

# “Thriller”--Michael Jackson (1982)

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Joe Vogel (guest post)\*



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Michael Jackson*

Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” changed the trajectory of music—the way it sounded, the way it felt, the way it looked, the way it was consumed. Only a handful of albums come anywhere close to its seismic cultural impact: the Beatles’ “Sgt. Pepper,” Pink Floyd’s “Dark Side of the Moon,” Nirvana’s “Nevermind.” Yet “Thriller” remains, by far, the best-selling album of all time. Current estimates put U.S. sales at close to 35 million, and global sales at over 110 million.

Its success is all the more remarkable given the context. In 1982, the United States was still in the midst of a deep recession as unemployment reached a four-decade high (10.8 percent). Record companies were laying people off in droves. Top 40 radio had all but died, as stale classic rock (AOR) dominated the airwaves. Disco had faded. MTV was still in its infancy. As “The New York Times” puts it: “There had never been a bleaker year for pop than 1982.”

And then came “Thriller.” The album hit record stores in the fall of ‘82. It’s difficult to get beyond the layers of accolades and imagine the sense of excitement and discovery for listeners hearing it for the first time--before the music videos, before the stratospheric sales numbers and awards, before it became ingrained in our cultural DNA. The compact disc (CD) was made commercially available that same year, but the vast majority of listeners purchased the album as an LP or cassette tape (the latter of which outsold records by 1983). The rapid explosion of portable cassette Walkman personal stereos meant people could experience music privately and on the go.

Once listeners popped in their cassette of “Thriller,” they were taken away. Three ricocheting drum beats kick off the frenetic opener, appropriately titled “Wanna Be Startin’ Somethin’.” There simply wasn’t a genre for a song like this in 1982. It wasn’t disco. It wasn’t funk. It wasn’t R&B. It wasn’t new wave. It was something new: a song that contained strains of each of these styles, and more; a song so wild and energetic it nearly bursts at the seams, unpredictably culminating in a triumphant Swahili chant. This was the sound of a new pop renaissance. It had no borders. It was a sonic carnival, perfectly capturing the diversity, fusion and velocity of a new era.

Critics have often characterized “Thriller” as a collection of hits, rather than a coherent album with a unified theme. This assessment is partially correct. Seven of its nine songs, after all, became Top Ten hits. “Thriller” isn’t a concept album, and never settles on a particular motif or emotion. Instead, it is about shifting tensions: between traditional instrumentation and electronic sounds, innocence and experience, optimism and dread, anxiety and ecstasy. The chaotic energy of its opener dissolves into the effortless glide of “Baby Be Mine”; the breezy charm of “The Girl is Mine” transitions without warning into the dark Gothic robofunk of the title track. “Sequencing an album,” explains Quincy Jones, “is one of the joys in being a producer because it’s like making a movie. That’s why I had ‘Human Nature’ right after ‘Billie Jean’ on “Thriller.” Because ‘Billie Jean’ was in three parts, like a mantra. The other one is like a kaleidoscopic harmonic collage, with all the harmonies running around the place. The ear loves that—it loves to feel that growth and change and movement.”

Jackson and Jones sifted through over 600 songs before settling on a final tracklist of nine. Jones referred to this process as “Polaroids.” Each potential song was held up to see if it had the right qualities and how it fit with already-existing material. Jackson brought in at least a dozen self-written tracks, including album standouts “Wanna Be Startin’ Somethin’,” “Billie Jean,” and “Beat It.” Rod Temperton, a talented British musician who was also a key contributor to Jackson’s previous album “Off the Wall,” composed over thirty potential songs for Jackson. Three made it onto the album: “Baby Be Mine,” “The Lady in My Life,” and the title track (originally titled “Starlight”). Other tracks were switched in the rotation later in the process, including the gorgeous Steve Porcaro and John Bettis-penned ballad “Human Nature,” which Jackson described as “music with wings.” “P.Y.T.” was originally written by Jackson, but later re-worked by Quincy Jones and James Ingram into a funky Minimoog synth jam.

The final result was an album that, as Jackson put it, had “no B-sides.” The material was strong from top to bottom. The public responded accordingly and “Thriller” led sales and airplay throughout 1983 and into 1984. Within 15 months, it became the bestselling album in the history of the music industry, shifting more than 22 million copies. It would also go on to win a record eight Grammy awards in 1984. The album seemed to cross every barrier imaginable: it appealed to black and white, young and old, middle-class and poor, American and beyond.

Its unprecedented success perhaps seems inevitable today. Jackson had already been a star for a long time: in the early 1970s, he and his brothers achieved enormous crossover success as the Jackson 5, and his 1979 solo album, “Off the Wall,” became the bestselling album ever by an African-American artist. Yet in the early 1980s, radio was largely segregated, adhering to narrow programming based on racialized genres. MTV, likewise, was strongly oriented toward rock and rock was often synonymous with white, while R&B was synonymous with black. Jackson challenged and ultimately demolished this logic with “Thriller.” It wasn’t only that his music featured rock icons like Paul McCartney and Eddie Van Halen or even that his music didn’t fit neatly into conventional categories; it was that his songs and videos were too good to be denied. People wanted to hear them on the radio and see them on TV. Eventually, the gatekeepers relented and the 1980s became the most integrated decade in music history.

Beyond the innovative music and groundbreaking short films, this is “Thriller’s” legacy. It broke down barriers, creating a new musical landscape in which artists of color were no longer relegated to the margins. Over 30 years since it first hit record stores, it remains the defining album of a decade and one of the holy grails of pop.

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\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.