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Nothing Compares 2 U: The Performance of Prince through Cover Songs

Prince Rogers Nelson, born in 1958, in Minneapolis, Minnesota was lauded as one of the greatest and most influential multi-hyphenates (singer-songwriter-producer-instrumentalist) in the music industry. He influenced many artists across different genres of music such as rock, funk, soul, and pop. With both parents musically inclined, he was destined to be involved in music. As a young child, Prince taught himself how to play the piano and the guitar he was given to as a child. He even wrote his first song on his father's piano. After his parents divorced, he moved back and forward between his parents' homes, but settled on living with a friend and his mother. This friend became a musical collaborator early in his career. He, his friend and few other musicians formed a band and performed around town and did various session work for different artists. Prince then recorded a demo tape with a producer, but was unable to secure a recording contract on his own. This producer then recruited assistance from a Minneapolis businessman who helped Prince to record another demo which resulted an interest from several record companies. Prince signed a recording contract with Warner Brothers Records in 1977 at the age of nineteen with outright creative control and ownership of publishing rights. His debut album, *For You*, was released in 1978 with four subsequent albums between 1979 and 1982. It was not until 1984 when Prince became an international star with the release of the album and accompanying film of the same name, *Purple Rain*. Just from this album alone, he earned an Oscar, earned two Grammys, and sold over 25 million copies worldwide. He recorded and released five more albums during the 1980s which included the soundtrack to original live-action

movie, *Batman*. After releasing five more albums in the early 1990s, Prince and Warner Brothers fought over music and money upon the release of *The Gold Experience* album. This prompted Prince to protest publicly by inscribing the word, “slave” on the side of his face and to change his name to a symbol that was unpronounceable. He recorded albums quickly to fulfill his contract in order to leave Warner Brothers. (Ironically, Prince and Warner Brothers reunited a couple of years before his death.) He eventually returned back to be called “Prince” after his publishing contract expired. During the 2000s, he recorded and distributed his albums independently as well as performed at different events which included a series of concert tours, the Grammy Awards in 2004 Super Bowl in 2007. In the 2010s, he started to perform with an all-girl band, 3rdEyeGirl, and entered a new deal with his old record label. This new deal allowed him to own his master recordings. In early 2016, he started another tour, but it was a more of an intimate show which featured only him and a piano. On April 21, 2016, Prince died at his home, Paisley Park, leaving a long and rich history of music to a generation and beyond.

Not only was his music timeless, his lyrics were thought-provoking, innovative and reflective of its time. Throughout his songwriting career, Prince has written about a wide range of subjects such as sex, religion, race, and social injustice. (And those themes are just a tip of the iceberg.) In the *Vulture* article, “Everyone Is Saying that Prince Was a Genius. Here’s Why,” David Marchese explains that “he [Prince] was intellectually curious, and wrote from the perspectives of men and, more impressively, women. He wrote narrative story songs and playful nonsense songs. He was original and insightful in his use of metaphor and almost never relied on stock pop language or rhymes” (Marchese, sec. 3). Being a prolific songwriter, Prince wrote songs originally for other artists such as Stevie Nicks and The Bangles. Besides writing

songs for himself, he wrote songs for his side projects like The Time and Vanity 6. Max Martin, who has created pop hits for artists such as Britney Spears, The Weeknd, Katy Perry and N'Sync said that Prince has been a major influence in regards to putting together a melody for a song:

“If the chords change a lot over the course of a song, it’s better to stay within the same melodic structure. Once again, it’s all about the balance. Another theory is that you can sing the chorus melody as a verse. For instance, take ‘I Wanna Be Your Lover’ with Prince. The chorus and the verse are exactly the same. But, as a listener, you don’t notice since the energy of the chorus is completely different compared to the verse. Once the chorus comes, you feel like you’ve heard it before. And you have! You’ve heard it in the verse. It automatically creates a sense of familiarity. Prince does this a lot. ‘Let’s Go Crazy’, same thing. I’ve used this trick a few times myself. [...]” (Wang, sec. 4).

Prince had hit songs over the decades with artists from different genres of music who have covered his songs such as Tom Jones, Tevin Campbell and Foo Fighters. In the research, there was an overwhelming abundance of female artists who have covered his songs. The Prince songs that will be the focus of this paper will be “I Feel For You” covered by Chaka Khan, “Nothing Compare 2 U” covered by Sinead O’Connor and “How Come You Don’t Call Me” covered by Alicia Keys. I argue that the covered version of these Prince songs by these women have different interpretations in performance with regards on how the song is conveyed by the listening ear.

Wrote and performed by Prince for his second, self-titled album in 1979, “I Feel for You” was about having a strong affection for someone and it is rumored to be about a romantic dedication to fellow musician, Patrice Rushen. He also wanted to give this song to Rushen to record, but she turned him down. Five years later, R&B singer, Chaka Khan recorded the song

for her third solo album of the same name, *I Feel for You*. There are two stories about how the song came to Khan's producer. One was that someone from Prince's publishing company sent the track. The other is that Prince himself sent it because he admired Khan's singing ability. Khan's interpretation consisted of a "more instrumentation and a array of production elements that aren't present in Prince's more stripped down original" The song was written in first person so it was easily to be interpreted by a male or a female singer" ("Chaka Khan"). Khan's version also included a rap by Melle Mel, who was a member of the rap collective Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and the harmonica part performed by Stevie Wonder. Initially, Khan was not on board in recording the pop song because she liked singing soul and jazz music instead. But, the song's producer convinced her to record the song anyway because the record company was pressuring her for a hit song. Eventually, her and her producer buckled down and recorded the song to appeal to the mainstream audience. It worked. "I Feel for You" reached to number three on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart and number one on the *Billboard* US Dance and R&B charts in 1984. As the songwriter, Prince won a Grammy for Best R&B Song in 1985.

Prince wrote "Nothing Compares 2 U" and it was originally performed by one of his side projects, The Family. The song received hardly any recognition when their self-title album was released in 1985. The song was about a longing feeling of being left by a lover after a break up, but O'Connor shifted the meaning to the sad feeling she had after losing her mother five years prior to recording the song in 1990 for her second album, *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*. (It was the idea of O'Connor's manager for her to cover the song.) The Family's version was performed with bare minimum instruments focusing more on the lead singer's vocals.

O'Connor's interpretation followed the original arrangement, but with more musical instruments

and background vocals. According to the *Daily Telegraph* in 2014, she shed a tear during the filming of the video because “she associated the lyrics of love and loss with her mother, who was killed in a car accident in 1985” (“Sinead O’Connor”). In 1993, Prince himself, along with a duet with Rosie Gaines, performed a live version of the song and included it on his compilation album, *The Hits/The B-Sides*. His version was not as sorrowful, but more soulful. O’Connor’s version became a hit across the world. It reached number one on the *Billboard* Top 100 for four weeks, number one on the *Billboard* Alternative Songs chart and number two on the *Billboard* Adult Contemporary chart. Prince approved the O’Connor’s cover:

“I love it, it’s great. I look for cosmic meaning in everything. I think we just took that song as far as we could, then someone else was supposed to come along and pick it up” (“15”).

“How Come You Don’t Call Me Anymore?” was released as the B-side to the song, “1999” in 1982. Using only the accompaniment of a piano and singing in falsetto, Prince wrote and performed the ballad as a strong desire for someone. Nineteen years later, R&B singer Alicia Keys covered this song on her debut album, *Songs in A Minor* in 2001 and renamed the song “How Come You Don’t Call Me.” A classically-trained pianist, she followed the same way that Prince performed it earlier, but “added a steady and pulsing bass line to the piano arrangement, and hummed and growled huskily in homage to her hero, while adding new details like, ‘I always thought you’d be by my side, poppa, and now you’re gone ... and I’m not trying to hear that shit.’” (“15”). Keys has said the following about the song in an interview with *Billboard* magazine:

“I had never heard [the original] before. They gave me a copy of the song on tape. I played it every day for three weeks. It is so raw and so truthful – I was just feeling it. It really came out well” (Hall 23).

Keys' version reached the top 30 on *Billboard* R&B charts and it only had moderate success on the radio, but Prince liked Keys' version. In fact, they met soon after her recording of this song and became good friends.

There were many, but there were several interesting facts among the three choices that were picked for this essay. The first one is obvious: all three selections were covered by women. Second, each woman came from fairly different musical backgrounds. Third, each woman entered into the musical scene in different decades. Lastly, each selection described an aspect of love. What can be said about this revelation? This reflects the genius in the scope of Prince's songwriting career and his contribution to music history.

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