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Special Issue: 'Dream Factories: Prince, Sign o' the Times, Box Sets and Cultural Artefacts'

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ABSTRACT

This editorial examines historical and artistic contexts within which Prince's *Sign o' the Times* box set reissue might be viewed and heard, while also considering the overall posthumous output from the Estate. The discussion therefore explores the commercial and other functions of box sets in general and Prince's reissued recordings in particular, potential symbolic signification, and the critical polarization that often accompanies such releases. Moreover, the box metaphor is employed to address academic partitioning and intellectual conservatism in Prince historiography.

Keywords

Prince, posthumous, recording, Vault, box set, reissue, culture, critic

Introduction: Vaulting ahead

Posthumous research on Prince has focused on the musicological, social, political and gender-related dimensions of his work, building on the foundations of relatively limited scholarship published during his lifetime. Prince's passing in 2016 has not only inspired a substantial outpouring of appreciation for his artistry, but it has also necessitated repackaging and reframing of his bodies of work in ways that would not have occurred while he lived. This Special Issue, focused on the Super Deluxe edition of 1987's *Sign o' the Times* (*SOTT*) album, is also deeply concerned with the roles of the box set in re-presenting Prince's legacy and the format's general functions as a signifier of cultural importance, longevity and commercial viability ([Alleyne 2022: 4](#)).

Although the term 'boxed set' has been frequently used in the record industry, 'box set' has become an accepted and even dominant phraseology in discussing multi-disc collections in popular culture publications. Warner Records's (formerly Warner Bros.) reference to the *SOTT* collection as a 'Super Deluxe Edition' avoids such issues altogether, leaving writers to grapple with terminological accuracy ([Alleyne 2022: 3](#)). For this special journal issue, we have opted to use 'box set' as the representative descriptor for the large-scale packaged multi-disc set.

The 2020 release of the eight-disc *SOTT* Super Deluxe edition includes material from three pre-existing abandoned projects from which the original 1987 album release was compiled: *Dream Factory*, *Camille* and *Crystal Ball* (not the 1998 compilation). This record was probably the most widely anticipated posthumous release from the Prince Estate to date, issued in this case in

conjunction with Warner Records. Often hailed as the ultimate validation of Prince's creative capability following its original release in 1987, *SOTT* emerged when his recording activity was extremely prolific, even by his own remarkable standards. For its deluxe re-release, the set was simultaneously issued in various other CD and LP configurations, but the discussion here centres on the most comprehensive version of the collection. The alternative configurations might well affect individual perceptions and experiences of the reissue in ways that cannot be fully considered in this introduction.

This collection of essays offers opportunities for a very specific focus, while simultaneously facilitating degrees of comparative consideration of Prince's overall career. Given the Estate's rapid output of releases since 2016 (at least thirteen albums at the time of writing), analysis of the *SOTT* box set invites a more general scrutiny of the posthumous record series in terms of quality, quantity, chronology, conceptual focus and the undoubtedly overwhelming task of organizing the Vault's volumes of recordings. In its original form as a classic double album, *SOTT* was inevitably compared to similar 2 LP artistic statements such as Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* (1968), *The Beatles* (informally referred to as *The White Album*) (1968), Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* (1970), Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (1973), *The Rolling Stones's Exile on Main St.* (1972) and Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life* (1976). Such ambitious recordings were fraught with commercial and critical challenges, and even prominent Black artists rarely received such an opportunity, raising the level of scrutiny under which *SOTT* was placed, even though it was preceded in Prince's catalogue by the double set *1999* (1982).

Much of the material included in the expansive Prince reissue collection comes from previously unreleased recordings finally emerging in remastered form from the famed Vault. Questions still remain about whether Prince would have deemed this material fit for public consumption in view of the incomplete and experimental nature of many of his Vault recordings. Such reservations are magnified by the wide range of his artistic ambitions and the characteristically perpetual impulse to move ahead rather than consciously revisiting the past.

Box set perspectives

The box set operates as a key cultural signifier of the value of an artist, genre or era. One of the challenges of the deluxe edition box set is that the critical and musicological histories associated with an individual artist's release are effectively rewritten by the inclusion of previously unreleased material and/or versions, and in some cases remixing and remastering, potentially adding sonic clarity and dimension to known works, thereby potentially facilitating deeper textual insights:

Revealing the sonic contours of material in gestation may affect our appraisal of its production characteristics, potentially altering the degree of credibility that we assign to the process. It is therefore worth considering the extent to which critical and commercial perceptions of a work's authenticity are affected by a reissued catalogue in the form of deluxe editions or other box-set compilations including demos or alternate versions of songs with which audiences are usually familiar in a more standardised 'finished' form.

[\(Alleyne 2020: 25\)](#)

In effect, the original version of the record that made the box set viable is no longer the definitive aural document once an expanded representation of the work, possibly with enhanced audio

qualities, reaches the market inclusive of liner notes that complement the recorded revelations about the artistic process. In this sense, there is no absolute, authentic, complete version, and even the box sets have undergone revision as either 'lost' material becomes available or record companies decide to issue other previously unreleased material to hungry audiences seeking the historical 'truth' of the work. The fundamental point is that legendary status and unexpected demise virtually guarantee recurrent textual revision. As Prince's Vault reveals more material, it remains possible that the deluxe editions – including *SOTT* – now considered definitive by many fans, may yet be precursors of further reissues.

It is also worth noting that graphic design revision sometimes accompanies archival restoration and recuperation, and the *SOTT* Super Deluxe edition cover includes a central image of Prince (almost as a ghostly spectre) vs. the original version on which he is depicted minus his discarded guitar, seemingly walking out of the photographic frame towards his next recording projects and live conquests. The album's title font and peace symbol are spot-varnished onto the Deluxe edition box's front and back, respectively, although complete track listing is only oddly included on a paper insert. The cover of the hardbound book offers another presence of Prince looking directly at the camera in different attire in a sharply defined shot. The relocation of Prince visually signifies the aural reset manifested by the revised expanded collection. One highly notable anomaly is the absence of the 2020 German-released *SOTT* live and documentary DVD set material from Turbine Media that prevents the Super Deluxe edition from being a thoroughly all-inclusive option.

Few Black artists have received the expansive anthology treatment given to Prince's recordings in such a short space of posthumous historical time, and fewer still have such a reputedly extensive repository of unreleased material likely to be eagerly consumed by fans if released. The remastering of the *SOTT* collection potentially offers renewed listening value and the inclusion of remixes, Vault tracks and live tracks guarantees interest among the many Prince completists. However, the blurring of the relationships between the original albums and the box sets both generally *and* specifically in the case of Prince's *SOTT* might justify a cautionary approach towards the Estate's prolific release output. Despite the urge to meet market demand and the willingness of audiences to buy the records, there is a distinct danger of too much material being released by the Prince Estate too quickly, and the possibility that much of the previously unreleased material is thematically and artistically disconnected from the stylistic core of the original releases. In this sense, the Estate might inadvertently undermine Prince's legacy rather than reinforcing its importance.

Critical polarization surrounding the previously unreleased *Welcome 2 America* album in 2021 provides an interesting example. While divergent analyses of artistic works are often anticipated, the chasm of disagreement regarding this posthumous material from an artist of Prince's stature may be revealing a degree of dissatisfaction with the Estate's release decisions. At one end of the spectrum the review in *The Irish Times* newspaper unflinchingly describes the release as 'a half-baked concept album' that is 'overall [...] an excruciating, boring mess – a grueling [...] odyssey of farcical indulgence'. The reviewer further notes that the status of Prince has led too many people to acclaim his recordings as works of genius, even when such exceptional quality is lacking ([Sweeney 2021](#)). Similarly, one review in *The Guardian* characterizes the album as 'sub-par' and argues that Prince likely 'knew this work was pleasant but unexceptional' ([Morris 2021](#): n.pag.). Conversely, the *Chicago Sun-Times* review hails the album as 'stunning', while yet another *The Guardian* review calls it Prince's 'best album of his last two decades' ([Petridis 2021](#): n.pag.). Ultimately, each listener determines whether the recordings have individual resonance, but it is certain that the record cannot be both brilliant and banal.

There are also significant questions about the seemingly haphazard chronological sequence of releases from the Estate, with some key albums from Prince's 1980s commercial heyday still seemingly left out of the archival retrieval process. However, this is a supposition made without direct knowledge of the scope of the Vault's holdings and the attendant complexities of comprehensively compiling definitive volumes well-suited for public consumption.

Boxed in

The metaphorical concept of the 'box' has also assumed negative connotations of restriction, confinement and quarantine as degrees of ideological factionalism have unfortunately emerged among academics discussing Prince, polarizing segments of an imagined community with the adoption of divisive strategies disconnected from Prince's own proclaimed philosophical ideals. An implicit and sometimes explicit perspective has surfaced involving forms of intellectual contestation of 'ownership' of Prince's creative aura, meanings and issues surrounding exactly who is authentically authorized to meaningfully speak about him or his legacies. In some cases, this has been characterized by a deliberately marginalizing and exclusionary discourse approaching imperialistic canonization with distinctly prejudicial cultural overtones. Such commentaries often conveniently overlook, for example, Prince's own early commercially purposeful career ambivalence about his racial background in favour of his later unambiguous embrace of his blackness. Moreover, Prince's mainstream commercial success – even manifesting itself in the very existence of this Special Issue – was achieved through his appeal to multicultural audiences who primarily developed perceptions of him as an artist. To suggest that Prince did not elude any stereotypical categorization, racially or stylistically, is a position divorced from cultural and commercial reality that imposes cultural embargo on the artist, making access to discussion of his work and career a negotiation around or through dogmatic exclusivity. In addition, any discussions premised on his international market appeal do not automatically separate Prince from his ethnicity, as some writers have malevolently implied. While Prince's Vault archives are physically boxed in the future, we hope that the signs of prescribed academic partitioning do not advance at the same pace. The following essays provide insight into the complexities of presenting and re-presenting Prince's vast output, the relationships between the music and visual manifestations of his image, and the role of the box set as a signifier of cultural importance and musical longevity.

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