The loss of a generation’s idol

Last Thursday afternoon, when the news broke that the ever-changing enigma Prince Rogers Nelson had suddenly ended his 57-year tenure on this thing we call Earth, I was in complete disbelief. The person that had shaped so many aspects of my being was gone – forever. My first response was, “No … It couldn’t be true.” It still has not fully registered in my brain, and I don’t know how long it will be before I can truly accept it.

Prince initially changed my life when I was at the tender age of seven. I combed through my mom’s VHS collection and chose “Purple Rain” as the film I was going to watch that day. As his silhouette filled my TV screen, and “Let’s Go Crazy” began to play, I was in complete awe. I had never seen anything like it. The clothes that he and The Revolution were sporting, the stylistic blend of genre that took me on a wild ride throughout the course of the film, and the explicit representation of sex (even though I didn’t quite know what that was yet) kept me coming back for more. I faithfully watched “Purple Rain” every day for who knows how long, like I was getting paid for it. Eventually, I claimed my mom’s copy of “The Very Best of Prince” as my own, and carried it with me everywhere, my CD Walkman right by my side. His lyrics awakened so many questions for me. “Little Red Corvette” prompted me to find out what a ‘Trojan’ was—in both senses of the word. I can distinctly remember asking my mom, “What’s masturbating?” after hearing “Darling Nikki” for the first time. She simply replied with a chuckle, “You’ll learn one day.”

The first CD I bought with my own money was “Sign ‘O’ the Times” (1987). The album is two discs of simple craziness, and it completely changed the way I thought about music. It opens
with the bluesy, socially conscious title track. From there, it spirals off into hardcore funk, a spacey ballad about the Dorothy Parker in Prince’s dreams (not the poet), pushes you to consider “Starfish and Coffee” as a new breakfast entree, and takes you into a world that defies sex and gender — where Prince imagines what it would be like to be your girlfriend (platonically, of course). It closes with what has to be the greatest love song of all time, “Adore.” I had never heard such a complete defiance of genre. One would think that each song came from a different record, by a different person. This was the album that painted Prince as a true auteur and genius in my mind, and the rest is history. From the punk elements within “Dirty Mind,” to the astounding oddity in “Around the World in a Day,” to the guitar solo in “Pink Cashmere,” Prince always possessed a remarkable ability to speak sensuality, sexuality, love and truth about the world we live in through song.

Ever since I was introduced to the magical entity that was Prince, I’ve talked about him boundlessly. I’m 21 now, people probably think I’m crazy, and my friends call me a Prince encyclopedia. They’re not wrong. Nevertheless, my personal feelings about Prince are only a fraction of the legacy that he has left behind in terms of style and music. He was one of the most prolific musicians of our time, if not the most. The numbers say more than I can. Prince is credited to 39 released studio albums of his own. Virtually all of his albums contain the classic slogan “Produced, Arranged, Composed, and Performed by Prince,” and it’s a true statement. He was a virtuoso, being known to have mastered 27 instruments in his lifetime. In terms of genre, he covered and blended, Rock, Soul, Funk, R&B, Jazz, Hip-Hop, New Wave and probably some I’m forgetting. He produced a number of albums for bands and protégés including The Time, Vanity 6 and Sheila E. He has also written for and/or played on albums by Madonna, Kate Bush, Paula Abdul, Stevie Wonder, Sheena Easton and a number of others. Ever heard the song “Manic Monday” by The Bangles?
Prince wrote that. What about “You’re My Love” by Kenny Rogers? Prince. Probably the most famous Prince-penned track outside of his own releases is Sinead O’Connor’s cover of “Nothing Compares 2 U,” originally performed by The Family in 1985. In 1987, Prince released two albums of wild jazz fusion, featuring the amazing Eric Leeds (a longtime band member) on saxophone and Prince playing all other instruments. The albums were released under the pseudonym “Madhouse.” None of this even includes the undetermined amount (rumored to be over 2,000 songs) of unreleased music in his infamous “vault” in the basement of his massive Paisley Park recording complex. I’ve only heard a portion of the unreleased recordings, and all I can say is that he did not always release the best of what he had.

One of the most fascinating things about Prince was his ability to change. Every time he released a new album, (almost one every year, sometimes two) he had a new persona. No album sounds anything like its predecessors or successors. On top of this, his character always implemented a sense of confidence that said no one or nothing could ever break him away from being who he was. He once said, “Despite everything, no one can dictate who you are to other people.” He embodied this philosophy to the core of his being.

As a black kid that grew up always feeling different, weird and out of the loop, I can say that Prince provided a voice for us that said, “It’s okay.” He transcended stereotypes and gender expectations. There was always an edge of what was acceptable by societal standards, and he spent the majority of his career jumping over it. From sexual explicitness to social awareness, Prince always said what needed to be said to make you think. Navigating his extensive catalog is a learning experience that I will forever cherish. He had a strong hand in aiding me to be proud of who I am, as I am, and I will be eternally grateful for all that he has taught me through music and the wisdom given in his rare public interviews. Prince, if
you’re reading this, I hope you understand the tremendous ways in which you have impacted so many lives. Music and culture will never be the same. I love you.