

A full-body photograph of Michael Jackson standing against a red brick wall. He is wearing a black tuxedo jacket, a white dress shirt, and a black bow tie. He has his signature black curly hair and is smiling at the camera. His hands are in his pockets, and he is wearing white gloves. The image is a classic promotional photo for his album 'Off the Wall'.

MICHAEL JACKSON

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 Andy Healy 2016

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MICHAEL JACKSON



OFF THE WALL

Dedicated to Michael, Quincy, Bruce and Rod who all set out on an amazing journey to discover and uncover a Michael Jackson for a new generation and in the process inspired many more generations to come.

This special Off The Wall Supplement is also dedicated to all the engineers, songwriters and musicians who helped bring Michael's music to life.

By a fan for the fans.



OFF THE WALL

How does a child star reintroduce themselves to a public intent on pigeon holing them? This was the issue Michael Jackson faced in the lead up to 'Off The Wall'. He was no longer the cute little kid twirling around in the front of The Jackson 5. He had grown as a person and as an artist and he wanted to bring this sense of maturity to his next project, his first solo album as an adult and the first truly of his making.

With 'Off The Wall' Michael closed the door on being the dazzling wunderkind of yesteryear and look to embark on a journey of creating music for today and beyond.

In retrospect listening to Off The Wall feels logical. It seems natural that it contains brilliance - it is after all a 'Michael Jackson' album. But in the lead up to its release Michael Jackson was considered just another singer-songwriter-performer; talented for sure, but maybe his best years were behind him - and this at the ripe old age of 21.

So for Michael 'Off The Wall' was a reintroduction of sorts. A chance to guide his own destiny, to create his own sound and chart his own course. For the first time in his solo career self-penned songs would be recorded, he would co-produce a handful of songs (along with the incredibly gifted Quincy Jones) and he would set about creating the perfect pop/r&b crossover album.

To hear 'Off The Wall' now it's easy to forget the obstacles Michael faced. Success seems a fait accompli. But it's a rare moment in his career where Michael is out to prove himself rather than top himself. There's a true sense of joy evident in the recording and in every performance. He is where he is meant to be, doing what he is meant to do, and loving every moment of new found creative freedom. It's his nothing to lose but something to prove album. His coming of age album. And his first step to true, unprecedented super stardom.

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OFF THE WALL

DON'T STOP 'TIL YOU GET ENOUGH
ROCK WITH YOU
WORKING DAY AND NIGHT
GET ON THE FLOOR

OFF THE WALL
GIRLFRIEND
SHE'S OUT OF MY LIFE
I CAN'T HELP IT
IT'S THE FALLING IN LOVE
BURN THIS DISCO OUT

When Michael decided to release his first solo album with Epic Records he knew this was going to be a different album to the ones he had released with Motown. For those he was the child singer, propped up in front of a mic and told what to sing and how to sing it. Now embarking on adulthood he wanted to have more of a say on how he would present himself to the world and more importantly what songs he would record. Buoyed by the success of the 'Destiny' album Michael was ready to record his own songs as a solo artist for the first time. He also had the talent and desire to produce himself but internally lacked the full confidence to pull it off so instead he turned to his 'The Wiz' producer, Quincy Jones, to helm this new endeavour whilst overseeing and co-producing the self-penned tracks.

So it seemed fitting that the very first song to present a new, more mature sounding Michael to a new audience of listeners was one wholly written by himself. And what a (re)introduction it was.

With its percussion and bass intro, 'Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough' beckons the listener in with Michael delivering a teased out spoken intro. It's as though we've caught Michael mid conversation as he hesitantly asks "You know I was... I was wondering, you know, if... if we could keep on, because the force it's... it's got a lot power." These somewhat nonsensical mutterings conveyed a truth in the delivery revealing an unsure, unconfident and shy Michael.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this 15 second introduction is that on first listen you don't know where the song will go. Then as a counterpoint to the shy, soft spoken intro the music kicks in and with it the superstar uber confident Michael let's out what would become a trademark scream and the track springs to life with a driving beat, lush strings, and teasing guitar.

And then there are the vocals.

Michael's falsetto is pure pop perfection on this track. Silky smooth, the lead and background vocals draw out phrases and add accents in a way that is immediately intoxicating. Michael gives each word space to float in the air. He draws them out. Teasing the listener with every utterance.

From sweeping strings that dart and zig and zag in between the vocals, to horns blaring with attacking and swooping patterns, each passing verse and chorus builds the intensity of the track carrying us to the climatic bridge where the song steps up to another level.

You can hear the love and dedication given to the delivery and arrangement of this song, with strings countering each other and that non-stop wall of percussion that powers the song along.

It's as though everything Michael has learnt in his career and his own musical ideas to that point are presented here. The way the song carries multiple hooks from the vocal melody to the jittering guitar lines to the blasting horns to the swirling strings says as much about Michael's ability to write a hit on his own terms as it does his ability to masterfully weave musical arrangements.

Of course, Quincy Jones' masterful production is evident and helps elevate the track, though it shouldn't be overstated. Michael's early demos recorded in his Hayvenhurst studios present the song almost fully formed with the wall of percussion grooving along, bass and key melody lines present (right down to the bubbling synth outro) are all there just ready to hook the ear.

This is Michael presenting himself to the world, letting them know that he is older, has a more mature sound, and that he means business.

Every second of this song is designed to be heard. And decades later it continues to entertain and hook you in from the very first bar.





Ladies & Gentleman, please welcome to the microphone, Michael the seducer. Here he is in 'Rock With You' teasing out the lyrics in a way he hadn't before. He drips vocal honey on lines as he urges the listener to "Close your eyes and let that rhythm get into you". The way he elongates key words, drawing out the feel and emotion from them draws you further and further into the track.

Written by Rod Temperton (of 'Heatwave' fame) with Michael in mind Rod writes to Michael's strengths allowing Michael to carry the listener away with vocals that lift you up towards the highs of the too-catchy-for-its-own-good chorus.

Rooted in a more traditional disco groove, 'Rock With You' allows Michael's voice to float through the verses in anticipation of a driving chorus. There is a sensuality here in Michael's voice. A mix of pleasing and promise. Of desire and deliverance. Of passion and playfulness. He teases. He coos. He slinks over notes with ease and adds punch when needed.

With each passing verse Michael pulls you into the groove. He soothes the worries of the world away, and makes this moment right now all that matters. This slight of hand vocal seduction is hypnotic and mesmerising.

And all that tease and promise is paid off when that bridge hits and Michael's vocals carry you effortlessly. When he claims "When the groove is dead and gone / you know that love survives / so we can rock forever on" you believe him. And since his unexpected passing in 2009, these words have become a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts as 35 years later we are still tuning in to the energy of his music that lives on.

The lush harmonies he layers in the bridge are rich and full, and guide us through to the uber catchy "pop-corn" inspired synth solo that is as quintessential disco as they come.

Again the production and arrangement sees Quincy Jones bring his ability to sew together hints of jazz with a funk groove, all topped with Michael singing with a pure sense of joy and excitement.

After its initial release, Michael, Quincy and Bruce Swedien ventured back into the studio to give the track a bit more punch, resulting in the addition of hand claps in the chorus to give it more energy for the club and party crowd. And whilst the revision would become the future standard for all subsequent pressings and releases, the original mix (sans claps) offers a preferred subtle laid back seduction.

Whereas other songs from the disco era now seem throwaway and soulless, 'Rock With You' offers a richness that drips from the slow delivery of the lead vocals, to the oh-so-sweet backing harmonies. Supported by a healthy sprinkling of soothing strings and popping synth notes 'Rock With You' manages to perfectly capture a moment in time and yet remain timeless and eternally captivating. It's proof that love, and a great song, survives.



Frenetic and pulsing with energy, 'Working Day And Night' bristles with pure funk. From the opening percussive groove complete with Michael's scatting and heavy breathing beat boxing, the song is grounded in the inescapable intensity of the rhythmic track.

Michael's sweet falsetto conveys the plight of a man so busy trying to please his lover that there is little time left over for actual loving. His delivery expresses the frustration at not getting the good loving he craves with conviction.

With blasting horns and piano stabs, the track is a dizzy hypnotic journey through the pains of unobtainable love that is too good to sit still to.

Exploring the conflict of his desire to please and the equally strong desire to love, 'Working Day And Night' uncovers the sweetness inside the tension of anticipation and ultimate frustration. The promise of "what my life was meant to be" drives the lyrics on as Michael struggles to turn the desire of love into "reality". But with all his time taken up working so hard to please his love he is ultimately filled with concerns that someone else is enjoying the fruits of his hard labour. It is this mix of passion and confusion that comes through loud and clear in his vocal delivery. Perhaps a realisation that being a slave to his career and ambitions takes a toll on the more social aspects of life.

Anchored in a propulsive driving beat, 'Working Day And Night' proved an effective dance floor filler as it did a stadium joint. It is perhaps the purist representation of Michael fully immersed in the funk (followed closely by follow up album track 'Get On The Floor').

The production on the song (co-produced by Michael) has everything sitting perfectly in the jingle jangle pocket that commands the listener to get up and groove. Nothing is embellished. Everything is in its right place rising and falling in the mix, popping out in prominence and then easing back to dial up the tension of the lyrics.

As with many of his stronger dance oriented songs, it's the groove with its stop start jittering that Michael was so drawn to. It's a song with a heartbeat that races and the little additions of extra percussion in the middle 8 gives the song a live energy feel that would go on to be showcased in future Jacksons and solo tours with Michael giving the track an extended work out that would see it being played for over 10 minutes.

The song also gives us a stronger shaping of Michael's vocal prowess with the emergence of his soon to be trademark ad-libs and percussive delivery. For a non-single release, 'Working Day And Night' remains a must hear for any fan of Michael's music.



Following on from 'Working Day and Night' the funkfest continues with 'Get On The Floor'. Structured around the sublime bass work of Louis Johnson (co-writer on the track) whose hands run all over the fret, Michael builds the song into a flurry of funk.

In its original release 'Get On The Floor' kicks off with a sparse arrangement of bass, strings and vocals anchored on a percussive infused groove that fills the song with pure energy. Here Michael's vocals and multifaceted harmonies are the centrepiece.

Blending both his upper and mid voice, Michael delivers the vocals with a sense of abandon and freedom as he teases out each line of the verses offering an invitation to join him amidst the writhing bodies of the party crowd. With playful twists and turns of phrase Michael is seductive and teasing as he promises to "groove ya gonna move ya, gonna say things to you, just wait and see".

Somewhat lyrically concise, Michael knows the juice is in the chorus and plays it for all it's worth.

At the glorious breakdown Michael uses his voice as a percussive instrument, whispering and grunting as the section builds and builds to its climax, kicking the track into next gear.

The oft cited joy of 'Off The Wall' as an album is completely evident here especially at the 3:38 mark where we hear Michael laughing, caught up in the moment. A spontaneous act that in later years would have been removed and sacrificed for a more polished take.

After the initial release of the album, 'Get On The Floor' also received a revised mix with guitar overdubs, horns, and claps to embellish and lift the chorus whilst extra background vocals are reprised during the outro. Whether this was necessary is up for debate as the song remains a standout in either form as a pure funk party track.





Kicking off Side 2 with the title track, Michael keeps the party going with an anthem for giving in to the power of the music and leaving your worries on the edge of the dance floor. Although penned by Rod Temperton, Michael imbued the lyrics to 'Off The Wall' with his own passion for losing oneself in music and dance.

"When the world is on your shoulder / gotta straighten up your act and boogie down" Michael sings as he pays homage to the escape and release he found in dancing, whilst also giving a nod to the wider community of 'party people' of the era who lived for the moment with a true sense of carefree abandon.

And it's this carefree nature that is imbedded in the song. The groove is uplifting as it shimmies to a classic disco beat accented by bright and sparkly harmonies delivered with a true sense of joy.

A pop hymn for the party ethos of the time, it captures the vibrancy and blissed out love that was key to the lifestyle. Here the dance floor is your sanctuary. Here you can "let the madness in the music get to you" and surrender to the up tempo grooves to wash away all stress or worries.

Temperton's use of short staccato words gives Michael the room to extend and snap words like elastic as he elongates some phrases like "So tonight" and then rapid fires "gotta-leave-that-9-to-5-up-on-the-shelf". With such meter in place it allows Michael to offer a percussive delivery which adds to the urgency of giving in to the moment.

The bridge with its bouncy hi-hats lets you get swept away on the approaching tide of luscious harmonies that are structured to swim around the main vocal.

As Michael was more prone to do on this album, the repeated chorus to outro structure gives him a chance to lose himself in the song and roll off sublime ad-libs that would in one heart beat race ahead of the backing chorus and then in the next breath would sit back and echo the main lyric.

It's touches such as this that keeps the song vibrant and full of captivating energy until the final fade out.

Due to its strict adherence to the disco sound, 'Off The Wall' is perhaps the song that suffers most from the distance of its surroundings. Whilst offering a nostalgic hit to the golden days of the era it does come of sounding slightly dated.

But if one can cast aside images of silver lame jumpsuits and spinning disco balls for a moment, there is still enough power in the song to uplift the spirit more than 35 years later, due largely in part to Michael's heartening performance.



GIRLFRIEND



Originally recorded by Paul McCartney for Wings 1978 'London Town' album, 'Girlfriend' (depending on who is telling the story) was written with Michael in mind as conveyed to Michael by Paul himself during a late night Hollywood Party. McCartney's original take on the song has him singing in a somewhat strained falsetto with equally as helium filled falsetto backing vocals that strongly hints to a Jackson 5 inspired arrangement. McCartney's version also contains a middle 8 that didn't make it across the pond when Michael stepped behind the mic to record his take on it.

As a somewhat obscure McCartney track, it comes as no surprise that many in the Jackson camp were unaware that this was even a cover. And in a weird kind of cross pollination McCartney's more Jackson 5 inspired arrangement falls by the wayside as Michael and team give it more of a traditional McCartney arrangement complete with little throwaway Beatlesque "woo hoos".

Michael also chooses to sing the song in mid voice rather than falsetto and in doing so adds extra strength to the verses and makes it more of a sweet song of pleading (or is that threatening) to solidify a new relationship by jettisoning an old one.

Production wise it's interesting to note that in the verses the music is very straight forward pop akin to McCartney's own stylings, but when it shifts into the post chorus scatting a little extra bit of funk and soul is added to the mix. Here Michael attacks each little utterance with gusto to the point where little cracks in his voice can be heard.

Slightly unremarkable overall as a song, 'Girlfriend' no sooner begins as it is ushered off to a quick fade out. The shortest track on 'Off The Wall' it gives the album a bit of a reprieve from the onslaught of the preceding dance oriented tracks and shifts things to a more decidedly middle of the road feel. This downshift works nicely as the perfect a lead in to the latter half of the record. And for that, all is not lost.

Hearbreak has never been captured on record quite like it is on 'She's Out Of My Life'. With its melodramatic string and synth intro the song takes on a haunting quality not yet present on the album. If 'Off The Wall' is an overall joyous undertaking, then here is a moment of sorrow to provide balance.

As the song transitions from the prelude to the main melody the sombre chords and crying guitar licks go straight for the heartstrings from the very first note.

Showing maturity in his vocals, Michael delivers an impassioned performance filled with warmth and reflection. Wisely, the instrumentation is kept to a minimum to offer a modern take on a simple piano and vocal torch song.

As Michael wades through the emotions of Tom Bahler's raw lyrics, he hones in on the inner turmoil and pain of lost love. He rides the melody with his vocal in a way that underpins the sorrow and regret as he sings "Damn indecision and curse pride" before he bursts through anguish with soaring and powerful "(I kept my love for her locked) deep inside" before surrendering to the final lament, "And it cuts like a knife".

The final phrase of the song is now legendary with Michael shedding real tears and a break in his voice as he draws the song to its heart


aching conclusion. Rumoured to be unable to complete the song without finishing in a flood of tears, the decision was made to keep the breakdown in the track presenting a vulnerability and authenticity somewhat lacking in other music of the time.

And whilst the 'Off The Wall' album cut is the most well known, it's worth noting that the demo version released in 2009 is the superior version.

This early stripped back, acoustic version does away with any extra instrumentation to draw out emotion and instead relies on Michael to deliver it. And deliver he does.

Without the strings and piano plucking on the heartstrings, the song stays this side of saccharine and presents itself as an earnest and authentic ballad. The purity displayed in Michael's voice in the demo shows that no studio trickery is needed when talent is this much in abundance.





With its smooth jazz vibe 'I Can't Help It' sees Michael taking a Stevie Wonder penned track and making you forget who wrote it from the very first note.

The rich and silky fretless bass opening coupled with dreamy jazz inspired chords creates a feeling of sensual delights just beyond our reach that Michael's voice invites us to explore. "Looking in my mirror" he coos, "took me by surprise / I can't help but see you / running often through my mind". He draws out the final word with such sweetness that if he hasn't hooked you by now you should probably get your heart checked.

The production on the track is second to none. Drawing on his wealth of experience in the jazz arena, Quincy Jones applies just the right mix of accompaniment, and holds back from overlaying Michael's voice with dense harmonies letting Michael just double track his lead in the chorus. A great example of restraint where less is more.

Similarly, rather than over wash the song in extra instrumentation for the solo, Quincy lets the best instrument - Michael's voice - take centre stage as Michael scats with precision and passion.

With such ease Michael's voice trails up and down his register, scats here and there before gathering pace and urgency in the chorus.

And just when you think there is nowhere else to go he soars in the closing minute before floating back down to earth.

If anyone ever questions Michael's vocal ability – this is the track to leave them awestruck. It shows his light and shade, his effortless grace and his ability to blend genres.

A must hear.

As the second cover song on the album 'It's The Falling In Love' is a prime example of the exemplary production of Quincy Jones and vocal stylings of Michael.

Written by Carole Bayer Sager and David Foster (who Michael would work again with on his final studio album *Invincible*) the song was submitted to several artists before being featured on Carole Bayer Sager's "...Too" album of 1978. The following year Jazz singer Dee Dee Bridgewater recorded her take on the song in the months prior to 'Off The Wall' for her disco cross over album 'Bad for Me'. That same year saw yet another version emerge as Australian singer Samantha Sang release her own take.

It's interesting then to contrast the various versions of the song that came out the same year and were aimed at the same audience as it highlights how a great song is a wonderful starting point but it is the production and performance that makes all the difference.

Whilst both Dee Dee Bridgewater and Samantha Sang's versions veer more to the disco side of the equation, Michael's version retains more of the intentions laid down by Carole Bayer Sager in her original.

With more of an organic feel to it, Michael and Quincy set out to make 'It's The Falling

In Love' their own. Duetting with Patti Austin on the track, Michael brings a sensuality to the song that is lacking in the other versions.

Furthermore, structuring the song as a duet provided another point of difference and shifted the song's narrative refashioning it as a tale of two star crossed lovers.

With Michael kicking off the first verse, his maturing voice and strength in the mid register gives his lines a sense of energy and desire, whilst Patti Austin's delivery is more smokey and alluring.

Detailing the fear and excitement of new love, Michael and Patti mix things up and shift the song from fearing the doubled edge of love's sword to bringing a jubilant delivery to the chorus (especially in the final passes of the repeated chorus). If you contrast Michael's first chorus to the final, you can track the surrender to the rush of love through the building excitement of each pass. And by the time he is trading "Yeah yeah yeah" tags with Patti he has truly given into it.

Despite not being one of the stronger, more stand out tracks on the album, 'It's The Falling In Love' does feature some of Michael's most soothing and soulful vocals, and for that was worthy of inclusion.



Closing the album with 'Burn This Disco Out' was both a fitting way to finish the record as well as a fitting farewell to the Disco Era that was drawing to a close at the end of the decade.

Encapsulating all that was good with this once flourishing genre, 'Burn This Disco Out' blends a bouncing disco beat with a harder funk and soul edge. Perhaps the most 'Jacksons' like track on the album, the stars of the show here are the richly layered backing vocals that counter the lead, harmonise on the chorus, and the bass vocal that underpins the soaring high notes of the pre-chorus.

Once more Michael sings with a sense of ease and sheer playfulness. One can almost see him dancing in the booth as he lays down his vocal, especially when you hear little utterances of throwaway ad-libs and the start of what would become his signature vocal ticks.

Special mention should be paid to Jerry Hey and The Seawind Horns who provided the blistering horn section for this and the other album tracks. Their sharp accents and sweeping flurries give the track extra vibrancy that seems to encourage Michael to lift his performance up a notch or two.

The see-sawing vocal melody of the bridge with its descending and ascending lines adds to the playfulness of the track and shows how writer Rod Temperton paid specific attention to how Michael would attack short phrasing giving it extra push and drive.

Despite the call out in the title, the song owes more to the energy of funk and soul than pure disco and as such has allowed it to weather the storms of time more gracefully than some of the other decidedly disco tracks on the album.

For what has been described as "the perfect party album" by critics, finishing on a such a joyous high was just the right note. It was the best way to end the party, with a feeling of it ending on a high and leaving you wanting to go round and relive it all again. And 35+ years after its release it still leaves you with that impression.

The sequencing of the album, along with sublime collection of songs and faultless production, not to mention pure talent in vocal delivery, is what has made 'Off The Wall' a classic album.

It was proof that Michael had the goods, and for those not paying attention to the artistic development of him as artist, songwriter and performer through his work with The Jacksons, it made sure that he would no longer be ignored.

And whilst the mega success of 'Thriller' is often pointed to as the blueprint for how to execute a multi-genre album, the initial sketches of such lofty goals can be found here in 'Off The Wall' with a collection of songs that blend funk, disco, r&b, soul, pop and jazz and intertwine them in the thread of a true artist.

With this release, and through subsequent recordings, Michael Jackson changed the musical landscape forever.

Free from lofty expectations Michael is allowed to flourish and stretch himself, to play and explore and find his sound. He is allowed just to be.

It's that purity, that authentic presentation of his talents and who he is as an artist that makes 'Off The Wall' such a rewarding listen.

Capturing that so perfectly is what makes 'Off The Wall' a timeless classic and ensures it remains part of the musical landscape for many more generations to come.







I hope this exploration into Off The Wall has made you
want to revisit and dig deeper into the album and give it another listen.
Send comments, feedback and thoughts to **mj101@outlook.com**



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