

Fahrenheit 9/10

The downfall of Michael Jackson

Pretty young things, repeat after me: Michael Jackson beat it.

Child molestation is not a laughing matter, but celebrity excess certainly is. Which is why I'm fascinated by the rise and fall of Jacko, a larger-than-life talent who has been under the watchful eye of the media microscope for more than 35 years. He is a living, breathing byproduct of our celebrity-obsessed culture. His transracial, transgender appearance betrays his self-loathing—a tragic figure whether or not you believe in his innocence—yet his appetite for attention seems insatiable.

Now that Michael is off the hook from his latest accusation of fondling little boys, talking heads are eagerly salivating over the next chapter in this sad tale. Tongues are wagging that he might show up at one of the Live 8 concerts July 2.

But can this career be saved? More importantly, does anyone care?

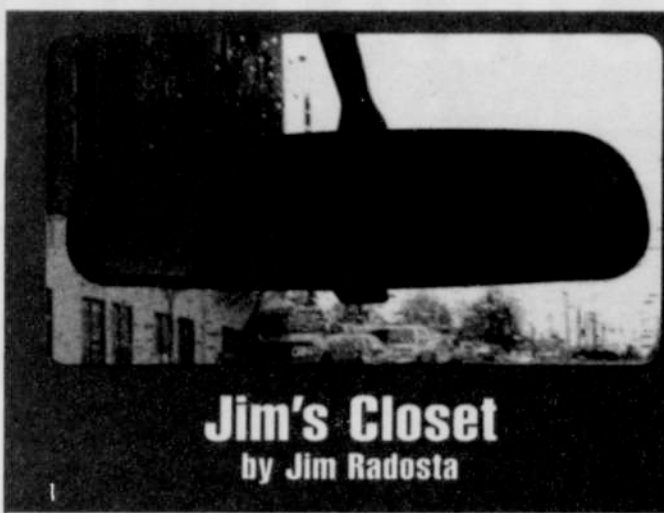
"I think...what the trial did was confirm what people want to think about Michael in the first place," Seth Clark Silberman, a Yale lecturer on black and queer studies, told ABC News. "For those who believed Michael was a child molester to begin with, the trial may not have changed their mind. For those who believe what the Jackson camp has been saying—that there's been this conspiracy and the Santa Barbara County sheriff's department is out to get him—the trial supported their theories, too."



The man in the mirror...is unrecognizable.

Either way, the self-proclaimed King of Pop already has been dethroned, brought down by a combination of ballooning ego and apparent mental instability. It's a tossup as to what precisely caused his downfall: Was it his clumsy kiss with then wife Lisa Marie Presley at the 1994 MTV Video Music Awards (a publicity stunt that failed almost as miserably as Tom Cruise's recent fist-pumping meltdown with Katie Holmes on *Oprah*)? Or was it his dangling of infant son Prince Michael II aka "Blanket" over a balcony in 2002?

As far as I'm concerned, Jacko sealed his fate four years ago when he invited his freaky friends to serenade him during a pair of concerts at Madison Square Garden to celebrate the 30th anniversary of his solo career. Never before has there been such a synthesis of infamous train wrecks under one roof:



- An aging Tito Jackson and the rest of the brothers awkwardly reuniting for the first time in 20 years. (Today the family still comes together, but only for Michael's court dates.)
- A dumbstruck Britney Spears, clearly creeped out by Jacko during their duet, "The Way You Make Me Feel." (Today she's knocked up by deadbeat dad Kevin Federline and starring in UPN's reality television series *Chaotic*.)
- An obese Marlon Brando, two-time Oscar winner and onetime voice of a generation, thanking Michael for donating money to build a children's hospital in Florida and mumbling about child abuse, starvation and disease until the impatient crowd booed him offstage. (Today he's, well, dead.)
- A bloated Liza Minnelli—Oscar/Tony/Emmy winner and the world's biggest gay icon second only to mama Judy Garland—warbling "You Are Not Alone." Backstage she met producer David Gest, who went on to become her next gay husband. (Today she's svelte and he's suing her for spousal abuse.)

• A skeletal Whitney Houston shocking the crowd when she joined Usher and Mya onstage for "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'." (Today she's out of rehab and doing the reality television thing with her husband on Bravo's *Being Bobby Brown*.)

Incidentally, Liza and Whitney looked so awful, the network suits at CBS took it upon themselves to digitally alter their bodies before broadcasting the concert several days later. This, my fellow Americans, was the nadir of pop culture.

But here's the best part: All of this took place in New York City on Sept. 7 and 10, 2001—literally the eve of destruction. Child actor turned heroin junkie

Corey Feldman recently revealed that Michael "basically...threatened my life" by refusing to give him a seat on the tour bus out of town the next day, leaving him stranded after the terrorist attacks.

How fitting, then, that one person's comeback advice for Jacko involves a trek to the Big Apple.

"Michael needs to become reacquainted with the world again," Silberman says. "Maybe he needs to move out of Neverland and move to New York and just be around people again."

Or maybe Jacko should simply heed his own advice from 1979's "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough." Michael, after all these years of scrutiny, haven't you had enough? **JR**

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