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# A Sequined Glove That Mesmerized the World

By GUY TREBAY JUNE 26, 2009

IT was impossible to look away from him — not when he was a dimpled child singer crowned with a pillowy Afro, not when he became a pop demigod uniformed in rhinestones and epaulets to command what were always referred to as his armies of fans, and not when his surgical transformations mirrored back to the culture the blurring of boundaries demarcating adulthood, sex and even race.

There is no way to know what was on Michael Jackson's mind as he journeyed from boy to man and partway back, from a brown-skinned man to one so pale he required an umbrella when he went out in the sun, and from a pop star with a quirky but defined masculinity to one who seemed most comfortable in a more nebulous zone. What seems clear is that all of it was considered. All of it was intentional.

More than almost any entertainer in memory, Michael Jackson was entirely of show business. From age 5, he was seldom out of costume, and so it is not surprising that his prodigious musical talents were matched by a genius for deploying the symbolic language of fashion in an age dominated by visual mediums.

Few entertainers can be identified solely on the basis of their clothes, and yet a single sequined glove held aloft signifies only one name.

The glove was merely an element in an image devised with mastery and with the powerful assistance of the then-new pop cultural phenomenon of music videos. There was also the trademark black fedora. There were the military costumes — part tin-pot dictator, part Emerald City of Oz — designed for him over the years by the Los Angeles costume designers Dennis Tompkins and Michael Bush. There were the show-biz tricks, the soft-soled black loafers and shortened trousers and the white socks used to direct the eye to a dancer's footwork — a move Mr. Jackson picked up from Fred Astaire.

In his 1980s heyday, Michael Jackson drastically revamped the image of a pop idol, layering elements of suavity adapted from Brit-pop boy bands with old-style Hollywood glamour, and coiffures that made unconscious reference to a hair obsession that had preoccupied black soul singers since James Brown got his first conk. Curiously enough, his look of that period has lately experienced a fashion renaissance, in the form of big-shouldered, glitter-covered 1980s clothes coveted by followers of the Balmain designer Christophe Decarnin.

By the time of “Beat It” in the early 80s, Mr. Jackson had added an element of the supra-normal to his appearance. He had begun to flout convention, wearing full makeup in public; attending an award ceremony at the Reagan White House dressed in a blue sequined jacket with gold sequined epaulets, a single glove, two-toned spats and aviator glasses as if he were a member of the honor guard for Queen Marie of Romania; and to wear surgical masks that, like those worn by Venetian nobles during the plague (and many travelers today), lent anti-contagion strategies a measure of chic.

It was not until after “Thriller” became the soundtrack for a global decade that Mr. Jackson set out on the road to his more strenuous physical transformations. His Jheri curl was replaced by a silken hair weave that framed and softened a face eventually so much altered by the surgeon's scalpel that it began to seem as if what was being sought by the singer was not some unattainable ideal of beauty but the limits of medical technology.

In this, as in his music, he anticipated the growing cultural unease with categories and their strictures (decades into the Jackson Five's career, record stores still racked their albums in segregated soul music sections). Was he black or white; old or young; gay or straight or something in between? Long before Thomas Beatie, the female-to-male transsexual,

announced his fatherhood on “Oprah,” or before a closet door was opened to public dialogue about transgender people, Mr. Jackson became the literal embodiment of identity in flux.

Who knows what effect this had on fans? It is unlikely that legions of music lovers rushed to have their anatomies altered after seeing the video of “Billie Jean.” But Mr. Jackson created the space for them to do so. And if his explorations sometimes seemed extreme, he remained unapologetic in asserting that his image — in all its curious and repellent, beautiful and alluring, sexy and asexual, masculine and feminine manifestations — was his alone own to devise.

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