

Michael Jackson – Thriller 25 Anniversary Edition (2008)

Written by bluelover

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1 –Michael Jackson *Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'* 6:02 2 –Michael Jackson *Baby Be Mine* 4:20 3 –Michael Jackson *With Paul McCartney The Girl Is Mine* 3:42 4 –Michael Jackson *Thriller Rap [Featuring] – Vincent Price* 5:57 5 –Michael Jackson *Beat It* 4:18 6 –Michael Jackson *Billie Jean Guitar [Featuring] – Eddie Van Halen* 4:53 7 –Michael Jackson *Human Nature* 4:05 8 –Michael Jackson *P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)* 3:58 9 –Michael Jackson *The Lady In My Life* 4:58 10 –Vincent Price *Excerpt From "Thriller" Voice-Over Session* 0:24 *Previously Unreleased Tracks For 25th Anniversary Edition* 11 –Michael Jackson *The Girl Is Mine 2008 Vocals – Will.I.Am* 3:11 12 –Michael Jackson *P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing) 2008 Vocals – Will.I.Am* 4:21 13 –Michael Jackson *Wanna Be Startin' Somethin' 2008 Vocals – Akon* 4:14 14 –Michael Jackson *Beat It 2008 Vocals – Fergie* 4:12 15 –Michael Jackson *Billie Jean 2008 (Kanye West Mix)* 4:37 16 –Michael Jackson *For All Time* 4:03

Thriller is the biggest-selling album of all time; it says so on the cover of this reissue package. What it doesn't say is that, on a worldwide scale, it outpaces the Eagles, Pink Floyd, and Celine Dion by more than just a marginal million or so: At 100 million+ copies sold, it's estimated to have sold more than twice its nearest rival.

And so people try to concoct explanations. The album was focus-grouped for broader appeal-- but then why haven't focus groups worked so well since? Jackson made the racial crossover breakthrough on MTV-- but once that door was opened, why didn't the sales crossover work for others? Jackson's stunning dancing and videos exploded pop's visual formatting-- but the Thriller album, until DVD-era reissues like this one, wasn't a visual experience.

When Thriller opens, those 100 million sales feel just. "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" is pure confused, shocked teenage rush. So there's another theory: Thriller is the best-selling record ever because it's the best record ever. That one holds up for six minutes and two seconds,

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during which Jackson and Quincy Jones mix the tension of rock'n'roll with the rapture of disco and hit perfection. But then you get "Baby Be Mine"-- one of the original tracks that wasn't a single-- and the momentum fades: On the heels of "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'", it should maintain the temperature; instead, it goes nowhere, starts nothing.

Thriller is inconsistent in style, which gives it something to appeal to everyone, but it's oddly tough to listen to even the great bits sequentially-- its peaks are from different mountain ranges. "Thriller"'s joke-shop horror segues well into Eddie Van Halen's headbanging guitar on "Beat It". But to follow that into the paranoid celebrity funk of "Billie Jean", the meltingly tender "Human Nature", and the smooth R&B of "P.Y.T."? These are all brilliant singles, though; Thriller's greatness lies in its great songs not in it "working like an album."

For this edition Jackson's called in some current big guns to provide remixes, and sadly they do provide the consistency the originals gloriously lack. Will.i.am sets the tone: He takes Macca off "The Girl Is Mine" but decides it can't work without someone sounding like an idiot and steps manfully in himself. There's a general reluctance to use what these guest stars are good at: will.i.am is a consistently slick, inventive pop producer but nobody wants to hear him rap, whereas on Kanye West's "Billie Jean" a guest verse might have added dynamics to the mix's clumsy claustrophobia. Fergie's gift as a pop star is the way her crassness shifts into oddness-- so on "Beat It" her nervous reverence is a waste of time. Only Akon comes off well, flipping the meaning of "startin' somethin'" and turning the song into a joyful seducer's groove, and here it's Jackson's own mush-mouthed new vocal that spoils things.

The remixes aren't a missed opportunity-- they're an imaginative way to wring bonus material from sessions overseen by a notorious perfectionist. It could be a lot worse. The last time Thriller got reissued it included "Someone in the Dark", a horror from the E.T. soundtrack showcasing Jackson's most saccharine side. We're spared that, and the token MJ rarity here is "For All Time", recorded during the Thriller sessions (and then later rejected for Dangerous). A glistening, slightly overdressed piano ballad, it might have made a nicely sappy album closer-- if we didn't already have the subtler, understated, and underrated "The Lady in My Life", possibly Jackson's most soulful solo performance on the record.

The DVD footage, with all the videos you'd expect, is much better. Watching the famous Motown 25th Anniversary performance of "Billie Jean" in particular I'm struck by how angular Jackson's dancing is, how tense: Knees and elbows spiking out, body freezing into indecipherable alphabets. And then how beautiful, the way he simply flows out of each position, the release that made his music so joyful given kinetic form.

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The biggest-selling album of all time, then, and you should probably take the "of all time" literally. His highest-clout guest stars here have shifted around one-twentieth the copies Thriller has, and in a dwindling industry it's hard to imagine anything similar happening again. Fluke it maybe was, but as a unification move it worked-- the last time, maybe, one person could incarnate almost all of pop, all the corny and all the awesome in one mind. We live now in the world of the "long tail"-- Thriller was the big head. ---Tom Ewing, pitchfork.com

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