

## MUSIC

# Music by Prince's father featured on new album, tracking 'that DNA thing'

John L. Nelson's daughter has produced a CD of his tunes played by jazz all-stars.

By Jon Bream (<http://www.startribune.com/jon-bream/10644496/>) Star Tribune

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Quiet, short and, of course, musical.

As they say: Like father, like son.

But this story is not about Prince; it's about his late father, John L. Nelson.

His music is about to get discovered — or rediscovered — via a new CD lovingly put together by his oldest child, Sharon Nelson.

It's called "Don't Play With Love" (<https://johnnelson.bandcamp.com/album/dont-play-with-love-the-john-l-nelson-project>) by the John L. Nelson Project. It features seven of his compositions interpreted by a top-notch instrumental band led by distinguished jazz drummer Louis Hayes, who has played with John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley, among others, and happens to be Nelson's nephew.

"He liked bebop," Sharon said Tuesday of her father, who died in 2001 at age 85. "This is jazz."

The album came together by serendipity. Sharon was cleaning her apartment in New York about three years ago and happened upon seven pieces of sheet music by her father.

"Dad gave me the music in 1978. He and I were going to collaborate together, but then somebody became very famous," Sharon recalled. "Dad left me and went to Prince, and I put the music away."

Speaking last week in her temporary Twin Cities townhouse, she remembered how her younger sister, Norrine, would find crates of Nelson's sheet music behind the furnace in the basement in their south Minneapolis home.

"Nobody else knew about this music. She'd get Dad's lyrics and write them to her boyfriends," Sharon remembered. "Her boyfriends thought she was the most fantastic writer."

Music was central to Nelson's life, but it wasn't his career. He worked at Honeywell for 35 years as a plastic molder, making rheostats for furnaces. On weekends, billing himself as the Fabulous Prince Rogers, he played piano with his Prince Rogers Trio at Twin Cities nightclubs and strip joints.

"You know these stories where Prince saw Dad playing at these strip clubs? He did do it," Sharon confirmed. "And the owner would come to Dad between songs and say, 'Your son's out there.' As soon as Prince saw Dad get up, he was gone back home. He must have been like 12, 13 years old."

Nelson went to work at 7 a.m. and then spent evenings sitting at the console piano at home.

"He put us to bed at 7:30, and we'd go to sleep with all his music playing," Sharon reminisced. "Some original tunes and some standards."

He gigged nearly every weekend in the Twin Cities, but he never performed out of town.

"Dad thought he wasn't any good," Sharon said. "Isn't that sad?"

## Didn't meet Prince till 1973

Sharon, who was 18 years older than Prince and moved to New York at age 19, didn't meet the youngster (with whom she shares a father but not a mother) until he was 13.



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JOHN GLANTON/HENNEPIN COUNTY LIBRARY

On weekends, John L. Nelson, left, who billed himself as the Fabulous Prince Rogers, played piano at Twin Cities nightclubs and strip joints.

"I met Prince in 1973 when my mother passed away and I came to Minneapolis for the funeral. Norrine introduced me to him," said Sharon, wearing a purple fleece top in her "Prince Entertainment Center" room featuring a baby grand piano and photos of her famous brother. "He said: 'You live in New York, huh?' He said, 'I want to come to New York.' I said, 'You can come visit me when you have finished high school.'"

When he graduated, he called and asked: "Can I come now?" He arrived the next day on a one-way ticket.

Prince spent three or four months in Sharon's apartment. She took him to meet several major record labels (he played an eight-track recording of his song "Soft and Wet"), but he wasn't interested in any of the offers because he wanted to produce himself, she said.

So he went back to Minneapolis and hooked up with music impresario Owen Husney, who helped Prince land such a deal with Warner Bros.

### **Father and son and Duke**

Sharon remembers her father teaching Prince how to turn his hands on the piano to play certain chords.

"He and Prince were close musically," she observed. "They didn't discuss politics. They loved Duke Ellington and music, and that was their conversation. My dad knew all the Duke Ellington chords, and he taught them to Prince."

In 1994, Sharon put together an album of Nelson's music, "Father's Song." He also occasionally collaborated with Prince, earning credits on "Father's Song," heard in the 1984 movie "Purple Rain" (it was left off the original album but included on last year's deluxe reissue), and co-writing the single "Scandalous" for the 1989 "Batman" soundtrack album.

Said Sharon: "The melodies that we have in our music come from our father. That DNA thing."

Sharon, 77, who retired from working in accounting with AT&T and the Dreyfuss Fund, plays piano and writes songs. (As a child, she took piano lessons at MacPhail Center for Music.)

She said her father was self-taught but could read and write music.

Nelson didn't know drummer Hayes, his nephew who grew up in Detroit, but Sharon does. Prince never met Hayes, who is 80.

### **Recorded at Paisley Park**

As producer of "Don't Play With Love," Sharon arranged for it to be recorded at Paisley Park in January 2017 — the first recording there since Prince's death in April 2016. It was done in Studio B because Prince had been recording his own jazz album in Studio A, and Paisley Park honchos wanted things left in place as part of the museum tours.

"Don't Play With Love" is an enriching straight-ahead jazz album rendered by Hayes' Cannonball Legacy Band, with ample solo opportunities for pianist Rick Germanson, saxophonist Vincent Herring, trumpeter Jeremy Pelt and drummer Hayes.

The ballads stand out — the slow and sad "Lonely" and the lovely late-night title track, which features a Twin Cities string quartet conducted by Adi Yeshaya. Another highlight is the playful "Step Back," which could keep the dance floor swinging.

"He'd love this CD," Sharon said of her dad.

And Prince might have, too.