

# Michael Jackson & Television Before Thriller

by

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The Jackson Five had a huge effect on television.

—Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*<sup>1</sup>

The primary form of Jackson's secular spirituality is televisual. In fact, the major moments in Jackson's vocation have been catalyzed by the visual medium, either on television or in music video.

—Michael Eric Dyson, "Michael Jackson's Postmodern Spirituality"<sup>2</sup>

We've lost a lot because of TV. You should be able to move people without all that advanced technology, without pictures, using only sound.

—Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*<sup>3</sup>

One of the paradoxes of Michael Jackson's career is that he was deeply suspicious of television, the medium that helped him become a global superstar. The sense of loss Jackson expressed in his 1988 autobiography is not the sentiment of an old-timer frustrated with new technologies; rather, it is the voice of a performer who came of age with, and whose music and stardom became inseparable from, television. From his groundbreaking music videos to the tabloid news coverage of his eccentricities and controversies, television played a major role in Jackson's career. Although Michael Jackson's performance on Motown 25 and his "Thriller" video are typically understood as his major television breakthroughs, Jackson performed on network television with the Jackson Five dozens of times from 1969 to 1976. These early performances show how Jackson honed his skills as a television performer, and make it clear that before Jackson released *Thriller* in 1982 his television image had already been circulated and commoditized in various program, with significant profits for media producers.

This essay examines the first phase of Michael Jackson's television career. First, I look at the Jackson Five's television debut in 1969 at the Miss Black America pageant and their first nationally broadcast performances on *Hollywood Palace* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Through these performances I examine how, under the guidance of Motown producers, the Jackson Five reshaped their chitlin-circuit performance style for a national audience. This first section also traces the wide range of television appearances the Jackson Five made to promote their records while signed with Motown. Second, I consider *Jackson Five* (1971-73), an animated series featuring Michael and his brothers. This cartoon was important because it was one of the first times that an image of Michael Jackson circulated apart from his physical performance. The show also provided its audience positive images of black youth at a time when few such images were available for young viewers. Finally, I analyze *The Jacksons* (1976-1977), a variety show featuring celebrity guests, singing, dancing, and comedy sketches. This program, the first televised variety show hosted by a black family, demonstrated Jackson's evolution as a dancer. While Jackson later expressed regret over agreeing to do this show, the program taught him to be selective in his television performances.

### **Michael Jackson's Television Debut and the Motown Influence**

Most Americans learned about the talented brothers from Gary, Indiana when they performed on *The Ed Sullivan Show* for the first time in December 1969. Before this performance introduced the Jackson Five to a large national audience, they had already performed extensively at local talent shows and on the chitlin-circuit of black clubs and theaters. Motown historian Nelson George notes that starting in 1966 the Jackson 5 piled "into vans on weekends and holidays to perform as far away as New York, Philadelphia, and Phoenix, thus building a reputation in black music circles well before signing with Motown."<sup>4</sup> Not only were the Jackson 5 seasoned performers by the time they reached television, but this rigorous touring schedule gave them two invaluable skills for their television performances. First, as in talent shows, they had only a few minutes to show their stuff on television. As Jackson noted in his autobiography,

Winning an amateur night or talent show in a ten-minute, two-song set took as much energy as a ninety-minute concert. I'm convinced that because there's no room for mistakes, your concentration burns you up inside more on one or two songs than it does when you have the luxury of twelve or fifteen in a set. These talent shows were our professional education.<sup>5</sup>

Television, like talent shows, valued intense performance over a short period of time, a skill at which the Jacksons were adept before ever entering a television studio. Second, they developed the ability to play to the desires and preferences of different audiences.

Unlike musicians who came up in recording studios, the Jackson 5 won talent shows and made a name for themselves on the chitlin-circuit by playing for hundreds of different audiences. Audience applause, not record sales, was their first metric of success. Michael Jackson and his brothers learned about playing to audiences from some of the best in the business. “While my brothers and I were paying dues on the so-called ‘chitlin’ circuit,” he wrote,

I carefully watched all the stars because I wanted to learn as much as I could. I’d stare at their feet, the way they held their arms, the way they gripped a microphone, trying to decipher what they were doing and why they were doing it. After studying James Brown from the wings, I knew every step, every grunt, every spin and turn. I have to say he would give a performance that would exhaust you, just wear you out emotionally. His whole physical presence, the fire coming out of his pores, would be phenomenal. You’d *feel* every bead sweat on his face and you’d know what he was going through. I’ve never seen anybody perform like him. Unbelievable, really. When I watched somebody I liked, *I’d be there*. James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Sam and Dave, the O’Jays—they all used to really *work* an audience. I might have learned more from watching Jackie Wilson than from anyone or anything else. All of this was a very important part of my education.<sup>6</sup>

The Jacksons’ early career, therefore, provided a rigorous show business education that placed a premium on being able to peak in short bursts and being able to connect with and win over any audience. Before most of America had ever heard of the Jackson 5 they were already savvy performers.

Michael Jackson performance skills were evident in the Jackson 5’s first television appearance at the 1969 Miss Black America Pageant, where they performed the Isley Brothers’ “It’s Your Thing.” While the group wore matching white suits with open-collar shirts, Michael was clearly the featured performer, both in his stage movements and vocal performance. He moved freely around the stage, venturing far out onto the pageant runway that jutted out into the audience, while his brothers stayed in the center of the stage. Michael’s dancing, moreover, was never synchronized with the rest of the group in this performance. He showed off a range of individual dance moves, and often danced directly in front of the group, while his brothers performed understated synchronized dance moves. While Michael performed for the audience, the television camera tracked him with medium close-ups of him singing and full shots of him dancing. For the television audience, Michael’s movement made him the focal point of the group.

In his singing, Michael offered a loose and soulful version of “It’s Your Thing” that reinforced these stage dynamics. Michael stretched syllables and added James Brown-style shouts and improvised interjections, especially in the refrain:

*It’s your thing* (holding last syllable in “thing”)  
*A do want you wanna do*, [woo] (raising pitch on “wanna”)  
*I can’t tell you* [huh], who to sock it to  
[Hit my man]  
It’s your thing, girl (holding “r” in “girl”)  
Do what you wanna do (holding last syllable in “do” and raising pitch)  
No doubt about it, who decides you  
[Yeah-ah]<sup>7</sup>

Later in the song, Michael exhorted the audience to participate in the song’s call and response lyrics, “Let me hear you say ‘It’s my thing,’” with his arms outstretched and small hips thrusting in time with the bass line. His showmanship shows how much he learned from the older performers on the chitlin-circuit. The performance may have been precocious, but it was also the work of seasoned stage performers, not the work of a “kiddie” group. This experience as a live act prepared Michael and his brothers for television by making them adapt at performing in four-minute bursts and teaching them how to pull in an audience. At the same time, after the group signed with Motown they reigned in much of the soul and improvisation evident in their first television performance. Television, therefore, both highlighted and reshaped the Jackson 5’s chitlin-circuit influences.

I am particularly interested here in how the Jackson 5’s breakthrough television appearance on the Ed Sullivan show resembles and differs from their first television performance at the Miss Black America Pageant. The important link between the two is the group’s first national television performance on *Hollywood Palace*, a Saturday night variety show guest hosted by Diana Ross. The October 1969 appearance came six months after the group signed with Motown and two months before the release of their first album *Diana Ross Presents The Jackson 5*. While Diana Ross did not discover the Jackson 5, as suggested by Motown’s press materials, she did introduce them to a national television audience. On *Hollywood Palace*, Ross introduced the Jackson 5 with help from Sammy Davis Jr., who asked, “You want to tell me who’s young? Who’s been in show business all his life and lights up a stage, other than me and Ed Sullivan?” Ross replied, “Well there’s one other. Michael Jackson and the Jackson 5.”<sup>8</sup> While this introduction placed Michael in the spotlight, the ensuing performance differed in important ways from the Miss Black America Pageant appearance. The camera first presented a full shot of the Jackson 5 in a straight horizontal line facing the camera. Unlike the pageant performance, where Michael danced independently from his brothers, on *Hollywood Palace* the group stayed lined-up and synchronized throughout the performance.

They opened with a medley of “Sing a Simple Song” by Sly & the Family Stone and “Can You Remember?” by The Delfonics. At the conclusion of this opening medley, Michael approached the microphone to introduce their next song: “Now we’d like to do our very first release on Motown. It’s on sale everywhere.”<sup>9</sup> “I Want You Back” opened with a twenty-second synchronized dance sequence before Michael started singing. During Michael’s lead vocals, the camera shot him in a medium and tight close-ups, before zooming out to a full group shot again for the group harmonies and dancing. Here again, Michael is the featured brother, but he is singing and dancing with, rather than in front of, the group. Michael’s vocal performance on *Hollywood Palace*, moreover, does not contain any of the improvisations or wordless sounds that punctuated the pageant appearance. If the Miss Black America Pageant showed the Jackson 5’s debt to the soul singers on the chitlin-circuit, the *Hollywood Palace* performance reflected the influence of Motown.

Michael Jackson’s autobiography and Nelson George’s history of Motown offer insight into how the record label shaped the Jackson 5’s new stage image. Motown’s core songwriting team of Lamont Dozier and brothers Brian Holland and Edward Holland, Jr., or H-D-H as the came to be known, left the company in 1968 following a dispute over royalties. When Motown signed the Jackson 5, label head Berry Gordy assembled a group of songwriters—Freddie Perren, Deke Richards, and Alphonzo Mizell—to work with him to write songs for the group. Gordy labeled this production team “the Corporation” to keep any of the individual songwriters from emerging as stars. “The Corporation” wrote, arranged, and produced the group’s number one singles “I Want You Back,” “ABC,” and “The Love You Save,” as well as other singles in 1970 and 1971. Of these songwriters, Jackson wrote,

Selecting the right songs for us to do was going to be a real challenge now that we weren’t depending on other people’s hits to win a crowd. The Corporation guys and Hal Davis were put to work writing songs especially for us, as well as producing them. [...] ‘I Want You Back’ could have been sung by a grown-up, but ‘ABC’ and ‘The Love You Save’ were written for our young voices...The Corporation had also written those songs with dance routines in mind: the steps our fans did at parties as well as those we did on stage.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than performing cover versions of popular R&B songs, the Jackson 5 now had their own age-appropriate songs. These songs, moreover, were conceived part and parcel with the choreographed dances the group performed on the *Hollywood Palace* and later television appearances.

In addition to these song and dance routines, Motown advisor Suzanne DePasse helped shape the group's image. Nelson George notes that "[DePasse] told them to cut the James Brownisms, selected their trendy Day-Glo stage garb, and wrote cute banter for the boys."<sup>11</sup> DePasse's influence helps to explain the absence of soul shouts and hip thrusts, so prominent in the Michael Jackson's pageant performance, from the appearance on *Hollywood Palace*. Jackson remembered that Motown also closely managed the group's television interviews:

Motown always told us what to say in interviews back then...Looking back, I wouldn't say Motown was putting us in any kind of straightjacket or turning us into robots, even though I wouldn't have done it that way myself; and if I had children, I wouldn't tell them what to say. The Motown people were doing something with us that hadn't been done before, and who was to say what was the right way to handle that sort of stuff? Reporters would ask us all kinds of questions, and the Motown people would be standing by to help us out or monitor the questions if need be. We wouldn't have dreamed of trying anything that would embarrass them. I guess they were worried about the possibility of our sounding militant the way people were often doing in those days. Maybe they were worried after they gave us those Afros that they had created little Frankensteins. Once a reporter asked a Black Power question and the Motown person told him we didn't think about that stuff because we were a 'commercial product.' It sounded weird, but we winked and gave the power salute when we left, which seemed to thrill the guy.<sup>12</sup>

Here, Jackson distills the essence of the group's Motown transformation. In their pageant appearance they were chitlin-circuit regulars led by a miniature James Brown, on *Hollywood Palace*, they became a safe "commercial product" that could be successfully marketed to national audience through network television.

These first two television appearances, Miss Black America Pageant and *Hollywood Palace*, allow us to see the group's performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* as a continuation of their Motown grooming, rather than as a starting point in their pursuit of cross-over success. *The Ed Sullivan Show* famously featured breakout performances by Elvis Presley (1956) and The Beatles (1964). Although the show had declined in popularity from these earlier peaks, the Jackson 5's reached their largest television audience to date in their December 1969 appearance. The Sullivan appearance resembled the *Hollywood Palace* performance, featuring synchronized dancing, Michael singing lead vocals but standing next to his brothers, and cute stage banter before and between songs. After Sullivan's introduction, for example, Michael introduced the group's cover of The Miracles' "Who's Loving You" by saying, "I want to tell you a little story about a girl I met in school one day, during sandbox. We toasted our love during milk break. I gave her my cookies. We feel out during finger painting."<sup>13</sup>

This Motown-approved banter replaced the grown-up seeming sexuality of their pageant performance with a cute grade-school love story. Similarly, Michael's performance is synchronized with his brothers with only a few traces of the individual showmanship of the pageant appearance. Michael is still clearly the star of the group, the camera holds him in a medium close-up for the majority of the performance, but the long camera shots find him singing and dancing next to his brothers, rather than apart from or in front of them. Motown closely managed every aspect of the group's television appearances, including their song selection, choreography, stage dynamics, banter, and interviews. The Jackson 5's *Hollywood Palace* and *Ed Sullivan Show* appearances demonstrate that their made-for-television performance style was already well established by 1969.

This Motown influence made the Jackson 5 extremely popular, and profitable, television performers. The Jackson 5's performance skills and clean image made them television-friendly, as did the consistency of their performances. When producers booked the Jackson 5, and when television audience tuned in to see them, they knew what they were going to get. While the outfits changed and the brothers grew taller, their performances remained consistent. With Motown's influence, the Jackson 5 were particularly well suited for television, a medium that thrives on consistency. From daytime soap operas to the evening news, network programmers position television shows to provide viewers with consistency. "Regularity," as media studies scholars Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow term it, is essential to understanding how viewers make meaning from television programs.<sup>14</sup> While the Jackson 5 would not have their own regularly scheduled variety show until 1976, they were regular television performers through the early-1970s. In their six years with Motown (1969-1975), the Jackson 5 appeared on dozens of television programs, including variety shows like *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* and *The Flip Wilson Show*, talk shows like *The Tonight Show* and *The Merv Griffin Show*, and dance shows like *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*.<sup>15</sup> The Jacksons also hosted a musical special, *Going Back to Indiana* (ABC, 1971), featuring music from a homecoming concert/album of the same name, as well as half-hour musical-comedy special (CBS, 1972).<sup>16</sup> Part of what makes Jackson's television career remarkable is that he appeared on television so frequently in the early and mid-1970s. The Jackson 5 performed on television so regularly, and on so many different programs, that it is difficult to imagine anyone with a television would not have recognized the group. This television exposure is important to understanding the level of investment many fans felt in Michael Jackson's career.

### ***The Jackson 5ive: Animating Michael Jackson's Image***

From age eleven to seventeen, television fans could watch Michael Jackson grow up as a performer in front of the camera. While the Jackson 5 appeared on television because it helped them sell records, which made money for the group and for Motown, their frequent appearances also made them media icons for young people. Motown fueled this popularity by licensing the band name and image for posters, stickers, coloring books, lunch boxes, and other products.

The most prominent of these licensing endeavors was *The Jackson 5ive* an animated series, broadcast on ABC on Saturday mornings from 1971-1973. Produced by Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment and Motown Productions, the cartoon featured the Jackson brothers having adventures while they were working to establish their music careers. In the opening credits for each show, pictures of the Jacksons morphed into their animated characters. Each episode also featured two Jackson 5 songs, as well as an opening medley of their hits. The Jacksons, busy touring and recording, did not participate in the creation of the show and actors provided their voices. Despite this lack of direct participation, *The Jackson 5ive* cartoon is important to Michael Jackson's televisual career for two reasons. First, the cartoon provided the Jackson 5's young fans, especially black children, with positive representations of black youth at a time when few such images were available on television. Secondly, while the Jackson 5 performed relentlessly in the early-1970s, *The Jackson 5ive* was unique because it separated Michael Jackson and his brothers' images from their physical performance. *The Jackson 5ive*, therefore, marks an early instance of Michael Jackson image being meaningful for fans and profitable for producers.

*The Jackson 5ive* debuted amidst criticism from civic and parental groups regarding programming for children on network television. Grassroots groups such as Action for Children's Television (ACT) petitioned the networks and the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) to limit the amount of advertising in children's television and to introduce more educational content on Saturday mornings and afternoons. At the same time, *Sesame Street* pioneered educational and entertaining children's television when it started broadcasting on PBS in 1969. *Sesame Street's* success, coupled with grassroots criticism, promoted the commercial television networks to revamp their children's shows. *New York Times* television critic John O'Conner contended that the problem "is the tendency...of the commercial stations to schedule nothing but junk, to deprive young viewers of a choice."<sup>17</sup> In an interview at the start of the 1971 television season, Michael Eisner, ABC's vice president of daytime programming, said the station planned "to upgrade the informational and educational elements of the network's children's shows while increasing their entertainment values." The network, Eisner argued, was especially interested in programs that attempted to "link the child's fantasy world with the real world."<sup>18</sup> *The Jackson 5ive* was one of the children's television programs ABC's executives believed could successfully blend entertainment and education. Given ABC's interest in appealing to both children's fantasy worlds and the real worlds, moreover, *The Jackson 5ive*, an animated series based on a real life group, made a logical choice for their fall lineup.

In addition to fitting ABC's programming goals, *The Jackson 5ive* became one of the first children's programs to feature black youth as the main characters (*Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* debuted on CBS a year later in 1972). The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, one of the city's leading black newspapers, discussed *The Jackson 5ive* in relation to the history of black performers on television. In the 1950s, television featured "controversial portrayals of the 'happy-go-lucky, scheming Negro'" and provided black artists only "meager parts."



In the late-1960s, however, black performers earned top roles on shows like *Julia*, *Room 222*, and *Mission Impossible*. *The Jackson 5ive*, the *Sentinel* reporter argued, was the next step in this history, and concluded by asking: “Can there be any doubt, that the progress of the Black artists in television is on the uphill climb?”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, a *Los Angeles Times* review of important African-American events in 1971 discussed the cartoon in the same space as Huey P. Newton’s trial, the death of Ralph Bunch, and the Black Expo. The *Times* critics wrote, “The Jackson Five burst into our living room on Saturday mornings via their new cartoon series. The kids never miss it.”<sup>20</sup> *The Jackson 5ive* did not have the lasting cultural influence of *Sesame Street*, but as these contemporary reviews suggests, the show brought positive new representations of black youth to children’s television. For the Jackson 5’s young fans, the show made the group Saturday morning cartoon stars, in addition to pop music icons. In doing so, the cartoon made the animated image of Michael Jackson and his brothers an important part of the way young people interacted with, or consumed, the groups’ music. The Jackson 5 were not just popular, they were extremely visible in an overwhelmingly white medium. Seeing the Jackson 5 on television on a weekly basis, especially for black youth, established Michael Jackson and his brothers as unique and influential performers.

Beyond the importance of *The Jackson 5ive*’s making it possible for young viewers to watch positive images black youth, the cartoon added a layer of mediation to Michael Jackson’s young television career. The Jackson 5’s television appearances sought to capture the energy of the group’s chitlin-circuit shows, while also making their performances more polished, safe, and consistent for a national television audience. These television appearances were mediated in the obvious sense that the group performed in front of a camera and studio audience (usually in Los Angeles), and then these images were broadcast to television viewers across the country. Despite this mediation, television viewers were still watching flesh-and-blood bodies singing and dancing, similar to a physical performances that made the Jackson 5 popular in live concerts. In contrast, images of the Jackson 5 abounded in *The Jackson 5ive*, but the group played almost no role in the cartoon’s production. While the Jacksons provided the real life figures, animation professionals wrote, sketched, and voiced the show. This marked the first time in Michael Jackson’s career when fans would interact with, and producers would profit from, his image apart from his physical performance of music.

Throughout his career, Michael Jackson’s image became the site of intense scrutiny and a measure of his increasing fame. Cultural studies scholar Kobena Mercer has examined this shifting image in relation to Jackson’s *Thriller* video. Building on Roland Barthes theory that celebrity faces function as “masks,” or surfaces on which viewers project their own fascinations and fears, Mercer writes, “Jackson’s face can also be seen a such a mask, for his image has attracted and maintained the kind of cultural fascination that makes him more like a movie star than a modern rhythm-and-blues artist.”<sup>21</sup> For Jackson, Mercer suggests, “the mask refers not to the real person of private ‘self’ but to Michael Jackson-as-an-image.

The metamorphosis could thus be seen as an accelerated allegory of the morphological development of Jackson's facial features: from child to adult...from star to superstar—the sense of wonder generated by the video's special effects forms an allegory for the fascination with which the world beholds this star-as-image."<sup>22</sup> In analyzing this star image, Mercer is primarily interested in Jackson's racial and sexual ambiguity and in the specter of the monstrous in the *Thriller* video. Marcarena Gómez-Barris and Herman Gray make similar observations in relation to Martin Bashir's television documentary *Living With Michael Jackson* (2003). "The preoccupation with race, though more subtly, is also central to the Michael Jackson spectacle," Gómez-Barris and Gray argue.

The figure moves from 'cute, young, Black singer' (i.e. your racial identity is legible, and hence, 'we know who you are') to 'weird, unfixed racial identity' in his adult years (i.e., your racial identity is illegible and incomprehensible according to the codes of American racial meaning, hence, 'we have no idea whom you've become'). This has been a constant source of news stories, perhaps since the release of the *Thriller* album in 1982. [...] The television spectacle and Jackson's disclosures on it do the cultural work of locating and then fixing race on the body—skin and nose.<sup>23</sup>

Gómez-Barris and Gray, like Mercer, see television as the locus of Jackson's star image. The process these scholars identify, however, started with *The Jackson 5ive*. Viewers of this cartoon interacted with "Jackson-as-an-image," and this star image made him more than a music artist. Viewers invested meaning in Jackson over and beyond an appreciation for his dance moves and singing ability. Although Jackson's image became a site of speculation and ridicule in the 1990s and 2000s, the roots of Jackson's star image grew, rather innocently, out of a cartoon.

While Jackson's star image in the early-1970s was more innocent than the tabloid image that consumed the last portion of his career, it is important to recognize that *The Jackson 5ive*, like everything the group did, was a commercial production. Companies paid to advertise their products to young viewers and ABC, Rankin/Bass, Motown, and the Jackson family all profited from the show. Michael also learned something about his stardom from this cartoon. Regarding *The Jackson 5ive*, he recalled, "I loved being a cartoon. It was so much fun to get up on Saturday mornings to watch cartoons and look forward to seeing ourselves on the screen. It was like a fantasy come true for all of us."<sup>24</sup> Describing the cartoon as a "fantasy come true for all of us," at a point when the Jackson 5 had sold millions of records and appeared on major television shows, suggests that the show added something meaningful to Michael Jackson's show business resume. *The Jackson 5ive*, I argue, made Jackson more familiar with his own star image. The show made it possible for him to "look forward to seeing ourselves on the screen," without having actively participated in the show's creation.

If Jackson learned about performing by watching James Brown and Jackie Wilson from off-stage, the ability to watch his own image on *The Jackson 5ive* surely contributed to his show business education. For all of Motown's public relations grooming, *The Jackson 5ive* taught Jackson that he had a public image that circulated separately from his person, an image that needed to be managed, and that if managed properly could be very profitable.

## **The Jacksons: Michael Jackson's Television Education**

If numerous television appearances in the early-1970s taught Michael Jackson about the value of media exposure, *The Jacksons*, a half-hour televised variety show, taught him about the dangers of overexposure. CBS added *The Jacksons* as a replacement show in summer 1976 and broadcast twelve episodes of the show over next year.<sup>25</sup> The program came at a transitional moment for the Jackson Five. Michael and his brothers left Motown in a dispute over royalties and signed with CBS/Epic. Jermaine, who married Hazel Gordy, Berry Gordy's daughter, in 1973, stayed with Motown to pursue a solo career.<sup>26</sup> Motown, meanwhile, owned the "Jackson Five" name, so after 1974 the remaining brothers performed as the Jacksons. The motivations behind *The Jacksons*, therefore, were twofold: to keep the Jackson name popular and to establish the new Jacksons line-up as a CBS, rather than Motown, product. For his part, Michael Jackson was seventeen-years-old when the show debuted, seven years removed from his national television debut. *The Jacksons* was not a great television show, the writing was corny and the show featured comedic skits that did not suit the Jacksons' talents as performers. The program is important, however, because it provides a bridge between Michael Jackson's young performances and his breakthrough solo performance on *Motown 25*.

*The Jacksons* is also interesting because Michael Jackson offered an extremely negative memory of the show in his autobiography. The program, he felt, took time and energy away from more productive and profitable opportunities. "Around the time that Jermaine left," he wrote,

things were further complicated for us because of the fact that we were doing a stupid replacement TV series. It was a dumb move to agree to do the show and I hated every minute of it. I had loved the old 'Jackson Five' cartoon show. I used to wake up early on Saturday mornings and say, 'I'm a cartoon!' But I hated doing this television show because I felt it would hurt out recording career rather than help it. I think a TV series is the worst thing an artist who has a recording career can do. I kept saying, 'But this is gonna hurt our record sales.' And the others said, 'No, it's gonna help them.' They were totally wrong. We had to dress in ridiculous outfits and perform stupid comedy routines to canned laughter. It was all so fake. We didn't have time to learn or master anything about television. We had to create three dance numbers a day, trying to meet a deadline. The Nielsen ratings controlled our lives from week to week. I'd never do it again. It's a dead-end road. What happens is partly psychological.

You are in people's homes every week and they begin to feel they know you too well. You're doing all this silly comedy to canned laughter and your music begins to recede into the background. When you try to get serious again and pick up your career where you left off, you can't because you're overexposed. People are thinking of you as the guys who do the silly, crazy routines. One week you're Santa Claus, the next week you're Prince Charming, another week you're a rabbit. It's crazy, because you lose your identity in the business; the rocker image you had is gone.<sup>27</sup>

As Jackson notes, the show mixed dance performances with comedy skits. Each show opened with the Jacksons performing one of their songs or a contemporary R&B or disco hit. Next, Michael would introduce his brothers, his sisters, and that week's guest. Guests included Sonny Bono, Red Foxx, Muhammad Ali, MacKenzie Phillips, Lynda Carter, Carrol O'Conner, and others. The skits frequently parodied other television variety shows, such as *The Sonny & Cher Show* and *Donny & Marie*.<sup>28</sup> In its format, *The Jacksons* resembled a series of variety stage shows the group performed in Las Vegas in 1974, but comedy was not the group's strong suit. The *Los Angeles Times* reviewer noted, "unfortunately, in the variety tradition, [the Jacksons] have been asked to perform in comedy routines. Suddenly, slick becomes awkward and the material isn't much help."<sup>29</sup> The problem with the show, Jackson later remembered, was that in addition to moving the group outside of their comfort zone as performers,

with TV...everything must be crammed into a little space of time. You don't have time to perfect anything. Schedules—tight schedules—rule your life. If you're not happy with something, you just forget it and move on to the next routine. I'm a perfectionist by nature. I like things to be the best they can be. I want people to hear or watching something I've done and feel that I've given it everything I've got. I feel I owe an audience that courtesy. On the show our sets were sloppy, the lighting was often poor, and our choreography was *rushed*.<sup>30</sup>

Television, Jackson suggests, disrupted the polished performances that had been the Jackson Five's foundation since their talent shows. The Jackson Five's dozens of television performances were crucial to their growing popularity in the early-1970s, but with *The Jacksons* Michael learned to be suspicious of the demands the medium placed on performers.

Despite Michael Jackson's criticisms of the program, his performances on *The Jacksons* showed him continuing to excel as a dancer. With Jermaine pursuing a solo career, seventeen-year-old Michael was the clear leader of the Jacksons. In the dance numbers that opened and closed each show, the brothers wore coordinated outfits and performed choreographed dance moves. Michael made frequent amendments to the routines, rocking his head back while his brothers look straight ahead, or adding a second spin while the other dancers only did one.

When the group performed “Dancing Machine,” Michael Jackson’s version of the “robot,” a breakdance inspired form he popularized on *Soul Train* in 1974, was more sharp and angular (more robotic) than his brothers. While he was thin, he moved with the body of a young adult, taller and more fluid than his childhood performances. His dancing on *The Jacksons* was lithe and strong in a way that anticipated his performance of “Billy Jean” on *Motown 25*.

*The Jacksons* offered the first televisual evidence of the breadth of influences on Jackson’s dancing style. Viewers of *The Jacksons* saw Michael Jackson performing dance styles with influences beyond James Brown and *Soul Train*. At least two episodes, for example, featured segments with Michael tap dancing. In one instance he danced with African-American tap legends the Nichols Brothers.<sup>31</sup> In other segments, Jackson performed in a ballroom style, dancing to “They Can’t Take That Away From Me.”<sup>32</sup> His performance pays homage to Fred Astaire, to whom Jackson dedicated his autobiography. Always a talented dancer, *The Jacksons* shows Michael Jackson practicing his skills with different forms of dance. Michael Eric Dyson, commenting on Jackson’s *Motown 25* performance, suggests the reward for this practice:

[Michael] Jackson’s passage from music superstar to a world history and cultural figure was ritually enacted on May 16, 1983, with his mythic dance performance of the ‘moonwalk’ on the ‘Motown 25’ television special, which was beamed to almost 50 million viewers around the globe. Jackson’s uncanny dexterity, disciplined grace, and explosive imagination coalesced in a series of immortal movements, which, in their turn, freeze-framed the recrudescence of street dance, summarized the important history of Fred Astaire-like purposeful grace in executing dance steps, and extended the brilliant tradition of African-American performers like Bojangles, Sammy Davis, and Katherine Dunham surging against the odds to create a vital art.<sup>33</sup>

With *The Jacksons*, the components of Jackson’s historic *Motown 25* performances were in place. The “robot” presaged the “moonwalk,” he emulated Fred Astaire, and he danced with and learned from the Nicholas Brothers. He synthesized these dance styles to a huge television audience on *Motown 25*, but the roots of this performance lay in a short-lived variety television show. Even if *The Jacksons* did not meet his high-standards, the show charted Michael Jackson’s evolution as a dancer.

In addition to showcasing Michael Jackson’s dance skills, *The Jacksons* was also the first television variety show hosted by a black family. Michael hinted at this breakthrough with a quip that opened the first episode, “A lot of people were expecting the Osmond’s, do not adjust the color on your set.”<sup>34</sup> Like the *Jackson Five*, *The Jacksons* offered positive images of black youth (now young adults) at a time when few such images circulated on network television. The difference, for Michael Jackson, was that *The Jacksons* required the group to work on a schedule that he felt took time away from the group’s focus on music.

Television breakthroughs aside, Jackson's lasting memory of the show was that it overexposed the group and highlighted their inexperience as comedians rather than their strengths as musical performers. With this experience, Jackson sought to engage with television on his own terms.

## **Conclusion: The Roots of Motown 25 and "Thriller"**

Jackson's negative experience with *The Jacksons*, coupled with his desire to pursue a solo career, led him to refocus his energy on recording music and take a break from television. He teamed up with producer Quincy Jones and produced two critical acclaimed solo albums *Off the Wall* (1979) and *Thriller* (1982).<sup>35</sup> Jackson, of course, made a triumphant return to television in 1983 with two performances that established him as a global music superstar. At *Motown 25*, Jackson reunited with his brothers to perform a medley of "I Want You Back," "The Love You Save," and "I'll Be There." At the conclusion of this medley, his brothers exited and Jackson took center stage to perform "Billy Jean," the current single from *Thriller*.<sup>36</sup> Jackson delivered an iconic performance that was the highlight of the show.<sup>37</sup> As media studies scholar Jaap Kooijman argues,

It was a pivotal transition in that it marked the shift of emphasis from musical performance to visual presentation. In stark contrast to the other, live, performances of *Motown 25*, Jackson performed a pre-recorded soundtrack, lip-synching to his multi-layered pre-recorded voice, thus indicating that the visual reenactment of music video imagery had become an integral, and perhaps dominant part of live performance.<sup>38</sup>

Later in 1983, Jackson's video for "Thriller" redefined the concept of a music video. Directed by John Landis, the thirteen-minute short-film premiered as an MTV event. MTV played the video in heavy rotation, a first for a black musical artist.<sup>39</sup> Kobena Mercer suggests that "the 'Thriller' video does not so much seek to promote the record as a primary product, but rather *celebrates the success the LP has brought Michael Jackson* by acting as a vehicle to showcase its star."<sup>40</sup> With these two television performances, Michael Jackson helped to set the terms by which future musical artists would be judged. Jackson helped to make artists' televisual image inseparable from their music.

While *Motown 25* and "Thriller" propelled Michael Jackson's solo career into a higher level of stardom, starting with these performances overlooks the first phase of Jackson's television career. From his first televised performance at the Miss Black America pageant in 1969 through *The Jacksons* in 1976, Michael Jackson literally grew-up in front of television cameras. Through these performances, moreover, we see Jackson developing as a performer, building the foundation on which *Motown 25* and *Thriller* were built.

While mesmerizing, Jackson's dancing on *Motown 25* would not have surprised viewers who had watched him perform as a James Brown-style showman at Miss Black America pageant, or those who saw him display a range of individual moves on *The Jacksons* variety show. The *Thriller* video played with the idea of Jackson's image, but so too did *The Jackson 5ive* cartoon over ten years earlier. Similarly, the shift in performance styles between the pre-Motown (i.e., pageant performance) and Motown (i.e., *Hollywood Palace*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and dozens of others) appearances, as well as Jackson's concerns about overexposure with *The Jacksons*, makes it clear that Jackson became a self-aware television performer very early in his career and that he knew how to construct the right performance at the right time to connect with his audience. Finally, those praising Jackson for breaking MTV's color-barrier should also note that *The Jackson 5ive* cartoon and *The Jacksons* variety show were also breakthroughs for blacks performers on television. Jackson's early career demonstrates how early and how fully he was immersed in the world of television performance and celebrity. Remembering the number and variety of these early television performances helps us understand how his career came to mean so much for so many.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 42.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, Revised Edition (New York: Harmony Books, 2009), 261.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 184.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 48.

<sup>7</sup> The Jackson 5 "It's Your Thing" at Miss Black America Pageant, 1969, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qmv9SUN16L8&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qmv9SUN16L8&feature=player_embedded) (Accessed December 15, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> The Jackson 5 on *Hollywood Palace*, 1969, [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9wsm8\\_hollywood-palace-1969?from=rss](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9wsm8_hollywood-palace-1969?from=rss) (Accessed December 15, 2010).

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> George, *Where Did Our Love Go?*, 185.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 87-8.

<sup>13</sup> The Jackson 5 on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, 1969, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9DpQ13ODww&feature=related> (Accessed December 15, 2009). For the Jackson 5's second performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1970, see *Ed Sullivan's Rock-n-Roll Classics: The Sweet Sounds of Soul* (VHS, Time-Life Video, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Heath and Gilliam Skirrow, "Television: A World in Action," *Screen*, Vol. 18 No. 2 (Summer 1977), 15.

<sup>15</sup> For a comprehensive list of Jackson 5 television appearances, see <http://www.jackson5abc.com/dossiers/tv/> (Accessed December 15, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> "Music, Movies, Drama Top This Week's Viewing," *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1971; James Brown, "Music, Comedy in Jackson Five Show," *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1972.

<sup>17</sup> John O'Connor, "Are They Doing Right By the Kids?," *New York Times*, September 26, 1971.

<sup>18</sup> George Gent, "TV Networks to Upgrade Much-Criticizes Children's Fare," *New York Times*, May 31, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> Gertrude Gipson, "The Progress of Black Artists in Television," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 23, 1971.

<sup>20</sup> Sandra Haggerty, "1971—Montage of Events," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1971.

<sup>21</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Routledge, 1993), 106.

<sup>22</sup> Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 105.

<sup>23</sup> Macarena Gomez-Barris and Herman Gray, "Michael Jackson, Television, and Post-Op Disasters," *Television & New Media*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (February 2006), 43-4.



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- <sup>24</sup> Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 99.
- <sup>25</sup> Lee Margulies, "Jacksons Fit TV Into Busy Schedule," *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1976.
- <sup>26</sup> Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 113-118; George, *Where Did Our Love Go?*, 191-92.
- <sup>27</sup> Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 118-120.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Jacksons, 1976-1977* (DVD; 2009), discs 1-4.
- <sup>29</sup> James Brown, "The Jacksons, Monteith Debut," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1976.
- <sup>30</sup> Jackson, *Moonwalk*, 121.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Jacksons, 1976-1977* (DVD; 2009), disc 1, episode 2.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Jacksons, 1976-1977* (DVD; 2009), disc 3, episode 9.
- <sup>33</sup> Dyson, *Reflecting Black*, 42.
- <sup>34</sup> *The Jacksons, 1976-1977* (DVD; 2009), disc 1, episode 1.
- <sup>35</sup> Dennis Hunt, "Michael Jackson: Growing Up," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1979; Richard Cromelin, "Jackson Goes Over 'The Wall,'" *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1982.
- <sup>36</sup> *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever*, dir. Don Mischer (MGM Home Video, 1983).
- <sup>37</sup> John O'Connor, "TV: Sound of Motown Celebrated," *New York Times*, May 16, 1983.
- <sup>38</sup> Jaap Kooijman, "Michael Jackson: *Motown 25*, Pasadena Civil Auditorium March 25, 1983," *Performance and Popular Music: History, Place and Time*, ed. Ian Inglis (Aldershot, England: 2006), 119.
- <sup>39</sup> Wayne Robbins, "A Thriller: Pop Battles Race Barrier," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1983.
- <sup>40</sup> Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 96.