

I wrote this the day after Michael's death. My editor at Atlanta Music Guide chose not to run it for numerous reasons, specifically stating that it did not properly celebrate his life. I think it does. None of the other tributes I read mention his achievements in breaking color barriers. I think this is a good honest assessment of him as well as catalyst for discussion on how we choose to remember our heroes. Let me know what you think. E-mail me at [al@alkaufman.net](mailto:al@alkaufman.net)

Did Michael Jackson Die Too Late?

By [Al Kaufman](#)

I never learned to moonwalk. I never owned a sequined glove. I never even bought *Thriller*. I never needed to. I heard it everywhere I went. I was heavily into the Beatles at the time and was angered at the comparisons that Michael was bigger than the Fab Four. But then I was looking through the TV listings one day and there was a little blurb after some anonymous show that the Michael Jackson Pepsi commercial would be on during it. An advertisement drawing people to watch a TV show. Wow, I thought, I'm really living through something big.

Michael was a smart guy. Yes, he was incredibly talented and revolutionized dance and music, but he understood crossover appeal as well. I remember listening to my favorite rock station in Boston, WBCN, and hearing the DJ say, "We don't usually play this kind of music, but he's got Eddie Van Halen doing a great guitar solo, so we thought you might want to hear it." Then "Beat It" came on. Would the white kids have flocked to Michael as they did if he hadn't incorporated the guitar god of every white teenage boy into his music? That issue is debatable. But Michael did the same for MTV. The station took a lot of heat for only playing white artists until Michael came along. His videos were simply too revolutionary to ignore.

So Michael was huge. Everyone loved him. What if he died then? What if he died right before *Bad* came out? How big would Michael be right now? *Bad* would be thought of as another masterpiece instead of the reread of *Thriller* that it was. Michael would be thought of as a genius that died during the peak of his powers. "How many more brilliant albums did he have in him?" we would ponder, whereas now we know the answer was zero. Think about it. John Lennon's *Double Fantasy* was an uneven album that at times could be so saccharine that the songs sounded like they came from Paul McCartney's pen instead. But Lennon was killed and the album sold millions and was considered a masterpiece.

Jim Morrison died just as he was becoming a fat, bloated rambling buffoon. Kurt Cobain reportedly was doing permanent damage to his vocal chords and was going to lose his voice. What if these people lived on? Would they have become late night TV fodder instead of legends? Most likely.

But think of it; Michael dying before all (or at least a lot of) the plastic surgery, before the face masks, before Wacko Jacko, before the bizarre marriages, before the alleged

child molestation. Think of Michael going out during the peak of his powers. The Neverland ranch would be our generation's Graceland instead of being an area taken over by a bank after so much reported misconduct. Michael would have been thought of as the greatest entertainer of our generation, period. He would have been thought of as someone cut down in his prime who could have given us so much more if he had only been given the time. Michael loved fame. I think he would have preferred it that way.