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On: 01 August 2012, At: 14:33

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Popular Music and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpms20>

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Version of record first published: 30 May 2012

**To cite this article:** Stan Hawkins (2012): You Rocked Our World, Michael: Your Moves, Your Look, Your Music, Everything!, *Popular Music and Society*, 35:2, 145-149

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2011.616295>

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# You Rocked Our World, Michael: Your Moves, Your Look, Your Music, Everything!

Stan Hawkins

The sheer brilliance of the late Michael Jackson's performances should never be underestimated. Encapsulating a myriad of idioms, styles, and gestures of an era, they are a mix of vulnerable genuineness, weirdness, and ethereality. Jackson transported pop to its most spectacular heights through a lavish display of musicianship that never failed to unite people around the world.

Upon Jackson's death, Susan Fast and I decided to edit a volume of essays that would place his music under a spotlight, one that would help reveal the wealth of markers that inscribe the richness of this artist's expression. Fast's poignant obituary article, "Difference that Exceeded Understanding: Remembering Michael Jackson (1958–2009)," which appeared in this journal in May 2010, was a fitting overture to the essays we now present. Sharing much in common with Fast's critical perspective, all the contributors of this volume celebrate Jackson for his virtuosity as an all-round performer, as much as the features that defined his acts. In sifting through the wealth of submissions we received, we kept in sight a principal objective: to address the issue of musical sound and its relationship to Jackson's subjectivity. The surprising shortage of scholarly writings on Jackson's subjectivity was a major driving force behind us seeking out essays that consider Jackson's creative output through new methodologies applicable to the interdisciplinary analysis of pop. As a result, the articles we offer in this special edition cover a range of interrelated topics, including video genealogies and dance, crossover and corporeality, micro-rhythms and sonic pleasure, musical queering and belonging, Orientalism, produced sound and vocality, black nationalism and rage, and gender, adolescence, and genre. Perhaps what makes these essays unique, at least when situated within the field of popular music studies scholarship, is their celebratory slant. The reader of this collection will note that the focus falls primarily on discovering what made Jackson's performances and compositions so legendary. Given the sheer amount of negative criticism towards Jackson in the popular press, as much as in academic circles, we, the editors, decided to opt for articles that were commemorative while at the same time rigorously investigative from an interdisciplinary vantage point. This is not to say that the

authors whitewash Jackson: far from it. They confront head on and critically many of the issues that shaped the artist's life. In particular, this collection is concerned with the ways in which creativity is mediated by the social practices of pop music, which, in turn, shape the subjectivity of the artist. The articles have been grouped in a way that not only informs key features and points of references relating to this volume's main focal points, but also that unite and extend debates from one article to the next in logical succession: Anne Danielsen's and David Brackett's essays explore issues of crossover and race; these aspects are picked up by Amir Khan who then dwells more on dance, while Brian Rossiter discourses on race through postmodern subjectivity that has a resonance in Jeremy Samuel Faust's theorization of Orientalism in Jackson's "Liberian Girl." These essays help usher in Jacqueline Warwick's and Mats Johansson's studies on vocality, which take up the debates on the voice and singing from opposite ends. The final article by Susan Fast opens up for a thorough debate on Jackson's sexuality alongside his musical virtuosity.

What emanates from the studies we have presented is a recognition of perhaps Jackson's greatest achievement, namely to bridge the influences, idioms, identities, and styles that affirm the diversity of African-American culture as much as white mainstream pop and rock. Capitalizing on the advances of technology and production, his exhilarating performances would push forward the boundaries of audiovisual recording practice. Everyone knows that the act of singing and dancing, a prerequisite of pop entertainment, requires tremendous effort to convince. Few manage this. Inevitably, Jackson would have realized this from an early age as he tailored his stylized movements and unique singing style into a perfect medium for audiovisual entertainment. Bear in mind that Jackson was the first black artist to break into the white arena of MTV (with "Billie Jean" directed by Steve Barron in 1983), turning the genre of music video into a source of profound musical and political force. Illustrating how the pleasurable aspects of dance and movement can be so endearing, his performances became legendary during his lifetime. In particular, his choreography will be remembered, especially the moonwalk stagecraft—the gliding, strutting, twirls—which set the precedent for a new generation of pop artists. Flawlessly, he synchronized physical movement with sound, bringing corporeal meaning to grooves, melodic contours, harmonic textures, and, of course, the beat. Today his legacy is documented in what have become the conventions of pop, a useful entry point for comprehending the musical experiences within popular culture.

If Jackson's solo career ushered in a video star who changed the course of pop history, it undoubtedly reshaped notions of black masculinity and ethnicity. The sheer impact of his appearance, his sound, and his agency is simply unparalleled in the history of pop. The commercial success of the *Off the Wall* and *Thriller* albums alone, between 1979 and 1983, chronicled an extraordinary feat of human agency. The production work and performance strategies behind *Thriller*'s top videos, *Thriller*, *Beat It*, and *Billie Jean* also stimulated the rapid turnover of music videos during this period, recasting the black body in a subtle interplay of sex, politics, and culture. And between *Off the Wall* and *Thriller*, with the rapid advances in music technology,

Jackson's performances exuded awesomely slick routines that secured his title, King of Pop. And, for sure, he taught us to dance.

Occupying a special place in the memories of those of us who witnessed the first signs of Michael Jackson's clambering to the top as a solo artist is *Off the Wall*. This, the first of three albums Jackson co-produced with Quincy Jones, helped launch his solo career. My favorite track and video is "Rock with You," written by Rod Temperton and released on November 3, 1979. Becoming the fourth best-selling hit of 1980, the song was sandwiched between Prince's "I Wanna Be Your Lover," in early December 1979, and Rufus and Chaka's "Do You Love What You Feel" later that month. For many this track kick-started the 1980s. So, what made it so special and how did the music help ignite the video?

Dazzling with glitz and passion, "Rock with You" is a disco-pop song that is laced with swirling strings, a tight horn section (played by the Seawind Horns), and a catchy groove-line. It is hardly surprising that this was one of Jackson's most adored songs. Joy is manifested in the idealism of youthful adulthood through memorable phrases such as "you gotta feel the beat and we can ride the boogie" and "I wanna dance you into sunlight," which breathed life into a long list of songs that would become global hits. Most of all, this pop song chronicles his life in 1979 at the advent of a meteoric rise to stardom. Released in 1980, the "Rock with You" video not only mesmerized and charmed us, but also objectified the male body. With this we witnessed a young pop icon, youthful, jubilant, smiling, and arguably naive, in the making. In retrospect, *Off the Wall* symbolized the coming of age of a pop sensibility that possessed just the right ingredients to pack dance floors all over the world. Expertly (if not miraculously), Jackson had discovered a niche that catered not only to the desires of young whites, but also to a black audience. In bridging the 1970s and the 1980s, Jackson must have understood his own construction within a fiercely competitive market; after all, in the early 1980s MTV profiled very few black artists against the huge success of white bands, such as Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, and Wham!

From the outset, as child prodigy, Jackson's performance skills steadily shaped the ideal conditions for empathic response. By the age of 21, with the release of "Rock with You," there was full evidence of a vitality that bolstered a sense of the subjective through the affective tropes of vocal inflections, rhythmic panache, and melodic phrasing. Effectively, his performances during the *Off the Wall* era would play a huge role in the global dissemination of pop and its narratives. In "Rock with You" he tells us of a girl he wants to rock with all night through, dancing her into sunlight. Uncannily, his desires become our desires through the strains of such beautiful serenading. Steered by a steady, medium groove (114 bpm), the song's melody is first discernible in the shimmering, flute-like synthesizer introduction (on a descending B flat minor triad). Grounded by an E flat minor tonality, the lush harmonic textures and chord progressions chart the protagonist's course throughout the song to the final arrival point. This is reached by one of Jackson's most beloved modulations, a subtle slip up a semitone (in this case to E minor).

Seductively, Jackson's voice is cushioned by the purring backing vocals as he milks the hook: "I wanna rock with you (all-night) ... Dance you into day (sun-light)." Aesthetically, the chorus is vintage material, its musical adjectives staked out by a mellow production that is as sequined as Jackson's disco attire. Comprising angular disco strings, a tight horn section, a dry, crisp, off-beat rhythm guitar riff, kit and percussion, and the ephemeral synth flute, the arrangement is crafted around Jackson's boy/girl voice—an androgynous voice that is delicately rendered queer through the timbral elasticity of a tenor register that effortlessly shifts in and out of falsetto on the repetition of the word "rock." The musical features in "Rock with You" embellish the idea of a persona who is fun loving, innocent, and yet sophisticated. And, fetishized by the details of a myriad of vocal mannerisms, the video of "Rock with You" quintessentialized the rise of the black pop dandy with unfathomable panache and wonderment.

Now to the video. Decked in a silvery sequined cat suit (of course, with matching boots!), Jackson is framed against a dark backdrop with bright green laser lights silhouetting him. At key moments his image is duplicated in diminutive form behind him to the upper right and occasionally the left, with multi-colored darted lighting enhancing the effect. Such production techniques had their precedent in earlier work by the same director, Bruce Gowers—in particular, his groundbreaking Queen video, "Bohemian Rhapsody," from 1975. Striking is the rhetorical force of Jackson's *jouissance*, his movements capturing a repertoire of gestures that are relaxed and nifty. Throughout, Jackson's huge smile sustains the camera's gaze in the long and short shots and cross-fades. Remarkably, it is the sensual quality of his appearance that lures the viewer into a performance space where the nascent body politics of his act are all about working long and hard. Historically, the video signifies one final farewell to 1970s disco.

Premiered for the first time in the US during late 1979, this video was exquisite for its time, encapsulating the end of one era and the start of another. From this point onwards, Jackson's movements would be all the more controlled, his choreography more elaborate, his look European, and his gender increasingly ambivalent. Even though this video is experienced differently today, it still provides us with an understanding of Jackson's destiny as much as his stylistic origins—how he fused R&B with rock and jazz through disco-oriented grooves closely aligned to soul and funk. Indeed, this video beamed across the world the image of an African-American artist and his extraordinary musicianship. Above all, Jackson's videos would stylize pop for a richly diverse audience through performances that rehearsed to perfection specific movements via an irresistible voice. "Rock with You" thus emulates many of the characteristics that determine the course of his style and sound hitherto—the minute details of the bass part, the horn section's punctuations, the string swirls, and, not least, the vocal embellishments, including the sharp punched accent on "rock" (B $\flat$ ), the fall of a fourth to "with" (F), and then a further major third fall to "you" (D $\flat$ ). Jackson's penchant for pitch inflection, his detailed timbral coloration, with nuances of quivering vibrato on his long notes, spell out a repertoire of vocal sounds that

would form the rhetoric of his auditory imagery. Indeed, the mix of passion, urgency, and fantasy in his video performances charted pop music's course in the 1980s and beyond. All told, his vocality conveyed a vibrancy that was mediated through the intricacies of technical control that we had never seen the likes of before. Thus, the patchwork of melody, rhythm, texture, harmony, and production techniques, coupled with a stunning visual spectacle, resulted in some of the most memorable performances of all time—surely, a manifestation of the creative power that affirms the ingenious qualities of human endeavor.

Tirelessly, the disciplining of Jackson's body (and, sadly, its eventual destruction) forms the narrative that has galvanized the gaze of millions of people. In every one of his texts his body would be brought to the fore; for Jackson knew how to pick up on any groove or riff in ways that passionately sported his musical vocabulary. To this end, he exemplified how musical performativity embodies the visual spectacle. Pop entices us into the carnivalesque spectacle, and Jackson helped form the blueprint for countless artists. Yet all this success should not detract from the dramatic turbulences in his life. Crucially, the rise and fall of Michael Jackson needs to be grasped as an elaborately cruel ritual within a post-civil rights context of struggle. A vast catalogue of events determined this artist's career, which was played out in a socio-political field, where a visceral voice sounded out the fragile aspects of black masculinity. However, when all is said and done, Jackson's memorable performances are harnessed forever in his pop scores, his songs, and videos. Eternally, he will remain with us in the form of a recorded voice that refashioned melancholy while dancing us into sunlight. Thank you, Michael.

### Notes on Contributor

**Stan Hawkins** is Professor in the Department of Musicology at the University of Oslo and adjunct professor at the University of Agder, Kristiansand. He is the author of *Settling the Pop Score* (2002), *The British Pop Dandy* (2009), and co-author of *Prince: The Making of a Pop Phenomenon* (2011). He is editor of *Critical Musical Reflections* (2011) and *Pop Music and Easy Listening* (2011), and co-editor of *Music Space & Place* (2004) and *Essays on Sound & Vision* (2007).