

MUSICIAN



JOE JACKSON

The master of musical eclecticism refuses to play it safe

By Bill DeMain

EVEN FOR THE PAST 30 YEARS, JOE JACKSON HAS PAINTED one of the biggest and most ever-changing pictures in pop music. New wave, jumpin' jive, big band, reggae, cocktail jazz, movie soundtracks, orchestral suites—the British-born artist has threaded his gift for melody and lyric through all these styles. Along the way he's racked up five Grammy nominations (with one win for his classical work *Symphony No. 1*) and eight Top 40 singles, including early signature hits "Is She Really Going Out With Him?" and "Steppin' Out."

But for Jackson, the misses are as meaningful as the hits. "First, I don't believe in obsessing over how many records or number of tickets you sell," he says. "And second, I've tried to avoid repeating myself. I don't work at creating a style. I work at trying to create a good tune, or a good marriage of lyric and melody."

There's no danger of Jackson repeating himself with his latest album, *The Duke*. He doesn't just cover the songs of the great Duke Ellington, he makes them sound as if he wrote them. "I think it's as much a Joe Jackson record as any of the others," says the 57-year-old musician. "It's just more about everything *except* songwriting—arranging, producing, band leading, singing. Not to compare myself to Ellington, but I think I'm a similar kind of musician who's maybe not brilliant at one specific thing but has a talent for seeing the big picture."

Jackson's fiercely independent spirit and musical imagination flows through *The Duke*, reinventing "I Got It Bad (And That Ain't Good)" as a jewel of string quartet chamber pop, and "Caravan" as a wild Middle Eastern-meets-fusion jaunt, with Farsi lyrics. From his home in Berlin, Joe Jackson discussed breaking rules, musical integrity and why he still loves touring.

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How did this project begin?

It's strange—Ellington tunes started coming into my head about three years ago, and they were sort of asking to be rearranged and experimented with. It was sort of like a mosquito buzzing in my ear. It started happening more frequently, to the point where I thought maybe this could be a whole album project. Then I really got serious about it, listening to a lot more Ellington and experimenting with the tunes.

Was it intimidating?

I just came to the conclusion that there was nothing I could do to hurt Duke Ellington. But I was definitely conscious of not wanting to do the songs like they've been done before. There are plenty of Ellington tribute records that for me don't go far enough away from sounding like Ellington. That's one of the reasons I didn't use any horns on the record. When you limit yourself in one way, it forces you to stretch your imagination in other ways. It gives

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you freedom. I had a handle on a way to arrange this so it would be different than anything I've heard before. For better or worse, I'd add. [laughs]

Any favorite stories about Duke?

One that I love is that when the band was on the road staying at hotels, apparently Ellington was in the habit of composing in the bathtub. Meanwhile, he had a valet who would bring him whiskey and ice cream and keep the tub filled with hot water. As he was composing, someone else would be transcribing it and passing the sheet music down the hall to various musicians' rooms. I find that a fantastic image.

How did he inspire you as a bandleader?

It's the brilliant way he was in control of the big picture, but he was able to share the spotlight with the musicians as well. He chose his musicians very carefully and knew them very well. It's still Ellington's music, though the individual players really shine and are allowed to improvise. I've always tried to do that as a bandleader and arranger.

Can you rate his songwriting?

It's difficult to judge him as a songwriter because most of his pieces were written as instrumentals, and then all kinds of different people wrote lyrics after the fact. Many were really cheesy. I can only conclude that Ellington didn't care much about lyrics, or didn't have a great feeling for the human voice. But in spite of that he still produced a huge list of hit songs. It shows no matter how great lyrics can be, music is always more important. It's the music that makes the emotional connection. I read a great quote recently about the difference between music and lyrics. "Music is like sex, and lyrics are like getting to know each other."

How has your songwriting evolved?

I've slowed down, but in a good way. Early on, as soon as I had an idea I bashed it into some kind of shape, and when I thought it was recognizably a song, then it was ready to go. As time goes on I take a lot longer, and I'm more likely to reject ideas because I think they're not good or not original enough. And I'm more likely to rewrite—especially lyrics. I often scrap a whole lyric and start over, something I never would've done 20 or 30 years ago.

How do you reflect on the mid-'70s punk period you came from?

It was just a lot of fun. I think I was in the right place and time to get swept along by it. It was strange, though, because I'd graduated from the Royal Academy of Music, and I was going to hear bands who barely knew how to tune their guitars. Musically, I started off learning the rules but then I broke them.

Tell us about writing "Is She Really Going Out With Him?"

It was just a line that I heard somewhere and thought it could be a song about beautiful girls walking around with creepy looking guys. I thought it could be quite funny. There was no more thought than that. Never imagined it would be a hit. Then I was surprised when people interpreted it as being angry. People missed the humor in a lot of my songs, and that always surprised me. That's the biggest misinterpretation of my work—they take it too seriously.

What inspired "Steppin' Out?"

That song was very much a case of trying to create a mood of anticipation and expectation. It's kind of a romantic feeling, a rather idealized notion of city life. The bright lights, the nightlife, the taxis.

ESSENTIAL JACKSON



LOOK SHARP! (1979)

Debuts don't get much stronger than this. An eclectic mix of punk, pop and ska, all wrapped in Beatle-esque melodies, darkly humorous lyrics and restless energy. Packed with classics, including "Sunday Papers," "One More Time," "Is She Really Going Out With Him?" and "Fools in Love."



I'M THE MAN (1979)

With the same great backing band, Jackson flexes his songwriting muscles in compelling new directions. From the nerd anthem "On Your Radio" to the male-female role reversal ballad "It's Different for Girls," there's not a weak track in the bunch.



NIGHT AND DAY (1992)

Jackson ditches the electric guitars and small combo settings to deliver a gorgeously orchestrated love letter to New York, via Brill Building-style weepers ("Breaking Us in Two"), Latino workouts ("Cancer"), chamber pop ("Real Men") and an electro-jazz hit ("Steppin' Out").



BIG WORLD (1986)

Recorded over three nights at New York's Roundabout Theatre before audiences who were instructed to remain quiet, Jackson succeeds in capturing the spontaneity and excitement of a live performance, sans crowd noise. One of his most emotionally direct collections, featuring fan faves "Right and Wrong" and "Home Town."



VOLUME 4 (2003)

After 23 years, Jackson reunited his original quartet. What could've been an exercise in nostalgia became something far more fulfilling—and the result is a rare collection of mature pop songs. Standouts include "Take It Like a Man," "Still Alive" and "Awkward Age."

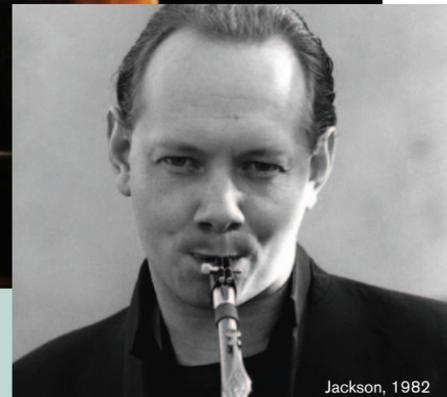
MUSICIAN



Frank Hoensch/Getty Images

Onstage in Berlin, Germany, 2010

Inset: David Gans



Jackson, 1982

'No matter how great lyrics can be, music is always more important.'

Do you have a style?

Actually, I probably do—but it's not apparent to me. I guess whatever I do, I do it in a way that no one else would. So, therefore I must have a style. I'm quite conscious of trying not to be trendy in any way. I'm trying to make something that's timeless. That's the ideal for me. If you try too hard to be fashionable then it gets old very quickly.

Do you know your audience?

No, I have no idea who my audience is. I'm just very happy every time one person buys a record or a concert ticket. They're a pretty diverse bunch, as far as I can tell. It became very apparent to me after my book was published. I remember doing a reading at a London bookstore. Instead of being in a

dark theater with thousands, I was up close in a brightly lit room. I could see the audience for once. I started laughing because it was everyone from teens to people in their 60s. It was very cool, but at the same time I thought, "This is a marketing person's nightmare."

Do you have reservations about lending your music to ads?

I don't see any downsides to it, honestly. I don't think anyone in the world would hear my song and think I was endorsing the product. Taco Bell used "One More Time" a few years ago, but I'm pretty sure people don't think, "Hey, Joe Jackson eats at Taco Bell!" If someone wants to use my music, that's fine with me. I get paid for it and people hear it. I do have to think about my retirement.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Joe Jackson spends most of his time playing acoustic piano onstage and in the studio—but that doesn't mean he's averse to electronics. "When I use electric keyboards, I tend to go for the vintage stuff, like old Wurlitzer pianos and clavinetts. But I just got a new keyboard to use on this upcoming tour—the Nord Stage 2. There are probably other brands that have a comparable acoustic piano sound. But I like their gear in general. The Nord is very user friendly—and what really won me over is that it has great organ sounds and electric piano sounds within the same unit. In fact, the organ sounds are the best that I've heard anywhere. I'm liking it a lot, and look forward to playing it onstage. Other than the acoustic piano and the Nord, I'll also be playing a bit of accordion on this tour ... just to mess with people."

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