

MJ: The Genius of Michael Jackson

By Steve Knopper

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The ultimate critical biography of the King of Pop: a panoramic, vivid, and incisive portrait of Michael Jackson that explores and celebrates his influence in music, dance, and popular culture, drawing on 400 interviews.

From the moment in 1965 when he first stepped on stage with his brothers at a local talent show in Gary, Indiana, Michael Jackson was destined to become the undisputed King of Pop. In a career spanning four decades, Jackson became a global icon, selling over 400 million albums, earning thirteen Grammy awards, and spinning dance moves that captivated the world. Songs like “Billie Jean” and “Black and White” altered our national discussion of race and equality, and Jackson’s signature aesthetic, from the single white glove to the moonwalk, defined a generation. Despite years of scandal and controversy, Jackson’s ultimate legacy will always be his music.

Rolling Stone contributing editor Steve Knopper delves deeply into Michael Jackson’s music and talent. From the artist’s early days with the Jackson 5, to his stratospheric success as a solo artist, to “Beat It” and “Thriller,” “Bad” and “The Man in the Mirror,” to his volatile final years, his attempted comeback, and untimely death, Knopper explores the beguiling and often contradictory forces that fueled Michael Jackson’s genius. Drawing on an amazing 400 interviews—ranging from Jackson’s relatives, friends, and key record executives to celebrities like will.i.am and Weird Al Yankovic—this critical biography puts all the elements of his career into perspective, and celebrates his triumph in art and music. This is a rare and panoramic view into the genius and influence of an incomparable talent.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Veteran journalist Steve Knopper balances the musical and the personal, packing the 400 pages of *The Genius of Michael Jackson* with fascinating anecdotes, covering every stage of the singer's career in vivid detail....The section on Jackson's childhood is especially gripping....an authoritative account of a world-changing force of nature." (*Rolling Stone*)

"Steve Knopper has done something very difficult: He's written a fair-minded, musically comprehensive biography of the weirdest superstar in pop history. This is the clearest, most objective portrait of Jackson I've read." (Chuck Klosterman)

"A rich and thorough examination of one of music's most riveting, mystifying, incandescent figures. Steve Knopper brings insight and clarity to the chaos of Michael Jackson's tragic final years, but—maybe more importantly—fleshes out the powerful and brilliant performances that transfixed the world." (Alan Light, author of *Let's Go Crazy: Prince and the Making of Purple Rain*)

"Tracing Jackson's life and career, from his upbringing in Gary, Indiana, to the Jackson 5, solo fame, and through his death, [Steve Knopper] reveals a complicated, workaholic, tortured, sensitive soul, a peerless performer... Knopper writes with verve not only about the music business, but also about music and performance." (Kirkus Reviews)

"Very powerful." (*Booklist starred review*)

"The first narrative biography to deconstruct Jackson's inimitable dance steps, live performances, songwriting method and studio sessions in fine detail." (*RollingStone.com*)

"A fascinating account of the tortured artist's tumultuous life that will be an invaluable resource to music historians and fans alike." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Knopper rewards readers with surprising, apt, and copious details...Knopper handles his prodigious subject with a reporter's imperative of impartiality but a music fan's spirit of appreciation." (Boulder Daily Camera)

"Reminds us why Michael Jackson was, indeed, a 'genius' entertainer." (*Newsday*)

"A book on Jackson that treats him fairly and shows his life wasn't black and white." (*Examiner.com*)

"More than rehash the well-known arc of the dysfunctional Jackson clan, Knopper targets the details that turned a child star into the King of Pop." (5280: *The Denver Magazine*)

"Amazing." (*Maxim.com*)

"Superb... [a] fascinating, fair-minded account of Jackson's dazzling rise to the pinnacle of pop music and his ignominious fall. We learn the backstory of the moonwalk, the military jackets, white socks, glove, plastic surgery, skin whitening and more, all of it scrupulously documented with multiple sources." (*Associated Press*)

"The definitive Jackson biography." (*The Denver Post*)

"Steve Knopper is on a rescue mission: To restore Michael Jackson's legacy as a significant artist....Through reminiscences and observations Knopper gathers from more than 400 interviews, MJ deftly recounts the familiar aspects of the story...Knopper shows similar critical and reportorial savvy in assessing Jackson's creative peaks and valleys....Among the book's many answers that can't be questioned is the resonating impact of Jackson's boundary-shattering talent." (*USA Today*)

"Extensive interviews with the multitudes who crossed Jackson's path, from record executives to studio personnel to video directors, set Knopper's effort apart, and the portrayal shies away from sensationalism. What emerges is a thoughtful look at an artist who grew up in a segregated mill town and who, for the rest of his life, made music to bring down walls." (*Chicago Tribune*)

"[Knopper] takes a journalist's approach to the story, chronicling M. J.'s journey from a working-class family, in Gary, Indiana, to unequalled fame and riches." (*NewYorker.com*)

"Michael Jackson's story is well known, but journalist Steve Knopper's meticulously researched book avoids sensationalism and hyperbole to create a rich, fair-minded portrait of Jackson and his unique artistry." (*Buzzfeed*)

About the Author

Steve Knopper is a contributing editor to *Rolling Stone* and veteran music reporter who has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *GQ*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Wired*, *Details*, and many other publications. His book, *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*, was prominently featured on NPR's *Fresh Air* and dozens of other prominent radio and TV shows; Tom Hanks called it "amazing." He has been a featured expert source on *NBC Nightly News*, *CNBC*, NPR's *Marketplace*, among others. He lives in Denver with his wife, Melissa, and daughter Rose.

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MJ: The Genius of Michael Jackson

PROLOGUE

The trouble began when a janitor forgot to unlock the auditorium doors at Emerson High School, in Gary, Indiana, on September 26, 1927. A crowd gathered in the hallway and waited for first period to begin. Then two African-American students walked by. A white kid blurted out: "Let's get out of here until they get rid of the niggers."

Within hours, six hundred white Emerson students, some on the football team, were parading down the streets of northern Gary, chanting, "Strike! Strike! Strike!" and "We won't go back until Emerson's white!" Strikers in cars drove in circles, honking horns, disturbing the peace, frightening passersby. The local Post-Tribune sensationalized the crisis, printing bold headlines: 'E' STRIKERS VOTE TO REMAIN 'OUT.'

It seems William A. Wirt, the superintendent who had run the Gary schools since the city had opened for business twenty years earlier, had miscalculated. Before the semester began, he realized Gary's black schools didn't have enough space to accommodate the three thousand African-American students enrolled in the fall, so he relocated fifty of them to a handful of white schools. Emerson received eighteen. (It wasn't Emerson's

first influx of black students, but school officials had carefully screened the few earlier kids for what they considered high intelligence, good manners, and light skin, so as not to attract too much attention.) The superintendent insisted segregation did not belong in Gary, but he took no action against the strikers.

The students' ringleader, Winfield "Junior" Eshelman, was a member of the swim team who wore a blue-and-white athletic sweater and calmly delivered his demands to the press and school officials. "The strikers are firm in their belief that a colored line must be drawn, and Emerson made a white school," Eshelman said. Facing mayoral pressure to resolve the problem, Wirt and Gary's city council compromised. They granted the strikers "excused absences." They transferred fifteen of the eighteen black students to temporary schools. They set up a temporary school facility for blacks with \$15,000 in city money. And they agreed to allocate \$600,000 to build a permanent all-black school, far away from Emerson. The Post-Tribune was euphoric: STRIKE OFF; ALL HAPPY.

Gary, Indiana, had not been built for African-Americans. Once a region of swampy marshland and sandy dunes, Gary's location on the lower shore of Lake Michigan attracted oil and steel companies at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1907, oilmen bought nine thousand acres of land and announced plans to spend \$65 million on massive plants. U.S. Steel would provide living quarters for loyal workers.

The steel giant's Gary Land Company built 506 houses and quickly added more, but at fourteen dollars per month, even the cheapest homes were too expensive for the mill workers, who made 16.7 cents an hour. By 1911, overcrowding was a problem. Garbage was everywhere. Barely born, Gary was quickly segregating into two cities, for rich and poor. The former, on the north side, contained tony establishments such as the Binzenhof pub and the Hotel Gary. The latter would attract two hundred saloons over three years, with names like Jack Johnson's Gambling Joint and the Bucket of Blood. Executives and skilled workers called this southern part of town the Patch, or the Other Gary.

The all-black Roosevelt High School, created from segregation, opened in the heart of the Other Gary on April 19, 1931. Eighteen years later, across a narrow alley from Roosevelt's track field, a one-story house would appear on the corner of Jackson Street and West Twenty-Third Avenue. It was roughly thirty feet long and twenty-five feet wide, with ten tall windows, impeccable white siding, and a brick chimney at the top. The address was 2300 Jackson Street. Within a couple of years, Joseph Jackson, a construction worker, would use his savings and some money from his new wife's stepfather to buy the tiny house, as well as a refrigerator, a stove, and a bed. Joseph and Katherine would raise nine children—six boys and three girls. The oldest boy would play baseball for Roosevelt High. He and four of his brothers would sing "My Girl" at a talent show in the Roosevelt auditorium. One of the youngest brothers would spin around and around and around, mesmerizing the audience.

* * *

Years later, Michael Jackson argued with Rupert Wainwright, director of one of his short films—a teaser video for the HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book 1 album. Michael wanted to display a four-hundred-foot statue of himself in the film. Wainwright gently pushed back: "Some people might think it's slightly vainglorious," the British director told him. They went back and forth. "Verbal fisticuffs," is how Wainwright describes it. He assured MJ he'd be happier if the image were abstract, as opposed to the King of Pop celebrating his own legend. Michael disagreed. It had been thirty years since Michael had been the kid from the segregated Gary neighborhood who'd barely seen Chicago, much less the rest of the world. He'd spent his first five or six years on the planet with nothing but walls and boundaries, and by 1995 he wanted no limits at all. He refused to let race, gender, musical styles, family, even his own facial structure constrict him. Every time somebody tried to define him, he literally shifted his shape, altering his music, his clothes,

his image, his nose. On albums, he wanted sounds that had never been made before. He wanted to sell more records than any musician, ever. He could heal the world, make it a better place, comfort the sick, save the environment, bring the children into his home, turn their fears and anxieties into joy. “With These Words,” he wrote in the liner notes to HIStory, “I Lovingly Dedicate This Album Of My Music To All The Children Of The World.” The capital letters were not vainglorious. They were just how Michael Jackson thought. He was bigger than the world, and he used his powers for good. Why not a four-hundred-foot statue?

Jackson told Wainwright the statue wasn’t so much a representation of himself as it was a “symbol of music.” Wainwright said that was worse than a statue. Michael called him dumb. Wainwright said maybe he was. How many records had Wainwright sold?

“You have lots of statues where you’re from,” Michael finally told the director.

“I live in LA,” Wainwright said, confused.

“In England, you have statues. You have statues of that woman all over the place.”

“Which woman?”

“The queen.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alyssa Cox:

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