

SONGS ABOUT SEX

Prince as Radical Theologian; Humorous and Hard Truths from Michael Callen

by ADAM BLOCK

I admire Billy Idol: If he mentions love, it's just another name for sex.

—Jamie Dillon, 1985

I'm here in Boston, visiting my old buddy Jamie, a high school teacher with a healthy regard for the redemptive powers of fucking. His is a conviction probably not shared by the local shopkeepers, who have been pulling copies of Prince's latest LP, *Lovesexy* (Warner Bros.), off their shelves, until stickers can be slapped on to conceal the singer's left ass cheek.

Prince is probably delighted. Remember, we are talking about the talent who agreed to dub his first protégé Vanity only after she had flatly refused his suggestion that she be called Vagina. This is the dude who, when accepting Minneapolis's Artist of the Year award, asked, "Don't you have an award for best ass?" I'd say the sticker applies.

Prince has always mixed the raunchy and the religious, but on *Lovesexy*, when he mentions sex, it is just another name for God. In the '50s and '60s, when gospel singers turned to pop, they often rewrote sacred pleas to Jesus as secular, sexual serenades, supplanting the Nazarene with the nookie. Soul stars like Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, and Al Green were all accused of sacrilege for becoming entertainers.

Lovesexy is so shot through with praise for Jesus that it ought to be nominated for best inspirational album at next year's Grammys, but it is also sufficiently seductive and salacious to send Jimmy Swaggart careening back to that by-the-hour motel.

Prince may intend a tip of his hat to that Right Reverend in the song "Alphabet City," the LP's first single, when he sings, "Excuse me, baby, I don't mean to be rude/ But tonight I'd like to—ummmm—watch." He manages to make safe sex sound extra kinky and appealing—sort of a tribute to Rev. Swaggart's sexual preferences.

AIDS has made sex scary and fucking almost unfashionable. While some artists have opted to encourage or even exploit those fears (e.g., Gwen Guthrie's recent up-with-celibacy single), Prince hasn't let the plague cast any doubts on his divinely inspired libido.

The music is staggeringly rich; the rhythms, flawlessly funky. Prince continues to absorb the works of past masters (from The Beatles to George Clinton, from Anton Webern to John Coltrane) and adorns his tunes with those discoveries, almost daring his fans to keep pace.

If Prince ain't no homo, neither is he homophobic. On "Anastasia," a song minted for horizontal dancing, he moans, "Have you ever wanted to play with someone so much./ You'd take anyone—a boy or a girl?" without a hint of condemnation. Frankly, I thought he should have added "a sheep" to the question, but I figure he covered that possibility with the chorus of "New Power," in which he insists, "Nothing is forbidden./ Nothing is taboo./ When two are in love." I'd like to see Jesse Helms concur with that sentiment. Come to think of it, I'd like to hear Sid and Nancy—and Orton and Halliwell—hash it out.

But the fact is, this album is addressed not to the decrepit or dead but to the quick and young. It opens with an invitation and closes

with a baptism; in between, Prince condemns smack, crack, and vandals while exalting sex, love, and Christ. Those who heed the call will join "the new power generation" of Christians stoked on love and sex.

What is boggling about all this is Prince's implicit belief that brazen lust and love of Christ aren't at odds but complement one another. Rowdy, raunchy, original rockers like Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard have careened between the stage and the church, but they always believed that they couldn't serve both. The stage was about sex and sin; the pulpit was about salvation. So look on Prince as a radical theologian, sanctifying sex and issuing a call to arms, legs, organs, and orifices to join him in a revolution you can dance to. Buy the soundtrack.

Michael Callen isn't a rock singer; when he sings about sex, he conjures up cabaret romance. Callen is a PWA singing hard and humorous truths about the plague. His assured theatrical vocals and familiar pop idioms make these tough subjects accessible: The best of these songs should even speak to the heartland.

His album *Purple Hearts* (Significant Other) ranks as the most remarkable gay independent release of the past decade. It boasts a full side of cuts that could pass for the soundtrack to a blockbuster musical; it is sort of a *Hair* for the age of AIDS. Callen is a passionate activist, with a voice as big as all Sam Harris that can soar up Yma Sumac's Andes.

The unwritten musical opens with the LP's first cut, a willfully overblown cover of "Where the Boys Are" that is decked out with aggressively camp backup singing, which ensures that the listener will recognize this as a fantasy from a more innocent time. Callen celebrates and subverts the glossy pop ode to the search for that perfect boy as the backup singers ominously attack his vocal.

"Me and Dickie D." (an Elton-John-meets-Dave-Lasley pastiche) is the one too-cute misstep on this side of the disc, but it is quickly dwarfed by a brawling, show-stopping anthem written for ACT UP, "Living in Wartime." Next, Gilbert and Sullivan get funky on the wry tongue twister "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic (Without Being Caught Up in the Polemics)." This is followed by Callen's Noël Coward tribute, in which he confesses, "My lifelong love affair with sex is through." If you swapped "Dickie D." for the first cut on the second side, the play would close with the romantic stunner "Love Don't Need a Reason."

The rest of the LP's second side is less compelling. It features covers of tunes by Elton and Lasley; the fake Simon and Garfunkel canticle "Home"; "On the Other Side," which sounds like John Denver's imitation of Judy Collins singing a Jacques Brel ballad; and Callen's "Talk to Your Daddy," which sounds straight out of Harry Chapin hell. Callen has labeled this the LP's "Bottom Side"; "downside" would be more precise.

If your local record store doesn't have *Purple Heart*, ask them to order it or send for it from Significant Other Records (P.O. Box 1545, Canal Street Station, New York, NY 10013; \$10, including mailing). The back-cover art alone is worth the price: It's sexier than Prince looking like a eunuch hatching from an orchid, and you won't have to peel off a sticker to feast your eyes.