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Why He's a Thriller

By Jay Cocks

Snap question, no time to think: Which one is Michael Jackson?

The svelte young man with black curls and two-lane grin who steps out of a Mercedes into the glitz and glare of Los Angeles' Melrose Avenue, wearing a bright red leather jacket with chain-mail yoke and 27 zippers, as, trailed by mother and manager, he goes shopping for clothes?

Or the young man in the tie and sweater holding a copy of the Watch tower, who stands at the door of an apartment in suburban Thousand Oaks, 40 miles and several dozen life-styles northwest of Melrose, fixing the uninterested girl who answered the door with his deep eyes, saying, "Today I'm here to talk about God's word"?

The girl shut the door on Michael Jackson. The Melrose Avenue counterfeit is Eric Evans, 17, who is fleshing out a fantasy and slapping down \$550 for a red leather jacket that duplicates the one Jackson wore in Thriller. The jacket that Eric is already wearing is exactly like Jackson's in Beat It. It is a fairly innocent dream, really. Eric only wants to look like the biggest star in the world.

Star of records, radio, rock video. A one-man rescue team for the music business. A songwriter who sets the beat for a decade. A dancer with the fanciest feet on the street. A singer who cuts across all boundaries of taste and style, and color too. Michael Jackson, 25 years old.

The numbers, which are incredible, are also becoming indelible. How many Beatles were there? How many homers did Babe Ruth hit? How many Grammy Awards did Michael Jackson win on Feb. 28? How many copies of Thriller have been sold? Well, the Grammys are easy. Jackson won an unprecedented eight. The album question is tricky, simply because the record keeps selling, long past the point anyone expected it to: Epic Records sells more than a million copies a week worldwide; to date it has sold more than 30 million copies. The figures pyramid into a crazy crystal that throws off light from any angle. There are nine songs on the album; seven have been released as singles; all have hit the Top Ten, and two of them have reached No. 1. "I don't think the album's sales are finished," says Walter Yetnikoff, president of Epic's parent company, CBS Records Group, with just a light dusting of facetiousness. "There are some 200 million people in this country, and we've sold only 18 million copies here so far. There are a few more to go."

No sulking in competitive corporate quarters, however. Says David Lieberman, whose Lieberman Enterprises stocks more than 2,000 record outlets: "The best thing for a record company is to have a hit. The second best thing for a record company is for somebody else to have a hit." Comments Gil Friesen, president of A&M: "The whole industry has a stake in this success." The fallout from Thriller has given the business its best year since the heady days of 1978, when it had an estimated total domestic revenue of \$4.1 billion.

Thriller has been the No. 1 album for 33 weeks. It is the bestselling album, of any kind, of all time. Keep in mind that, as Jackson's attorney John Branca points out, "Michael has the highest royalty rate

in the business." That translates into approximately \$2 for each of the more than 18 million albums sold in the U.S. Now you have some idea of what Jackson is using for pocket money these days. This does not, of course, count revenues from compact discs or the sale of some 350,000 copies of a \$29.95 videotape called Making Michael Jackson's Thriller. Or continued royalties from the sale of old albums. Or the sales of Thriller abroad. Or the impending arrival of novelties like the Michael Jackson doll, due to appear in stores in May at a price of \$12.

Portents of a huge phenomenon are not found exclusively on sales graphs or balance sheets, however. When Jackson's hair was burned in an accident during the filming of a Pepsi-Cola commercial in late January, the mishap made headline news around the world. Once completed, two Pepsi commercials featuring Jackson and his brothers premiered on MTV. The next day on their national morning news shows, CBS, ABC and NBC all aired one or both spots as hot stories, not paid ads.

Jackson and his five brothers are scheduled to hit the concert trail in June in what is billed as the biggest music tour in history. Pepsi is sponsoring the tour and has already given the Jacksons \$5 million. Co-Promoter Don King has kicked in an additional \$3 million. The Jacksons will receive 85% of the net receipts; King and their parents, Katherine and Joseph Jackson, the remaining 15%. King, a congenially bombastic presence whose recent show-business experience has been limited to booking prizefights, estimates that "if the boys decide to exploit every avenue of merchandising and marketing available to them—T shirts, pay-per-view TV concerts, clothing lines, perfume lines, product identification—the tour could gross \$100 million."

Jackson and his brothers, both as the Jackson 5 and later simply as the Jacksons, made up one of the most appealing and popular rhythm-and-blues acts of the '70s. (There are nine brothers and sisters in the family: Maureen ["Rebbie"], 33; Jackie, 31; Tito, 29; Jermaine, 28; LaToya, 27; Marlon, 26; Michael, 25; Randy, 21; and Janet, 17.) But with the release of *Off the Wall*, Jackson's first solo album on Epic in 1979, it became clear that the group's leader was setting a pace that would be tough for anyone to follow. *Off the Wall*, which came out during the record-biz doldrums, sold 8 million copies worldwide and fielded four Top Ten hits. Those are impressive numbers by any standard, except the one that Jackson has just set with *Thriller*. "Michael's doing this tour to help his family," according to King. "I feel this will be the last tour that Michael will do with them." Lest he sound too much like the last flower child to bloom, we have Attorney Branca to remind us that "Michael is very informed and aware of what is going on in his life, to an amazing degree. He's his own Rasputin."

For a record industry stuck on the border between the ruins of punk and the chic regions of synthesizer pop, *Thriller* was a thorough restoration of confidence, a rejuvenation. Its effect on listeners, especially younger ones, was nearer to a revelation. *Thriller* brought black music back to mainstream radio, from which it had been effectively banished after restrictive "special-format programming" was introduced in the mid-'70s. Listeners could put more carbonation in their pop and cut their heavy-metal diet with a dose of the fleetest soul around. "No doubt about it," says Composer-Arranger Quincy Jones, who produced *Off the Wall* and *Thriller* with Jackson. "He's taken us right up there where we belong. Black music had to play second fiddle for a long time, but its spirit is the whole motor of pop. Michael has connected with every soul in the world."

Thriller does not have the mean, challenging immediacy or weird fervor of a rap record like *White Lines (Don't Don't Do It)*, and it lacks most of rap's snappy, snazzy street smarts. But it is consummate contemporary rhythm and blues. Jane Fonda, one of Jackson's pals, puts it as neatly and nicely as any music critic: "Michael's got a fresh, original sound. The music is energetic, and it's sensual. You can dance to it, work out to it, make love to it, sing to it. It's hard to sit still to."

Since Fonda's litany tidily summarizes the full range of contemporary American leisure activity, it is no wonder that Jackson is in the air everywhere. The pulse of America and much of the rest of the world

moves irregularly, beating in time to the tough strut of Billie Jean, the asphalt aria of Beat It, the supremely cool chills of Thriller. Thriller has been on the Japanese charts for 65 consecutive weeks, and local teen idols are copying Michael's moves and even singing some of his songs. Thriller is also South Africa's top seller: "Jackson, you might say, bridges the apartheid gap," muses one record executive. The Soviet press has, of course, denounced Jackson, and his fans cannot buy his records in any stores. But bootleg cassettes are swapped and treasured. Says one Soviet high school senior: "His music is electrifying. His beat is the music of today."

"Michael used to say, when he wrote, he'd write for everyone," says his mother Katherine, "even though the music business would list it as rhythm and blues because of him being black." The combined evidence of the bottom line, the hard listen and the long view is difficult to resist: Jackson is the biggest thing since the Beatles. He is the hottest single phenomenon since Elvis Presley. He just may be the most popular black singer ever.

This success is a matter of moment simply because, as Jones says, "it has never happened to a black performer." Before anyone declares a three-day holiday on behalf of brotherhood, it ought to be pointed out that, inevitably, the qualities that make Jackson's music so accessible also divert it from expectations of what popular black music ought to be. Those expectations, however, do not invariably come from the same source as the music. Rock critics (who are mostly white) liked Thriller well enough and wrote respectfully of it when it was released in December 1982, but they were as surprised as record-company executives (who are mostly white) when the album started burning its way into the country's collective musical consciousness. The fine points of what Thriller might have been, and was not, seemed petty to the audiences (mostly young) who gave the record its initial push, who hip-hopped to it in clubs and break-danced to it in the streets this past summer. The message is obvious anyway: soul is for sharing, not segregating.

Jackson knows his roots and reveres them. In one of his frequent ascensions to the Grammy rostrum a couple of weeks ago, he leaned down to the microphone, announced, "I have something very important to say...really," and proceeded to thank and honor Jackie Wilson. Dead only five weeks before the awards, from the side effects of a heart attack that had paralyzed him for almost a decade, Wilson was one of the greatest of all American soul singers. He sang high and hard, like Jackson, and like him, projected a dazzling sexual aura. Jackson's sexuality is more ethereal—Wilson in performance was like a tomcat—but both singers share a grounding in music that is almost equal parts soul and show biz.

Ray Charles, Little Richard, Chuck Berry and Frankie Lymon were some of his contemporaries, but the singer who really knocked Jackie Wilson out was Al Jolson. Jackson may dance like Baryshnikov straddling a jackhammer, move like a street blood steeped in Astaire and t'ai chi, sing like an angel on a soul-food bender, but a fair portion of his personal taste and his musical inspiration comes from the sort of glitzy places where soul seldom strays. One of his favorite things is My Favorite Things, sung by Julie Andrews, raindrops on roses, warm woolen mittens and all. He loves the Beatles, and he also loves Gordon MacRae booming his way through Oh What a Beautiful Morning.

Jackson cares so little about conventional standards of hipness that he can rise above embarrassment on such matters of taste. His catholicity directs him straight to the vital center of contemporary pop culture. Thriller is an insinuating, invigorating album, but it is not the kind of great album one has come to expect since the tumultuous days of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band: a record that provokes, challenges, raises questions and laughs at answers. Thriller is not Who's Next or The White Album or Blonde on Blonde or Songs in the Key of Life or Born to Run, records that were argued over and championed like talismans that could change lives. It is like a piece of elegant sportswear: slip right into it, shrug it off. Jackson has written and performed ebulliently with Paul McCartney; he often appears in bright band jackets; he has palled around a bit with Sean Ono Lennon and has taken him to a Broadway show. It should be clear from all this that Jackson is smitten not only with the Beatles' legacy

but with their mystique. Unlike the Beatles, however, he has a vast audience but a small constituency.

In England now, rock is exploding in small bursts all over the place, but there is no single focus or figurehead for the movement, let alone the kind of triumvirate (Beatles-Stones-Who) that reigned during the mid-'60s. In America there is Michael Jackson, with no clear movement behind him, just an unprecedented momentum that has sent him off on a dazzling solo flight. Stevie Wonder is still flourishing, and Lionel Richie is the most elegant songwriter in the neighborhood. Donna Summer can be spectacular; Prince is incandescent; Rick James cataclysmic; rap groups are the rough conscience of the streets. But commercially and aesthetically, they all revolve in separate orbits that only occasionally intersect. Jackson is a world apart, a phenomenon that exists in much the same way that the star himself lives. In isolation.

Director Steven Spielberg has remarked that "if E.T. hadn't come to Elliott, he would have come to Michael's house." He reflects that Jackson is like a hybrid of outer space's most famous tourist and of Chauncey Gardiner, the video-bedazzled innocent whom Peter Sellers portrayed in *Being There*. "I think Michael can be hurt very easily," Spielberg says. "He's sort of like a fawn in a burning forest." Jones watched Michael break down several times while recording *She's Out of My Life* for *Off the Wall*, and eventually just left the crying on the track. Jackson also teared up repeatedly while recording the children's album *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. During a break in a photo session for the album, Spielberg saw Jackson chatting and swapping gestures with E.T. "It's a nice place Michael comes from," Spielberg observes. "I wish we could all spend some time in his world."

That would require, as a visa, a disbelief willingly and perhaps perpetually suspended, a wariness of outsiders (Jackson has not given a print interview in more than a year), a capacity for gentleness, and a tolerance for fantasy that might tax the average adult imagination. Jackson lives at home in Encino, Calif., with his mother, father and two youngest sisters. He supervised the recent redesigning of the sprawling Tudor house, and the result is a cross between a vest-pocket Disneyland and *Citizen Kane's* Xanadu in suburbia (see following story). The menagerie, the soda fountain, the screening room are dream toys of childhood and the diversions of Southern California show-business affluence, all awash in the pastels of perennial boyhood. He takes trips to the Disney parks as to a shrine. He has spoken often about doing a movie musical of *Peter Pan*. The parallels are as obvious as they are misleading.

A good friend is right when he suggests that, ultimately, "Michael's appeal is universal less because of his music than because of who he is." Jackson has been in show business for most of his childhood and all of his adult life—there are those who argue persuasively that he has had no adult life—and, with a few other tricks, he has mastered the techniques of fusing his life with what is thought to be his image. This results in some arresting and deeply intriguing paradoxes: the thin young man, with bones as fragile as the veins in an autumn leaf, suddenly igniting on the downbeat and burning his way through to the hot, angry heart of *Billie Jean*; the boy who has an uncanny sense of what his audience wants and how to go about the hard and profitable business of giving it to them; the gentle, slightly self-mocking teen-ager in *Thriller* ("I've got somethin' I want to tell ya...I'm not like other guys") who turns into one of the grisliest werewolves in screen history and enjoys the transformation the way another adolescent might heat up on a first heavy date.

Many observers find in the ascendancy of Michael Jackson the ultimate personification of the androgynous rock star. His high-flying tenor makes him sound like the lead in some funk-ed-up boys choir, even as the sexual dynamism irradiating from the arch of his dancing body challenges Government standards for a nuclear meltdown. His lithe frame, five-fathom eyes, long lashes might be threatening if Jackson gave, even for a second, the impression that he is obtainable. But the audience's sense of his sensuality becomes quite deliberately tangled with the mirror image of his life: the good boy, the God-fearing Jehovah's Witness, the adamant vegetarian, the resolute non-indulger in smoke, strong drink or dope of any land, the impossibly insulated innocent. Undeniably sexy. Absolutely safe.

Eroticism at arm's length.

Michael puts a sliding scale of value on distance. Director Sidney Lumet, with whom Jackson was staying when he starred in *The Wiz*, recalls that his teenage daughters once had some friends over and one asked Michael to sing. "O.K.," Michael said affably. "But cover your eyes." "I think he was embarrassed by the closeness of the situation," Lumet says, "but his desire not to be rude or hurt her led him to say yes."

But there are also different lands of occasions, when distance distorts. Jackson's enforced isolation is partly show-biz savvy and partly an attempt to preserve intact the fabric of his fantasy life. Inevitably, there are breaches. "You know, everybody thinks you're gay," Vocal Coach Seth Riggs told him one day during a break in a vocal lesson. "I know," Jackson laughed. "The other day a big, tall, blond, nice-looking fellow came up to me and said, 'Gee, Michael, I think you're wonderful. I sure would like to go to bed with you.' I looked at him and said, 'When's the last time you read the Bible? You know you really should read it because there is some real information in there about homosexuality.' The guy says, 'I guess if I'd been a girl, it would have been different.' And I said, 'No, there are some very direct words on that in the Bible too.'"

Misunderstandings like this can be compounded by the gutter press (MICHAEL JACKSON—MORE OF HIS INTIMATE SECRETS; MICHAEL'S AGONIZING TUG OF LOVE) and by the putative inside-track show-biz gossip. Jackson wants a sex-change operation; Jackson has gone under the knife for extensive plastic surgery; Jackson has been shot full of female hormones to keep his face pretty and his voice soaring high. "Not true," says Riggs. "I'm his voice teacher, and I'd know. He started out with a high voice, and I've taken it even higher. He can sing low—down to a basso low C—but he prefers to sing as high as he does because pop tenors have more range to create style." The power of gossip is such that it has penetrated the iron gates that surround the Jackson never-never land out in Encino. It takes no effort of imagination to calculate what talk like that must do to a proud father and a mother who is a devout churchwoman. In addition to his door-to-door field service, which, according to his mother, "he does twice a week maybe for an hour or two," Michael attends meetings at a Kingdom Hall four times a week. On Sundays, he fasts.

And he dances. He shuts himself up at the house in a room that has no mirrors—"Mirrors make you pose," he has said—and cuts loose to his own music or to the Isley Brothers' *Showdown*, practicing what Dancer Hinton Battle calls "moves that kill. It's the combinations that really distinguish him as an artist. Spin, stop, pull up leg, pull jacket open, turn, freeze. And the glide, where he steps forward while pushing back. Spinning three times and popping up on his toes. That's a trademark, and a move a lot of professionals wouldn't try. If you go up wrong, you can really hurt yourself."

Three old pros are fans too. "I think he's terrific," says Director-Choreographer Bob Fosse. "Clean, neat, fast, with a sensuality that comes through. Maybe he's more a synthesizer than an innovator, but it's never the steps that are most important. It's the style. That's what Michael has." Gene Kelly talks about Jackson's "native histrionic intelligence and his great wit. He knows when to stop and then flash out like a bolt of lightning. There are a lot of dancers who can go 90 miles an hour, but Michael is too clever for just that." From Fred Astaire comes perhaps the ultimate tribute: "My Lord, he is a wonderful mover. He makes these moves up himself and it is just great to watch. I think he just feels that way when he is singing those songs. I don't know how much more dancing he will take up, because singing and dancing at the same time is very difficult. But Michael is a dedicated artist. He dreams, thinks of it all the time. You can see what the result is."

Show business accepts innocence only if it can be sentimentalized; Jackson's world of fantasy is easier to dismiss with malicious gossip than understand with sympathy. "On some level, I don't even know whether it's conscious or not, Michael knows that he has to stand off the demands of reality and protect

himself," Jane Fonda points out. Jackson spent more than a week with Fonda on the set of *On Golden Pond*, talking far into the night about "acting, life, everything. Afrinight about "acting, life, everything. Africa. Issues. We talked and talked and talked. His intelligence is instinctual and emotional, like a child's. If any artist loses that childlikeness, you lose a lot of creative juice. So Michael creates around himself a world that protects his creativity." And the world outside is intrigued: about that rhinestone glove, for instance, that he has taken to affecting of late. Whatever their significance may be to Michael, gloves neatly, wittily—and, one hopes, consciously—deflect seriousness and reflect two of Michael's most publicized obsessions. A glove, even one with 1,200 rhinestones, suits Astaire-style topper and tails; it is also standard issue for many Disney cartoon characters.

In its fine details as well as its broadest aspects, Michael Jackson's dream world has been under construction for 25 years, and its chief architect has not rested yet. Katherine Jackson likes to say her family got into show business because the only other available outlet for communal fantasy, the television, broke one day. "You know children; if they don't have TV to watch, then they have to do other things," says their mother. She may be oversimplifying some, but a blown-out television is not so readily replaced in the home of a Gary, Ind., steelworker with a family to feed. "The dancing came natural," their mother adds. Soon after, Joe Jackson began his intensive after-school coaching and practice sessions. Occasionally, as he recalls, the neighbor children lobbed stones through the Jacksons' window and shouted performance critiques through the shattered glass. When inspiration flagged, Michael, then 5, would step right in and, says his mother, "make all the moves." One year later, Michael was the lead singer, and the boys were playing benefits and winning amateur contests.

Rufus Morgan, whose organization hired them to perform at a fund raiser for a firemen's ball, recalls, "Those boys were so fascinating to watch that everybody just gathered around the stage. We didn't dance. We watched and threw money." At Garnett Elementary School, Principal Gladys Johnson invited the boys to perform at an assembly. (Admission: 10¢. Proceeds split with the Jackson family.) About 1,200 students turned out, and this time around, not a rock was thrown. "The children really enjoyed that show," Johnson remembers. "I could not believe how they idolized those Jackson 5 boys." Johnson also kept an eye on Michael's academics, and once advised the fourth-grader to bone up on his math. "My manager," Michael replied, "will take care of my money."

By the time they cut a couple of singles for a local label called Steeltown in 1968, word of the young prodigies with a front man who could sing and move like Jackie Wilson had started to spread as far as Detroit and Motown. Calls were placed; connections were made. In November 1969, Motown released the first Jackson 5 single, *I Want You Back*, with a propulsive vocal by Michael, 11. The record reached No. 1 in twelve weeks.

Over the next six years, the Jackson 5 became one of the cornerstone acts for a label that had more than its fair share of the best soul in the land. But after seven more Top Ten singles, there were the inevitable career dissatisfactions. Their father struck up a deal with Epic Records, provoking bad feeling at Motown and some family tension. Jermaine, who had married Berry Gordy's daughter Hazel, stayed behind at Motown, soloing, while the other brothers moved on.

Now calling themselves the Jacksons (Motown retained title to the name Jackson 5), they proceeded to cut four albums, two of which, *Destiny* and *Triumph*, went platinum. But it was Michael's first Epic solo album, *Off the Wall*, that started to set the barns all burning. His excessive prominence within the family was always manageable, one senses, but not without stressing the importance of perspective. "Michael is pretty stable," his mother says. "I think it's his raisin'. We used to talk to the boys about getting big heads. None of them is better than anyone else. One might have a little more talent, but that doesn't make you better. You're just the same as anyone else. It's just a job. Other people might be doctors and lawyers, but Michael entertains because maybe that's Michael entertains because maybe

that's what he can do best. That doesn't mean he's better."

What it does mean, however, is living your life on guard, within tantalizing reach of platoons of adoring fans who stake out the gates of the Encino house starting at 4 a.m. or so. It means bringing home the hospital gown you wore after the accident on the Pepsi commercial and letting it be tossed over the fence, to be caught by one of the most adoring of the faithful, Dena Cypher, 16. "I look at it every night, smell it, all that good stuff," she reports. "I was going to wear it to bed, but my mom talked me out of it. We didn't want to wrinkle it. I mean, those are Michael's wrinkles in there."

Beguiling as those comparisons are between the extraterrestrial and Michael, the earthly, slightly spacey superstar, what may be most pertinently recalled about E.T. is the way in which the family's house was suddenly closed by outside forces, turned from a home into a hermetically sealed fortress. Spielberg talks about the "rage" he senses when he watches Jackson in concert, and the impression of angry release. Jackson, in front of an audience, is like a projectile—alive, explosive—that always returns, charge intact, to the chamber from which it was fired.

Jackson's whole existence is lined with insulation. His friends, many of whom are famous, help him keep life at bay and illusion near at hand: their celebrity, which complements his, also helps cast his everyday life with the living embodiments of public fantasy. "We might think his bubble world is fantastical," says one of his most sympathetic pals. "But to him it's very real. My only fear is that he'll step out and become like everybody else. He is too special the way he is. He is not immune. If he steps out of that world, it might be his last time."

Still, even a fan like Amy Gancherov, 13, of nearby Sherman Oaks, can sometimes notice, as she catches a phantom glimpse of Jackson, that "he looks so sad." She thinks the reason may be that "everybody is always shoving things in his face." Occasionally Jackson comes out to the yard. Sometimes he will ride a red-and-white motor scooter. Sometimes he will take his electric car for a spin. It is a close copy of a vehicle from Mr. Toad's Wild Ride at Disneyland. Outside the iron gates, the fans on the street can see him whizzing along the driveway, playing by himself, and at those times, he is too far away for anyone to see his face at all. —By Jay Cocks. Reported by Denise Worrell/Los Angeles, with other bureaus.

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