

Letters from Prince: A Minneapolis writer remembers his relationship with a lost star

Minnesota native Neal Karlen was 25 years old when he landed the first of two in-depth interviews with Prince for Rolling Stone. What followed were 31 years of handwritten notes, late-night calls and an unlikely friendship.

By Neal Karlen Special to the Star Tribune APRIL 29, 2016 — 9:06AM

I just pray to God Prince was dead by the time he hit the floor.

I just pray Prince wasn't cognizant, even for a mite of a moment, that he was dying alone in a nondescript elevator, in a Wonder Bread suburb of the city that was one day too late in telling him we loved him as much as he loved Minneapolis.

Because there's one thing I'm positive I know about Prince. After knowing him in forever alternating cycles of greater, lesser and sometimes not-at-all friendship over the last 31 years: His biggest and perhaps only fear was dying alone. Prince didn't care if the end came in a Chanhassen elevator inside a building where he owned all the buttons; or in an opulent Prime Minister's suite in a Parisian hotel, inevitably and idiotically redecorated for his arrival by a clueless management staff apparently determined to recreate for his pleasure Liberace's living room. He just didn't want to die alone. Yet he always accepted what was coming, and was trying to prepare, he told me as far back as 1985.

Of course, the question must be asked whenever someone says anything about Prince. "How do YOU know? Why would he tell *you*? Did you see that?"

Well, um, personally, on this and several other topics, yes. For once upon a time, in what feels like a previous lifetime, I wrote a gaggle of articles and interviews for Rolling Stone and then the New York Times with Prince and about Prince — his thoughts, worlds, bands and best friends of the moment, what he wore on his head and the height of the heels on his feet.

And then, in the 1990s, I quit.

I didn't quit Prince, just writing about him or hanging around his world. I still don't know if I was brave or stupid to walk away from the only real scoop rock 'n' roll had to offer in those days. But I wanted to be a real writer, writing real things and running away to join other circuses besides the music world, where life is the proverbial high school with money — and the entire world is reduced to the simple binary equation of "*that's cool*" or "*that's not cool.*"

If I didn't quit, I knew way back, I would never be taken seriously as anything more than Prince's Bobo, a slur in the baseball world denoting a professional sycophant to a superstar player. In the rock world, I figured, the equivalent Bobo might be, say, the only reporter someone like Prince would give interviews to, or hang around with, or divulge the inner meaning of his shoes. ("I don't wear 'em cuz I'm short," the 5'2" musician told me in 1985, "I wear 'em cuz the women like 'em.")



BRIAN PETERSON – STAR TRIBUNE
Prince fans left this tribute outside
First Avenue nightclub in
Minneapolis.

These are the first words I've written about Prince since back in the day. Until now I kept a promise to myself that I wouldn't write about him anymore, and I think he understood.

Because, in the coming years, he asked me to write a couple things with him. The projects sounded so ridiculous I figured no one would believe they existed anyway.

In the '90s, I wrote the libretto to a rock opera called "The Dawn" which he composed as a wedding present to Mayte, his first of two ex-wives. He gave me a couple details of what he wanted: a setting in the desert, a princess being courted Valentino-style by an inscrutable, magical — ahem — prince.

He also gave me the indescribable experience of catching a true genius in the act of being a genius.

"Will you pay me?" I asked.

If he did, I knew, I'd be set free if I ever wanted to sell out. I also knew I could never write about him again, at least not in the guise of an objective journalist.

"No, I won't pay you," Prince said. "But you can say you wrote a rock opera with me."

Good point, little purple guy, I thought. And damn, looking back half a lifetime ago, that was the most profitable thing I've ever worked on, karmically speaking.

The last thing we worked on together was a private 1993 manifesto, written by me in his voice, explaining why he really changed his name to that goofy glyph. He told me the manifesto was for a "time capsule" to be buried on the grounds of Paisley Park. I have no idea if it ever was. I have my copy on a last-century floppy disk in a Minikahda Storage locker where I keep memories I don't know where to put.

Purple stationery

I always told Prince I knew he really didn't consider me a friend, but as one of the few people in Minneapolis who was probably awake, like he always was, in the middle of the night, and was "Willing and Able," as my favorite song of his is titled, to talk about loneliness and death.

I even rubbed it in, in the opening of [my second Rolling Stone cover story](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/prince-talks-19901018) (<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/prince-talks-19901018>) on Prince, published in 1990.

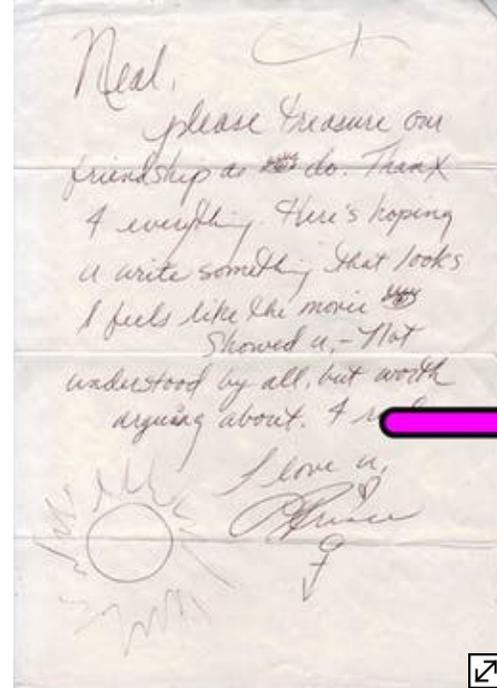
"The phone rings at 4:48 in the morning."

"Hi, it's Prince," says the wide-awake voice calling from a room several yards down the hallway of this London hotel. "Did I wake you up?"

No, you jerk, you never woke me. Well, actually you did a couple times, but I was always happy to hear from you, even when you were so lonely and depressed you could barely speak.

When he wrote me I'd always write him back care of Paisley Park. I still have no idea if he ever got my letters, because I never had any idea what the hell was going on over there, even when I used to visit.

An hour before I quit on this story, I sent my editor [a scan of an old letter he sent me](http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_146192963160879.jpg) (http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_146192963160879.jpg) that began, "Neal, Please treasure our friendship as I do — yes he drew an eye for an I — and ended " ... 4 real. I love you."



FEED LOADER

Prince sent the author many handwritten notes during the course of their friendship.

I don't know why I sent the editor that letter; perhaps I wanted her to know I really knew him, we really were friends. Or maybe God just wanted me to read it again, and smarten up.

Still, like the rest of Minneapolis, I neglected to tell Prince I loved him back until it was too late.

He once told me he believed in heaven, and he thought if he made it there it would look exactly like earth. You can look it up. [Rolling Stone, Sept. 12, 1985 \(http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/prince-talks-the-silence-is-broken-19850912?page=5\)](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/prince-talks-the-silence-is-broken-19850912?page=5).

If he was right ... well ... hey, Prince! Will you give me a call one last time? I forgot to tell you something.

I love you, too.

Neal Karlen is the author of eight books on a range of topics including vaudeville, baseball, religious fundamentalism and linguistics. He was an associate editor for Newsweek, a contributing editor for Rolling Stone and a regular contributor for the New York Times. He teaches creative writing at Augsburg College.

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