

Michael Jackson's 'This is It' - Captivating

Written by Dwight Brown, NNPA Film Critic



(NNPA) - By the time he died, the media and his antics had obscured the most obvious. Michael Jackson was the greatest singer/entertainer/performing artist of his generation. Many could argue that point. But as you watch this work-in-progress documentary, with footage that was never necessarily meant to become a theatrical feature-length film, you have to ponder, 'What pop artist was or is better?'

Elvis could sing, act and gyrate, but he couldn't dance. And his talent didn't extend into creating theater or video. Madonna takes elaborate shows around the world, but she has a voice only a mother could love. The Beatles have a catalogue of music that is unmatched to this day, but on stage they just stood there -- and could John Lennon moonwalk?

It's like Michael stepped out of his grave to say, "You will not tarnish my legacy, and I'm going to give you the show of a lifetime!"

As *This Is It* starts, dancers convene for what was to be Michael Jackson's final rehearsals for a 50-night performance schedule in London. Some reveal how important it was for them to dance with him. In-between piqued emotion that's leading to tears, one hooper proclaims, "I was searching for something to give me meaning. This is it."

Skeptics would point out that Jackson is no Dalai Lama, L. Ron Hubbard or Dr. Phil who warrants or doesn't warrant legions of followers. But to put that quote in perspective, for a young pop dancer, performing on stage with the person who changed dance movement for the MTV generation, he in fact is talking about a pop music guru.

Footage of the rehearsals depicts a fit MJ; lean -- not emaciated, energetic -- not lethargic, lively -- not near death's door. He jumps, twists, turns and hops with the same gusto and precision as his back-up dancers. Only they are in their 20s and MJ is 50! That's right 50!

He often is not singing in full voice, as he tries to preserve his vocal chords for the up-coming

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concerts, and though some may say his vocals have been enhanced, he sings a whole lot better than some of today's top artists, like Justin Timberlake. When he goes full out, he's pitch perfect, his voice is flexible and emotional.

What was in the works was a very ambitious musical theater piece that included movie clips, elaborate sets (production designer Bernt Amadeus Capra, set director Donald Elmlad), provocative costumes and magical lighting. The most astonishing feat is MJ's insinuation into the movie *Gilda*, starring Rita Hayworth and Humphrey Bogart, for the song "Smooth Criminal." A machinegun-wielding Bogart chases Michael, and in black and white footage—courtesy of a blue screen—you can see how the concert magic is being created. There is another song in which dancers cavort on frames like a construction site on the back of the set that is bathed in a warm moss green metallic light that is simply mesmerizing.

Jackson is heavily involved in the creative process of this mammoth, ambitious show. Credit director Kenny Ortega for the visual splendor and day-to-day coordination, but as the footage attests, MJ is the captain of the ship. Both the choreographer and vocal supervisor Dorian Holley defer to him.

The "Earth Song" sequence is a patience-testing misstep. On film, in a setting that must represent the Amazon, a young child runs through a forest that is being demolished by bulldozers. The moment is so sentimental and politically correct that it grates on the nerves and adds seven minutes to a 112-minute film that could have been a tad shorter. Edited down from hundreds of hours of footage, each second is crucial; this unfinished attempt at an eco friendly message should have been left on the editing floor.

"Human Nature," "Billie Jean," "Thriller"... the gloved one puts on a backstage show that is thoroughly entertaining—and in fact more compelling than if the production team had simply filmed the concert. Watching him create each song/performance on a sound stage is as captivating as him singing and dancing in front of a live audience.

There are some who will claim this documentary is ghoulish. I think haunting is a better word, as you fathom what the music world would have been like had he lived. This enlightening, behind-the-scenes documentary gives MJ a way of setting the record straight. If any performer is more talented than he, or has left more of a legacy on this generation, they should step up or shut up.

Visit NNPA Film Critic Dwight Brown at www.DwightBrownInk.com.