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# Rolling Stone



Michael Jackson's Final Days

## HOPE AND RUIN

PLUS: HIS UNFINISHED LAST RECORDINGS

**IN THE SHADOWS**  
Jackson leaving an  
L.A. clinic on May  
21st, a month  
before his death

Frail, deep in debt and addicted to drugs, he was consumed by a single dream: to blow people's minds with the greatest concerts ever. Inside the comeback that almost was

# The Last Days of Michael Jackson

*By Claire Hoffman*

**M**ICHAEL JACKSON'S BODY LAY ON A METAL GURNEY in the county morgue in downtown Los Angeles. He was dressed in shiny black trousers, a thin hospital gown and nothing else. His feet were bare, his left arm scored with needle marks. His pale, narrow chest was covered in bruises - evidence of the medical efforts over the past few hours to save his life. Doctors and security guards milled in and out of the little room containing the gurney, eager to catch a glimpse of Jackson's body. ★ It had started that Thursday morning, when Jackson's own live-in doctor had tried frantically to revive him. By the time the medics arrived, responding to a desperate call to 911 at 12:21 p.m., they wanted to pronounce him dead on the spot.



But Michael Jackson couldn't be dead. His body was lifted into the back of an ambulance and rushed to UCLA Medical Center, where a team of doctors worked for another hour, pounding a defibrillator on Jackson's chest, all of them hoping that they could keep one of music's greatest entertainers from ending up in this morgue.

Jackson's face, which he had so painfully reworked and concealed from the public for decades, now lay out in the open, undisguised under the morgue's harsh lights. The prosthesis he normally attached to his damaged nose was missing, revealing bits of cartilage surrounding a small, dark hole. But to those who passed through the room, Jackson's face looked porcelain, impeccable. After years of torment, Michael was finally at rest. "Seeing him lying there," recalls one eyewitness, "he looked peaceful."

It was still a day before the autopsy, when pathologists would open him up and try to understand why a thin, 50-year-old man who had danced for hours the night before would die so suddenly. But as Jackson lay in the morgue on the afternoon of June 25th,

had nearly fainted when a nurse broke the news to him. This was the Michael Jackson that the world knew and mocked: the crazy family, the botched plastic surgeries, the two divorces, the charges of child molestation, the financial woes that had left him an estimated \$500 million in debt.

But Michael had a different view. In his final days, he not only dreamed of a comeback, he worked as hard as he could to pull it off, maybe as hard as he ever had in his life. He wrote new songs, rehearsed hour after grueling hour to perfect the shows that would pay off his debts and mark his return to greatness, and planned every detail of his comeback tour - a massive spectacle that had already cost at least \$25 million in pre-production alone. Jackson gave the tour its title, and the name said it all: *This Is It*. Jackson knew what people thought of him, and he was going to change their perceptions, just as he had so many times before.

In the final months of his life, Jackson thought of nothing but the tour. And those whom he loved and trusted the most were sure that this was the moment he had been

ager, "we've got to put on the greatest show on Earth."

The tragedy is, he almost pulled it off.

ONE DAY NEAR THE END of February, Kenny Ortega answered the phone in his home office in Sherman Oaks, California, and heard a soft, familiar falsetto on the other end of the line. "Kenny," the caller said, "it's Michael."

Right away, Ortega heard something in Jackson's voice that had been missing for a long time: excitement. The two had become friends in the early 1990s, when Ortega choreographed Michael's *Dangerous* tour, and they worked together again on the *HIStory* tour. Following his acquittal on child-molestation charges in 2005, Jackson had largely dropped out of touch with his friends in the music business. But now, as Jackson described the comeback tour he was putting together, Ortega heard a focus in the star that had been absent for years. Michael sounded sharp and clear as he told Ortega that he wanted this to be the most spectacular

Under the harsh light of the morgue, Jackson's face looked porcelain, impeccable. "Seeing him lying there," recalls an eyewitness, "he looked peaceful."

detectives were already inside the singer's rented chateau in Bel-Air, gathering up the mother lode of prescription drugs that he kept on hand. Most frightening were numerous reports that the two large bags of medication investigators removed contained vials of Diprivan, a powerful anesthetic used to put patients under before surgery. Jackson had reportedly been using Diprivan for years to help him sleep, and L.A. police were soon looking into whether his death should be considered a homicide, making it clear that they wanted to question Jackson's physician, Dr. Conrad Murray. Murray had demanded \$1 million a month to work for Jackson - and had vanished after his client was pronounced dead in the UCLA emergency room.

Within hours of Michael's death, La Toya Jackson reportedly descended upon her brother's home, frantically searching for the bags of cash she knew he kept there, and in a matter of days, their mother raced to court to fight for control of Michael's estate and custody of his three children. The kids had followed Jackson to the hospital in a blue Escalade, and the job of telling them that their father was dead fell to Michael's manager, Frank DiLeo, who

Contributing editor CLAIRE HOFFMAN wrote about Amy Winehouse in *RS 1056*.

waiting for. "This is real?" asked his friend Deepak Chopra, who spoke with Jackson often in the weeks before his death. "You're coming back for real?"

"For real," said Michael, laughing. The night before he died, Jackson ran through a six-hour dress rehearsal of his concert at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. More than a dozen people who witnessed the final rehearsal - from his promoter to his choreographer to his musicians - all agree on one thing: Jackson was better than he'd ever been. He *popped*, just like he had in his glory days, singing and out-dancing the young pros that surrounded him. "He was so brilliant onstage," recalls his tour director, Kenny Ortega. "I had goose bumps."

Ken Ehrlich, who has produced the Grammy Awards for three decades, sat in the audience, awed. "I turned to somebody and said, 'This is amazing!' For so many years I have watched Chris Brown and Justin Timberlake and Usher and the Backstreet Boys and En Vogue all imitate Michael Jackson - and now here we were this many years later, and he was going to do it again. I got chills, literally. The hairs on the back of my neck were raised. Those are the moments you hope for."

This *Is It* was to be the biggest comeback ever. "Frank," Jackson told his man-

show in music history. "This is it," Jackson said, echoing what would eventually become the tour's title.

Only the summer before, Michael had seemed a broken man. Photographers had captured him as he was pushed around in the baking Las Vegas sun in a wheelchair, wearing a surgical mask and pajamas. It was hard not to look at those photos and wonder what happened to the man who had once danced in his sparkly socks and gloves as if he controlled gravity. These days he looked like a creature from some other world, ungoverned by logic and vulnerable to everything.

Jackson had moved to Vegas after returning from the Middle East in 2006, taking up residence with his children in a 10-bedroom mansion west of the Strip. Jack Wishna, a wheeler and dealer in the gaming industry who had lobbied Donald Trump to open a resort in town, was trying to help Michael land a series of shows in Vegas that could pay off his mounting debts, but the deal wasn't going well. Wishna would later tell CNN that the singer seemed "drugged up" and "incoherent" and was often so weak that he needed a wheelchair to get around. Jackson and his children rarely left the mansion, except for shopping excursions. When they did go out, the kids wore feather-and-

FUNERAL FOR A KING Pallbearers at Jackson's July 7th memorial service included his brothers Jermaine and Tito.



mesh masks to shield them from photographers, their father by their side in his odd uniforms from some imaginary army, replete with epaulets and armbands. The Vegas shows were eventually canceled because of Jackson's condition, Wishna said. Around that same time, Jackson's sister Janet reportedly tried to stage an intervention with Michael to curb his drug use but failed.

By that point, Jackson had been spiraling downward for years. The breaking point had come as he was driven home in a motorcade on June 13th, 2005, just after his acquittal on 10 counts of child molestation and related claims. The mood in the car was subdued. Arriving at Neverland Ranch, Jackson went upstairs and turned to Dick Gregory, a comedian and family friend who had known Michael since he starred in *The Wiz*. Jackson grabbed Gregory and clutched him tightly. "Don't leave me," he begged. "They're trying to kill me."

Gregory had the feeling that Jackson was referring to the whole world. Michael seemed paranoid and dehydrated. "Have you eaten?" Gregory asked him, knowing that Jackson often went without food for days.

"I can't eat," Jackson responded. "They're trying to poison me."

"Do me a favor," Gregory told him. "Get out of here. All of these people have double-crossed you."

As melodramatic as it sounds, Gregory may have been right. Jackson had long lived in an alternate world of yes men who seemed to come and go, alternately bilking the singer or accusing Michael of bilking them. Not even his family seemed to be able to get past this world of opportunism. By the time of his molestation trial, this circle had grown increasingly shady. There was Marc Schaffel, a former gay-porn producer who advised Jackson for years, and Al Malnik, a lawyer who reportedly once represented mobster Meyer Lansky. There were two German "entrepreneurs" who managed to get Jackson to endorse a sports cola, known only as "Mystery Drink," which was briefly sold during the *HIStory* tour. And there was his security detail from the Nation of Islam, which was rumored to have come to blows with several of Jackson's brothers who had expressed concern over the Nation's growing sway over Michael's life.

Jackson knew he had to get out - but his choice of a savior only made things weirder. That June, to help him resolve his finances and escape the glare of the media spotlight, Jackson turned to a man he had never met: Sheik Abdullah bin Hamad bin

Isa Al-Khalifa, a prince of Bahrain. The sheik had befriended Michael's brother Jermaine, who had converted to Islam and spent four months living in Bahrain. Now Abdullah helped pay off some \$2.2 million in legal fees for Michael, and by the end of the month, Jackson - with his three young children and staff in tow - went to live with the prince. There were rumors of private shows for the sheik. Abdullah, who had musical aspirations of his own, later said that he and Michael were working on a record together.

Even then, Jackson was dreaming of a comeback. "A tour was always in the works," says Miko Brando, the son of legendary actor Marlon Brando, who spoke to Michael on the phone during the singer's time in Bahrain. "It was just to get himself ready to go back to work and be productive. Michael is too much of a perfectionist just to sit around and not do anything. He was always creating music, creating ideas. He knew how to put things together, what worked, what the public was hungry for."

As always, though, things seemed to go wrong quickly. After Jackson left Bahrain in 2006, Abdullah filed suit against the singer, claiming that he had spent enormous sums on Jackson - from renting a palatial home to buying him body lotions and a Ferrari - in the expecta-

tion that Michael would record an album of songs he had written. Jackson fled to Ireland, where he continued to work on music [see "Michael Jackson's Unheard Music," page 49]. But he never released any songs.

In the summer of 2007, Jackson was contacted by AEG, one of the world's leading concert presenters. The company was about to open the O<sub>2</sub>, an 18,000-seat arena on the banks of the Thames River in eastern London, and it needed someone with the star power to fill it. Randy Phillips, the CEO of AEG Live, was friendly with Jackson from the 1980s, when they had worked together on a deal for the sneaker company LA Gear. Phillips flew to Las Vegas to meet with Jackson and his advisers, and they sat down for dinner in the private wine cellar of a luxury condo complex.

Jackson arrived in sunglasses and a hat, but he seemed disengaged as Phillips made his pitch for a series of shows at the O<sub>2</sub> arena. "He was listening," recalls Phillips. "He wasn't excited." Jackson said he loved the long-running show that Celine Dion had been doing in Vegas, and he was interested in doing something similar. But not long after the meeting, Phillips got a call from Raymone Bain, one of Jackson's advisers at the time, who said the star wasn't ready to perform again, let alone commit to an arduous, ongoing series of concerts.

Then in October 2007, creditors began foreclosure proceedings on Jackson's beloved Neverland. "He didn't think about money - it wasn't his motivator," says Phillips. "Which may have been why he spent so much."

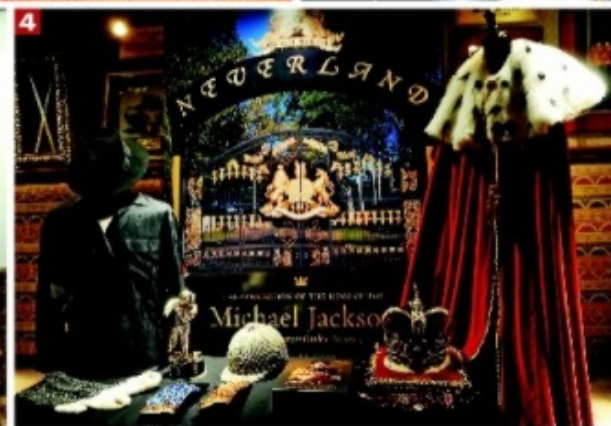
**L**AST YEAR, WITH THE CONCERTS off the table, Jackson turned to Wall Street to bail him out. Given a spending habit that some said had hit \$35 million a year, Jackson had sustained his lavish lifestyle by taking out a reported \$270 million in loans from Bank of America, much of it secured by his Neverland Ranch and his stake in the Sony/ATV publishing catalog, which includes the music of the Beatles and the Jonas Brothers. But Bank of America had sold the loan package to Fortress Investments, a New York firm that specializes in distressed debt. Fortress was well-connected, and it knew how to take advantage of other people's misfortune. In 2007, presidential candidate John Edwards, who worked as a consultant for the firm, was forced to withdraw \$16 million he had invested in Fortress after news reports revealed that it was buying up distressed properties in New Orleans and foreclosing on families hard hit by Hurricane Katrina.

In March 2008, Jackson announced that he had made a deal with Fortress - which at one point was reportedly charging him 20 percent interest on his old loans - to stop the firm's foreclosure proceedings



**Michael's Circle**

(1) In 2005, Jackson moved to Bahrain to live with Sheikh Abdullah (left), who paid off \$2.2 million of his legal fees. (2) Dr. Arnold Klein, whom Jackson visited days before his death. (3) Dr. Conrad Murray wanted \$1 million a month to be Jackson's physician. (4) Items from the aborted Neverland auction.



on Neverland. But the deal never materialized. Instead, Michael took the advice of someone he had just met: Tohme Tohme, a Lebanese financier from Los Angeles. According to Tohme, he was contacted last year by Michael's brother Jermaine, who asked if he could help save Neverland from foreclosure. The two flew to Las Vegas and met with Michael, who put his trust in Tohme. The financier quickly persuaded his friend Tom Barrack, the billionaire CEO of Colony Capital, to meet with Jackson.

Barrack, whose investment fund owns the Las Vegas Hilton and dozens of other resorts and casinos, prides himself on his "cautious contrarianism," which he defines as "investing in out-of-favor sectors or markets to exploit capital or product misalignments." If ever a sector was out of favor or misaligned, it was Michael Jackson - and Barrack had the resources to rescue him from Fortress.

In May 2008, Colony and Jackson staved off foreclosure on Neverland by forming a holding company to own the property jointly, with the two as partners. They reverted to calling it by its pre-Jackson name, Sycamore Valley Ranch, and immediately started renovation work,

most likely with an eye toward selling it. Tohme, seeming to think he could turn the chaos of Jackson's life into a sound investment, also made a deal with Julien's auction house in Los Angeles to sell off the contents of Neverland. Darren Julien, the auctioneer, spent months working with the Jackson camp, carefully cataloging the immense contents of the 2,700-acre ranch. "It was like Disneyland collides with the Louvre," says Julien. "Only in Neverland could you see an 18th-century statue next to a monumental castle next to a statue of butlers and maids." But this spring, the auction came to an abrupt halt when one of Jackson's own companies filed suit against Julien's, claiming it had not consented to the sale. The sudden reversal underscored what many in Jackson's world had long known: that Jackson was surrounded by competing advisers, and that who was in or out of favor seemed to change on a whim.

If Jackson wasn't going to sell off his stuff from Neverland, he would have to find another way to raise money. Last fall, Barrack sat down with Phillips and described Colony's plans for restructuring the mess that was Jackson's money. In November, Jackson flew to Los An-

geles from his home in Vegas and met with Phillips at the Bel-Air Hotel. Once again, they spoke about the possibility of a comeback - but this time, Michael seemed keenly interested.

As he and Phillips spoke for hours, Jackson opened up about everything he wanted. He talked about making movies that he would star in and direct. He had already spent millions on one - *Ghosts*, a short, family-friendly horror film starring himself and based on a screenplay he had commissioned from Stephen King. He wanted to make another album. And he wanted to tour. But more than anything, Phillips recalls, Jackson wanted to be able to show his kids what he did, what made people on the street mob him when he left the house.

"He wanted people to see his work and not just talk about his lifestyle," says Phillips. "Michael was a very smart marketing person. People say he was feeble and manipulated, but he was powerful and a manipulator. He was ready. He wanted to clean up his finances." Jackson told the promoter that he wanted to pay off his debts so he could buy a house in Las Vegas that he had fallen in love with, one that belonged to the Sultan of Brunei. It would be his new Neverland. "He was ready to stop living like a vagabond and settle down and earn money again," says Phillips. "He wasn't stupid - he knew there wasn't a fairy godmother coming. The house and making movies were huge to him."

After the meeting, Phillips debriefed the owner of AEG, Phil Anschutz. "I believe Michael needs to do this financially," Phillips told his boss. "And he's ready to do this emotionally. He's ready to get back on the horse." Jackson agreed to kick off a world-wide comeback tour with 31 performances at the O<sub>2</sub> arena, beginning on July 8th. According to Phillips, the number of shows wasn't arbitrary - Jackson chose it so he would have 10 more shows than Prince, who had opened the arena with a series of spectacular concerts in 2007. Michael, it seems, had been engaged in his own private competition with Prince since 1987, when Prince refused to perform a duet with him on "Bad." Two decades later, Jackson was still eager to upstage his rival and remind the world who was King.

In February of this year, after reaching a deal with AEG, Jackson made a number of calls to old friends and associates whom he had let go or fired over the years. "It was the old team," says Ortega. Frank DiLeo, who had been pushed out of Jackson's inner circle two decades earlier, was brought back as manager, along with choreographer Travis Payne and longtime lawyer John Branca, who had helped Jackson buy his stake in the Sony/ATV catalog and the rights to all his masters. "He understood that he would be working toward financial freedom, and he was very excited about that," says DiLeo. "It encouraged him - he knew he was working toward something."

# Michael Jackson's Unheard Music

Inside his final recordings - and the hundreds of unreleased tracks from his vault

**I**N DEATH, MICHAEL JACKSON finally achieved the comeback he so desperately wanted: He is once again the hottest recording artist on the planet. In the two and a half weeks after his passing, Jackson sold more than 2.3 million albums, according to Nielsen SoundScan, and occupies the top 12 slots on *Billboard's* pop-catalog album chart. And his death will pose little impediment to the release of more music: Jackson was at work on both a new pop album and a collection of classical-style instrumentals, and there are also untold numbers of outtakes in the vaults.

In the years since his last studio album, 2001's *Invincible*, Jackson recorded new songs with that album's co-producer, Rodney Jerkins, as well as with Will.i.am, Akon and Ne-Yo. Jerkins says that he finished 10 new songs with Jackson, including a



Jackson and Quincy Jones in 1984

couple that reprised the anti-media themes of 1987's "Leave Me Alone." He says Jackson, who feuded with his record label, Epic, hoped to release the new album independently.

Will.i.am worked on five songs with the singer - one, "I'm Gonna Miss You," Jackson wrote in the wake of James Brown's 2006 death. They tried out songs in various styles, including one inspired by Estelle's 2008 hit "American Boy" and another in the style of the Jacksons' "Can You Feel It." "It was music that made us dance and made us feel good," says Will.i.am.

Akon recorded extensively with Jackson over a period of months, working on songs that touched on social issues such as poverty and AIDS. But Akon says most of the material was left unfinished - Jackson told Akon he wanted to put his recording projects aside while he prepared for his 50 shows at London's O<sub>2</sub> arena. "He want-

ed to just be patient and come with the right concepts and the right songs for his new comeback," says Akon.

Jackson was also at work on his first album of instrumental music, collaborating with film composer David Michael Frank on two eight-to-10-minute classical-style pieces. Jackson intended to have the music, which Frank describes as "almost like a film score," recorded with an 80-piece orchestra.

Then there's Jackson's extensive library of outtakes: "Every time that he recorded, he over-recorded," says former Sony Music CEO Tommy Mottola.

"He would record anywhere from 20 to 30 songs for each album. Any of them could have been as big a hit as the ones that came out." Among the outtakes is a song from the *Thriller* sessions called "Don't Be Messin' Around."

Longtime engineer Bruce Swedien and Jackson also recorded experimental material: "I have a whole bunch of reels of tape that we just called 'unusual sounds,'" says Swedien. "Our idea was to eventually put them together and make them into music tracks." Even Jackson's earliest outtakes are likely to be heard - employees for Universal Music Group, which owns the rights to the Jackson 5's Motown work, are already digging through the archives.

"Any new work or compiled old work will be extremely commercially viable," says Mottola. "And don't forget, as a result of his death, kids who have really only heard about him before are becoming a whole new wave of Michael Jackson fans. You're going to have new audiences listening, buying and dancing to Michael Jackson's music for decades to come."

Brian Hiatt and Steve Knopper, with reporting by Shirley Halperin

For AEG, booking Jackson for a series of concerts at the O<sub>2</sub> arena was a huge gamble. The insurance costs alone were monumental, and everyone knew that Jackson did nothing on the cheap. As part of the deal, AEG set up a million-dollar development fund for creating a movie version of "Thriller," which Michael was eager to produce. But despite the costs, the potential upside was huge: What if AEG could do the impossible and bring Michael Jackson back to the world? "People told me I was crazy, that I would get my heart broken by him," says Phillips. "But I just believed in him. How many times in your career do you get to touch greatness? I thought it was worth the risk."

**I**N MARCH, WITHIN HOURS OF Jackson telling a screaming mass of fans in London that he was preparing for what he called his "final curtain call," more than 1.6 million people signed up to buy tickets. Given the numbers, Phillips called Tohme, who over the past year had become Jackson's principal spokesman, and asked if the pop star might consider adding more shows to the schedule. How could they limit themselves to 31, Phillips asked, when there was so much money waiting to be made?

"Michael was ready to stop living like a vagabond," says Phillips. "He wasn't stupid – he knew there wasn't a fairy godmother coming."

Jackson called back 20 minutes later and told Phillips he would do 50 shows – as long as AEG did two things for him. First, he wanted to be provided with an English country estate with rolling hills, greenery and horses for the kids. Second, he wanted a ceremony held at the end of the tour to commemorate some as-yet-to-be-defined accomplishment by Jackson for the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It was the two, seemingly contradictory things that he had striven for his entire life: to live in seclusion, surrounded by children and animals, and to be recognized as the greatest performer in history.

By that point, Jackson had moved his family to Los Angeles, renting a seven-bedroom, \$38 million chateau in the Holmby Hills from Hubert Guez, the CEO of luxury T-shirt maker Ed Hardy. After signing a lease for \$100,000 a month, Jackson settled into a routine of sorts, going out mainly at night. But it didn't take long before the fans and paparazzi tracked him down and set up vigil outside his new home. Every day a dozen or so people waited outside, some who had come from as far away as Switzer-

land and Sweden just to catch a glimpse of Jackson, even if it was only a hand waved through the window of one of his two blue Escalades. Some of them would tail Jackson to Beverly Hills, where he regularly visited his longtime dermatologist, Dr. Arnold Klein.

Klein's office is where, in the mid-1980s, Jackson met Debbie Rowe, his second wife and the mother of his two oldest children, Prince Michael and Paris. Klein, who declined to comment for this story, has said that he was treating Jackson for vitiligo, a skin condition that causes pigmentation loss, and working to help rebuild his damaged nose. Klein has insisted that he did not overmedicate Jackson, saying he sedated the singer only during painful medical procedures.

Some days when Jackson left Klein's office, he seemed drowsy and out of it. "It's not a good day for him," his security guards would tell the assembled well-wishers. "He's tired." But some longtime fans weren't buying it. "Sometimes the guards would say that he just went to the doctor and he's on medication," says one die-hard fan. The fan says Jackson visited Klein the Monday before he died, when Michael's security detail brought him to the dermatologist's office at 9 a.m. – an early-morning

mission seemingly scheduled to avoid detection by fans and paparazzi.

According to one source, Jackson also had a rampant eBay addiction, staying up late at night to make purchases on one of the numerous accounts he maintained. He also went on secretive shopping expeditions in L.A., taking his kids to the Ed Hardy store in West Hollywood to check out the clothing maker's wares, or to an antique shop he loved called Off the Wall. Sometimes he would just take the kids out with his security detail and drive. Despite being a purported health nut, he would sometimes stop for Kentucky Fried Chicken along the way.

But for the first time in years, Jackson had a show to focus on. In March, auditions for the comeback tour began at CenterStaging, one of the primary rehearsal spaces in Los Angeles. From the start, Michael took a hands-on role in the shaping the show, urging those around him to conduct a sort of intergalactic talent search. "Think about the greatest artists and dancers in the world," he told Ortega. "Let's find them."



**FINAL CURTAIN** Jackson at a dress rehearsal two days before his death. "He had that glow, that swagger," says the show's musical director. "He's got amazing muscle memory."

More than 5,000 dancers applied, and Ortega and his team narrowed it down to 700. The final auditions were held at the Nokia Theater in Hollywood, where the Academy Awards take place. Jackson was there, sitting next to Ortega, fully focused. "Let's get closer," he told the choreographer. "I want to see their eyes." When he spotted a promising dancer, he'd say, "That one there, the girl on the end – she's so beautiful."

At the end of March, just three months before the first concert was scheduled to kick off, a crew of dozens of musicians and dancers and technicians began showing up for daily rehearsals at CenterStaging – putting in long days, seven days a week. In the beginning, Jackson would show up only a few times a week, sitting with Ortega for several hours and going through his huge archive of material – old photographs, videos, records. They were hoping to capture that essence, that special something that made him the King of Pop.

Jackson was determined to give the fans everything they wanted. He had ordered a website set up so fans could vote for which

songs he would perform, and it was from that forum that he and Ortega began compiling a 30-song session list. Jackson, who had a lifelong interest in magic, seemed eager to blow people's minds.

"When the show opens, I don't want to hold anything back," he told Ortega. "I want this to be the most spectacular opening the audience has ever seen. They have to ask themselves, 'How are they going to top that?' I don't even care if they're applauding. I want their jaws on the ground. I want them to not be able to sleep, because they are so amped up from what they saw."

To get in shape for the grueling tour, Jackson started working out a few times a week with Lou Ferrigno, from the TV show *The Incredible Hulk*. The two had met years earlier at a party, when Ferrigno noticed Jackson staring at him from across the room, recognizing him as the Hulk. "He was like a kid," says Ferrigno, who would arrive in the morning to be greeted by Jackson's children racing around the house, playing games.

Jackson was painfully thin – although pushing six feet, he weighed only 127

pounds – and he'd suffered several injuries over the years. He and Ferrigno would go to a backroom that was equipped with a treadmill. Jackson didn't want to build muscle, so they worked out gently, stretching with a rubber band and an exercise ball. Jackson wore black tuxedo pants, a black T-shirt, black shoes and black socks while he worked out, so he wouldn't have to change when he went to rehearsals afterward. "He was a hoot," says Ferrigno. "Many years ago he told me he was extremely lonely. But when I was with him he looked very fulfilled and happy. He was like Mr. Mom."

Jackson clearly loved being at home with his children, and he often engaged in his own childlike antics. "He was a jokester," says Ferrigno. "He'd call my phone, sometimes disguising his voice for 10 minutes. I was thinking I had a stalker. He would say his name was Omar and that he was looking for me."

But "Omar" did more than play pranks on his friends. According to TMZ, Jackson also used the name to fill prescriptions for the cornucopia of painkillers and sedatives he was taking. In 2007, a Beverly Hills

pharmacy called Mickey Fine filed a complaint against Jackson for not paying his bill for prescriptions – a total of \$101,926.66, dating back to 2005. Court documents from the investigation into child-molestation charges against Jackson included interviews with two former Neverland staffers who reported that Jackson regularly took as many as 40 Xanax a night in order to sleep.

**A**LTHOUGH JACKSON WAS playing a central role in shaping the comeback tour, taking the stage to prepare was another matter entirely. While the crew logged long hours at CenterStaging, Jackson preferred to work from home most days. Those around him were getting nervous. According to Phillips, AEG's initial budget of \$12 million for preproduction had more than doubled. But when the promoter pressed Jackson on the \$150,000 a month he had agreed to pay Dr. Murray, Michael rebuffed him sternly. "Look," Jackson said, "my body is the mechanism that fuels this entire

business. Like President Obama, I need my own personal physician attending to me 24/7."

Others began to press Jackson to rehearse more. "I had my concerns if he was ready, and I questioned him," says Ortega. "There were days when I was like, 'Are you going to show up? Are you really going to be here? You need to do this.'" Citing the need for more setup time in London, Ortega asked for the opening show to be pushed back five days, to July 13th.

In early June, Dr. Murray mediated a meeting at Michael's home between Jackson and Ortega, who felt the star needed to come to rehearsals more often. Jackson listened quietly to the tour director, but he didn't seem alarmed. "I know my schedule," he said calmly. "Just trust me."

But after that, Jackson started coming to rehearsals all day, every day. To those around him, he seemed focused and attentive to every detail. "I like to refer to Michael as a gamer," says DiLeo. "He's the quarter-

try another. It was an addiction that was created and perpetuated by doctors."

For the most part, nights seemed to be the biggest problem for Jackson - he had complained of insomnia for years. But it was also the time when he felt a higher power was channeling creativity to him. "I didn't get a whole lot of sleep last night," he would tell Ortega. "I was up working on music. That's when the information is coming, and when it's coming you gotta work."

"Michael," Ortega joked with him, "why can't you make a pact with your higher power so that you could put these ideas on the shelf until after July 13th?"

"No," Jackson responded. "Then he might give them to Prince."

Despite his workouts with Ferrigno, Jackson remained thin, almost emaciated. "I was concerned about his weight," says Phillips. "When I started with him, he was a little heavier - heavy for him might have been 130 pounds. He was like the absent-minded professor - he would get so engaged

dreams in check. "You want us to go to Victoria Falls and shoot the waterfall from a helicopter?" he'd say to Jackson, who wanted the video for the show's closing number. "Do you know how much that costs?" But Jackson didn't seem to care. "Money was not his motivating factor," says Phillips. "It was just doing something greater than anyone else had ever done before. That's what motivated him."

On the last night of his life, Jackson arrived at the Staples Center for six hours of a full run-through. First he had a meeting with Phillips, AEG president Tim Leiweke, his manager DiLeo and Grammy producer Ken Ehrlich. They were going over ideas for a Halloween special they were putting together: the network debut of *Ghosts*, Jackson's short film, which would incorporate clips of a live performance of "Thriller" from London. Afterward, Jackson went into another room and spent about an hour going over the 3-D effects for the show. He ate dinner, chicken

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“When the show opens, I don’t want to hold anything back,” Michael told his tour director. “I don’t care if they’re applauding – I want their jaws on the ground.”

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back. He's the star of the team, and in practice, quarterbacks are easygoing. But game day, he's turning it on."

"He was rusty in the beginning, sure, he'd miss some notes," says the show's musical director, Michael Bearden. "But he would always say, 'That's why we rehearse.' And the last two or three rehearsals, he was ready to do that show. He knew it, he had that glow, that swagger about him. MJ is the master closer. He's got amazing muscle memory. When he gets in front of his fans up on that stage, it's just magic."

At rehearsals, Jackson quickly took charge. Orianthi Panagaris, a guitarist who performed with Carrie Underwood at this year's Grammys, recalls coming in for an audition and being told to play "Beat It." Jackson sat in front of her on a couch. "I was so nervous," she says. "From the couch he told me to crank up my solo. He was clapping at the end, he was really happy. He came over to me and grabbed my arm, and started walking me up and down the front of the stage area. He said, 'When you're playing the solo, I want you to chase me!'"

Still, some around Jackson were concerned about his heavy reliance on prescription drugs. "I became aware of it in 2005," says Deepak Chopra. "I brought it up with him many times. His assistant would call frequently about it, saying he was being given medication by a lot of doctors. He would go to great lengths to get it - if one doctor didn't give it to him, he'd

in the creation of the show that he'd forget to eat. To the point where Kenny Ortega used to cut up his chicken breast and feed him broccoli, like a kid, as they worked. I actually brought an associate of mine to just remind him to eat, stuff like that."

Part of Michael's inspiration for the tour was his concern about global warming. Three weeks before his death, Jackson sent Chopra a CD, hand-delivered to his home in Carlsbad, California. "The music is a very soft, mellow piece," says Chopra. "It's called 'Breed.' He wanted to do a song about the environment, and he wanted me to help him with the lyrics. There were big ideas behind the lyrics - how the trees are our lungs, the Earth is our body."

Indeed, Jackson's worldview seemed to have incubated and grown during his time off the stage. During rehearsals, he often talked about what was going on in the world. "He'd built up a big arsenal of things he wanted to communicate," says Ortega, who found Jackson to be surprisingly engaged in politics and the environment. "He felt time was running out, and he really wanted to dig in and participate. He'd say, 'Do you know this about the rain forest?' or 'Let's bring in Norman Lear and Deepak. Who else do you know?'"

Sometimes those ideas were expensive. Those who worked on the show say they never saw any sign of the financial pressure Jackson was under. Indeed, he seemed to enjoy spending money as much as ever. Ortega recalls he often had to keep Jackson's

breast and broccoli. Then he went to his dressing room and came out for three hours of performance.

The closer was slated as "Earth Song," from *HISTORY*, one of Jackson's favorites. An impassioned ballad about the state of the world, it ended with a repeated refrain asking about the victims of humanity's rampant and heedless development, from crying whales to ravaged forests. "What about death again?" Jackson sang at the ballad's conclusion. "Do we give a damn?"

Those who witnessed the performance - seasoned professionals who had worked with the best in the business - were awestruck. Standing before them was the Michael they all remembered, the artist who had grown from a child singer to forge a whole new style of pop. When Jackson walked off the stage, he hugged DiLeo. "This is our time again," he told his manager. "It's time for us to take it back."

The rehearsal was over, but no one wanted to break the spell by leaving. "He was bioluminescent," recalls Ortega. "When he finished, we all stayed there, just messing around." Michael was ready. In only 19 more days, he would take the stage in London, and the world would know, once again, that the King of Pop was back.

Finally, as the performers started to drift away, Phillips walked Jackson to his car. Michael put his arm around the promoter. "Thank you for getting me this far," he told Phillips in that whisper of a voice. "I can take it from here. I know I can do this." **C**