

A close-up portrait of Michael Jackson, smiling and looking down. He has his signature curly hair and is wearing a white shirt. The background is dark and textured.

MICHAEL *Joseph*
JACKSON



1958-2009





MICHAEL





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Michael Joseph Jackson was born August 29, 1958, in Gary, IN. The fifth son of steelworker Joe Jackson, Michael displayed a talent for music and dance from an extremely young age. His childhood was strictly regimented; from the start, he was to an extent sheltered from the outside world by his mother's Jehovah's Witness faith, and his father was by all accounts an often ill-tempered disciplinarian. Joe began to organize a family musical group around his three eldest sons in 1962, and Michael joined them the following year, quickly establishing himself as a dynamic stage performer. His dead-on mastery of James Brown's dance moves and soulful, mature-beyond-his-years vocals made him a natural focal point, especially given his incredibly young age. Dubbed the Jackson 5, the group signed to Motown in 1968 and issued their debut single in October 1969, when Michael was just 11 years old. "I Want You Back," "ABC," "The Love You Save," and "I'll Be There" all hit number one in 1970, making the Jackson 5 the first group in pop history to have their first four singles top the charts. Motown began priming Michael for a solo career in 1971, and his first single, "Got to Be There," was issued toward the end of the year; it hit the Top Five, as did the follow-up, a cover of Bobby Day's "Rockin' Robin." Later in 1972, Jackson had his first number one solo single, "Ben," the title song from a children's thriller about a young boy who befriends Ben, the highly intelligent leader of a gang of homicidal rats. Given the subject matter, the song was surprisingly sincere and sentimental, and even earned an Oscar nomination. However, the momentum of Jackson's solo career (much like that of the Jackson 5) soon stalled. He released his fourth and final album on Motown in 1975, and the following year, he and his brothers (save Jermaine) signed to Epic and became the Jacksons.

In 1977, Jackson landed a starring role alongside Diana Ross in the all-black film musical *The Wiz*, a retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*; here he met producer/composer Quincy Jones for the first time. Encouraged by the success of the Jacksons' self-produced, mostly self-written 1978 album *Destiny*, Jackson elected to resume his solo career when his management contract with his father expired shortly thereafter. With Jones producing, Jackson recorded his first solo album as an adult, *Off the Wall*. An immaculately

crafted set of funky disco-pop, smooth soul, and lush, sentimental pop ballads, *Off the Wall* made Jackson a star all over again. It produced four Top Ten singles, including the number one hits "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" and "Rock With You," and went platinum (it went on to sell over seven million copies); even so, Jackson remained loyal to his brothers and stayed with the group.

No group could have contained Jackson's rapidly rising star for long; however, there was still no sign (if there ever could be) that his next album would become the biggest in history. Released in 1982, the Quincy Jones-produced *Thriller* refined the strengths of *Off the Wall*; the dance and rock tracks were more driving, the pop tunes and ballads softer and more soulful, and all of it was recognizably Michael. Jackson brought in Paul McCartney for a duet, guitarist Eddie Van Halen for a jaw-dropping solo, and Vincent Price for a creepy recitation. It was no surprise that *Thriller* was a hit; what was a surprise was its staying power. Jackson's duet with McCartney, "The Girl Is Mine," was a natural single choice, and it peaked at number two; then "Billie Jean" and the Van Halen track "Beat It" both hit number one, for seven and three weeks respectively. Those latter two songs, as well as the future Top Five title track, had one important feature in common: Jackson supported them with elaborately conceived video clips that revolutionized the way music videos were made. Jackson treated them as song-length movies with structured narratives: "Billie Jean" set the song's tale of a paternity suit in a nightmarish dream world where Jackson was a solitary, sometimes invisible presence; the anti-gang-violence "Beat It" became an homage to *West Side Story*; and the ten-minute-plus clip for "Thriller" (routinely selected as the best video of all time) featured Jackson leading a dance troupe of rotting zombies, with loads of horror-film makeup and effects. Having never really accepted black artists in the past, MTV played the clips to death, garnering massive publicity for Jackson and droves of viewers for the fledgling cable network. Jackson sealed his own phenomenon by debuting his signature "moonwalk" dance step on May 16, 1983, on Motown's televised 25th anniversary special; though he didn't invent the moonwalk (as he himself was quick to point out), it became as much of a Jackson signature as his vocal hiccups or single white-sequined glove.

Showing no signs of slowing down, Thriller just kept spinning off singles, including "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'," the airy ballad "Human Nature," and "P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)"; in all, seven of its nine tracks wound up in the Top Ten, obliterating conventional ideas of how many singles could be released from an album before it ran its course. Thriller stayed on the charts for over two years, spent 37 nonconsecutive weeks at number one, and became the best-selling album of all time; it went on to sell 25 million copies in the U.S. alone, and around another 20 million overseas. Naturally, Jackson won a slew of awards, including a record eight Grammys in one night, and snagged the largest endorsement deal ever when he became a spokesman for Pepsi (he would later be burned in an accident while filming a commercial). At the end of 1983, Jackson was again on top of the singles charts, this time as part of a second duet with McCartney, "Say Say Say." In 1984, Jackson rejoined his brothers one last time for the album Victory, whose supporting tour was one of the biggest (and priciest) of the year. The following year, he and Lionel Richie co-wrote the anthemic "We Are the World" for the all-star famine-relief effort USA for Africa; it became one of the fastest-selling singles ever. In late 1996, Jackson remarried, to nurse Debbie Rowe; over the next two years, the couple had two children, son Prince Michael Jackson, Jr. and daughter Paris Michael Katherine Jackson. However, Jackson and Rowe divorced in late 1999. In 2001, Jackson was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and later held a massive concert at Madison Square Garden celebrating the 30th anniversary of his first solo record. Among many other celebrity guests, the show featured the first on-stage reunion of the Jacksons since the Victory tour. In the wake of September 11, Jackson put together an all-star charity benefit single, "What More Can I Give." His new album, Invincible, was released late in the year, marking the first time he'd issued a collection of entirely new material since Dangerous; it found him working heavily with urban soul production wizard Rodney Jerkins. Invincible debuted at number one and quickly went

double platinum; however, its initial singles, "You Rock My World" and "Butterflies," had rather disappointing showings on the charts, with the latter not even reaching the Top Ten. To compound matters, the expensive "What More Can I Give" single and video were canceled by Sony when executive producer Marc Schaffel was revealed to work in pornography. Jackson's camp tried to distance the singer from Schaffel, and the various corporations that were attached to it (McDonalds, Sony) claimed they had minimal involvement if any with the song. Sony and Jackson began a press war in the summer of 2002, starting with Jackson's claims that the label asked for 200 million dollars to pay them back for marketing costs. Although they had spent 55 million on his disappointing comeback, Sony released a statement saying that no such request had ever been made. Jackson stewed for a few weeks before launching a press attack on Sony Music chairman Tommy Mottola, calling him "devilish" and making claims that he used racist language and held down black artists. Many Sony artists, including Mariah Carey and Ricky Martin, defended Mottola, but Jackson and his family maintained that racism ended their professional relationship. From that point, Jackson's career took an extreme turn toward the bizarre, starting with MTV's annual Video Awards. When Britney Spears presented him with a birthday cake, an offhand remark about being the artist of the millennium inspired a rambling Jackson to accept a meaningless trophy (which everyone presenting on-stage received) as an actual Artist of the Millennium award. Next came accusations from a promotional company over his promises of a tour and several appearances that he then canceled. Jackson arrived in court late, gave a drowsy testimony, and inspired gasps when he removed a surgical mask to reveal his nose had caved in from a botched cosmetic surgery. Only days later, German fans were horrified when Jackson came to the balcony of his hotel suite and briefly dangled his 11-month old baby Prince Michael II (nicknamed "Blanket" by Jackson) over the edge with one arm. Although he apologized the next day, claiming he had gotten caught

up in the moment, this only did more to cement the King of Pop's public image as an out-of-control millionaire. 2003 turned out to not be Jackson's year as in November his Neverland Ranch was extensively searched by police, whereby he was subsequently arrested on charges of child molestation. That same month the single disc retrospective Number Ones hit the stands with one new song, "One More Chance". A year later - nearly to the day - the four CD and one DVD box set The Ultimate Collection appeared with numerous rarities including the original demo for "We Are the World". In January 2005 his child molestation trial began and by May he was acquitted on all counts. Jackson soon relocated to the Persian Gulf island of Bahrain and began working on new music including a charity single that would benefit victims of Hurricane Katrina. The single never appeared but the two disc The Essential Michael Jackson did and in 2006 the strange box set Visionary was released featuring 20 DualDiscs replicating 20 big hit singles with their videos included on the DVD side. In early 2007 it was announced that a comeback album was planned for late in the year; the album never materialized.

While in the middle of rehearsing for a series of 50 comeback concerts scheduled for the summer of 2009, Michael Jackson collapsed from a cardiac arrest on the afternoon of June 25, 2009. He was rushed to the UCLA Medical Center where he was pronounced dead at the age of 50.

- Steve Huey, *All Music Guide*





Michael Jackson
NEVERLAND









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