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THE BROKEN STOOL

When I took over in-house design at Paisley Park in the early '90s, I think they had shoehorned the art department into a space that was really meant for storage: it was down a ramp, there were no windows, and it stank when it rained. The upside to the space was that the stairs to Prince's apartment were right above us and the ramp down to us was hollow underneath, so you could hear footsteps coming and going. Especially someone with heels, who walked really hard. So, we usually knew when Prince was heading toward us, whichever route he took.

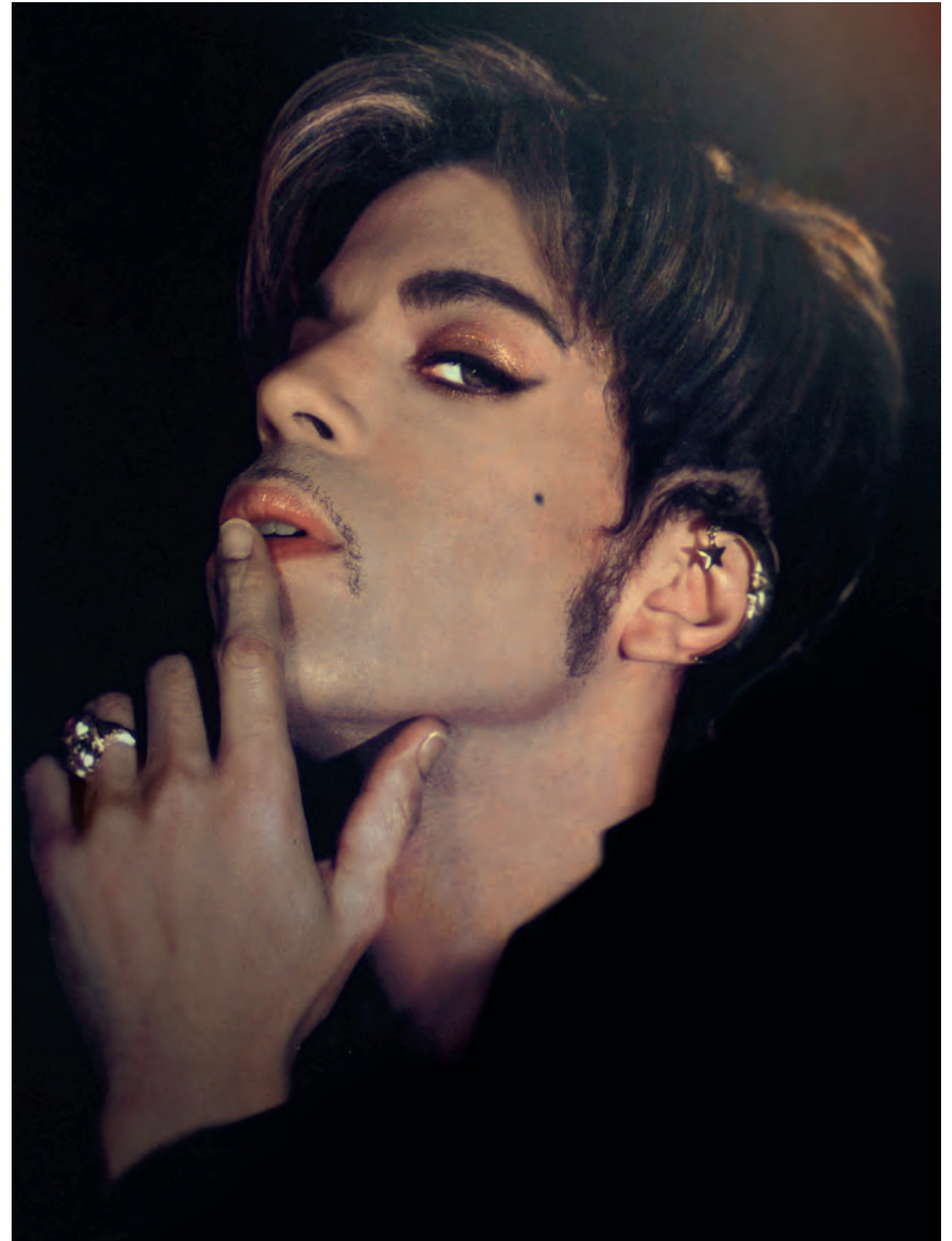
The odd part was that this little cramped space, which Michael Van Huffel (who I brought in as fellow designer and the department computer explainer in 1996) and I shared for a while, became one of Prince's favorite hangouts, from what we could tell. He would come sit with us while we worked for hours on end. He would tell funny stories, and I would come up with endless ideas of things we could produce—such as comics (check), tour books (check), action figures (nope).

Michael would pull his hair out every time I came up with something new. Since I was only at Paisley Park for one week each month, he figured I'd be out of town when the idea came back around and he'd be the one stuck executing it.

We'd all joke (even Prince) about how Michael and I made stuff out of whatever we found in our pockets, with so few resources. It was not far from the truth.

The only place to sit in our space besides at our desks was on one sad, rickety wooden stool, which someone had probably stuck there at some point to get out of the way. Prince insisted on sitting on it, and he'd rock back and forth. A lot. We offered up our chairs on numerous occasions, but he preferred the stool. He rocked. We watched the thin wire holding its parts together stretch to near snapping. We even tried hiding the stool in a closet, but it magically reappeared in the office. He perched on it like a bird. Finally, one day I grabbed it and tossed it into one of the large dumpsters out back. I didn't think I could take it if the thing collapsed. Prince didn't hang out as long after that, but it also seemed—perhaps coincidentally—that we got moved upstairs not long after the stool went missing.

Should have thought of it sooner.



THAT DARNED SYMBOL

Prince famously changed his name to a symbol in 1993. I don't know that any of us working for him thought much of it, except for the practical challenges it created.

Originally Prince told me he wanted to use it as an underground mark when he worked on other people's albums. "So I don't have to get permission from Warners," he said. Somewhere along the way, though, he decided to take it on as his own moniker full time. He explained that Parliament Funkadelic operated as separate musical entities: recording as Parliament and other times as Funkadelic—yet touring as Parliament / Funkadelic. I assumed he wanted to try that path as well. So, it became my job, as a designer, to make that mark work on everything.

Easier said than done. From a geometry perspective it was oddly shaped, taking up a square but leaving lots of negative space. Fortunately for me, a local type designer named Chank Diesel designed a set of fonts with the symbol and in this way offered some variations. I was grateful that Prince saw the font as a nice expansion of the symbol palette, instead of an unwelcome revision.

The name change was a bit flustering at the studios, since no one knew what to call Prince after that. The nice thing for me is that there were so few people in the studio when I was working through the night that if I shouted out a question or "Hey!" in Prince's general direction, he'd turn around. So, I encountered very few issues. Other people had more problems, like those working at the front desk. I know when we would ask if "he" was in the building most people knew who "he" referred to. Eventually, people started referencing Prince as "boss" because he was our boss. Prince picked up on this and made it clear that he didn't approve.

"I'm not the boss," he said. "Bruce Springsteen is the boss."

I was grateful that the release of *Rave Un2 the Joy Fantastic* returned the name Prince alongside the symbol, just to make things easier, but I also respected and am in awe still that he had the power and originality to have the media actually use a symbol in place of his name.

I don't know who else could have pulled that off.



THREE PRINCES

My partner in graphics crime at Paisley Park, Michael Van Huffel, called to tell me he'd heard an interview with film director and comedian Kevin Smith on NPR (National Public Radio), and, it turns out, Kevin was a huge Prince fan. Prince was doing a 1999 celebration and Michael said I should try to get him hooked up. I knew that *Dogma* was one of Prince's favorite movies, so I called his manager Jacqui and asked if I could offer up passes and I got a definitive "Yes."

I tracked down Kevin's company and called. A very nice lady named Grace (who turned out to be Kevin's mom) picked up the phone. I asked about the tickets and was told I'd get a call back. The phone rang soon after with another definitive yes. So, I hooked up Prince's management and Kevin's View Askew production company and all went off without a hitch. Then, more calls came. "Can you get Morris Day's number?" I got it. Next up, "How about a number for The Time?" Sure; they featured in Kevin's 2001 movie *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*. Grace and I continued to chat from time to time, and I started getting cool holiday cards from View Askew.

One day Grace called and told me that Kevin was spending the week out at Paisley Park working on a project that he was not quite sure how to deal with. I tried to tell her that things did not always work the same way out there as they did in many other parts of the universe, and that Kevin should listen to his instincts and only agree to what he was comfortable with.

It was a pleasant exchange, but I felt bad because I knew that situation and had simply learned to deal with each thing as it came. One day Prince was your best friend and a guy you could speak your mind to, another day he was your boss and all that comes with that, and yet another day he was simply the public persona of Prince with the trappings that came with the current incarnation, good or bad. Some days it was all three. Learning to roll with it was as important as your skill set.

Years later, during one of Kevin's talks—An Evening with Kevin Smith—at Kent State University in Ohio, I heard his not-so-positive take on the situation and I laughed. That said, I also felt sorry that he didn't get to experience much of the "best friend" side of Prince that I'd seen over the years.

