

Live

Prince and the Revolution Wembley Arena, London, August 14

In reviewing in these pages a James Brown concert at this same venue, the estimable C Roy Williams noted how James Brown takes ordinary musicians and makes them James Brown musicians. Prince is also this kind of bandleader. Former sideman (and now star producer) Jimmy Jam commented recently on his former employer's motivational powers: "He would give us keyboard parts that would be impossible. We would be like, we can't play these. He would be like, yeah, you can and now, when you're playing it, I want to do this step of choreography and sing this note of harmony. Couple of days later we'd be doing it. A month later we'd be on tour and it would be automatic. We watch tapes of those shows and you look back and say, damn, I did that."

As if to demonstrate such, the band started with a restrained 'Around the World in a Day' before launching into a non-stop five song medley, which halted only so Prince could dash off stage for the first of his five or so costume changes. He dashed back, and the first hour, filled mainly with songs from the earlier albums and new stuff, was like a marble cake of popular music forms. Funk, jazz, rock and soul segued into each other without the band missing a beat.

And none of yer usual grand stadium-rock ploys either; arrangements were complex and varied. The rhythm section of Brown Mark (bass) and drummer Bobby Z was at its toughest all but unfettered by other instrumentation for the length of 'When Doves Cry', with only the vocal echoing around the melody. First mate in this band is guitarist Wendy Melvoin, but she hasn't got the greatest singing voice and the brief occasions when she took the mike to cover for Prince's sojourns from the stage were the only let-ups in the action. Inevitable really,

And of course, they all dance. Especially his three backing singers. Portly to a man, but move? Good Lord!

No one moves like Prince, however. His personal drug and alcohol-free regime is obviously a necessity to keep him in the kind of physical condition his performance demands. He leaps, dances, dives into the splits, bounces back up ... even at one point re-entering with a catlike leap from a very high drum riser (but then again, one of the singers jumped into the photographers' pit to met the audience with the same agility).

Once the band had been fully warmed up and worked in, things got serious: "Now we're gonna really party," Prince told us, and the emphasis shifted to songs as showpieces, with the aforementioned 'Doves', a crashingly noisy '1999', a sexy 'U Need Another Lover' and suddenly everything shrinking down into a croony 'Little Red Corvette' 'neath a wash of appropriate lighting.

Then it was off for the first genuine let-up, all four minutes or so. And that was probably to accommodate the guest "stars", Sting and Ron Wood, who played along on the Stones' 'Miss You' in repetition, apparently, of a party jam earlier in the week. Sting trotted out routine jazz-funk riffs on bass, dull after Brown Mark's playing, but Ron was, it must be said, dead funky. After the obligatory bustling jam, the extraneous people left the stage and the real show was back on.

By this time in tight, black leather, Prince led the band (and the crowd) through a very nasty version of 'Kiss', then 'Dirty Mind', then off. He hadn't played 'Purple Rain' and everybody knew that would have to be the finale, and sho' nuff, he returned in a long lilac frock coat, picked up his guitar for only the third time in the night and we got the full, epic glory, complete with a long, aching lead break (shades of guess who ...). The lights came up and, after two and a quarter hours, most everyone seemed well sated.

I should make it clear that I was the kind of lukewarm Prince fan that most people seem to be — I mean, there's a degree of schlock-endross on all the albums. But as a live performer he must have turned the star occupants of the red-carpeted VIP box the deepest shade of green. Some of Prince's

big moves would have been just lumen in anyone else's hands; who else could get away with 'Purple Rain'? And every time you got that "uh-oh, here comes a big rock finale" feeling, the song would subvert away into something quite unexpected to finish.

The little bugger not only wrote and arranged all the music, but directed a show that was constantly watchable with a minimum of technoflash. He dances like a nymph and has at least four singing voices. He's got a wicked sense of humour too. And the icing on that marble cake is his Star Quality. Stars are Stars and you can have all the chops in the world without being a Star. There's no accident or incongruity in the way he reflects JB, Little Richard, Hendrix or Otis Redding.

So, no 'Sexuality' or 'Controversy', and a typically standard English PA system (through which the soundman did a sterling job), but, in terms of the big Concert Stage ... well, the best thing I've ever seen ...

Russell Brown

Bill Dieren, Barry Stokely State Trinity Theatre, July 25

I must confess this was my first Trinity musical outing — but you know how it is. (Actually, if you're not a parent you won't.) It was very dark but friendly and quiet, save for the occasional clink and rustle. Pretty stunning backdrop those organ-pipe pipes, and overhead wonderful curved wooden beams, around which Bill's voice soared crystal clear and rich as rich as he launched in Lou Reed's 'Pale Blue Eyes'. It was evident by half way through this first song that Bill (playing acoustic) and double-bass player Barry Stokely were going to give us a treat in thoroughly sensitive dynamics no less! No chance of boredom with these two. Every word Bill sang was audible and the balance of instruments (including a drum machine on a couple of songs) spot on.

These were the songs which grabbed me (please excuse the lack of proper names) — 'I Drink' (a repercussion of philosophising) — great song, no more than 20 words or so, paced with humour and edge; 'Johnny Hall'; Bill tells us this man was hanged a couple of hundred years ago. A real grabber this song ("My name is Johnny Hall and I hate you all"). An hilarious little S&M tune got everyone laughing and allowed Bill to clown a bit,

during which his strap actually came off, so he whipped off stage, coming back to ask if anyone had a knife — after that song! Next was a familiar but — due to the duo's talent — refreshing version of 'Sweet Jane'. Stokely really knows how to combine the light and rhythmic with solid dramatic, the man's damn near perfect. A nice surprise for me now, being a fan of both Randy Newman and Alan Price, is 'Simon Smith and the Amazing Dancing Bear'. Irony fills the church in the warmest of ways.

The closing song is about Dunedin, porridge and courage! And the crowd wants more and Bill obliges by heading the call for 'Alligator' — a satisfying finale to an extremely rewarding evening.

Jay Clarkson

Dance Exponents, Blueprint Gluepot, August 22

Blasting out of the gloom at the far end of the Gluepot the Dance Exponents make a fine spectacle. Not really a comeback — more of a breakout. A lengthy spell in a recording studio obviously held much energy in check, and on the Friday night of their Gluepot stint, the Dance Exponents let fly.

Exuberance and confidence leap out of the performance. The band has evolved into a unit that plays together so well — tight and direct — raucous when they feel like it yet capable of restraint.

Chris Sheehan's guitar virtuosity shines like a beacon. Lean and snaking guitar lines gnaw away through the music, in, over and around the superbly solid rhythm section. Jordan Luck sings far more comfortably these days. He looks and sounds relaxed, appearing better able to cope with singing the way he wants to. The charming Brian Jones turns in some fine work with his guitar playing and excellent backing vocals.

The Dance Exponents possess a considerable repertoire of NZ rock classics, songs familiar to the majority of pub gig-goers. Indeed, those songs ('Know Your Own Heart', 'All I Can Do', 'Airway Spies' et al) are the drawcards for their audience. Interesting to note the offhand manner with which the band tosses off those same numbers, preferring instead to plough their energies into the new, more sombre (and less accessible) tunes. The good-sized crowd loves the 'oldies' but shuffles unsurely through the moody new epics.

The band do not seem to notice, relishing the chance to cut loose. Highlights include a subdued 'Victoria' and an unstoppable, headlong 'If Only I Could Die'.

The encore is an absolute treat — a psycho mindwarp version of Gary Glitter's 'Rock and Roll' followed up with a breakneck 'Cadillac'. Knock-out!

Support band was Blueprint — four energetic lads playing Devo/Ramones-style power pop.

Brendon Fitzgerald

The Cramps Galaxy, August 29 & 30

The PA plays ads for *Rabid* (starring Marilyn Chambers) and *The Toolbox Murders* (starring Cameron Mitchell) then the sweet sounds of 'Thus Spake Zarathustra' conjuring up the spirit of Nietzsche and Elvis. Then the entrance of the loved ones.

First Mr Nick Knox, backbeat and sang froid — like I'm talking real cool, freeze city. Then stand-in Cramp, Miss Candy Del Mar, bass throb and licked lips — roll over Ginger Lynn and tell Tracy Lords the news! Holy hot tamale! Here's Miss Ivy with burlesque bump and guitar grind. Fever pitch with the arrival of Mr Lux Interior, all golden glow with a face etched in mascara and history, and a collection of interesting body scars — the sort you get when you burn leeches off.

First sonic snarl was a slamming 'Heartbreak Hotel' during which I swear I saw the face of the King appear on Lux's chest. This was a holy night, the second coming, the religion of show biz, direct from the holy land Hollywood. Some of us have waited a long time for this sort of rock and roll. Lux at times looked like a deranged Liberace and then, filled with the divine spirit of Little Richard, he climbs the speakers giving golden sacraments to the crowd.

Miss Ivy played beautiful guitar with just the right touch of tremelo and distortion, a super fine 'Most Exalted Potentate of Love' and a miracle laden 'What's Inside a Girl?'. Highlights for me were the tribute to Ricky Nelson in 'Lonesome Town' and one of Elvis's best songs in 'Do the Clam' — a fitting tribute and a touching bongo solo.

Two nights of wild rock and roll, with the climax of 'Surfin' Bird' a thing of beauty. A lesson in life that too far can never go far enough.

Kerry Buchanan

The Residents

Galaxy, August 23

From 'The Complete Residents Handbook':

"... you could count on one hand how many people make original interesting music, and still have enough fingers left over

to shoot a bird
or signal for peace
or be a Boy Scout."

The Residents: number one original interesting music group. That's why the Galaxy was full. That's why no one really minded waiting for the show to start over an hour late (except for the girl who screamed).

A collection of Residents videos was first, displaying their off-beat humour and spellbinding mastery of images, carefully refined from the earliest ('Skinny', 1974) to the best and most recent — JB's 'Man's Man's World' given "the treatment".

The Residents (as everyone should know) are four people who had eyeballs for heads, but at Christmas in San Francisco someone stole one of the eyeballs. So now the Residents are three people with eyeballs and one person with a huge grimacing grey skull for a head. Such is life.

Snakefinger is an English weirdo. He hangs out at the back of the stage, playing guitar and backing vocals beside the Skull, who puts floppy disks in the Emulator. Wild.

Two of the Residents arranged inflatable plastic giraffes around the stage. They then removed their eyeballs and danced in black. They were female Residents. They may have even been female humans — that is, if the Residents are humans. Who knows?

The fourth Resident was the singer. His face was seen, and he delivered the most passionate rendering of 'Man's Man's World'. Ever. He leapt to the 'Jailhouse Rock'.

The Residents' noises were scarier in the flesh. Their machines can make beautiful, horrible sounds, as can Snakefinger's guitar. At times (the start of the second set) mind-numbingly boring, but at others, the most exciting — yes danceable — sounds you'll hear all year. The show finished just as they looked like they would finally achieve "it". What is "it"?

Those who were there may know, but others will say of it all: "This is crazy and makes no sense."

Paul McKessar

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