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AAAS 182

Off The Wall, A New Jackson

It’s the classic progression; become a star for so many years as a kid before eventually deciding that a new redefining step needs to be taken. We see this very evident in today‘s stars such as Miley­ Cyrus as well as in the previous generation with greats such as Michael Jackson. Before Jackson could ride a bike, he was hitting pop charts with his siblings. He grew up so defined by the music his family made, he soon realized he needed a divergence, and a drastic one at that.

The Motown music Jackson made with his siblings was what initially brought him national acclaim, but his solo album, *Off The Wall*, in 1979 was what began a period of radical self definition in Jackson’s music. Within just a few songs, he created himself a powerful new image as a musician keeping some aspects of the Jackson 5 as well as adding attributes entirely unique to Michael.

The mood of the album jumps out before the needle hits the record (or, more modernly, before the play button is pressed). The album cover sets the mood immediately making the audience think of going to some sort of club or dance party in their local city. The brick wall with the almost graffiti-looking album title chalked on it evokes images of being in some sort of alleyway or outside a neighborhood building. This alone might look dangerous or somehow uncomfortable – alleyways are not exactly known for bringing feelings of home – but when that wall combines with the utter joy radiating from Michael’s face, the audience cannot help but feel right at home getting ready to go to some sort of party with fancily dressed gentlemen similar to Michael himself.

This feeling is only further accentuated when the needle finally does hit the record. The first 15 seconds are barely filled with just a funky beat and Jackson whispering a few words until the song hits and the dance party starts. The high, fast strings break out the disco-feeling which, once merged with that funky beat and the quickly proceeding horns, makes the listener want to break out into dance. While many songs are meant to be deep, lyrical introspections or some sort of world-changing comment on society, this song was built for the feeling of night life. What does that mean exactly? How does a song focus on feeling? For *Don’t Stop ‘Til You Get Enough*, that focus on feeling comes out in the focus on sounds and rhythm over lyrics. Listening to this song, it is really difficult to understand the lyrics. For most of the verses, many people cannot hear a single word properly, but that’s not what is important. The song plays out Jackson’s high energy falsetto voice for every bit of joy a song could contain. The clacking of the bells and the constant interjections of the strings, horns, and synthesizer give this song a solid foundation to always dance to as well as exciting moments to keep that spirit high. While not directly contributing to the high energy feeling, the synthesizer solo a little less than three minutes into the song is actually very interesting to think about considering it recurs in the melody of one of Jackson’s most famous songs, *Thriller*. I think this connection is significant because both songs are about high energies although, *Thriller* being much darker, the type of energy is very different. This progression must have been important to Jackson.

With the energy of the night running high, Michael Jackson tells the story of the party life with this album. The first several songs – *Don’t Stop ‘Til You Get Enough*, *Rock With You*, *Workin’ Day And Night*, and *Get On The Floor* – are purely about the excitement of finishing up the work week and diving into the club. This sentiment continues in *Off The Wall* as he talks about “Liv[ing] off the wall” and “do[ing] what you want to do”. Taken literally, the lyrics do seem to be just about ignoring responsibilities and partying up. However, if the song were as simple as just the literal interpretation, its significance would drop far below the levels of deserving the position as album title. This song also can be expanded to be more of a call to opening the mind and opening the heart. Even with that mindset, in many contexts, this song would still be taken as just another ‘live free’ exclamation. However, this song is truly more about love and exploring outside of the comfort zone of the currently experienced love life.

The song begins with unsettling laughter and quite an off-putting chord progression that could be heard as someone walking away from the negative influence society has on taking chances. This follows with a keyboard vamp that sounds exactly like someone walking the way Michael does with his dance-affected style. Once the lyrics kick in, Michael has a very intimidating tone. It sounds criticizing as his hard-hitting, interjecting notes work their way between accusations of the stiff character with “the world on [her] shoulder” who “can’t hang with the feeling.” His voice then switches from evil and imposing to excited and fun-loving when he talks about himself dancing and lifting all worries. The structure of those verses sounds like a painful trudge through society until reaching that one person who lets you forget your troubles and live more carefree. Expanding the scope of vision to the next song, *Girlfriend*, this song is telling the girl to even forget her current love commitments and just live her heart’s desires out with Michael. The multiple vocal overlays all through the choruses are telling the girl that Michael will take care of her, so she should just do what she feels is right. While this definitely speaks to the ‘live free and forget consequences’ theme common to music, this song penetrates deeper, speaking directly to a girl he has found at the party around which this album revolves.

The story of love continues happily in *Girlfriend* as Michael does find love with the girl. The particularly large amounts of vibrato in the song remind me of the nervous, excited feeling love can give. However, the pure ecstasy of the song is dramatically contrasted in the next song when Michael actually descends into crying during the slow, fragile song, *She’s Out of My Life*. The lullaby sounding keyboard here really conjures images of a broken man who has lost everything he loved, which is certainly the feeling intended by Jackson. The earlier songs involve such high spirits and energy full of dancing and music that can only conjure smiles. Nonetheless, this album is about the progression of love compressed to the time period of a single night of partying. After long hours of working, the party night finally comes. Michael finds a girl, falls in love, reaches an all time high, but yet plummets down to one of the hardest parts of life. Anyone who has been in love can attest, the times just after the highs are by far the lowest. However, former lovers also know what it is like to bounce back and still be hung up on the last love, as is the case in this album.

Michael follows up the most painful song with the most jazzy, confusion-filled songs, *I Can’t Help It*. The song begins with a slow, uneasy transition symbolizing the emotional rehabilitation and instability felt when recovering from a rejection. The first lyrics conjure thoughts of the introspection experienced as well as the satisfaction felt that the love was ever experienced. Michael wants to remind us that, while painful, the process of love is still worth it for all the high moments. The feeling of instability continues throughout this song as it rarely features continues progressions of notes, but rather more disjoint notes sung to convey the lost and searching feelings of withdrawal. The jazzy and particularly musical qualities of this song make it very unsurprising that it was written by Stevie Wonder. The instrumentation of the human voice is very apparent in all of Stevie’s work, no less with the keen execution by Jackson. This song holds back from Michael Jackson’s typical aggressive, staccato style until the final chorus where the lifting of the vocal range sounds like Michael finally reached peace with his tormented heart. While painful, he “wouldn’t help it, even if [he] could”. This newfound conviction and trust in the joy of love brings him back to his old self with the more aggressive hit on the notes as well as less jazzy approach to the song in general. This may be too much of an extrapolation, but the fact that Stevie Wonder wrote the song could be an implication that Michael needed to rely on the help of a friend to carry him through the rough time. This confidence and return to conviction carries on into the next song as Michael talks about how he has learned so much from the strife of love, but still feels so good to be “trading in the passion for that taste of pain.”

The album ends with Michael back to his old self living it up at the party. The extra heavy levels of vocal overlays permeate the song drawing a picture of a bunch of people ready live off the wall, not stopping until they get enough. Although not the first album to focus heavily on nightlife and love, *Off The Wall* set the stage for pop albums to come. Justin Timberlake’s *20/20 Experience* does not even attempt to hide the Jackson influence. While that may be a topic for another day, the example of Timberlake’s most recent music style strongly supports Michael Jackson’s title as the King of Pop. With his own natural talent, as well as help from greats like Paul McCartney (writing *Girlfriend*) and Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson pulled away from the world of Motown defining himself and pop music for decades to come.