

## MUSIC

# History Theater musical 'Complicated Fun' is a Minneapolis mixtape



By [GRAYDON ROYCE](#), STAR TRIBUNE  
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Playwright Alan Berks was 12 years old when “Purple Rain” hit screens in 1984. About the same time, a buddy put in Berks’ hands a cassette tape of “Sorry Ma, Forgot to Take Out the Trash,” the Replacements’ first shoutout to the world.

In less time than it took to listen to a Hüsker Dü 7-inch, the young kid from Chicago fell in love with the music coming out of Minneapolis in the early ’80s.

“I became a freakish fan and as I got older, I connected with Trip Shakespeare, the Jayhawks,” Berks said. “I always thought Minneapolis was some magical music land.”

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clubs of Minneapolis more than 30 years ago. You might have been lucky one night to get the tip that Prince would be playing a late, unpublicized show at First Avenue. Another night, you could have stood 5 feet away as the Replacements crashed through a set in the 7th Street Entry. Hüsker Dü could leave you exhausted in that little room. Across the river, the Suburbs might be closing out the night at the old Union Bar on Central; in Seward, the Flamin' Oh's and their magnetic frontman Robert Wilkinson were playing Duffy's. And how fun was it to catch the Wallets, the Hypstrz or the Suicide Commandos when they were hot?

Meanwhile, in a little south Minneapolis studio, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis were finding their legs as producers who turned out an incredible string of work from SOS Band, Alexander O'Neal and eventually Janet Jackson, Mariah Carey and Usher.

Berks has turned his youthful infatuation with the Minneapolis scene into a theatrical work that he calls a "mixtape love letter" to an era in which several distinct musical sounds emanating from Minneapolis caught the ears of fans near and far. Berks packed 26 songs into "Complicated Fun: the Minneapolis Music Scene," a new play that opens Saturday at History Theatre in St. Paul. Dominic Taylor has staged the show, with Nic Delcambre fronting a band that faces the daunting task of performing the music of many different bands and styles.

Berks has anchored his story in 1984, which coincides with his epiphany of Minneapolis as a musical mecca. In addition to "Purple Rain," Hüsker Dü released its epic LP "Zen Arcade" that year, the Replacements recorded "Let It Be" and the Suburbs had "Love Is the Law."

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The presence of Prince, Paul Westerberg, Bob Mould and others certainly permeates the play, Berks said, but he didn't want to make a bio-drama. He approaches the period as a fan, creating protagonists from the ranks of young fans and record clerks who watched the music unfold and would spend afternoons arguing about which bands were the coolest.

Berks didn't include any of Prince's music in the play, for copyright reasons, but also because no single song would satisfy the catalogue.

"As it is, even when he is silent, his influence and presence hangs over every scene — literally, his name is mentioned in every scene," Berk said. "It seems strange and sad yet somehow respectful that his spirit animates the play in this way ... The music scene would not exist without him."

## **The unlikely legend**

The historic figure who cuts the widest swath in Berks' play is Steve McClellan, the big bear of a man who managed and booked First Avenue for years.

"Steve became my hero," Berks said. "He's a generous sweetheart under the scary exterior and he embodied a lot of the ethos that was in the music."

McClellan gets nearly universal credit for integrating First Avenue audiences by bringing Prince and his many talented associates into downtown. At the same time, McClellan (who insists he's no music critic) gave the smaller 7th Street Entry over to the punk and new wave bands that were sprouting up.

"You have to oversimplify in a play," Berks said, "but on a basic level, Steve brought a lot of that stuff together. That's where I go in the play."

McClellan was able to forge relationships with the musicians. Chris Osgood, whose Suicide Commandos were one of the punk bands that seeded the landscape, said McClellan "treated us fairly." McClellan, who seems uncomfortably bemused by the hagiography growing around him, demurred that, "I didn't know what I was doing. Other club guys told me, 'You're never supposed to show the musicians the numbers.'"

Prince would develop what became known as the Minneapolis Sound, a faster funk style that owed much to the influence of new wave, and used guitar and synthesized keyboards as prominent instrumental voices.

"Prince was unique with that sound — it was idiomatic," said Chan Poling of the Suburbs.

When "The Minneapolis Sound" is brought up with the iconoclastic McClellan, he shakes his head and winces.

"No, no, no," he said. "It was all marketing."

## **Witness from the front lines**

Poling was up for coffee near his St. Paul home the other day, at 8:30 a.m. There was a

time when the Suburbs' keyboardist, songwriter and singer might have just hit his REM sleep cycle after a night of performing and partying with other musicians.

Minnesota had a rich and diverse musical history but the late 1970s was something of a “watershed moment,” Poling said, when punk and new wave — the Sex Pistols, the Talking Heads — refreshed and reinvented a stale rock 'n' roll. Minneapolis was a microcosm of that change in energy, though established patterns and crowd tastes resisted the new experiments.

“You couldn't get a gig if you did original songs,” Poling said. “We'd go into clubs and say, ‘This is our music’ and they'd ask, ‘Do you know any Rolling Stones?’ ”

So the Suburbs would throw parties in their studio and started packing in crowds. In 1977, the Longhorn Bar realized that a critical mass was forming and started booking bands that played original music. Osgood's Suicide Commandos, Curtiss A, the Suburbs, the Replacements and others used the funky, low-ceiling downtown club to establish a foothold.

The Longhorn also brought in the B52s, the Talking Heads, the Police, Iggy Pop, the Plasmatics and Elvis Costello for their first Minneapolis dates.

“You have to credit Steve McClellan and [the Longhorn's] Hartley Frank with nurturing the scene,” Poling said.

As Berks suggests in his play, the bands had their different camps of followers and the argument could go on long into the night on who was better. As McClellan puts it, “Who was the greatest? The ones who sold the most tickets.”



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## Getting their punk on

Osgood remembered when Mould, a freshman at Macalester, came to him for guitar

lessons. After a few sessions, Osgood told him, “Bob, go out and form a band.” With Mould, Grant Hart and Greg Norton, Hüsker Dü was fashioned on blinding speed (both musically and pharmaceutically) — the punkiest of the bunch.

Paul Westerberg famously joined up with a combo run by Bob Stinson and his little brother Tommy. A few years later, Westerberg dropped off a tape with Peter Jespersen, a clerk at Oarfolkjokeopus, and before long the Replacements were insulting fans who loved them banging around the Entry.

Prince will always stand above the other groups in popularity. But the local punkers and new wave groups did their share of road work and would eventually create the fertile ground for such alt-rock successes as Soul Asylum, Trip Shakespeare and its successor Semisonic, the Jayhawks and the Gear Daddies. Many found bigger audiences through Twin/Tone Records, co-founded by Jespersen, but other than Prince, the Twin Cities’ success did not produce a Nirvana or Pearl Jam or REM.

“No one had the success that they deserved,” Poling said over coffee. “I remember there was a New York interviewer who came in here and said, ‘You guys are all so self-deprecating.’”

That, of course, is the other Minneapolis Sound — quiet demurrals.

“The how and why all this came about, I don’t know,” said Poling, who plays with the New Standards now, and wrote music and lyrics for “Glensheen,” History Theatre’s monster hit last fall. “Paul Westerberg, Curtiss A, Bob Mould, Chris Osgood, Robert Wilkinson all just happened to be here. North Minneapolis produced Prince, Jimmy Harris and Terry Lewis and Morris Day. It was remarkable.”

Berks, who has long been fascinated by musicians and the world in which they live, said he hopes he does justice to a scene he could only participate in through his imagination and the tapes he listened to in Chicago.

“There was something in Minnesota that was bubbling up that was different,” he said. “There was this fertile ground, and that’s where I want to go in the play.”

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Complicated Fun: The Minneapolis Music Scene

What: By Alan Berks. Directed by Dominic Taylor. Musical direction by Nic Delcambre.

When: Opens 7:30 p.m. Sat., 2 p.m. Sun., 10 a.m. & 7:30 p.m. Thu. Ends May 29.

Where: History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul.

Tickets: \$10-\$45. 651-292-4323 or historytheatre.com

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