

performers

# michael jackson

By Mikal  
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**T**HERE WAS ONE  
unmistakable mo-  
ment when Michael  
Jackson entered the  
American mind as  
an embodied possi-  
bility of not just  
our pleasures but  
also our ideals.

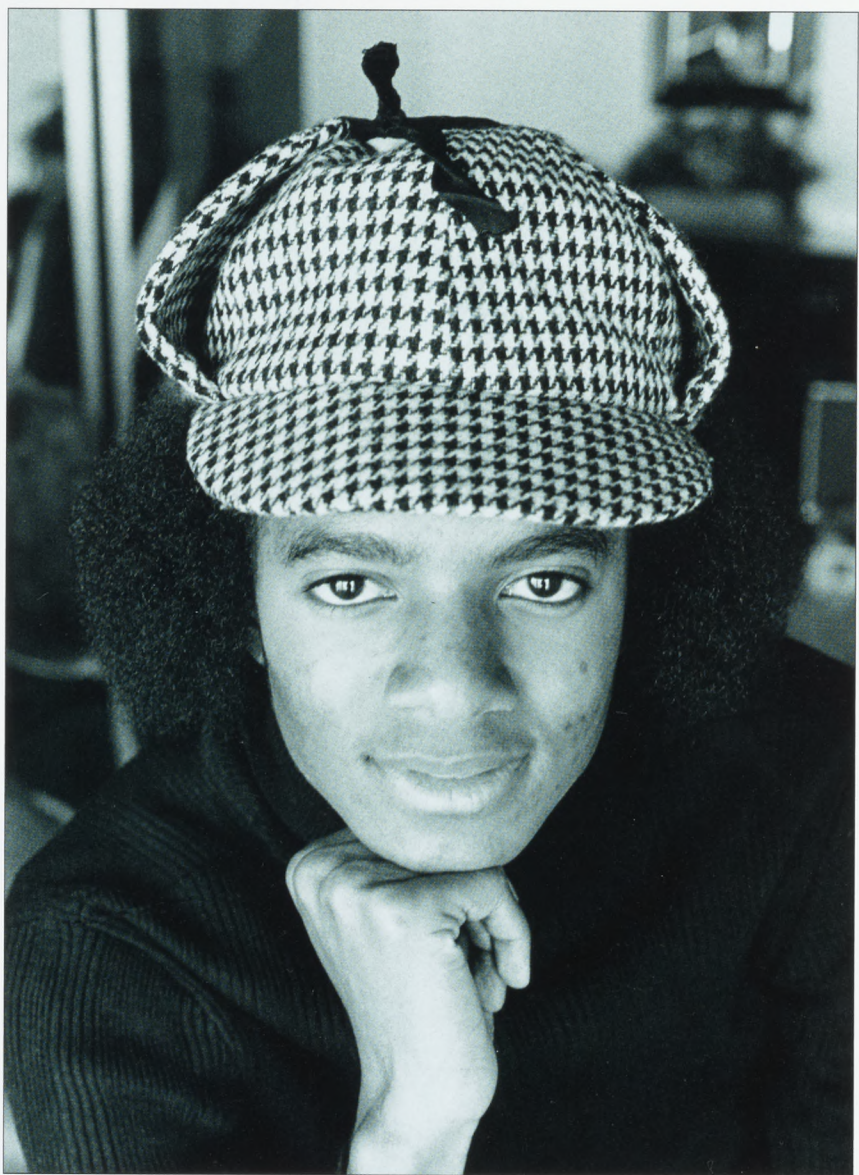


**T**HAT MOMENT CAME in early 1983. Jackson's music was already in the air by that time – in fact, it was transforming the air. Everywhere you turned, you would hear an animating sound. It began with taut, maddened, funk-infused guitar lines that scrambled against the upsweeping curve of a string section in a heady depiction of emotional panic. Then a high-end, sensually imploring voice entered the fray and imposed elegance and resolution upon the panic: “What do you mean?” the singer moaned breathtakingly. “I am the one/Who will dance on the floor in the round.” The song was Jackson's “Billie Jean,” and it had suddenly, surely become one of the most ubiquitous – and exciting – breakthrough singles in recent pop history.

Whenever a song becomes as madly popular as “Billie Jean,” it can be fun to examine the reasons why: Was it simply the appeal of the music's exacting but impelling sound? The fine phrasing and tremulous emotion at play against each other in the singer's voice? The allure of the artist's personality or celebrity? In the case of “Billie Jean,” it was a bit of all those things. Clearly, since a string of brilliant childhood triumphs with the Jackson 5, Jackson – who was twenty-five in 1983 – had long been one of soul and rock's most stirring singers. He began releasing solo albums in 1972, but it wasn't until 1979's *Off the Wall* that he stood out as a mature, stylish vocal force in his own right. For that reason, as much as for the memorable songwriting of Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney and Rod Temperton, or the ravishing production of Quincy Jones, the record proved one of the most consistently exuberant (and popular) black pop works of the 1970s.

It came as a surprise, then, that at first few listenings, Jackson's long-awaited 1982 followup, *Thriller*, seemed to restrict him to a catchy but somewhat tame brand of dance-floor romanticism. Indeed, the boldest-sounding tracks on the album were the ones Jackson had the strongest hand in writing, producing and arranging: “Wanna Be Startin' Somethin',” “Beat It” and “Billie Jean.” After hearing these songs find their natural life on radio, it became evident that they were something more than exceptional highlights. They were in fact the heart of the matter: a well-conceived body of passion, rhythm and structure that defined the sensibility – if not the inner life – of the artist behind them.

These were instantly compelling songs about emotional and sexual claustrophobia, about hard-earned adulthood and about a new-found brand of resolution that aimed to work as an arbiter between the artist's fears and the inescapable fact of his celebrity. “Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'” had the sense of a vitalizing nightmare in its best lines (“You're stuck in the middle . . . /And the pain is thunder . . . /Still they hate you, you're a vegetable . . . /They eat off you, you're a vegetable”). “Billie Jean,” meantime, exposed the ways in which the interaction between the artist's fame and the outside world might invoke soul-killing dishonor (“People always told me/Be careful what you do/Cause the lie becomes the truth”). And “Beat It,” in many ways the album's toughest song, was pure anger:



In its relentless depiction of violence as an enforced social style, it conveyed terror and invincibility almost as effectively as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's “The Message” had in an earlier season.

But the ultimate excitement about *Thriller* was that “Billie Jean” seemed merely a first step. I was fortunate to be present in an auditorium in

Pasadena, California, when Jackson did the song before a live audience for a TV special celebrating Motown's twenty-fifth anniversary. Jackson had just performed a medley of greatest hits with the Jackson 5 – and it was exciting stuff. Had those been his sole moments onstage, they still would have dominated the show. But for Jackson it wasn't enough. As his brothers said their good-

byes and left the stage, Jackson remained. He seemed lost for a moment, awkwardly holding a fedora in his hand, trying to find words to say. "Yeah," he almost whispered, "those were the good old days. I like those old songs. But" – and then he took the hat, put it on his head with suave confidence and said – "I like the new songs even better," and he gave us "Billie Jean." Nothing could prepare us for that moment – not what we'd just seen Jackson do with his brothers, not even the recording of the song. This was one of Michael Jackson's first public acts as a star outside and beyond the Jacksons, and it was startlingly clear not only that he was one of the most thrilling live performers in pop music but also that he was perhaps more capable of inspiring an audience's physical and emotional imagination than any single pop artist since Elvis.

From there, things went up – far up. *Thriller* placed an unprecedented seven singles in *Billboard's* Top Ten and became one of the biggest-selling albums in pop history (more than twenty-six million copies or something like that), and at the 1984 Grammy Awards, Michael Jackson captured eight awards, including Album of the Year and Record of the Year. Then, a few months later, Jackson went on a nationwide tour with his brothers, the Jacksons. In December 1984, they closed their tour with six sold-out performances at Los Angeles's Dodger Stadium. I managed to catch the tour's last show, and it was a hell of a thing to see. Jackson accomplished as much as was possible that night. In his best moments, you felt like you were watching something downright supernatural, if not impossible.

Four years later – in 1988 – I sat in the audience at the Grammy Awards show in New York City, where Jackson turned in an inspiring performance that also served as a timely reminder of a sometimes overlooked truth about him: namely, that whatever his eccentricities, Michael Jackson acquired his fame primarily because of his remarkably intuitive talents as a singer and dancer – talents that are genuine and matchless and not the constructions of mere ambition or hype. Moreover, it is also plausible that in certain ways, Jackson's phenomenal talent may not be completely separable from his eccentricity. That is, the same obsessions, fears and reveries that fuel his prowess as a dancer, songwriter and singer may also prompt his quirkiness, and perhaps without all that peculiarity he would be far less compelling to watch.

In a sense, Jackson's opening moments on the Grammy telecast – in which he delivered a slow-paced, Frank Sinatra-inspired reworking of "The Way You Make Me Feel" – were in fact exemplary of his famed quirkiness. He seemed at first self-conscious and strained pulling off the song's cartoonish sexuality, and his overstated crotch grabbing came off as more forced than felt. And yet when the music revved up, all the artifice was instantly dispelled. Jackson seemed suddenly confident, executing startling hip-and-torso thrusts alongside slow-motion, sliding mime moves that left the audience gasping.

But it was with his next song, the social-minded, gospel-inflected "Man in the Mirror," that Jackson defined for himself some surprising new strengths. It was a deceptively straightforward delivery, and yet its simplicity prompted Jackson to give an increasingly emotional perfor-

mance. By the song's middle, he wasn't so much singing or interpreting as simply surrendering to the song. At one point – spurred on by the majestic vocal support of Andraé Crouch and the New Hope Baptist Church Choir – Jackson broke into a complex, skip-walking dance step that carried him across the stage and back. He then crashed hard to his knees in a posture of glorious, testifying abandon, sobbing fervently as Crouch came forward and dabbed the sweat from his forehead, then helped him to his feet. His live version of "Man in the Mirror" seemed to be an act of living passion for him. In fact, it now seemed a more personal, heartfelt song for Jackson than "Billie Jean." In 1983, the latter song seemed like his way of negotiating with the world – a way of attracting the world's curiosity in a motion that also announced he was afraid of being misinterpreted or used up by that world.

But with "Man in the Mirror," a song about accepting social and political responsibility, Jackson seemed to be trying to negotiate his way out of the cocoon his massive fame had produced. It was hardly an easy peace that Jackson was seeking. After all, at the end of the song he retreated back into his world, a place that to those on the outside has always seemed private and isolated.

It has been a lifetime in the pop-music world since those 1988 shows, but even so, no single artist has truly eclipsed what Michael Jackson accomplished in the first glorious years of his adult solo career. Clearly, many other entertainers have given us great art, great outrage, great invention and great rejuvenation – but Michael Jackson changed the balance in the pop world in a way that nobody since has managed. He forced the mainstream press to accept that the biggest pop star in the world could be young and black –



Opposite: Jackson in 1976;  
Above: Los Angeles, 1985;  
Below: In 1972

and he made new media such as MTV accommodate that truth as well. Michael Jackson didn't just grab the gold ring. He hooked it to a new bar and set it even higher, and nobody has yet snatched it with quite the same flair or results.

At age forty-two, Michael Jackson is among the youngest artists ever inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In fact, the only younger artist was Michael Jackson himself, back in 1997, when he was inducted as a member of the Jackson 5. That's kind of fitting: From his earliest performing years until today, Michael Jackson's greatest competition has always been himself. When competing selves produce as much great music as Jackson has, our collective pleasures are enriched and our history is made more intense and complex. Few artists get to pull off such remarkable feats as eventfully as Jackson has – and tonight, we have the chance to thank him by getting to our feet and celebrating not just his music and not just the traditions he has exemplified but also how his breaking through barriers helped make the modern pop world a richer and more inclusive scene than it was before.