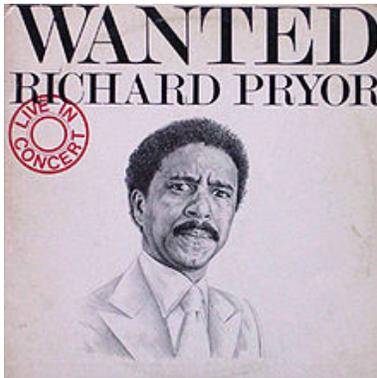


“Wanted: Live in Concert”--Richard Pryor (1978)

Added to the National Registry: 2016

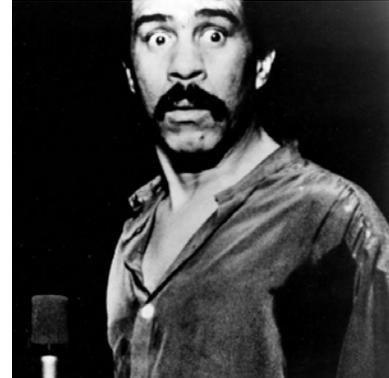
Essay by Audrey Thomas McCluskey (guest post)*



Album cover



Original label



Richard Pryor

By 1978 when “Wanted,” his 12th comedy album was released, Richard Pryor (1940-2005), was at the top of his game. He had become “an overnight success” after toiling in the vineyards of stand-up comedy and film for well over a decade. With a large number of movie credits to his name, he was being dubbed “the most powerful black man in Hollywood” and the most prolific, highest-earning black American in entertainment history. At the center of his commercial success was Pryor’s indubitable talent combined with a personal vulnerability that gave him the ability to convince audiences across class and racial divides that he was speaking directly to them. Yet beyond the highs and lows of his acting career--from the subtlety of his character, “Piano Man” in “Lady Sings the Blues” (1972) and his comedic versatility in “Which Way is Up?” (1983), to the embarrassing shtick of roles in “The Toy” (1982) and “Brewster’s Millions” (1985) that he admittedly did just to get paid--Pryor was candid about some of his self-perceived failings. “I wasn’t [always] courageous and honest.... I try to do new and different stuff and sometimes I don’t get there.” He did get there in his stand-up, especially the recorded live concerts that brimmed with insight and irreverence while delivering rib-splitting laughter to his audience.

“Wanted” is among the best in his catalog of comedy albums. Recorded live in three different venues in Washington, DC, New York City, and Chicago in September of 1978, “Wanted” shows Pryor’s multifaceted, but even by today’s standards, politically incorrect brilliance. At this point, in his career, Pryor had not yet visited Africa (1979) to swear off the use of the n-word, which is a constant refrain in several of the sketches on “Wanted,” along with a sprinkling of the word “b----,” a synonym for woman in some of his routines. While his frequent use of the b-word would likely cause some blow-back today, curse words in general and his favorite curse word, “mother-----,” dispatched with disruptive intent, seems timeless. The effect was to assert his own voice, trespassing boundaries imposed by race and class.

His album covers sometimes announced his disruptive intent. One example is the cover photograph of “Is It Something I Said?” (1974). It shows Pryor in a monk’s robe, tied up against a wall with kindling wood stacked near his feet as hooded figures in black robes, holding flaming

torches, move towards him. Projecting such vulnerability served to disarm his critics and provide an opening for his discursive counterattacks.

The black and white album cover art of “Wanted” deploys another of his comedic strategies...defiance. The head-and-shoulder shot shows Pryor, dressed in suit and tie staring--with raised eyebrows, pursed lips, staring indignantly into the camera. The album tackles the recurring themes of the next decade of his career. These include his dispatches on such hot topics as: racial differences; the police; death; sex; models of masculinity; and riffs on his personal foibles. He used movement and voice impressions to personify animals, women, and children. In the piece about a kid’s artful use of language to escape punishment for breaking a lamp, he is the voice of both the reluctant child and the questioning adult.

Although race is a frequent subject, it is not a cudgel with him, but rather a lens that serves to interrupt static ways of seeing while making blacks and whites laugh about their differences. In an illustration using voice impressions, he explains how blacks and whites behave differently at funerals. White mourners, Pryor says, are reserved in their sorrow while black mourners yell and scream and “let it [all] hang out.” A tragi-comic sensibility permeated his work, especially the subject of death. He told of how he--who couldn’t swim--almost drowned in the family swimming pool while his kids laughed, thinking that their relentlessly funny daddy was just “playing.”

Another irreverent take on death comes at the expense of his dearly departed stepmother and shows the influence of Pryor’s father whom he called the “most honest” person he ever knew. Her burial on the coldest day of the year was taking too long and his father interrupted the graveside ceremony with choice curse words telling the minister to hurry it along. His own brush with death after a heart attack is used for comic effect as his heart sternly chides him for “eating all that pork.” After this episode, he philosophically concludes that “death” does not give a f--- where it goes.”

Encounters with and critiques of the police are woven throughout most of his stand-up. In “Wanted,” it occurs after an incident outside his house. “All I did was kill a car,” he explains. When cops arrive to question him about shooting his departing spouse’s tires out, he quickly retreats into the house. His prescient reasoning is a commentary on the long simmering fear and hostility between the black community and the police: “cops...don’t kill cars, they kill niggahs,” he declares. Masculinity, a subject that Pryor wrestled with throughout his life, is magnified in his heroic depiction of black male athletes--Muhammad Ali and Jim Brown. He glorifies their physical attributes, calling Ali “the baddest motherf--- that ever boxed.” He states that “one leg” of football great, Brown, with whom he once had a business partnership, “is as big as me.” Pryor portrays Brown as a warrior for justice who answered the racism he encountered on the field by overpowering adversaries with his powerful running. Even Leon Spinks, the once heavyweight boxing champion whose personal problems diminished his standing, is praised for his “good heart.” These images of strong black males were the opposite of Pryor’s self-presentation as physically vulnerable.

Pryor loved animals and nature--for which he again credits his father who took him into the woods to hunt. Animals are a prominent theme in “Wanted” and his close observation of their

behavior allows him to voice their concerns. His subjects are monkeys, dogs, and a horse (a gift from a director that he got instead of the money he was owed). This segment includes a graphic description of dogs copulating, from which Pryor segues to condemn rape, which he blasts as an assault on “a person’s humanity.”

A good measure of the continued admiration for Pryor and his place among the royalty of comedic performance even years after his death, stems from adoring, longtime fans, and a newer crop of comedians’ embrace of his legacy that infuses their own work. In addition to his record five Grammy Awards for Best Comedy recording, he was the inaugural recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 1998. The award acknowledged Pryor’s ability to voice mundane as well as difficult subjects and lift them to broader social meaning, filling us with raucous laughter in the process.

“Wanted” is a worthy representation of Richard Pryor’s enduring legacy.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.