

1970s

There's **NOTHING** *that I wouldn't do*

PRINCE MAY HAVE ONLY RELEASED RECORDS IN THE LAST TWO YEARS OF THE 70S, BUT IT WAS ENOUGH TO MAKE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT. WE LOOK AT HIS EARLY LIFE AND TENTATIVE EMERGENCE AS A STAR

PAUL LESTER



Prince, aged 19, in a series of images shot by photographer Robert Whitman

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PRINCE

hit the public eye at the end of the 70s, when the prolific

wunderkind began his recording career in earnest. His first two albums, *For You* (1978) and *Prince* (1979), were intriguing efforts, albeit commercially and critically outshone by contemporaneous releases from Chic, Michael Jackson and Earth, Wind & Fire.

Nobody would have guessed from these two long-players that Prince would dominate the next 10 years. But they were promising: of their time, if not defining it, in the way that his 80s output indisputably did.

Prince didn't exactly arrive out of the blue as a fully formed major-label artist in 1978, however. Events of the early part of that decade in particular had shaped him as a musician and as a performer.

Prince Rogers Nelson was born on 7 June, 1958.

At the start of the 70s he was 11 years old, and still coming to terms with his parents' divorce.

His father, John Lewis Nelson, a pianist and composer in a Minneapolis jazz band, had left the family home on Logan Avenue in 1968. Prince and his sister Tyka had to fend for themselves while their mother, Mattie Shaw, a part-time singer, went out to work. Over the next few years, his parents would acquire new partners, leading to new siblings and half-siblings. "There was a lot of illegitimacy – different fathers, different mothers," he told *NME* in 1981.

There was a phase when he moved between the homes of his parents, friends and relatives. "I was constantly running from family to family," he said. "I didn't like being shuffled around." His first manager, Owen Husney, noted that Prince learned early on that the only person he could truly depend on was himself. "If you're a control freak like him," he said of the future studio monomaniac, "you're just trying to control your environment so you won't get hurt."

SOLACE IN MUSIC

The other problem with which the young Prince had to contend was bullying. He sought solace in music, particularly playing the piano that his dad had left in the family home. "He left the piano behind when he left us behind," he recalled. "I wasn't allowed to touch it when he still lived with us."

Prince wrote his first tune, *Funk Machine*, on that piano at just seven years old. As his mother recounted in a 1984 *Minneapolis Star Tribune* interview, "he could hear music even from a very early age. When he was three or four, we'd go to the department store and he'd jump on the radio, the organ, any type of instrument there was. I'd have to hunt for him, and that's where he'd be – in the music department."

Before Prince had hit double figures, his other great obsession – sex – began to develop. He would search out his mother's collection of porn magazines, which he would pore over for hours. "She had a lotta interesting stuff," Prince revealed. "Certainly that affected my attitude towards my sexuality."

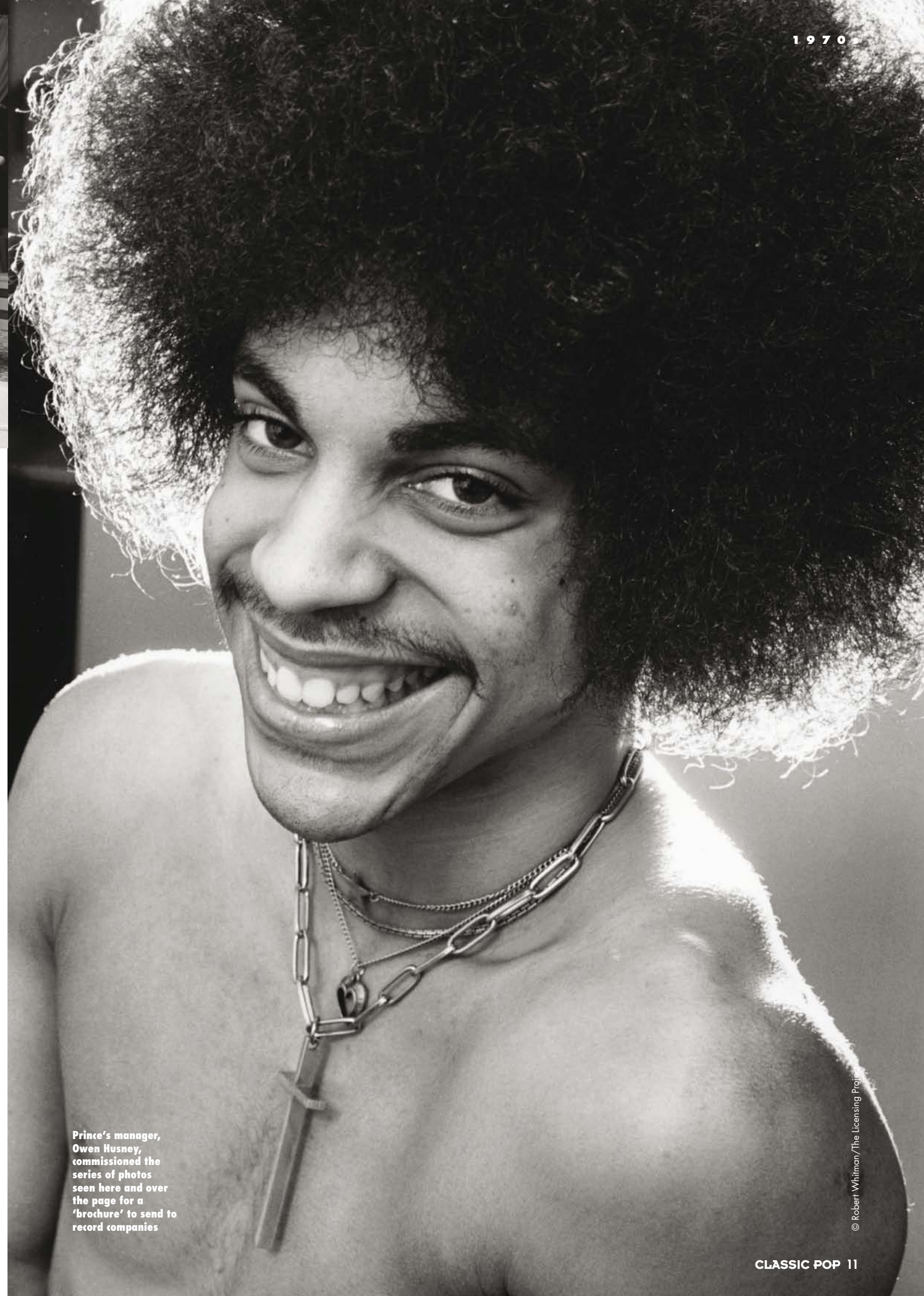
Luckily, he found an outlet for all his pent-up feelings and frustrations in music and performance. He formed his first band at 13, while studying at Minneapolis' Central High School. He recruited his second cousin, Charles Smith, and his neighbour and friend from elementary school, André Anderson (later known as André Cymone, of Prince And The Revolution).

Prince's father bought him his first electric guitar, so he naturally assumed those duties, while Anderson played bass and Smith chose drums. The band originally went by the name of Phoenix and had a brief existence as Soul Explosion, but eventually settled for Grand Central, sometimes known as Grand Central Corporation.

By his mid-teens, it became evident that one instrument would never be enough to satisfy Prince. In 1973, while in junior high, he met James Samuel

He sought solace in music,
**PARTICULARLY THE PIANO HIS DAD HAD
LEFT IN THE FAMILY HOME...
HE WROTE HIS FIRST TUNE AGED SEVEN**

POP UP Prince's early fascination with musical instruments meant that he quickly found his way around piano, drums and guitar – and apparently, he learned the latter by tuning to an open A chord rather than standard tuning



Prince's manager, Owen Husney, commissioned the series of photos seen here and over the page for a 'brochure' to send to record companies

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Prince outside
the Schmitt Music
Company building
in downtown
Minneapolis, in 1977

'Jimmy Jam' Harris III, a future member of The Time and songwriting partner of Terry Lewis. Jam was impressed not just by Prince's work ethic, but by the breadth of his talent as a multi-instrumentalist.

Jam said later: "We were in a band to back up the choir at school. I was gonna play drums, and I knew Prince played keyboards. He showed up at practice, picks up a guitar and plays, note for note, the intricate solo from Chicago's *Make Me Smile*. I made the mistake of getting up from the drums, and he sat there and killed 'em."

JAM CENTRAL

Prince continued to perform with Grand Central until he graduated from high school, although there were changes in personnel – Smith was replaced by Morris Day (later lead singer of The Time and Prince's nemesis in the *Purple Rain* movie).

By then, Prince was playing piano and guitar as they performed at clubs and parties around Minneapolis. Attendees testify to a young musician in thrall to Stevie Wonder and James Brown, Jimi Hendrix and Carlos Santana, the pioneering funk-soul of Sly & The Family Stone, the acid jams of Parliament-Funkadelic, the orchestral disco of Earth, Wind & Fire, and the multifaceted rock of enigmatic 70s musician Todd Rundgren. A further sign of Prince's eclecticism was that Grand Central also covered Steely Dan and Grand Funk Railroad.

When he was 17, Prince gave his first interview, and although it wouldn't be his last, future encounters with the press would be few and far between. Dated 16 February, 1976, it was with his high-school newspaper, the *Central High Pioneer*, and pictured a young afro'd Prince seated at a piano.

"I play with Grand Central Corporation. I've been playing with them for two years," he explained, unusually dissing his home town ("I was born here,

unfortunately," he said), perhaps because, as he saw it, he should have achieved recognition from the outside world by now. He continued: "I think it is very hard for a band to make it in this State, even if they're good. Mainly because there aren't any big record companies or studios... if we would have lived in Los Angeles or New York or some other big city, we would have gotten over by now."

He added that he enjoyed school, if only because of the music facilities, and boasted that he could play several instruments. Plus he sang, although he gave up saxophone in seventh grade. He was, he confessed, self-taught, playing by ear.

"I've had about two lessons, but they didn't help much," he noted. Nevertheless, the diligent Prince advised pupils who wanted to learn an instrument

"to get a teacher unless they are very musically inclined. One should learn all their scales, too. That is very important." He concluded that his band was "in

the process of recording an album" of self-composed material and that it was due for release that summer. His ambition, finally, was "to go to college".

Soon after this interview, the band changed their name to Champagne and carried on gigging locally. But it was clear that Prince had set his sights on being more than just a member of a band.

Virtually concurrent to all this activity was Prince's brief involvement with 94 East, the band formed by Pepe Willie, the husband of Prince's cousin, Shauntel Manderville. Willie – whose uncle was a founding member of Little Anthony And The Imperials – hired André Anderson and Prince to record tracks he had written. Prince contributed guitar and co-wrote a tune called *Just Another Sucker*. Further tracks later saw the light of day via the LP release, *Minneapolis Genius – The Historic 1977 Recordings*. It was the first time that Prince had recorded in a studio.

WHEN HE WAS 17, Prince gave
his first interview.
FUTURE PRESS ENCOUNTERS WOULD
BE FEW AND FAR BETWEEN



© Robert Whitman/The Licensing Project

POP UP In 1975, Pepe Willie invited a then-teenaged Prince to record his first-ever session. "Prince played better than a professional session player, and I've been to a lot of sessions," said Willie



Lover BOY

PRINCE LIVE, ON VIDEO, ON RECORD

SOFT AND WET

WARNER BROS, MARCH 1978

Prince's first single was a racy, risqué sign of ribald things to come. "Hey, lover, I got a sugarcane / That I wanna lose in you / Baby can you stand the pain?" he enquired in a teasing androgynous falsetto that suggested he could assume a male or female role in whatever romantic scenario he envisioned. Its sparse, staccato, stop-start rhythm presaged later funk-pop masterworks such as *Kiss* and *Black Sweat*. The B-side, meanwhile, showcased another side of Prince, all bluesy and forlorn, with an intricate guitar figure at the start and lyrics of the "my baby done left me" variety.



FOR YOU

WARNER BROS, APRIL 1978

As soon as you heard the album's rousing *a cappella* title tune, with Prince's voice multi-tracked to sound like a choir of sexed-up seraphim, you knew that here was somebody capable of greatness. One glance at the credits — it would have been easier to list what he didn't do — confirmed the arrival of a major talent. Too often dismissed by critics as a weak first foray, *For You* displays many of the elements that would make Prince a superstar in the 80s: the anguished cries, the consummate mastery of everything from rocked-up funk to strings-drenched slow jams — already in place.



PRINCE

WARNER BROS, OCTOBER 1979

I Wanna Be Your Lover was almost as arresting an album opener as *Let's Go Crazy* would be six years later. *Why You Wanna Treat Me So Bad?* was irresistible synth-funk with a hint of new wave, like Sly Stone if he joined The Cars. *Sexy Dancer* was the sound of a proficient unit tightly jamming — and astonishingly, Prince was that proficient unit. *With You* appeared to have strayed in from a Stylistics album. Then there was *Bambi*, which rocked loud and hard. There was no name yet for the places he and his arsenal of instruments could go.



JUST AS LONG AS WE'RE TOGETHER

WARNER BROS, NOVEMBER 1978

As though to prove how quickly Prince was moving, Warners decided to issue this track from his debut a month after the eponymous second album. It seemed like a blast from the dim and distant past, despite being taken from a long-player barely eight months old. *Just As Long As We're Together* was frisky pop-funk. It reached 91 on the R&B charts, but failed to enter the pop charts. Luckily, Prince wouldn't have to wait long for a bona-fide crossover hit.



Willie reminisced to *Rolling Stone* in 2016, just after Prince's death. "He was definitely a better guitar player than me," he laughed. "Prince had desire. He was not going to fail at anything he did musically. That's what I admired about him the most... I've never seen a musician like Prince, and I don't know if we're going to see anybody like him again."

IMPLIED NAUGHTY SEXUALITY

In early 1976, Prince and Anderson recorded a demo at ASI Studio, Minneapolis. That spring, there was further recording at Moonound, where the 17-year-old Prince impressed studio owner and producer Chris Moon. Moon offered Prince free studio time in return for collaborating on some songs, allowing him to increase his knowledge of recording and gain valuable experience of composing and performing.

Their deal effectively signalled the demise of Champagne, but meant Prince could now focus on developing himself as a solo artist. He worked around the clock and came up with several songs, one of which, *Baby*, would make it onto his debut album.

According to *Prince: The First Decade*, by Per Nilsen, it was Moon who encouraged Prince to pursue a risqué direction with his lyrics and image. "Moon came up with a concept he termed 'implied naughty sexuality': sexually suggestive lyrics that used teasing word-play and metaphors so that they could be interpreted different ways," wrote Nilsen.

Prince soon had the words for a track entitled *Soft And Wet* and 13 other songs — enough for an album. Buoyed by his new music, he headed for New York in a bid to secure a record contract. Initially unsuccessful, things started to move when Owen Husney, a Minneapolis businessman, concert promoter and ad-agency owner, heard Prince's tape. Husney signed Prince, still only 18, to a management contract, and raised \$50,000 to support him until he got a deal. It was Husney's idea to create mystique around Prince. There were no clippings of articles or photos in their press pack, just a single, terse line of copy. He decided, too, to tell record companies Prince was a year younger than he really was.

Husney helped Prince create a demo at Sound 80 Studios in Minneapolis, with producer/engineer David Rivkin, aka David Z, who had recorded Grand Central in 1975. "He did all the instruments," Rivkin later said. "He had a little cassette machine into which he hummed each part. The horn part, the guitar part — he had it all separated. It was really evolved."

He also noted that Prince was a little diffident in company. "When anyone came in the studio while he was singing, he wanted me to turn the light off because he didn't want anybody to look at him. He got over that shyness, that's for sure."

Husney sent the demo out to record companies on a silver reel-to-reel, not a cassette. There was interest from Warner Bros, A&M Records and Columbia. After a bidding war, Prince signed to Warners, attracted by their growing roster of black acts such as Funkadelic, Rose Royce and Curtis Mayfield. At the same time, Prince was keen to not present himself solely as a black artist. He didn't want to be pigeonholed. "I'm not an R&B artist," he told the record company. "I'm not a rock'n'roller. I'm an artist and I do a wide range of music. If I deliver you rock'n'roll, don't come back to me and say I can't do it because I'm black."

Lenny Waronker, then head of A&R at Warners, was delighted to have such a single-minded artist on



Prince successfully overcomes his shyness to perform at the Roxy Theatre on 26 November, 1979 in LA



Prince trades licks with guitarist Dez Dikerson, in his first public concert at the Capri Theater on 5 January, 1979 in Minneapolis

his books. "You could not only tell there was talent, but there was a vision," he said, recalling his new signee warning him, "Don't make me black."

Prince signed to Warners on 25 June, 1977, in a deal that gave him creative control and ownership of the publishing rights to his songs. It was two weeks after his 19th birthday. The stipulation was that he had to deliver three albums in 27 months, the first of them within six months of signing.

Husney and Prince decamped to Sausalito, California, where the first album, *For You*, was recorded at Record Plant Studios between October 1977 and February 1978. Veteran engineer Tommy Vicari was at the controls, with Prince assuming all other duties. According to the album notes, he produced, arranged and composed all the material (except *Soft And Wet*, whose lyrics were co-written by Chris Moon) and played all 27 instruments. Prince also met three of his heroes during recording: Sly Stone, Carlos Santana and Chaka Khan, who would later have a hit with one of his songs, *I Feel For You*.

The sessions didn't all go smoothly, however. Prince's legendary wilfulness and obduracy were already evident and he didn't like to be challenged on his often idiosyncratic working methods. Husney remembers Waronker and Warners head Mo Ostin coming up to the studio in Sausalito. "Prince didn't really want them up there," recalls Husney, "and I'm trying my best to keep them happy. We're listening to the playback of the track *So Blue*. Lenny goes, 'Great song, but there's no bass.' Prince turns around and says, 'That's it. Everybody out. Get out.' I turned white. I thought, 'It's all over.' We go shuffling out of the studio. Lenny said, 'Don't worry about it. The song is great. I get where he's coming from. I'm with him.'"

DAZZLING TECHNIQUE

The album was finished in February 1978. It cost \$170,000 to record, nearly the whole budget for Prince's first three albums. Prince was exhausted, but happy with the results. The album was mixed in Los Angeles and released on 7 April, 1978, to generally good reviews. Critics noted his breathy falsetto, drawing comparisons with Smokey Robinson, Michael Jackson and The Bee Gees. While many commented favourably on Prince's abilities, there was a sense that *For You* was a triumph of technique and polymathy over songcraft and melody.

Today, *For You*'s nine tracks seem strong and assured, offering a neat précis of 70s music styles. The album showed signs of the young prodigy's fearlessness and audacity from the *a cappella* opening track onwards. *For You* fared well commercially, selling 150,000 copies in the States and reaching No 21 on Billboard's soul chart, stalling at No 163 in the pop chart, which, considering his crossover ambitions, will doubtless have frustrated Prince. The first single, *Soft And Wet*, sold 350,000 in the US and reached No 12 on the soul chart and No 192 on the pop chart. The follow-up, *Just As Long As We're Together*, reached No 91 on the soul chart.

It was enough to generate media interest in the young musician, but the few face-to-face interviews Prince did make his bosses at Warners think twice about the benefits of doing press. Whether out of awkwardness or a desire to be different, he asked a female journalist from *Record World*: "Does your pubic hair go up to your navel?" It was then that it was decided that a no-interview policy might

Lover BOY

LIVE, VIDEO, ON RECORD (CONT'D)

I WANNA BE YOUR LOVER

WARNER BROS, AUGUST 1979

The urgent fever-pitch disco-funk of *I Wanna Be Your Lover* will have been many people's introduction to Prince. In a way, its lyric – "I wanna be your brother / I wanna be your mother and your sister, too / There ain't no other / That can do the things that I'll do to you" – foretells *If I Was Your Girlfriend* as Prince asserts his polymorphous desires. Clearly there was a market for such perverse impishness – the public softened up in this respect by disco androgynes such as Sylvester – and it became his first big hit in the US and the UK.



I WANNA BE YOUR LOVER (VIDEO)

WARNER BROS, AUGUST 1979

There are two videos accompanying this single. The main one features Prince in an unbuttoned leopard shirt and jeans singing alone against a black background, his lightly wavy hair a departure from his afro. Various shots show him playing the instruments by himself. The other version shows Prince and his band members performing the song in a painted room. The video was pulled due to its sexually suggestive nature, and remains sought-after by collectors.



LIVE AT THE ROXY THEATER, LA

NOVEMBER 1979

On 28 November, Prince and his band began a 14-date tour. Attended by a 500-strong crowd, it showed how far Prince and his players had come since the semi-debacle at Capri Theater. Reviews were generous, even if some were a little perplexed by the mix of funk and hard rock, suggesting it might alienate the largely black audience. How about funk, rock – and reggae? Prince met Bob Marley backstage, the idea being that the pair might record a track together. Unfortunately, the macho reggae superstar was put off by Prince's skimpy leopard g-string briefs and the collaboration was put on hold.



WHY YOU WANNA TREAT ME SO BAD?

WARNER BROS, JANUARY 1980

The squealing synth line was all the hook this single needed to sustain the chart success of its predecessor, *I Wanna Be Your Lover* (although that success was limited this time to the R&B chart, where it peaked at No 13). Critics who accused Prince of being a two-theme writer – his sexual voraciousness and the faithlessness of women – would have had their theory confirmed by this dig at a cruel lover, but the guitar solo at the climax was blistering.





Prince poses at the piano in his manager Owen Husney's home

© Robert Whitman/The Licensing Project

work better for Prince. Instead, it was going to be about recording and performing. All he needed was a band. Many musicians auditioned in LA, including Jimmy Jam, who was rejected, as was a guitarist who made a reference to drugs. Keyboardist Ricky Peterson turned Prince down because it seemed too much like boot camp ("They'd say, 'You can't drink; you have to show up on time...']"). But a strict regime was necessary because touring was essential to spreading the word about Prince and establishing his reputation.

Prince's plan was to have Warners organise a tour for 1979. He just needed to convince them he was worth the financial outlay. He assembled a band – André

Cymone on bass, Dez Dickerson on guitar, Gayle Chapman and Matt 'Doctor' Fink on keyboards, and David Z's brother Bobby on drums –

and Pepé Willie arranged for them to play two shows at Minneapolis's Capri Theater on 5 and 7 January.

Prince was nervous ahead of his live debut as a solo artist. "I'm terrified because it's gonna take a while to block out the fact that there are people out there," he told *Minneapolis Star* reporter Jon Bream.

The gig itself, in front of 300 fans, friends, and family members, was a mixed affair. DJ Kyle Ray of local radio station KUXL introduced Prince as "the next Stevie Wonder". To Jon Bream, at least, a star was born: Prince "strutted across the stage with grand Mick Jagger-like moves and gestures," said his review. "He was cool, he was cocky, and he was sexy. Prince's performance indicated he has extraordinary talent." But there were numerous technical hitches, and Prince cut a largely apprehensive figure, spending much of the show looking at his musicians, with his back to the audience. "Prince was real down on himself," said Dickerson later. "I remember us encouraging him, 'Put it behind you. We did fine.'" "He was still developing what he was going to do

stage-wise," opined Matt Fink. "It went okay, but I don't think it went well enough for Warners to say, 'You guys are ready to go out on the road.'"

The band proceeded to "rehearse like crazy" for the next few months, while Prince did what he would spend the next three decades doing: he recorded another album. Prince's self-titled second album was completed in just seven weeks between April and June 1979, at Alpha Studios in Burbank, California. It was an exercise in monomania. "Produced, Arranged, Composed And Performed By Prince", declared the credits, with occasional assistance only from "Heaven-Sent Helpers" Cymone and Bobby Z. Costing just \$35,000, it had the accomplished,

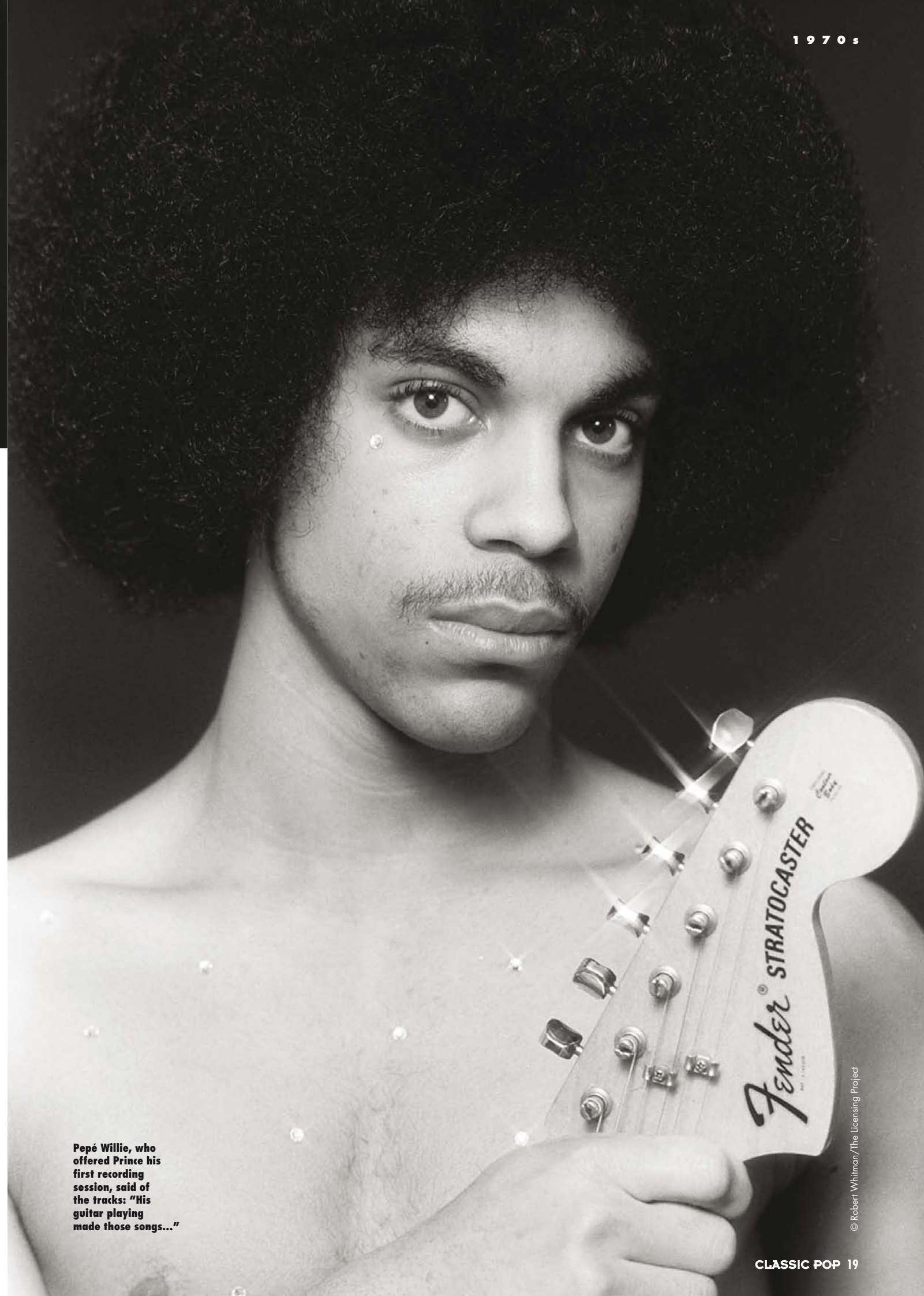
sophisticated feel of its predecessor, but the material was stronger and more diverse. It contained four singles; one of which, *I Wanna Be Your Lover*,

became something of a calling card, selling a million copies and peaking at No 11 on the Billboard Hot 100 (it was also a later global hit for Chaka Khan in *I Feel For You*).

Released in October 1979, *Prince* reached No 22 on the Billboard 200 and went platinum. It also earned great reviews. "*Prince* teems with hooks that echo everyone from The Temptations to Jimi Hendrix to Todd Rundgren," raved Stephen Holden of *Rolling Stone*. To reinforce his burgeoning reputation, Prince also finally cracked the live thing: summer 1979's showcase for media and Warners staff at Leeds Instrument Rentals in LA evinced a band, according to Bobby Z, "a hundred times tighter" and a Prince "a hundred times more confident" than the one who appeared at the Capri Theater earlier in the year. Watching Prince strut, sashay and prowl the stage, as cheeky and charismatic as you could want; the unanimous view among the assembled was that they were witnessing the birth of someone and something really special. ■

PRINCE "strutted across the stage WITH GRAND MICK JAGGER-LIKE MOVES AND GESTURES," SAID A REVIEW OF HIS LIVE DEBUT

POP UP The LA Times' review of Prince's debut performance at The Roxy in 1979 recognised Prince's talent, but worried that the artist was attempting to straddle two disparate musical worlds



Pepé Willie, who offered Prince his first recording session, said of the tracks: "His guitar playing made those songs..."

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