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TROUBLE IN PARADISE

COULD THE KING OF POP END YEARS OF SILENCE AND RECLAIM HIS TITLE AS THE GREATEST ENTERTAINER OF ALL TIME? WE LOOK AT THE STAR'S CONTROVERSY-FILLED FINAL DECADE...

STEVE HARNELL

At the Jackson brothers' reunion concerts, Madison Square Garden, September 2002



Jackson performs with NSYNC at Madison Square Garden, 2001

HOW

exactly do you go about spending \$30 million on making just one album? Take one look at the monumental list of

contributors to 2001's *Invincible* and you might be able to piece together an explanation.

The final studio LP proper from Jackson was an epic – 16 tracks and almost 80 minutes of music. As this was his first full-length album of new material for six years, the stakes were high.

In an attempt to keep up with some of the young pretenders nipping at his heels, Jackson elected to go for an edgier and more urban feel to the record in places. In what has now become standard operating procedure for R&B and hip-hop albums, multiple producers were drafted in to helm the material. Diversity was seen as preferable to the singular vision of a Quincy Jones.

Teddy Riley returned once more to co-produce four tracks, but it's the contribution of Rodney Jerkins in the studio that shines brightest. By the turn of the millennium, Jerkins was a hot property in the world of chart-friendly R&B, rising through the ranks with a clutch of hits including *The Boy Is Mine* by Brandy and Monica, Whitney Houston's *It's Not Right But It's Okay* and *Say My Name* by Destiny's Child. Sessions were so lengthy for the *Invincible* album that Jerkins was forced to crowbar in Brandy's *Full Moon* project between breaks with Jackson. Behind the faders elsewhere there were appearances by established big-hitter names like R Kelly and Babyface alongside newer talent such as Andreae 'Fanatic' Heard and Richard Stites.

INVINCIBLE WAS AN EPIC, WITH ALMOST 80 MINUTES OF MUSIC. AS HIS FIRST FULL ALBUM OF NEW MUSIC IN SIX YEARS, THE STAKES WERE HIGH

The album kicks off with a trio of crackling hard-edged tunes, all co-produced by Jerkins. The feisty and defiant *Unbreakable* features a rap cameo from the Notorious B.I.G. and is another in a long line of Jackson's kiss-offs to his critics, something akin to *Leave Me Alone* or *Scream*. The glitchy *Heartbreaker* goes toe-to-toe with the urban high-rollers of the day and admirably holds its own while the title track is another funky highlight with Michael bigging himself up against an array of love rivals.

Break Of Dawn harks back to the smooth glories of *Human Nature* from *Off The Wall*, but it's many of the remaining downtempo tracks that can make *Invincible* heavy-going for the non-diehards. Jerkins shores up the album's mid-section with the superb *You Rock My World* but the ballads *Speechless*, *You Are My Life* and *The Lost Children* are too insipid to bear close comparison with his best work. The latter song came in for some harsh criticism from *The Guardian's* Alexis Petridis, who called it a "hideous, syrupy sub-Broadway showtune" and noted that the closing spoken word section had "deeply unpleasant connotations and [was] appallingly misjudged".

In the preceding weeks before *Invincible* hit record store racks, the signs for Jackson's return to the fray were positive as he rebuilt his public image back to mythic proportions. The album's release was heralded a month earlier by a clutch of live shows – a surprise appearance alongside *NSYNC to duet on *Pop* at the MTV Video Music Awards as well as two major concerts at Madison Square Garden in New York to mark his 30th anniversary as a solo artist. At the latter, Jackson appeared on stage with his brothers for the first time since 1984 and the remaining supporting cast was nothing less than stellar – Destiny's



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POP_UP Up to 50 songs were lined up for *Invincible*. Abandoned titles included a remake of the Isley's *Shout*, *Another Day* with Lenny Kravitz, *All In Your Name* with Barry Gibb and *Do You Want Me* with Dru Hill





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Above: the World Music Awards in London, 2006

Child, Usher, Luther Vandross, Jill Scott and Guns N' Roses axe hero Slash all turned up to pay tribute to the King of Pop.

Jackson knew that for all his aura of mystique, it was time to give *Invincible* the big push. Among a series of interviews he undertook was a phone-in Q&A with Anthony DeCurtis for getmusic.com. It was a sedate affair with DeCurtis resolutely staying clear of any whiff of controversy, and Jackson was at pains to push the positives of the album rather than allowing any muckraking of his private life.

"I tried to make [*Invincible*] a potpourri of wonderful melodies of any style," he tells DeCurtis. "I don't believe in stylising or branding any type of music. A great artist should be able to create any style, any form – from rock to pop and folk, to gospel and spirituals. Anybody can sing it, from an Irish farmer to a lady who scrubs toilets in Harlem."

In light of his subsequent alleged prescription drug addition, it's ironic that Jackson's few harsh words in an otherwise wholly fluffy interview were reserved for those who have lost their songwriting muse due to living a rock'n'roll lifestyle. "Any painter or sculptor does their best work in their 60s or 70s. Fred Astaire did his best dancing in his 70s. In the music business, some of the great artists have become stumped because of self-abuse at such a young age with the crazy things they drink and the pills [they take]. We should take care of our bodies a little more."

In another interview with *Vibe* magazine, Jackson revealed he was happy to make use of new styles to stay relevant and welcomed the chance to allow Jay-Z to remix *You Rock My World*. "[Jay-Z's] hip, the new thing, and he's with the kids today. They like his work. He's tapped into the nerve of popular culture."

Jackson also spoke candidly of his reservations about his children following him into the music industry. "It's hard, since most of the children of celebrities end up becoming self-destructive because they can't live up to the talent of the parent. People used to always say to Fred Astaire Jr., 'Can you dance?' And he couldn't. He didn't have any rhythm, but his father was this genius dancer. It doesn't mean that it has to be passed on. I always tell my children, 'You don't have to sing, you don't have to dance. Be who you want to be, as long as you're not hurting anybody'. That's the main thing."

After Jackson's death in 2009, Rodney Jerkins also spoke to *Vibe* magazine about the album and recalled the tortuous recordings which ran over several years.

"It was a lot of starting and stopping. One time, [Michael] was like, 'Let's start from scratch... I think we can beat everything we did.' That was his perfectionist side. I was like 'Man, we been working for a year, we gonna scrap everything?' But it showed how hard he goes."

"There's stuff we didn't put on that I wish was on there. My first batch [of beats] is what I really wanted him to do. I was trying to go vintage, old school Mike. He kept *Rock My World*, but he wanted to go more futuristic. So I would find myself at junkyards – we'd be out hitting stuff, to create our sound."

"It was Michael's idea [for *Invincible* to be so long]. We actually had that conversation where I was like: 'You should make it 10 songs and that's it.' You never know... maybe he felt it would be his last album."

If the reception at the live shows and buzz around the album had both augured well, a long-running record label dispute with Sony Music Entertainment over the ownership of Jackson's masters still

"I TRIED TO MAKE *INVINCIBLE* A POTPOURRI OF WONDERFUL MELODIES. I DON'T BELIEVE IN STYLISING OR BRANDING ANY TYPE OF MUSIC"

POP UP Aside from *This Is It*, Jackson's last real concert performance – pictured above – was joining a children's choir performing *We Are The World* at the 2006 World Music Awards in London



BACK TO THE GARDEN

JACKSON MADE A TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO NEW YORK – BUT THERE WERE SIGNS ALL WAS NOT WELL

If there was any doubt remaining concerning Michael Jackson's pulling power at the box office, then his two 30th Anniversary Special concerts in 2001 more than laid them to rest.

Staged at the legendary Madison Square Garden in New York on 7 and 10 September, Jackson's comeback gigs were among the most hotly-anticipated in pop music history. Ticket prices broke all records, with the best seats sailing through the \$10,000 mark. For his part, the star was reportedly paid \$15 million for the two shows.

Tied in to mark Jackson's first ever single release *Got To Be There* from 1971, the concerts were a star-studded affair and included appearances from Hollywood royalty as well as an array of soul and R&B stars paying their own tributes to the singer.

The running order and featured acts between the shows differed slightly between the two nights. Whitney Houston and Marlon Brando – the latter giving a typically rambling humanitarian speech – only appeared in the first concert, and did not reprise their roles three days later.

Elsewhere, the diverse line-up across the two shows included Dionne Warwick, who performed *I'll Never Love This Way Again*, James Ingram

and Gloria Estefan's duet on *I Just Can't Stop Loving You*, and another of Jackson's famous friends – and later the wife of one of the show's producers David Gest – Liza Minnelli, who sang *You Are Not Alone* and *Over the Rainbow*.

But these were mere aperitifs for the main event – the return of Michael Jackson with an added bonus of an on-stage reunion with his famous family. After running through a handful of family classics including *Can You Feel It*, *ABC* and *I Want You Back*, Michael took to the stage alone and plucked a brief selection of solo hits out of the bag to deafening roars during a mini-set that featured a slowed-down *The Way You Make Me Feel*, *Black Or White*, *Billie Jean*, *Beat It* and *You Rock My World*.

The shows were eventually merged into one for a two-hour TV special, which aired on the US network ABC in late November. But they were not without controversy. Some fans commented that Jackson seemed strangely disoriented at points during the first gig – he improvised the closing section of *Billie Jean* and only attempted a perfunctory moonwalk. Both David Gest and Michael's brother Jermaine would later allege that by this point the singer's addiction to painkillers was already having a detrimental effect on his performance.



Photo © Photoshot

threatened to dilute the impact of his comeback. The singer subsequently claimed Sony failed to fully get behind the release, despite the fact *Invincible* still went on to sell 13 million copies worldwide. For their part, Sony claimed that Jackson's decision not to tour on the back of the record ultimately affected its long-term sales potential. The argument got even uglier when the singer later labelled the company's chairman Tommy Mottola (and former husband of Mariah Carey) a "racist" and a "devil" who failed to fully support black artists on the label.

One of the most notorious episodes in Michael Jackson's troubled relationship with the media came with the 2003 documentary with Martin Bashir. The journalist first came to prominence in 1995 after his interview with Diana, Princess of Wales for the BBC's *Panorama* current affairs series. The fly-on-the-wall show *Living With Michael Jackson* makes for extraordinary and, at times, disturbing viewing, as Bashir pulls no punches in trying to get to bottom of the King of Pop's everyday existence. Such was its impact that it could be said to have lifelong implications for the star as more controversial aspects of his life were once more put under the microscope.

Over the course of eight months, Bashir attempted to uncover, as he put it, "the disturbing reality of [Jackson's] life today". At first, we're shown the childlike aspects of the singer's demeanour as he climbs his 'Giving Tree' and talks about how he's been inspired to write many of his songs up in its branches. He also reveals, to Bashir's bemusement that his favourite ways to unwind are "water balloon fights and climbing trees".

But the pain of Jackson's upbringing is never too far from the surface. He tells Bashir how his father Joe took a belt, ironing cords and "whatever else was around" to his children while they were rehearsing as The Jackson 5. Pointedly, he adds that he never lays a finger on his own children "when people say the abused [go on to] abuse, that's not true at all. I remember hearing my mother scream, 'Joe! You're gonna kill him, stop it!' I was so fast, he couldn't catch me half the time, but when he would catch me, oh my God, it was bad. Really bad," Michael adds. "We were terrified of him. I don't think he realises to this day how scared we were of him. So scared that I would regurgitate just seeing him. Sometimes I'd faint and my bodyguards would have to hold me up."

A brisk shopping trip at a Las Vegas store shows just how extravagant and out of control Jackson's spending habits had become. Bashir remarks that the singer lives like an "emperor or Louis XIV" as he spends millions of dollars on furniture.

The journalist also tenaciously pursues a line of questioning about Jackson's changing appearance to which the star responds that Joe was often behind much of his insecurity about that, too. "He would tease me about how I looked. He'd say 'God, your nose is big. You didn't get it from me'. On top of that you have to go on stage in the spotlight in front of hundreds of thousands of people. I would have been happier wearing a mask."

Later, when Bashir returns to his questions on appearance, Jackson gets touchy about the gradual whitening of his skin. "You gotta ask God about that. That has nothing to do with me. That's ignorance. I don't control puberty, or the fact that I have vitiligo."

When Bashir lists a whole host of plastic surgery procedures that the star is rumoured to have



Jackson exits the Santa Barbara courthouse, April 2005

Photo © Photoshot



Jackson with Elizabeth Taylor at the Royal Albert Hall, London, May 2000

Photo © Photoshot



Photo © Photoshot

had, Jackson denies the lot. "None of it's true. It's B.S. [The media] made it up. When I was growing a beard, one paper said I had each individual hair transplanted into my face with a laser. I can't even grow a beard now? You ignorant fool, who wrote such a thing! It's not the truth. It's garbage."

The documentary also includes footage of Jackson dangling his child Blanket over the balcony of a Berlin hotel room and disturbing scenes during a visit to the city's zoo where the star and his family are mobbed by fans and paparazzi. The singer seems totally unphased by the carnage, much to Bashir's disbelief.

There was more damaging elements to come though. "The most disturbing aspect of his life story," says Bashir near the documentary's closing scenes. "I, like everyone, knew that 10 years ago, children were being invited to sleep over at Neverland."

Bashir was referring to the Jordan Chandler case and added: "I'd assumed that now he'd be more cautious, but to my utter astonishment, I discovered that children were still sleeping over – sometimes in his house, sometimes in his bedroom."

Tensions rise as Bashir points out that the majority of people would be astonished at the singer's behaviour, especially in the light of the Chandler case. Jackson, though, is totally unrepentant: "I feel sorry for them. They're judging people. The most loving thing you can do is to share your bed."

It makes for extremely uncomfortable viewing. As a PR exercise, it was a disaster and for many people their views on Jackson became set in stone from this point onwards.

The fallout from the Bashir documentary was monumental. Jackson immediately realised the gravity of this career-threatening negative publicity.

Claiming that the footage was a "twisted and edited construction of scandal and innuendo", the singer went to the extraordinary length of issuing a rebuttal documentary that showed Bashir being largely complimentary about him as a man and a father. In an attempt at damage limitation, Jackson's new video called upon his parents Joe and Katherine, brother Jermaine, ex-wife Debbie Rowe and confidante Elizabeth Taylor to give glowing testimonials.

Only Bashir now knows the real truth behind this hugely complicated saga. Outtakes presented in Jackson's version of events seem to contradict the journalist's voiceover in the final cut. Did Bashir twist the truth to suit his own ends? It's a hugely labyrinthine topic that can be endlessly debated.

THE FALLOUT FROM THE DOCUMENTARY WAS MONUMENTAL. JACKSON IMMEDIATELY REALISED THE GRAVITY OF THE NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

The content of the Bashir documentary went far from unnoticed. Soon after it was aired, the Santa Barbara county

attorney's office began a criminal investigation into goings-on at Neverland that would ultimately prove pivotal during the rest of Michael's life. A preliminary investigation by the Los Angeles Police Department and the Department of Children and Family Services concluded that the allegations of child abuse were unfounded. But following further information from the family of Gavin Arvizo – the teenage cancer survivor featured in the Bashir documentary – the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office reopened the case, sending 70 investigators to execute a search warrant at Neverland.

In November 2003, Jackson was charged with child molestation and administering alcohol to a minor. The ensuing five-month trial made headlines across the world as a string of damaging accusations continued to emerge. The star was finally acquitted on all counts on 13 June 2005.

POP_UP Jackson only spoke at his trial via videotape, but celebrity supporters who did testify on his behalf included Macaulay Culkin, chat show host Jay Leno, actor Chris Tucker and comedian George Lopez





Diamond Award winner at the 2006 World Music Awards, Earls Court

Photo © Photoshot

A moment from the BRIT Awards, 2006



Photo © Photoshot

POP_UP Before he passed, Michael's plans for the future included a three-movie deal, a tour starting in China, another Superbowl appearance, one more tour with his brothers, and opening a children's hospital



Despite his acquittal, Jackson was struggling financially and by March 2006 the main house at Neverland Ranch was closed to save money. Throughout the remaining part of the year, reports began to surface that the star was collaborating with will.i.am from the Black Eyed Peas but fans would have to wait almost three years before he resurfaced with anything concrete.

In what was one of the major entertainment stories of the decade, March 2009 saw Jackson announce a remarkable closing chapter to his performing career. The This Is It residency at London's O2 Arena was initially intended to be just 10 shows, but the astonishing appetite of fans soon meant this number swelled to 50 as more than one million tickets were snapped up in less than two hours.

Jackson hinted at retirement after the shows – the residency's title was pretty explicit in that regard, of course. The spectacular gigs were due to run from 13 July 2009 to 6 March 2010. An extraordinary press conference was staged with the usual bravado and flair for over-the-top theatricality. Jackson, though, looked unprepared, ill at ease and befuddled. After thanking fans and throwing a few shapes, there was little in the way of fine detail from the man himself. "These will be my final performances in London," he said. "When I say 'this is it', I really mean it. I'll be performing the songs my fans want to hear. This is the final curtain call. I'll see you in July."

As in life, so it was in death – Michael Jackson's premature demise on 25 June 2009 was the final controversial chapter in a life littered with them.

The residency at the O2 Arena, of course, never came to pass. With less than three weeks to go before opening night, Jackson was found dead at

his rented mansion in Los Angeles. The news of the star's untimely demise prompted an instant and massive outpouring of grief across the world. Google blocked web searches about his death for half an hour when the story broke in the mistaken belief their search engine was under DDoS attack, while Twitter and Wikipedia crashed under the strain of fans desperately trying to find out the latest on the story. AOL subsequently labelled the event a "seminal moment in internet history. We've never seen anything like it in terms of scope or depth."

Record sales for Jackson jumped 80-fold after his death. Six of his singles returned to the UK's Top 40 as he broke chart records across the globe.

Key to the circumstances surrounding the singer's death was his use of the powerful drug propofol, which is used in hospitals for anaesthetic

purposes. Nicknamed 'milk of amnesia' due to its white appearance, the drug has been linked with heart attacks in the past. When Jackson's home was searched by investigators after his death, they found several bottles of the drug at the property.

Jackson's personal physician Conrad Murray had joined the singer's camp in May 2009 as part of an agreement with AEG Live – the concert promoters behind This Is It. When investigators traced the propofol back to Murray, he was charged with involuntary manslaughter in February 2010. After a trial, Murray was eventually convicted on the charge in November 2011, serving two years of a four-year jail term.

The following years have seen various rumours surface concerning Jackson's addiction to painkillers, anti-anxiety medication and anti-depressants although a subsequent BBC report that took into account

"THESE WILL BE MY FINAL PERFORMANCES IN LONDON. WHEN I SAY 'THIS IS IT', I REALLY MEAN IT. THIS IS THE FINAL CURTAIN CALL"

Jackson at the final rehearsal for his 'This Is It' shows to be held at the O2 Arena in London



Photo © Photostat

NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN

A PLACE TO NEVER GROW UP: THE FANTASY WORLD OF MICHAEL JACKSON'S IMAGINATION

Michael Jackson's extraordinary Neverland Ranch was the ultimate in pop star playgrounds – literally as well as metaphorically. It was named, of course, after the fantasy land in the singer's perennial touchstone *Peter Pan*, and Jackson was first introduced to the 3,000-acre site through Paul McCartney, who was staying at the property while the pair filmed the video for their *Say Say Say* duet of 1983. Jackson fell in love with it immediately but it took several more years before the singer closed the deal – he finally moved into the ranch in 1988 after snapping it up for a reported \$30 million.

Originally called the Sycamore Valley Ranch, the main house was designed by architect Robert Altevers in a French-Normandy style. Alongside the gargantuan main residence, the most famous features added by Jackson included a petting zoo and two narrow-gauge railway lines. Its two trains, one of which was named Katherine after the star's mother, would transport guests along the quarter-of-a-mile journey to a private 50-seater cinema and full-size amusement park on the complex.

Apart from regularly hosting trips for underprivileged and sick children, Neverland also staged the eighth marriage of Elizabeth Taylor and was a regular hang-out for Hollywood

A-listers including Marlon Brando, Eddie Murphy and Liza Minelli.

Jackson eventually moved out of the ranch in 2005 following the fallout from the police investigations into goings-on there two years earlier. Within a year, the majority of its staff were dismissed and the property was closed up. The ownership of Neverland then remained in limbo for several years as Jackson struggled to keep up with loan repayments.

The star's daughter Paris returned to her childhood home a year after her father's death. Saddened at its rundown appearance, she eventually announced plans in 2013 to buy it back and return it to its former glory. But the plans failed to materialise and the house has now been put on the open market with an initial starting price of \$100 million.

If you're thinking of dipping your hand into your pocket then be warned that many of the trademark features of Neverland's Jackson era have now been removed. The amusement park is long gone, along with the menagerie of animals, although the odd llama still reportedly remains. There are, though, odd glimpses of its former controversial owner still in situ such as the private train and the beautiful floral clock that formed the ranch's centrepiece.

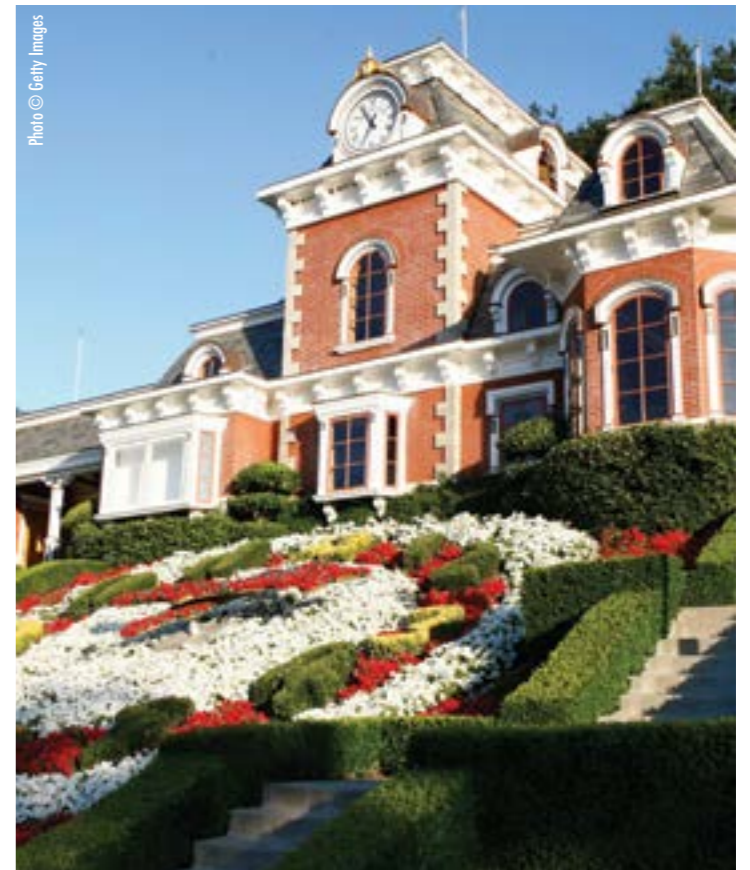


Photo © Getty Images

the singer's autopsy result found him to be healthy and with no hint of a heart condition.

As befits the self-proclaimed 'King of Pop', Jackson's memorial service was something akin to a state funeral. This was, of course, no traditional ceremony. The event itself was partly-organised by the gig promoters behind the singer's *This Is It* comeback tour, AEG Live. Held at the Staples Center in Los Angeles on 7 July, such was the interest from the public that organisers had to issue tickets via a lottery system and more than one million well-wishers applied for one of the 17,500 available to the service.

Among the mourners were many of Jackson's closest friends including Smokey Robinson, Lionel Richie, Brooke Shields, Magic Johnson and Stevie Wonder. In tribute to the singer, each of Jackson's brothers escorted the gold-plated coffin wearing a sequined glove on one hand.

During one eulogy, Motown founder Berry Gordy told the crowd: "The more I think about Michael Jackson, I feel the King of Pop is not big enough for him. I think he is simply the greatest entertainer that ever lived."

The service also featured a number of musical guests. Mariah Carey and Trey Lorenz performed *I'll Be There* and Usher descended from the stage during a heart-rending *Gone Too Soon* to place his hand on Jackson's coffin. He ended the song in tears before being consoled by fellow mourners. In an unexpected move, Jackson's daughter Paris gave a brief speech to the crowd saying: "I just want to say, ever since I was born, Daddy has been the best father you could ever imagine... and I just want to say I love him so much." The service was broadcast live around the world and some estimates put viewing figures at almost one billion people.

After Jackson's untimely death, AEG recouped their losses on the abandoned *This Is It* residency shows with a hastily-released documentary. The feature-length effort comprised the planning stages and rehearsals for the London concerts and an array of behind-the-scenes footage featuring Jackson, his musicians and backroom staff. The documentary's producer Kenny Ortega confirmed that none of the footage was originally intended for official release and came in for criticism from fans that the movie was an exploitative cash-in exercise. Adding that the scenes have "a real unguarded honesty to them," Ortega admitted that the material was only ultimately meant for Jackson's private library.

Meanwhile, other fans were happy to feast on the scraps and at least see something of what could have been. Despite some fans boycotting its release and Jackson's family refusing to endorse it, *This Is It* was still a massive box office success, and went on to become the highest-grossing concert film of all time.

Film critics generally gave the documentary a warm reception. Seasoned veteran Roger Ebert was at pains to dispel rumours that AEG would have known that the singer was in bad health before the run of shows in his review: "Here is not a sick and drugged man forcing himself through gruelling rehearsals, but a spirit embodied by music. *This Is It* is a portrait of Michael Jackson that belies all the rumours that he would have been too weak to tour."

Fans were left to ponder what might have been. Would Jackson have pulled off the biggest comeback of all time? It's destined to be one last unanswerable question about the most remarkable of lives. ■