

Rolling Stone

Prince: Come



By Tom Moon

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Hmm ... let's see. Tombstone on the cover proclaiming 1993 as the year of Prince's death. A dramatic recollection from an abused child, complete with a scarifying warning: "Don't abuse children, or else they'll turn out like me." Vague talk about change, cosmic and otherwise. Could this be the major career announcement that has been pending since Prince, with a wave of his press agent's wand, became (The Symbol)

Not so fast. Turns out that not much has changed except the name. The former Prince is still playing Artist Knows Best: When Warner Bros. shut down Paisley Park Records and cautioned him about flooding the market, what did this royal pain do? He set up another label, arranged independent distribution for his

overflow goods and promptly scored a told-you-so hit with the puzzlingly Princelike "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," Then he announced that he would fulfill his contract with Warner Bros. by issuing material from the countless reels of studio tape he made as Prince. *Come*, whose songs carry a 1994 publishing registration, is the first such archive collection. Naturally this "old" material is not to be confused with the music and worldview of the new, unpronounceable (The Symbol).

Whatever you do, appreciate these latest moves as part of what has become the most spectacular slow-motion career derailment in the history of popular music. Ordinary artists just make duds; this guy specializes in public-relations catastrophes that confuse his loyal following and erode his stature as the major genre-busting innovator of the last decade. Ordinary artists tear up albums and start again; he's tearing up his entire identity and starting again.

So far, however, this grand makeover-in-progress feels like another layer of pancake plastered onto the face of a tired actor. (The Symbol) might not be Prince anymore, but he still has the same toolbox. There's nothing on the uneven *Come* or the *1-800 New Funk* compilation, which was written and produced entirely by (The Symbol), that will change anybody's impression of this artist. He's still horny. Still adventurous. He can't escape his sonic signatures, which derive not only from his Jekyll-and-Hyde voice and its gymnastic falsetto but also from his rhythmic exactitude, ability to imply different harmonies and rare gift for insinuating melody. Nobody builds a vamp the way he does. No other guitar crackles with that dry, tart tang.

In the past, as he balanced these elements with the agility of a master orchestrator, Prince never left his imagination behind. He recognized that the interpretation had to sell the goods: He could give the raunchiest idea a sense of righteous grandeur and make a high-minded spiritual quest sound like an illicit affair. Not this time. *Come* features the most blatant soft-porn pillow talk Prince has ever released. At one point the lazy pulse of the title track becomes a forum for Prince to discourse on his (surprisingly ordinary) oral-sex techniques, and the closing "Orgasm" comes off as a you-are-there live remote recording of a sexual encounter.

Following a pattern established albums ago, Prince all but abandons the convoluted spiritual concerns he voiced on "7" and other tracks from "(The Symbol)" (1992). He's back to earth — talking Slylike and direct about "Race," moaning about being done wrong in the taut gospel ballad "Dark," returning to

the relatively innocent seduction strategies of "Soft and Wet" on the blazing, funky chant "Pheromone."

But that stuff always was easy for Prince. Indeed, portions of *Come*, including "Space" and "Loose!," exhibit so little creativity, you wonder whether they were born during studio catnaps. Ever since "Alphabet St.," his challenge has been to broaden the music and allow it to address real issues, to move away from the cartoon image that dogged him after *Purple Rain* and *Under the Cherry Moon*. It's possible to interpret the gospel-tinged "The Sacrifice of Victor," from "(The Symbol)," as part of that campaign — an account of Prince's childhood that was, for an artist who is obsessively secretive, a major step.

With the graphically violent "Papa," which chronicles the disciplining of a 4-year-old, Prince elaborates on the hints in "Victor" that he has been abused. "Papa" probably won't make the box set, but its coda is a fiery eruption worthy of the subject matter, and its candor is clear evidence that Prince wishes to be less restrained.

The same sense of forthright introspection marks the sauntering strut "Letitgo," which many will read as an apologia for the excesses of the Prince era. In a regretful tone, it offers a past-tense acknowledgement that Prince, that notorious workaholic, wasn't always the most pleasant creature. An indictment of his self-absorption, the song suggests that whatever comes next will represent a change in attitude: "Lover here, lover there/Who cried, who cared/Foolish pride/Never was a good seat at any of this man's shows/Until now, all I wanted 2 do was/Do do do do what I do.... But now I've got 2 let it go."

That admonishment aside, *Come* documents Prince at a surprisingly mediocre point — still able to pop out thumping, genuinely new grooves but unwilling to leave them alone, cluttering them with banal lyrics and overwritten horn parts and missing wildly with indulgent experiments like "Solo," one adventure in reverb best left in the vault.

So it's tempting to look to the compilation *1-800 New Funk* as the true start of the (The Symbol) era. If "Letitgo" serves as a preview of the attitude change that accompanies the name change, then this collection might be seen as its first reel. It's odd that he would choose a compilation: Back when he was Prince, one of the thorns in his side was the inability to use his own success to generate interest in other artists. Paisley Park Records — despite the presence of Mavis Staples and George Clinton — never really established anybody. Yet the Purple One is still a magnet for talent, and this collection shows off his skills as writer and as a

producer even when the artists turn out to be wretched — does it really come as a surprise that kinetic dancer Mayte, of the New Power Generation, isn't much of a singer? Prince-philes will already be aware of the Clinton ("Hollywood") and Staples ("You Will Be Moved") tracks, which appear on their most recent albums. There's a rousing performance by the Steeles ("Color"), the return of the instrumental funk terrorists Madhouse ("17") and "Love Sign," a duet between (The Symbol) and Nona Gaye that is appropriately twitchy.

The biggest surprise comes from Minneapolis native Margie Cox, whose "Standing at the Altar" is a buoyant single that finds (The Symbol) paying affectionate homage to the Motown hit machine.

Still, no big meaning on this set. Maybe it's a mistake to expect such things from an artist whose focus is drifting from his art and who is increasingly settling on semantic games about what he should be called. Maybe someone who has contributed so much, whose ideas have broadened the very canvas on which everyone else works, deserves to trash everything while waiting for the next inspiration to arrive. That doesn't mean we have to suffer patiently beside him.
