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MUSIC

BEHIND THE STAGE

In an new book, Afshin Shahidi shares an intimate look at Prince

Words **ROSHANAK TAGHAVI**



Afshin Shahidi

“Everyone has three lives,” acclaimed Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez once said. “A public life, a private life, and a secret life.”

Fans of the musical prodigy Prince have long held witness to the artist’s public persona. Stylized music videos, choreographed stage performances, and meticulously directed photographs allowed the world a window into the life of Prince, a notoriously inaccessible musical icon. Three years after his death in April 2016, Afshin Shahidi, Prince’s personal photographer and confidante, is offering the world an intimate,

private view into the artist’s life, speaking about who Prince was as a musician, artist, and friend.

In his book *Prince: A Private View*, Shahidi presents the life of the artist in dazzling color, comparing the incantatory power of Prince’s humanity, music, and artistry with the magical realism of García Márquez.

In García Márquez’s works, surges of breath and wind serve as forces of energetic change, disruption, and transformation. “That’s how I saw Prince,” Shahidi says. “As a magical wind that came in and took everyone out of their normal reality and turned all of

their attention towards this wind; towards this dynamo.”

The Iranian-American photographer collaborated with Prince for more than two decades, working his way from film loader to cinematographer, filming and co-directing music videos, before becoming Prince’s photographer. The artist entrusted the task of chronicling his life and performances solely to Shahidi, who says he felt the weight of capturing every moment as authentically and precisely as possible.

Shahidi was the only photographer to document Prince’s legendary 3121 parties, where the singer hosted a range of Hollywood and music elite, including Salma Hayek, Stevie Wonder, and John Legend. Photographer and subject were close: Prince knew Shahidi’s wife and children, inviting them to join him on vacation, and was supportive of Shahidi’s actor daughter Yara, of *Black-ish* fame.

Such rare, unfettered access allows Shahidi to pepper *Prince: A Private View* with anecdotes about the circumstances and nature of every shot in the book, sharing the essence of who Prince was as both icon and confidante. “In a small group of people he was familiar and comfortable with, Prince was outspoken, funny, and charismatic,” Shahidi says. “It’s those in-between moments I wanted to include, to show a different narrative of his life as a person, as a man, as an artist beyond the limelight.”

A native of Mashhad, Shahidi moved to the US at age seven. It was during his childhood in Minneapolis, less than an hour outside Prince’s Paisley Park estate and production complex, that Shahidi’s mother, an amateur photographer who kept a darkroom in their home, exposed her son to the art of photography. “Watching a picture appear on paper when it’s put in the developer for the first time was as close to magic that a kid at that time would’ve seen,” he says.

He often refers to Prince in magical terms, with page after page of photos showing the singer merging fantastical scenarios with the ordinary world of the stage. “At the beginning of every single

live show, there was always this kind of electricity that would give me goose bumps,” he says. “Whether it’s magical realism or the fact that I could be in a room with A-list celebrities and CEOs, somehow there is something about Prince that would draw their attention to him.”

Prince, in turn, was fascinated by Shahidi’s Iranian heritage, with the two discussing politics and Iranian poetry, as well as the mystical Sufi poet Rumi, who is cited in the beginning of the book.

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It wasn’t until he saw his images of Prince printed for his first-ever public exhibition, *Prince – A London Private View*, that Shahidi realized how much his Iranian heritage had influenced his photos of the musician. “Symmetry in Iranian and Middle Eastern art is important: from our rugs to the mosques, everything is about symmetry,” Shahidi says. “I looked at my images of Prince and realized that in 99% of them, Prince is centered in the frame.”

Shahidi chose London for his debut exhibit because it was the first place he and Prince traveled together outside of the US. He hopes exposing younger generations to images and stories of Prince will help sustain the artist’s legacy as a musical genius and role model. To this end, he asked Beyoncé, who performed at the 2004 Grammys with Prince, to write the book’s foreword. “Truth be told, the word ‘icon’ only scratches the surface of what Prince was and what he remains to me,” Beyoncé writes. “He dared to fight for what was rightfully his: his freedom, wrapped up in words and music he created.”