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The Skanner has received 20 NNPA awards since 1998

**The Skanner Newspaper**, established in October 1975, is a weekly publication, published every Wednesday by IMM Publications Inc.

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The Skanner is a member of the National Newspaper Publishers Association and West Coast Black Publishers Association.

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# Opinion

## Prince: Unreconstructed, Free and Funky Artist

I liked Prince as a teen but I grew to really appreciate him even more for his music, fashion, business sense, and artistic creativity, as I became an adult. He is without a doubt a heroic role model of our era. He never stopped trying new things and challenging "tradition." Undaunted by norms, he was willing to be a daring, inventive, radical, free, and unreconstructed human being.

The year is 1984 and the album *Purple Rain* has dropped, along with the movie of the same name. I saw it twice within 24 hours. First I saw it with my boy Stephen and again the next day with my girlfriend. Prince suffered the misfortune of releasing the most dynamic album and film at the same time that Michael Jackson took the music world by storm. In the face of stiff competition from the King of Pop, Prince developed an incredible following.

When Prince came to St. Louis to perform in 1984, my cousin, who had followed him for at least three years prior to *Purple Rain*, went crazy. She and my older sister and their friends packed into her car and spent the night following leads to "Prince sightings" in downtown St. Louis after attending the concert.

Thabiti  
Lewis, Ph.D.Guest  
Columnist

They got in trouble for staying out too late, but did not care because they wanted a chance to glimpse or meet Prince. They loved him for being sassy, sexy, and cool and wanted to be with this diminutive fellow — enraging and baffling me because two of

“Prince exhibited carefree blackness,” which Dr. Bolden says, “is funk”

their girlfriends who gushed over Prince told me I was too short even though I stood four inches taller than Prince.

Tony Bolden, professor of African American Studies at Kansas University and guest editor of “The Funk Issue” in *American Studies Journal* (2013) sheds light on the meaning of funk and Prince. “Funky,” says Dr. Bolden, “is honesty of expression at our deepest emotions. The genre Funk is hybrid forms. And Prince is the exemplification of that. He rejected categories, opting for Funk’s embrace of multiplicity of forms.

Prince exhibited carefree blackness,” which Dr. Bolden says, “is funk. In many ways [Prince] reflected the meaning of the word and the genre.”

As an adult, I witnessed Prince’s funk live at his 2004 Musicology Concert in Portland with my wife and three other couples. We loved Prince as teens and as young adults and his latest album reflected the dynamic funky sound that drew us all to him in our youth. As we entered it shocked me that we each received a copy of the album that we already had

purchased. I smiled and exclaimed, “Genius! This brother just flipped the script again on the suits.” By including the album into the price of a ticket, he jumped to the top of the billboard chart during his concert tour. It was a funky move.

Throughout his career, Prince waged battle against the record executives who controlled artists economically and creatively. Prince famously wrote the word “Slave” on his cheek during his battle in the 1990s with Warner Brothers over how often he could release his mu-

sic and who owned it. Tied to a contract that required him to release a fixed number of albums, Prince produced them feverishly to speed up the execution of the contract. After leaving Warner Brothers, he formed his own music company, NPG Records and released a triple album in 1996 — not coincidentally titled “Emancipation.”

Always looking forward, he also was one of the first artists to utilize the Internet’s potential. He released his double album *Crystal Ball* for \$50, selling 500,000+ copies. He famously told Larry King to, “do the math” when explaining the profit that he made from this unconventional approach.

Who can forget how he changed his name to a love symbol — a combination of the symbol for male and female — during his epic battle with Warner Brothers as a statement against corporate greed and in support of artistic bodies. This move left Warner with no “Prince” to sell, by abandoning that name and wresting control of his body and art. More than a symbolic gesture, he redefined himself without words.

Read the rest of this column at  
**TheSkanner.com**

## Child Watch: Recognizing All of America’s Heroes

Every day I wear a pair of medallions around my neck with portraits of two of my role models: Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth.

As a child I read books about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. She and indomitable and eloquent slave woman Sojourner Truth represent countless thousands of anonymous slave women whose bodies and minds were abused and whose voices were muted by slavery, Jim Crow, segregation and confining gender roles throughout our nation’s history.

Although Harriet Tubman could not read books, she could read the stars to find her way north to freedom. And she freed not only herself from slavery, but returned to slave country again and again through forests and streams and across mountains to lead other slaves to freedom at great personal danger.

She was tough. She was determined. She was fearless. She was shrewd and she trusted God completely to deliver her, and other fleeing slaves, from pursuing captors who had placed a bounty on her life.

“Twa’nt me. ’Twas the Lord. I always told Him, I trust You. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I expect You

Marian  
Wright  
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to lead me. And He always did...On my underground railroad, I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger,” she was quoted as saying. No train, bus or air-

“The new bills also will powerfully remind all Americans and teach our children and grandchildren that Black history and women’s history are American history

line company can match this former slave woman’s safety record. And few of us could match her faithful partnership with God, determination to be free and willingness to help others to be free without thought about self-sacrifice.

Now the entire nation will pay public homage to Harriet Tubman’s devotion to freedom, and also honor Sojourner Truth and other great women and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who never stopped demanding and working to assure that America lives up to its declared creed of freedom, life, liberty, pursuit of happiness and equality for

all.

Kudos to the Treasury Department which has announced that Harriet Tubman’s face will grace the front of the redesigned \$20 bill, making her the first woman in more than a century and first African American ever to be represented on the face of an American paper note. And it’s wonderful that she will not be alone.

For too long and for too many, money has been the most powerful symbol of

nation’s profoundly crippling birth defects of slavery, Native American genocide, and exclusion of all women and non-propertied men of all races from our electoral process and ensuring full participation in our nation’s life. It is so important to make sure all of our children can see their ancestors pictured on something as basic as the money used every day by countless millions and this will deepen the meaning of how we define success in America.

And to Black children — who remain the poorest group in America — I hope Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth become anchor reminders of their great heritage of strength, courage, faith and belief in the equality of women and people of every color. None of us must ever give up fighting for freedom and equality and human dignity however tough the road. I hope all of our children and all of us will be inspired anew by our diverse and rich heritages and cultures as Americans and renew our determination to build a level playing field in our nation for every child and help our nation shine a brighter beacon of hope in a world hungering for moral example.