

Mass Choreography and Red Leather Jackets: Michael Jackson and the Art of Cultural Diplomacy

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Like pretty much everyone, I initially mediated my “Death of Michael Jackson” experience through television. I don’t usually watch cable news, but I felt stunned, uncomprehending—almost embarrassed by the intensity of my own bereavement—it was almost as if I were looking for permission to grieve. But cable news ain’t no fireside chat. The first hours after Jackson’s death were awful, as the network anchors scrambled vainly for newsy details while stumbling through awkward, ad libbed panegyrics. They obviously hadn’t come to work prepared to bury the King of Pop. It must have been like trying to eulogize Santa Claus. It was the Rev. Al Sharpton who ultimately came to their rescue with a hastily-called press conference on the steps of the Apollo Theater in Harlem. With that landmark of African-American music as a backdrop, Sharpton offered up a consumable context for Jackson’s life and work, and the networks gratefully ran with it. This is likely when Sharpton earned his own show on MSNBC. And it’s also

when Michael Jackson, who spent his whole life dancing just beyond the defining grip of race and gender, finally began receiving his due as a racial pioneer.

But making Jackson a “race man” also downplays his gendered significance. At Jackson’s memorial service a week or so later, Rev. Sharpton and others credited him for doing the intensely personal work of human relations—of “creating a comfort level” that allowed children from all over the world to connect with one another. Michael Jackson’s youngest fans, Sharpton said, “grew up from being teenage, comfortable fans of Michael to being forty years old and...comfortable to vote for a person of color to be the president of the United States of America.”

Well, okay. But then what made Michael Jackson “comfortable,” or (more to the point) *safe* for mass consumption in the first place? Perhaps it was because, in addition to the intensity and perfection of his art, Michael Jackson performed an outward neutrality about sex, race, and gender that demanded very little from his audience. From his childhood, Jackson had been what biographer Margo Jefferson calls a “sexual impersonator...more a god of dance and song than a man intimating the danger and pleasure of real sex.”¹ He had mastered an a-raciality that made him universally “comfortable,” in the Sharpton parlance. His stylized, femmed-out virility beggared established gender rules and presumptions. He could confound race, sex, and gender with constructed personae, and contain and manage social conflict with the same confident precision of his dancing. In reality, Jackson was probably not just burdened, but truly warped by the racial, gender, and sexual expectations that came along with his

¹ Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson* (New York, Pantheon Books, 2006), 100.

mind-boggling fame. On the proverbial stage though, which is where the youthful Michael Jackson spent most of his time, he was on a confirmed path of transformation, becoming something that wasn't male or female, nor "black or white." It was a spectacle that invited everyone's attention, if not always their admiration. Among other things, Jackson became a conduit for almost every major style of American music, and there is no doubt he influenced them all. (Witness the *Pickin' On Michael Jackson* bluegrass tribute). It probably misses the point of Jackson's artistry, and it doesn't even begin to approach his character, but that postmodern agnosticism lies at the core of his mass appeal.

Perhaps that's also why, when I first learned of Jackson's death, the first thing I thought of was the leather jacket from the "Beat It" video. You know the one. It had symmetric golden shoulder patches, and rows of diagonal zippers on either side of the breast. Jackson wore it unzipped, with the collars pulled up and the sleeves almost improbably hiked up well above his elbows. Oh yeah, and it was red. An entire generation, including myself, adopted that jacket (along with the pleated red leather one from the later "Thriller" video) as personally symbolic of a certain period of our lives. And herein lies a portion of whatever genius Michael Jackson personified. As in the video, Jackson's music and dance lent a point of commonality to a country that had been on a path of separation and even alienation—city from suburb, black from white, and old from young—for three decades. America's trust had been abused by political power, it had been defeated in war, racial tension still simmered, conservatism was ascendant, and people were "bowling alone," to borrow from Robert Putnam. This was the historical context in which Michael Jackson's *jacket* became a fixture of both children's and youth

fashion nationwide. I say “both” because Jackson’s *jacket* seemed as ubiquitous in American elementary schools as it did in middle and high schools—a remarkable feat in itself. Jackson’s video, and the fashion that radiated from it, spoke of television’s continuing potential to forge common experience, and the *jacket* became a prime artifact of that distinctive Jacksonian “crossover.” All of this, and yet the video almost never made it to air.

When Michael Jackson completed the video for “Billie Jean,” the second single off of his 1982 *Thriller* album, MTV, which had only been on the air for a year, refused to show it. In fact, MTV largely refused to show videos from black artists in general. Rick James couldn’t get the video for “Superfreak” into MTV’s rotation, and the channel wouldn’t play Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing” either.² As *Time Magazine* put it at the time, “the network claim[ed] that music, not skin tone, dictates air play: rock 'n' roll, not soul.” The corporate line was that MTV was a televised version of a typical rock music station, and nobody would expect a rock station to play Soul or R&B. But television was not radio, and the explanation didn’t satisfy the president of CBS music—who was also Jackson’s publisher—Walter Yetnikoff. “I’m pulling everything we have off the air,” Yetnikoff was said to have told MTV’s co-founder Bob Pittman in the wake of the channel’s initial refusal to show “Billie Jean.” “I’m not going to give you any more videos. And I’m going to go public and fucking tell them about the fact you don’t want

² “Why it took MTV so long to play black music videos,” *Jet*. FindArticles.com. Accessed 15 Sep, 2009.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1355/is_14_110/ai_n16807343/

to play music by a black guy.”³ Evidently cowed, MTV quickly relented and began to play “Billie Jean.” Michael Jackson’s lean track and accompanying video repaid the upstart network by helping to transform it from a marketing novelty into a cultural institution, thereby confirming what its executives should already have known: white kids would listen to, and watch, black artists, and they would love what they heard and saw. It was a defining cultural moment in American history, and it belonged entirely to Jackson. It was the moment when he turned America’s obsession with fame against its obsession with the color line.

Jackson followed “Billie Jean” with a third single off the *Thriller* album, “Beat It,” and this time, no one had to convince MTV to play it. To all appearances, the track itself was an attempt to do precisely what “Billie Jean” was already doing—appeal to white kids who liked rock. The song’s backbeat firmly established it as a rock tune, and Eddie Van Halen’s heavy guitar solo completed its crossover appeal. The music video for “Beat It” represented the next step in Jackson’s progression of increasingly theatrical, expensive, and lengthy music videos for *Thriller* releases, culminating with the video for “Thriller” itself, which was fourteen minutes long and cost a million dollars to produce. There’s a reason we still remember these videos, and it’s not just because they were good. From a marketing perspective, this was absolute cutting edge stuff. In the early 1980s, music videos were an untested vehicle for music sales—a recent add-on to an established business model. Record labels generally financed their production, but saw

³ [The 500 Greatest Songs Since You Were Born, *Blender*](http://www.blender.com/lists/68125/500-greatest-songs-since-you-were-born-451-500.html?p=13). 15 Sep, 2009, <http://www.blender.com/lists/68125/500-greatest-songs-since-you-were-born-451-500.html?p=13>.

them as little more than glorified ads for their artists' albums.⁴ It took the runaway success of both the "Billie Jean" and "Beat It" videos for Jackson to convince the CBS brass to pony up the million for the "Thriller" video, which cost more to make than the entire album. Not surprisingly, many of the most prolific early music video directors came from the New York ad world, including Bob Giraldi, who was tapped to direct Jackson's "Beat It" video.

Giraldi, choreographer Michael Peters, and Jackson himself shared an ambitious vision for the "Beat It" video. Even more than "Billie Jean," "Beat It" was to be a concept piece—a movie to better convey the urban fable of the song. The production featured over 80 male dancers (both white and black, most of them amateurs plucked from the streets of L.A.), and cost some \$150,000, which, according to one source, Jackson paid for himself.⁵ The atmospherics evoke a dark and fantastically dystopic New York City landscape circa early 1980s, including the obligatory chain link fences, warehouses, loading docks, and kids crawling out from under manhole covers. The black cast members generally sport early '80s hip-hop gear, and the white ones look like they came straight out of *The Wild One*. The finished video's resemblances to *Westside Story* (particularly the fight scene) pay sly yet respectful homage to the Broadway standard. Jackson himself appears as his diffident but hyper-charismatic self, deploring and

⁴ In 1983, performance artist Laurie Anderson criticized contemporary music videos for their unrealized potential. "Much of it is just boys playing the guitar on the roof, boys playing the guitar in the shower. It's redundant," she told *Time Magazine*. JD Reed, Alessandra Stanley, and Stephen Koepp, "Music: New Rock on a Red-Hot Roll," *Time Magazine*, July 18, 1983.

⁵ Even after the recent success of the "Billie Jean" video on MTV, CBS executives were unwilling to spend a great deal of money on a format they saw as essentially extraneous to their core product. Craig Halstead and Chris Cadman, *Michael Jackson: The Solo Years*. (Hertford: Authors Online, 2003).

eventually transcending the almost endearingly quaint violence depicted in the video (seriously, they're using switchblades) through music and dance. The video ends with a mass choreographed dance routine, soon to become a Jackson trademark, in which all the "gang members" gather behind Michael for some energetic soft shoe reconciliation. The "Beat It" video is mass spectacle and artistic dalliance in the best senses: utterly remote from the human experiences it so breezily depicts, but rivetingly taut with youthful energy. It's as fun to watch today as when it first aired.

But contrast the grungy locational iconography of the "Beat It" video with the shiny suburban newness inhabited by a large part of its domestic target audience. Consider as well how racially and geographically segregated male teen fashion had become since everyone wore blue suede shoes. In high Jacksonian style, "Beat It" ventured an exploratory and highly conditional embrace of the black city. Recall that a doubting MTV had to be browbeaten into showing and promoting black artists. Comes now Michael Jackson, and a significant percentage of their target audience is suddenly running around the white suburbs clad entirely in red leather, which pretty much settles the question of market viability. His undeniable masculinity, which that iconic jacket expresses so concisely, is queered just enough to neutralize him as a threat to white womanhood. Even better, Jackson's fashion is easily replicable (try this at home, kids!) and equally accessible to both whites and blacks, males and females—a rare form of intensely common cultural property.

Given all of this, it's tempting to think of Jackson, while at the peak of his trend-setting powers, as a sort of cultural smuggler who trafficked music, image, and fashion across America's well-patrolled racial borders. But the Michael Jackson of *Thriller*

wasn't really selling anything. He just happened to live outside this country's conceptions of race and gender, and in the new media environment of the 1980s, he was cool enough to bring everyone to him. He was less the ambassador, and more the middle ground.

It couldn't last, and it didn't. Michael Jackson could not remain what he was then, any more than we could. In this month's (Sept 2009) *GQ*, you can find a feature length retrospective on the King of Pop titled "When Michael Was Cool." The title refers to the Thriller period of the early to mid 1980s, but it would be nice to think it's about our time as well. White America in particular has spent the better part of two decades pathologizing Jackson as a fallen idol, an unredeemable pervert, an abused child, and an irrelevant, fame-damaged wreck. For a while, it seemed like a long time had passed since Michael Jackson had been King. But then he died. It was like getting clocked with a 2x4 of pure, wistful nostalgia. Suddenly he was ringing in our ears again, and we were reliving the thrill of listening to his music and watching him move. AND, once again, we were all watching him together. As it turns out, it wasn't that long ago at all. Only now, if you want the Sergio Valente version of that jacket, be prepared to fork over 800 bucks.