

# Close Your Eyes, it's Not Just Imagination – it's Thriller

MOJO WORKING braves the midnight hour, and under the moonlight steels its nerves to peek (between fingers) at the production of one of Michael Jackson's biggest hits, *Thriller*.

Twenty-five years ago Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album won a record-breaking number of Grammy Awards and, according to a Time magazine article in March 1984, single-handedly restored confidence in the record industry. *Thriller* picked up seven Grammy Awards in 1984, with an additional, unrelated award in the Best Children's Recording category, for *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, bringing

Jackson's haul to eight, a figure unrivalled by any single artist until Carlos Santana equalled it in 2007.

### Hitting The Highs

With the record industry having slumped from a high point in the late '70s under the impact of independent label punk and synthesiser music, *Time* magazine called Jackson "a one-man rescue

team for the music business." At that time, *Thriller* had been lodged at the top of the US album charts for 33 weeks, selling one million copies a week worldwide, according to Epic Records, and was on its way to becoming the best-

selling album of all time – a position that it retains. The Guinness Book of World Records credits *Thriller* with 65 million copies, and there is conjecture that it may have sold as many as 109 million.

*Thriller* also redefined the number of singles that could be spun off an album. Of the nine tracks, seven became singles, with all of them charting in the Top 10 and two of them reaching the top slot in the US, with similar success worldwide.

### Successful Attributes

Much of the success of *Thriller* can be attributed to Producer Quincy Jones, a musician, Arranger, and Producer who is also no stranger to the Recording Academy, having won more Grammy Awards – 27 – than anyone alive. According to

"Swedien had hoped to encourage his Great Dane, Max, to perform on the title track.

"We had a small farm in California and we took Max out by the barn at night to listen to the coyotes and see if that would inspire him, but it didn't. We ended up having Michael do all the wolf howls."





Quincy Jones, Michael Jackson, and Bruce Swedien.

Recording Engineer Bruce Swedien, recognised with a Grammy for Best Engineered Recording, Non-Classical for *Thriller* (on his way to a career total of five), Jones was adamant that *Thriller* would be a momentous album from the very beginning. "Quincy's mandate to all of us involved in *Thriller*, including Michael, was that this had to be the most unique, most unusual sounding recorded music ever," recalls Swedien, now in his 70s and still working hard. "Quincy's real mandate was to make an album that was recorded with sounds that people had never heard before. It would have been easy to try to duplicate whatever was the flavour of the day, but Quincy and I never wanted to do that."

Swedien, who had previously worked with Jackson and Jones on the *Off The Wall* album, continues, "The first session on *Thriller* was at 12:00 noon on Wednesday, April 14, 1982. It was at Westlake Audio's beautiful new Studio A on Beverly Boulevard in Hollywood. That first session was Michael Jackson and Paul McCartney recording *The Girl Is Mine*. To have those two in the studio, singing, was a joy beyond compare."

Much has been published over the ensuing decades about the recording of *Billie Jean*, a song that is instantly recognisable from the very first beat of the kick drum. Responding to Jones' challenge, Swedien, with drummer N'dugu Chancler on *Billie Jean*, worked hard to create unique drum sounds, using a combination of a custom kick drum cover, plywood platform and isolation between the snare and hi-hat mics. "I still use it on almost all of my projects," says Swedien of the bass drum cover, adding, "I still use a lot of the techniques that started on that recording."

### Wolfish Techniques

The sessions, which stretched into early November (the album was released November 30), involved some new technology, he says, especially on the title track. "We had a huge [New England Digital] Synclavier, which was Michael's. It's a fantastic piece of equipment, and could do just about everything we can do today with digital audio workstations."

Swedien had hoped to encourage his Great Dane, Max, to perform on the title track. "We had a small farm in California and we took Max out by the barn at night to listen to the coyotes and see if that would inspire him, but it didn't. We ended up having Michael do all the wolf howls."

He continues, "There's a whole 24-track just of the intro elements. Much of the sound effects I ended up editing on the Synclavier. It's very difficult to use, but we were really blessed because we had Chris Correll, who did the Synclavier work;

he was a master. That took the sonics of that piece of music way ahead of anything else at the time."


### In The Background

At the opposite end of the technology scale was a gimmick Swedien employed for a vocal effect on *Billie Jean*, for the background response, "Don't think twice/Do think twice." He explains, "I wanted a very unique sound on that one little line but there was no processing equipment at the time that would do it." By chance, someone had left a six-foot-long mailing tube in the studio. "Michael had his earphones on in the vocal booth and he sang the line through this tube. It gives it such a wonderful filter and a unique effect."

Jackson, who added some rhythmic parts by playing on drum cases with his hands on *Beat It*, also added some foot percussion (he's credited with 'bathroom stomp board' on *Wanna Be Startin' Something*). "If we had him stomp on the floor, we found that the sound of that coupled across the floor with all the low frequencies going into the other microphones, had no presence,"

says Swedien. "So I had the studio carpenter build a two-foot-square platform to keep the sound off the floor."

### Another Level

Looking back, he says, "I absolutely love *Off The Wall*, but *Thriller* took us to another level. Working with Quincy and Michael is such a joy. Quincy and Michael have always allowed me total freedom when it comes to creating these sonic landscapes, and I think it shows in the work." 

© Copyright Mojo Working International 2009.  
All Rights Reserved.

Thanks to Mojo Working International for putting this feature together.

Mojo is a PR company for the global recording, post, and creative markets.  
[www.mojoworking.com](http://www.mojoworking.com)