

Thrills, Chills, and Safe Sexuality: The Sounds of Michael Jackson's "Thriller"

Oswaldo Oyola

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Abstract

Next month may mark the 30th Anniversary of the release of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, but chances are that if you are going to a Halloween dance party this year –or have since 1982–the musical highpoint of the night will still be when they play the title track.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Film/Movies/Cinema, Gender



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Next month may mark the 30th Anniversary of the release of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, but chances are that if you are going to a Halloween dance party this year –or have since 1982–the musical highpoint of the night will *still* be when they play the title track. While thematically and sonically appropriate for Halloween getting down, there is more to the song's sonic exploration of fear, both its "scary sounds" and the lyrical references to sound–the stolen scream, the creeping from behind–in the role of scaring an audience. There is startling disconnect between the scariness the song describes (and the stock sounds of classic Hollywood horror films it samples) and its ability to make something potentially scary palatable to a pop mainstream. It is not so much the elements of horror themselves that Michael Jackson's song makes acceptable, but the potential scariness of sexuality for which it is a metaphor.



<https://youtu.be/sOnqjkJTmA>

There is a long tradition of horror movies as metaphors for sexuality, in particular adolescent sexuality. Iconic examples include Michael Landon's untrustworthy violent tendencies in 1957's *Was a Teenage Werewolf* (a film clearly being referenced in the opening to the John Landis-directed video for "Thriller") or more recent incarnations like Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where sleeping with your boyfriend can literally lead to the loss of his soul.

While written by Rod Temperton, a white Briton, "Thriller," as performed by Michael Jackson and produced by Quincy Jones, takes on the horrors of emergent sexuality via a racial lens. The pop song becomes self-referential, metaphorically about the very taboo thrills that have made young white people seek out black music, and their parents fear for the consequences. And while 1983 was a far cry from the 1950s-era outrage over white kids listening to and making their own "black" rock n' roll, we also can't forget that it was an era of a newly-launched MTV almost completely devoid of black artists (before hip hop's explosion among young white males). It was largely Jackson's popularity, in fact, that prompted MTV to finally include more black artists in its programming.



Photo by Shaun Wong via Flickr

While references to race in "Thriller" may be oblique, the lyrical references to sex are fairly obvious. The menace of the sexual encounter is present throughout the song as it is in the genre—sex itself is thrilling, desirous despite its potential physical, emotional or even social dangers. The scariness of the late night creature feature on television becomes an excuse to "cuddle close together." This comforting occurs "all through the night" and the singer "can thrill you more than any ghost would ever dare try" (and the use of "ghost" to make a distinction between it and the singer reverberates with racial meaning). There is a dichotomy present in the song, in that the speaker is both the comfort from the fear of violence, and potentially "the beast about to strike." Of course "nothing can save you" from that beast, when it is also the figure you are counting on to save you to begin with.

Similarly, at the height of his popularity, Michael Jackson embodied a safe version of black male sexuality. (In contrast, consider Prince, who in the early 80s was putting it all out there with albums like *Dirty Mind* (1980) and *Controversy* (1981), and would not get anything remotely like *Thriller* success until 1984's *Purple Rain*). Despite Jackson's pelvic thrusts or his videos featuring dark alleyway dancing, he represented a form of sexless sexiness, as emasculated in the eyes of the public as his doll (as famously demonstrated by Eddie Murphy on SNL). Perhaps most indicative of that position was Jackson's bringing [Brooke Shields as his date to the 1984 Grammy awards, while having Emmanuel Lewis accompany them](#). At the time MJ's Peter Pan latency meant that Brooke was safe from predation and Emmanuel Lewis was an innocent child-friend to the child-like entertainer. Michael Jackson's persona would not be undone by the accusations of monstrous pedophilic tendencies for another nine years. Like the *Thriller*-themed doll pictured, Jackson was safe for both children and mainstream America, despite his ability to be transformed into something ostensibly terrifying.



Eddie Murphy shows what MJ has between his legs on SNL

The song is arranged and produced by Jones to echo this dichotomy of safe danger. The bass groove is a creeping disco loop never arriving, but suggestive of the warning music of the slasher genre. The hook is introduced with a sudden and shocking chords on a synthesizer, like the title screen music of an old monster movie. The high-pitched synthesizer whine that warbles during Vincent Price's rap emulates the [sci-fi spookiness of a theremin](#). The availability of Vincent Price was a coup for Jones and Jackson—a well-known figure of the genre, but even by 1980s, he was already a throwback to an older and out-of-date notion of horror—known for his low-budget work in Roger Corman films like [Masque of the Red Death](#) (1964) and [appearances on Scooby-Doo](#). Furthermore, the song is marked by stock creaks, footsteps, thunderclap, slamming doors, wind and howls, sounds that enter the realm of kitsch. The sound effects are so exaggerated and artificial as to undercut the sense of the scariness the song describes and potentially represents. It disguises the supposed threat of black sexuality so successfully that it is now performed at many a white American wedding.



<https://youtu.be/OPmYbP0F4Zw>

The campiness of the song's excess, both sonically and lyrically, takes the edge off the sexual desire—the very thrill the song is meant to evoke. Even John Landis's vision of the song in his 14-minute long video that remixes the album track for cinematic effect, mixes its film-quality monster effects with a playfulness evident in Jackson's multiple incarnations in the video. In the movie inside the dream inside the video narrative, he seems more concerned with teasing his date about how easily she is scared (and scaring her some more) than sleeping with her—but his mischievous grin signals an unspoken desire that comes alive in his date's alternating desire and fear of him. The dangers of werewolves and zombies are always arrested to reveal a level of artifice, a gotcha moment for his date—and for the audience—that undermines any real risk.



*Michael Jackson transformed into a literal
"black beast."*

The title track on what remains one of the best selling albums in history, "Thriller" evinces the ways in which Jackson and Jones figured out how to perfectly package and promote this tamed sexuality through their manipulation of sound. Sonically, the song (and other songs on *Thriller* such as "Beat It," "Billie Jean," and "Wanna Be Startin' Something") evokes the tantalizingly forbidden and yet makes it accessible. The infectiousness of "Thriller"'s groove, along with the appeal of pop hook sung by Jackson's unmistakable voice, threatens possession of the listener but always allows for her to "change that number on your dial." Part of what made this music broadly appealing (aside from Jackson's obvious talent) is its success at dissembling, avoiding the backlash against the figure of "the black beast" rapist while subconsciously evoking the fear of it.

But there is a price to be paid for this sonic disconnection. There was certainly something horrific in Jackson's physical transformation in the years that followed his *Thriller* apogee. Could it be that MJ's desire to further improve on this formula led to what Richard Middleton describes in his book, *Voicing the Popular* (2006): a change from black child star to a "simulacrum of white middle-class woman" (128)? The extremity of such camp collapsed on itself, allowing that sexual anxiety to flow back through the disconnect his "safe" persona was supposed to shore up. Whatever fear that the sexless sexiness of Michael Jackson was actually a cover for queerness was brought to the fore

because he stood accused of molesting little boys, allowing for a depiction of monstrosity that works across both gender and racial lines (and also highlighting a difference in attitude from when girls are the victims).



*"Thriller" re-enactment held in
October 2010 in Springfield, MO.
Photo by Darin House via Flickr*

Jackson's fall from grace may have come in the form of molestation accusations, but it still provides insight into the long history of fear of black America and black music that still lingers, proving that the mainstream's love can turn to suspicion, even hate, in a heartbeat. Jackson's broad appeal narrowed significantly when there was even a chance he wasn't the sexless figure he appeared to be. As James Baldwin, whose writing and social criticism was always focused on the intersection of race and sexuality in America, wrote in 1985's "Here Be Dragons" in regards to the hysteria of Michael Jackson's popularity:

The Michael Jackson cacophony is fascinating in that it is not about Jackson at all. I hope he has the good sense to know it and the good fortune to snatch his life out of the jaws of a carnivorous success. He will not swiftly be forgiven for having turned so many tables, for he damn sure grabbed the brass ring, and the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo has nothing on Michael. . . Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated—in the main, abominably—because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires.

Oswaldo Oyola is a regular contributor to Sounding Out! and ABD in English at Binghamton University.