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Michael Jackson: Before He Was King

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Product Description
Photographer Todd Gray worked with Michael Jackson for several years before Jackson requested that he become his personal photographer, a relationship that would encompass the singer's performances with the Jacksons through the release of his smash solo albums *Off the Wall* and *Thriller*. This collection of unseen, intimate, and joyful pictures of Michael taken over a span of 10 years reveal him at home, with his family and fans, in career-making live performances, and the on the "Beat It" video shoot. A young black man not much older than Jackson at the time they met, Gray brings unique insights to his time with the singer, contributing stories and context to the images, presenting a rare, intimate portrait of Jackson at a creative peak as he grew from a brilliantly talented young man into a pop icon.

A Q&A with Todd Gray, Author of *Michael Jackson: Before He Was King*



Q: How did you first meet Michael Jackson?

A: I first met Michael in 1974, when I was sent on an assignment to photograph Stevie Wonder at the Record Plant studio in Hollywood. Stevie was recording the single “You Haven't Done Nothin',” which featured backing vocals by the Jackson 5, so Michael and his brothers were there. I had been photographing rock groups since 1971, while I was still in high school, and kept on to help pay for college and later, art school. When I got to the studio that evening I walked into the engineering booth and saw a young man with a huge Afro. He was wearing ill-fitting slacks and hovering around the mixing board, watching Stevie's hands intensely as Stevie was adjusting the sound of the playback. I realized he was Michael Jackson. I had no idea that the pictures I took of him then would be the beginning of a decade-long journey.

A few years later, in 1979, I was hired to shoot the Jacksons for their back-to-back appearances on *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*. I’d photographed the Jacksons a few times since 1974 for various magazines, but never really spoken to them (publicity photographers are kind of low on the totem pole). This assignment would change that. On the *Bandstand* shoot, all the brothers were backstage along with record company

people, family, friends. Each new person who entered greeted Jackie, Marlon, Randy, and Tito, but it was clear that Michael was the one who had the juice in the room, and everybody was jockeying for position to get his attention, catch his eye. I thought it best to stay away from all the action swirling around Michael, so I just drifted over to another part of the room. It didn't take long for Marlon to find me and start peppering me with questions, probably because I was the newest face in the crowd and we were close in age, but maybe also because I was one of very few black photographers on the rock scene. Soon Tito and Jackie wandered over, and in no time I felt relaxed and at ease, as if hanging out with my own friends.

The next day we were on the set of *Soul Train* in Hollywood. The same cast of characters was there--marketing, promotion, and publicity people from Epic Records--and they were all buzzing around Michael. When I came into the dressing room Tito and Marlon greeted me warmly. Jackie and Randy joined us, and I quickly became the focus of their teasing and inside jokes. We laughed a lot, talked about sports, cars, and movies--guy stuff. I didn't make any effort to get Michael's attention or even look his way. I was having too good a time joking with his brothers, and all of the adults around Michael seemed boring in comparison.

Two weeks later I was shooting Michael backstage at L.A.'s Forum, where he was receiving his platinum records for Off the Wall. Once again there was a huge entourage of industry people, family, and friends around. When I saw Michael he walked over to me and asked in a quiet whisper, "How come you never speak to me? You joke with my brothers, but not with me. Don't you like me?" I didn't know what to say. He took me completely off guard with his voice and his question. "No, you're fine," I said, "You always look so busy, and I've had nothing to say. Michael, I like you." "Okay," he said, and walked away.

The following January I got a call that Michael had personally asked me to come and photograph him while he was taping a TV special with Danny Kaye at Disneyland. Whenever the director would release him from the set to prepare the next shot Michael would grab my arm and say "Come on, let's hit some rides," and we'd run off ushered by Disney security through secret passageways, making certain we never waited in line. Michael, who was t21 at the time, loved Disneyland, and while sitting next to him on the rides I joined right in with his screams and laughter. We really had fun.

Not long after this job, I got another call from his manager saying that Michael had told him to hire only me when he needed a photographer. His manager asked, "What's up with you and Michael?" "We just get along, I guess," I said. I asked the manager why Michael chose me and he said Michael told him, "I like Todd because he doesn't talk much."

Q: What are a few of your observations about Michael's life that people outside of his world have never



seen?

A: Well, he was very observant, and had amazing focus. And when he was performing it might look effortless for him when he was doing it, but that only happened because he had a dedication and perfectionism focused on his performance, whether that was on stage or in the mixing booth with the engineers. He'd be nervous and tense before going onstage, but that would all get channeled into his performance. Sometimes he didn't sleep well in hotels on the road, and he had a special recording machine that switched on in the middle of the night and played stories. It had three clocks--you can see it on the nightstand in the second photo in the book.

Q: Did Michael's work ethic influence you in your work?

A: MJ would not stand for mediocrity. I only realized that I had adopted his work ethic a few years after I stopped working for him. Whenever I was tired and my heart was not into my work, I'd find myself thinking about how MJ pushed himself to maintain a high level of quality, and this made me not settle for "good enough" in my photo work. I always strove to achieve the best I was capable of producing, regardless of the circumstance or size of the job. I passed this onto my students over the years as motivation to achieve greater heights than they thought themselves capable. "Shoot for the stars, and if you don't make it, at least you'll land on the moon."

Q: What was it like travelling with Michael and the Jacksons?

A: Traveling with MJ and the J5 was akin to being in a bubble. Security blanketed us while on the road. Michael was so engrossed in the development of his career that he had a disproportionate world view. I (and others) had to watch our language: no swear words, sexual references, dirty jokes. He maintained an ultra moral, verbal-antiseptic space around himself, and perhaps saw the world through the atmosphere of this space. He chose to focus on pleasant things. As a result he may not have been able to make clear distinctions between the space that constituted his reality and the one we refer to as the "world."

Q: You started out shooting the Jacksons, and then became Michael's chosen photographer. What was his relationship like with his brothers?

A: Marlon was great fun. Sometimes too much fun. He was a joker and prankster. Jackie was cool, more on the quiet side. They made me feel at ease. No subject was out of bounds with them. I could be unguarded, knowing that I wouldn't offend them if a swear word or bawdy joke slipped out. I could share a beer with Jackie. Oops... I thought you wanted to know my relationship with them! Michael and his brothers got on very well. They shared a level of intimacy that anyone outside of the family was not privy to, except for lifelong body guard Bill Bray. Michael seemed to reach out to Randy and Marlon the most, though. Katherine was treated in the highest regard. Joe was a quiet, forceful presence. He was hanging out with LaToya when she'd join us on the road, and later at home.

Q: Which photograph in the book is your favorite? Which do you feel is the most honest representation of the Michael you knew?

A: My personal favorite is the first white T-shirt shot in the book (page 27). That's my favorite session because MJ and I talked about it quite a bit beforehand and we were undisturbed. We wanted to express a level of his depth in the portraits. It took a month for me to get an hour with Mike alone. My other fave is the shot of his shoes when he hits that pose on the tips of his toes (pp. 40-41). The most honest representation is the shot of Michael and the band screaming their heads off and getting amped up before taking the stage (pp. 58-59) or laughing in his movie theater at home (pp. 126-127). All the laughing shots. Michael was quick to laugh, and took great pleasure in it.

Q: Do you think Michael took more satisfaction in his singing or his dancing?

A: I would guess he took most satisfaction in his singing. He took the utmost care of his voice. Turning off the air conditioning while it was 95 degrees outside, drinking lemon honey brews, singing scales. He treated his voice very seriously. Given the amount of care, I'd have to say singing.

Q: What did you learn as a photographer in the years you photographed Michael?



A: I learned the importance of observing and understanding your subject. The importance of creating a narrative: telling a story in a picture or asking a question to create viewer interest and engagement. I was trained as a conceptual artist, not a photojournalist, yet most of the work I did with the Jackson 5 and Michael was documentary photography. At first I was quite ambivalent about documentary photography, believing that one was simply working like a Xerox machine, and not especially creatively. But I developed a respect for documentary--the reality in front of us is often more fantastic than what we can imagine, if one has the patience and sensitivity to observe it. Still, my next step would be to go on and make art and create my own meaning of the world, rather than seek out more opportunities to convey someone else's.

Q: What is your favorite MJ song amd why?

A: Wanna Be Starting Something" and "Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough." Although I heard these songs countless times on the tour, I never tired of them, and I was full of joy whenever Michael would sing them. Maybe also because my best shot, the one with his shoes en point, was made during the tuxedo segment of the show when he sung those songs.

Q: You say in the book that Michael seemed like a child at heart. How did that part of his personality impact his adult life? Was it a struggle to balance the childlike view with his adult responsibilities?

A: Mike was good at bracketing. He'd slip into serious adult mood in a flash when business was being discussed. He was a wise man-child. When finished discussing business issues he could easily and quickly slip back into play mode. On the positive side, his childlike persona gave him fluid access to the creative part of his mind. He could play with musical ideas easily and maintain a sense of curiosity and wonder, making his own rules. I think he found a way of being that was satisfying and immensely productive.

Q: How did Michael interact with you behind the camera? Did posing come naturally for him, or did you need to draw him out?

A: Photographing a subject is a dance. It takes a while to click into rhythm. Michael never stumbled in our photo dance. By the time Thriller was released he was more in command of the camera than a few years earlier. More confident. In Atlanta (for the white T-shirt shoot), he took more direction than in his home in Encino for the photos later in the book. Our relationship developed to the point that it wasn’t necessary to draw him out. There was trust. We were both spontaneous when we shot.

Q: How has Michael's death affected you? Were you surprised by your feelings?

A: I didn't grieve until several days after he passed. I spoke to my son the day Michael died and he was deeply emotional over his passing. When I did grieve, I surprised myself. Alone in a room, sobbing, I started talking to Mike, finishing the conversation we started 25 years ago, and making a promise to fulfill a wish. I don’t normally act this way.

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