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Introduction

Michael Joseph Jackson was an American songwriter and singer. He is recognized as one of the most successful artists in twentieth century popular music. Born on 29 August 1958 in Gary, Indiana, Michael Jackson became a dominant figure in the music industry in the early 1980s and influenced many people and artists across the globe and in different musical genres. The genres of Michael Jackson's music were varied. He was best known for his pop, rock, funk, Rhythm and blues, Disco, post-disco, dance disco, and new jack swing music. Even though his songs centred on playing in discos and entertainment for the young population, MJ was always conscious of the circumstances around him and used to release songs that were woke about a certain social or global issue.

Making his first professional debut in 1964 with his brothers in the Band called The Jackson 5, he went on to become a Legend in the industry, as described in Lerner's 2017 edition "The ultimate music legend.". Michael Jackson was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1984. In addition to his 13 Grammys, he also won a total of 26 American Music Awards and 13 Billboard Hot 100 hits.

Furthermore, MJ captivated us not only with his voice but also with his dancing moves; his manoeuvres, particularly the moonwalk, were trendsetters and continue to astound spectators who watch his videos. (Krohn)

However, Jackson's legacy goes beyond awards and accolades. He produced woke songs about social concerns that affected USA during his time, such as racism, poverty, war, and environment. After his death in 2009, he still remains one of the world's most influential figures in popular music history. The following are a few of his songs that have significantly impacted the world, particularly the United States.

Billie Jean

All this began with the 1983 hit single Billie Jean. A song that not only revolutionized the music industry but had a far wider impact on the world of music and its fans. At first, the lyrics may put you off as it sounds just like another Pop Song. Billie Jean's lyrics revolve around a woman calling Michael Jackson out for impregnating her while he tries to defend himself. The song explores themes of sexual infidelity and paternity, which was not common in pop music at the time. (Jones) (“Michael Jackson – Billie Jean”) The idea of producing a video for a single proved to be a masterstroke by Michael Jackson and MTV. With a proper budget and a good production, Billie Jean transformed MTV from a mere division of four young people into a cultural institution that society largely paid attention to. The song instantly became a nationwide and global hit as it was adored by both Black and White listeners. (Jones) (Guardian Staff)

An industry embedded with racism was caught aback by the song's reception, which finally led to a shift in many people's attitudes and opened doors for many Black artists. This move by Michael Jackson was monumental in terms of the effects it would have on American Music in the years to come and how Black Americans would capitalize on it. (Guardian Staff)

Beat it

"Beat it" by Michael Jackson, released in 1982, was another successful song that attracted a broad audience mainly because of its upbeat, fast-paced music and lyrics. Nonetheless, the song had another purpose; America in the 1980s was rife with gang battles and bloodshed. Michael's "Beat it" directly aimed to avoid violence by encouraging people to deliberately walk away from a fight. If the lyrics weren't enough to get someone to grasp the music, the video made it more approachable to everybody viewing. (Shelton)

A song focusing entirely on reducing violence significantly influenced the public and quickly became a song of peace in America. "Beat it" resonated particularly with young people, giving them the confidence to back away and flee when confronted with a fight-or-flight situation. Jackson's "Beat it" has been cited as one of the most successful, recognized, and celebrated songs in pop music history. The King of Pop's hits impacted everyone; his songs and videos spread like wildfire, igniting a great interest in pop culture across America and helping the industry re-establish itself in the hearts of the American people. (Shelton). "Beat It" was not only just a song as it symbolized the black community and demonstrated to the American people and the world what a Black man can accomplish with just his voice and groovy dance moves. (Krohn)

President Reagan also acknowledged Michael for the song in the White House in recognition of his role for the campaign against violence. This further spurred Jackson's and the black communities' morale to achieve equality. Reagan claimed that Jackson exemplified what a person may achieve via a life free of alcohol and drugs. ("President Reagan Awarded Michael Jackson the Presidential Public Safety Commendation"). He further said that "People who are young will respect that, and if Americans follow his example, then we can face up to the problem of drinking and driving, and we can, in Michael's words "beat it" (Krohn) (Jones)

Black or White

Black or White, released in 1991 as the first single from Jackson's eighth studio album, Dangerous, was another tremendous hit for the American Pop Legend. MJ composed and wrote while Bill Bottrell produced. The song is a mash-up of pop rock, dance, and hip-hop; numerous labels, including Epic Records, referred to it as a rock and roll dance song about racial harmony. "Black and White" was viewed as a song created to unite both races, and it

peaked at number one on the Billboard Hot 100 on December 7, 1991, making it the fastest US chart-topper at the time. (Vogel) (Jones)

The song was released at a period when racial ambiguity in America was at its height. Although Michael Jackson had gone through a lot of physical and emotional changes at the time after switching his skin tone, he remained a black man at heart, and this song revealed to the world that he desired peace. In fact, his identify as a black artist had only further enhanced. An unparalleled 500 million viewers watched the video of Black or White, providing Michael Jackson with the biggest platform of his life. This song broke barriers and provided America and the world with a much-needed refresher in terms of the racial war spewing hatred all over the country and the world. (Vogel)

The video may at first feel monotonous, but as the video progressed, we see that Jackson was not only focused on White or Black people but his primary motive, especially throughout the video, was to unify people of all races and colors. With a message this strong that unites all races under one flag, Michael did something bold with the possible consequences of changing the course of America's Future. (Vogel) (Jones)

Even though the focus of the lyrics and film was on uniting all races under one umbrella, at the end of the video, we see a black panther (a symbol of the black panther party) sprinting off into the Alley, quietly spreading the Black Lives Matters message to all his viewers.

They Don't Care About Us

Michael Jackson released "They Don't Care About Us" as part of his 9th Album in 1996. Many consider it a protest in the shape of a song, making it one of Jackson's most controversial compositions. (“Michael Jackson “They Don’t Care about Us””)

With the unexpected spike in allegations and scrutiny in the media, as well as from many listeners and reviews, MJ was forced to provide various clarifications and even apologize to

everyone impacted by the song. Some claimed that Jackson's 'They Don't Care About Us' contained antisemitic lyrics. Thus, the song and lyrics had to be changed before it could be officially re-released in the market. (Krohn)

In his defence, Michael Jackson criticized the media and audiences for misinterpreting his lyrics and taking the song out of context. Still, the immediate reaction to this song shook Jackson, the music industry, and America. (“Michael Jackson “They Don’t Care about Us””) (Jones)

Fast forward to the 21st Century, Michael Jackson's 'They Don't Care About Us' receives some well-deserved renewed attention. The Black community single-handedly resurrected the song as it became an essential part of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014, 2015, and again in 2020. (“Michael Jackson “They Don’t Care about Us””)

When it was first released, the song was met with plentiful criticism and dismissed as just another Michael Jackson song. A song that has now become a statement against racism, political unrest, and social injustice, just like Michael wanted it to be over two decades ago. (Krohn) (Jones)

Hold My Hand

'Hold My Hand,' a duet with the famous Akon, was initially recorded in 2007 but released after Michael Jackson's death in 2010. The song received a lot of attention, mainly because of the tender lyrics and the profound message behind them. (“Michael Jackson Feat. Akon: Hold My Hand (Music Video 2010) - IMDb”)

The video was made after Michael died and is about his life's work and how much he has contributed to fostering peace. As evident in the video, people of various races and colors come together to support Michael and show their affection for him. The song can also be interpreted

as a homage to Michael's hard work and a depiction of what he always imagined America to look like. (“Michael Jackson Feat. Akon: Hold My Hand (Music Video 2010) - IMDb”) (Jones)

Conclusion

The truth behind Michael's songs, and perhaps his entire career, was that he wanted to reform the music industry and be a voice for Black Americans' suffering in the country. The support he received was variable, to say the least, but he adhered to his beliefs, and even now, after his death, his words have become a symbol of resistance and possibly peace. (Krohn)

The songs or videos he produced always had a subtle meaning to them, which discussed issues affecting the masses, be it police brutality, racism, or global issues. Despite being called a variety of derogatory names and labeled as a racist, Michael Jackson never gave up and continued making songs and films that promoted unity and highlighted institutional issues. (Jones)

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