

Title:How Michael moonwalked into our lives.

Pub:*New Straits Times*

(July 4, 2009)(1036 words) Detail:

Full Text:COPYRIGHT 2009 The New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd

Byline: Johan Jaaffar

I HAVE a confession to make. Shortly after his death, I bought a copy of The Essential Michael Jackson, an album produced five years ago.

Listening again to Don't Stop Till You Get Enough, Off The Wall, Billie Jean, Beat It, Thriller, Bad, Black or White, You Are Not Alone and Earth Song brought back memories of the 1980s and 90s when Michael was the biggest thing in popular culture. He helped redefine the entertainment industry. His songs dominated the airwaves; he set a new marker for stage performance and created some of the most memorable music videos. People of my generation grew up with him, entertained by his songs, enthralled by his lifestyle and intrigued by the controversies surrounding him. Most of us have moved on with our lives, yet Michael was barricaded from the real world, bedevilled later by financial woes, court cases (1,500 in his lifetime, and probably many more after his death) or worse.

He was a brilliant performer. Michael was huge, and he impacted the lives of at least three quarters of the inhabitants of this planet. He was destined for fame and glory, the child prodigy who became, naturally, the brightest in the constellation of stars. He was bigger than any other performer - even Elvis Presley. If the Beatles were a tsunami, Michael made possible climate change. He is a celebrity extraordinaire - not even the iconic Princess Diana came close to him in that respect. David Beckham rebrands himself to become the most popular football player - one where high style meets good skill - but he is nowhere near Michael.

But Michael was, like most successful performers, the victim of his success. To be fair to him, he was doing what he knew best: singing and performing. But celebrities are haunted by paparazzi, tabloid editors, detractors, hangers-on, money-grabbers, to name a few. It was not easy to be Michael. And Michael wanted to be more than just Michael. He wanted a totally new image - one that deformed him and made him whiter than normal. He was demonised as much as he was adored.

Michael, the pop icon, the role model, the Peter Pan who refused to grow up, the man who befriended children and made his sprawling Neverland complex a mini Disneyland eventually had to face child molestation charges by some of the boys he trusted most. To rub salt to the wound, the Martin Bashir interview in 2003 helped establish the type of person he was. His answer to Bashir's question was: "The most loving thing to do is to share your bed with someone." The die was cast. The 14-week trial by jury in February 2005 took a tremendous toll on him. He was found innocent on all accounts, but the stigma lingers. The money woes came shortly after. He lost control of Neverland.

He had been around for a long time as a performer. When The Jackson 5 appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1969, the siblings became a household name, with Michael, hardly 11 at the time, dubbed "The Prodigious One".

The Jackson brothers didn't last as a group. Their "Victory Tour" in 1984 marked the beginning of the end for the group. Michael had other ideas.

When Michael acted in the 1978 production of The Wizard of Oz as Scarecrow, he got close to Quincy Jones, the film's musical supervisor.

The film tanked but it was Jones who remade Michael into what he was later. The collaboration was one of the most enduring in the history of pop music. The first album they worked on together was Off the Wall. It was a big hit by any standard at the time. The album sold 20 million copies. It was a quantum leap in Michael's solo career. A superstar was born. Four years later, Thriller was released. It was phenomenal. More than 100 million copies were sold. It is one of the top 10 albums in the history of mankind.

But that alone was not enough. Imagine, a walk, yes, a walk, that changed everything, and which catapulted the singer to the stratosphere.

The year was 1983, the occasion was Motown's 25th anniversary, the station was NBC, the song was Billie Jean. He "moonwalks" on stage stealing the show, not to mention the attention of millions of new fans.

I was one of them. It became a signature Michael performance - a glove and the walk, and later the hat. The Gloved One became an essential part of the pop culture landscape. It was the same year the music video for Beat It appeared on the fledgling station, MTV. He was the first African-American artiste to appear on MTV. His Thriller mini-movie, the most expensive in history, directed by John Landis became one of the most watched videos in history.

Music videos were never the same again. Thriller, too, became the best selling solo album in the world. He was crowned the King of Pop when he won the most awards for an individual in that year's Grammys. Even when his hair caught fire while filming a PepsiCo commercial, the event dwarfed any other news at the time.

Michael attracted as much attention back in the 1980s as he did before his death. Perhaps his latest albums did not do that well. By Michael's standards, Invincible was a failure considering only 10 million copies were sold. Tabloid news about his marriages, his children (including the picture of him dangling one of his sons off a hotel balcony) and lurid details of his life overwhelmed his true talent. Yet, when he announced his "Last Curtain Call" concert tour, 750,000 tickets were sold within hours. He was a troubled personality, flawed at his worst, notoriously talented at best.

Perhaps the lyrics of one of his better known songs explains the man behind the enigma that was Michael Jackson. Born to amuse, to inspire, to delight/Here one day/Gone one night/Like a sunset/Dying with the rising moon/Gone too soon.

He was all that, and more. Like his signature moonwalk routine, he glided gracefully and memorably into our lives and now he is gone.

Perhaps that is how he wanted to be remembered.

Source Citation: "How Michael moonwalked into our lives." New Straits Times (July 4, 2009): NA. General OneFile. Gale. THE NEW SCHOOL. 16 Sept. 2009

<<http://find.galegroup.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/gtx/start.do?prodId=ITOF>>.

Gale Document Number:A203218225