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From the Baltimore Sun

Prince inherits the halftime crown

Oddly, the Purple One has become the safe choice to perform at Super Bowl

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In 1984, his explicit ode to a naughty vamp named "Darling Nikki" prompted a shocked Tipper Gore to start the Parents Music Resource Center. In 1991, his canary-yellow, seat-less pants were the talk of the MTV Video Music Awards. Four years later, during artistic and contractual conflicts with his label Warner Bros., he appeared in public with "slave" scrawled across his face.

Now, in 2007, the NFL is entrusting a calmer Prince to entertain an estimated 141 million Americans during the G-rated, more-frills-less-thrills musical circus known as the Super Bowl halftime show.

Janet Jackson's 2004 "wardrobe malfunction" aside, the performances over the last decade or so have become multimillion-dollar spectacles with pyrotechnics, huge choirs, elaborate costumes, even helicopters. The NFL has been trying to perfect a knotty formula of family values, musical credibility and mass appeal by showcasing acts whose gasp-inducing provocations of yesterday have been neutered by maturity and, this year at least, religious conversion.

"We always try to do something spectacular and unique, and this year will be more so," says Charles Coplin, the NFL's vice president of programming. "Prince has songs that are very familiar and get people singing along in the stands, which translates well on TV."

Prince, perhaps the raciest and most unpredictable pop performer of the 1980s, has, in recent years, become a Jehovah's Witness. The "dirty mind" he once celebrated has cleaned up its act, and the man has changed his ways. No more cussing, no more drinking, no more gap-legged grinding on stage. As reflected on his past two hit albums, 2004's *Musicology* and last year's *3121*, Prince's music these days is decidedly tame, though still occasionally brilliant. In his kinetic, confetti-littered concerts, he mostly jams the memorable, less risqué hits of the past: "Little Red Corvette," "Purple Rain," "Raspberry

Beret."

However, no one but Prince seems to know the set list for tonight's halftime show. And Coplin is tight-lipped about any further details on the Purple One's performance, which will last 12 minutes. (If that seems woefully short, keep in mind that CBS is charging an estimated \$2.6 million per 30-second commercial; 12 minutes of Prince is 12 minutes in which the network could be earning \$62.4 million.)

This less-outrageous, 48-year-old Prince is a perfect fit with the flashy but harmless focus of the halftime show - much as the Rolling Stones were last year. And with an increasingly fragmented pop audience, he - like them - is one of few performers around with mass appeal.

"The old Prince, while he was celebrated, was more of a cult figure. Now he's celebrated in the mainstream and he's safe," says Richard Laermer, commentator for Public Radio's Marketplace program and co-author of Punk Marketing. "It was a smart move to hire him as opposed to Kenny G, which would make folks turn the channel."

That would be a lot of channels changed. Last year, 90.7 million people tuned in to snack, drink and watch the Pittsburgh Steelers defeat the Seattle Seahawks, and similar numbers are expected for the Chicago-Indianapolis matchup tonight.

"The Super Bowl experience is more fun than Christmas, because [with Christmas] you're buying and buying and it's really for the children," says Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo in New York. "The Super Bowl is an event for adults - when men and women can have parties, get into the intensity of the game and the extravagant trappings of the halftime show."

In a fragmented, iPod-and- MySpace culture, the halftime show is one of the few musical experiences that millions of Americans still share.

"The Super Bowl, particularly the halftime show, stands out as a public sphere for music," Rapping says. "Music has become so private with iPods and the Internet. It's probably the only time we can all come together and listen to the same thing, kind of like how it was in the '60s, when everybody seemed to be listening to the same thing and seeing the same shows."

As today's music industry produces fewer multitalented, crossover powerhouses like Prince, it has become harder for the Super Bowl planning committee to find hip, young acts to headline the halftime show. After Jackson and Justin Timberlake's notorious incident, tried-and-true rock vets have taken center stage: Paul McCartney in 2005, the Stones last year.

"The music industry has changed so much," NFL's Coplin says. "It's hard to find these iconic acts that cast a wide net in a singles-driven, iTunes world. With Prince, his catalog has expanded over the years. In 1984, when he was at his [commercial] peak, he wasn't the legend he is now."

And Prince's shows certainly weren't as family-friendly then as they are now. But he hasn't lost the skills and magic that make him one of the most dynamic performers pop has ever known.

"It's exciting to know that Prince will rock this year's halftime show," says Michael Shimbo, co-founder and president of Concert.TV, a television network devoted to live music. "I'm sure it will be this big show with everything but the launch of the space shuttle."

Given the recent history of the halftime show, that would be an even more spectacular touch.

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