

## Michael Jackson: The music

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### Michael Jackson King of the POP

Michael Jackson was a towering presence in the world of popular music - a giant who could stand shoulder to shoulder with the likes of Elvis, The Beatles and Frank Sinatra.

His skills as a singer, composer and arranger were often overshadowed by his showmanship and eccentricity, but his legacy will undoubtedly be the songs he recorded.

The most memorable records he made:

I WANT YOU BACK - 1969

Jackson's first chart hit came when he was just 11, with this Motown classic recorded alongside his brothers in the Jackson Five.

The youngster's pyrotechnic vocal performance was a revelation - yelping and screaming with boyish intensity as he pleaded with an ex-girlfriend to give him "one more chance".

In 2004, it was ranked 120 in Rolling Stone magazine's 500 Greatest Songs of All Time list.

#### BILLIE JEAN - 1982

Bizarrely, this era-defining funk track was not the first single to be released from the Thriller album - an honour which went instead to the saccharine Paul McCartney duet The Girl Is Mine.

The song is recognisable from the very first thud of the kick drum, something that was very much intended - producer Quincy Jones told his audio engineer to create a drum sound no-one had ever heard before.

Jackson's writing is a masterclass in musical economy - the entire track comprising little more than a dirty, fuzztone bassline, that drumbeat and the star's staccato, almost mournful delivery.

The lyrics, by the way, refer to a real-life experience Jackson had with a fan who claimed he had fathered her twin sons. The insanity surrounding his music was to become a more and more common feature in later years.

## BEAT IT - 1983

But before then Michael Jackson would break a few more musical boundaries.

The shimmering pop melody and heavy rock riffing on Beat It now seems an obvious combination. But for a black R&B artist to collaborate with rock god Eddie Van Halen in 1983 was nothing short of a revolution.

"I wanted to write a song, the type of song that I would buy if I were to buy a rock song," Jackson said later. "That is how I approached it and I wanted the kids to really enjoy it - the school kids as well as the college kids."

Twenty-six years later, the influence of Jackson's melting pot approach can be heard in the rap-rock crossovers of Linkin Park and the heavy, crunching guitars used by pop acts like Katy Perry.

## THRILLER - 1984

Considered to be one of Jackson's signature songs, Thriller was in fact written by British musician Rod Temperton.

Nonetheless, the subject matter was a perfect fit for the 24-year-old star. Not only was he obsessed with the hyper-real movie horror of *An American Werewolf in London*, but the lyrics hinted at a period of turbulence in the star's life.

Jackson's parents were threatening to separate, his media profile was higher than ever and he had been involved in a paternity claim. When he sings "they're out to get you", he means it.

Although the song is best remembered for its music video, it is also one of Jackson's most sonically inventive tracks - from the creepy

B-movie sound effects to Vincent Price's spooky graveside rap.

#### MAN IN THE MIRROR - 1988

"I'm starting with the man in the mirror / I'm asking him to change his ways / And no message could have been any clearer / If you wanna make the world a better place / Take a look at yourself, and then make a change."

Another song that seemed to comment on Jackson's state of mind, Man In The Mirror was also one of his most critically-acclaimed singles.

Jackson's voice is little more than a whisper as the music starts. He seems vulnerable, broken and unsure as he tells himself "I'm going to make a change". But as the music builds, so does his resolve.

By the end of the track, he is backed by a gospel choir, screaming his mantra at the top of his voice as a snare drum cracks like the whip.

#### BLACK OR WHITE - 1991

Described by Jackson's record company as "a rock 'n' roll dance song about racial harmony", Black Or White was one of the biggest radio hits of the 1990s.

This was no mean feat in an increasingly formatted radio market, and was a tribute to the star's ability to combine musical genres - in this case hard rock, dance, pop and rap.

The lyrics are perhaps less thought-provoking than Jackson intended - "if you're thinking of being my baby it don't matter if you're black or white" is hardly up there with Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" - but they gave Jackson another opportunity to poke fun at critics' comments about his skin tone.

His willingness to appropriate hip-hop beats also put him ahead of many of his contemporaries, who were increasingly left behind by the likes of Public Enemy and NWA.

#### EARTH SONG - 1995

Jackson's last UK hit to really cross over to the mainstream was a Christmas number one in 1995.

Written as a protest against environmental destruction, the song's simple, wordless hook is a plaintive howl of despair - with none of the promise of redemption Jackson saw in *Man In The Mirror*.

As it builds to its catastrophic climax, the choir is no longer there for moral support - they are harbingers of doom summoned from the seventh circle of hell.

For those who said Jackson had lost the passion of his early work, this was a stunning riposte. But the loss of hope, and the sprawling running time, hinted at the turmoil and lack of control that were to mark the King Of Pop's final years.

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