearning to get close to his female lover is so intense that he’s come to feel that his own gender is a barrier to ultimate intimacy.” If only he could become one of his lover’s girlfriends, he could feel intimacy with her. The narrator wishes to wash his girlfriend’s hair, pick out her clothes, and go to a movie and cry together. In “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” the love between two women as friends is comparable to the intimate romantic relationship between a man and a woman. According to Reynolds, this shows Prince borders on the fantasy of being a lesbian.

In the song, Prince says, “If I was your best friend / Would you let me take care of you and do all the things / That only a best friend can” (lines 6-8). Here, he has introduced the comparison of himself with a girl. While initially not explicitly sexualized, Prince transitions to

his love for a woman. At this moment, the listener is unsure if the narrator is speaking as a woman or a man. “I mean, we don’t have to make children to make love,” Prince sings (47). If the narrator “could somehow be his woman’s best girlfriend as well as her boyfriend,” if he could transcend the boundaries of gender, he could overcome the “gender divide” (Reynolds).

Prince attempts to overcome the gender divide with another aspect of his music: vocals. In “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” he sings in an artificially high falsetto that, according to Reynolds, connotes the otherworldly and feminine. While the use of falsetto may not be intrinsically feminine, the combination of meaning of the lyrics and Prince’s vocals present a feminine side of the artist. Many of his more famous songs included falsetto, helping him cross borders of stereotypical gender lines with his voice. But, not only did he use falsetto as part of his sex appeal, he influenced pop artists far into the future. Masculine sex symbols of today like Justin Timberlake, Nick Jonas, Jason Derulo, and Usher can be found singing in falsetto. While Prince was not the first to use falsetto, he certainly changed the way later generations would view its sex appeal.

Reynolds also claims that singing in falsetto was a representation of “the angelic,” a persona further presented by Prince in the music video of “If I Was Your Girlfriend.” Prince can be found on stage wearing a feathered white costume. Whether intentional or not, Prince’s choice of the angel is an interesting reference to religion. In Christianity, angels are genderless creatures, above human fault and flaw. Prince’s portrayal of his angelic vision can be seen as a nod to his androgyny. Ancient art depicted angels as masculine or genderless. While they tend to wear long robes and long hair, their names – like Michael, Gabriel, or Raphael – are masculine. In modern western ideals of angels, however, they are often depicted as female. In modern religious art, they are seen as guardians, caretakers, or mothers. On the Victoria’s Secret runway,

the female models are paraded as angels. Prince, by representing himself as an angel through voice and dress, is saying his gender cannot be pinned down. He is neither the male religious symbol nor the objectified female lingerie model.

In “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” Prince implicitly states he is neither male nor female. In “I Would Die 4 U,” it is explicit. Prince sings, “I’m not a woman / I’m not a man” (1-2), arguably one of his most famous lines, and rejects conformity of gender. Present throughout the rest of the song are other binaries like the one between woman and man. Prince sings, “I’m not your lover / I’m not your friend” (10-11) and “I’m not a human / I am a dove” (23-24). By claiming to be none of these binaries, or even human, Prince is rejecting any sort of duality related to gender conformity. His lack of gender orientation and androgyny led to an obfuscated sexual orientation. As Stan Hawkins pointed out, “Prince transcended gender norms in ways that turned him into the first poststructural queer pop artist” (126). By blending “racial, sexual, and gender signifiers,” Prince rejected patriarchal standards and clichés that he, as a black male performer, faced (Hawkins, 126).

While Prince rejects the binaries of gender, what he does claim to be is “conscious” and “love.” “Prince’s quirky idiolect exhibited the brash signifiers of an androgynous body,” says Hawkins (126). Prince identifies himself with two non-concrete, genderless objects that allow him to transcend gender. According to H. Zahra Caldwell, Prince “imagined society [was] rooted in non-conformity,” with many races and many genders, all with equal access to love, sexuality, freedom, and peace (411). Rather than associate with a gender or sexual orientation, Prince boiled his identity down to consciousness and love. Caldwell called Prince’s desire for an equal access to opportunity his utopia. All genders and races were represented in Prince’s music,

movies, and performances, as all could participate in the vision he had for his art and his aspiration of a utopia.

Because of Prince's attempt at a utopia, Caldwell argues that, "visually, the band looked unlike any other" (411). Men could be found wearing heels, lace, and makeup. Women were presented as androgynous and goddess-like. "Somehow," says Hawkins, "he mastered the skill of turning fashion into a structuring tool for transforming the male body in pop" (127). In *Purple Rain*, the movie that accompanies the album of the same name, Prince performs "I Would Die 4 You" on stage in a lace collar to a crowd of women and men in makeup. His guitarist Wendy Melvoin plays in a blazer and black lace shorts. Prince bent the rules of gender by presenting him, his bandmates, and his fictional *Purple Rain* movie audience in a way that veered from the stereotypical.

Because of his small stature, Prince often wore heels. This sort of dress earned him homophobic condemnation. Rather than be swayed by critics, however, he continued with full force. "Unperturbed, Prince turned to slick choreography, makeup, and clothing," says Hawkins (127). He can be seen showing off heeled boots in "I Would Die 4 You." In an interview, Melvoin reflected that her presence on stage allowed him to be even more androgynous (Hawkins, 412). Her performance in the music video of "I Would Die 4 You" is evidence of Prince's sentiment.

Prince's costume was as much a part of his utopia as his lyrics. Kevin Whiteneir claims that Prince's dress was a revolution against the control of fashion by aristocrats. Whiteneir says Prince challenged "the tradition that prestige was dependent on class and that fashion should be available only to the denizens of the upper class" (85). He wanted to change the way fashion influenced status and vice versa by breaking stereotypes on stage. Part of the utopia he wished to

build included these changes, and with social and economic status no longer influencing access to creativity, music, happiness, and equality. By dressing however he liked, Prince showed that it didn't matter who you were.

Aside from his gender queer fashion, the vocals in "I Would Die 4 You" once again connote femininity through falsetto. In combination with his makeup and the line, "I'm not a woman / I'm not a man," "I Would Die 4 You" is an essential queer single.

Even before Prince's declaration of being genderless in "I Would Die 4 You," "Controversy" thrust Prince into the world of pop as a pansexual icon. He sings, "Am I black or white, am I straight or gay" (line3). The idea of a binary returns; he questions race and sexuality as two sides of a coin. The song's title suggests a disagreement over the definitions of black and white, and straight and gay. According to Caldwell, Prince's early tours, including for the album *Controversy*, often made such claims. "He challenged gender and promoted sexual fluidity early in his career," Caldwell says (413).

"Controversy" was, in some ways, a response to the media and national sentiment of the time. Prince "presented himself as the Enigma at the roiling center of a vortex of discourse" (Reynolds). When the album *Controversy* first appeared, Prince received significant backlash from non-supporters. While opening for the Rolling Stones, Prince was met with a predominately white crowd that immediately rejected his New Wave Rock & Roll style in a violent manner that included booing and throwing trash. *Controversy*, and its titular single, became a revolutionary piece that showed Prince was not ready to back down. In today's atmosphere of anti-LGBT sentiments battling allies and supporters, *Controversy* is still relevant. Reynolds claims that Prince's lyrics are especially appropriate for the trans-aware moment we live in.

While not quite as explicit in his use of genderqueer language, or as contentious as “Controversy,” “Diamonds and Pearls” is still an example of Prince’s use of gender queer language. In the song, Prince wishes to offer his lover diamonds, pearls, and if he could, the world. All he can do, however, is offer them his love.

What makes the song enigmatic is Prince’s reference to his lover. They are never named or even assigned a gender. Instead, they are simply referred to as “you.” Still, this usage of genderless language in music is not uncommon. What makes the use of “you” significant in “Diamonds and Pearls” is the lines, “If I gave you diamonds and pearls / Would you be a happy boy or a girl” (lines 7-8). By being unspecific in his wording, Prince “posed himself as a human question mark” (Reynolds).

Prince’s undisputed status as a queer pop icon is one that has made study of his music common place. With his death, evidence that he was an even more secretive man than many knew has surfaced. A look at how his previously unknown personal life influenced his work beg future study and exploration. However, it is undisputed that his work influenced queer culture, identity, and representation.

Prince was unafraid to include androgynous language in his songs, feminine vocals, and genderqueer fashion in his performances. Without his music, male sexuality and the politics of gender may not look the way they do now. Reynolds claims Prince’s music was “a mystical-political rebuke to reality.” Perhaps, he was just trying to portray his utopia through the light of androgyny and gender nonconformity. In an interview, Prince was asked if his androgyny was an act or a search for self-identity. He responded that he was simply being himself.

Works Cited

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Great work here, Uma. I'm fascinated by his androgyny and the androgyny of many performers (David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, even masculine bands like Poison). Of course, Prince does it more interestingly, as you point out. You did a fantastic job of using specific examples from videos, performances, sounds, dress, and lyrics. And you balanced those close readings with interesting and helpful secondary sources. Brava! Grade: A

Here's a picture of Stryper, a Christian hard-rock band I loved when I was in middle school. They were considered very straight, very masculine, very cool, and very Christian. But they dressed like this:

