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Michael jackson with the high heels on

May 24, 2019 • By Laurie WinerNOT HAVING PAID strict attention to Michael Jackson’s lyrics before his death, I spent three decades singing, “The chair is not my son” whenever anyone played “Billie Jean.” That changed after I saw Leaving Neverland, the Dan Reed-directed HBO documentary in which two men speak about childhoods spent as Jackson’s special friends. The stories of James Safechuck and Wade Robson are textbook cases of child seduction, illustrated by miles of video and still footage in which pheromones bounce off of Jackson and his boy friends, whose exuberance in each other’s company is disturbingly infectious. We are hardwired to feel happy for people in love. Robson and Safechuck speak about their experiences with a frankness and lack of shame made possible by three decades of confrontation with the human propensity for pedophilia, a compulsion from which no country, social class, or profession is immune. Americans undertook this late-breaking examination in the 1980s, around the same time that these two men say the abuse began. Ironically (or fittingly?), the slow reveal of Jackson’s actions over the years (thanks to many journalists, documentarians, and online researchers) contributed to that cultural shift, and Leaving Neverland will take its place as a milestone in continued understanding of the phenomenon. Before they became tales of abuse, heartbreak, and cruel abandonment, Robson’s and Safechuck’s stories were love stories. Conveying this is a singular accomplishment. Reed is not judgmental; he acknowledges that once your life is invaded by magic — a substance more addictive than money or love (for which you will mistake it) — you will not willingly let it go. You must be dislodged from it. Imagine the elation of seven-year-old Robson, a ferocious tiny dancer who rewound and repeated “The Making of Thriller” video until he had Jackson’s moves down perfectly, being brought onstage by his idol to dance for 65,000 screaming fans. “I was him for a moment, almost,” says Robson, who describes the event as “dreamlike,” and “sensory overload, emotional overload.” The first time Jackson put his hand on Robson’s thigh, it felt great. “Out of all the kids in the world,” he says in the film, “he chose me to be his friend.” For those of us, myself included, who so harshly judged the Mrs. Safechucks and Mrs. Robsons of the world, Leaving Neverland reminds us that we too, if we examine our lives honestly, have undoubtedly found it convenient to overlook all manner of things in our efforts to court enchantment. When Mrs. Robson remembers watching her son dance on that stage, her voice trembles and almost breaks with her joy; it’s a memory of overwhelming appreciation. At the same time, and this is its great strength, Leaving Neverland says to one and all — are you fucking kidding me with this? Who in God’s name could look at the mountains of evidence pouring out of every crevice and angle of this story, and not see what was happening? Within the fortress of his talent and fame, Jackson lived exactly as he liked. He was hardly the first star to do so, nor was he the only one to wrestle with conflicting desires for attention and concealment. But, in him, the performer’s primal need to be witnessed collided in a quite spectacular way with the criminal’s compulsion to stay hidden. These conflicting imperatives, played out to their human limit, produced a life that seemed to derange everyone who crisscrossed it, starting, of course, with the man in the mirror. And what on earth did we think we were watching as the astounding young performer altered his features, the structure of his face and the color of his skin? We peered at his military costumes, his sunglasses, the Kabuki makeup and curls cascading down the front of his face, and winced at the disappearing nose, itself covered at times by surgical masks. We gawked, only half understanding the marriages that looked not at all like marriages, but like the union of two different life forms unsure why people kept insisting they stand together and be photographed. And even as Jackson cried persecution and sang anthems about children and started charities and wore mask upon mask, in his songs he told us about all of it, how he felt about every part of it. Whatever else he was, Jackson was an artist, and that is what artists do — they turn what they know, at the deepest levels, into art. And so we have the Michael Jackson songbook, an oeuvre so supercharged with crime and punishment it is Dostoyevskian. “Smooth Criminal” begins on the sound of a fast heartbeat, a titillating sensation similar to one you might feel reading a Patricia Highsmith novel. Jackson sings in rough voice, announcing his presence with a joyous yelp, the call of an animal with a fresh kill. Make no mistake, this is a song about the thrill of getting away with something big; it is a crow of pride — “You’ve been struck by a smooth criminal!” And no wonder I couldn’t understand the lyrics to “Billie Jean”: Jackson’s verbal illegibility is in keeping with everything else going on in that twilight zone of lust and concealment. (A rather hilarious website that collects misheard pop lyrics lists Michael Jackson as its number-one artist. Shameless!) The one line we could always hear clearly was the singer’s denial that an accuser was his lover. But if that was the case, why is the song filled with unanswered questions, its atmosphere so turbulent and guilty? Jackson laid out the themes of his life in the very song that made him a superstar. It was with “Billie Jean” that he debuted the moonwalk in 1983, which, with his unflinching instinct for showmanship, he reserved for the song’s home stretch. His beautiful dancer’s body signaled it was moving forward while it was in fact sliding backward. He seemed free of gravitational laws. And, indeed, that is what his new level of stardom ensured, and he seemed to know it in every snew of his being. With “Billie Jean,” he interacted on some divine level with all the people of Earth, becoming not a pop star but the pop star, a man whose death would be mourned by one billion people. (When Jackson died, my husband was in an Uzbekistan hotel, where the entire staff gathered around the one TV screen available to them and wept.) “Billie Jean” (original title: “Not My Lover”) is a portal to Jackson World and a reminder we choose the themes of our life (as per the song, mysteries about his parenthood still surround Jackson’s youngest son). With this song, Jackson seizes his future, and he invites us to listen in on his internal debate: “Just remember to always think twice,” followed by the urgent, “Don’t think twice! Don’t think twice!” and a high, wolfish howl. And finally, a line that could be on his gravestone: “My mother always told me be careful who you love / Be careful what you do / ‘Cause the lie becomes the truth.” Jackson said “Billie Jean” was inspired by the women who followed the Jackson Five when the band toured, trips during which his father and brothers conducted their sexual encounters in the same hotel room with a boy who pretended to be asleep. The father, Joseph, who sired 11 children with two women, presented a protean example of taking what he wanted — his oldest daughter allegedly filed a sexual assault complaint against him when she was 13 and eventually went to live with another family, and another daughter told of sexual abuse as well. The mother, Katherine, was naturally a world-class denialist; I watched a 2003 ABC interview in which she defended Michael, calling his accusers “mean and wicked.” She could reverse course in mid-sentence — “It’s not really plastic surgery, I mean, if you don’t like your nose you get it done.” When reporter Michel McQueen asked Katherine, a practicing Jehovah’s Witness, how she felt about Michael grabbing his crotch onstage, the mother said, “People say he was grabbing his crotch, but he was not grabbing his crotch; if you look he had his hand on the side of his belt like this,” and gestured to the area of her thigh.α I’ve always been obsessed with lyrics. It’s not a showy art form, and it often requires restraint to achieve its greatest effect (in fact, I’ve just finished writing a book on Oscar Hammerstein II and this very subject). Just as poems do, lyrics inevitably reveal something of the author’s interior landscape. When I was a kid, I filled notebooks of favorite song lyrics, which I transcribed from vinyl records. It was a painstaking process: I sat by the turntable, leaning forward every 30 seconds or so to pick up the needle and softly place it a few grooves back, ensuring I got each word exactly right. As a young adult, Jackson’s lyrics escaped my notice; in my ignorance they struck me as primarily dance songs and not ones that demanded my attention. Listening closely for the first time, I found that parsing the Jackson songbook for autobiography is as ridiculously easy as it is fulfilling, whether the lyrics were penned by him or for him (he authored more than 200 songs). I wrote more than 100 of his many lyrics of persecution, his least interesting persona (though it’s worth noting that in “They Don’t Care About Us,” Jackson conflates his legal troubles with those of citizens who get targeted for no reason other than color). The rest are more telling. They are hardly revelations, but they do tell a story. In “Bad” (1987), music and lyrics by Jackson, he makes a promise that he kept: They say the sky’s the limit And to me that’s really true But my friends you have seen nothin’ Just wait till I get through On that Brisbane stage, Jackson smiles with inordinate happiness watching tiny Wade mimic moves that reek of adult sexuality, while the background lyrics blare, “I’m bad, come on, you know it, I’m really really bad.” Watching some 30 years later, I can draw no other conclusion than Jackson wanted us to know and thought that we did know. And on some not wholly conscious level, we did. Steve Porcaro wrote “Human Nature” (1983) for his five-year-old daughter after she asked him why a boy had hit her at school. Producer Quincy Jones brought in lyricist John Bettis to refashion the song for Jackson. The melody is contemplative, resigned, and Jackson makes it defiant as well. When they say why?, why? Tell ‘em that it’s human nature [...] I live livin’ this way I like lovin’ this way Jones also recruited Rod Temperton to write for Jackson, and the British songwriter gave the world “Thriller” in 1984. When Jackson invited Jimmy Safechuck to choose any jacket in his closet as a gift, the boy picked the red one that Jackson wore in the famous “Thriller” video — “Of course. Go big,” says Safechuck. Imagine how this nine-year-old, who watched movies in Jackson’s private theater with him before bed, eventually heard this lyric: “Cause this is thriller Thriller night And no one’s gonna save you From the beast about to strike Jackson wrote “Xscape” in 1999 for the Invincible album, though it was only released posthumously in 2014. This one needs no commentary. He sings it in his rough, “Smooth Criminal” voice. Why is it I can’t do whatever I want to? Went in my personal life and I don’t live for you So don’t you try to tell me what is right for me You be concerned about you, I can do what I want to “The Way You Make Me Feel” was one of five number-one hits from the Bad album, and it is written by Jackson. At the end of the song, Jackson includes a nod to “Ain’t Nobody’s Business,” a 1922 blues standard by Porter Grainger and Everett Robbins that was recorded by Bessie Smith in 1923 and Billie Holiday in 1949. 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