

Positive Feedback

15 seconds of Prince makes "51 Hours" a well-timed collectible

Erie, Pa., radio DJ Dan Sheldon is exposed to the music of literally hundreds of singers and bands every day as part of his profession. But for Sheldon, personally, there is one artist only whom he could broadcast all day and every day above all others — Prince. "No amount of words could explain it to those who don't get it, and those who *do* understand don't need it explained," he admitted. "I don't know if it's the passion in his music... maybe it's the many genres he covers. It could be the way he has the audience eating out of his hand when he plays live."

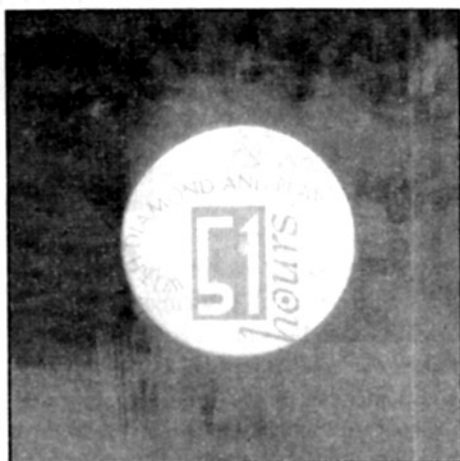
Sheldon's appreciation for Prince is reflected in an impressive personal collection. But instead of gathering every known piece of memorabilia of the artist, he focuses almost exclusively on 12-inch singles. "You not only get the song, but you get a longer version of the song. The longer the song, the more Prince music you get," he said.

At last count Sheldon had amassed an astonishing 176 Prince 12-inch singles from five different countries. However, one piece had eluded him — the unreleased 12-inch single of "51 Hours," an item so rare it is believed that only 30 exist.

Composed by techno-music producer and sound engineer Mark Forrester, "51 Hours" was recorded in Australia, where Prince had made a stopover for the *Diamonds And Pearls* tour in 1992. The main purpose of the recording session was to produce songs for the proposed movie musical soundtrack *I'll Do Anything*. "The sessions produced about nine tracks intended for the musical, but in the end *I'll Do Anything* the musical became *I'll Do Anything* the regular movie, and none of the songs were used," said Tim Burrell, moderator of Housequake.com, a Prince discussion forum. Nonetheless, with studio time available, the singer decided to tackle a side project, a song not intended for *I'll Do Anything*.

Ironically, one of the rarest Prince-related singles ever recorded doesn't even feature the singer. "Prince's two dancers, Diamond [Lori Elle] and Pearl [Robia LaMorte] added their vocals, and Prince's own vocals were relegated to little more than 15 seconds of backing vocals on the finished record," said Burrell. Collectors have long believed that actress Carmen Elektra provides additional rapping on the recording. "She was recording tracks for her own Paisley Park album around this time," said Burrell. "It certainly sounds like her vocals and rapping style."

After the recording wrapped up, Prince allegedly pressed up a batch of singles and kept them stashed in his Minnesota studio while he considered whether to commercially distribute the song. However, the



homemade records were never released. "51 Hours" was only meant to be an in-house only pressing from Paisley Park. It was never officially released," said Alex de Marseille, of Sleeveographia (<http://sleeveographia2.free.fr>), a Prince vinyl collector's guide Web site.

A few years ago, a rumor started that a former Paisley Park employee liberated the singles that Prince had pressed. Sheldon also heard the rumors, and if the news happened to be true, he wouldn't consider his own 12-inch singles collection complete without the addition of the mystery disc. Two years ago he finally found and acquired a copy from an eBay seller in the United Kingdom. "I paid a total of \$496, including shipping and handling. It was money I earned when I DJ'd a wedding, but it was worth it to me. I never thought I would ever own this beautiful record," he said.

Packaged in a plain black 12-inch sleeve, the single contains no label name, number nor other hint of its origin. The equally plain white label offers a clue only of who might be affiliated with the recording, with an often-stylized Prince font illustrating the title of the song "51 Hours" "With Diamond And Pearl." Prince fans, of course, can put two and two together rather quickly with the similarities.

"It's definitely a collector's item," said Burrell, "due to the very small number in existence, and the fact that the track itself has never been officially released in any shape or form guarantees its value and collectibility. It was changing hands for a high price when it first surfaced, and that price has been consistent ever since." On May 26 another copy of the record appeared on eBay and sold for \$371.30.

Have you discovered a long sought-after recording on an online auction site? Drop me a line via my Web site, www.isleofwrite.com, and tell me more. While you're there, check out an archive of past columns.

— Lisa Wheeler