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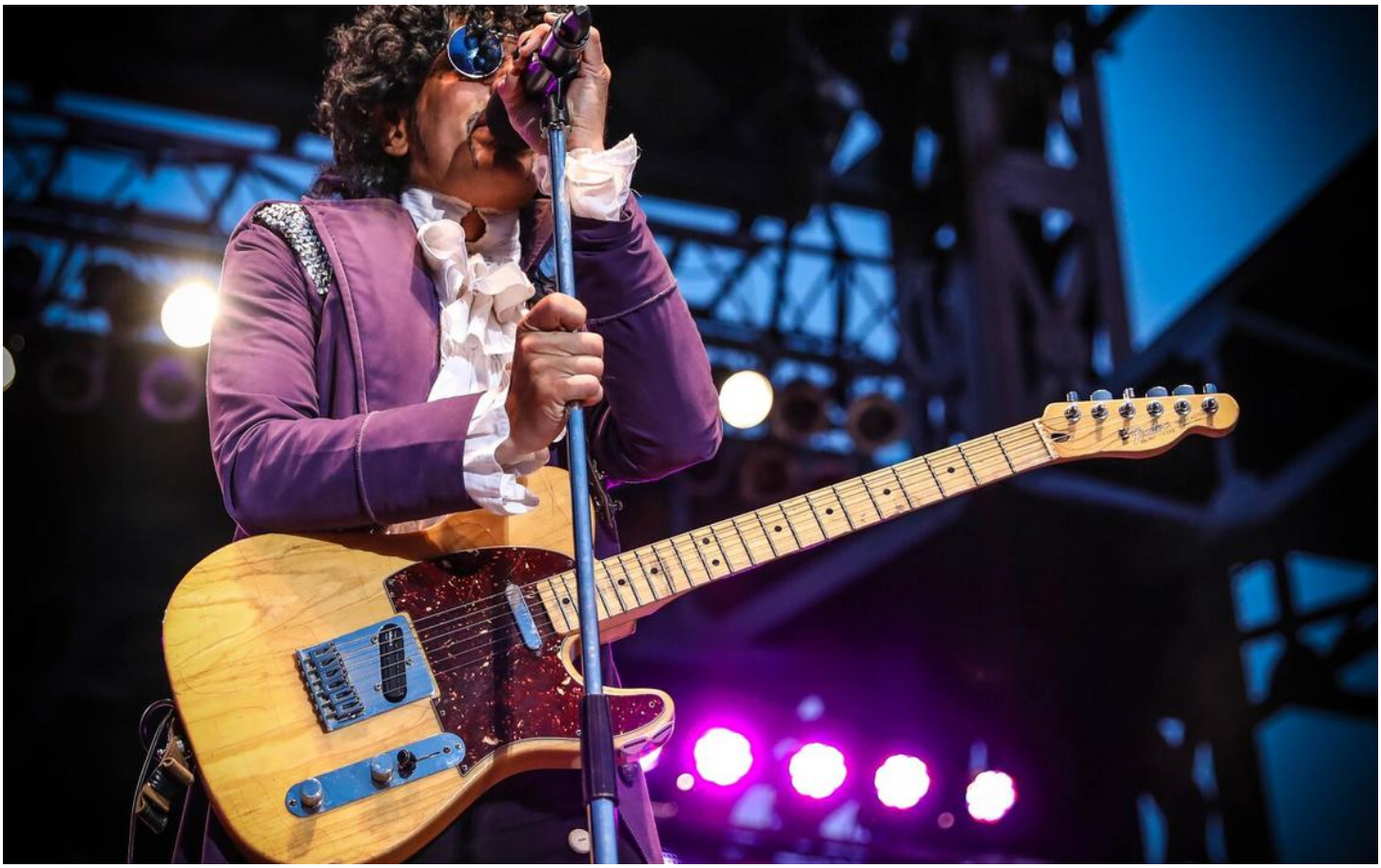
When arena rock tribute band Hairball plays Prince at the Minnesota State Fair

Written By: Jackie Renzetti | Sep 12th 2018 - 9am.



Kris Vox of Hairball performs Prince at their July 3 Bayfront Festival Park concert in Duluth. Photo courtesy of Eric Sherman

The Minnesota-based arena rock tribute band Hairball prides itself on near-identical portrayals of icons like Alice Cooper. So when a white vocalist appeared wearing dark makeup to play Prince's

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blackface. "How would we do it in any other way?"

At the Sept. 1 concert at the Minnesota State Fair's largest venue, most of the predominantly white crowd sang along to the '80s hit known for catapulting Minneapolis native Prince to national stardom. As a purple glow lit the Grandstand, middle-aged couples slow danced and millennials linked together as they swayed back and forth.

"Our fan base loves it, that's the only reason it's really in the show," said band member Bobby Jensen. "If someone has a problem with it, don't come to the show. That's all you gotta do."

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Jensen and his five bandmates, who met playing shows as teenagers in the Twin Cities suburbs, have built a career bringing on-point impersonations to crowds of thousands. They've performed in such cities as Austin, Texas, and Denver, Colorado, but their strongest markets are in Midwestern areas like Mankato and Brainerd, with near-annual shows in cities like Fargo and Duluth.

At their Grandstand debut, longtime fans donning Hairball tees said they've been to more than 10 shows. Their fanbase extends to some of the stars they impersonate, like Alice Cooper and Judas Priest's Rob Halford, who last week commended the group's theatrics .

While Hairball and some of the band's fans defend the Prince set as an accurate portrayal, others say the growing Midwestern institution's use of blackface points toward the historical exclusion of people of color from arena rock, rather than a tribute.

"When you're portraying a brother, a minority, like Prince, it's a different story," said Pepé Willie, who served as one of Prince's earliest mentors and who is black. "You have to think before you do something like that. Because people will get offended."

Willie added that wearing the iconic "Purple Rain" jacket and ruffled blouse would suffice in getting

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the time."

In a phone interview after the show, Jensen elaborated on this "world of rock 'n' roll":

"We don't care what Colin Kaepernick does. We're a rock 'n' roll show. From the beginning of the show to the end of the show," he said. "In the world of theater, men are women; women are men; black people are white; white people are black ... In order for him to look like Prince, you'd obviously have to do something."

"We don't play the race card," he added.

Still, arena rock is anything but exempt from race and politics, says University of Minnesota American studies professor Elliott Powell. His courses focus on the intersection of politics and pop culture, including one with Prince as one of its main focuses.

"It's odd in the sense that you don't need to do blackface in order to do Prince. But also not odd, because arena rock seems to be a kind of safe space around white male masculinity," Powell said. "It shows a kind of fissure within arena rock in terms of how it's been constructed. The use of blackface highlights the problem around race within arena rock."

Amid civil rights protests, disco artists were topping national radio play charts in the '70s - many of whom were women, queer or people of color. Meanwhile, bands such as ACDC were starting to gain popularity with images based on anti-establishment and masculinity.

"For a lot of people who were upset about disco kind of being this dominant genre ... it's like, 'What about people in middle America? What about white men?'" Powell said. "So hard rock and arena rock become this kind of side of white masculinity and white working class."

If disco is constructed as a "soundtrack" for people who were black, women or queer, Powell said, then arena rock could be seen as centered on white, male, heterosexual masculinity.

While rock bands likely weren't intent on countering disco artists' success, Powell said, the juxtaposition between the two genres - and between artists who were white and of color in the '70s and '80s- is complex. For example, in 1979, the hard rock DJ Steve Dahl led a "Disco Demolition Night" where a giant crate of vinyl albums by people of color - and not just disco artists - were blown up at Chicago's Comiskey Park baseball stadium.

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So in 2018, when a white band like Hairball pays tribute to a black artist like Prince wearing blackface, it becomes an "interesting move," Powell said.

"The use of blackface points to exclusion of people like Prince from arena rock," Powell said. "It becomes a problem about how you address things like blackness, things like women, things like Prince, within this larger kind of genre around arena rock."

That's not to say that everyone who rocks out to Alice Cooper or his impersonators is racist.

"Pop music in general and pop culture is not not this kind of one way kind of street where everything lines up neatly," Powell said.

For people who had their first kiss to Journey's "Don't Stop Believing," or blared Queen's "Somebody to Love" on their drive to their first date with their spouse, the draw of arena rock is largely nostalgic.

"I grew up with rock 'n' roll, and it brought me back to when I was a kid," said Jodi Papke, who was at the State Fair show. "And I can imagine that everyone who was cheering and clapping, it made them happy. It brought them back to a time they remember."

Papke, who is multiracial, said she thought the use of makeup was unproblematic and a necessary move.

"How could someone be upset about it?," she said. "What would make you upset that they remade (Vox) to be (Prince)? ... If we saw somebody come up there, and he was 6 feet tall, and he had blonde hair and he came out wearing tennis shoes singing Prince, we'd be like, this is stupid."

She emphasized her respect for the band's ability to capture a large variety of artists.

"When they started singing Prince, those people, it touched their hearts," she said.

The makeup shouldn't be looked at as an offensive gesture on par with 19th- and 20th-century minstrel shows, where performers wore blackface to mock African-Americans, she said.

"That's not what this was ... We're not there anymore. We're here. And so let go of there, and let's worry about what's going on now," she said. "None of us were slaves. Yes, my ancestors were slaves ... It was bad then. And this is now."

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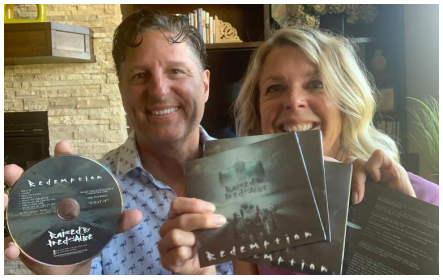

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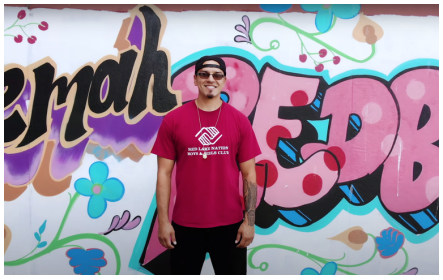

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instructors in the Red Wing school's recording studio as well as their individual studios. photo by Ruth Nerhaugen / contributor

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