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MICHAEL JACKSON

THE SEVEN AGES OF MJ

Our greatest entertainer embodied every dark speck of our time

LIFESTYLE hacks who make a living out of celebrity, crime, scandal, sexuality and fashion soon figure out there are about seven types of stories that help you survive cut-throat edit meetings and the questioning eyebrows of a newsmagazine editor. You can handle the irrepressible sniggers that float up upon suggestions of 'serious' entertainment stories if you memorise Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. *The Seven Ages of Man* are the basic steps to move fluidly in the back of the book and then, as the story goes, *All the world's a stage*.

In Michael Jackson, both alive and dead, contemporary lifestyle journalism—American and global—found everything it needed to move from the back pages to cover stories. Choose your topic and Jackson worked as the 'Thriller' in each one. Extreme celebrity and dizzying fame for hungry tabloids. A messy combination of dedication, passion and prodigious talent. Conspicuous consumption and obsessive, made-to-order luxury. Androgyny, sexiness in asexuality, metrosexuality. Severe accidents and a burnt scalp. Psychological derangement, drug addiction, megalomania, depression and loneliness. Trailblazing fashion statements with the sequined single glove, glittering military outfits, black loafers, white socks, the black fedora. Beauty and make-up indulgences: orange matte lipstick, skin-whitening treatments, straightened hair, and architectural eyebrows. And the ultimate fix-it—plastic surgery.

MANJULA PADMANABHAN

'Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation'. It's shockingly fascinating how MJ moonwalked through the bard's seven ages of man. As the then Prince of Pop grew older, his childhood became insanely possessive. It wouldn't let him go. By now, news editors, health writers, legal and crime journalists wanted admission to the Jackson University of Lifestyle Journalism. As the absolute No. 1 man in show business, he brought home the agonising ecstasies of Gen X, and starry tragedy of race and gender dilemmas. For Indians, he was the first global pop star who would provoke fandom of the crazy kind—inspiring everyone from village idiots, tamasha artists, Ramleela Hanumans, Bollywood heroes to wannabe movers and shakers. Boy bands formed and fragmented all over the world, in Jackson-style fusion and fission. In the Singapore zoo, a cutely entertaining dolphin show includes Michael Jackson dance steps! Then came his vitiligo, lupus, cardiac side-effects of prescription medicines, religious manias, crushes on spirituality, rocky relationships, accusations, out-of-court settlements, divorces, alimonies, custody cases, a child through surrogacy, allegations of paedophilia, an acquittal. Don't Stop Till You Get Enough, his life seemed to say.

As I write this, I am nervously referring to my notes, past and present: Am I forgetting anything? If I do, you will pounce upon it and write back to Vinod Mehta. But if I add something even if it isn't terribly accurate, chances are you may overlook it. That was MJ's tragedy. Let's say, I want to misuse the liberties of lifestyle journalism and add some reckless fictional stuff to this MJ outpouring. Trust issues, strange diets, anaesthesia-induced post-surgical paranoia, violence towards psychiatrists, diamond-studded underwear, black sheets, feathery sexual toys, tall blue drinks—add on anything plucked from the vocabulary of fashionable neuroses and it could be passed off as a Jackson aside. He had so many issues around him that it became easy to fabricate some layers and fatten the story called Michael Jackson: King of Pop. King of Pop Psychology. King of Pop Vulture Culture. King of How Not To Survive. Did we ever find out which one was most accurate?

When his reputation ran out, we felt vicariously triumphant (at least I did) that a unique celebrity accused of child abuse was sentenced to a lifetime of disrespect, if not prison. We may have loved his music and dance, but could we ever relate to him? Could we imagine sharing regular drinks and dinner, a shopping trip or a picnic with MJ? Visualise having sex with him? Not really. Name, fame, shame apart, his real self had been comatose long before he slipped into a coma.

Yet after his life ran out last week, I feel sad like many. Let me admit, like a hypocritical storymonger. Not so much for the singer with that voice who died without a voice. Or for the one and only magical musician of our lifetime. But for the rarest of rare case studies who mirrored the modern age, all at once, all the time. For my lifestyle hero-turned-heroine-turned-villain-turned-autopsy was a case of every story told.

With the '80s revival looming as the biggest lifestyle trends of '09, I want to sign off. I now believe we cannot revive a trend especially if it was called Michael Jackson.

Last scene: That Ends This Strange Eventful History, Sans Teeth, Sans Eyes, Sans Taste, Sans Everything. ◘