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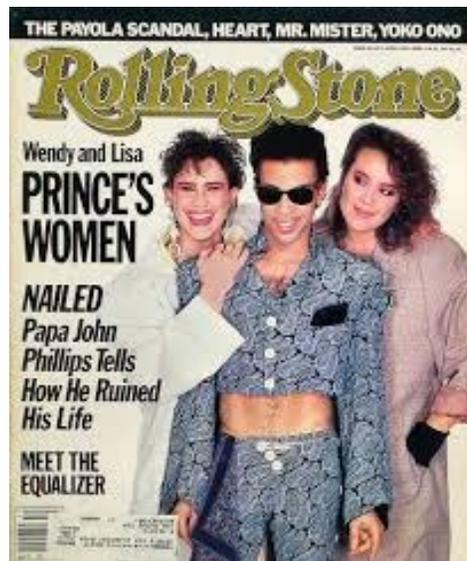
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**Lisa Coleman and Wendy Melvoin: Ladies in Waiting**

**Wendy, Lisa and Prince: A musical love affair**

By

**NEAL KARLEN**



**Prince and The Revolution perform on stage at Ahoy, Rotterdam, Netherlands, August 17th, 1986 Rob Verhorst/Redferns/Getty**

Minutes from now, Sheila E. will begin pounding her magical drumsticks for 6200 howling fans inside the Universal Amphitheatre. Though showtime is imminent, the backstage greenroom at this Universal City concert hall remains packed elbow to elbow with assorted kings, queens and court jesters of the Los Angeles music kingdom. Rock & roll Annies, pressed between the walls and their escorts, nurse their complimentary drinks and grind out Gitanes at their painted competition's feet. Funkified Barbie, Ken and Mr. T dolls fight for air space and each other, while a quickly panicking backstage guard shields the door with her body and announces, "No more, no room, no air, nobody else!"

Though few working the greenroom seem to know it, Prince is standing in a hallway not five feet away. After Sheila's final encore, he and the Revolution – now twelve members strong – are scheduled to sign in for a still undetermined number of songs.

Prince, you remember, said last year that he might never again play live, that he was going to “look for the ladder.” There haven't been many miracles in Los Angeles lately, and his surprise performance will be hailed by the committed as a return from the Other Side. For the rest of the audience, the evening promises to provide a damn nice show.

Upstairs from the stage, Revolution keyboard player Lisa Coleman and guitarist Wendy Melvoin are waiting in their dressing room. Both are Los Angeles natives and the only members of the Revolution who commute to Minneapolis. They are also the Revolution's only women and the only faces in the band that carry brand-name recognition. But they aren't feminine adornments, tambourine-banging mannequins brought in to leaven Prince's macho onstage swaggering. Above all else, Lisa and Wendy are wicked musicians, the only ones to whom Prince gives carte blanche in the private music-making regions of his head.

No, they both assert, Prince isn't their boss; he's their best friend and collaborator. “We don't want to leave and start our own thing,” says Lisa softly, “because this *is* our own thing – I don't feel like we're just hired musicians taking orders. He's always asking for our ideas.” And more. The group's latest album, *Parade: Music from 'Under the Cherry Moon,'* contains two songs – “Sometimes It Snows in April” and “Mountains” — co-written by Lisa and Wendy. They have also begun writing songs for Prince's third movie. They're not sure what it's about, but Prince has let it be known he'll shape his film to suit their songs.

Together, says Wendy, the triad makes music no one can beat. “I'm sorry,” she says with conviction, “but no one can come close to what the three of us have together when we're playing in the studio. *Nobody!*”

*Wendy makes me seem all right in the eyes of people watching. She keeps a smile on her face. When I sneer, she smiles. It's not premeditated, she just does it. It's a good contrast.*

*Lisa is like my sister. She'll play what the average person won't. She'll press two notes with one finger so the chord is a lot larger, things like that. She's more abstract. She's into Joni Mitchell too. -Prince*

A lot has happened to the purple clan in the months that have preceded the Revolution's surprise Los Angeles appearance. For lunch on the day of the show, Lisa and Wendy pick the Musso & Frank Grill as an appropriate Hollywood spot to talk. While would-be and real movie agents and producers drink their lunch at nearby tables, the two order salads and mull over the recent events. The Family, a band Prince godfathered through its first album, has just fallen apart in the wake of singer Paul Peterson's walkout. Among those left stranded is Susannah Melvoin, the Family's other exsinger, Prince's current beloved (though, contrary to rumor, not his fiancée) and Wendy's forever identical twin sister.

Then there's *Parade*, the Revolution's new record, and *Under the Cherry Moon*, Prince's new movie, which he directed and which will be out in a few months. According to Lisa, the film is a “boy-meets-girl love story, a kind of a *Pygmalion* in reverse. Instead of making a high-society dame out of a tramp, it's about a man trying to loosen up a high-society dame.”

Right around the time the movie opens, [Prince and the Revolution](#) are planning to take off on a nine-month world tour, their longest ever. So now it's time to start getting the live kinks out: except for a three-hour performance earlier this week at Minneapolis's First Avenue club, neither Prince nor his band has played a note in public in a year.

"I'm not nervous," says Wendy, "and I don't even want to guess what's going to happen. All I know is that this band is going to be together a long, long time." Lisa nods in agreement.

Superficially, the two women's offstage personalities seem very similar to their onstage auras. Wendy, in front and extroverted, embellishing whatever's been said with a cracking verbal riff or some funny dialect. Lisa, hanging back, talking slowly, adding grace notes of reflection or perfectly timed tiny gibes to keep the two different story lines in electric rhythm.

That they talk the way they jam, says Wendy, makes perfect psychological rock-band sense.

"There are actually different attitudes for different positions in a band," she explains.

"Keyboard players know when they join a band that they're going to be in the second line. And guitarists know they're going to be in front. So they get that guitarist's attitude of being in front. When you're up there, you *know* you can't just stare down at your instrument and pretend you're not there."

Long pause. Lisa reflects, takes a drag on her cigarette, adds her chord: "I like it in the second line. I feel *comfortable* there. I call it my apartment."

Half-beat pause, Wendy adds a hearty riff via a deep-throated laugh. "She *calls it her apartment!*"

Lisa says she doesn't mind that "Lisa and Wendy" are a single entity in the rock public's eye. She laughs shyly – her most frequent kind of laugh – as she remembers a solo shopping trip she took this week. "I was at the market," she says, "and these two little girls, all decked out, walk by. They went past me, turned around, and yelled, 'It's Lisa and Wendy! It's Lisa and Wendy!' I had to stop and count how many of myself there were. Let's see. One."

Wendy has more trouble with the commingling of their public personas. "It's hard," she says thoughtfully. "It's weird." The two then engage each other in a dialogue that is one part Abbott and Costello to two parts longtime best friends busting each other's chops.

Lisa: It's fine. I couldn't think of a better person to be linked with.

Wendy: (*Laughing*) I could.

Lisa: (*Laughing*) Yeah. Me.

Like Prince, Wendy and Lisa grew up in families headed by fathers who were professional musicians and who eventually were divorced from their wives. Jazz keyboardist Mike Melvoin and percussionist Gary Coleman are seasoned studio musicians *and* best friends. Their credits include Barbra Streisand's "Evergreen" and Frank Sinatra's "That's Life"; they appeared together on the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations" and on several early Jackson 5 albums; and they were the ones who played the instruments for half of the Partridge Family.

"Our parents were total beatniks, then hippies, and we turned into twelve-year-old hippies ourselves," says Wendy, who's now twenty-two. "They used to joke that to rebel we'd have to turn into staunch Republicans," adds Lisa, who's twenty-five. "But we just took their lives and went one step further."

In 1971, all six Melvoin and Coleman kids joined together to cut a kiddie-hippie-bubblegum album. “But we *weren’t* the Partridge Family,” chortles Lisa, “we all actually played our instruments.”

The name of the album? “I forget,” feigns Wendy. “I think it was... *Geek City*.”

“Yes, I’m sure that was it,” says Lisa, mock soberly.

Both earnestly agree that their birthright as spectators into rock-business reality has helped them keep that ever-diminishing industry resource – perspective. “Growing up the way we did,” says Wendy, “really gave us an edge on people who were just starting in music. We know how to get around all the games.” She pauses. “There’s so much ego in the music business, especially when you first get started. The people who grew up around the business are more relaxed with it.”

And fantastic success, Wendy says, hasn’t changed her a bit. “I never think about it. I have a few friends and a few things I like to do. I never go clubbing. I’d rather just go home and play my guitar. Sometimes I can’t believe how boring I must seem to my friends.”

“A lot of people have this real glamorous vision of what it means to be a musician,” adds Lisa. “Sometimes it’s true, but what I learned as a kid is that there’s got to be a whole lot of work behind it. You have to practice, you have to have your chops, you have to know your music perfectly.” Sometimes it hits her that she’s *Lisa* – but never in public. Alone, at home, she occasionally thinks about it. Then she usually goes to bed.

Lisa began studying classical piano at an early age. Three years older than Wendy and Susannah Melvoin, she remembers the twins when they looked like “plucked chickens in diapers.” Wendy got her first guitar for her sixth birthday; Susannah received toe shoes. Surrounded by musical relations, Lisa and Wendy kept practicing. In private. Even after their bubblegum record, they refused to play in front of their classmates. Says Wendy, “People who went to junior high school with me at Cal Prep in Encino still come up and say, ‘I didn’t even know you knew *how* to play the guitar.’ The instrument was still so personal to me that I didn’t want to share it with anyone.”

In Hollywood, Lisa suffered similar junior-high phobias. Once, the drama department at her school needed a pianist to accompany a dance routine. Lisa was called out of class, placed on a piano bench and ordered to play “Mr. Bojangles.” Lisa shudders as she recalls the experience: “I don’t know what happened, but I sat down at the piano and couldn’t play. I mean I *could* play, but I pretended that I couldn’t. I was really depressed all day, then went home and sat back down at my piano. You know, that night I played the *shit* out of ‘Mr. Bojangles.’” She got through Hollywood High through the good graces of an English teacher named Judy Coleman, who gave Lisa ample independent-study credits for her music and Joni Mitchell-style lyrics. “I basically just stayed home from school and wrote songs,” she says. “Every once in a while I’d call up Judy and say, ‘Come on over and give me some credits.’” After graduation, she enrolled at Los Angeles Community College as an English major, pulled down a 4.0 average, “read everything from Vonnegut to Hayakawa” and dropped out.

Lisa then started work as a grunt on the shipping dock of a documentary-film company in Los Angeles. In 1979, a friend working for Prince’s L.A. management company heard that His Royal Badness – who was still a couple of years away from his big commercial breakthrough – was

looking for a keyboard player. Lisa made a tape, sent it in and was quickly summoned to Minneapolis for a private audition. "When I got to Prince's house," Lisa remembers, "he sent me downstairs and said he was going to change clothes. There was a piano down there, and I just started playing, trying to relax. I got the feeling he was eaves-dropping at the top of the stairs, so I whipped out my best Mozart. He finally came back downstairs, picked up his guitar, and we started jamming. From the first chord, we hit it off." Hired on the spot, she moved to Minneapolis.

Wendy, meanwhile, was gritting her way through high school in North Conway, New Hampshire, her divorced mother's new home. She liked the country but felt marooned. "No one understood what I liked," she says, "and no one knew I played the guitar." Foiled romance finally gave her the gumption to get through. "I was sixteen and madly in love with a senior named David Merrill. I finally went up to him and said, 'I can't stand it anymore, I just have to let you know that I'm attracted to you.' He just looked at me and said, 'There's a whole bunch of other guys in the school.' After that, I said, 'Forget it, I just want to get out of here.'"

Wendy graduated, then headed back to L.A. to waitress and play secretary while she figured out which music college to attend. In 1983, she went to visit Lisa in New York. The band was on the 1999 tour, and Wendy holed up for a few days in her friend's hotel room. Down the hall, Prince heard someone playing a guitar. He knocked on Lisa's door and found Wendy practicing. He asked her to play more, liked what he heard and later asked her to fill in at a sound check that guitarist Dez Dickerson had missed. Soon after, Dickerson quit to form his own band, and Wendy was in.

How does it feel being the only women in a twelve-member band? "It's a little weird," says Lisa, "but not really. When I first joined the band, I got solace from the fact that here were some other people so different that they only fit in there. That's the thing – they're all nice guys, and we all fit together."

What about the explicitly sexual content of Prince's lyrics? "Like 'Head'?" Wendy says, laughing. "People do it. It exists."

"It's all in the name of good music," adds Lisa.

And what about romance? "I like to keep my personal life personal," says Lisa with an air of distaste.

"I love Bugs Bunny," says Wendy, ever in front with a lick. "I'd marry him if he were alive. He's just soHollywood."

Most of Hollywood still seems to be sipping lunch at Musso & Frank's, but Wendy checks her watch and realizes it's time for the sound check. The bill is paid, and everyone clambers back into Wendy's rented BMW for the trip to the Universal Amphitheatre.

As they wait for the afternoon call to the stage, Wendy and Lisa relax in their dressing room. On the couch lies a paperback of hard-to-do crossword puzzles and a copy of *The Twilight Zone* magazine. Wendy is musing over a piece of plastic that looks just like an American Express platinum card. Shaking her head, she points out the words Hard Rock Cafe where the American Express legend should be. The embossment on the bottom left of the card says Wendy, just Wendy. "This was just sent to me, *unsolicited*, in the mail," she says. "This card

allows me to butt in front of anybody in line at the Hard Rock Cafe. Can you imagine the kind of person who would use this?"

Wendy drops the card and lights some incense to chase out the room's sweat-sock smell. Lisa lights a Merit. On a table sits an uneaten basket of strangely colored and oddly shaped cookies baked by a fan who spied them shopping for books the day before. "Give some to Prince," pleads the note that accompanied the questionable edibles backstage, "please."

An aide walks in and announces, "Prince wants you onstage ASAP." As Lisa walks down the stairs and through the wings, she says, "I nicknamed Prince 'Fearless,' as in 'Fearless Leader.'" As in Rocky and Bullwinkle.

On the stage, Lisa and Wendy strap and plug themselves into position – Lisa back in her dark apartment with a little smile and her head cocked slightly; Wendy in front with a wide grin, next to Prince in the fully lit, empty auditorium. Gone are the days when Fearless Leader put his friends through all-afternoon sound-check jams that could last as long as that night's concert. Clean-cut, dressed in a resplendent black suit and a white ruffled shirt, Prince faces the band and orders up a tune. The Revolution begins hammering.

"Okay," says Prince, "Sheila comes in here." Cut. "Is Sheila here yet?" he asks. Momentarily, Sheila E. strides in, stage left, in sunglasses and a trench coat. She and Prince huddle for a second, then the maestro barks, " 'Controversy'! Ready!" The band is pounding again. "Come on, stay in beat," says Prince. "I'm listening." Perfection is found in a few measures, and the band carries on with the song. Prince then announces, "End of 'A Love Bizarre.' Check it out." He jumps offstage and runs up an aisle, both listening to the sound and practicing an audience run he will perform that night.

"Can we lose that low range somehow?" he asks. "Let me hear the bass out." Perfection again, then into the Revolution's new single, "Kiss." Prince pauses. "I think finger cymbals would be better. Now when we film videos tomorrow, we're going to drag it out so everybody will get their chance to be in it." With that, he heads offstage. Wendy unstraps herself from the guitar, Lisa unplugs from the keyboard, and they head back upstairs for dinner.

Wendy is fighting for terms to describe her and Lisa's relationship with Prince. They aren't his toys or minions; he's not their boss or master. Together they form a musical ménage that has alchemized new multiracial forms of funk rock out of both talent and (they say) deep-dish love.

"We tell Prince we love him all the time," says Wendy. "He always gets all embarrassed and doesn't know what to say. We tell him to tell us the same thing so he goes, 'Uh, okay, yeah, I love you too.' It's silly, us all being so intense about it and swooning over each other, but it's meaningful. Not that the rest of the band doesn't understand Prince – they do. We're just a bit more spiritual with him."

The three have a silent language, adds Lisa. "When Prince says something funny at rehearsal," she explains, "he knows who will understand and where to look for the smile. And it's always there. And we know where to look for that smile too."

Like Tom Landry checking out field conditions ten minutes before the season's opening game, a quietly wired Prince roams the grounds backstage. Walking down the corridor, he pays as little attention to the greenroom dollies as Landry does to the Dallas Cowboys' cheerleaders.

Prince disappears through the wings and heads anonymously into the audience to watch Sheila pound out her tunes. The walls are shaking out there; the crowd is swaying, its eyes centered on Sheila and her neon drumsticks. No one pays heed to the clean-cut guy in the nice black suit who has melted into their midst. While Prince cases the joint from the bleachers, the Revolution is upstairs getting made up in its two dressing rooms.

The men's quarters are crowded with faces both familiar and new. In recent months, Prince has added six new members to the band: Eric Leeds on sax, Matt Blistan on trumpet, Mico Weaver on guitar and three guys whose job it is to work to the side of Prince as a Pips-like dance line. They are Greg Brooks, Wally Safford and Jerome Benton – Morris Day's hilarious valet and mirror holder in *Purple Rain* and the only Revolution member to appear in *Under the Cherry Moon*. "We've got a much bigger sound now," says Lisa. "And we're a lot more funk oriented, that's for sure."

In one corner, Revolution drummer Bobby Z and keyboardist Matt Fink, tied for second in the race for Most Famous Jewish Rock Star Ever to Come Out of Minnesota, are discussing whether the Yiddish word for "gizzard" is *pipik* or *pupik*. In the *shtetl*, the chicken gizzard was a delicacy saved for the head of the household on Friday night. In suburban St Louis Park, Minnesota, however, the word now generally is spoken by parents wondering why their son has hair down to his *pipik*. Or is it *pupik*? Matt, in his green doctor's scrub suit, thinks it's the latter. Bobby Z finally agrees.

While the guys get made up, dope smoke wafts down the hallway. "You know how much trouble we'd get in if we did that?" one new member of the honest-to-God drug-free Revolution says, laughing.

Across the hall, Wendy explains the band's pharmaceutical habits. "There is absolutely no person in this band involved with drugs," she says vehemently. "We're real militant about that. Fortunately, it happens that everybody in the band got together and felt the same way. There are a few people in the organization who are into the drugular lifestyle, but you can't help that."

"This band's going to last a long time because we're all going to live a long time," Lisa adds softly. "The headline Keyboard player found dead of drug overdose sounds boring and pathetic to me."

Sheila is finishing up onstage now, whipping the crowd out of its seats as she beats a first encore. The entire Revolution meets for a moment, agrees on the key for the first song, "A Love Bizarre," then hustles downstairs, just offstage. Huddled in the darkness like a high-school basketball team about to take the court, the musicians fidget and limber up.

One encore for Sheila. Another. One more. The curtain comes down again, and the crowd sees the shadow of scurrying feet. *Something* is happening. The curtain goes up, the Revolution is in place, and the disbelieving screams start. Prince smiles, Wendy smiles next to him, and in her apartment, Lisa cocks her head, finally relents and smiles, too. The first chord is an A, and the unceasing screams leave no doubt that the real king, his queens and the purple court have finally returned.