

Michael Jackson performing in Lamndover, Maryland in 1988. Below: an eleven-year-old Michael performs on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1969. The Jackson 5 (photographed in 1975) consisted of five brothers: Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, Marlon, and Michael.



Scan this QR code and listen to the Spotify playlist with the Top 10 Michael Jackson songs.

Top 10

# Michael Jackson

## LEARNING WITH MUSIC

Una vita tra luci e ombre: ripercorriamo la carriera dell'intramontabile "re del pop" con dieci delle sue canzoni più iconiche.

Global superstar Michael Jackson was **dubbed**<sup>1</sup> the King of Pop in the 1980s and dominated the music world for decades, becoming one of the 20th century's most culturally significant figures. Seventeen years after his **untimely**<sup>2</sup> death, a new biopic aspires to maintain this acclaim, with Jackson's **nephew**<sup>3</sup> Jaafar Jackson in the title role.

Michael Jackson is a **polarising**<sup>4</sup> figure and has been accused of child abuse. However, this film largely focuses on the singer's musical career: aged just six when his father created the Jackson 5 with his four brothers, the group was soon signed to the iconic Motown **record label**<sup>5</sup> and their first four singles were **chart toppers**<sup>6</sup>. It was Jackson's solo career, however, that catapulted him to worldwide fame, and his 1982 album "Thriller" remains the best-selling album of all time.



### 1. I Want You Back (1969)

The Jackson 5's debut was a huge **smash**<sup>7</sup> following a **milestone**<sup>8</sup> performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The only single from the album "Diana Ross Presents The Jackson 5", the title led listeners to believe the American soul singer had discovered the family quintet. The lyrics are very simple, with eleven-year-old Jackson singing about a failed relationship, using mostly the past simple.

*When I had you to myself,  
I didn't want you around  
Those pretty faces always made you  
stand out<sup>9</sup> in a crowd<sup>10</sup>  
But someone picked you from the bunch<sup>11</sup>,  
one glance<sup>12</sup> was all it took  
Now, it's much too late for me to take a  
second look*



### 2. ABC (1970)

The second single by the Jackson 5 was their second Number One and sold two million copies in its first week. A tribute to learning, the song compares love to schooling and includes the line "i before e except after c," a classic English mnemonic for **spelling**<sup>13</sup> words. "Sing simple melodies, that's how easy love can be" — and learning too!

*A B C,  
It's easy as 1 2 3,  
as simple as  
do re mi,  
A B C, 1 2 3  
baby, you and me, girl*



### 3. Ben (1972)

Jackson's first solo Number One was about a boy with a pet rat. The theme for a film of the same name, it was from the thirteen-year-old's second solo album while he continued to record with his brothers' band. The lyrics reflect the singer's anguish at people's reaction to his strange pet, concluding with an example of the second conditional.

*They don't see you as I do  
I wish they would try to  
I'm sure they'd think again  
If they had a friend like Ben*



SCAN, READ & LISTEN  
06

UPPER INTERMEDIATE B2

## GLOSSARY

- 1 **to dub:** soprannominare
- 2 **untimely:** prematura
- 3 **nephew:** nipote
- 4 **polarising:** che genera divisione
- 5 **record label:** etichetta discografica
- 6 **chart toppers:** successi in cima alla classifica
- 7 **smash:** successo travolgente
- 8 **milestone:** pietra miliare
- 9 **to stand out:** spiccare
- 10 **crowd:** folla
- 11 **bunch:** mucchio
- 12 **glance:** occhiata
- 13 **to spell:** scrivere
- 14 **vocal hiccups:** singhiozzi vocalici
- 15 **to pepper:** disseminare
- 16 **to claim:** affermare
- 17 **to father:** essere il padre di
- 18 **presciently:** con lungimiranza
- 19 **signature:** distintivo
- 20 **rhinestone:** strass
- 21 **lawsuit:** causa legale

### 4. Don't Stop till You Get Enough (1979)

For his fifth solo album "Off the Wall", Jackson was finally given creative control and this was the first song he ever wrote alone. Together with iconic producer Quincy Jones, he created this disco masterpiece which introduced his falsetto and **vocal hiccups**<sup>14</sup>. The lyrics are **peppered**<sup>15</sup> with imperatives but the spoken intro features the past continuous and indirect speech.

*You know, I was  
I was wondering, you know  
If you could keep on  
Because the force  
It's got a lot of power  
And it make(s) me feel like, ah  
It make(s) me feel like, ooh*



### 5. Billie Jean (1983)

The second single from "Thriller", the world's best-selling album of all time, was a tale of a groupie who **claimed**<sup>16</sup> Jackson had **fathered**<sup>17</sup> her child. Producer Quincy Jones was initially against the song's release, but the singer **presciently**<sup>18</sup> insisted and it became a huge smash hit. He introduced the world to his **signature**<sup>19</sup> moonwalk and single silver **rhinestone**<sup>20</sup> glove in a Motown television special, cementing his iconic status. The lyrics narrate a fictional **lawsuit**<sup>21</sup> using the past simple and reported speech.

*She told me her name was Billie Jean  
as she caused a scene  
Then every head turned with eyes  
that dreamed of bein' the one  
Who will dance on the floor in the round*



Right: the 1985 We Are the World video featuring Paul Simon, Kim Carnes, Michael Jackson, and Diana Ross, among others.

## GLOSSARY

- 22 beat it:** vattene  
**23 threats:** minacce  
**24 werewolf:** licantropo  
**25 ghouls:** spettri  
**26 graveyard:** cimitero  
**27 manic laughter:** risata folle  
**28 to lurk:** nascondersi  
**29 proceeds:** ricavati  
**30 famine relief:** aiuti contro la carestia  
**31 reminder:** promemoria  
**32 moniker:** nome, pseudonimo  
**33 to heed:** fare attenzione  
**34 to lend a hand:** dare una mano  
**35 to spawn:** generare  
**36 broader range:** gamma più ampia  
**37 to deal with:** occuparsi di  
**38 to heal:** guarire  
**39 purchase:** acquisto  
**40 to come under scrutiny:** finire sotto esame  
**41 to go into a frenzy:** andare in delirio  
**42 to send shockwaves:** scatenare sconcerto, scalpore  
**43 Irishism:** espressione tipicamente irlandese

### 6. Thriller (1983)

The album's title track was its record seventh single, all US Top 10 hits (including the Number Ones *Billie Jean* and *Beat It*<sup>22</sup>). A horror story in the present simple with a lexical set of nocturnal threats<sup>23</sup>, this disco-funk track was accompanied by a thirteen-minute short film with Jackson transforming into a werewolf<sup>24</sup> and dancing with ghouls<sup>25</sup> in a graveyard<sup>26</sup>. The song scarily concludes with the sonorous voice of legendary horror actor Vincent Price and his manic laughter<sup>27</sup>.

*It's close to midnight  
 Something evil's lurking<sup>28</sup> in the dark  
 Under the moonlight  
 You see a sight that almost stops your heart*



### 7. We Are the World (1985)

Noting the success of the UK's Band Aid charity single *Do They Know It's Christmas*, with all proceeds<sup>29</sup> going to Ethiopian famine relief<sup>30</sup>, Jackson and Lionel Richie wrote this simple reminder<sup>31</sup> of equality and unity. Produced by Quincy Jones, it was recorded in just one night after an awards ceremony and features the crème of the country's singers under the moniker<sup>32</sup> USA for Africa. It is the best-selling single of the last sixty years and was the first time Jackson publicly worked on a humanitarian project.

*There comes a time  
 When we heed<sup>33</sup> a certain call  
 When the world must  
 come together as one  
 There are people dying  
 Oh, and it's time to lend a hand<sup>34</sup> to life  
 The greatest gift of all*



Jackson performs during a concert for the 50th birthday of Hassanal Bolkiah, the Sultan of Brunei, in 1996, in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei. Right: the new musical movie *Michael*.

### 8. Man in the Mirror (1987)

Following the success of "Thriller", Jackson embarked on the Victory Tour, his last one with his brothers, the Jacksons. On his return he reunited with Quincy Jones to work on his seventh solo album "Bad", which spawned<sup>35</sup> a record five US Number Ones. *Man in the Mirror* is a reflective call to make the world a better place, using the slang 'gonna' ('going to') for intentions.

*I'm gonna make a change  
 For once in my life  
 It's gonna feel real good  
 Gonna make a difference,  
 gonna make it right*

### 9. Heal the World (1991)

For his next album, "Dangerous", Jackson worked with different producers to create a broader range<sup>36</sup> of styles, including electronic and hip-hop. Many of the tracks dealt with<sup>37</sup> social issues, but this linguistically low-level ballad is the song he claimed to be most proud to have created. In 1992, he set up the Heal<sup>38</sup> the World Foundation, saying he wanted "to improve the conditions for children throughout the world."

*Heal the world  
 Make it a better place  
 For you and for me  
 And the entire human race  
 There are people dying  
 If you care enough for the living  
 Make a better place  
 For you and for me*

### 10. This Is It (2009)

Over the years, Jackson had become the subject of intense media speculation. Eccentricities included unusual pets, such as a snake and a chimp named Bubbles, his purchase<sup>39</sup> of the Beatles' music rights, and his changing skin colour. His marriage to Elvis Presley's daughter, and his three children, also came under scrutiny<sup>40</sup>. In 1993 he was first accused of child sexual abuse at his Neverland ranch, and he became a recluse, spend-

ing much time living abroad. When he announced a 2009 fifty-date residency in London, ticket-selling sites went into a frenzy<sup>41</sup>. He died of an overdose eighteen days before the first date, sending shockwaves<sup>42</sup> around the world. A demo of this song was found during preparations for a film documentary, and Jackson's brothers helped complete the recording. It features the Irishism<sup>43</sup> 'grand', meaning 'okay', perhaps reflecting the six months he lived in the country in 2006.

*This is it, here I stand  
 I'm the light of the world, I feel grand  
 And this love, I can feel  
 And I know, yes, for sure, it is real ☒*



Fergal Kavanagh runs the website [www.tuneintoenglish.com](http://www.tuneintoenglish.com), the web's largest free resource for learning English through pop music. Scan this QR code and you'll have access to the worksheets for the songs included in this article.

