



MICHAEL JACKSON

101

THRILLER



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MICHAEL JACKSON



THRILLER

Dedicated to Michael for proving that dreams can come true and that music can unite people of different races, creeds and ideologies the world over.

This special THRILLER Supplement is also dedicated to the producers, engineers, songwriters and musicians who helped bring Michael's vision and music to life.

By a fan for the fans.



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Thriller. Just the mere mention of the album throws up a string of iconic images and record shattering statistics.

Yes, it is the biggest selling album of all time.

Yes, it spent a record-breaking thirty-seven weeks at number one (including a 13 consecutive week run.)

Yes, it was the highest selling album of the year for back-to-back years in 1983 and 1984.

Yes, it was the first album to spawn seven Top Ten singles.

Yes, it helped Michael Jackson set a record Grammy haul for one night with eight trophies.

Yes, its videos (or short films as Michael called them) reshaped what promo clips could be and broke down the racial lines of the then-burgeoning MTV.

Yes, it brings to mind images of light up pavements, zipper jackets, dancing zombies, glittering socks, sequined single gloves, and moonwalks.

Yes, it became the blueprint for every album that followed.

Yes, it outsold the collective sales of the remainder of the Top 10 albums.

Yes, as Quincy Jones infamously said, it "saved the record industry."

Yes, it catapulted a superstar into the rarefied air of the pop music stratosphere.

But before all that.

Before the awards and the accolades. There was simply *Thriller*, the follow up to Michael's landmark 1979 album *Off the Wall*.

Michael, no longer just considered the twirling Wunderkind of The Jackson 5, had proven himself as a viable solo artist with his disco-defying breakout.

Now with *Thriller*, Michael wanted to continue to push his creativity and he was intent on creating an album that wouldn't be restricted to the racially drawn classification of genre or radio play.

So, as Michael reconvened with producer Quincy Jones and engineer Bruce Swedien in Westlake Studios on April 14, 1982 they set about recording *Thriller* guided by Michael's vision to create an album so powerful in its content it could not, would not, be ignored.

Recording sessions would last until November 8th of that year and would see the team whittle down a collection of thirty songs (since inflated to numbers in the hundreds by Jones) to the final nine that would make up the album.

But when they came to review the labors of their hard work Michael felt they had missed the sonic mark. With too much music crammed into the grooves of each side of the album, the result was a muddy mix. And this wouldn't stand.

So Michael, Quincy and Bruce set about sonically saving *Thriller*, editing and remixing each track until it was ready. This strive for perfection paid off as *Thriller* not only changed the trajectory of Michael's career, it changed the world of music forever.





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WANNA BE STARTIN' SOMETHIN'

Like a sonic knocking on the door of the world, the triple hit intro of 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'' is set to blow the doors wide open. With its driving beat and infectious groove 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'' bridges the gap between where we left off with *Off The Wall* and what *Thriller* promised. No surprise then that this track had its first incarnation during the *Off The Wall* sessions but was left to percolate until it fit more with where Michael wanted it to go musically.

Charged with energy, the relentless bass line grounds the track throughout with the same hypnotic notes playing over and over. But rather than wear out its welcome, the bass line pulses like a heartbeat through the track with a growing sense of urgency. With each passing verse we are introduced to more instrumental embellishment as horns puncture lines, synths swirl, and percussive claps hit. They combine in a way that elevates the track to a higher plane as each new chorus approaches.

Michael's most personal take on the world around him at the time, the lyrics convey his helplessness as those surrounding him feed and thrive off idle gossip and rumour. He tackles our collective ruthless desire to gossip, and the pain it inflicts. He takes aim squarely at hypocritical behaviour and even spares a verse to square off with teen pregnancy.

We are also introduced to the antagonist of Billie Jean. For those of us who got to listen to *Thriller* prior to the release of 'Billie Jean' as a single it was quite a kick to have this lyrical cameo appear here and then discover a further reappearance in the title track.

The backing vocals offer jubilation and richness as the co-sign the main vocal with emphatic "Yeah, Yeah" then turn dark with the taunting delivery of "You're a vegetable" where Michael lays down a mocking take buried in the mix. Michael decries the sense of being seen solely as an object in

this line, a source of nourishment for those feasting on rumormongering. He 's lashing out at being used, taken advantage of and people constantly "eating off" of him and his success. It's a brilliant metaphor that hides its meaning just below the surface.

Just when you think the song may get weighed down in its own struggle, Michael breaks the chains of gossip that surrounds him and flips the track to one of positivity.

With an empowering declaration on the strength of self-belief and knowing your own truth, Michael matches the infectious rhythms with an equally infectious sense of optimism. Here the track shifts gear and uplifts the listener as it builds towards its apex. With the, now often sampled chant, inspired by Manu Dibango's "Soul MaKoosa" the song elevates to a new place as it encourages you to join in.

At just over 6 minutes in length 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'' remains fresh and vital throughout and never overstays its welcome. To this day it remains a track that is just as moving and catchy as it was the first time it blasted through the world's stereos back in 1982.

As an album opener it is set the scene for *Thriller*. There were subtle callbacks to the funk of *Off The Wall* but Michael here was expanding his musical vocabulary with influences of tribal and world music piercing the track. At a time when music sales were in decline and the recording industry was struggling, for Michael to even dream of topping *Off The Wall* was seen as audacious. But as Michael bellows, "Yes, I believe in me" you get a sense of his faith in his talent to carry him beyond his wild ambitions. 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'' is the soundtrack to that ambition, the launchpad for *Thriller* as an album. And by the time the song ends, you have a sense that the musical landscape has changed forever. And it had.







As he had done with *Off the Wall*, Michael chose to supplement his self-penned creations with songs sourced from external writers including the late, great Rod Temperton. Temperton ended up contributing three songs to the album including this, the funk-soul groove of “Baby Be Mine.”

Starting with a drum fill that calls back to the iconic intro of “Rock With You”, “Baby Be Mine” is perhaps the most straightforward track on the album and has all the hallmarks of a Temperton penned track. There’s a cool swaying beat, a heavenly brass section and a playful countenance between lead and backing vocals.

Carried by the groove, the song finds Michael in a more carefree space vocally than elsewhere on the album. The production, and specifically Michael’s vocals, elevate the song from being purely filler as one expects it would be on a lesser artist’s album.

The lyrics themselves provide space in the melody for Michael to sing with an airy quality as he declares “I don’t need no dreams when I’m by your side.” Michael elongates words, and dips and bends notes with ease as he sings, “Darling let me hold you” sweeping the end of one line into the start of the next.

There is an inherent sweetness in “Baby Be Mine” that thankfully stays this side of schmaltzy and is carried with the confidence of Michael’s delivery.

The chorus in particular is a prime example of how Michael layers his backing vocals to add a lush, soothing quality to them. Just listen to how effortless they are. They aren’t forced either in delivery or in their place in the mix but instead are allowed to float above the lead vocal and provide an accent when needed. This is true in both the chorus and in the

second verse onwards where the backing vocals become another part in the narrative outlining Michael’s longing and enthusiastic desire as they offer, “I can’t sit still, you thrill me, baby be mine.”

With the song fixed on its swaggering groove, it takes a leap in the bridge as Michael pleads his case with optimism and conviction. Here Michael is in full control of his power as a vocalist, using his instrument to both ground his voice in one moment and then take flight in the next. He rings every drop of emotion from the lines with enticing promises of the future. Just listen to the blissful delivery of “Lady can’t you see that heaven’s just begun” - it’s filled with hope and conviction. It’s then followed by with surety that “It’s living here inside our hearts.”

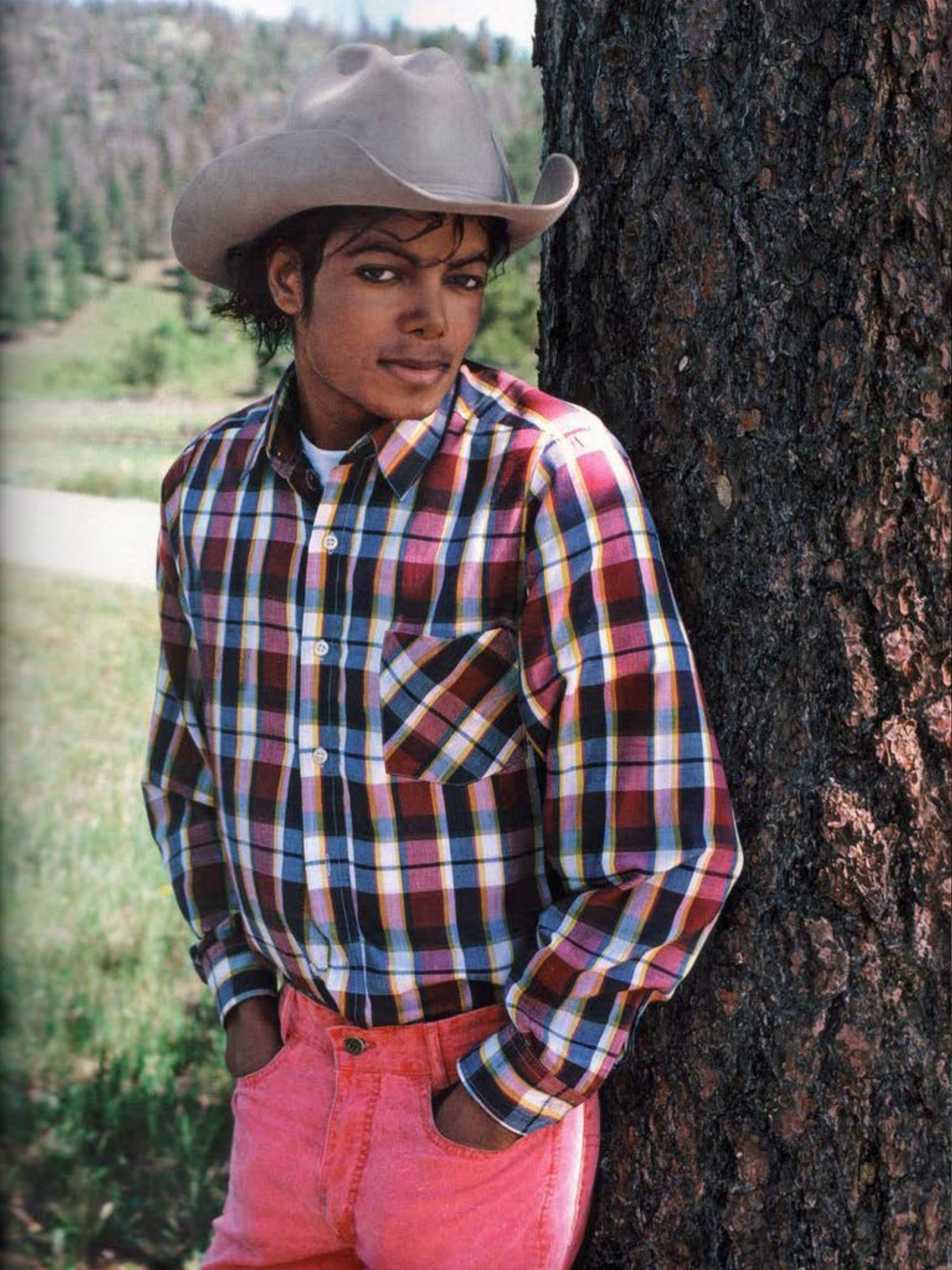
There’s something about the key change at the 3:30 mark that feels sloppy and almost rushed. It’s the only unsettling moment in this otherwise flawless production. Thankfully as soon as Michael begins the ad-libs with soon to be trademark “Come on Girl” call outs that slight slip fades from memory as you relish the abandon with which Michael teases out the words.

And those horns.

They add just the right amount of funk, buzzing around the closing moments like bees savoring the nectar of the sweet honey.

“Baby Be Mine” is a playful, effortless song that glances back at *Off The Wall* and bathes in its afterglow. Hardly the standout track on the album, it does play its role in satisfying the desire of the listener who wants some of that familiar Jackson sound. It also offers a nice transition point from the power of the album opener and the more Middle Of The Road vibe of “The Girl Is Mine.”





As pick for the lead single for *Thriller*, 'The Girl Is Mine' wasn't quite what people were expecting. A strategic choice to get the star-studded duet out of the way, it did give some pause for what the follow up to *Off The Wall* was going to offer.

If you can get past the borderline schmaltzy popfest and the hokey spoken back and forth between Paul McCartney and Michael, 'The Girl Is Mine' offers insight into Michael's growing ability as a songwriter and composer.

Perhaps spurred on by the sweet pop sensibility of the McCartney penned 'Girlfriend' which was featured on *Off The Wall*, Michael proves his own prowess in writing a simple, yet catchy tune.

He also exemplifies a skilled hand as a lyricist in building a narrative of two competing voices.

The opening verse finds Michael as a confident (but fooled) lover and sets up the conceit of the song simply with the line "I'm so proud I am the only one who is special in her heart".

With the introduction of McCartney's own narrative in Verse 2, the lyrics spell out the competing efforts for the mutual object of affection. Here McCartney seems to be taking on the role of antagonist with a heightened knowing of the classic love triangle. He is well aware of Michael and his "roses" and "silly dreams" and confidently teases that these efforts are "really just a waste of time."

Taking turns to state their case through their own verse and chorus the two rivals meet at the bridge as they trade barbs. Here, Michael as songwriter, has them trading line for line not only trying to convince the other of their prowess but also to try and woo the girl at the same time.

The final verse continues this trading line format as Paul and Michael take turns to prove their rightful place as the sole occupant of her heart.

A lot has been made over the years over Michael's choice of "Doggone" in the lyrics. Whilst it may not be the most eloquent or flattering way to describe one's love, it does demonstrate Michael's approach to song writing. Here Michael is going for feel, for meter, rather than going for an overly descriptive word. After all he could have chosen any two syllable descriptor such as gorgeous or lovely. But Michael went for "Doggone" (as he would later on 'Leave Me Alone') and on closer inspection it may not be such a throwaway phrase as first thought.

"Doggone" as a word is a descriptor of irritation or frustration, and when viewed through the prism of the narrative, the idea that Michael (and in turn Paul) are frustrated by the toying and indecisiveness of the woman at the center of the song then suddenly doggone seems quite apt. There's a sense of frustration mixed with allure at play here for Michael - a characterization he has given to women previously in songs like 'Working Day and Night' and 'Heartbreak Hotel'. An insight into how Michael viewed the dynamics of relationships.

Musically the song is pretty much standard Middle Of The Road fare with a pure pop focus. It's pleasant enough and catchy enough to keep you entertained but not as ground breaking a composition as other songs on the album penned by Michael.

Curiously, the original demo version has a more laid back jazzy feel to it, something worked out of it on the final album version (even more surprising considering producer Quincy Jones' jazz pedigree) With more of a soulful feel to it the demo comes out miles ahead and for fans who haven't heard it, it's likely to takeover their appreciation for the final album cut.





It's difficult not to conjure up the visuals of the landmark short film as soon as you hear the opening of 'Thriller' but before the iconic imagery was burned into our collective consciousness there was just this catchy-but kooky track in the middle of an otherwise mature album.

Removed from the short film, the song is at once a novelty and a serious contender for your dancing shoes. Its shuffling groove grabs you like one of the song's ghouls and doesn't let go while Michael's vocals contain a sense of dread before exploding with excitement in the killer chorus.

Originally written as an optimistic tune called 'Starlight' the lyrical content was changed at the behest of Jackson and Jones who felt the song should have a darker edge to it.

Charged with the task songwriter Rod Temperton came back with this ode to the joys of schlock horror and Michael knocked it out of the park.

Employing a production trick he had used earlier on 'This Place Hotel' sound effects are used to give the track an cinematic feel including Michael howling in the opening.

The song pulses around a funk driven bass line and multilayered percussive groove. It's repetitive structure builds tension and a sense of dread through the choruses as Michael details the unfolding drama.

"It's close to midnight / And something evil's lurking in the dark" are not your typical opening lyrics for a pop hit. As the lyrics progress the sense of threat and doom continues to amp up with each passing verse.

There's aplomb a plenty in the choruses as Michael belts out, "Thriller / Thriller night" before running a maddening number of words together in the follow up. This trick of extending and contracting successive

lines aids in building a level of excitement, anticipation and drama in the chorus. It's a trick utilized with each chorus where the support lines offer up a new threat from the terrifying (a beast about to strike) to the a callback of the fanciful horror of yesterday (the thing with forty eyes).

As the song progresses the lyrics go from being innately threatening to more an menagerie of the tropes of classic horror films. By the third verse Michael reveals that the horror being witnessed is on late night tv. An early take on "Netflix and Thrill" perhaps, Michael and his date are watching scary movies for the thrill of it and also as a way of connecting with Michael assuming the role of protector, "Now is the time / For you and I to cuddle close together / All through the night / I'll save you from the terror on the screen" and that if it's real thrills the girl is looking for they are waiting in Michael's arms.

The coupling of Michael's edgy vocals and the songs groove that dances between menacing to euphoric to a tribute to the horror and thriller movie trailers of years gone by especially in the way the vamping horns are arranged.

The song's killer groove and Michael's textured and multilayered vocals always keep the song anchored this side of being kitschy. Whereas other artists might have not taken the risk with 'Thriller', this was a perfect song choice for Michael. It allowed him to be simultaneously playful, sexy, dark, and mysterious.

The addition of horror king, Vincent Price's rap at the end of the song was a masterstroke in production and execution, taking the epic quality of the track up another level.

As the closer to side one, 'Thriller' reignites the excitement that the kicked off the album and had you eagerly awaiting what will come next.







Opening Side II with 'Beat It' was a bold move on Michael's behalf. As his first bona fide rock track, it was a gamble that would either galvanize listeners or have them scratching their heads. So far the album had pushed Michael down an evolving Pop and R&B trajectory, taking what listeners knew and expected of him and elevating it. 'Beat It' was a left turn that would be shocking in its audacity, and rewarding in its enjoyment.

From its opening electro-chimes 'Beat It' sounded unlike anything else you had heard from Michael throughout his career.

It was harder. Grittier. Rawer.

It was rock.

From its sparse drum machine driven intro replete with off beat accents, first time listeners were still guessing where this song will go (especially considering the cabasa shifting back and forth accents in the mix.)

Then the drums pound in with heavy hits and that guitar riff begins to climb in repeating patterns before being accompanied by heavier rapid fire shredding.

And then Michael's vocal's punch through, "They told him don't you ever come around here / Don't wanna see your face you better disappear."

Gone is the softness and sweetness of Michael's vocals that had been displayed in abundance on the songs proceeding it. That has now been replaced by a more defiant and challenging delivery that is razor sharp and laser focused.

Michael is almost threatening in the way he delivers "Beat It! / Just Beat It!" at the tail of the first and second verse.

And then that chorus hits and Michael takes flight with piercing high notes. Michael's skill as a lyricist is often under appreciated due to the success of his compositions, but just look at how he structures the chorus with compound rhymes linking "Beat It/ Beat It" with "Be-De/fea-fed." He also

turns a position of letting things be and not escalating shift from being seen as cowardice to being one of enlightenment and strength.

Drawing from the urban world around him, Michael relays the pressures of a young man needing to prove himself in a street tough environment. He explores the push and conflict that exists between being a man, and manning up.

Fleshing out this bold expedition into the world of rock came the masterstroke of pairing Michael's harder vocals with the rock trickery of Eddie Van Halen.

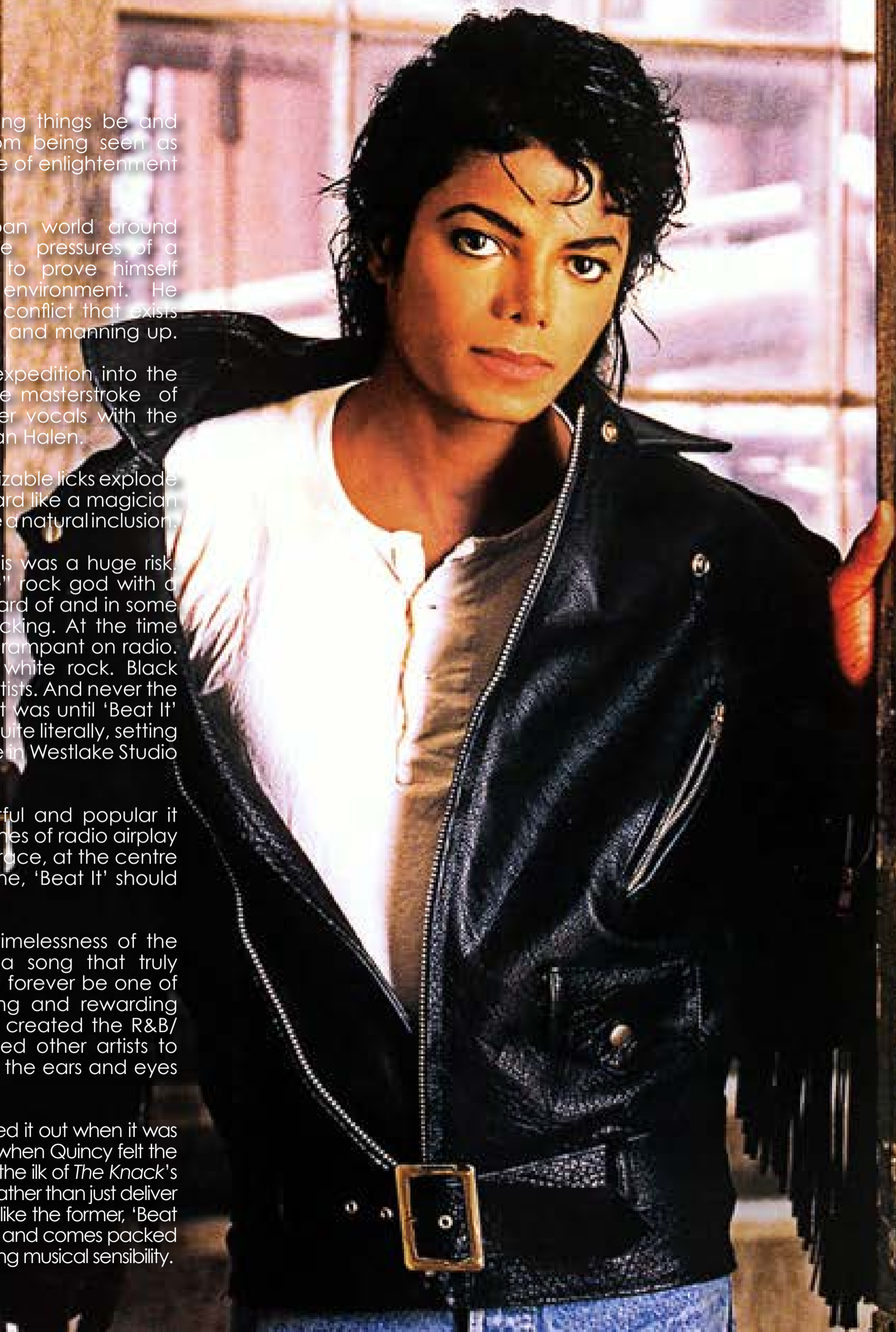
Eddie's instantly recognizable licks explode as he works the fret board like a magician and his solo now feels like a natural inclusion.

For its time however, this was a huge risk. The pairing of a "white" rock god with a "black" artist was unheard of and in some camps considered shocking. At the time music segregation was rampant on radio. White stations played white rock. Black stations played black artists. And never the twain should meet. That was until 'Beat It' blew up the speakers (quite literally, setting a set of speakers aflame in Westlake Studio B.)

'Beat it' was so powerful and popular it obliterated the colour lines of radio airplay and placed music, not race, at the centre of playlists. For that alone, 'Beat It' should always be celebrated.

Couple that with the timelessness of the track and you have a song that truly packs a punch and will forever be one of Michael's most surprising and rewarding musical moments. And created the R&B/Rock blueprint that freed other artists to follow, and opened up the ears and eyes of record buyers.

Once again Michael pulled it out when it was needed writing the track when Quincy felt the album needed a song in the ilk of *The Knack's* 'My Sharona'. Thankfully, rather than just deliver a generic rock-pop track like the former, 'Beat It' delivers something new and comes packed with killer hooks and a strong musical sensibility.





PUSH



If ever there was a quintessential Michael Jackson song it would have to be the sonic masterpiece that is 'Billie Jean'.

Before the Motown 25 Anniversary Special, before the unveiling of the moonwalk, before the captivating split screen video, there was an irresistible beat and bass line.

It's perhaps hard now to disassociate the song from the mental images it conjures. Whilst there is no denying this was Michael's iconic live performance piece, there is also no denying the mastery and craftsmanship that went into the writing and delivery of this song.

The crispness on that opening beat alone is something to marvel at. Just a simple one step beat, but the way it hits has such energy and propulsion it is almost irresistible.

And then the bass line kicks in. A mix of strut and stalk, the bass walks its way through the track and is so fat in its sonic value it literally hums through the speakers.

For most songs those two elements alone would be enough to make it an instant classic, but musically Michael brings so many little hooks to the track that would transcend it from being one the best songs he ever recorded to being one of the best songs ever recorded, period.

Michael hooks you in with the opening line, "She was more like a beauty queen / from a movie scene" as he outlines the allure of the titular antagonist. But he quickly shifts this from being another love song to a tale of being caught in paternity trap nightmare. "I said, 'Don't mind, but what do you mean / I am the one?'" The shift here is so sudden and unexpected it almost fails to register.

As he continues to outline the desire for the lead character in the second verse

he also plays with the definition of being "the one." It's presented here as being an enviable position, to be chosen by someone so beautiful, so captivating. The way he counterplays the definition and intent of "the one" keeps the listener on their toes.

The way Michael structures the "People always told me / be careful what you do" pre-chorus is a masterstroke in narrative. He presents the unfolding story as being of his making, the price for breaking a "young girl's heart". It now shifts from being a story of love gone wrong to being a story of a woman scorned. As the next line details, her plan for revenge will center around a tantalising lie, and as Michael sings "the lie becomes the truth."

The unlikely content of a hit chorus, Michael's denials are bold and straightforward as he sings passionately, "The kid is not my son."

From the percussive lyrical delivery, to the rich harmonies, to the countering backing vocals, to the myriad of tantalising musical flourishes, 'Billie Jean' is as close to musical perfection as you are ever likely to hear.

From the verse with its bass line and ascending/descending chords, to the flurry of synth horns and trademark "heeeees" in the pre-chorus, to the chorus with its guitar hook and stabbing strings, to the bridge with its twanged guitar solo, there is something in every phrase, every note to catch the ear and keep it entertained.

Add to the mix Michael's flawless vocal delivery and surprisingly personal lyrics that are at once filled with intrigue, concern and then flat out denial and you would think its place in music history was predestined. It's as if all of Michael's musical ambitions are embedded in each bar. And successfully so.



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Haunting.
Seductive.
Intimate.

All words that perfectly encapsulate the melodic beauty of 'Human Nature' yet they only give a glimpse into the depth of its appeal.

With a dreamlike introduction of trickling synths and seductive guitar, the heart of 'Human Nature' lays in the mystery of the lyrics and the sweet floating vocal delivery Michael brings.

As if waking from a dream, the vocals paint a narrative of restless isolation and longing amidst a bustling cityscape. With a strong desire to get out "into the night time" that "four walls won't hold me tonight," Michael embraces the adventure that the twinkling city lights of New York promise; a chance for excitement, discovery and perhaps one night of love.

Maybe it is this desire to connect, this curiosity of what else must lay beyond the small confines of our individual worlds, that is at the heart of our collective *human nature* and holds the answer to the questioning why. And it is this exploration, this curiosity, that is rewarded with a soothing love that is greeted in the morning light.

There's a sense of curiosity, of daring, present in the lyrics. The intrigue and pull of mystery. The promise of what might be if you can just step out of your comfort zone.

Detailing a one night stand wasn't new in popular music, but here it is presented as something sensual with an almost romantic quality to it. That need to connect may be primal, but here it is also sexy and captivating rather than bawdy and explicit. And it may also be fleeting as hinted to in the final verse as Michael is at once present "reaching out I touch her shoulder" and the next already moving on, "dreaming of the street."

The airy, dreamy quality of the melody cushions Michael's vocal as they float and swirl around the listener before taking flight with those oh-so-perfect extended exclamations of "Why?" Michael pierces the sky with those notes and showcases what a powerhouse he is being able to convey melancholy and self-questioning in that one note.

It seems counter-intuitive that a song so heavily based in electronic instrumentation with bubbling synth runs and sweeping synth pads resonates such a rich, organic warmth. This feat is thanks mostly to Michael's vocal delivery (especially in the often missed backing vocals) that keeps the track still feeling fresh and current, and the intoxicating melody that feels as though it has been plucked from the future.

Penned by Toto alum Steve Porcaro and lyricist John Bettis, its development from sparse writers demo to a completed track is evidence of taking a beautiful hook and packing it with authentic heart and soul.

Add the impeccable production and silky smooth vocal delivery, and it's easy to see why 'Human Nature' is one of Michael's most covered songs, and why live performances generated an intimate feeling in stadiums of 60,000 plus.

'Human Nature' is undeniably one of Michael's greatest moments on record. His vocals are peerless, the wistful emotion he conveys elevates the song to a timeless status and it demonstrates once again that Michael didn't have to write the songs to make it his own.

As soon as the song faded after that first needle drop it became an instant classic. It also became the blueprint for what a soothing R&B ballad should sound like, and how it should make you feel.





During the recording of *Thriller*, challenges would often be thrown out to the in-house team of writers. 'P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)' was the result of one such challenge.

Married to Peggy Lipton at the time, Quincy Jones noticed the label on one of her sets of lingerie and the brand name read, *Pretty Young Thing*. Thinking this would be a great name for a song, Quincy put the challenge out to the team to come up with a song with this title.

Michael and keyboardist Greg Phillinganes set about writing a smooth, intoxicating slo-jam, while Quincy Jones teamed up with James Ingram to pen an all out dance party favourite. Needless to say Quincy and James won out.

With a spring in its step, 'P.Y.T.' is an infectious party jam. With spoken intro structure similar to Michael's 'Don't Stop Til You Get Enough' the song equally explodes into a solid dance-funk groove.

The comparison to *Off The Wall* era tracks isn't unwarranted as following on from the darker, more adult themes of the preceding songs, 'P.Y.T.' is pure joy. Michael's vocals are light and effortless. There's a smile in his seduction. When he sings "Where did you come from lady / and ooh won't you take me there" you are drawn in by his playfulness. And besides, with lyrics like "Tendoroni you've got to be" you know this isn't going to be overly serious fare.

Nor does it need to be. Some songs are written to stir the heart, others the mind, and then there are those to shuffle the feet. 'P.Y.T.' is definitely in the feet shuffler category.

There is a sweetness embedded in the track that has kept it from aging, and while not overly complex musically, it does allow the musicians the chance to play their hearts out with little flourishes and runs. And whilst

not vocally challenging, it has the ability to improve moods and place a smile on the face of any listener.

In particular, pay close attention to the music beneath the playful "Na na na na" breakdowns that feature sisters, Janet and La Toya. Focus in and you'll be treated to some amazing bass playing courtesy of the legendary Louis Johnson and extra funky guitar licks by way of Paul Jackson Jr.

For the sheer musicianship it's worth hunting down the instrumental version of this track. Hearing it without Michael's vocals front and center you'll be treated to some amazing playing and may discover some wonderful vocoder work at play too.

And who can resist the helium pitched chants of "I want to love you / P.Y.T. / I want to give you / T.L.C." in the final minute or Michael's spoken come ons in the fade.

'P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)' is an unexpected crowd pleaser in an album packed to the brim with classic hits. There's something so simple in its playful, sweet, and charming way that hits at the heart of everyone who hears it.

It's the album's moment of fun dance-pop that isn't meant to change the world, but is designed to get the feet moving. For a track that some critics derided as "throwaway" and "forgettable" 'P.Y.T.' has stuck around as a moment of pure-pop jubilation. It will continue to be a shining example of Michael at his most joyous best.







Dripping with old school soul 'The Lady in My Life' is another slice of perfect production.

The third track on the album penned by Rod Temperton, 'Lady In My Life' is seductive and as smooth as silk as it slowly builds with it's sparse arrangement.

Michael's sublimely pure vocals and that sweet enticing melody pulls you into the song as Michael sings, "Just put your trust in my heart / And meet me in paradise."

With an extended call out, "Girl", leading into the second verse (not unlike the similarly teasing call in 'Rock With You') Michael's voice drifts over the melody like ripples on a lake, creating a swell that builds to the chorus.

Dialing up the seduction, Michael hits the chorus with a promise of a love that will last all time. Michael's choices about which words to push, draw out, and accent heightens the tension of the melody and adds to the allure.

Originally recorded with extra verses, timing constraints on vinyl forced the song to be trimmed back, so we shift from the first verse and chorus straight to the bridge as the song finds its groove. The drums kick in with a pumping heartbeat as the synths bubble away.

After another blissful sweep through the chorus we hit the midpoint of the song. Popular convention would argue that a song built of 1 verse, chorus, bridge and chorus needs more fleshing out lyrically. That verse 2 or verse 3 should be included.

Thankfully, more verses were sacrificed to create space for perhaps the finest 2 and half minutes of Michael's vocals captured on record. The decision to recut the song to give more than half of it to Michael's ad-libs in the extended

outro was a gutsy decision but one that more than paid off.

Asked my producer, Quincy Jones, to go back into the vocal booth and plead his case for the outro, Michael stepped behind the mic, with light dimmed to near blackout and he tore it up.

Neverbeforehadweheardsuchemotion, such diverse textures in his voice, such desire. Michael lays it on the line and is at his most sensual. He twist and bends notes. He dips and soars. Just listen to how he dives under then touches heaven with "I need you one more time." Forget it. Game over. But then he backs it up with that impassioned, forceful "Don't you go nowhere." He coos then bursts with emotion. Winding his way through the final minutes with jaw-dropping finesse.

It's worth listening to the song twice over to really appreciate the vocals here. Listen once to Michael's main vocal as he dips, swirls and soars. Then listen to the backing vocal harmonies. Listen to their rich, deep texture as they sing, "Lay back in my tenderness". They are flawless and the icing on a track that showcases the brilliance of Michael as vocalist.

And as the song fades you get the feeling that you'd be more than happy to listen to this outro for another 2 minutes, and then another 2 on top of that.

Closing out *Thriller*, 'Lady In My Life' had a more mature, sexier Michael on display. Not only do you sit back at the conclusion of the song floored by what you just heard, but also the other 8 tracks that preceded it.

'Lady In My Life' was the perfect way to close out the album as it shows Michael at his peak and has you wanting to listen to the whole journey *Thriller* has taken you on once more.



A photograph of Michael Jackson standing with his arms crossed, wearing a shiny red and black outfit. The background is black, and the lighting highlights his face and the texture of his clothing. The text "THE SHORT FILMS" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font across the middle of the image.

THE SHORT FILMS

BILLIE JEAN

Directed by Steve Barron



Michael had danced before in his short films. But he had never danced so freely up to that point as he does in 'Billie Jean'. Directed by Steve Barron the concept for 'Billie Jean' was to just tell the narrative of the story, to visually illustrate the blurring of the line between fact and fiction.

It was a simple concept. Michael would be trailed by a press reporter looking to prove the 'Billie Jean Scandal' (as a featured newspaper headline screamed). But Michael is always one (illuminated) step ahead of the paparazzo illuding him at every turn. In a precursor to the Midas like effect Michael would have in his career, everything he comes into contact with is transformed into light; a positive energy that transforms a homeless man into a dapper dan, and springs a tiger from a tiger-print handkerchief. It's Michael magic, plain and simple.

And the true magic happens in the middle section of the short film. When Michael asked for a segment to dance in, Barron carved out a bit of narrative and set up a long tracking shot that would follow

Michael down a path. He highlighted which pavers would light up and readied the camera for rehearsal. But Michael wanted to capture the spontaneity of the moment so they shot rather than rehearsed. And Michael, dancing his way along the path hit every spot all the while mesmerising with his moves.

Using split screen and freezes to accentuate the dance and draw out the lyrical content this small section of the short film became its most iconic.

The story's resolution of Michael getting into, then disappearing in, the bed leaves the question of fact vs fiction up to the viewer. Was there truth to this tale, or was it all just unfounded rumour? Doing so ensured the magic and mystique of 'Billie Jean' lived on.

What was captured in the short film was so powerful it couldn't be ignored by a fledgling MTV who to that point had relegated the few black artists they aired to non-prime time viewing. With its intriguing narrative, effects and captivating performance MTV had no choice.



Soon 'Billie Jean' was placed in high rotation and in doing so Michael broke the cultural divide of MTV and broadened its appeal. It can't be underestimated how influential this move was. As the first artist to be played in high rotation in prime time and prompting endless requests Michael and 'Billie Jean' opened the door for other artists to stroll, strut and dance through.



It was without doubt a major turning point for Michael. A moment when his vision began to come sharply into focus. Each illuminated step was his launching pad for the next chapter of his career. And somewhere, amidst all the split screens, glowing sidewalks and freeze frames, there dancing in the moment you get the feeling that he knew precisely that.



BEAT IT

Directed by Bob Giraldi

As a modern day 'West Side Story', 'Beat It' introduced an era of mass choreography into the world of music videos. With its gritty urban setting, street gang storyline and real sense of dread it brought a degree of cinematic tension to the soft pop landscape of most performance piece clips.

Directed by Bob Giraldi, Michael created a honest look at the pressure of street gangs as two rival tribes square off. Over what, we are unsure but this in itself is also a key piece of the narrative. We automatically assume there is rivalry, there is beef. All we know is that it has been leading to this.

As word of the fight spreads through both gangs' turf we are introduced to Michael as lead character and narrator (through his lyrics). He is in his urban apartment becoming aware of the impending battle. Searching through their haunts in a bid to quell the brewing storm, Michael always seems a step behind as if the fight and the impending bloodshed is a foregone conclusion that can't be stopped.

Gathering in a warehouse the gangs prepare to fight with both leaders bound to each other in what will be a battle to the death. But just as the tension rises Michael arrives and breaks up the fight with an unrivalled dance break down. Using the unity of dance as a means of finding common ground, the routine has a strong, machismo to it. Expertly choreographed by Michael Peters the routine was cool enough to appeal to hardened hoods as well as the average home viewer.

By diffusing the situation through dance Michael not only played out his belief of the power of music and movement, but also created the blueprint for which all dance orientated clips would be set against. To this day the formation dancing is still seen and replicated by new artists striving to have the same kind of impact

that 'Beat It' had.

Using actual members of the rival street gangs the Crips and Bloods, Michael brought in a level of authenticity that was key to the palpable tension exhibited in the short film. And this move didn't go as smoothly as hoped with minor brawls breaking out on the first night of shooting. But just like in the short film, when Michael arrived on set everything calmed right down and the gang members were converted into admiring fans.

As the song itself crossed the segregated programming of radio, 'Beat It' followed the path that 'Billie Jean' had blazed and further smashed the segregation of MTV and ensured Michael's position in high rotation generating request after request for it to be replayed.

It also launched many a frenzied hunt for the iconic red zipper jacket and within days authentic and knock off versions would find their way to the streets further cementing Michael's role as influencer of style and fashion.

'Beat It' would become a watershed moment not just for MTV and music video but for Michael himself as it became the cross-over hit that exposed him to a wider audience and drew in fans from all genres of music.

Just as the narrative in the short film does, the 'Beat It' short film managed to unite the segregated fans of rock with fans of R&B and turn the whole world into fans of music. Suddenly it was OK for rock fans to want to break out a few moves, or for dance fans to want to rock out to some heavy guitar work.

And with life imitating art, at the very centre of it all it was Michael. Unifying. Inspiring, and leading the way for generations of artists to follow.







THRILLER

Directed by John Landis

When it comes to lists of the Greatest Music Videos of All Time 'Thriller' has built up a bit of default position as number one since it first debuted 30 years ago. Part of it has to do with the nostalgia of the "golden age" of MTV and the emergence of music videos as entertainment. But there is more to it than just a fond look back. 'Thriller' didn't just raise the bar it changed the whole game. It became the first music video that was required viewing if you wanted to be connected to pop culture. It was the first to have a "debut" and the first to illustrate what was truly possible with this new medium.

Whilst the notion of a short film music video was a relatively new concept to most, Michael had already shown his intention to create visual art with the release of 'The Triumph' the short film that featured The Jacksons' 'Can You Feel It' a few years earlier in 1980. With 'Can You Feel It' Michael bought a filmic approach to the way music was represented. This classic Jacksons clip was Michael's first step into telling a larger story. And to anyone who was paying attention to the visuals he had already created for 'Billie Jean' and 'Beat It' (and by now the whole world was) Michael's intentions to keep pushing and revolutionise the medium was evident.

At a time when the whole concept of another short film for a single off Thriller was being dismissed by CBS records (who thought the album had peaked in terms of sales) Michael held steadfast to his vision of creating a short film event for the title track initially proposing to fund the \$500,000 budget himself. The budget alone was unheard of at the time when by comparison most other videos were being made for \$25,000.

For 'Thriller' Michael knew he wanted to create something that elevated the song beyond being a gimmicky track.

Contacting director John Landis who was fresh off his hit movie "American Werewolf in London", Michael set about fleshing out a mini-movie that would see him transform into both a Werewolf and Zombie. Written by both Landis and Jackson, the script would play with the conventions of both music videos and horror films. The opening scene pays homage to the B-movie horror films from the 1950s by placing Michael on a date when his car runs out of gas in a deserted wooded area. Playing with his innocent public persona (and giving a nod to what drew Michael to Landis in the first place) Michael transforming from innocent into a Werewolf (more Werecoat) under the glow of a full moon.

In a meta moment, the opening is revealed to be movie being watched by Jackson and his girlfriend, played by Ola Ray, in a crowded cinema establishing the set piece that will be Thriller.

Part of what made Thriller feel so fresh was the way the story played out. The movie in a movie wrapped up in a dream that maybe wasn't a dream added excitement and twists, while the rearrangement of the song itself provided a fresh take on the familiar drawing you in further. But without a doubt the crowning moment of 'Thriller' is the dance routine conceived by Michael Peters and Michael. Creating a routine that further played to the narrative the dancing reflects what Michael called "zombie moves without being comical". The routine has become as iconic as the V shaped red leather jacket Michael wears. It is a dance of the undead. A dance that would take on a life of its own.

Perhaps the routine performed more by lay people than any other in history, the 'Thriller' dance has been recreated in movies, tv shows, computer games, by flash mobs, lego blocks and even Filipino prisoners.





But the influence of 'Thriller' extends beyond just an often mimicked dance routine

'Thriller' changed the way audiences consumed music and forever changed the way music would be presented. It was Michael leading the way in what could be achieved, and everyone else was left playing catch up. It made music videos exciting, inspiring a slew of artists to look beyond the standard band performing on stage set up and invest in storytelling.

It also made it palatable for movie directors to start exploring music videos as a way of expression, something that prior to 'Thriller' they wouldn't go near.

It has gone on to inspire generations of recording artists, been ranked The Greatest Ever in every conceivable music video countdown and holds the distinction of being the only music video ever to be archived in the US National Film Registry by the Library of Congress.

Oh, and it reportedly helped sell another 14 million copies of the album. Not bad for a project CBS couldn't see selling any more albums for.

For all the accolades and success it brought it's hard to believe that 'Thriller' almost never saw the light of day. With an edit finalised Michael, under considerable pressure from leaders in the Jehovah's Witness church, demanded that the master reel be destroyed. Thankfully Michael's quick thinking lawyer at the time, John Branca, shelved it rather than destroy it and proposed instead a disclaimer that would appease the church by denouncing any belief in the occult. With that 'Thriller' was approved by Michael to air, and the rest is history.

Michael had always been a visionary but now he was also a pioneer. With 'Thriller' he set a new standard not only for himself but for the whole industry. Something he would find to be both a blessing and a curse.





AFTERTHOUGHTS

Thriller was the blessing and curse for Michael Jackson. It was the culmination of all his creative ambitions and the realization of his wildest dreams. It launched him into the stratosphere of icons. Placed him in the same breath as Elvis and The Beatles. Made him a household name the world over.

But in achieving all the success that was due, *Thriller* also became Michael's albatross.

If it had been equally successful as *Off The Wall* or even mildly more successful, things might have been different. Michael might have been forgiven by a press for surpassing his previous achievements. After all the press love to build stars up just to tear them down. There are stories to sell in the rise and even more in the fall. And for Michael, the global record breaking unprecedented success of *Thriller* meant he was now everywhere. Magazine's that previously had thought black artists don't sell clamoured to place him on their covers. There was an insatiable appetite by the media and the public for more

It was a sharp ascension and one that looked like it would never let up. For 2 years Michael dominated the airwaves with his music, dominated pop culture with his style, and dominated TV screens with his short films and rare public appearances.

Thriller gave Michael the level of success he wanted but it came at a personal and creative cost.

Thriller's sales have never been matched. Even 35 years later no-one has even come close. And so by making the album by which all others would be measured Michael built a creative target that couldn't be reached again. No matter how brilliant and ground breaking all works that came later were, they wouldn't match *Thriller*. But then, no-one could.

Despite creating a new record with 5 consecutive number 1 hits *Bad* was no *Thriller*. Despite showcasing an artist fully in charge of his own creative destiny, *Dangerous* was no *Thriller*. *HIStory* with its unprecedented debuting Number 1 hit single was no *Thriller*. *Invincible* with an artist still a creative powerhouse 20 years on, was still no *Thriller*.

Thriller would be the album every review would name check. It's mammoth success meant everything else would pale in comparison and so 20 million sellers would be quickly labelled (unfairly) flops.

Thriller is a landmark album. It changed everything. It became the go-to blueprint for blockbuster albums. It became the beacon of what was possible. Michael relished being the artist with that status. So it would be unfair to suggest he would have wanted it any other way. But sometimes the success of *Thriller* was also a creative constraint for Michael and an undue pressure. Sometimes, you have to be careful what you wish for.

I hope this exploration into THRILLER has made you want to revisit and dig deeper into the album and give it another listen. Send comments, feedback and thoughts to mj101@outlook.com



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THRILLER

