

The Prince Experience

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The Prince Experience, featuring the music Prince and the Revolution played on the Purple Rain soundtrack in 1984, will perform two shows at Riverfest on Saturday, Aug. 13. Band members in the back row from left are Kristopher Crow and Junior Gamez. The front row from left include Peter Neumer, Rudy Zemthmel, Tracey Sparks, Gabriel Sanchez as Prince, Dekorah and Droopy. Not pictured is David Gonzalez, who performs as Morris Day.

The Prince Experience to perform at Riverfest Aug. 13

By Kevin Wilson
of the Daily Times staff

Prince and the Revolution became a huge commercial success in 1984, using a blend of funk and rock, some Jimi Hendrix-style guitar licks and a danceable backbeat to make the "Purple Rain" soundtrack one of the most-played albums of the year.

Milwaukee native Gabriel Sanchez heads a nine-member group known as The Prince Experience, which aims to

provide just that when it performs two shows at Riverfest on Saturday, Aug. 13.

The free shows run from 4 to 5:15 p.m. and 8:30 to 10 p.m.

"(We try to offer) the whole vision, being Prince as he was in 1984, not as he is today," Sanchez said.

"We mainly do songs like '1999,' 'Little Red Corvette' and all the hits he had prior to that. Pretty much people are going to know every song we do because we'll do the whole 'Purple Rain' album. Sometimes you might hear 'Kiss,' which is after 'Purple Rain,' or 'Around the World.' He had some songs that weren't big hits but were well known, but we're not doing those for this show. Some of those other songs are not family friendly."

Prince is a versatile musician capable of playing multiple instruments. Sanchez appreciated that versatility growing up when he also learned to play a variety of instruments. His band's talents can be seen on promotional videos at the group's website, www.thepriinceexperience.com.

"He's got great songs," Sanchez said. "The fact that I could do that, it kind of helped when I started doing it. I'm able to hop around a bit. Mainly drums was what I really worked on more as a child. Playing guitar was always there as well. I practiced five hours a day as a kid until my fingers blistered up. It helped me to where I am today, hopping from instruments.

"It's definitely challenging. It challenges me, pushes me to play better. I'm constantly thinking what could I do to make it better."

Another challenge for Sanchez is trying to mirror Prince's vocal range.

"The vocals are really challenging," Sanchez said. "He's a four octave (singer). I'm a true three octave. Even three, I'm blessed with that. A lot of people have two normally. I can pretty much do what he has out there. I am lucky I can do that, with a lot of practice. That's how he got

those tones. You can't just hit the notes. You have to try to sing them in the manner he did."

Sanchez also grew up with a love of acting, which led him to take a job performing as Prince in a theatrical production seven years ago.

"I started in 2004 with a theater company doing 'Purple Rain Live, The Movie,'" Sanchez said.

"They asked me to be Prince. At first, I said no. I never thought about acting, but I was a big Prince fan, so I decided to do it. I stopped working full time, studied the movie to learn how he moved ... his eyes, his hands. I practiced and practiced. When the show came, I never saw people react like that. It was very different. It gave me the idea that I should keep doing this."

Sanchez put together a different band for the purpose of local touring.

"We opened up for Pink at Summerfest in 2006," Sanchez said. "Rozzy Alexander made the costumes. He ended up passing away that year, so I stopped doing it for a couple years. We were very close. Time passed and people told me, 'You should do it. He would want you to do it.'"

The band's current production manager, Todd Fink, helped press Sanchez back into performing two years ago.

"Half jokingly, he said, 'You should get the band back together,'" Sanchez said. "He called me and said, 'What date do you want?' It got me fired up again."

Sanchez recruited members for the new band. He plays drums, guitar, bass keys and

vocals, and is backed by Tracey Sparks (backing vocals), Dekorah (backing vocals), Peter Neumer (saxophone), Rudy Zemthmel (bass), Junior Gamez (drums), Droopy (guitar), Kristopher Crow (keys) and David Gonzalez (as Morris Day).

Neumer, a Brookfield native, sharpened his saxophone skills studying at Boston Berklee College of Music. He spent the 1980s on the road with Chicago's powerhouse horn band, One Eyed Jacks, and the legendary Sly Stone.

"The past two years, I had to switch out members," Sanchez said. "I'm picky, more than I was before. I want it to be good. I don't allow drinking or drugs. I want a high quality show. Now, I have the perfect setup. We have great players, nobody has egos out of control. Everybody has a great time on stage. The audience can see that. They can see we're having fun and they are having fun."

Last winter, Sanchez's band braved a statewide blizzard for the thrill of performing at First Avenue, the Minneapolis club where Prince launched his career.

The band performed on the Potawatomi Stage at Summerfest last month and will play the Northern Lights Theater in the Potawatomi Casino on Nov. 23.

"When we do outdoor shows (like Riverfest), it's going to be G rated," Sanchez said. "We can't do the full R-rated show. On Nov. 23, that's going to be the R-rated show. That's where the (elaborate sets with things like Prince's) bath tub come out and I change costumes (and perform some of Prince's more racy numbers). At the outdoor shows, it's all about the music and making it family friendly."

