

“Janet Jackson’s Rhythm Nation 1814”—Janet Jackson (1989)

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Essay by Ayanna Dozier (guest post)*



Janet Jackson

Revolution Televised: “Janet Jackson’s Rhythm Nation”

“Janet Jackson’s Rhythm Nation 1814” is a significant piece of Black feminist cultural production that pioneered new modes of using popular music to convey socio-cultural commentary to a larger mainstream audience. Conceptual in form, the album’s impact on youth culture is made possible by Jackson’s attentiveness to the televisual as seen in the album’s music videos and its incorporation of television culture in its sonic arrangement. Whereas Jackson’s contemporaries like Madonna, Prince, and even her brother Michael, adapted to television from radio early in their career, Jackson was one of the first true simultaneous audio/visual artists of the 1980s. What emerges from this practice is an album that without having seen its accompanying videos *feels* visual and cues images to the imagination upon each listen. “Rhythm Nation 1814” responds to what media historian John B. Thompson writes as the verisimilitude of mediated historicity. Mediated historicity defines the growing access we have to media images of the past that rather than represent history or an event we did not live through they simply *become* history.¹ “Rhythm Nation” materializes this strenuous period in which our lives, communication, and perception of time and space become mediated through the televisual and rarely exist outside of it. During an era where “I want my MTV” was feverishly chanted by teenagers across the country, “Rhythm Nation 1814” is a time capsule of how television began to permeate our quotidian experiences in an irrevocable way.

“Rhythm Nation 1814” sees Jackson once again collaborate with producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis--returning from their successful debut with “Control” (1986). The album broke numerous records that I will not repeat here save for the incredible feat of having seven top five singles from one album in the “Billboard” top 100 and three “Billboard” number one singles placed in three different calendar year from a single album. In the album, we hear Jackson experiment with different genres that include; glam rock, pop, new jack swing, hip-hop, and R&B. The beat heavy album used a drum machine in its production, a practice that was more commonly associated with hip-hop music at the time and sonically posed a risk of alienating her

white “core pop fanbase.”² Additionally, Jackson’s experimentation extended itself to working through samples from various genres across music history. Notably, “Alright” features a sample from Lyn Collins’s “Think (About it)” and BTS Express’s “Do You Like It,” two prominent funk songs that place Jackson within a larger genealogy of Black music production (distinct from her family). In a MTV interview for her “janet.” (1993) album, Jackson discussed the importance of using citation via samples or features to educate her fanbase on Black history. Jackson stated that she credits music, specifically hip-hop, for how it educates its audience on the rich history of Black culture that is often erased from official records or simply not taught.³

The samples used on “Rhythm Nation 1814” do several things: one they remix previous generations of Black cultural production and demonstrate how history, like a remix, is something that is open and not petrified in time. The other is that the sample, as a citation, literally bridges a temporal gap to forge an intergenerational dialogue. No other sample on the album does this best than the title track, “Rhythm Nation,” which features an impressive use of Sly and the Family Stone’s “Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin).” This sonic mastery of its use is made evident in its subtlety where the listener is only given a faint trace of the foot stompin’ classic. The sample here operates as a memory that capitalizes on the wide distributional reach that “Thank You” had worldwide. The song “Rhythm Nation” not only reminds audiences of that outreach but builds on top of its legacy through its sonic difference. The difference between the two songs is key for it speaks to Jackson’s creative agency but also the postmodern zeal that blanketed socio-cultural practices--what scholar Stuart Hall describes as popular culture’s absorption of cultural difference.⁴ However, where Jackson succeeds in her use of cultural citation is her ability to call attention to difference, rather than collapse them; differences across gender, geography, temporality, genre, and form that resists postmodernism’s more cannibalistic practices.

“Rhythm Nation 1814” is jamboree of emotions, politics, relationships, and bliss with the same fervent ardor as one takes when flipping through the channels. Media scholar Neil Postman described the television in the 1980s as the facilitator of a supraideology of entertainment insofar as entertainment became the natural representation for all experiences everywhere.⁵ For Postman, this quick flicker and continuous structure of television programming (“Join us tomorrow” segments on the news for example) warped our communication with the world and reduced traumatic experiences to “cheap thrills,” desensitizing the very audience it was meant to “inform.”⁶ Producer Jimmy Jam remarked that Jackson’s experience watching CNN and their coverage of poverty, homelessness, racism, and major tragedies like the white supremacist Stockton playground murders inspired several songs on the album (“Rhythm Nation,” “State of the World,” and “Living in a World”).⁷ Beyond the immediacy of the lyrical content, the album’s pulse is tapped into the televisual signal that incorporates the promiscuous use of music culture in its structure.

The use of interludes on the album expand the sonic landscape and mirror something that is distinctively visual in form. When writing about Jackson’s use of interludes for “The Velvet Rope,” I located this practice as an experimental form of narrative that works to expand the disciplinary structures of musicking that place Jackson in the realm of theater, oral historian, and performance artist.⁸ If we take seriously the histories in which Black women are excluded from larger practices of cultural production, we can approach Black popular culture artists like

Jackson as interdisciplinary by design insofar as expanding their craft as musicians enabled them to occupy space elsewhere and ensure greater exposure. In this way, Jackson's interludes are a dramaturgical exercise of world building that pull the listener into gaps of intimacy, pleasure, socio-political commentary, tragedy reports, and more. The interlude, "T.V." captures this *feeling* through its sonic cue of hearing someone flip through the channels at rapid speed catching only auditory snippets of the frequency of emotions that one can experience in a day made possible by the television: one second you're watching a game show, the next it is a horrific news report. "Rhythm Nation 1814" similarly embodies this affective spectrum of experiences.

The album is experientially arranged to guide the listener through a political journey as well as a blossoming new romance. Jam remarks how Jackson resisted turning "Rhythm Nation 1814" into a standard pop album that front loaded the "hits" and featured the political commentary at the end.⁹ On that alternate record, the mid-point ballad, "Livin' in a World (They Didn't Make)" would have been the album's closing track which would have neatly summarized the overt socio-cultural commentary that runs rampant through the album. Instead, the album closes with the seductively alluring "Someday is Tonight" which would be the first track of many in Jackson's oeuvre to feature her aural registers of moaning, cooing, sweet-talking and heavy breathing as part of the melodics of the song. This move continues to surprise listeners as it foreshadows the divergent path of Janet's career from "little sister" to "grown woman" that would further be solidified on "janet." (1993). What strikes me about this closing track in relation to the larger album's thematics is how sex or, rather, intimacy is encapsulated as part of the album's political ethos. I root this union of sex and politics as part of a larger cultural practice by Black women in music from the Blues to Funk as described by L.H. Stallings in "Funk the Erotic." Black women in music production have long situated romance and sex as equal commitments to a political cause.¹⁰ "Rhythm Nation 1814" balances the tension expertly and demonstrates to Jackson's listeners how romance is not a narrative removed from political expression but rather is intertwined with it.

In the album's promotional visual materials, Jackson models a politically aware, informed, active *and* in love Black woman to a mainstream audience on the album and closed a transformative decade of Black feminist media production. Joseph Vogel reminds us that "Rhythm Nation 1814" plays a critical role in the development of Black feminist media by following works like Toni Morrison's "Beloved," Kathleen Collins's "Losing Ground," and Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Similarly, I want to link the importance of Kimberlee Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," in which she originates the term, "intersectionality" alongside these Black feminist media works that help ground the politics of "Rhythm Nation 1814."¹¹ Intersectionality defines how systems make some bodies legible depending on the intersections in which they fall along race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. Crenshaw, a legal studies scholar and activist, wrote the piece to reconcile with how Black women were rendered invisible through legality in domestic violence cases and job discrimination.¹² Crenshaw defines intersectionality as not an identity but rather a way of reading how institutions determine the viability and visibility of one's personhood *through* their identity. "Rhythm Nation 1814's" hybridity in genre, content, and form aesthetically maps an intersectional approach to engaging with how institutions facilitate power that determine the production and distribution of access, be that healthcare for substance abuse ("Black Cat"),

education (“The Knowledge”) or even affection (“Lonely”). While other Black feminist texts were producing a language and history around Black womanhood, Jackson served a critical role by producing popular media work that represented what the politics for Black women might look like.

While the televisual runs rampant through the album’s acoustics, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the groundbreaking music videos and visuals that set the template by which other pop artists would follow. “Rhythm Nation 1814 Film” simultaneously premiered alongside its album release as a “telemusical” 30-minute film directed by Dominic Sena. The B&W short film featured videos for “Miss You Much,” “The Knowledge,” and “Rhythm Nation,” and traced the fallout of two young musicians whose dreams are compromised by substance abuse. Jackson and her dancers appear as social activists looking out for younger musicians and each other which is emphasized in the dazzling chair-spinning choreography for the lead single, “Miss You Much” (a video that would spawn numerous imitations and homages from Britney Spears to The Backstreet Boys). The film is emphatically cinematic in its aesthetics and borrows heavily from the early film noir of the 1940s with lush smoke, nocturnal environments, and dimly lit interiors. In her remarks on the film, Jackson demonstrated to audiences the weight music videos have for an album not just for marketing but for providing an outlet for greater artistic control: “We’re living in a very visual time right now.... That’s why videos are so important. Before, they really weren’t. They play such an important part in the music business. The next is the live show. But the first they ever see of you is the video.”¹³

The film set the visual tone for the album with its monochromatic black unisex military garments, and its synchronized dancing. Jackson frequently received backlash for the “drab” tone in a critique that veers dangerously close to wishing she would just smile her way through systemic oppression but she maintained a firm insistence to use the visuals and fashion to ground the commentary of the album. This early utilitarian aesthetic began to shed slowly over the album’s three year publicity tour. The transformative glam rock single “Black Cat” (1990) demonstrated this tonal shift best as we witness Janet break free from any aesthetic barriers placed upon her body. Her 1990 performance of the song at the MTV Video Music Awards shocked audiences when she ripped her white blouse open, like in the video, to reveal a black push up bra (she would recreate this move in her 1998 video for “I Get Lonely”). The unscripted moment singled a new type of “Janet” was breaking loose, one who was more open about sharing their sensuality with others. By 1991, this Janet premiered in the music video for the seventh and final single, “Love Will Never Do (Without You).” The Herb Ritts-directed video was an aesthetic shift for the singer and featured a more relaxed and carefree Jackson. As the only visual to heavily enforce Jackson’s sensuality, “Love Will Never Do” reminded audiences of the political efficacy of intimacy and solidarity that runs concomitant with the socio-cultural commentary on the album.

“Rhythm Nation 1814’s” “ethos” 30-plus years later can easily be met with a cynicism, even Jackson herself remarked the album has its moments of naiveté. However, when looking back we can more appropriately locate how Jackson modeled to a wide audience that popular music could be the place and platform for overt socio-cultural commentary. Stuart Hall describes such popular strategies that Black popular culture, as a margins to center practice, possess great efficacy in using cultural production to shift the positions of power.¹⁴ While counter culture

musicians did this work prior to Jackson, their approach was an “outside in” whereas Jackson was starting at the center, making music that was accessible and intended for wide distribution which, in many ways, posed a greater risk. No other mainstream artist prior to Jackson can be credited for the type of work turning a Black woman’s intimacy and socio-cultural commentary into a distinctively tele-mediated document for audiences and that alone continues to speak volumes.

Ayanna Dozier is a writer, lecturer, curator, filmmaker, and performance artist. She recently received her Ph.D. from the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. She is the author of “Janet Jackson’s The Velvet Rope” (2020) and was a 2018–19 Helena Rubinstein Fellow in Critical Studies at the Whitney Independent Studies Program. She is currently a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum and a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

Endnotes

¹ John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 34.

² Chris Williams, “Key Tracks: Jimmy Jam on Janet Jackson’s Rhythm Nation 1814,” *Red Bull Music Academy*, September 19th, 2014, <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2014/09/jimmy-jam-interview>.

³ “Janet World Tour Special 1993, Part 1,” *MTV*, YouTube video, accessed on September 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOQKsLk99w8>.

⁴ Stuart Hall, “What is this Black in Black Popular Culture?,” in *Black Popular Culture*, eds. Michelle Wallace and Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 23.

⁵ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 87.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fred Bronson, *Billboard’s Hottest Hot 100 Hits* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1991), 362.

⁸ Ayanna Dozier, *The Velvet Rope* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2020), 13.

⁹ Williams, “Key Tracks.”

¹⁰ L.H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 60.

¹¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: 1989: Issue 1, Article 8.

¹² Ibid., 141.

¹³ “Janet Jackson: The Making of ‘I Get Lonely,’” *BBC TV Special* 1998, YouTube video, accessed July 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCikIPb7PMw>.

¹⁴ Hall, “What is this Black in Black Popular Culture?,” 24.