

Remembering Michael Jackson

by Shaun McNamara

At this point, the death of Michael Jackson is hardly news, but the tragic event of his death and the enigmatic details surrounding it, as well as the continued inertia of his sometimes dubious memorial, are really just a continuation of a life that evolved into sound (and video) bytes. It's a stark mirror held up to a world immersed in eye-catching headlines and lives taken out of context for the purpose of titillating and horrifying the public into continued reading, viewing, or other engagement. Jackson did indeed fuel that clip by clip speed of light, but even as his true and insurmountable contributions to Pop music, dance, and video are recounted, they again evolve in pieces, and somewhat disjointed. Mark Twain described the proper proportions of maxim, often held up as a precursor to the term sound bite, as "a minimum of sound to a maximum of sense". I think, however, Twain was referring to succinct statements about finite elements and immediate concepts, whether they are stories or ideas being related to an audience, or the much more personal interactions we have in our daily lives. To apply such a thing to an entire life is not as deft or astute as Mr. Twain intended, and which he often rebuffed: "I have no special regard for Satan; but I can at least claim that I have no prejudice against him. It may even be that I lean a little his way, on account of his not having a fair show. All religions issue bibles against him, and



and Richard Pryor. Jackson's serendipitous meeting with the music director of that film, Quincy Jones, and their eventual collaboration on *Off the Wall*, with Jones as producer, says it all. Heavy hitters appeared on the album including Larry Carlton on guitar and Steve Porcaro performing keyboards, synthesizers, and programming.

Though Jackson had worked with the greatest talent that Motown could offer, he was now working as a peer with people who were great musical talents in their own right; people with careers and names that need to be maintained with respect to continue at the top of their genre. All the money in the world won't draw phenomenally talented artists to you over and over again unless you have the chops and respect to back it up. I'm aware of several instances where a musical or graphic artist has asked to have their name removed from album credits because they felt their work or the work of the featured artist was something they didn't want to be associated with; that was never true with Michael. He labored over the production of his albums as much as he labored over his performances. He would continue to work with other hugely talented artists as a peer throughout the rest of his career, including Eddie Van Halen, Steve Lukather, and Paul McCartney on his 1982 follow up to *Off the Wall* - *Thriller*. He would go on to attract top notch artists in the film and music world

say the most injurious things about him, but we never hear his side. We have none but evidence for the prosecution and yet we have rendered the verdict. To my mind, this is irregular. It is un-English. It is un-American; it is French."

A recent headline on July 31st read, "Jackson autopsy further delayed," more than a month after his final departure from this life. There always seems to be a delay, or a continuation.

But I remember being in awe of The Jackson 5 as a kid, watching their cartoon on TV and seeing them live on a host of TV specials. And I remember, as a little kid, watching another kid my age, albeit in reruns, lead the other 4 with confidence and vigor. It was amazing. I couldn't begin to envision how to attain the talent or charisma that Michael had at such an early age. But attain he did, from those early years in group formation as the Jackson Brothers in 1964 (Michael joining in 1966), to their signing with Motown and meteoric rise, with the help of Berry Gordy's promotion and the songwriting of "The Corporation", to the tumultuous break with Motown and continued success with CBS records. They were, arguably, the first

black teen idols to have ubiquitous appeal across races, as evidenced by their recurring appearance on the cover of the teen magazine, *Right On!*, from 1971 to 1974, and their 2 year stint with ABC as animated characters on the Rankin/Bass produced, *The Jackson 5ive*.

Also in 1972, Motown saw enough in the young Michael to launch a solo career with his first album, *Got to Be There*, which spawned two hits, the title track and the unforgettable cover of Bobby Day's "Rockin' Robin." If you have it or can find it and take the time to listen to the emotive qualities and spot on musicality that Jackson offers up, you'll feel that sense of awe, and possibly inspiration. To hear and internalize the depth of soul on the previously mentioned singles as well as covers of Bill Withers "Ain't no Sunshine" and Carole King's "You've Got a Friend" is to hear an unrivaled teen Pop star that never faltered musically, and gave every last ounce of energy until there was no more to give.

For all you horror movie fans out there, Michael, at age 14, also sang the title track for the movie, *Ben*, a follow-up to the 1971

killer rat movie, *Willard*. "Ben" became a number one hit on the U.S. charts for a week in 1972. It was Jackson's first number one U.S. hit as a solo artist, followed by another 12 throughout his career.

His solo efforts continued with 1973's *Music & Me* and 1975's *Forever, Michael*, both made during the tumultuous time of Michael's voice changing, his unhappiness at a lack of control over his music, and his departure from Motown; the latter record marked he and his brother's springboard from Motown to CBS records. Jackson's apparent freedom and ability to take his creativity to even greater heights was clearly marked by his follow up to *Forever, Michael - Off the Wall*, with hits like "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough," "Rock with You," the title track, and his first collaboration with Paul McCartney, "Girlfriend."

Off the Wall came at a critical time, when Michael needed to prove himself and was taking chances by expanding his range of talent into movies with an urbanized retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, which featured an entirely African-American cast. This included, among other greats of the time, Diana Ross

including Martin Scorsese, Steven King, Stan Winston, Steve Stevens, Stevie Wonder, Notorious B.I.G, Slash, and Trevor Rabin. The advent of the *Thriller* album also marked Jackson's redefinition of music video form with the title track, turning a video into a movie short that lasted 14 minutes. It was directed by John Landis who co-wrote the screenplay with Michael. Landis would even go on to direct one of Michael's follow-up movie shorts, "Black or White." Jackson was unstoppable at producing such short movies, including "Bad," "Smooth Criminal," "Ghosts," "Remember the Time," and "Scream," to name a few. People, of everyday societal quality and people of constant fame; people of great wealth and people of great need all wanted to be a part of the phenomenal talent that was Michael Jackson.

Guinness World Records lists Michael Jackson as the most successful entertainer of all time with 13 Grammy Awards, 13 number one singles, and an estimation of record sales over 750 million units. He broke a Guinness World Record during the *Bad World Tour* when 504,000 people attended seven sold-out shows at Wembley Stadium.



He broke another Guinness record when the Bad World Tour grossed \$125 million. Through it all, he invited underprivileged children to watch the concerts for free. His donations to charities earned him another world record. At one point in the current decade he supported a total of 39 charities – more than any other entertainer.

In all of this, Michael's forward momentum was a constant, right up until the day he died at his home in Holmby Hills, Los Angeles, California on June 25th, 2009. He was in the process of rehearsals for 50 sold-out concerts at London's O2 arena from July 13th, 2009 to March 6th, 2010. These were to possibly be the last of a long career, as Jackson alluded to retiring during a press conference. That retirement was never attained, but the outpouring of public grief in live settings around the world as well as a furious rise in internet traffic concerning all things Michael Jackson continues to put a fine point on his huge popularity. And that huge popularity, that huge whirlwind of a life must have been like a blur to him, enjoying stolen moments here and there – a recognizable person anywhere in the world. Maybe his naiveté lasted throughout his 50 years. At the 1993 Grammys when he was presented with the Living Legend award by his sister Janet, he said, "I don't read all the things written about me, I wasn't aware the world thought I was so weird and bizarre. But when you grow up like I did in front of 100 million people since the age of five, you're automatically different. The last few weeks I have been cleansing myself, and it's been a rebirth for myself; it's like a cleansing spirit. My childhood was completely taken away from me. There was no Christmas; there was no birthdays. It was not a normal childhood, no normal pleasures of childhood. Those were exchanged for hard work, struggle and pain, and eventual material and professional success."

He indeed was an astute businessman

Michael Jackson Discography

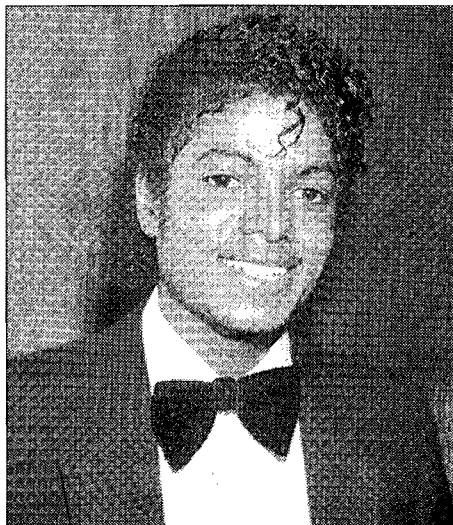
- Off The Wall (1979)
- Thriller (1982)
- Bad (1987)
- Dangerous (1991)
- HIStory - Past, Present, And Future, Book I (1995)
- Blood On The Dance Floor - History In The Mix (1997)
- Invincible (2001)
- Number Ones (2003)

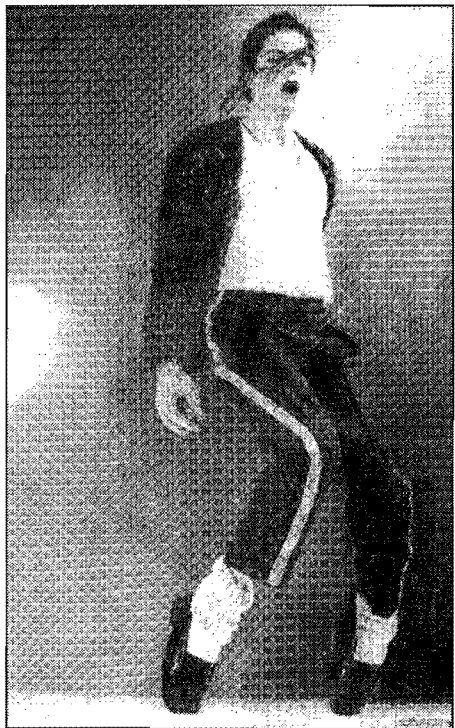


Jackson 5 Discography

Motown Releases:

- Diana Ross Presents the Jackson 5 (1969)
- ABC (1970)
- Third Album (1970)
- The Jackson 5 Christmas Album (1970)
- Maybe Tomorrow (1971)
- Greatest Hits (1971)
- Lookin' Through the Windows (1972)
- Skywriter (1973)
- The Jackson 5 in Japan (1973)
- G.I.T.: Get It Together (1973)
- Dancing Machine (1974)
- Moving Violation (1975)





and performer, but he died owing millions of dollars, and lost his solace with the loss of Neverland Ranch. He clearly loved children, but sometimes came to the public eye by spiraling off into, at the very least, inappropriate areas. Possibly he was at a loss to try and understand his life and the life around him in the cold dark hours of loneliness when the lights are off and we all wonder who really loves us. Perhaps he was ultimately a lost soul, though no one can ever take away the greatness of his talent. And perhaps, as someone recently related to me, after pondering another star's death on the same day; a death that was ultimately overshadowed by Michael's: maybe Farrah needed to pass then, and first, to guide Michael on his final journey. She seemed to be a strong willed person of great conviction and perseverance and Michael seemed to be a broken and lonely child at the core, going on a final journey into the great unknown, needing another to help him on his way.

I hope that Michael Jackson finally caught that elusive sailing airship to the moon; one of those he detailed in video for the song "Childhood" from his 1995 album, HIStory: Past, Present, and Future, Book I. It's time to stop singing, time to stop remembering, and catch that ride.

- Anthology (1976)
- Joyful Jukebox Music (1976 compilation)
- Boogie (1979 compilation)
- An American Dream Soundtrack (1992)
- Soulsation! (1995)
- Jackson 5: The Ultimate Collection (1995)
- The Very Best of Michael Jackson with The Jackson 5 (1995)

CBS Releases:

- The Jacksons (1976)
- Goin' Places (1977)
- Destiny (1978)
- Triumph (1980)
- The Jacksons Live! (1981)
- Victory (1984)
- 2300 Jackson Street (1989)
- The Essential Jacksons (2004)
- The Very Best of The Jacksons (2004)

