

These Hammers Don't Hurt Us



It began with the question: did Michael Jackson really record a song with the title and refrain of “Keep It In The Closet”? From the bottom of a dusty box of CDs, I excavated my copy of *Dangerous*, and the album played on repeat for the next four months. I became obsessed, watching every music video, interview and live performance I could find. I wanted to see it all, but was particularly fascinated with anything *Dangerous*-era, the pivot point between the unanimously adored, and the dynamically tragic. I had never forgotten about Michael, but somehow the distance between his early 90’s presence and 2008 felt particularly vast and warped. Granted, he would go on to make more hit songs, more music videos, and legions of fans will argue that he continues to make good albums post-mortem, but to my mind, *Dangerous* was the end, and the video for “Remember the Time” was the finale.

Beyond its amazing dance sequence, the video’s Ancient Egyptian setting struck me for its suitably shameless mythologizing of a star whose fame had already assumed impossible proportions. Having gorged on all things Michael via the internet, I began to consider online archiving and viewing as a kind of mummification; the age of MJ and the music video has passed, but it left behind its undead shell to be played and replayed forever, shrouded in digital gauze. I began tinkering with the video in early 2009, slowing things down, adding flicker and reverb as I tend to do, and was not really getting anywhere.

Then he died, embalmed with painkillers, encased in his fortress of solitude. Having spent a somewhat unhealthy amount of time looking at Michael Jackson on my computer, I screamed when that same machine announced his death. Like many, I was startled and confused, not because of the suspicious circumstances or unfortunate timing, but because his dying suggested that he was actually mortal, and that he had actually been alive for the past 50 years. It was easier to understand him as a deity, a specter, or an alien force residing in the airwaves, than to get my head around his humanity.

*How strangely awake I feel, as if living
had been just a long dream, someone
else's dream, now finished at last.*

*But that now will begin a dream of my
own, which will never end.*

My thoughts wandered to those who had assumed the roles of his terrestrial companions: Diana Ross, Macaulay Culkin, and of course, Elizabeth Taylor. Among the videos I watched most repeatedly during the months before Michael’s death was an excerpt of a Fox television special, in which Taylor guides him through his first Christmas at Neverland in 1993 (all of the gifts were Super Soakers). In looking for more depictions of the two of them together, Taylor’s online presence was consistently marked by stunning stills from *Cleopatra*, an evident inspiration for the

styling of “Remember the Time”. Servicing their immense celebrity in similarly lavish fashions, *Cleopatra* was, in 1963, the most expensive film ever made, and “Remember the Time” remains among the most costly music videos. In finally watching the film, I could not help but imagine Michael’s adoration of Elizabeth’s performance, and I interpreted her character’s words as directed at him. Cleopatra’s many declarations on love, death and divinity articulated the mess of otherworldly ideals Michael seemed to live by. The project I was about to abandon suddenly had a new star and a new tabloid-ready premise: Taylor Escorts Jackson Into Afterlife by Means of Egyptian Pageantry. I worked on the film for nearly a year, pulling materials from dozens of sources (History Channel documentaries, mummy B-movies, Dutch Ice Capades, *This Is It* DVD bonus features) finishing this past fall.

A few weeks ago, I woke early to catch a flight to Michigan for the Ann Arbor Film Festival, where *These Hammers Don’t Hurt Us* was screening that evening. A heavy snow was falling, so I hurried to my computer to check on my flight, and was greeted with the news: “Elizabeth Taylor Dead at 79”, accompanied by a still from *Cleopatra*. Feeling both cursed and charmed, I made my turbulent flight, and the screening was humbling and surreal to say the least. My own experience of my films often changes with time, but this felt like a congenial bitch-slap from the gods.

Yet for all my fascinations, my film is not really about Michael Jackson or Elizabeth Taylor, nor is it about Egypt, revolution, or immortality.

It is all of those things and none of those things, and hopefully something else.

MICHAEL ROBINSON

Without you, this is not a world I want to live in, because for me there would be no love anywhere.

