

Curriculum-Based Study Guide Michael Jackson Dance Ensemble

Michael Jackson: An American Entertainment Icon

Michael Jackson (1958-2009) was an American popular recording artist, dancer, singer-songwriter, musician, and philanthropist. He is recognized as the most successful entertainer of all time, having sold over 700 million of recordings. His significant contributions to popular music, dance and fashion, along with a celebrated personal life made him a global icon for over forty years.



Figure 1. Michael Jackson in the 1980s.

Born in Gary, Indiana, the eighth of ten children, Michael Jackson began his music and dance training at a young age. He was a lover tap and modern jazz, especially the work of the Nicholas Brothers, Fred Astaire, and Gene Kelly. Michael studied the moves of these performers closely. Michael also learned about the craft of performing from James Brown as well as many other African-American soul, R&B, and Motown artists. In 1964, at age six, Michael joined his brothers' band as a backup vocalist and percussionist. By age eight, he was singing lead vocals with the band, which by this time was called *The Jackson 5*. Guided under the strict supervision of their father, Joe, the *Jackson 5* toured the Midwest extensively in the late 1960s, performing as opening acts at black nightclubs. In 1968, the group was signed by Motown Records and set Billboard chart records with hit singles such as "I Want You Back", "ABC", "The Love You Save", and "I'll Be There." It was during this time that young Michael was recognized as having prodigious gifts as a musician and dancer.

By the late 1970s, Michael had begun a solo career, working with the producer Quincy Jones on his debut album, *Off The Wall* (1979), which was the first American solo recording to produce four Top 10 hits—including the singles "Don't Stop 'till You Get Enough" and

“Rock With You.” Building on this success, Jackson released *Thriller* in 1982, a mega-best seller which would produce seven Top 10 hit singles and sell over 100 million copies worldwide. The success of *Thriller’s* innovative music videos (such as “Beat It”, “Billy Jean”, and the 20-minute long “Thriller”) helped pave the way for black artists to appear on MTV and reach mainstream white audiences. These videos featured complex story lines, dance routines and special effects that were ahead of their time for their meticulousness and technological innovation. It was during this time that Michael also developed his unique fashion look (sequined jacket and a single white glove) and inimitable dance steps such as the moonwalk which would inspire performers the world over.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Michael continued to release acclaimed recordings and videos, perform concerts worldwide, and donate tens of millions of dollars (often anonymously) to various beneficial causes, especially children’s charities.

Dance Techniques Used In The Performance

Today’s performance will include jazz, hip-hop, modern, tap, and ballet fused into a choreographed funk and soul style. Michael Jackson made numerous contributions to contemporary dance, fusing a variety of styles from tap to modern jazz to create a singular style of movement. Below are some of Jackson’s key innovations that will be featured in today’s performance:

- **The Robot**—Michael began developing the Robot while singing his hit song “Dancing Machine” on the TV show *Soul Train*. As performed by Michael, the mechanical movements of the Robot would spawn a whole new era of dance, inspiring hip-hop, “pop and locking”, and countless other urban dance genres.



Figure 2. The Robot

• **The Moonwalk**—This dance movement creates the illusion of floating weightlessly over the floor. Michael first performed the movement during a performance of his song “Billy Jean” at the 1983 American Music Awards. Michael has noted that moonwalking was inspired by a skit by the great French mime Marcel Marceau (1923-2007) called “Walking Against The Wind.”



Figure 3. The Moonwalk

• **The Toe Stand**—The Toe Stand typically takes place at the end of a moonwalk. The sequence as Michael would perform it would often be as follows: *moonwalk, moonwalk, moonwalk, pivot, pivot, pivot, dime-stop, hop on your tiptoes and hold then the position for five seconds.* This liquid sequence resembles ballet.



Figure 4. The Toe Stand

• **The Tough Guy With Flair**—In many of his music videos such as “Beat It” and “Bad” Michael revisited scenes that depicted groups of tough young men acting out their anger through dance sequences as a form of theatrical combat. Michael derived much inspiration from the 1957 Broadway musical, *West Side Story*, taking its gang choreography into the late twentieth century. Tough Guy with Flair dance sequences are often showcases for Jackson's signature moves: *lift your knee and twist it to the side while thrusting your pelvis a little, shimmying to the right and then striking a pose*—all for dramatic effect!



Figure 5. The Tough Guy With Flair

• **The Synchronized Group Dance**—Perhaps Michael’s most enduring contribution to modern dance is the synchronized group dance as depicted in the “Thriller” video. While Michael was certainly not the first choreographer/dancer to present a synchronized group number, he nevertheless raised the form to new heights through imaginative use of the dancing body depicting half-dead creatures of the night. As depicted in “Thriller”, the synchronized group dance is now known around the world as an infectious and groovy line dance!



Figure 6. The Synchronized Group Dance

• **The Crotch Grab**—Michael liked to provoke his audiences too, especially through his signature “crotch grab.” This move first appeared in Michael’s video for “Beat It” and garnered instant attention. In fact, the move was reminiscent of Elvis’s pelvis shake back in the 1950s in its ability to shock viewers. But Michael made the crotch grab playful and theatrical too, accompanying it with his inimitable primal *vocables* (meaningless spoken words or syllables), shouting out “Ow!” or “Shamon!”



Figure 7. The Crotch Grab

• **The Anti-Gravity Lean**—In his video for "Smooth Criminal" video (originally part of the film "Moonwalker"), Michael provides the viewer with a remarkable, gravity-defying, Gene Kelly-esque forward lean. To accomplish the lean effect, Michael and his creative team created a system whereby pegs would rise up from the stage and hook into the heels of the dancers' shoes, supporting them as they leaned forward at extreme angles. The anti-gravity lean exemplifies the lengths to which Michael would go to achieve his artistic vision, even if that meant developing mechanical contraptions to assist dancers.



Figure 8. The Anti-Gravity Lean

Music Used In The Performances

The musical soundtrack for today's show is, naturally, comprised of songs from Michael Jackson's extensive catalog of hits! These songs include:

“Will You Be There”

“I Want You Back”

“Beat It”

“Bad”

“Smooth Criminal”

“Man in the Mirror”

“Remember the Time”

Class Discussion After The Performance

- What is your favorite Michael Jackson dance move? Why?
- What do you find more significant or interesting about Michael's dance choreography?
- How does the music shape the dancing? Conversely, does the dance choreography help you better appreciate the music?
- Can you think of any living musical artists whose work—as musicians and/or dancers—has been shaped by Michael Jackson's artistic legacy?

Classroom Activity: How To Moonwalk!

The *moonwalk* dance movement creates the illusion of floating weightlessly over the floor.

- **Step 1.** Find a pair of non-grip shoes or just wear socks.
- **Step 2.** Find a smooth surface such as a polished floor to moonwalk on.
- **Step 3.** Stand with both feet close to each other, left foot slightly ahead of the right.
- **Step 4.** Raise the heel of the right foot so that you're standing on the front of the right foot as if you're taking a step. The left foot should stay where it is.
- **Step 5.** As you lower the heel of the right foot, lean all your weight on it, and drag back the left foot so that its toes are in line with the heel of the right foot. The left foot's heel should be slightly off the ground at this stage. As you drag back *do not push down* on the left foot at all or it will not glide smoothly. Make sure as you lower the heel of the right foot (slowly) that the left moves at an equal speed. Practice makes perfect!
- **Step 6.** Keep practicing the above steps 3-5 until you can make the moonwalk movement without thinking about it.
- **Step 7.** Once you have mastered this sequence, you can try "kicking" outwards with the left foot. Move it out a foot-size length away from the toes of the right foot.
- **Step 8.** After you make your left foot move so it's at the starting position, lift up the right foot heel once more. Make sure the left leg is bent at the knee. Repeat step 5.

Keep practicing until you can create the moonwalking illusion of floating across the floor!



Michael Jackson Word Search

P O P L O C K I N G M Y V Q Y J A Z Z Z
T Q X D M V L O N D P O O N H M A X R L
B T P Z A M V K Z O C N L S P S I N G E
D E N I U Q E S R A G F V P A Q D M U A
M S S X U D M H B B N C H A R I T Y E N
K O H N P A T L M H I X B Y G V D Z T J
H Y O V O N E O K D C X M V O R B V H T
P I M N A S T B N X N B G M E N R F R M
G U P L W O K D F U A E F L R A A P I Z
P Z I H W A G C R A D I X Z O K Z X L S
D H D N O N L R A W L N Z W H G L N L M
P Q J I I P V K N J E D P E C U B B E R
Y D F G Q B V A W U Q I W S O K R F R K
M I N T I U H G A C I A E S H I Z F E Y
P I V C O D V T C F D N N Z L G E R P B
S Z O J B B S Z N D A A C O G F A I P B
H N I F W G O Q V K O C K B Z C D A C M
T E L L A B C R V F R Z D O D M G L O H
U V I N R B K D L C K E R S C A S F C U
N R E Z C S U A L L N I E O M Q V Y M Q

Word Bank

moonwalk
soul
dancing
jazz
hip-hop
flair
Indiana
philanthropy

robot
Jackson
singing
tap
mime
vocables
pop-locking
sequined

Motown
Thriller
charity
ballet
choreography
lean
icon



Answer Key

P O P L O C K I N G + Y V + Y J A Z Z +
+ + + + + + + + + P O + + H M + + + L
+ + + + + + + + + O C + + + P + I + + E
D E N I U Q E S R A G + + + A + + M + A
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Further Resources

Books:

Vogel, Joseph. 2011. *Man in the Music: The Creative Live and Work of Michael Jackson*. Sterling Publishing.

Music:

- Michael Jackson: *Off The Wall* (1979). Epic Records.
- Michael Jackson: *Thriller* (1983). Epic Records.
- Michael Jackson: *Bad* (1987). Epic Records.
- Michael Jackson: *Dangerous* (1991). Epic Records.
- Michael Jackson: *Invincible* (2001). Epic Records.

Video:

“How To Moonwalk.” Accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EEynvjfljU>
