

## Prince's *The Rainbow Children* Reaches for a Higher Musical Mantle

by C. Liegh McInnis

First, if you are looking for a cd filled with nicely cut and packaged hit singles that are radio and Billboard friendly, *The Rainbow Children* ain't for you. However, if you are looking for a diversified musical experience with lyrics that take you further than the sheets, then *The Rainbow Children* is up your alley. The biggest knock on Prince's latest efforts is that his albums sound incoherent because the songs stop and go with no specified direction. The truth, however, is that his albums are coherent, and they do have direction; it is just that the direction is not toward Billboard, nor is he attempting to craft songs that are easily packaged for radio. No, Prince's direction has been to become the best musician and lyricist that he can, which often means to stretch past the charts, to juxtapose notes, sounds, chords, and other musical and lyrical ideas that produce--God forbid!--something...different!?! Many see Prince as one who has ceased to fulfill his potential. On the contrary, *The Rainbow Children* is proof that Prince continues to fulfill his potential. It is just that he never saw hit records as the "be all--end all" of his potential.

Most of the songs on the album have at least three musical movements. These multiple movements become a motif, as Prince continues to be one of the best in the pop field to use sound as a metaphor. For instance, in "The Work, Pt. 1" he is noticeably using a James Brown inspired riff that echoes soulful, black power semantics, which he laces with lyrics about the "hard" but necessary "work" that needs to be done for "revelation to come to pass." The music sets a mood of the black power struggle, then Prince infuses his notions of a metaphysical struggle, which exists along side the physical struggle. "Every time I watch the other people news/ I c a false picture of myself, another one of u/ They try 2 tell us what we want, what 2 believe/ Didn't that happen in the Garden/ When somebody spoke 2 Eve?" This connecting the black struggle to the metaphysical is quite essential to Prince's own theory, as evidenced by how he uses the term "Devil" throughout the cd to refer to the physical devils who exploit people for their wages. He then uses those physical devils as a trope for the metaphysical "Devil" in "Rainbow Children" and "Muse 2 the Pharaoh" because in Prince's theory the ultimate battle is in the metaphysical realm and not the physical realm, as also evidenced by "Digital Garden" and "The Everlasting Now." On one level, the multiple movements create a trope for Prince and his inability to be confined to arbitrary categories. On another level, the multiple movements represent his need to continue to grow, searching for the sound or idea to take him to the next level. As he states in "Last December," which has the most drastic musical changes and movements, "Did u ever find a reason Y u had 2 die?/ Or did u just plan on leaving/ Without wondering y?...In ur life did u just give a little/ Or did u give all that u had?/ Were u just somewhere in the middle/ Not 2 good, not 2 bad?" The musical movements combine with questioning lyrics to echo the desire of the jazz musicians, such as Sun Ra, who wanted to show that within the soul of the music was a desire to go somewhere and become something that transforms us. Thus, the lyrics of *The Rainbow Children* are pointing the listener in a direction, and the music is acting as a guide.

For the first two-thirds of the cd, Prince is challenging our notions of what a "pop" song can be by challenging the conventions of what sounds can be combined. While the first few songs are held on our musical radar by well measured/regulated beats and a soul-like mesh of hypnotic keyboards, Prince takes from that line and constructs grooves in various directions, attempting to expand himself and what we know as "popular music." Again, this expansion serves as a trope that works as a backdrop for what the lyrics want to do, which is to destroy our archaic understanding of what it means to be man and woman, what it means to be human, what it means to be living in truth, which also reflects in what it means to make art. He begins with a creation song, as all good myths do, but his creation begins with the fall and then redemption of mankind in "Rainbow Children." "With the accurate understanding of God and His Law they went about the work of building a new nation: The Rainbow Children." Playing on the myth of Osiris and Iris and Adam and Eve, Prince asserts that the new nation will only be created if we are able to build constructive relationships between man and woman. "As prophesied, the Wise One and his woman were tempted by the Resistor. He, knowing full well the Wise One's love 4 God, assimilated the woman first and only. Quite naturally, chaos ensued and she and 5 others were banished from the Rainbow...4ever." This ideology is nothing new for Prince, for man's fall from grace and salvation have always been linked directly to man's relation to woman, most notably in "And God Created Woman" and in a more secular sense in "Raspberry Beret" and "Forever in my Life," where it is the female who has the power to fertilize man's life. In fact, he affirms this by invoking a line from a much older tune, "Sexuality," with "Reproduction of the new breed leader Stand up and organize!" This line affirms that Prince is using sex as a metaphor for metaphysical union and that sexuality is a trope of human identity. The following songs continue to pontificate over the fall and redemption of mankind. The music acts as a guide, continually changing the mood as the lyrics take us down a sundry of issues and solutions. The songs are an amalgamation of jazz, with an avant-garde sensibility, where Prince p to their limits of sound, hoping his moving in various musical directions will push the listener to free his mind and become open to the messages.

*The Rainbow Children* is avant-garde in that it is pushing and questioning what we know as truth and beauty in the sense of pleasing music and gratifying ideology. It is not avant-garde in the sense of "wanting to be art for the sake of art." Prince is too influenced by black musicians to think of art outside the context of man's daily existence, even if his inclusion of the metaphysics has put him at odds with what has been on the charts for the past ten years. Working with the definitions provided by Walter Davis in his essay, "So You Wanna Be An Avant-Garde Fan," *The Rainbow Children* is avant-garde in the sense that the "Freebop" or

Ornate Coleman, the "Expressionism" of Coltrane, "Restructualism," and the "Post-Modernism" of Wynton Marsalis all come together to serve as aspects and foundations of what the term "avant-garde" meant to the artists who were working within that certain framework. In accordance, the music of *The Rainbow Children* seeks to open alternative musical pathways and ideas that are then articulated through the lyrics. In "1+1+1 is 3" he asserts, "As she fell in<sup>2</sup> the Sensual Everafter, out of body/out of mind, he stroked her hair a hundred times. And as she fell deeper in<sup>2</sup> the hypnotic unwind, he counted his way in<sup>2</sup> the suggestive mind. Planting a seed that bears fruit on the tree, he said, 'repeat after me...1+1+1 is 3.'" Throughout the cd, the songs interact in a circular, call and response manner, where the emotion of urgency and the notion of a quest is amplified by the experimental fusion of varying sounds. On top of the silhouetted jazz grooves, Prince coordinates funk, soul, and gospel in a manner that shows both the brilliance of black music as well as the innate and organic link that black music has to spirituality in all of its forms.

Just when you have slipped into the experimental form of this album, he hits you with "Family Name," which is classic Prince: classic in that Prince is able to take what he has done in the past and evolve it into where he is now...classic in that it's Prince's electrified, thumping bass line beneath his piercing falsetto...classic in that it's Sly and the Family Stone meets Curtis Mayfield, and at the end of this meeting, the song explodes into Prince making his case that he is the best guitarist of his time, which he proves later in the final movement of "Last December." "Family Name" is about the fallacy of the oppressor's story and how this fallacy is used to oppress the Children of the Rainbow.

"First of all, the term 'black and white' is a fallacy. It simply is another way of saying 'this or that'... 'this' means the truth, or 'that' which is resistant <sup>2</sup> it. When a minority realizes its similarities on a higher level--not just 'black'--but PEOPLE OF COLOR, and higher still 'INGIGENOUS,' and even higher still, 'FROM THE TRIBE OF --' and yet higher -- the 'RAINBOW CHILDREN'...When this understanding comes, the so-called minority becomes a majority in the wink of an eye. This action will cause a Reaction or Resistance. The source of this Resistance must b banished as it is in direct conflict with the initial action. It cannot b assimilated, <sup>4</sup> its very nature is resistance. In other words, ONE CANNOT SERVE 2 MASTERS. U r either 'this' or 'that' which is not 'this.'"

"Family Name" climaxes right into "The Everlasting Now," where the album shifts into overdrive, leaving us with the question, "What the hell happened to the direction of first part of this album?" Where jazzy soul was the dominate form of the first two-thirds, funk dominates the last third. As with the other songs on this album, "The Everlasting Now" has at least two musical movements--three, depending on how you are counting. Again, it is the funk chords and the refrain of "Don't let nobody bring you down!" that drive this groove, which is seconded by the horns that come late into the jam, which, in one final movement, shifts into James Brown cookin' with Jimi Hendrix at 2:30 a.m. With the lyrics, Prince is once again employing the metaphoric "I" as a way to connect the individual to the collective. Many of the verses seem quite true to his personal story, but he uses the impressionistic style best seen in *Around the World in a Day* or in "Sacrifice of Victor" from 1992's "Symbol [O(+>)]" cd, which allows his novel to assert the universal. Prince is continuing his theme of freedom and liberation and his ability to link that theme with the collective, moving from a focus on the individual to a focus on the masses. He is definitely talking about his liberation from Warner Bros. and from a world that he sees as based on entropy, but he is also using his personal as a metaphor for liberating the masses with truth.

"Mirror, mirror what u c?/ Have I still got those dark clouds over me?/ Or am I really feeling what I feel?/ The last days of the Devil's deal/ Mirror what u c?/ Devil, devil what u know?/ U been here since 1614, but now u got 2 go/ U been hidin' behind corporate eyes/ U wanna war, but u can't fight/ Devil u got 2 go...Teacher, teacher what u say?/ Did we really come over in a boat?/ Did it really go down that way?/ Or did I arrive b4 u and ruin Thanksgiving Day?/ Teacher, what u say."

Driving *The Rainbow Children* is the notion that the songs are meant to please and enlighten--to move both our bodies and our souls in a positive direction. Prince bookends the cd with love, because, in his theory, only love can save us. The first song, "Rainbows Children," concentrates on the love between man and woman. The last song, "Last December," concentrates on the love between God and mankind. "Did u love somebody/ But got no love in return?/ Did u understand the real meaning of love/ That it just is and never yearns? When the truth arrives/ Will u b lost on the other side?/ Will u still b alive?/ In the name of the Father/ in the name of the Son/ We need 2 come 2gether/ Come 2gether as one." The motif is still liberation--the liberation that has been there since day one--but now Prince has successfully merged his desire for individual liberation with the necessity of collective liberation. And this liberation must take place in the metaphysical before we can achieve physical liberation. With the insight of Stevie Wonder, *The Rainbow Children* is able to construct a theology of George Clinton's "Free your mind and your ass will follow," and the music is another lesson in just how spacious the spectrum of music can be if we allow it to be all that it has the potential to become.

