

Michael Jackson's death

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One greets the death of singer Michael Jackson at the age of 50 with genuine sadness, but without extraordinary surprise. Given the entire set of circumstances, it was not clear how his saga might end happily. Individuals who enjoy immense celebrity and success in America so often pay a terrible price.

Undoubtedly a great many people are moved by Jackson's death. After all, he was one of the first global performing superstars and reportedly sold some three quarters of a billion albums worldwide. Those who enjoyed his music and dancing, and also perhaps felt sympathy for his obvious personal traumas, will respond with spontaneous emotion.

The opposite must be said about the reactions of entertainment industry moguls and the media, along with—ludicrously—various political figures (from British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Germany's economy minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg to former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and the Philippines' former first lady, Imelda Marcos). Here financial (and even political) calculation and cynicism vie with one another.

Jackson's death at a rented home in Los Angeles Thursday afternoon produced a massive burst of interest on various online services, as well as a surge in sales of his music. The cable television channels and Internet news outlets can talk of little else. MTV reported Friday that "Jackson's music managed to fill every slot in Amazon's Top 15 best-seller list and occupy half of iTunes' Top 20 downloaded albums and singles."

It is not doing recording industry executives, a notoriously predatory breed, any particular injustice to suppose that Jackson's death was immediately looked upon in certain circles as a golden opportunity to improve this year's tumbling compact disc sales (analysts forecast that overall music sales in 2009 will be \$23 billion, down 16 percent from 2006).

In an official statement Sony chief executive officer Howard Stringer—whose company owns the rights to Jackson's best-selling music—called the singer "a brilliant troubadour for his generation, a genius whose music reflected the passion and creativity of an era," while Bloomberg wire service noted that Sony "may boost revenue through a rebound in sales of the late pop icon's CDs and DVDs." A Deutsche Bank AG analyst in Tokyo, however, poured cold water on the excitement, pointing out that the contribution to the company's overall earnings brought about by Jackson's passing "will be limited and won't likely impact Sony's share price."

As for the mass media, at the time of Jackson's 2005 trial in California on charges of child molestation, the various news outlets highlighted each salacious detail and speculated in the most lurid fashion about his private life. His acquittal on all charges was

met by a collective groan of disappointment from the tabloids and the media generally. The prospect of Jackson sentenced to prison offered simply too many opportunities for further publicizing and exploiting his humiliations.

Following his death, the *Los Angeles Times* noted: "The tabloids that had baited Jackson mercilessly when he was alive, dubbing him 'Wacko Jacko' for his erratic behavior, increasingly strange looks and accusations of child molestation, were suddenly effusive in their praise of a man 'who provided the soundtrack to a billion lives.'"

One of the most repugnant offenders in all such cases, Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* in Britain, for example, pontificated Friday: "He fought off his accusers, but his health was broken and his fortune destroyed. Let us remember today the Michael Jackson the world loved: The child star of the Jackson Five whose talent, charisma and charm captivated the world. ...

"The whole world was his stage and the whole of mankind his audience. Those lucky enough to have seen him will never forget it. Those with his records—and can there be anyone who *hasn't* got his records—will play them today and weep."

Such was the corrupt, hypocritical environment in which Jackson operated and that effectively destroyed him. It would seem imprudent to separate his death, whatever its immediate physiological cause proves to be, from the immense strains in his life. A professional entertainer for 40 years, endlessly pursued by the media, hounded by scandal, under great pressure to make a successful comeback, Jackson—whose health had not been good for years—succumbed on the eve of a grueling series of 50 concerts in London, scheduled to extend from July until March 2010.

Promoters insisted that Jackson undergo "a series of rigorous medical check-ups" before agreeing to the shows, undertaken in part to help the singer extricate himself from what were reported to be hundreds of millions of dollars in debts. Typical of the macabre and ruthless atmosphere surrounding Jackson, British bookmakers William Hill offered only 1/8 odds that he would show up for his first scheduled performance. Los Angeles publicist Michael Levine, who once represented the performer, told a press conference: "A human simply cannot withstand this level of prolonged stress."

Over the course of his life, various processes came together to seal Michael Jackson's fate. In the first place, of course, there was his immense talent. It is very difficult at this point to get behind the self-serving media frenzy and hyperbole and reconstruct an accurate picture of his gifts. Video of his audition for Motown Records in 1968, when Jackson was 10 years old, suggests the kind of popular musical prodigy he was. As a commentator notes,

Jackson “dances, he shimmies, swivels and backslides across the floor in a blur of independently operating limbs, triumphantly demonstrating that the human body can be an instrument, not just a dumb appliance” (*Guardian*).

Growing up in the industrial town of Gary, Indiana, Jackson absorbed the music and feeling in the air, and enjoyed commercial possibilities made possible by the struggles and sacrifices of the civil rights movement, as well as African-American performers of previous generations.

Coming from a difficult family background, as we noted in 2003, “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.”

This is not to diminish the brilliance of Jackson’s dancing and performing, which perhaps reached its height in the 1980s. A reader of the WSWS recalls a performance at the time: “The group performed some older material together, then Michael would perform his songs. On the few occasions when he had done several in a row and left the stage to take a break, the other Jacksons would perform, and Jermaine would do some numbers from his new solo album ... This was just marking time, however. We were all just waiting for Michael to return. Then Michael would come back on stage and the arena would go mad. ... What a dancer!

What energy! He truly mesmerized the audience.”

Jackson was also the beneficiary of relatively new technologies and formats: the music video came to prominence in the early 1980s with the launching of MTV (Music Television), the cable television network. In 1983, the nearly 14-minute video for his song “Thriller” was released, at an unheard of cost of half a million dollars. The album “Thriller” went on to sell an astonishing 109 million copies, making it the bestselling such compilation of all time.

To the entertainment and media world such stratospheric success signifies both money and blood. On the one hand, of course, CD and DVD sales, live performances, endorsements, publicity deals, and all the rest generate huge profits for the conglomerates, which exploit and feed off the genuine talent of individuals such as Jackson and many, many others. Years of effort, vocal or compositional skill, conscientiousness, generosity, humanity, whatever the performer brings to his or her music, is valuable to the industry only in so far as it brings in money.

On the other hand, celebrity itself plays an important and unhealthy role in the US. In a country where only the most constricted official debate takes place over vital issues (between right-wing and other, even more right-wing conceptions) and political life is almost entirely scripted, a voyeuristic fascination with the lives of the wealthy and famous helps fill some of the void and also diverts the attention of the population from its real needs and interests.

At the same time, however, popular frustration and discontent do not disappear. The general public’s attitude, nourished by the media, toward “celebrities” often veers between uncritical admiration and resentment. The tabloids, talk shows and “entertainment news programs” manipulate these sentiments for their own purposes. The unfortunate athlete, pop star or movie performer who falls from grace may find him or herself demonized in a truly monstrous manner.

For someone like Jackson, gifted but also psychologically deeply troubled, to be violently jerked around—adored one day, ridiculed and despised the next—must have been particularly distressing. This is a man who, according to his own words, lived for his performances on the stage and for the adulation of anonymous masses of people.

Now, the giant media and entertainment machinery will try and extract what value it can from Jackson’s death, while keeping its eyes open for its next victim.



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