

# An Appreciation: Michael Jackson broke the colour barrier

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When [Thriller was released in 1982](#), music lovers around the world rushed to record stores to get the highly anticipated new album from Michael Jackson. His deliciously catchy lyrics and melodies poured out from radio stations everywhere.

Well, almost everywhere.

In 1982, my family was living in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I was four years old. There were no music stations. In fact, there was very little music anywhere. We lived in a city where music, dance and any public expression of joy were taboo.

Asian countries are always early adopters of new technology, so CDs were available in Saudi Arabia long before they were in the West. Somehow, my parents got me bootlegged copies of Michael Jackson's music videos, and the *Thriller* CD. It was my first CD. And Michael became my first love.

Little girls in Jeddah didn't go outside and play. In a conservative culture like that of Saudi Arabia, little girls stayed indoor most of the time. But I didn't mind – I had Michael. I spent countless hours watching Michael's videos, trying to simulate those unearthly dance moves. The only drawback was that I had nobody to practice with, because Saudi kids didn't mix with non-Saudi kids. So I danced alone in our living room in front of the television, with my worn-out VHS compendium of videos like *Billie Jean* and *Beat It*.

This wasn't just a little-girl crush on a pop superstar – it was my first introduction to America: American music, American style, American joy and possibility. And I saw it all through a black man who had broken through the colour barrier.

Yes, he was a black man. Despite what illness and plastic surgery might have done to him, Michael was a black man. In recent years, it was easy to focus on his eccentricities and the criminal allegations levelled against him. What the man did privately, what mistakes he may or may not have made — it is not for me or for you to judge. What we can judge is the contribution he made as an artist, and in that regard, no one else even comes close to the gifts he gave us.

From Mexico to Moscow, Calgary to Cape Town, New York to New Delhi – Michael belonged to all of us. There were millions of kids like me dancing in their bedrooms to his music. Sure, stars like The Beatles or Elvis also had international reach. But Michael was black, and for little kids of colour, that made him different. It made him more accessible than the others; he was one of us.

Last week, Rev. Al Sharpton said, "Michael Jackson made culture accept a person of colour way before Tiger Woods, way before Oprah Winfrey, way before Barack Obama." I feel the reverend is right. Michael was the first black artist to get into regular video rotation on MTV. His music broke the colour barrier like no other artist had done before.

Musically, he combined rhythm and blues and rock and roll; he fused disco and ballads and pulsating rhythms and electric guitars. His music had something for everyone. Every major pop star since has mimicked his style and sound, and none have been able to outshine or outsell him.

Growing up in a highly racialized, segregated society like Saudi Arabia, even as a child I knew the colour lines that divided us were wrong. I believed that if Michael could transcend race and racism, and be judged solely on his talent and contribution as a human being, maybe the rest of us kids of colour could transcend those barriers, too. Despite the demons that plagued him, Michael Jackson continued to inspire us.

So, on the Friday night after Michael's death, I celebrated him the way I had done so many times before: singing his songs and dancing to his music. But this time, it wasn't alone in my living room, in a segregated Saudi Arabia, like when I was four. This time, I danced to Michael's music in multicultural Toronto along with more than a thousand other fans. Gathered downtown at Dundas Square, [we moonwalked](#) to honour the real "Thriller," whose music brought people from all walks of life together.