

'All that's left now is his music'

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief



WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Michael Jackson. The name itself is synonymous with music legend. That is why reports of his death from cardiac arrest June 25 continue to stun fans around the world.

As details of this surreal story continue to unfold, the one thing that remains clear is that the revolutionary music of this dazzling icon called the “King of Pop” will live forever.

“Michael kept climbing,” said the Rev. Jesse Jackson in an interview with the NNPA News Service just hours after visiting with the Jackson family. He described how Michael Jackson, the super star, not only revolutionized the music industry world wide, but naturally contributed to the rise of Black people.

“It was his success. We ride with the success of those who do well. He expanded our legacy in music. He expanded Motown. ...[His writing and production] of ‘We are the World’ - he helped in that way. His African projects - he helped in that way. All that’s left now is his music.”

Jackson was found in a coma in his Bel-Air home by paramedics responding to a 911 call from a man describing someone as not breathing. He was rushed to the UCLA Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead at 2:26 pm, according to his brother Jermaine, who announced the shocking news at a brief news conference at the hospital.

As word made its way around the nation and world, the reaction has been literal shock; especially since the 50-year-old icon was preparing for a tour of 50 concerts in London this summer, starting in July. The breaking story continues to dominate the airwaves this week, raising more questions. Rev. Jackson ticked them off, saying the grieving Jackson family wants answers:

“There cannot be closure as long as there is glass in the wound. And the question becomes, ‘What happened and when? And in the end, how did he spend his last hours? 911 said he was not breathing; not conscience. How long had he been not breathing? How long had he been not conscious? How long had the doctor been there? What did the doctor do earlier with him? ... We’re not sure.”

The physician, Dr. Conrad Murray, had reportedly lived with Jackson for two weeks, was

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helping him prepare for the string of concerts, and was with him when he stopped breathing, according to the Associated Press. An ambulance crew reportedly worked on Jackson at his home for 42 minutes before rushing him to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead, AP reports.

Initial toxicology reports revealed prescription drugs in Jackson’s body, but it could be weeks before a conclusive cause of death is actually known.

Police say Dr. Murray is not a suspect of any wrongdoing. Nevertheless, he was preparing to be questioned by police and had hired an attorney, who issued a public statement saying Murray was cooperating fully with police.

“But, the doctor’s bizarre behavior adds to the mystery here,” said Rev. Jackson. “I mean the doctor didn’t sign the death certificate, he didn’t meet with the coroner, he didn’t meet with the family. That’s why an inquiry has become an investigation. Why did he hide? These are questions that deserve to be answered for there to be reasonable closure.”

Meanwhile, reflections on Michael Jackson’s life ranged from those who knew him professionally to those who simply loved his music.

“Oh my God...He was a giant of an entertainer,” said Danny Bakewell, publisher of the Los Angeles Sentinel, and new chairman of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, a federation of more than 200 Black-owned newspapers. “Some will say he’s the greatest entertainer that has ever lived.”

Many recall Jackson - not just for his music and the controversies that embroiled his recent years - but for his humanitarian heart.

Bakewell’s daughter received a personal call from Jackson before she died of leukemia at the age of 16 in 1992. “I said to him one time, ‘You were better than chemotherapy.’”

Public Relations mogul Ofield Dukes, whose client was Motown when the Jackson 5 signed a contract with the record company about 40 year ago, said Jackson’s music will outlive memories of controversies that plagued him, particularly over the past decade.

“His legacy will be as a pioneer in the epic album, Thriller,” said Dukes. The album sold as many as 109 million copies. “And the fact that, at an early age, when he was five, he entertained so many people throughout the world. And I think folks will always remember the best of Michael Jackson and not so much his life that was so fraught with controversy over the past several years.”

Jackson was acquitted of a string of child molestation and other charges in 1995, episodes that appeared to permanently scar his reputation. In recent years since the overwhelmingly negative publicity, he had largely become a recluse.

Recently, he had announced an exciting new venture – one last concert tour for his London fans. He had been in Los Angeles rehearsing for this sold-out series when he died.

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Despite changes in his appearance due to plastic surgeries and the lightening of his skin due to what he described as the disease, vitiligo, millions simply remember Michael Jackson as that little brown boy with the huge afro who, along with his brothers, rocked the Ed Sullivan Show with the Jackson Five in the mid 60s. Others, in younger generations, will remember him as the dazzling adult dancer and singer despite the stark changes in his appearance and the controversies.

“People will try to muddy that legacy with all of the things that he was accused of, but never proven, but accused of,” said Bakewell. “But, we will have to focus on the fact that he was just a giant of an entertainer.”

Even as a towering entertainer who once owned a 3,000-acre ranch called Neverland Valley Ranch in Santa Barbara, CA, Jackson never stepped far from his humble beginnings.

“I think Michael Jackson did more than just contribute music to our community,” said Sonny Messiah-Jiles, publisher of the Houston Defender, among the hundreds of Black-owned mediums that contributed to Jackson’s stardom. “A lot of people remember the beat. But, what was more important was the significance of his words and the power of his words and how they contributed to the diversity and the appreciation of diversity in our society today. From ‘The Man in the Mirror’ to some of the other songs, I think that he made a major contribution to civil rights although I don’t really think he was a civil rights advocate.”

The Rev. Jesse Jackson predicts the Michael Jackson legacy will grow larger in death than it was in life.

“He struggled so hard to make a contribution, to be accepted, to be appreciated, but Michael kept climbing,” Jackson said.

As a string of memorials, tributes and even celebrations were underway or being planned, Jackson said America should pray especially for his family. “I talked to his Mom and she was so hurt. She said, ‘My baby, he was such a good boy. He was such a good boy. I love my son,’” he recalled. “I think what brought them some joy, some redemption was the global response to Michael...People who spend all their time in the negative, they can just beat it. I think the thing now is that we’ve lost our joy. Michael has lost his pain. Now we have his legacy and his memory.”

NNPA National Correspondent Pharaoh Martin contributed to this story.