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Approximating the King of Pop: Michael Jackson's 'Xscape', Reviewed

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It's hard to say how much bias informs general antagonism towards posthumous Michael Jackson albums – the notion of dishonoring the King of Pop by releasing outtakes deemed unworthy of his painstakingly honed oeuvre (Jackson would reputedly cut up to 50 songs per album). Speaking to Canada's CBC Radio, longtime MJ producer Quincy Jones dismissed second after-death LP 'Xscape' with: "It's about money." He continued, "Everybody's after the money, the real estate, the lawyers."

Jones wasn't wrong: "Xscape" is the clincher of a reported seven-year \$250 million deal between the Jackson estate and Sony Music, which featured the single 'Slave To The Rhythm' in its advertisements for Sony Mobile's Xperia Z2.

Whew. Deep breath. For those who can cast aside preoccupation with artistic integrity, 'Xscape' features some repeat playback-worthy listens despite an inevitably cobbled-together feel. Producer Timbaland and team – comprising Jerome "JRoc" Harmon, Rodney Jerkins and Stargate – the sonic brains behind the powerhouses of mainstream pop today, were enlisted to "contemporize" recordings dating from 1983 to 1999.

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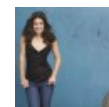
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Bearing in mind that 'Thriller's seismic success, the peak of Jackson's career, was felt in 1982, Timbaland's repurposing is surprisingly non-invasive – using little more than bass drums, synths and the percussive favored in EDM-flavored 'Top 40' radio today, without encroaching on the vocals. In this respect, at least, Epic Records CEO L.A. Reid was on-point.

The album opens with love song "Love Never Felt So Good" of a lyrically forward-looking, easy-breezy ilk of "This Is It" released ahead of Jackson's 2009 comeback tour that never was (Jackson died on June 29, less than a month before the first of 50 concerts). It's a piano-strings disco-throwback tune of a style recently re-popularized by Bruno Mars, Mika and Pharrell in "Happy." "Loving You" has a similarly carefree, effervescent feel about shacking up with a lover on the "weatherman's" advice rather than braving the elements. "Instead of going out to some restaurant I stay home in bed where I'll be loving you," Jackson croons in two-part harmony.

The song's naïveté is a bittersweet hearkening to the days of 'Bad' (1987) before the onslaught of molestation lawsuits and Jackson's bitter rebukes "Paparazzi," "Leave Me Alone" and "Monster" towards an increasingly rabid media and numerous traitorous relationships.

More serious material is packaged in catchy beats "Slave To The Rhythm" and "Do You Know Where Your Children Are?". The former is the album's most Timbaland-tinged track, featuring a frantic percussive and rebounding synth that brilliantly narrates the round-and-round-on-a-hamster-wheel narrative of a woman trapped in an exploitative marriage. A dramatic, sweeping string opening with booming drums and clinking chains befitting a fallen hero as he is conveyed to the gallows gives way to an infectious dancefloor beat in typical MJ diversionary-breakdown style.

Jackson's nerve to sing about child sexual abuse in a song with electric guitar riffs and snare drums in "Do You Know Where Your Children Are" might, to some, corroborate his innocence. Then again, the single was penned before the 1993 Evan Chandler molestation suit. But Timbaland's inclusion of the song is a wise nod to Jackson's signature, that of conveying change-the-world doctrines through relatable, light-hearted music such as "Man In The Mirror," "Earth Song" and "Black Or White." In this respect, the record should be lauded for honoring the requisite "ingredients" of a Michael Jackson album despite its lack of cohesion.

'Xscape's sole misfits are "Chicago" and "Blue Gangsta", whose instrumentation seems unfinished. "Chicago's lingering synth and distant xylophone melody creates a murkiness that befits the sleaze of Jackson's unknowing fictional affair with a married woman, but the song fails to climax. Similarly, "Blue Gangsta" features a repetitive two-note piano riff normally used to convey sneaking footsteps on Saturday morning cartoons backed by an accordion, and reeks of a musical number rather than a pop song.

Title track "Xscape" bookends the album, a recognizable cut from 2001's futuristic-themed 'Invincible' for its distorted staccato backing vocals, and decries a "system" involving "electric eyes" and "the man with the pen who writes the lies."

If a unified statement for a body of work is too much to expect in a posthumous album (2010's 'Michael' was similarly à la carte), 'Xscape' at least includes everything Michael Jackson would mandate in an album – and some things he wouldn't.

Rating: 4/5

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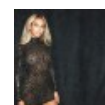


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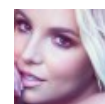
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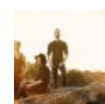
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Kindra Cooper

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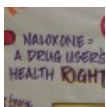
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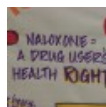
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