

Remembering Michael: Beyond Greatness

Contributed by Vasco L. Bridges -- Black College Wire
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Despite the controversy, there will never be another...

In the days since Michael Jackson passed away, we (thanks to the wonderful powers of mass media) have dissected every part of his life from the time he burst into the public eye as a nine-year old. We've seen all the storylines: -The paternally-abused but nationally-admired child star that set the stage for future tween-stars like New Edition and The Jonas Brothers.

-The self-conscious twenty-something who moonwalked his way into pop-royalty.

-The evolution of his doctored appearance and accusations of child-molestation and poor parenting. And of course the music: MJ tributes are happening in clubs around the world and radio stations of all formats broadcast his previously under-played hit songs. Album and download sales have skyrocketed while music-television stations show MJ videos in rotation several at a time.

However, throughout the barrage of media coverage, my favorite line came from a talking-head on CNN who said (and I paraphrase): "Michael Jackson was Barack Obama before Barack Obama. He practically invented this post-racial world."

First, like most Black folks who understand the current realities of race relations, I'm not a full believer in this new much-bespoken notion of "Post Racial Nirvana" in which we now live. Additionally, I feel uncomfortable making an outright comparison between our first black president and one musician's rise to fame. That being said, there is one thing that MJ has over Pres. Obama (aside from the President's two left feet of course): THERE WILL NEVER BE ANOTHER MICHAEL JACKSON. While President Obama has broken through the highest glass ceiling of them all, he will likely reach back and lift other qualified minorities and women to lead our country. His breakthrough has blazed the non-traditional path toward political success that can soon be emulated and improved. But Michael Jackson's stance as the King of Pop will remain unmatched, because the current music industry environment will not let it happen.

Michael Jackson is the greatest entertainer in the history of civilization, and to this day, the universality of Michael's acceptance and fame remains unquestioned, for three reasons.

1) Michael Jackson bridged genres. Not only was he the first black artist to appear on MTV, but one of his biggest hits mixed Quincy Jones production with an Eddie Van Halen guitar solo. He has performed duets on record with Paul McCartney, Biggie Smalls, Slash (from Guns N Roses) Carlos Santana and even comedian Chris Tucker.

But today, as radio and music-TV become more targeted and focused, it becomes increasingly difficult for artists to effectively bridge genres for commercial success. And true, being great in one genre, targeting one audience, will make millionaires and superstars, but will not make royalty. Tupac and Biggie together have fewer hit songs than Michael did before he turned 18. Even Beyonce, who crosses genres on radio pretty effectively, still lacks support from straight men. At his prime, EVERYONE loved MJ: Black or White, man or woman.

2) Michael Jackson bridged geographies. I think it was Martin Lawrence who once said that Michael Jackson is the only one who got Iranians "dancing with bombs on their backs" at concerts. And in this regard MJ was unique - most Black American artists lack significant worldwide acclaim. Even Kanye West has trouble selling concert tickets in many countries around the world. And even those who are successful world-wide lack the fanaticism. Would thousands risk a trampling to see Celine Dion up close in Berlin? Or if Coldplay crooner Chris Martin died suddenly, would 12 people commit suicide the next day in grief?

3) Finally, Michael Jackson bridged generations. I was one year old when Thriller was released in 1982 and I know every word of every song (even those cuts like "Lady in my Life" and "Human Nature.") As music is created for more immediate, low-cost consumption (downloads, ringtones, etc) the longevity of songs and albums suffers. Twenty-five years from now, will kids sing-along lyrics to T-Pain? MJ's music was admired by my grandmother, purchased by my parents, enjoyed by me and will be remembered by my kids. No other artist or group (The Beatles as the only exception) can say that.

On June 25, we lost an American Icon. Despite the recent images and descriptions of a broken man, I remember Michael Jackson for the impact he has made on this world. We can compare his success to recent discussions of post-racial reality. We can look at the thirteen Grammys and 800 million records sold as a barometer of success or we can analyze his artistic and humanitarian contributions.

But it remains clear that Michael Jackson's status as the greatest entertainer to ever walk this earth will likely remain unmatched.

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