



MICHAEL JACKSON

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THE SHORT FILMS



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Andy Healy

 Andy Healy 2013

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MICHAEL JACKSON



THE SHORT FILMS

Dedicated first and foremost to Michael Jackson.
And to all the choreographers, dancers, writers and directors
who shared their talents and together with Michael helped usher in a new media.

This book is also dedicated to the fans the world over - new, old, and yet to be -
who by exploring the richness in the art will ensure Michael's musical legacy
and influence continues on.

This is a book by a fan for the fans.





Before Michael Jackson music videos were disposable pieces of visual wallpaper. Before Michael Jackson music videos were purely promotional afterthoughts. Before Michael Jackson music videos were not hailed as an art form. Before Michael Jackson music videos were not an event, a must see that held as much anticipation as a Summer Blockbuster.

In his career Michael Jackson not only changed the musical landscape, he also reframed the visual landscape. He transformed music videos into 'Short Films'. He elevated the medium beyond something that played in the background to something that could not be ignored. His short films were made to be watched. To be poured over. To wow and delight its audience. With budgets and shooting schedules that rivalled Hollywood productions he set about changing the way a song was heard. Now it would be seen as well.

It's often hard now to separate the visuals from the song, and vice versa. So embedded into our collective consciousness are the images, the iconography, the dance steps, the clothes. Michael gave us experiences. He dazzled with routines we would spend hours trying to mimic. He wowed us with visual effects we would watch over and over. And he connected with us through storytelling.

Collected here are 20 of his best.

As with all lists, the rankings might not match yours but they have been selected based on their visual artistry, the impact they made on the industry and the creative growth it provided for Michael.

I hope reading through the list inspires you to watch all of Michael's short films again and relive the magic once more.

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When it comes to lists of the Greatest Music Videos of All Time 'Thriller' has built up a bit of default position as number one since it first debuted 30 years ago. Part of it has to do with the nostalgia of the "golden age" of MTV and the emergence of music videos as entertainment. But there is more to it than just a fond look back. 'Thriller' didn't just raise the bar it changed the whole game. It became the first music video that was required viewing if you wanted to be connected to pop culture. It was the first to have a "debut" and the first to illustrate what was truly possible with this new medium.

Whilst the notion of a short film music video was a relatively new concept to most, Michael had already shown his intention to create visual art with the release of 'The Triumph' the short film that featured The Jacksons' 'Can You Feel It' a few years earlier in 1980. With 'Can You Feel It' Michael bought a filmic approach to the way music was represented. This classic Jacksons clip was Michael's first step into telling a larger story. And to anyone who was paying attention to the visuals he had already created for 'Billie Jean' and 'Beat It' (and by now the whole world was) Michael's intentions to keep pushing and revolutionise the medium was evident.

At a time when the whole concept of another short film for a single off Thriller was being dismissed by CBS records (who thought the album had peaked in terms of sales) Michael held steadfast to his vision of creating a short film event for the title track initially proposing to fund the \$500,000 budget himself. The budget alone was unheard of at the time when by comparison most other videos were being made for \$25,000.

For 'Thriller' Michael knew he wanted to create something that elevated the song beyond being a gimmicky track.

Contacting director John Landis who was fresh off his hit movie "American Werewolf in London", Michael set about fleshing out a mini-movie that would see him transform into both a Werewolf and Zombie. Written by both Landis and Jackson, the script would play with the conventions of both music videos and horror films. The opening scene pays homage to the B-movie horror films from the 1950s by placing Michael on a date when his car runs out of gas in a deserted wooded area. Playing with his innocent public persona (and giving a nod to what drew Michael to Landis in the first place) Michael transforming from innocent into a Werewolf (more Werecoat) under the glow of a full moon.

In a meta moment, the opening is revealed to be movie being watched by Jackson and his girlfriend, played by Ola Ray, in a crowded cinema establishing the set piece that will be Thriller.

Part of what made Thriller feel so fresh was the way the story played out. The movie in a movie wrapped up in a dream that maybewasn't adreamadded excitement and twists, while the rearrangement of the song itself provided a fresh take on the familiar drawing you in further. But without a doubt the crowning moment of 'Thriller' is the dance routine conceived by Michael Peters and Michael. Creating a routine that further played to the narrative the dancing reflects what Michael called "zombie moves without being comical". The routine has become as iconic as the V shaped red leather jacket Michael wears. It is a dance of the undead. A dance that would take on a life of its own.

Perhaps the routine performed more by lay people than any other in history, the 'Thriller' dance has been recreated in movies, tv shows, computer games, by flashmobs, lego blocks and even Filipino prisoners.





But the influence of 'Thriller' extends beyond just an often mimicked dance routine

'Thriller' changed the way audiences consumed music and forever changed the way music would be presented. It was Michael leading the way in what could be achieved, and everyone else was left playing catch up. It made music videos exciting, inspiring a slew of artists to look beyond the standard band performing on stage set up and invest in storytelling.

It also made it palatable for movie directors to start exploring music videos as a way of expression, something that prior to 'Thriller' they wouldn't go near.

It has gone on to inspire generations of recording artists, been ranked The Greatest Ever in every conceivable music video countdown and holds the distinction of being the only music video ever to be archived in the US National Film Registry by the Library of Congress.

Oh, and it reportedly helped sell another 14 million copies of the album. Not bad for a project CBS couldn't see selling any more albums for.

For all the accolades and success it brought it's hard to believe that 'Thriller' almost never saw the light of day. With an edit finalised Michael, under considerable pressure from leaders in the Jehovah's Witness church, demanded that the master reel be destroyed. Thankfully Michael's quick thinking lawyer at the time, John Branca, shelved it rather than destroy it and proposed instead a disclaimer that would appease the church by denouncing any belief in the occult. With that 'Thriller' was approved by Michael to air, and the rest is history.

Michael had always been a visionary but now he was also a pioneer. With 'Thriller' he set a new standard not only for himself but for the whole industry. Something he would find to be both a blessing and a curse.



If 'Thriller' raised the bar for music videos then 'Scream' refashioned it in a sleek pristine finish.

Released at a time when Michael was reintroducing himself to the public after a troubling time, the critics had their pens sharpened to rip apart any offering. Knowing what was on the line, Michael came back with a video that wowed all who saw it. He didn't just knock it out of the park but out the hemisphere.

Directed by Mark Romanek, 'Scream' is a super-slick visual feast. To give the short film its futuristic aesthetic, Romanek sought out the latest in camera technology and used super high grade film that holds no grain to give total clarity to the piece.

A true space odyssey, 'Scream' features Michael and Janet as sole occupants of a streamlined intergalactic spaceship. Considering Michael was the world's most famous person who's every move was captured by the press and picked apart, the idea of escaping to the isolation of

outer space didn't seem all that far-fetched when first pitched by Romanek and had a certain escapism that Michael was drawn to.

With its high gloss sheen and quicksilver set design Romanek fashioned a spaceship befitting the larger than life occupants. Complete with mediation room, morphing art gallery, uber modern media room, stress pills on supply and even an cyber-psych ward observation room, this was their refuge, their retreat. A place, away from prying eyes, where they could let go, exorcise their stress and obliterate their pressures.

Matching the song's hard industrial beats and rebellious lyrics the short film is filled with moments of angst and frustration as both Michael and Janet react to the world's twisted perception of them. These angered and harder edge moments are balanced by more private, playful interactions that showcases the loving relationship between the brother and sister megastars.







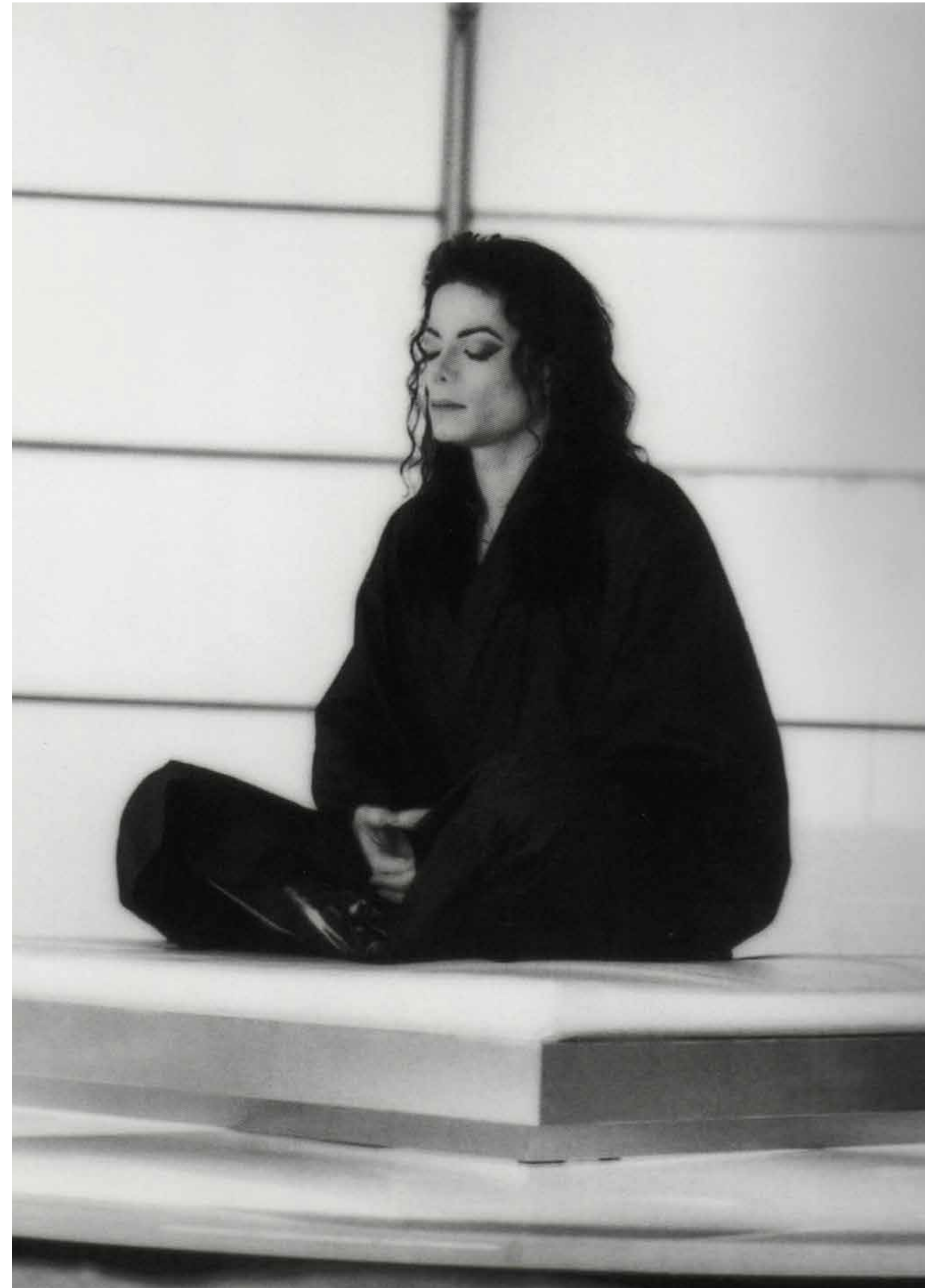
What was perhaps most surprising was that this wasn't the big song a dance number many expected from this dynamic duo. Whilst the dance break satisfies our desire to see both Michael and Janet dancing in unison, their focus is on the bigger story to be told. One of escaping the ongoing pressure of celebrity, of always being in the public eye. This theme might be painted in broad exaggerated strokes, but at its heart this is message of 'Scream'. In order to escape the pressures and constant glare of the world and find relief they have nowhere to go but to leave it.

Like 'Thriller' had done before it 'Scream'

immediately upped the ante for everyone else in the music industry. Its look and feel were copied and appropriated by popstars and R&B acts alike, most notably by TLC in their 'No Scrubs' video.

And whilst it is repeatedly touted as the most expensive music video in history, this bit of folklore has been refuted by Mark Romanek.

Fact or fiction, what matters is that every dollar is well spent. It's all on the screen capturing the energy of this super sibling pairing in a short film that continues to inspire and excite.







As the set piece for the 'Moonwalker' project 'Smooth Criminal' began its life as a truly long form film. With its bigger story of Michael battling Mr Big to foil his plans of getting every child in the world hooked on drugs the 'Smooth Criminal' segment mixed many of Michael's filmic inspirations from orphaned kids a la 'Oliver' to sci-fi elements and special effects, to film noir and great dance movies. At the heart of the piece was the Club 30 segment, eventually trimmed down to be the official short film for the title track.

Colin Chilvers directed the piece and explained how Michael wanted to pay tribute to classic dance sequences like Fred Astaire's *The Band Wagon* and *Girl Hunt* with the art direction, look and feel and colour scheme. Together with choreographers Vincent Patterson and Jeffrey Daniels, Michael worked on a routine that would become as iconic and replicated as 'Thriller'.

The whole sequence takes place in a 30s era night club filled with gangsters and femme fatales. Michael dressed in a white suit and fedora, blue shirt, white tie and spats created a look that would become as instantly recognizable as *Thriller*'s famed red jacket.

He is an outsider, an unsure entity who is both friend and foe and through the course of the short film goes from being an unknown, to threat, to person under threat and worth saving. He wins over the members of the establishment in typical MJ fashion - through dance.

With choreography drawn from gangster movies, Astaire classics, and even Looney Toon cartoons, the dancing is a mix of fluid movement and sleek angled shunts, and even allows time for Michael's first ever sensual slow dance. All the while winding his way through a series of damsels in distress or seductive pick-pockets.





There are so many iconic moments in 'Smooth Criminal'. The elongated tossing of the coin across the crowded club to have it slide into the slot of a jukebox, the hustling game of dice, the disrupted game of pool, or the free form breakdown of writhing bodies possessed by the emotion and spirit of the dance as they moan and whimper "Annie are you OK?".

Its from this breakdown on that 'Smooth Criminal' comes into its own with the extended dance sequence and *the lean*. Oh yes, the lean. A gravity defying move that sees Michael and his co-horts lean in unison to a 45 degree angle. This move became as signature an MJ move as his spins, crotch grab, knee kick or moonwalk. Dumbfounding viewers on screen it further amazed when replicated in concert. And while the illusion may have been solved the spell it created and the excitement it stirred lives on.

The routine itself builds and builds in a precursor to flash mobs as more and more of the clubs inhabitants join in with each passing slide. Eventually everyone is untied by and with the dance, from those on the floor, to those on bars and in the balcony.

Without the larger story to play against the elements of the kids and the henchmen become a bit of distraction, but by the time you've been wowed by the dance routine Michael firing off a Tommy gun at the forboding silhouetted figures becomes passable.

With 'Smooth Criminal' Michael made yet another short film that stopped all others in their tracks. Immediately iconic, it remains a favourite amongst fans, and for some rivals 'Thriller' as his greatest. Its harder edge, grittier feel and extraordinary dance routine ensures it remains as watchable today as it did when it first debuted in 1988.





At a time when the public perception of Michael was informed more by wild and fanciful tabloid rumour than fact, Michael responded the only way (and the best way) he knew how; through his work.

With 'Leave Me Alone' Michael effectively turned the gaze of fame back on the viewer and highlighted the absurdity of his life as depicted by the media. It was his first real salvo in a long standing battle between fact and fiction. Here Michael is playing with the perception, letting us see the world from inside the fishbowl, and in doing so treats the tabloid rumours for what they are - nonsense and lies.

Teaming up with famed director Jim Blashfield and co-director Paul Diener the idea was to place Michael in the midst of the tabloid stories coming to life in a modern day carnival setting where side-show attractions beckon the viewer in.

Drawn to the Blashfield through his stop animation work for the surreal suburban adventure of Talking Head's 'And She Was' and the visual narrative of Paul Simon's 'Boy in the Bubble', Michael set about putting his own spin on it. Unlike Blashfield's previous work the visual narrative here wasn't pinned down by the lyrical content of the song but driven more by Michael's role in the world of entertainment and the way he was (mis) treated by the media.

With Michael's support and desire to push things, they set out to make a statement video that was a true carnival ride; shocking, humorous, absurd.

Debuting as a vignette in Moonwalker, 'Leave Me Alone' was the first public glimpse of Michael playing with his image. It's full of self referential jokes that poke holes in the tabloid stories and give us a glimpse into the way he views the world as well.



Painstakingly created by hand every frame in the short film is made up of layered imagery cut out from film footage, photo shoots, or magazine clippings. Shooting all of Michael's parts first on film, a team would then go in and cut out every object in the scene to have as stand alone elements from Michael, to roller coaster tracks, to the background. These items would then be remade in collage form drawing in the additional items. Time consuming and with an intense attention to detail, the process would take weeks to finish a few minutes of film time. The frame by frame, stop motion animation technique gives 'Leave Me Alone' a jittery, almost silent picture feel that heightens the absurdity and drives home the humour.

Filled with allusion and imagery 'Leave Me Alone' starts with Michael secluded in a star trailer on a deserted island. This moment of privacy is turned upside down as Michael's life erupts around him. Landing on his doorstep are the kind of tabloid stories that had littered his career at that point. Tales of the absurd presented as fact, here Michael takes aim at the National Enquirer and Inquisitor for their diet of trash. The newspaper masthead of National Intruder sums of the constant violation of his privacy and dignity.

Through a series of laughable headlines, we get glimpses of Michael's life and around it imagery pays allusion to his experience. We see a glimpse of a glove, a fishbowl, even a \$20 bill (tongue in check replacing one Jackson with another) that depicts Michael's fame, his life experience and those that clamour for money as they sell him out. Michael is having fun with the headlines that featured so prominently in his life: the oxygen chamber, the Elephant Man's bones, and his relationship with the women (and chimp) in his life.



As we are transported through the door of his trailer we enter the world of a carnival ride. In scenes that could have been ripped from Michael's own nightmares he travels through a dark tunnel where chomping teeth symbolise a ferocious appetite to chew up celebrity, as flashing cameras and intrusive calls close in.

As the 'ride' continues a spinning brain illustrates the imbalance of focus between true global concerns and a fascination with Michael's plastic surgery. And all the while Michael is watched by dogs in suits stylised like old news reporters sniffing down their next 'scoop'.

There's all parts of Michael's life here, from his love of the Disneyland ride 'Pirates of the Caribbean' to his reported 'Shrine to Elizabeth Taylor' who appears in cameo with clips taken from Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

In the film's twist we see the carnival 'ride' Michael has been on is one of him captured and pinned down. In a nod to Gulliver's Travels, a larger than life Michael is being strapped down by the Dog's in Suits - alluding to the media wanting to restrict and control Michael's image for their own benefit. They want him held captive and perceived as only they desire.

It is in this moment that the short film makes its boldest statement. We see a captive Michael treated like a side-show attraction dancing it up with the Elephant Man. It's here the Michael as ride goer begins to liberate his own identity, snatching up Bubbles and Muscles as he zooms past. This leads to the Gulliver-like Michael awakening to his own public image and breaks free destroying the carnival attraction that surrounds him. It's Michael quite literally taking a stand against his public image and attempting to destroy it. In the final scene a free Michael breathes a sigh of relief.

For all it's tongue in cheek playfulness and self mocking, 'Leave Me Alone' leaves an impression on the viewer to re-evaluate how we view Michael. Powerful then, it is perhaps even more powerful a statement now.







STRANGER IN MOSCOW

Directed by Nicholas Brandt

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Isolation and connectedness are the central themes of the beautifully shot 'Stranger in Moscow' directed by Nicholas Brandt. An acclaimed stills photographer whose use of light and shade combine to create evocative, breathtaking images, Nicholas wanted to bring some of that study to the 'Stranger in Moscow' short film.



With a song that deals with isolation and abandonment, the short film depicts the lives of 6 individuals from all aspects of life who feel separate and left behind by the world around them. We see them contemplating, observing the world around them and yearning to connect. A man peers down at the passing world outside his apartment window, a woman reflects alone in a cafe, a homeless man begs quite literally to be recognised, a young teen looks for inclusion, a businessman contemplates his life, and Michael wanders the city streets.



Shot in super slow motion the world around our central characters passes by gradually as if the isolation elongates every moment. As if the disconnection from the world makes them more observers than participants. We see the detachment. We feel it.

Each moment of isolation is ultimately punctured by a moment of disruption whether it is the kindness of a passerby tossing the homeless man a coin, a crashing window, or a spilt coffee to bring them back into the world.



As if heightening their feelings, dark clouds invade the city and soon heavy rain begins to fall. As others scamper by desperate to get out of the rain, our characters look to it as a unifying moment. Right here, right now everyone is experiencing this. It is a shared moment. A connected experience that unifies the whole city whether others realise it or not,



Each interacts with the rain in their own way; initially tracking running drops down a window or reaching out from a sheltered area to feel it. It is by feeling they are connecting. By feeling they are affirming their existence. And while the rest of the city looks to find shelter, they each look to find life. They let the rain fall on them, explode on their skin and make them feel alive.

There is a cleansing quality to the rain. Washing away their loneliness. Cleansing them of isolation. They connect with and through the experience.

This stunning short film draws emotion out of the viewer and in doing so connects us all. The beauty of the slow motion study heightens the visual quality of the piece and saw it win accolades and awards in the process.

The whole concept of feeling alone in a crowd was something Michael had experienced often in life with his shy, reserved personality off stage leaving him feeling somewhat at arms length from the world. Not to mention the way the world from a very young age often viewed him as a commodity, a personality rather than a person. Unfortunately for Michael, the greater his success the more isolated and cut off from the world he became, either through his own design or the reality of being the biggest star in the world where every time you step outside you are mobbed, photographed or harassed.

It is no surprise then that the thing that unites all the characters in the film is an act of nature. For Michael, nature allowed him a time to find peace, to feel part of something bigger, something shared whether it was climbing his 'Giving Tree' or strolling the hills of Neverland and admiring a sunset.

Ultimately the message is a simple one, no matter how isolated or separated from the world you feel, there are moments of shared experience that bind us all and for that moment, if we choose, we belong.



As a modern day 'West Side Story', 'Beat It' introduced an era of mass choreography into the world of music videos. With its gritty urban setting, street gang storyline and real sense of dread it brought a degree of cinematic tension to the soft pop landscape of most performance piece clips.

Directed by Bob Giraldi, Michael created a honest look at the pressure of street gangs as two rival tribes square off. Over what, we are unsure but this in itself is also a key piece of the narrative. We automatically assume there is rivalry, there is beef. All we know is that it has been leading to this.

As word of the fight spreads through both gangs' turf we are introduced to Michael as lead character and narrator (through his lyrics). He is in his urban apartment becoming aware of the impending battle. Searching through their haunts in a bid to quell the brewing storm, Michael always seems a step behind as if the fight and the impending bloodshed is a foregone conclusion that can't be stopped.

Gathering in a warehouse the gangs prepare to fight with both leaders bound to each other in what will be a battle to the death. But just as the tension rises Michael arrives and breaks up the fight with an unrivalled dance break down. Using the unity of dance as a means of finding common ground, the routine has a strong, machismo to it. Expertly choreographed by Michael Peters the routine was cool enough to appeal to hardened hoods as well as the average home viewer.

By diffusing the situation through dance Michael not only played out his belief of the power of music and movement, but also created the blueprint for which all dance orientated clips would be set against. To this day the formation dancing is still seen and replicated by new artists striving to have the same kind of impact

that 'Beat It' had.

Using actual members of the rival street gangs the Crips and Bloods, Michael brought in a level of authenticity that was key to the palpable tension exhibited in the short film. And this move didn't go as smoothly as hoped with minor brawls breaking out on the first night of shooting. But just like in the short film, when Michael arrived on set everything calmed right down and the gang members were converted into admiring fans.

As the song itself crossed the segregated programming of radio, 'Beat It' followed the path that 'Billie Jean' had blazed and further smashed the segregation of MTV and ensured Michael's position in high rotation generating request after request for it to be replayed.

It also launched many a frenzied hunt for the iconic red zipper jacket and within days authentic and knock off versions would find their way to the streets further cementing Michael's role as influencer of style and fashion.

'Beat It' would become a watershed moment not just for MTV and music video but for Michael himself as it became the cross-over hit that exposed him to a wider audience and drew in fans from all genres of music.

Just as the narrative in the short film does, the 'Beat It' short film managed to unite the segregated fans of rock with fans of R&B and turn the whole world into fans of music. Suddenly it was OK for rock fans to want to break out a few moves, or for dance fans to want to rock out to some heavy guitar work.

And with life imitating art, at the very centre of it all it was Michael. Unifying. Inspiring, and leading the way for generations of artists to follow.







By the time 'Who Is It' was released each MJ short film came with certain expectations. There of course would be dancing. There would be singing. There would be amazing effects. And there would be an iconic look.

Perhaps weary of these expectation or just wanting to go in a different direction 'Who Is It' contains none of the above. Yet it still manages to be one of Michael's most captivating (and perhaps his most obscure) short films ever made.

Directed by David Fincher this highly stylised and cinematic short film balances style with substance and draws you into the darker, more brooding landscape of the song.

Ultimately a tale of deceit and betrayal 'Who Is It' is Michael's most adult short film. In it we see him contemplating a failed relationship with the discovering of a silver card with the name 'Alex' embossed on it. With the lyric providing the narrative the viewer assumes that this is the person Michael's love has been cheating with. But as the truth unravels we witness the object of Michael's desire readying herself for a date. Approaching

a hotel room she presents an identical silver card this time with the name Diana on it. It appears the betrayal is deeper than we are first lead to believe as the lifestyle of our heroine unfolds. Primping and priming herself and assuming multiple identities we see glimpses of the woman's life as a high paid escort entertaining a vast array of clientele.

Investigating further Michael gets a fuller picture of the betrayal, and packs up his belongings and leaves town only to be persuaded by his love but it is too late, she has been exposed and left behind.

High class escorts, bisexuality, abuse, betrayal. Not the usual MJ short film fair. And because of this 'Who Is It' is in a category all its own. With exquisite cinematography and art direction its lush rich visuals provide a new glimpse into Michael and presents him as more of an adult than any other of his filmic endeavours. It is a short film that is hard to be ignored and encourages repeat viewing with its concurrent storyline and twist reveal. Its these qualities and the more reserved performance by Michael that makes 'Who Is It' a stand out in his cannon of work.









For pure entertainment you can't go past 'Remember The Time'. This Egyptian inspired tale of forbidden love sees Michael assuming the role of mystic wizard sent to entertain Pharaoh Ramses and his rather bored Queen.

Featuring Eddie Murphy and Iman as the King and Queen, and Magic Johnson as temple announcer, the 9 minute short film was a playful interpretation of the song's narrative with Michael using his moves and voice to do more than just entertain the Queen but also seduce her.

For all the playfulness of the chase through the Egyptian temple and markets, and stolen kiss, it is the dance breakdown that really makes 'Remember the Time' stand out from the pack.

Choreographed by Fatima Robinson and set to a stripped down production of new jack swing beat and Michael's vocals the intricate dance breakdown draws inspiration from Egyptian Temple artworks as well as the popping and locking style of

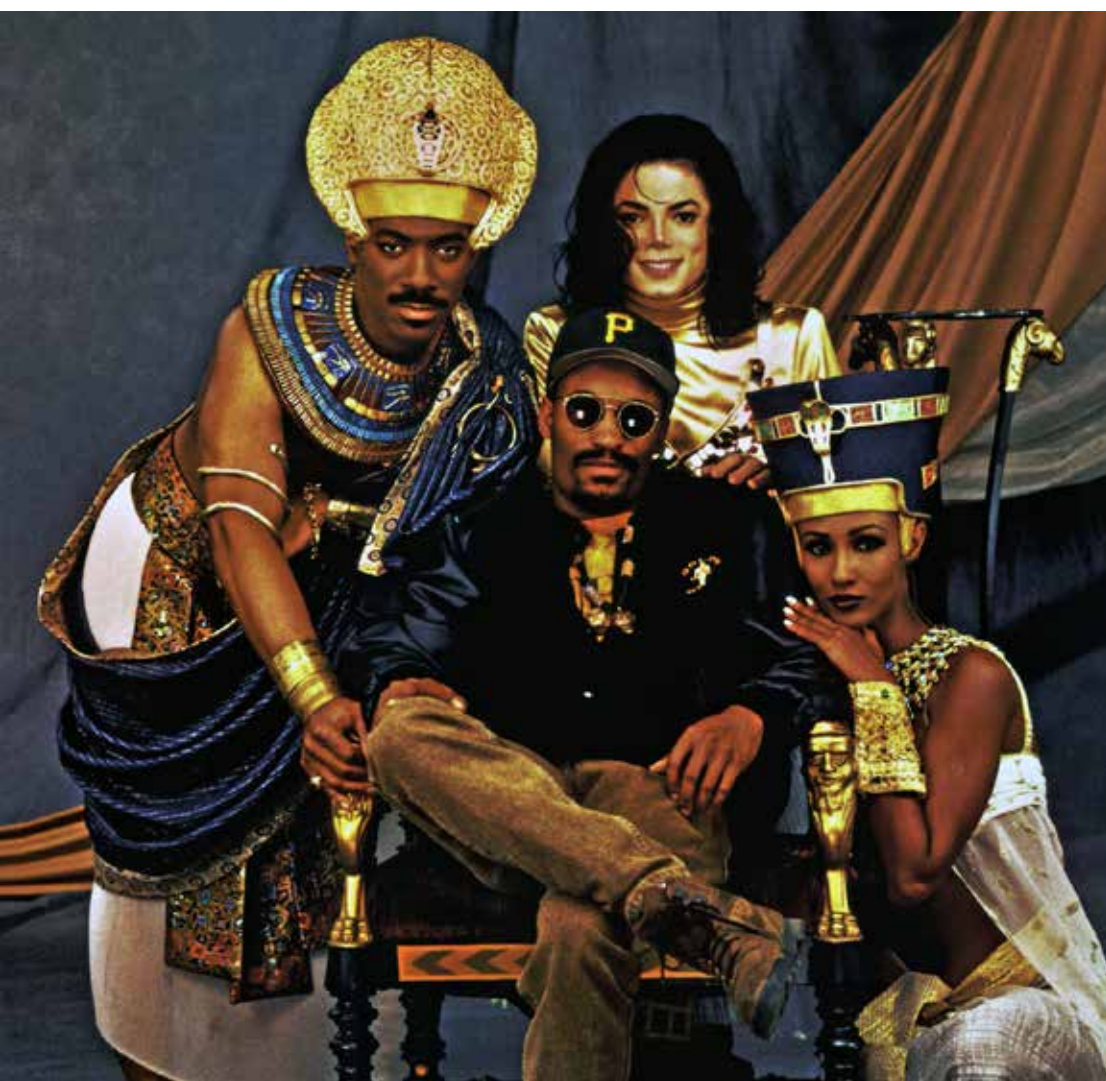
the streets. Sections of it also see Michael paired off with a female dancer.

The short film is notable for several reasons. Most notably it was Michael's first onscreen kiss (an onscreen kiss with a super model no less). It was also the first time Michael has employed an all black cast that not only satisfied John Singleton's desire but also celebrated Michael as a proud supporter of African-American entertainment.

John Singleton's direction pays homage to the golden age of Hollywood big number productions and the choreography of Buzby Berkley, which gives 'Remember The Time' a timeless quality to it.

An epic extravaganza that is bright, colourful and seductive 'Remember the Time' is one of Michael's short films that whilst not the immediate go to film is one that always delights with each airing. You see a Michael at ease. More comfortable in his skin and his surrounds. Working with old friends and new. And it shows.









For many 'Thriller' was the pinnacle. The short film by which all others would be measured. Critics would always refer to it with each successive short film Michael produced. Was it as good? Was it as epic? But like trying to capture lightning in a bottle - it's hard to pull off just once, let alone every single time. For Michael it was an artistic blessing and curse. It was something he could be immensely proud of but also one that he would constantly be trying to top. This would see him return to the horror-
esque theme with his short film 'Ghosts'. But rather than just replicate, Michael pushed the boundaries further in terms of special effects and dance routine.

Postponed in the early 90s, Michael sketched out the story of 'Ghosts' with famed horror novelist Stephen King as they set about telling a classic tale of a puritan town hell bent on driving out anything odd or unusual from their enclave. This tale of village mob driving out the ogre was dusted off and resumed (or is that exhumed) for its release in 1996.

Not credited enough for his own self awareness or sense of humour, 'Ghost' shows us a Michael who is acutely aware of the names and perception the media fed public has of him. And using his art as his argument he presents his side in dramatic fashion.

This can be seen in the setting of "Normal Valley" where Michael's character 'Maestro' resides in a Gothic inspired mansion. Ostracised from the town, his only friends are children who see him for his playfulness and humanity. When word spreads of his entertaining the town's children, a fire and pitchfork wielding mob led by the pious town Mayor (also played by Michael) aim to confront the "weirdo" and drive him out of town.

What transpires is a mix of humour, mild horror and some of the sharpest parallels between Michael's life and the public's perception. With Michael (one would assume relishing) the role of the self righteous mayor, he spews the epithets Michael had been labelled with. Going to town, and comically overboard, the Mayor calls the Maestro everything from "weirdo" to "strange" to "freaky boy freak circus freak".



As the story unfolds there are some keen observations that cut deep at the hypocrisy of the self-righteous. In one scene a mother chastises one of her sons for slapping his brother across the back of the head by repeating the action as if by reflex illustrating learned behaviour. In another the Mayor has, quite literally, a mirror held up to him showing his grotesque persona. The possession of the Mayor also alludes to the idea of walking in ones shoes before criticising. And in the dramatic scene where Michael as Maestro crushes his body into the floor there is a strong sense of loss felt by the villages. In this moment there is a degree of reflection and questioning, "what have we done?". There is remorse as if in the finality of it all people could truly see and appreciate what they had lost. Sadly, this moment of appreciation too late was echoed many years later following Michael's untimely death.

In the middle of it all is what everyone came to see; Michael dancing. With his "family" of Ghosts behind him Michael unleashes a funky routine that borders on threatening as the Maestro aims to out scare the villages and in the same process entertain. This elaborate routine features some of Michael's most innovative dancing and spell binding moves. This routine, that never got the true recognition it deserved outside of the fan community, was slated to be included in the This Is It concerts during the extended 'Threatened' breakdown following 'Thriller'.

Revised after its initial limited theatrical debut the soundtrack was expanded beyond '2Bad' and 'Ghosts' (only played in the credit sequence) to include 'Is It Scary' during the skeleton dance, and 'Ghosts' during the Mayor's dance.

With its broader themes of acceptance and understanding 'Ghosts' is a deeper piece of film than 'Thriller'. And while many may view it as a rehash or Michael repeating himself (or trying to recapture something) 'Ghosts' gives us more insight into Michael's personality and sense of humour. And when the dancing is this brilliant it needs to be seen. And often.







Event television. That's what a new Michael Jackson short film had become. Just as 'Thriller' and 'Bad' had debuted at a fixed time 'Black or White' also received its own prime-time special. As introduction to his 'Dangerous' album people were keen to see what Michael's next offering would be. And by the millions they tuned in to see an epic globe trotting song and dance extravaganza.

Teaming up once more with 'Thriller' director John Landis the mandate was clear - create something that would captivate and blow people away. And that they did.

As a sign of global unity the short film transports Michael across the globe to see him dance with different nationalities and cultures. With elaborate set pieces, costumes and design Michael mixes ethnic and traditional dance with his own signature moves dancing with African Tribesman, Thai dancers, Native Americans, an Indian woman, and Russian Cossack dancers.

This notion of one world is also illustrated by Michael is singing atop the Statue of Liberty flanked by other famous landmarks from all over the globe including the Eiffel Tower, The Taj Mahal, The Giza Sphinx, Hagia Sophia, The Parthenon, the Pyramids of Giza, the Golden Gate Bridge, Big Ben and St. Basil's Cathedral.

This sense of global brother/sisterhood is perhaps most powerfully conveyed in the final segment of the song. Using the latest in special effects we see different people of all nationalities, creeds and sex morph in and out of each other as they sing the song's final choruses.

One of the first to use the visually stunning morphing technique Michael utilized it perfectly not only creating a "how did they do that?" moment but also using it to convey his message of unity and ultimately being one race - the human race.



For all the excitement the main body of the short film generated it was the final 4 minutes of the 'black panther' segment that created controversy and bewildered many.

Showcasing Michael transforming from black panther in an abandoned inner city alleyway, the segment featured Michael free styling dance moves as he rampages through the neighbourhood. Driven by the animal instinct and energy of the panther as expressed through dance, the key moments of Michael's sexually suggestive moves including multiple crotch grabs (including a humorous zip up moment), trashing of shop front windows and smashing the windows of a car left many scratching their head. What statement, if any, was he trying to make? Was it just an interpretation of the dance? A calculated ploy to get people talking? Or was there a bigger message being made? And had we missed it?

In the uproar that followed Michael issued an apology and the 11 minute version was quickly trimmed down to the key 'Black or White' segment. Subsequently the panther scene was amended for its inclusion in the Dangerous Collection home video to include racial graffiti superimposed on the storefronts and windows as if to try and make sense of the outburst and drive home Michael's message. Whether this was to explain the motivation or make the scene more palatable is up for debate.

Thankfully future releases returned the scene to its original content. Controversy aside this was the first time Michael had appeared in short film dancing without any musical accompaniment. There was no beat, no soundtrack, just him; in the moment in pure performance and expression. He taps, he slides, he grinds. Fluid one moment, bursting with energy the next. This is raw Michael. And it's hard to beat.

And for all the controversy that not-often screened segment had, its power lies in how quickly iconic and identifiable it became. It's as if with the whole world watching its debut this single airing made a truly indelible impression. And it still does today.





Michael had danced before in his short films. But he had never danced so freely up to that point as he does in 'Billie Jean'. Directed by Steve Barron the concept for 'Billie Jean' was to just tell the narrative of the story, to visually illustrate the blurring of the line between fact and fiction.

It was a simple concept. Michael would be trailed by a press reporter looking to prove the 'Billie Jean Scandal' (as a featured newspaper headline screamed). But Michael is always one (illuminated) step ahead of the paparazzo illuding him at every turn. In a precursor to the Midas like effect Michael would have in his career, everything he comes into contact with is transformed into light; a positive energy that transforms a homeless man into a dapper dan, and springs a tiger from a tiger-print handkerchief. It's Michael magic, plain and simple.

And the true magic happens in the middle section of the short film. When Michael asked for a segment to dance in, Barron carved out a bit of narrative and set up a long tracking shot that would follow

Michael down a path. He highlighted which pavers would light up and readied the camera for rehearsal. But Michael wanted to capture the spontaneity of the moment so they shot rather than rehearsed. And Michael, dancing his way along the path hit every spot all the while mesmerising with his moves.

Using split screen and freezes to accentuate the dance and draw out the lyrical content this small section of the short film became its most iconic.

The story's resolution of Michael getting into, then disappearing in, the bed leaves the question of fact vs fiction up to the viewer. Was there truth to this tale, or was it all just unfounded rumour? Doing so ensured the magic and mystique of 'Billie Jean' lived on.

What was captured in the short film was so powerful it couldn't be ignored by a fledgling MTV who to that point had relegated the few black artists they aired to non-prime time viewing. With its intriguing narrative, effects and captivating performance MTV had no choice. Soon





'Billie Jean' was placed in high rotation and in doing so Michael broke the cultural divide of MTV and broadened its appeal. It can't be underestimated how influential this move was. As the first artist to be played in high rotation in prime time and prompting endless requests Michael and 'Billie Jean' opened the door for other artists to stroll, strut and dance through.



It was without doubt a major turning point for Michael. A moment when his vision began to come sharply into focus. Each illuminated step was his launching pad for the next chapter of his career. And somewhere, amidst all the split screens, glowing sidewalks, and freeze frames, there dancing in the moment you get the feeling that he knew precisely that.

EARTH SONG

Directed by Nicholas Brandt



In perhaps Michael's most powerful short film 'Earth Song' highlights the plight of the planet and conveys Michael's deep hearted concern for it. Directed by acclaimed nature photographer Nicholas Brandt (who also directed 'Stranger In Moscow' and 'Cry') the short film transports us all over the globe from the Amazon Rainforest, to war torn Croatia, to the desert plains of Tanzania. At each spot we are given a glimpse of the location as it is and as it was. Pristine Rainforests have been overcome with pollution and trees cleared and ripped from the soil. The scars of war have obliterated and uprooted a tiny village. And herds of wildlife have been thinned due to poaching and cruelty.

In poignant scenes we see flashbacks of happier times, healthier landscapes and thriving animal populations. These scenes are rich in colour and vibrancy and offset against the bleaker, starker story being told driving home the message of our self-made destruction of the world.

In each location, tribes, families and Michael fall to their knees in anguish and desperation. In an act played out all over the globe they bury their hands in the earth and massage and knead it, turning the soil in desperation to promote new life. It's in this caring and nurturing of the world that we can reverse the damaging effects we have inflicted upon it. This unity of action by the everyday man and woman promotes healing and the earth course corrects with mother nature creating violent storms that reverses time. We see fallen trees return to majestic growth, wild winds driving back advancing soldiers and barren deserts and seas repopulated with wildlife.

Michael's concern for the planet had always been well documented in song but never as effectively had it been conveyed on film as it does in 'Earth Song'. Michael truly believed that just as we had inflicted destruction onto the planet we had the power to reverse our actions and make a change.







When 'Bad' debuted in 1987 Michael Jackson short films were an event. And as his first short film since 'Thriller' people wanted to know what Michael was going to do next. As sure-fire water cooler conversation starter 'Bad' debuted with its own prime time TV special and introduced us to a tougher Michael than we had seen before.

Directed by Martin Scorsese, the 18 minute short film was based in part on the story of Edmund Perry, an honour student from Harlem who was shot to death by a plain clothes policeman on June 12, 1985. Highlighting the social pressures within communities, Michael plays a returning scholarship student Darryl who is back from private school amongst the friends of his old neighbourhood.

Testing how much things have changed, and how 'Bad' he still really is, his friends (led by Wesley Snipes) pressure Darryl to return to his old petty theft and mugging ways. Showing the harsh reality of inner city living the morality tale has Darryl taking a stand against the peer pressure in a showdown that results in a highly choreographed song and dance (lest we forget this is a MJ short film).

With buckle laden outfit, Michael and his cohorts dance their way through an abandoned subway station showing just how 'bad' they really are. Expertly captured by Scorsese the camera becomes part of the dance moving and tracking with Michael as he shuffles, slides and melds classic with ballet with urban dance.

As brilliant and captivating as the routine is, the piece de resistance comes in the final breakdown with Michael improvising the lyrics in a tough gang call and response. For all the posturing the short film has in its attempt to give Michael a harder edge, its this segment that seals the deal. Its Michael unfettered, raw and in the moment. It's a glimpse into his talent.

And it's hard to go by. That alone warrants the inclusion of 'Bad' amongst Michael's best. It's the icing on a truly funky and tasty cake.







THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT US (PRISON VERSION)

Directed by Spike Lee

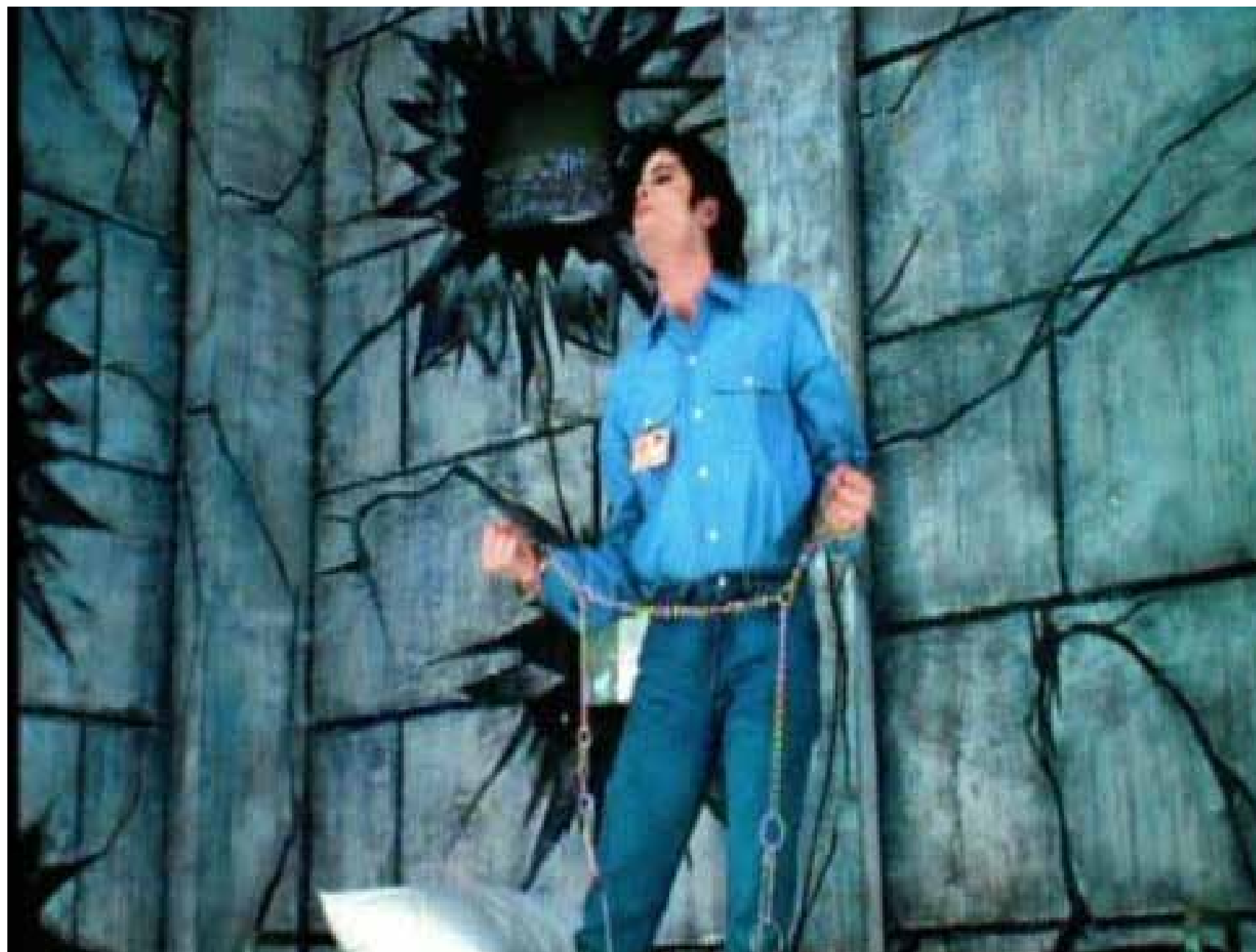
For 'They Don't Care About Us' Michael produced 2 short films; the more widely seen version featuring Michael in Brazil, and an alternative known as the 'Prison Version'. While some were let down by the jovial 'Brazil' version that seemed to underplay the power and protest conveyed in the lyrics, the 'Prison version' is quite the opposite. Stark, bleak and unapologetic this version cuts to the heart of the matter with depictions of man's inhumanity to man through archival footage and drives home the tension in the song.

Set, daringly some might say, inside a prison mess hall and inmate cell this version is grittier and more aptly reflects the true nature of the song. At times confronting, the short film sees Michael shackled and chained inside a prison cell while archival footage shows race riots, KKK burning crosses, the Tiananmen Square military crackdown, police brutality, assassinations, and sadly on and on. Surrounded by fellow inmates of all races, Michael riles against the system, slowly stirring unrest amongst the prison community before leading a rebellion.

It's important to note that the prison population of inmates and guards isn't made up of just one race. There are black guards and white guards. Black, Hispanic, Asian and white inmates. This isn't about one race's inhumanity towards another, this is about all acts of inhumanity. This is the us Michael sings about. And in a defiant move, Michael is still clearly seen singing his "controversial" lyrics despite the re-edited sound effect version being used as the soundtrack. Where Michael could have easily edited around this, he keeps it in showcasing his belief in his intent of the original lyrics.

Using the prison setting is both a literal and figurative device to state his message. The prison, whether it is four walls or a system of injustice, privilege and social constructs that restricts opportunity and potential, crushes the human spirit. It's injustice in all its form that Michael is coming up against. And as controversial and at times confronting as the imagery used is it is the mere existence of such footage that should cause the bigger outrage. Perhaps Michael's most shocking and truly controversial short film, it is also one of Michael's most potent.





In tune with Michael's more 'street tough' image being pushed for 'Bad' it was decided to crank things up a notch with 'The Way You Make Me Feel'. With director Joe Pytko placing Michael in an inner city urban location the short film brought a bit of edge to the bouncy pop infused track. Michael of course plays Michael; a bit of an outcast from the street thugs and hustlers who view him as an innocent naive who doesn't "have that kind of knowledge" when it comes to women. Cue Michael proving them wrong by making a move on the collective object of their desires played by model Tatiana Thumbtzen.

And make a move he does. Or several in this case as we see him pursue Tatiana through the neighbourhood. He makes advances. He glides along side her. He mimics her. And with every advance comes the counter play from her playfully fending him off in this seductive game of cat and mouse.

The joy of the short film is seeing Michael freestyle his moves as he pursues her. We'd seen this kind of playful interchange in 'Thriller' but here Michael is a little more confident, a little more brazen, and a whole lot more sexually suggestive.

This is a sexier, tougher Michael on display. But still with his playful side. If it was any other artist this stalking could be considered threatening and borderline harassment, but Michael pulls it off with a playful smile enticing Tatiana's interest with every curvaceous run of his hands.

As we'd come to expect, the short film contains a soon to be trademark Jackson routine. Choreographed by long time collaborator, Vincent Paterson, it sees Michael flanked in silhouette by male dancers. The silhouetted approach means all energy and passion has to be conveyed by the lines and figures they cut without any reliance on close ups of expression.





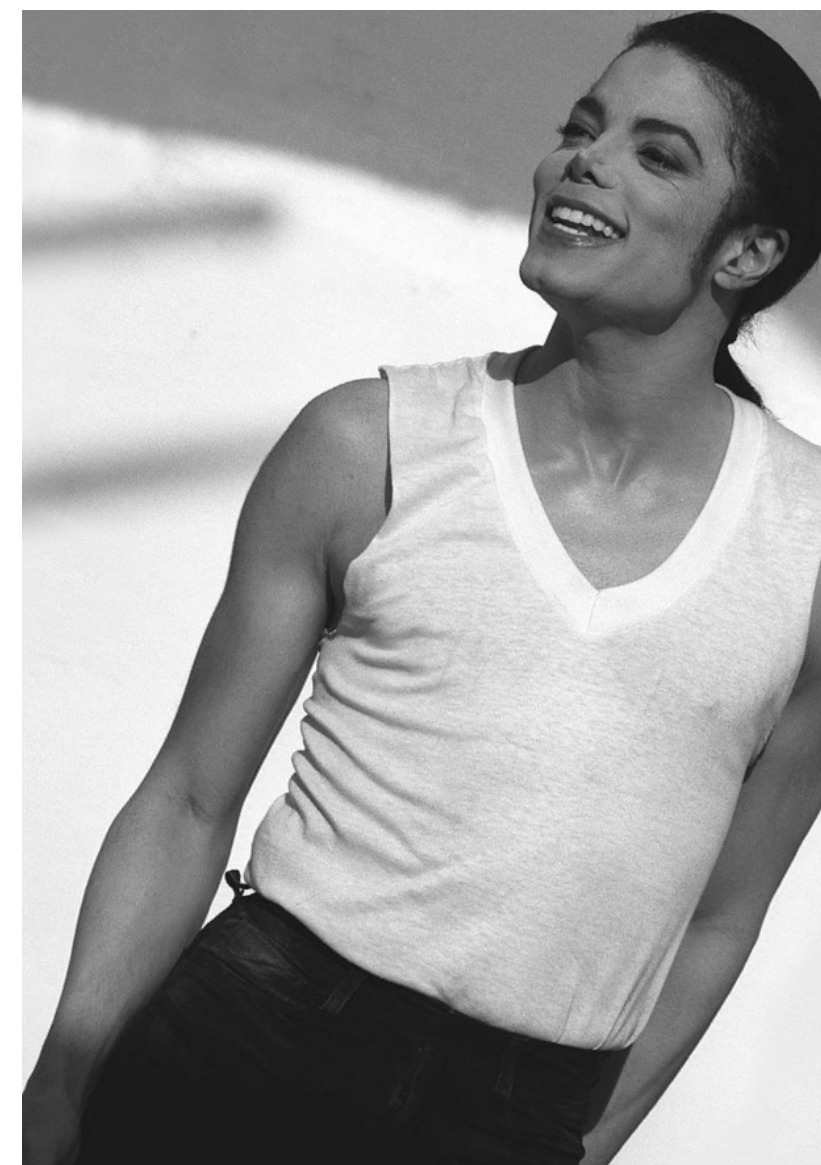
This silhouette approach is a masterstroke of direction that adds to its appeal and imprints itself on your brain.

With 'The Way You Make Me Feel' Michael plays his own take on street smart and does with a conviction that is more believable than in the case of 'Bad'. And of course Michael gets the girl in the end, sealing the deal with a.... hug.

Everything about 'The Way You Make Me Feel' became instantly recognisable and memorable - every element became a pop-culture touchstone from the casual street styling of Michael in blue shirt, white tee and white rope belt, to the sexual gesticulation, to the dance routine that went on to be replicated ad infinitum and became a highlight of Michael's live performances.

And for those wondering what music is playing in the background of the extended introduction - it is Roy Ayers' classic groove "Hot". The only time Michael incorporated music (other than score) by another artist into his short films.





As Michael's most suggestive song 'In The Closet' begged for a sensual depiction as a short film. And with famed photographer Herb Ritts at the helm, Michael delivered.

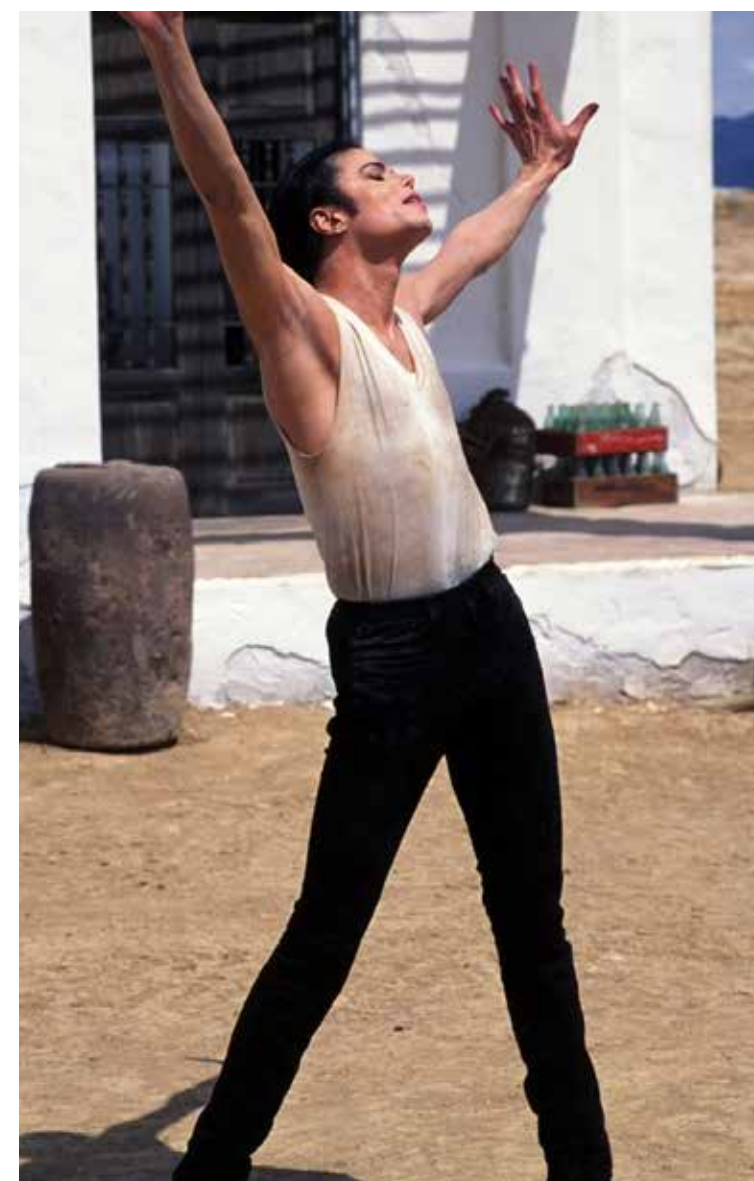
Pairing with fashionista and supermodel Naomi Campbell in skimpy crop top and flirty skirt, the two scorch up the screen in a short film that is shot in sensuous sepia black and white. Filmed under a blistering sun of the Salton Sea in California the two turn up the heat as they tease, flirt and writhe their way through the song.

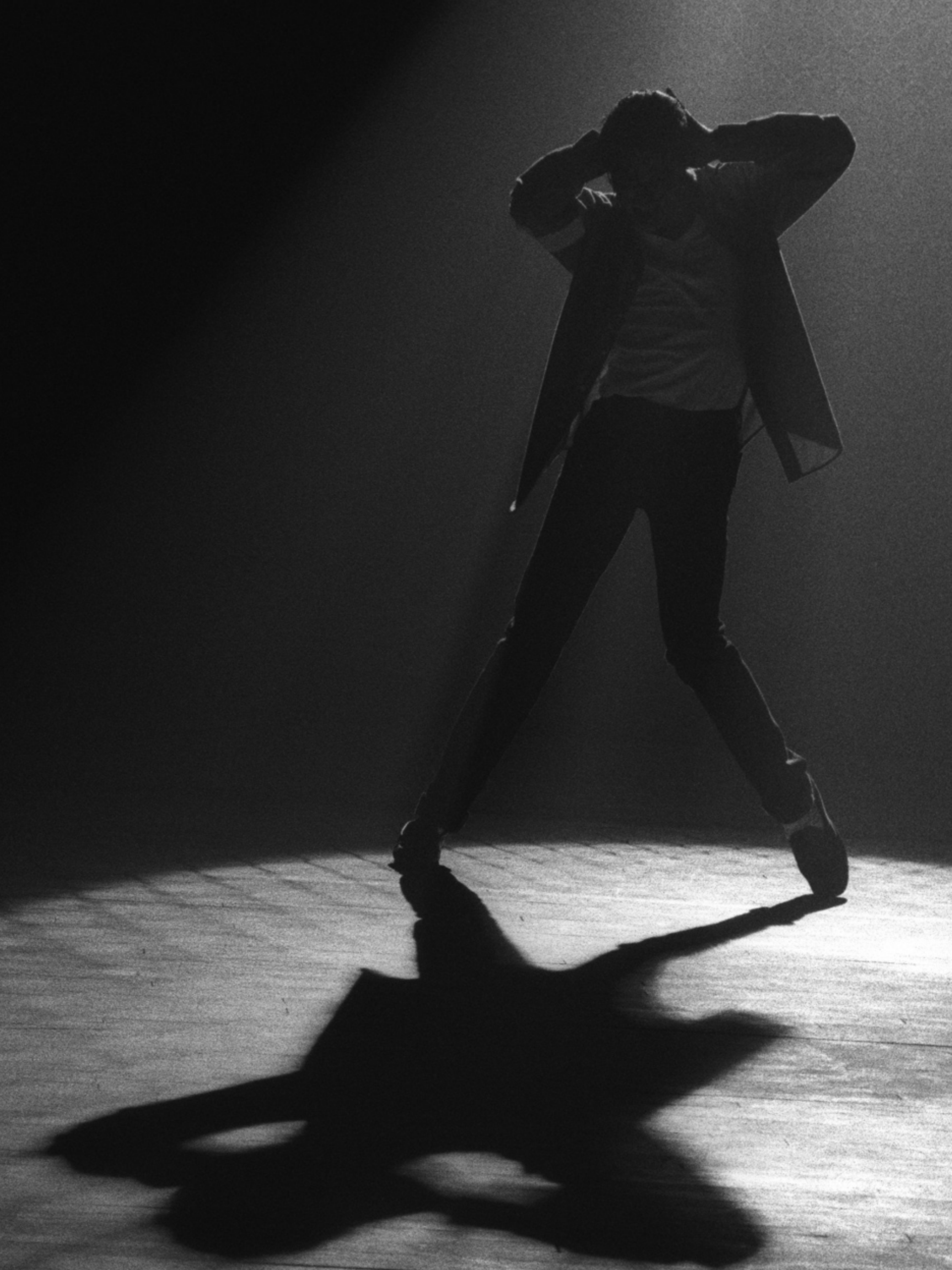
Voicing the spoken word segments of the song for this version, Naomi adds a more convincing telling of the story of seduction. And this is matched through the way they play off each other.

Making a striking couple, Naomi and Michael work up a sweat as they run their hands over each other in intimate and playful exchanges that straddle the line between tease and seduction. Using handheld cameras Ritts captures the fluidity of the exchange in a way that is candid and natural. While the silhouetted moments that see the two working it up in the shadows lends an almost voyeuristic quality to the footage.

A master of light and shade, Ritts knows when to tease and when to reveal. And with Naomi spurring Michael on, we get to see a side of Michael rarely seen in his short film works that of MJ in a truly romantic, sexual lead. And with the climax building the camera work becomes more frenetic trying to keep up with the rising passion between the two of them.

The final 90 seconds of Michael dancing in silhouette framed by a doorway harkens back to a visual experiment he captured in 1984 in private movies in Hayvenhurst. His body cutting sleek lines, he dances freely just using the beat and groove of the breakdown to guide it. Nothing is preplanned, it's all captured in the moment. Bringing this study in sensuality to its teasingly satisfying climax.





Some of Michael's most enjoyable short films are the ones based on a simple premise and for 'Jam' it was simply Jackson V Jordan. MJ and MJ. One Michael teaching the other what they knew. Jordan teaches how to shoot hoops and Jackson teaches how to shoot hoo's.

The interplay between the two stars is fresh and natural, and you can't help but laugh in the extended outro where a towering Jordan struggles with a few trademark Jackson moves.

But the real appeal of the short film isn't in the structured interactions but in the moments of true freestyling when we see Michael just moving to the music.

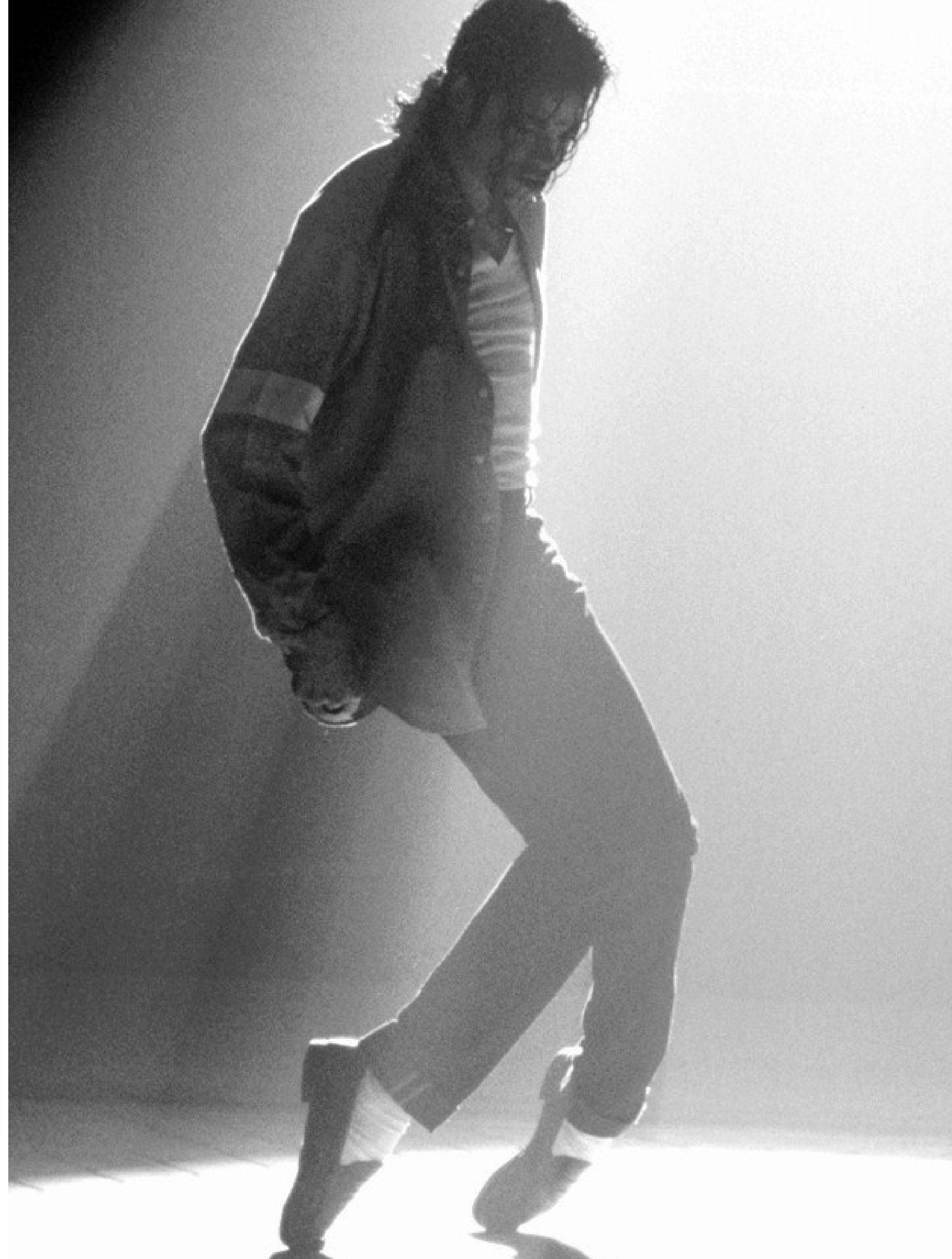
Director David Kellog takes on a more candid approach to Michael's dancing. Whilst there is an obvious element of

performance present, it is more of a private show. Almost like getting a glimpse into Michael's legendary 'Sunday Rehearsals'. Teasing out the moments Michael is first presented in silhouette, and it's not until the interaction between Jordan practicing his game in one warehouse and Michael in another that he is revealed.

With cameos from Heavy D, Naughty by Nature and Kris Kross, this high energy short film merges the ballet of sport with the athleticism of dance with the final moments seeing both dancers and basketball players mixing moves and jump shots on the one court.

Not often called off the bench when it comes to lists of Michael's best short films, 'Jam' is at its very essence a performance piece packed with fluidity and dance. And worthy of another look.







DON'T STOP TIL YOU GET ENOUGH

Directed by Nick Saxton

18

When it comes to a truly joyous Michael Jackson short film you can't go past the sheer abandon captured in 'Don't Stop Til You Get Enough'.

Here is Michael breaking out on his own on the cusp of superstardom, introducing himself to a new generation of music lovers. Dressed in tuxedo, this is Michael's debut into the world of adult pop. And what a debut.

Opening with a shy, reserved Michael delivering the spoken word introduction, the screen explodes into a kaleidoscopic backdrop of disco glitz and abstract images. All the while Michael does his thing.

The genius here is in the restraint shown in editing. Rather than rely on cuts to create

the momentum, the camera studies Michael in single shots as he sings and dances with the freedom of being in a club.

Michael's exuberance and energy can barely be contained in the frame as he grooves along to the song. He can't help but move.

And what's not to love in the musical breakdown when presented with a trio of Michael's grooving in synch with each other? At the time this little cloning technique wowed as leading edge visual effects, and it still holds some of its charm all these years later.

Singing and dancing like no one was watching it captured the essence of Michael's brilliance as a performer in such a way that soon the whole world was.

19

MAN IN THE MIRROR

Sometimes the most powerful impact you can make on film is what you don't show. And with 'Man In The Mirror' Michael knew the importance of the message shouldn't be overpowered by performance. No flashy special effects. No highly choreographed routine. And in this instance almost no appearance.

Instead Michael drew us in through archival newsroom footage literally showing a mirror up to the world around us. Here we are given a visual history lesson showing how both good and evil triumph if we, both individually and collectively, allow it to. By doing nothing, and waiting for someone else to make a change, no real profound change can occur.

Michael mixes some of humanity's darkest moments (atom bomb testing of Operation Crossroads, the rise of Hitler, burning crosses

of the Klu Klux Klan and the assassination of both Kennedy brothers) with moments of hope through such luminaries as Mother Teresa, Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu, Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King illustrating that one person's convictions can overcome any obstacle.

There are also moments of political unity present in peace accords of the Camp David Accords and the INF Treaty as well as evidence of true global change to tackle issues as depicted by Live Aid and Farm Aid.

As the short film progresses the sense of hope grows and you are left empowered to make a difference. Even Michael's 'Where's Waldo' moment in the final 30 seconds is a joyous one. It does what film does best, connects with us and moves us. Inspiring us to make a difference.



Officially a Jacksons short film, 'The Triumph' - aka 'Can You Feel It' - has to be included in any review of Michael's work as a visual artist as it holds the gem of Michael's vision. Mixing global concern with visual effects in an extended play narrative, 'The Triumph' is very much the percussor to all Michael would set out to achieve in his solo work short films.

An ambitious project from the start, Michael's vision was to create something that hadn't been seen before. Inspired by the commercial works of Robert Abel and Associates Michael set about telling his creation story using the latest technology to give 'The Triumph' it's futuristic feel.

Conceived by Michael, 'The Triumph' depicts the brothers as godlike figures who tower over a newly born world, a world where every colour of the rainbow is reflected in the landscape and people

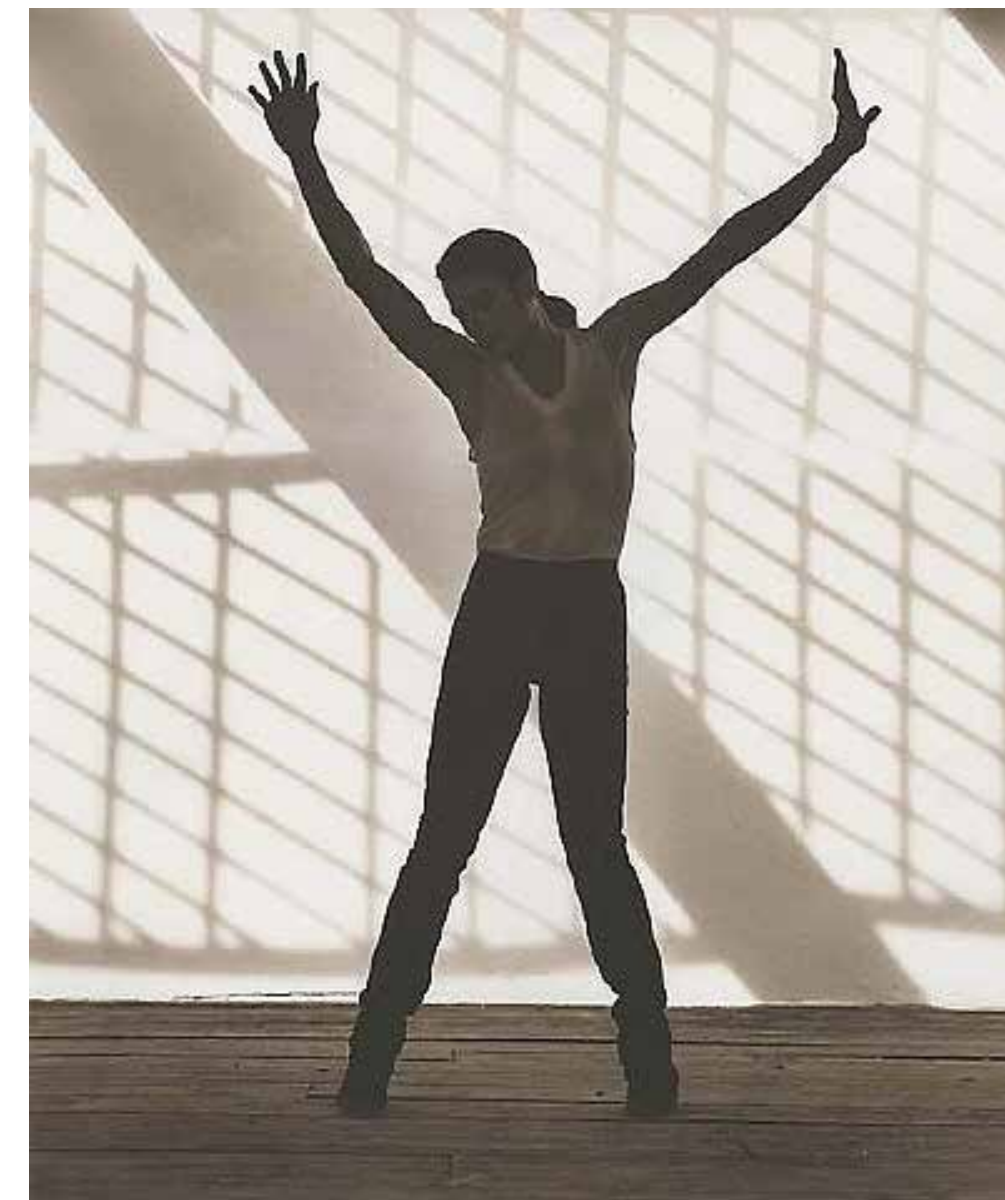
who inhabited it. Part biblical study, part sci-fi extravaganza the short film has the brothers sprinkling cosmic dust over the populace as they create the world. They create sunlight, fire, majestic rainbows and herald in the arrival of new souls to the world.

Against the driving beat of 'Can You Feel It', the message of unity and shared experience ripples through every frame of 'The Triumph'. It's the world as Michael believed it could be and wished it was. A world of one race not segregated by colour, sex or beliefs.

With its (of the time) cutting edge visual effects 'The Triumph' wowed audiences and those paying attention witnessed Michael's own genesis as an artist pushing the boundaries and elevating the art of the lowly music video into something truly special. A triumph for the times indeed.



I hope this exploration into the short films of Michael Jackson has made you want to revisit and dig deeper into his art. If one of your must haves isn't on the list let me know and tell me what it means to you.
Send your comments, feedback and your own selects to **mj101@outlook.com**



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MICHAEL JACKSON

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THE SHORT FILMS

