

Michael Jackson's tragedy

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With Michael Jackson's arrest and indictment on charges of child molestation, the American public is now being subjected to the latest scandal involving celebrities and sex. The various media outlets have yet another opportunity to indulge in their customary feeding frenzy, to compete for the latest rumor, innuendo and salacious detail.

We are guaranteed the debasing spectacle of months of press and television coverage of the Jackson case, during which media pundits and talking heads will pontificate, gloat or smirk, depending on his or her particular "angle," without offering a single serious insight.

The media functions in this unhappy episode along a number of lines: to divert public attention from genuinely pressing issues, particularly the ongoing violence and death in Iraq, to pollute and deaden public consciousness by every possible means, and to pursue anything that might "get the blood flowing" in the hope of gaining circulation, building up advertising, etc.

No facts in the case have yet been presented and Michael Jackson is entitled to the presumption of innocence. His accuser is reportedly a 12- or 13-year-old cancer survivor (the singer hosts events for seriously ill children at his ranch) who was a guest at Jackson's Neverland Ranch north of Santa Barbara, California.

The singer's defenders allege that the boy's mother has launched the legal action to extort a big financial settlement from Jackson. On November 25, Jackson's lawyer, Mark Geragos, angrily told the media, "If anybody doesn't think, based upon what's happened so far, that the true motivation of these charges and these allegations is anything but money and the seeking of money, then they're living in their own Neverland."

Reports have appeared in the press suggesting that the boy's mother has a history of making abuse allegations. An audiotape has also emerged, made by the woman and her son last February, in which they praise Jackson and reject the notion that any inappropriate behavior has occurred. On the tape the woman apparently states that God had blessed her family by bringing Jackson into their lives and calls him a "father figure" to her son. A signed affidavit along the same lines reportedly also exists. An attorney for the father has disputed the accusations against Jackson.

The campaign by Santa Barbara authorities against Jackson has reactionary political and social overtones. County district attorney Tom Sneddon is a conservative Republican with an ax to grind. In 1993 he was hoping to prosecute Jackson on similar charges when the singer settled out of court with a family that had launched a civil suit.

The singer later retaliated by writing and recording a thinly-

disguised attack on Sneddon. The district attorney could barely conceal his glee during last Wednesday's press conference at which he announced the charges. Santa Barbara officials had already indicated their approach by the heavy-handed intrusion of 70 personnel from the county sheriff's department into Jackson's ranch.

In an interview with *ABC News*, Jermaine Jackson, one of Michael's older brothers, condemned Sneddon's "personal vendetta." He added, "They're a bunch of racist rednecks out there who don't care about people." Earlier, in a telephone conversation with a CNN newswoman, Jermaine Jackson called the case "a modern-day lynching." The entire Jackson family, including his father, about whom Michael has had harsh things to say in the past, has come to the singer's defense.

Sneddon no doubt sees himself as a crusader in a cultural and moral war. There is a social layer in this country that presumes the very worst about Jackson, is bitter that he escaped prosecution a decade ago and would like to see him crucified. A great deal of pent-up rage and frustration, encouraged by right-wing forces, is being directed his way. Although the targets have very little in common and the charges are quite different, there is a hint of the Oscar Wilde scapegoating of 1895 in the current affair.

That Jackson is a damaged, perhaps seriously disturbed individual seems beyond dispute. Whether he is guilty of the crimes with which he is charged is another matter. Whatever the facts of the case, one is tempted to say that if law enforcement officials and the media did not have Jackson to place on trial, they would have had to invent him.

Eccentricity in behavior, particularly sexual behavior, is viewed by a considerable portion of the US legal-police establishment as near-proof of criminal behavior. Even if Jackson were proven guilty of such crimes as to justify his being separated from the community, a humane society would view him with sadness and even sympathy, rather than scorn and hatred.

What are other people to make of Michael Jackson when he obviously has so little idea of who he is himself? His life story is the stuff of folklore. Born in Gary, Indiana—a working-class suburb of Chicago—in 1958, the son of a crane operator in a steel mill, Jackson, one of nine children, began his professional career at the age of five as the lead singer of the Jackson 5.

The group was signed by Motown Records in 1968, leading to a string of hits. As a solo act from the late 1970s, Jackson was for nearly a decade the leading figure in international popular music. His second album with producer Quincy Jones, "Thriller," released in 1982, was an astounding success, producing seven hit singles and selling more than 50 million copies worldwide. In

1984 Jackson won a record-breaking eight Grammy awards.

Jackson has spoken openly about his personal difficulties. He asserts, and this is confirmed by his brothers, that his father was demanding and controlling, and that he was regularly beaten. Joseph Jackson, his son claims, would tease and ridicule him.

“I don’t know if I was his golden child or whatever, but he was very strict, very hard, very stern. Just a look would scare you. ... [T]here’s been times when he’d come to see me, I’d get sick, I’d start to regurgitate,” he told Oprah Winfrey in 1993. Jackson gave the impression in that interview that for most of his life loneliness and sadness had been his lot.

Jackson has been a public personality from a tender age. The entertainment business has helped him become what he is, for which it deserves censure. The falseness, the unreality of perpetually putting on a public face and concealing personal suffering have clearly taken their toll, in Jackson’s case in a particularly acute form.

The singer has acknowledged that for many years he was “most comfortable on stage,” that this was his real “home.” No one should blame him for taking reality on stage for reality itself.

For a black performer who has become the greatest “crossover” act of all time, burying one’s identity must have had an added and perilous significance. Why should anyone be overly shocked or outraged by Jackson’s physical transformation? He has merely followed the culture’s own arguments, its relentless addiction to the false and unreal, to their logical, if grotesque, conclusion.

His immaturity seems bound up with the same facts—a life spent in a show business cocoon, at a certain point surrounded by a gigantic entourage devoted to fulfilling his every whim. The “Peter Pan complex,” the apparently fake marriages, the surrogate mother for his third child—everything points to a man floundering in a set of conflicting demands.

All his desperate (and ultimately pathetic) efforts to be what “America,” i.e., official public opinion, apparently wants him to be—whiter, sexually non-threatening, heterosexual, a parent—separate him farther from any conception of where his own real self might be found. In the face of this fakery and loss of reality Jackson seems genuinely convinced of only one truth—that his life would be more enjoyable if he could experience it as a child.

It often happens in America that nothing is more damaging than success, and the greater the success, the greater the damage. An almost preternaturally talented boy from a dysfunctional, working class family, Jackson was swept up by the American entertainment industry’s bone-crushing machinery—and not, given his psychic vulnerabilities, at the most propitious moment.

Jackson’s greatest individual success coincided with the Reagan years in the US, a period in which many in America put the radicalism of the 1970s—their own or other people’s—behind them and concentrated on the business of becoming wealthy. Selfishness, hedonism, individualism, greed were given pride of place. Jackson was a phenomenally gifted singer, dancer and songwriter, but the ability to say something with one’s music is not inborn nor the product even of incessant rehearsing and parental pressure.

The Jackson 5 arrived on the musical scene and at Motown, in

particular, in a period of widespread protest. The record company, owned by Berry Gordy, a fervent believer in “Black Capitalism,” had not been spared contact with radical currents.

In 1971, Gordy and singer Marvin Gaye clashed over the latter’s desire to record “What’s Going On,” an anti-Vietnam War song. Gaye, whose cousin had died in Vietnam and whose brother had served three tours there, wondered out loud at the time, “With the world exploding around me, how am I supposed to keep singing love songs?” Other black performers such as Stevie Wonder recorded songs highly critical of Richard Nixon in the early 1970s. Curtis Mayfield was an outspoken opponent of war and racism.

The Jacksons, through no fault of their own, served as one of the music industry’s antidotes to all that with what became known as “bubblegum soul.” Jackson broke with his childish musical persona in the late 1970s, but there is no need to overestimate his achievement. He demonstrated extraordinary skills, but the content of his songs never rose to notably insightful and certainly not oppositional heights. In the media discussion about Jackson, one always has to distinguish between the appreciation of his genuine gifts and the far greater awe with which journalists and industry insiders regard his sales figures and accumulation of personal wealth.

The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of the polished but bland entertainment industry “blockbuster”—the Lucas-Spielberg productions: the *Star Wars* films, the *Indiana Jones* series, *E.T.*; on television, *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, etc. Jackson’s recordings, again largely through no fault of his own, fit into this general picture, as the work of an exciting and dynamic, but, in the end, relatively harmless public figure.

From this point of view, one might say that having helped create Jackson, manipulated his appeal and nurtured his personal eccentricities, the establishment will now make use of him for another purpose: as this year’s victim of a corrupt and insatiable media out to channel popular discontent along channels that represent the least possible threat to the powers that be.

However Michael Jackson’s court case turns out, one has the feeling that a sad, perhaps even tragic fate lies in store for the performer. Everything about American society and its entertainment industry in particular, of which he is both a celebrated figure and a victim, would seem to point in that direction.



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