

# Saying the Unsayable: The Non-verbal Vocalisations of Michael Jackson

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*Lift your head up high  
And scream out to the world  
I know I am someone  
And let the truth unfurl*<sup>1</sup>

In *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith asks: 'What is the relationship between the voice as a carrier of sounds, the singing voice, making "gestures", and the voice as a carrier of words, the speaking voice, making "utterances"?'<sup>2</sup> The voice is more than just another musical instrument, Frith writes, not just because it is capable of language, but because it is produced by the body itself, so it represents the physical presence of the singer in a way other instruments do only indirectly.<sup>3</sup> This physicality ties the singer's performance tightly to his or her persona. Frith argues that:

a pop star is like a film star, taking on many parts but retaining an essential 'personality' that is common to all of them and is the basis of their popular appeal. For the pop star the "real me" is a promise that lies in the way we hear the voice.<sup>4</sup>

In that case, it is difficult ever to hear the 'real Michael Jackson.' His pop music is thematically orthodox, composed chiefly of macho dance numbers, romantic love songs and sappy ballads. Yet his public persona is much more ambiguous and disturbing. Is he an habitual child abuser, or a boy who never grew up? A surgically created Caucasian, or proud African-American? A loving family man, or an asexual deviant who created his kids in test-tubes and dangled his younger son from a hotel balcony? A persecuted tabloid victim, or a canny businessman who never misses an opportunity for self-promotion?

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Jackson, 'Wannabe Startin' Somethin'.'

<sup>2</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996) 186.

<sup>3</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites* 191.

<sup>4</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites* 199.

It is not the aim of this article to provide any definitive answers to these questions. In the light of his notorious interview with Martin Bashir,<sup>5</sup> his accusations of racism against Sony boss Tommy Mottola,<sup>6</sup> and his current indictment on child sexual abuse charges,<sup>7</sup> it seems unlikely that even Michael Jackson can make sense of his own contradictions. Instead, the aim here is to investigate the Jackson phenomenon through an analysis of one of its key attributes: Jackson's idiosyncratic non-verbal vocalisations. This may seem like a frivolous enterprise, or even like the worst excesses of academic fandom. After all, despite believing himself the Artist of the Millennium,<sup>8</sup> Michael Jackson looks suspiciously like a washed-up Eighties star whose wacky personal life has usurped his musical talent. Do his increasingly banal songs really warrant further academic attention? I believe they do. The non-verbal vocalisations are one of the best-known yet least-investigated aspects of Jackson's music.

But Jackson is the subject of this article for another, more important reason: his non-verbal vocalisations open up potential readings of pop music beyond ideas like 'songs as text' or 'music as affect.' This unproductive dichotomy has led to something of an impasse in popular music studies. Of course, songs *are* texts: they contain semiotic cues which can be 'read' by listeners (and watchers of music videos), and analysed by researchers. However, these signifiers exist within and between cultural contexts; their meanings are largely connotative rather than denotative. By contrast, some musicological analyses are almost purely denotative: reducing pop songs to verses, phrases, video frames, even syllables. They might find symbolic or

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<sup>5</sup> Jackson granted television journalist, Martin Bashir, full access to his home and family for eight months. The resulting documentary, *Living with Michael Jackson*, was aired in February 2003, to strong worldwide reactions. Among other things, Jackson revealed that he allowed a 12-year-old boy to sleep in his bed, recounted how he snatched his newborn daughter from the hospital still covered in placenta, and said he would commit suicide if there were no children in the world. An angry Jackson later claimed that Bashir had manipulated the footage, and revealed further footage he had recorded himself, in which Bashir praised his parenting abilities. See 'Inside Michael Jackson's Odd World,' *ABC News Online* [US], 6 February 2003: available from <[abcnews.go.com/sections/2020/DailyNews/michael\\_jackson\\_doc\\_030206.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/2020/DailyNews/michael_jackson_doc_030206.html)> [accessed: 6 February 2003].

<sup>6</sup> In July 2002, Jackson appeared at a press conference convened by African-American activist, the Reverend Al Sharpton, at Sharpton's national Action Network headquarters in New York City's Harlem neighbourhood. Jackson said of Mottola, 'He's mean. He's a racist, and he's very, very, very devilish.' Jackson also claimed Mottola had used racist slurs on an unnamed African-American artist. Commentators speculated that poor sales of Jackson's *Invincible* album, which had cost \$US300 million to promote, were behind his feud with Sony Music. Prominent African Americans in the music industry refused to back up Jackson's allegations. In a statement, Sony Music called Jackson's comments 'ludicrous, spiteful, and hurtful,' adding: 'We are appalled that Mr. Jackson would stoop so low in his constant quest for publicity.' See 'Jackson Blasts Music Industry for Racism,' *ABC News Online* [US], 8 July 2002: available from <[abcnews.go.com/sections/entertainment/DailyNews/Jackson020708.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/entertainment/DailyNews/Jackson020708.html)> [accessed: 8 July 2002].

<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing this article, Jackson had been indicted on ten counts in Santa Barbara County, stemming from his relationship with the 12-year-old boy featured in the Bashir documentary. The charges included child molestation, conspiracy to falsely imprison and abduct someone (he allegedly planned to have the boy's family taken to Brazil so they could not alert authorities), and extortion. Jackson faced court in September 2004. He pleaded not guilty to all the charges. See Bill Lagattuta, 'A Michael Jackson Conspiracy?' *CBS News Online* [US], 2 June 2004: available from <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/06/02/48hours/main620746.shtml>> [accessed: 5 June 2004].

<sup>8</sup> At the 2002 MTV Music Video Awards, pop star Britney Spears summoned Jackson to the stage, referring to him as the 'artist of the millennium.' Jackson expressed surprise and humility at receiving this honour; but it turned out that MTV was giving no such award. It was Jackson's birthday, and what Spears had handed to Jackson was not an award statuette, but a birthday cake. See Matt Drudge, 'Michael Jackson Blowup: MTV Takes Away Award it Never Gave?' *The Drudge Report*, 30 August 2002: available from <[www.drudgereport.com/mtv.htm](http://www.drudgereport.com/mtv.htm)> [accessed: 30 August 2003].

narrative meaning within lyrics, or map a song's words onto its cadences and melodies, but they are at a loss to engage the wider repertoire of cultural conventions that often make popular music so compelling.

This tendency is particularly striking in David Brackett's analysis of the James Brown song 'Superbad'.<sup>9</sup> Brackett realises that 'social "competence,"' or in his terms, intuitively being able to recognise a 'groove,' is the key to appreciating soul music.<sup>10</sup> His aim is to make explicit the 'rhythmic syntax' of this groove for those (white?) listeners who lack this cultural knowledge. He divides the overall song structure, as well as individual phrases, into sections labelled by letters, transcribing key vocalisations into classical notation form. Unfortunately, Brown's transcribed vocalisations come across as faintly ludicrous: the melody-focused notation system is barely able to contain their exuberant glissandos and tremolos; and the 'lyrical' content is negligible (for example: 'yaay—Hay—Hay—Hay—; huh-yaay—'). Brackett's 'decoding' technique also does not read well:

Figures *a* and *e* tend to occur in tandem at the end of the B sections ... the last two statements of figure *a* occur at the end of section B3 and frame within them the final statements of both figure *d* and figure *e*.<sup>11</sup>

While it certainly foregrounds the 'syntax' of soul, this mercilessly close semiotic reading does not offer much insight into how the text 'Superbad' reveals its cultural contexts and ideologically positions its audiences, although, as will be argued below, Brackett's wider argument about 'signifyin'' as a black performative practice is more useful.

Another strand of popular music studies sees music as affective, hence, as a practice rather than a text. This approach is experiential, arguing that the 'meanings' of music can be located in the cultural formations associated with particular styles, such as moshing in hard rock and heavy metal, or raving in electronic dance music. This can be a valuable approach.<sup>12</sup> It becomes dangerous, however, when critical attention drifts from the affective possibilities of the music itself to the organisational or industrial structures of these audiences, whether they are called 'subcultures,' 'scenes' or 'crowds.' This methodology also excludes the possibilities of affect in the *production* (that is, recording or performance) of music—how it manifests the emotions and experiences of the performers.

This article uses Michael Jackson's non-verbal vocalisations as a way of negotiating a potential 'middle path' between too little and too much focus on the cultures of creating, distributing and appreciating popular music. It draws on analyses of both the songs themselves and of the social and critical climate in which they were released. While only one possible interpretation of Jackson's music is offered (rather than an ethnographic survey), I believe this reading to be both legitimate and productive.

Three issues in the non-verbal vocalisations will be examined—race, sexuality and gender—by mapping them onto the themes of Jackson's songs. The spin Jackson himself puts on them

<sup>9</sup> David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 108–56.

<sup>10</sup> Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* 144.

<sup>11</sup> Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* 135.

<sup>12</sup> Melissa Campbell, 'Bass in Space: How Low-Frequency Music Gives Youth Subcultures Room to Move,' *AntiTHESIS* 12 (2001): 219–31.

in his 1994 song 'Scream,' a duet with his sister Janet, will then be discussed. Overall, the contention is that the non-verbal vocalisations perform Jackson's complicated identity far more successfully than the hegemonic, racially unmarked masculinity conveyed in his lyrics and video clips.

### The Non-verbal Vocalisations

'An odd thing about Michael Jackson,' notes *Village Voice* critic Frank Kogan, 'is that he has a totally spectacular voice but he doesn't feel the need to amaze us with it ... On dance songs he makes his voice as hard and compact as the percussion, reducing himself to icy shards and chilly wails.'<sup>13</sup> Other critics have referred to these 'wails' as 'yelps,' 'coos and hiccups.'<sup>14</sup> There is the instantly recognisable, high-pitched 'Hoo!' or 'Ow!' and the related 'Hee-hee!'. Jackson also punctuates his lyrics with guttural grunts and sharp expulsions of breath, and creates rhythmic 'beatbox' effects.

What do these non-verbal vocalisations *mean*? It is arguable that they are primal screams of deep anguish or pleasure, innately representative of the inner emotions that escape expression in Jackson's lyrics and melodies. However, that argument does not accord with how stylised they are, nor why Jackson uses them so much and so predictably. On the other end of the signification scale, they might be just a pastiche of trills, tics and vocal embellishments from other musical eras and styles, with no specific meaning at all. Perhaps Jackson picked them up as a child imitating his soul singer idols, and now, like bad grammar, he finds them hard to shake. That possibility needs unpacking.

Before this unpacking, however, it is important to examine our need as audiences and critics to *imbue* non-verbal sounds with meaning. Frith calls them 'willed sounds' because audiences *will* them to be significant. Rather than entertain the idea that we find them meaningless, we choose to interpret them 'as words we do not understand, or as sounds made by someone who has chosen to be inarticulate.'<sup>15</sup> From another perspective, Australian postcolonial critic Paul Carter calls them 'sounds in-between.'<sup>16</sup> For Carter, sounds in-between define the space of first encounters between people without a common language, like colonisers and indigenous people, or migrants and their host cultures. Yet by definition, sounds in-between are confusing and ambiguous to both parties because they are not pure spectacles to be appreciated aesthetically, nor do they follow linguistic rules.<sup>17</sup>

Carter's example is the Australian indigenous vocalisation 'cooee,' which, he argues, was originally a greeting. European settlers misinterpreted this meaning, coming to view 'cooee' as a method of communicating over long distances for the arbitrary reason that its tonal qualities lent themselves to amplification. Consequently, many Australians now believe that Aborigines 'authentically' used 'cooee' to call out to others in the bush. Thus, something that

<sup>13</sup> Frank Kogan, 'The Man in the Distance,' review of *Invincible* by Michael Jackson, *Village Voice* (28 November–4 December 2001), <[www.villagevoice.com/issues/0148/kogan.php](http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0148/kogan.php)> [accessed: 7 June 2003].

<sup>14</sup> Pete Scriver, 'Invincible,' review of *Invincible* by Michael Jackson, *BBC* <[www.bbc.co.uk/music/pop/reviews/jackson\\_invinc.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/pop/reviews/jackson_invinc.shtml)> [accessed 6 June 2003].

<sup>15</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites* 190.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Carter, *The Sound In-between: Voice, Space, Performance* (Kensington, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Carter, *The Sound In-between* 13.

'begins in a desire for dialogue' takes on an altogether different meaning through mutual misunderstanding.<sup>18</sup>

This idea of communicating with sounds-in-between might seem somewhat futile—but only from the perspective that communication 'fails' if intended meanings do not match interpreted meanings. Instead, I find the sound in-between provides a productive intersection with Frith's notion of willed sounds. While Frith identifies audiences as the primary meaning-makers of pop music, Carter writes that non-verbal vocalisations delineate 'a space where, in future, misapprehensions and differences can begin to form the basis of a new cross-cultural argot.'<sup>19</sup> Just as sounds in-between historically led to hybrid forms of communication like pidgin, Michael Jackson's non-verbal vocalisations are an attempt to bridge the gap between the things he says and the things his audiences assume about him, while simultaneously acknowledging the very precariousness of assigning these meanings.

### **Race: 'It don't Matter if you're Black or White'**

Like Jackson's persona, the non-verbal vocalisations are an ambivalent mix of race, sexuality and gender. There are two ways to look at their racialisation. From Carter comes the idea that they occupy 'the borderline between what can be said and what can only be acted out.'<sup>20</sup> Thus, they do not fit into a white aesthetic tradition of narrative communication: 'Except in performance [they have] no place; except as notation for actions [they have] no meaning.'<sup>21</sup> White culture places them in an orientalist tradition of blackness as exotic spectacle. Brackett describes several instances of white Americans observing West African slaves celebrating and worshipping: he writes that what they saw 'did not present itself in a way that they could comprehend as ordered.'<sup>22</sup>

Mark Anthony Neal, however, argues that non-verbal vocalisations are perfectly comprehensible—to African Americans. These sounds derive their meanings from what theorists of black speech call 'tonal semantics.' 'The practice of "polytonal" expression,' Neal writes, 'in which complex and varying meanings were conveyed via vocal tones, represents a unique process emblematic of the African-American experience.'<sup>23</sup>

Neal argues that tonal semantics created a privileged black cultural sphere. Slaves were denied the musical instruments used in African polyrhythms, and lived under a degree of surveillance that impeded the social activities and individual expression that would usually take place in the private sphere. Polytonal expression therefore 'created the context for the creation of covert social space(s) in which the parameters were not physical, but aural.'<sup>24</sup> Indeed, there is a rich tradition of non-verbal vocalisation in African-American music: call-and-response field hollers, gospel congregationists speaking in tongues, jazz scatting and the anguished cries of blues and soul.

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<sup>18</sup> Carter, *The Sound In-between* 12.

<sup>19</sup> Carter, *The Sound In-between* 13.

<sup>20</sup> Carter, *The Sound In-between* 16.

<sup>21</sup> Carter, *The Sound In-between* 16.

<sup>22</sup> Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* 114.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, 'Michael Jackson: Love Songs,' review of *Love Songs* by Michael Jackson, *Popmatters* <[www.popstars.com/music/reviews/j/jacksonmichael-love.html](http://www.popstars.com/music/reviews/j/jacksonmichael-love.html)> [Accessed: 6 June 2003].

<sup>24</sup> Neal, 'Michael Jackson: Love Songs.'

However, Michael Jackson is a product of a different kind of African-American musical expression—the Motown philosophy of integrating ‘black’ music with wider American popular culture to produce the ‘Sound of Young America.’ Neal points out that, while this process of depoliticisation ‘satiated both mainstream curiosities about Blackness and African Americans’ desire to consume their own images,’ it also eroded the significance of tonal semantics.<sup>25</sup> I would argue that Michael Jackson’s non-verbal vocalisations are a kind of racial residue, a stylised form of blackness that doesn’t threaten mainstream white audiences. As his long-time producer Quincy Jones told *Time* magazine in 1984, ‘Michael has connected with every soul in the world.’<sup>26</sup>

Jackson’s non-verbal vocalisations also form another kind of racial residue: an extension of the African-American musical practice of citation or sampling. Andrew Bartlett argues that ‘there is a clear continuum in which African-American artists have put things learned by listening into action by way of performance.’ Digital sampling in hip hop, Bartlett writes, is a process of ‘selective archiving,’ mining the back catalogue of African American music for fragments worth preserving.<sup>27</sup> Bebop musicians performed a similar, although less high-tech, process. By appropriating melodic lines from other soloists, they transformed what might have been just a pet phrase or one-off improvisation into a canonical sample that, by subsequent repetition, took on an existence of its own.

Michael Jackson’s childhood performances reveal him to be a keen student of this technique. Reviewing a compilation album of early songs, Neal remarks: ‘for damn sure he could plead James Brown-style (“Please, please, please”) as he does during the break-down section of ‘I Want you Back’ (“All I want, all I need / All I want, all I need!”).’<sup>28</sup> As an adult, he has become *self-referential*, to the point where the vocalisations intrude upon and even replace his singing. Perhaps Jackson has been performing these vocalisations for so long that, like the proliferation of images that Fredric Jameson associates with late-capitalist postmodern culture, any affective possibilities they once contained have long since waned.<sup>29</sup> Or, to continue this Jamesonian train of thought, perhaps Jackson’s endless pastiche of his own childhood vocalisations has a nostalgic impetus.<sup>30</sup> It is well documented that Jackson idealises childhood, prefers the company of children to adults, and behaves in childish ways.

Jameson’s postmodernist framework, however, fails to account for the still-racialised nature of Jackson’s self-citation. The non-verbal vocalisations are like jazz licks that have become standards, or classic rhymes repeated by dozens of MCs. While they are no longer spontaneous or tonally nuanced, they still demonstrate a knowledge of the musical terrain, a homage to previous African-American vocal stylings, and membership of an imagined Black community.

<sup>25</sup> Neal, ‘Michael Jackson: Love Songs.’

<sup>26</sup> Reported in Jay Cocks, ‘Why he’s a Thriller: Michael Jackson’s Songs, Steps and Sexy Aura Set a Flashy Beat for the Decade,’ *Time* 123.12 (19 March 1984): 54-60.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Bartlett, ‘Airshafts, Loudspeakers, and the Hip Hop Sample: Contexts and African American Musical Aesthetics,’ *African American Review* (Winter 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Neal, ‘Michael Jackson: Love Songs.’

<sup>29</sup> Frederic Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,’ *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (Hemel, Hamps.: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 69-70.

<sup>30</sup> Jameson, ‘Postmodernism’ 75-76.

### Gender: 'I'm Starting with the Man in the Mirror'

Just as Michael Jackson's racial appearance has gradually morphed from black to white, his external markers of gender have become more ambiguous. In the late-1970s, he had a mop of short, curly hair and got about in a tuxedo. By 1990 his hair was ponytail-length and he was wearing obvious makeup, pseudo-military outfits and mirrored aviator sunglasses: a kind of camp Gaddafi. Today, even this kind of performativity seems beyond Jackson. He just looks like a woman.

My use of the word 'camp' is deliberate. Ambiguous, arch gender performance was par for the course in Western Eighties pop. Boy George, Adam Ant, and assorted soft-metal bands and New Romantics were continuing the androgynous, disco-and-David Bowie tradition of the Seventies. Jackson's 'Thriller' video reveals some sense of this irony. Wearing a letterman sweater, he informs his date, 'I've got something to tell ya ... I'm not like other guys,' before morphing into a leather-clad 'self' that the video clearly codes as 'monstrous'.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, his songs are strangely un-ironic, narrating a masculinity that is mainly signified by criminality. This sits uneasily with Jackson's stagey androgyny—in the 'Bad' video, gang leader Wesley Snipes appears bemused by a gyrating Jackson dripping in silver-buckled vinyl, shrieking how 'bad' he is. Jackson's gender, like the sound in-between, has been lost in translation; it makes an unconvincing spectacle as well as disobeying social rules for interpreting gender. But Jackson's non-verbal vocalisations can help make sense of gender in his music.

It is interesting here to compare different understandings of Jackson in the Soviet Union, where in 1988 he was chosen to promote Pepsi. 'Russians like men who look like men and women who look like women,' said Pepsi's US translator. 'When you add their distaste for [Western] rock music to the fact that they can't tell if Michael Jackson is male or female, they find him absolutely horrifying.'<sup>32</sup> Soviet teenagers, however, loved him. Of course, to a generation just awakening to glasnost and perestroika, Jackson's ambiguity probably signified the general glamour and exoticism of Western pop music. But the point I want to make is that Jackson's gender performance may have made *more* sense to them *because* 'they don't even understand the words. They just like the beat.'<sup>33</sup>

It might be difficult to imagine Jackson's high-pitched screams as articulations of masculinity. But Frith notes that masculinity in pop music is linked to qualities with which we endow particular vocal pitches: 'The high [male] voice is heard as the young voice, and rock is a youth form.'<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Frith argues, the high-pitched male voice in Western pop isn't effeminate; it is 'the sound of seduction, of intimacy, of the private man ... [W]e now take it for granted that a male voice will move up a pitch to register more intense feeling, that the more strained the note, the more sincere the singer.'<sup>35</sup>

This might explain the sublime yowls of soft-metal singers like Axl Rose and Steve Tyler, or the keening of indie popsters like Coldplay's Chris Martin and Radiohead's Thom Yorke. But Michael Jackson's shrieks are not expressions of masculine intimacy. Indeed, they seem

<sup>31</sup> Kobena Mercer, 'Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*,' *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Routledge, 1993) 100–103.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Blayne Cutler, 'Soda Superstar,' *American Demographics* 10.12 (December 1988) 54.

<sup>33</sup> Cutler, 'Soda Superstar' 54.

<sup>34</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites* 195.

<sup>35</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites* 195.

calculated to distance the listener: their loudness rudely disrupts any illusions of privacy or sincerity. Earlier, the reviewer Kogan was quoted on the hardness and iciness of Jackson's voice. Kogan elaborates: 'Michael's not throwing his voice into these songs; he's deliberately spare.'<sup>36</sup> Jackson interrupts each phrase with snarls or hiccups that clamp down on meaning, unlike the tonal semantics employed by soul singers, which open meaning up. Despite his aggressive lyrics, Jackson does not draw his masculinity from action, but from dispassionate, unrelenting observation. To use his own preferred criminological metaphors, he's a stalker, not an attacker.

This masculine severity is most evident in 'Smooth Criminal,' which finds poetry and almost pleasure in a violent attack on a woman. Jackson's vocal tones are harsh; his voice seems strained—or more precisely, *restrained*—as if deliberately limiting his expressive capabilities. The repetitive, chant-like melody of the verse spans only four notes. Jackson begins each line with expulsions of breath, and pauses in the middle of phrases, seemingly for no reason other than rhythmic effect:

(*Ach*) As he came in through the window  
 It was the sound of (*pause*) a crescendo  
 (*Ach*) He came into her apartment  
 He left the bloodstains (*pause*) on the carpet  
 (*Ach*) She ran underneath the table  
 He could see she (*pause*) was unable  
 (*Ach*) Then she ran into the bedroom  
 She was struck down, (*pause*) it was her doom

Despite the song's refrain—'Annie, are you okay?'—there is no hint that Jackson is an active participant in the scenario he narrates. Nor, despite the fact that Annie is obviously not okay, does Jackson imply that he deplores her bloody end. The non-verbal vocalisations act as a distancing tool, establishing Jackson's impassive control over the narrative as a trope of masculinity.

### Sexuality: 'Keep it in the Closet'

It has been well documented that white fears of moral degradation and miscegenation have historically surrounded forms of popular music associated with African Americans, like jazz, rock'n'roll, disco and hip hop. The same fears accompanied 'cross-over' artists like Eminem and Elvis Presley. Interestingly, Elvis's black-shoe-white-sock look and dance move of standing on the toes have become Michael Jackson's signatures. However, the sexuality conveyed in Jackson's songs and persona was never racialised. Rather, as Richard Lacayo wrote in 1989 in *People Weekly*, he is:

the prince of paradox. Has there ever been another sex symbol who displayed so little offstage libido? The gentle boy with the whispering voice who shed tears while recording the E.T. storybook album never accorded with the impregnable warrior on 'Bad' who snarls, 'Your butt is mine.' Michael spoke from the groin or he spoke from the clouds, but rarely from any point in between.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Kogan, 'The Man in the Distance.'

<sup>37</sup> Richard Lacayo, 'Michael Jackson (20 who Defined the Decade),' *People Weekly* 32 (Fall 1989): 68–69.

This oddly bipolar sexuality neutralises any racialised sexual threat to mainstream white audiences. For *Time* magazine's Jay Cocks, Jackson is '[u]ndeniably sexy. Absolutely safe. Eroticism at arm's length.'<sup>38</sup> However in recent times, the gap between his songs and the perceived bizarreness of his persona has widened to the point where Jackson is no longer ethereally sexy, but incomprehensibly perverted. Alexis Petridis from England's *Guardian* newspaper writes bluntly that:

the very fact [that banal romantic lyrics] are being sung by Jackson gives them a whiff of weirdness. 'Let's walk down to the park, making love until it gets dark,' he trills. The thought of Jackson having sex is odd and frankly distressing.<sup>39</sup>

Jackson's compositions have always been fraught with sexual anxieties that threaten to disrupt his credibility as a 'heteromantic' subject. Jackson usually casts himself as a desirable (but racially unmarked) man, whose naivete and generosity are sexually and financially exploited by predatory women. Particular examples are 'Billie Jean,' 'Wanna be Startin' Somethin'' and 'Dirty Diana.' Other songs, notably 'In the Closet,' 'The Way you Make me Feel' and 'Remember the Time,' express desire for permanence and control over women and relationships.

The obvious use for non-verbal vocalisations in this sort of song would be as sexual noises; and the master of this type of vocalisation is self-proclaimed sex machine, James Brown. Brown's non-verbal vocalisations stem from the call-and-response interplay between himself and members of his band, especially saxophonist Maceo Parker, all over an insistent groove set up by the JB's' rhythm section. The vocalisations are narcissistic as well as orgasmic: he likes to shout 'Watch me!' and 'I got it!' between expostulations and grunts.<sup>40</sup> Brown's speciality, however, is a brand of screaming that he imbues with visceral intensity. Philip Gourevitch describes Brown in action:

The scream has a sound of such overwhelming feeling that you cannot believe the man controls it. The impression, to the contrary, is that he is controlled by it, as if out of all the throats in the cosmos it had found his, and rendered him wild ... Take this spectacle as you will—as death or birth; conquest or surrender; hellfire or apotheosis; sexual climax or heartbreak's abjection; vaudeville hamming or sublime authenticity—you won't be wrong. James Brown is a master of the simultaneous suggestion of opposing possibilities.<sup>41</sup>

By contrast, Jackson's few attempts to use vocalisations as sexual noises are dismal. In the bridge of 'In the Closet,' they amount to whimpers and yelps, like an ignored puppy. While Brown performs his vocalisations over a simple, looped rhythmic pattern, Jackson requires swelling strings in the background to lend his vocalisations a sense of climax. It is telling that although 'In the Closet' was an international top-ten chart hit in 1992, it did not make Jackson's greatest-hits compilation.

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<sup>38</sup> Cocks, 'Why he's a Thriller'.

<sup>39</sup> Alexis Petridis, 'Normality Play,' review of *Invincible* by Michael Jackson, *The Guardian* [UK] (26 October 2001), <[www.guardian.co.uk/arts/critic/review/0,1169,743666,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/critic/review/0,1169,743666,00.html)> [accessed: 6 June 2003].

<sup>40</sup> Philip Gourevitch, 'Mr Brown,' *The New Yorker* (29 July 2002).

<sup>41</sup> Gourevitch, 'Mr Brown.'

On other occasions, Jackson uses the non-verbal vocalisations as a stand-in when words fail him. But where singers of tonal semantics like James Brown, Wilson Pickett or Jackie Wilson employ gospel-style wails, Jackson turns his voice into a robotic instrument, yelling on-beat like a metronome. In 'Remember the Time,' an impassioned bridge sequence dissolves into scattling: 'Do you remember girl? / Do you? Do you? / Drrrr-up, dup-dup-dup! Drrrr-up duppa-dup!' He sounds like a machine; but importantly, he is not a sex machine.

### **Conclusion: 'Don't it Make you Wanna Scream?'**

As has been argued, reading non-verbal vocalisations is a tricky process. As willed sounds, not only is it impossible to tell whether the 'meaning' we understand is what the singer or speaker intends, it is also just about guaranteed that we will get that meaning 'wrong.' But sounds in-between also enable otherwise 'unsayable' things to be said.

To this point, one subgenre of Jackson songs has not been mentioned: his pleas for peace. The earliest of these, 'Man in the Mirror' and 'We are the World,' were co-written or written by others, and have a proactive, optimistic tone. As Jackson's career has progressed, these songs have become more embittered and defensive, linking the world's ills to what Jackson perceives as his own victimisation by the media. Music critics tend to assess the value of songs either by comparing their aesthetic or formal aspects to other, similar songs, or by treating the lyrics as narrative texts. In Jackson's case, critics tend to use a third approach: using his lyrics as keys to 'unlock' his public persona. Accordingly, Jackson's most recent album, *Invincible*, got a bollocking. In *New Musical Express*, Mark Beaumont rails against self-pitying lyrics like 'unblock my privacy' and 'stop maliciously attacking my integrity:'

Alright then, Whacksie, here's the deal. You stop floating twenty foot statues of yourself down rivers, having your tackle discussed in court, organising ludicrous tribute concerts to yourself, having race-changes and spending billions of dollars violently ramming your image as a superhuman pop masterbeing down our throats, right, and we'll stop taking any notice of you.<sup>42</sup>

A much more effective treatment of the same theme is 1994's 'Scream,' a duet with his sister Janet in which Jackson redeploys the non-verbal vocalisations. He not only discusses them in the lyrics, but explicitly assigns them a use: as expressions of frustration and mutiny against a system he feels has entrapped him. The screams in question are consonant with the uses of non-verbal vocalisation that have been discussed in this paper. Their tones do not signify a particular emotion; instead, they are a stylised, distanced representation of emotion. Janet's vocals, usually quite mellifluous, sound hard and crystalline here, like her brother's.

Importantly, this emotional distance forms an operational strategy for Jackson. By screaming, he retreats from being a victim to his favoured position of observer and narrator. If we are ever to make sense of this contradictory and troubled artist—and, by extension, of the complicated meanings surrounding popular music in general—we, too, must take a step back. Forgetting what we are told, we will find out more about popular music by listening to what it cannot say.

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<sup>42</sup> Mark Beaumont, 'Michael Jackson: Invincible,' review of *Invincible* by Michael Jackson, *New Musical Express* (30 October 2001), <[www.nme.com/reviews/8926.htm](http://www.nme.com/reviews/8926.htm)> [accessed: 7 June 2003].