Purple Passion and the Press: An analysis of front page coverage in selected U.S. dailies of the death of Prince Rogers Nelson

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The sudden death of Prince Rogers Nelson on April 21 inspired American newspapers to create front pages that not only marked the musician’s cultural significance as an innovative songwriter and performer but reflected his unique style and sensibility. For this paper, I analyzed the display of news stories announcing his death on the front pages of a dozen U.S. daily newspapers for April 22 and found an abundance of purple, the performer’s signature color, in both graphic presentation and in prose and other treatment that reflected the diminutive musician’s outsized persona.
When Prince died on April 21 at the age of 57, the media used language like “legendary,” “iconic,” “innovative,” “genius,” “controversial,” and “prolific” to describe the performer.* His career, which spanned the 40 years from 1976 to 2016, was marked by high productivity (39 releases and nearly yearly national and international touring), fierce creative independence (he waged war against Warner Bros. and other industry giants for control of his music), genre-busting (his songs incorporated R&B, rock, electronica, dance music, jazz and pop) and gender-bending (he presented a highly sexualized, androgynous public persona). At 57, Prince was a familiar and enormously popular part of the musical history of the Baby Boomer generation – many of whom were writing, editing and designing newspapers across the country. Prince’s idiosyncratic boldness as a public figure – he was small of stature (5-2) but his regal name suggested a larger presence – pushed newspapers nearly to the brink of excess in their tributes to him. Their visual displays were often captivating and, in some instances, uncharacteristically ornamental. The newspapers reviewed for this study reflected the artist’s color palette, songwriting and joie de vivre to striking effect, as evidenced in the ethereal front page of the Richmond Times Dispatch. This ghostly, otherworldly aura was a common element among the pages reviewed. In many instances, the stories were both celebrations and send-offs, not unlike a wake.

*Rolling Stone, Associated Press
The Denver Post’s 4-column treatment of Prince’s death borrowed from the traditional black and white scheme associated with death notices but subverted solemnity by featuring the bare-chested performer, arms extended in a pose that mirrored the small cross hanging from his neck. Prince, who was a Jehovah’s Witness, evoked the sacred and the sexual in his recordings and in his stage shows, which delighted some, puzzled some and enraged others. The size of the display – most of the front page – was typical among the papers reviewed.
The Kentucky Enquirer ~ which is part of the Gannett chain, which includes USA Today ~ featured a highly processed, purple-tinted graphic that was used by other Gannett properties. It featured portraits of Prince from different eras surrounded by clouds, starry skies and white doves. The doves were used many times in newspaper tributes to the writer and performer of the chart-topping single “When Doves Cry” from the Grammy-winning soundtrack for his film Purple Rain – his most popular song on his best-selling album. The bursting light and stars evokes not only the artist’s spectacular stage shows but the afterlife, as well.
The Clarksville, Tennessee, *Leaf-Chronicle* places a photograph of Prince within a stylized image of a crying dove. This was one of the more sentimental (rather than celebratory) treatments of the musician’s passing found in this study. In each case where the imagery and/or title/lyric were used, the designer appeared confident readers would successfully decode the message(s) they contained, indicative of the designers’ belief that the performer was so well-known that such oblique references in a headline would be understood, if not appreciated. Such choices are not often seen in media that prides themselves on message clarity.
The front page of the privately owned *Victoria Advocate* of Victoria, Texas, did not feature a story on Prince’s death but did include a promotional banner for a *USA Today* story inside the paper, B1. Interestingly, while the title of his biggest hit is displayed, the reader sees only the performer’s back, presumably in a concert setting. The photograph ~ Prince facing away from the camera into a bright light, shrouded in smoke or mist ~ might be read as the artist moving into the afterlife. That interpretation is supported by the use of “When Doves Cry” and the performer’s birth and death dates.
Hawaii’s *Star-Advertiser* blended classical and popular culture in a starkly dramatic promotional banner that features Prince taking a bow on stage during a concert performance. The headline “Goodnight, sweet Prince” borrows from the last scene of Hamlet to lend the graphic element a striking distinction and sophistication a bit removed from doves, purple and sexual provocativeness and into a realm more often associated with jazz performers or adult contemporary song stylists. Because Prince was such a tireless and electrifying live performer many of the photographs of him used in front page displays were taken during concerts.
Prince’s hometown newspaper, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, devoted the entire front page to news of the artist’s death. The banner headline Purple Majesty along with the main photo of the performer bedecked in purple ~ presumably during the Purple Rain era ~ and wincing as he plays his guitar and the secondary photo of a concert crowd reflect the newspaper’s desire to affirm both the size of the performer’s public impact and the size of the loss to his fans. Curiously, though Prince’s concerts were highly profitable ~ his concerts contributed greatly to building his $300 million estate ~ crowd shots were not used often in front page displays.
Alabama’s Daily Sentinel used the same photograph as the Star Tribune but incorporated purple raindrops into the design, a reference to the artist’s best-selling album. The incorporation of this element shows an understanding and appreciation of the artist’s most important work and would certainly be easily read (decoded) by fans. Unlike the crying doves on other pages, however, the raindrops do not incorporate as neatly the theme of loss, mourning or grief. The song itself is about romantic regret, which is not wholly consistent with the sentiment in the headline “Losing A Legend.”
The *Tampa Bay Times* made an even more oblique reference in its headline Symbol of a Generation: Prince’s famous transformation into an unpronounceable glyph in 1993 in a contractual disagreement with Warner Bros. From ‘93 to 2000, he was referred to in the press as “the Artist Formerly Known as Prince,” and the glyph, a combination of male and female symbols, was his graphic representation, called the Love Symbol. His public battles for control of his catalog captured the imaginations of other artists and inspired a generation of self-published / self-managed performers. Though the more manifest meaning of the reference ~ his iconic significance as a popular music artist ~ would be easily decoded, the latent reference to the glyph might elude many readers.
The *Chicago Sun-Times*’ decision to display a striking photo of the unidentified performer playing guitar during a concert and his birth and death dates reflects the editors’ confidence that Prince was such an iconic figure that his image would be sufficient, especially among culturally savvy Chicagoans. The artist is dressed in retro-Victorian garb, and bathed in light and haze, which lend his figure a transcendent quality, reflecting not only the impact of his creativity but hints at his passage into another realm.
It is not surprising that so many saw an opportunity to connect with readers through elaborate design and display of the news regarding the iconic performer’s death. No other celebrity death since Michael Jackson’s in 2009, received this treatment. Though emblems and symbols – gloves, references to “king of pop” -- were integrated into page designs for Jackson, the packages were not as elaborate or as fanciful as those announcing Prince’s death. My contention is it was Prince’s own seemingly endless creativity, cross-genre output and collaborative spirit and the depth of his talent that inspired the haunting and often beautiful commemorations that were run in daily newspapers.