



## Sign o' the Times

*Michaelangelo Matos*

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## **Sign o' the Times** Michaelangelo Matos

One of the greatest double albums of the vinyl era, Sign 'O' the Times shows Prince at his peak. Here, Michaelangelo Matos tells the story of how it emerged from an extraordinary period of creativity to become one of the landmark recordings of the 1980s. He also illustrates beautifully how - if a record is great enough and lucky enough to hit you at the right time - it can change your way of looking at the world.

### EXCERPT

The most immediately striking thing about Sign 'O' the Times is the jazzy sensibility running through it. Prince's father was a jazz musician, his mother a vocalist; he'd been a fan of chops-heavy jazz-fusion as well as rock and R&B growing up. But when Prince began recording for Warner Bros., he abjured the brass sections that dominated groups like Earth, Wind & Fire and Parliament-Funkadelic, opting instead for stacked synthesizer patterns and a spare, cold feel that markedly contrasted with lush, overarranged disco and the wild, thick underbrush of the era's giant funk ensembles; Rickey Vincent, author of Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One, dubbed it "naked funk." Getting away from traditional R&B instrumentation is an underappreciated aspect of Prince's crossover success; Prince is also said to have actively disliked the sound of horns early in his career.

## **Sign o' the Times Details**

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Author : Michaelangelo Matos

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## From Reader Review Sign o' the Times for online ebook

### Trevor says

This the third title I've read in this series. Not my favorite, but still an interesting read. This album has some of my favorite Prince songs ever (Sign O' The Times, It, Starfish and Coffee, If I Was Your Girlfriend, I Could Never Take The Place Of Your Man), and it was great to learn more about them.

I do think the author should have focused just on this album. That's the whole idea of the 33 1/3 series. One book about one album. He spends far too much of the book giving us a mini-bio of Prince. We can get that in a proper Prince bio. This book is called "Sign O' The Times". He should've stuck to just writing about the album.

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### Stephen Curran says

I have no problem with critics putting themselves at the centre of their work, but only if they speak in an engaging voice, or are witty or insightful. This is none of those things. The childhood reminiscences are dull, the prose is flat, the jokes are tiresome.

Then there is the music criticism itself. U Got the Look is Prince parodying himself? Is it, really? And The Ballad of Dorothy Parker is a precursor to Trip Hop, an ancestor of the output of Tricky and Massive Attack? That's nonsense. That's beefing up your word count.

At least it made me listen to Sign 'o the Times for the first time in an age. What a superb album. Except for The Cross, which is toss.

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### Jon says

Another quick read, but that's what the best of this series should be! And, frankly, if not the very best, Matos' take on Sign o' the Times is easily up there at the top of the 33 1/3 pile. This is the kind of deep dive I like reading most - a healthy balance between context, a thorough discussion of the specific songs, all topped out with the author's personal context and reaction. Really great stuff!

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### Kristan says

Usually these books are either 1) about how the album was made and the context it was made in or 2) a personal narrative about the author's relationship to the album. This one tried to do both but didn't do enough of either.

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### Lyn says

"I come to realize that this album is the greatest fucking thing I have ever heard in my life, and that

realization has me completely shaken. "

This series of books are for music geeks. If you love this album, you'll probably enjoy reading this. It helps to have the album handy for specific song references.

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### **John says**

The personal writing is good, giving a musical context to 1987 and an idea of what it was like to be from Minneapolis while Prince was blowing up. The analysis itself is a bit skimpy, which is a pity because when it's there it's decent and interesting. For example there's a detailed reading of the Little Red Corvette video versus previous Prince videos that goes a long way in teasing out why that song in particular was such a breakthrough hit.

The biographical content is mainly fine, a lot has been clarified and expanded on since this book came out but it would be unfair to use this to criticize any factual errors or rumours taken as truth.

However, to these eyes the authors tendency to declare songs and albums rubbish with no thought as to why other people may like them (in the case of Diamonds and Pearls, in their millions) really starts to grate after a while. Half of Lovesexy sucks because it sucks; Play In the Sunshine is the weakest song because I say so etc. Drags the whole thing down.

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### **Ian says**

While the albums picked by the 33 1/3 series are largely unimpeachable, the books are far less consistent. The attempts to blow open the scope of rock criticism read like livejournal entries, while the technical accounts reduce excellent music to a laundry list of dates, session men, and technical specifications. Matos manages to split the difference by capturing, more than just the feeling of listening to the album, but of anticipating it in the late 80s, of living in suburban Minneapolis and feeling like magic was in the air and Prince could do anything, while also giving an account of the actual making-of.

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### **Oswaldo says**

I have written a bunch about Prince's music in general and *Sign o' the Times* in specific, and like the author I have listened to this album with loving attention since it first came out (I was about 3 years older than the author was that year). As such, I have a lot of opinions about this record, which may have biased my reading of this book.

Full disclosure: When I became recently aware of a call for proposals to this 33 1/3 series and that the current publisher wants to take the series in a more academically rigorous direction, I immediately thought I would write about *Sign o' the Times*, so while reading this my disappointment mounted, as its existence meant that I could not propose to write about it for this critically-acclaimed series, and also means that as I turned each page I could not help but think, I could write a better book about this album.

Matos and I do agree on one important thing: *Sign o' the Times* is Prince's best work and arguably not only his most important, but has a lot of unnoted influence on popular music that bears noting. (Is that three things?) However, we kind of part ways there.

Matos frames his discussion of the album in a personal narrative, and while at one level I can appreciate that since I can clearly remember (as he does) my first exposure to Prince and other musical artists that were meaningful for me and connect the various albums with different times in my life, sometimes he seems to linger too long on himself - to the degree that the middle section about the album is shorter than the story of the author's life.

When it comes to establishing the various side projects and rejected albums that *Sign o' the Times* emerged from, Matos does a great job, but he needed to spend more time on the songs themselves and needed to be a little deeper in his analysis. He writes off the queer undertones of "If I was Your Girlfriend" too quickly, and hardly spends any time on "Starfish & Coffee." He connects the title track to Prince's other political songs, but misses the clear connection between it and "1999" in terms of its apocalyptic vibe - and so on.

Don't get me wrong, he does a great job with some songs, making more of "Strange Relationship" than I had ever been able to articulate and explaining in detail why the title track was overrated and doesn't really set the tone for the rest of the record, but Prince's music is so rich, so lush, even when it is the stripped down stuff that can be found on this record, that I cannot forgive that Matos spends so few words on "Adore" or "Forever in My Life" or "The Ballad of Dorothy Parker."

I have called "Sign o' the Times" the best album of the 80s and on most days I still think so. It is not that Matos seems to disagree, but rather that his analysis seems a bit light in the context of that kind of feeling about it.

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### **Ron Maskell says**

I've read a lot of Prince related books and this is a middle of the road book. It starts strong but fades towards the end. One of the biggest problems I had with this book is that the author does not provide sources for such things as track listings for albums. The author does his best to relate personal stories to the album and everything Prince which does add to the book. Overall though I find the book as a whole, lacking.

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### **Peter O'Connor says**

It can be refreshing to read something on an artist, not written by a biographer, an eyewitness or the artist themselves who may have their own agendas. What we have here instead (as with a lot of the 33/13 books) is a more heartfelt exploration of not only the album but the affect it had on the author as a teenager of that era in Minneapolis. The fact that he is roughly my age and carries the same opinion that *Sign o' the Times* is likely Prince's greatest work made it all the more readable on a personal level.

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### **Dan Phillips says**

A great meditation / personal essay on my favorite Prince album. Strange to have read this just three months before he died. I'm not sure I'm going to have much to say about these 33 1/3 books in general, unless they're

done horribly (which I've heard is the case with a few of them). As the kind of person who absorbs rock criticism with ease, these books are like breezily reading a copy of MOJO magazine...only they count as books, which to my currently-busy self is a great cheat / blessing.

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### **Billy Justus says**

I love the album so I was excited to read the book about it, however I was disappointed. 1/3 of the book (which is short, under 100 pages) is spent telling the author's life story. The book is nothing but critical of the album, hardly any facts here I hadn't already known or new revelations about its making. Quite let down by the book in general but it was a quick way to pass an hour or so.

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### **Amy says**

Meh. I didn't hate it as much as some of the reviewers here did, but I also didn't get that much out of it.

Also, I was made irrationally angry by an editing error early on in this book ("Raspberry Parade," Bloomsbury? REALLY???) This book came out in 2004 -- you've had plenty of time to fix that in subsequent printings. For crying out loud.)

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### **Alex V. says**

Matos comes on very strong, talking about how Prince figures into his life as a welfare kid in the suburbs, and that Prince came via his mama's and aunt's record collections, but when he gets to the record itself, it's a confusing game of track comparison.

Evidently, Sign 'O The Times was meant to be a triple album fuck-you to the record company and a decaying fanbase, but was Frankenstein;d out of those sessions into one of the last great double albums. I always considered it his White Album after his obvious Sgt. Peppers-y Around the World in a Day. Lots of bands were doing it then: XTC followed Sgt. P :Skylarking::White Album:Oranges & Lemons (with its own embarrassing Princely "Pink Thing" ...but I digress, much like the author did.

The last five or so pages when the author emerges from his flowcharts and scumbled whiteboards and gets back to himself, it becomes brilliant again. My complaint here can be summed up by a singular utterance of "more talk, less rock"

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### **Kaoru says**

Blimey, that was *awful!*.

Anyway, it's written by one of those people who think this album is Prince's best work. (A view I personally don't share, but since so many do - who am I to contradict?) Which is not necessarily a problem, but sometimes I just wish he could be a bit less subjective when it comes to backing his claim. The *real* problem

is that it's written by someone who apparently thinks of himself as pretty hot stuff. The entire first third of the book is entirely about him, him, him and even more about him. And his fan relationship to Prince's music. And I'm sorry to say... I have very little interest in Michaelangelo Matos and whatever his views on the world are. And what things went on in his family as he was listening to "1999" when he still was a kid. And so on. I don't know how many pages it took in the printed book because I was listening to the audio version... but it took almost a full hour until the words "Sign 'o the Times" finally slipped off the reader's tongue for the first time. And I'm really not joking here or trying to be sarcastic!

Even worse: The author thinks that the word "fuck" is a really kewl dude. So it keeps popping up in his sentences. Again. And again. And again. In every context conceivable, and so frequent that a Tarantino script comes across as mute in comparison. It's very adolescent, if not even childish. I mean... what is he? Twelve?

And then... there's actually very little to learn about "Sign o' the Time" here, even though there's a hell of a lot of back story to it! The whole batch of projects that didn't get released and ultimately led to this sort of compilation of the songs are merely mentioned in passing. You hardly hear anything about "Dream Factory", even though it was actually a pretty important thing in Prince's career. I mean, it was what caused his backing band The Revolution to dissolve, for christ sake! But Matos doesn't really tell you anything. He'd rather inform you how he fucking enjoyed it watching the fucking awesome Prince performance of fucking Little Red Corvette on fucking TV.

Better read the wikipedia entry to this album instead. It isn't very long, but has more facts covered than this little thing here.

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