

**This interview with  
QUINCY JONES,  
producer of “Thriller,” was completed  
by the Library of Congress on June 6, 2016.**



*Michael Jackson and Quincy Jones*

**LOC:** When you began the album, did you and Michael approach it with a particular theme in mind? What did you want to do with this LP that was different from “Off the Wall”?

**Quincy Jones:** Like everyone else, I always go into the studio to make a number one record, but anyone who tells you that they knew a record was going to be a big hit is a flat-out liar. We knew that we had something special with “Off The Wall,” but we had no idea that it was going to be as successful as it was. With it, Michael had successfully transcended from the world of “bubble-gum” pop and planted his flag on top of the ‘80’s music mountain.

“Off the Wall” set the bar pretty high, but what came next with “Thriller,” I don’t think any of us were ready for. I always say you have to leave space for God to walk into the room, and man did he/she ever. Michael, the music and MTV all took it to the stratosphere. It was the perfect convergence of forces. When “Thriller” came out, it chewed up everything in its way.

**LOC:** Legend has it that you and Michael considered over 600 songs for the final LP. Is this true? What was the process of culling through that many songs? What did a song have to have to make the final cut?

**QJ:** It all starts with the song. A great song can make a star out of the worst singer in the world, but even Sinatra or Aretha can’t save a bad song. Each song on an album should have its own thing that contributes to the whole, and you need to put some thought into how each song flows

into the next and what part each song plays. With “Thriller,” every song works together to create one album that gives the listener a dramatic experience in nine scenes. You also need to give the ear six choices of things to listen to on each song so that every time they listen, they hear something new. That way, they have to listen to a song multiple times to get the full experience of it. A big part of the sales success of “Thriller” was that people were buying three and four copies of the record because they would wear them out playing them over and over again.

Rod and I listened to 800 songs, 30 written by Rod, to get to the nine we used on “Thriller.” Our only criteria being to satisfy “our ears.” Once we had the nine done, I took out the four weakest ones...and those four were great songs that went on to be hits for some other artists, and replaced them with “Lady in My Life,” “P.Y.T.,” “Human Nature” and “Beat It.” That was it, it was over!

**LOC: Rod Temperton seemed to write well for Jackson and for this album—what drew you, as a producer, to his work?**

**QJ:** Rod is an amazing songwriter, period. Not just for Michael, but for James Ingram, Patti Austin, Rufus and Chaka Khan, Herbie Hancock, and a host of others. His creativity just doesn’t stop. He has an excellent compositional instinct and writes great music. He has absorbed it to such an extent that it just comes straight out of him as if it were second nature. He wrote three songs for “Thriller”...”Baby Be Mine,” “The Lady in My Life” and “Thriller” and wrote the Vincent Price intro to “Thriller” in the car on the way from the airport to the studio. I mean are you kidding me? It’s insane his talent. He’s the best friend and brother you could ever work with. Rod is one of my go to songwriters.

**LOC: How would you describe your role as producer on “Thriller”?**

**QJ:** If an album doesn’t do well everyone says “it was the producers fault;” so if it does well, it should be your fault to. The tracks don’t just all of a sudden appear. The producer has to have the skill, experience and ability to guide the vision to completion. To take charge of virtually every phase of the creative process from finding the right songs to the album’s packaging. You are the conductor of everything from the bottom to the top.

And you need to understand the importance of working with the best people you can at every step from finding the right engineer and studio, to the right instrumentalists and background singers. Outside of my “Killer Q Posse” of Rod Temperton and Bruce Swedien...the best engineer in the business; nobody knew what we were doing on “Thriller,” at times, not even Michael. If you listen to “Baby Be Mine,” that song is pure Coltrane. The production has a bass line on it and pop lyrics, but the essence of the song is Coltrane. Michael had more talent than I had ever seen: dancing, singing, and performing. I was mentored by all the jazz guys growing up, had years of experience producing, arranging and composing for so many of the great artists and for film, and had studied composition with Nadia Boulanger, who had taught Stravinsky and Aaron Copeland. Add in Rod, Bruce and the rest of my “posse,” and some space to let God walk through the room, and it was a powerful team with everyone operating from their strengths. We had the perfect balance of soul and science.

**LOC: You have worked with a galaxy of extraordinary musical talents—where does Michael Jackson fit in that lexicon? In terms of in the studio, did he remind you of anyone else that you worked with?**

**QJ:** When you work with artists like Sinatra, Ray Charles, Sarah Vaughan or Aretha, to name a few that I've worked with, you better know what you're doing and be prepared, because they can all tell in a second if you don't and will run over you. Early on I focused on mastering my craft, so that when I ask an artist to leap without a net, they have the trust in me that I won't let them fall.

What you have to understand is that artists like Sinatra, Ray, Sarah, Aretha and the true legends, are totally dedicated to their craft. There is innate natural talent, but every single one of them works extremely hard to be the best. That's why their music transcends generations. I've been in the studio with Aretha when she would sing a section of a song over and over again, exploring and developing it. It doesn't happen automatically if you don't work at it.

When Michael and I first worked together on "The Wiz," I saw his work ethic. He knew everybody's songs and lines from the movie. Plus he was getting up very early in the morning to do five hours of make-up every day. This was a young man that had already found success, but he was that dedicated to what he was doing. Michael was an extremely hard worker, and that was the common denominator that he had with great artists I had worked with in the past. So when he asked me to help him find a producer for his first solo record, which would become "Off The Wall," I said I'd like to take a try at it. I knew he had more inside of him artistically than he'd given us with The Jackson Five.

**LOC: Were even you surprised by the mega-success of the album? And by its incredible longevity?**

**QJ:** I believe that you must have humility with your creativity, and grace with your success. As I said earlier, we went into the studio with the intention of making a great record, but you never know what is going to happen when the album comes out. All you can do is make something that moves you...that gives you the "goosebumps." After that, if you're lucky, the stars align for you.

About a year after "Thriller" came out, I went to see one of my mentors, Count Basie, at the Palladium. I'd known Basie since I was 13 just coming up as a young musician in Seattle, and in the '60s it was one of the highlights of my life to record with him and Sinatra. When Basie saw me that night, he touched my arm and said, "Man, what you and Michael did, me and Duke [Ellington] would never even dream about nothin' that big. You hear me? We wouldn't even dare to *dream* about it!" It brought me to tears to hear that from this giant who was like a father to me.

Musically, we knew we had "it" with "Thriller." To this day I can hear artists trying to replicate its sonic power. It's no accident that more than three decades later no matter where I go in the world, in every club, like clockwork at the witching hour you hear "Billie Jean," "Beat It," "Wanna Be Starting Something," and "Thriller." In every language on the planet, from prison

yards in Thailand to Thrilltheworld.com, “Thriller” is still giving people “goosebumps.” It’s pretty astounding and very satisfying as an artist.