

"Gone Too Soon"

Date range confirmed in Mike Smallcombe's "Making Michael" ("Over the course of 1990, Michael also worked with Bruce Swedien on a number of new songs... [one of these tracks that] Swedien co-produced was called 'Gone Too Soon'..."); the song was recorded after the passing of Ryan White, which occurred on April 8, 1990.

Buz Kohan, songwriter. ["The Atlantic" \(June 25, 2012\) \(archived\)](#)

It was past midnight on a Sunday when the phone rang at the Kohan home. "Sorry, did I wake you up?" a voice whispered on the other line. "Is Buzzie there?"

It was Michael Jackson, who, at the moment, was riding one of the biggest waves of success popular music had ever seen. That month (February, 1983) Jackson was featured on the cover of Rolling Stone; "Beat It" joined "Billie Jean" at the top of the charts; his videos played in a loop on MTV; and Thriller was flying off shelves like loaves of bread.

"Buzzie" was Buz Kohan, renowned television producer and writer (best known for his work on award shows and variety shows, including the Motown 25 special). Jackson first met him when the singer was just 12 years old. Buz lived nearby in Encino on beautiful Beaumont Street. He was a well-known veteran in the entertainment industry, and the two became good friends. Jackson would ask Buz endless questions about legendary figures like Bing Crosby, Gene Kelly, Sammy Davis and Fred Astaire—the "greats," as he called them. They later worked closely in Las Vegas for the Jackson family's variety show.

"We oughta write some songs together," a teenage Jackson suggested one day. They began co-writing soon after and their collaborations, which included songs like "Scared of the Moon" and "You Were There," continued over the next two decades.

Buz's wife, Rhea, had grown accustomed to Jackson's late night calls. "Just a second," she said, passing the phone to her husband. Jackson was calling that night about a particular song. Earlier that evening he had watched Dionne Warwick (a good friend) perform a tribute on the TV special, "Here's Television Entertainment." It was dedicated to many performers whose lives had been cut short too soon—John Lennon, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Sam Cooke, among others—but its poignancy was especially felt due to the death of Karen Carpenter just days earlier at the age of 32.

"Certain singers carry with them the energy of their time," Warwick had said. "They become symbols or signposts. They're reminders of our frailties and need to communicate... [Tonight] we are left with unanswered questions that are asked when any great talent is consumed before its time: Why? What if? And what might have been?"

Warwick proceeded to sing a moving rendition of a song co-written by Buz Kohan and Larry Grossman. It was called "Gone Too Soon."

Jackson said he wept as he watched. He had grown up with the music of the Carpenters. Their songs were part of his DNA. But that song—there was something deeper about it that he connected to.

That night Jackson told Buz he felt he had to record it some day. "It's yours when you want it," Buz said. In the ensuing months, however, other projects took precedent, including the music videos for "Beat It" and "Thriller." Every now and then, "Gone Too Soon" re-appeared as a

tribute number at charity events or ceremonies. In addition to Dionne Warwick's performance, it was later sung by Patti Labelle and Donna Summer. But it was never recorded in a studio. Years later, in 1990, Buz and Jackson were talking on the phone when Jackson brought up a young boy he had befriended named Ryan White. "He's not gonna live forever," Jackson said. "I wanna do something special for him." Ryan had become the national face of AIDS at a time when the disease was still severely misunderstood, stigmatized, and feared.

An ordinary kid from Kokomo, Indiana, Ryan contracted the AIDS virus through a tainted blood transfusion (Ryan was a hemophiliac). He was then shunned, taunted, bullied, and threatened with violence by his classmates and community. Fellow students called him a "queer" and treated him like a leper. Members of his local church refused to shake his hand. Neighbors on his paper route cancelled their subscriptions. Eventually, he was forced out of his middle school. When he heard the story, Jackson reached out to Ryan to offer friendship and support. They quickly became close. Both were so accustomed to feeling different, they said, it was a relief just to feel "normal" for a few hours in each other's company. Over the ensuing months, they talked on the phone often. Ryan was a remarkably thoughtful, eloquent, and mature teenager. He understood he was hated and feared by many; he understood he had been thrust into a very public role; and he understood he would die soon.

Jackson remembered one night listening to Ryan White at his dining room table telling his mom how to bury him. "He said, 'Mom, when I die, don't put me in a suit and tie,'" Jackson recalled in an interview with Shmuley Boteach. "I don't want to be in a suit and tie. Put me in OshKosh jeans and a T-shirt.' I said, 'I have to use the bathroom,' and I ran to the bathroom and cried my eyes out, hearing this little boy tell his mother how to bury him."

Jackson knew he couldn't change Ryan's fate, but he hoped to give him some escapism and joy before his time was up. White and his family made several trips to Neverland Ranch, where they rode four wheelers, ate pizza, and watched a private screening of Indiana Jones: The Last Crusade. "Those trips to California kept me going," Ryan said.

Jackson later bought Ryan a red Mustang convertible, his dream car, for his birthday. Just months later, however, on April 8, 1990, Ryan died.

The next day, Jackson arrived in Indiana. He sat in Ryan's empty room for hours, looking at his souvenirs, clothes, and pictures. "I don't understand when a child dies," Jackson later said. "I really don't." Ryan's mother, Jeane, offered to let Jackson have whatever he wanted as a keepsake, but he told her just to keep everything in his room as it was.

In the front yard was the red Mustang Jackson had given Ryan, covered with flowers from well-wishers. Ryan's sister, Andrea, got in the car with Jackson. When he turned it on, "Man in the Mirror" began to play. It was the last song Ryan had listened to.

When Buz Kohan heard of Ryan's death, he had archivist Paul Seuratt (who compiled and catalogued videos for Jackson) put together footage of Jackson and Ryan together along with Dionne Warwick's rendition of "Gone Too Soon."

Jackson called Buz soon after. "It's perfect," he said. "I love it." Jackson had promised Ryan he could be in his next music video, but they ran out of time. This was it, Jackson thought. He would create a video and song dedicated to Ryan and his cause. I want the world to know who you are, he pledged.

"There's one thing though," Jackson told Buz. "I don't do covers. Has anyone recorded it?"

"Nope," Buzz said. "It's been sung, but not recorded. My people have a word for this. Bashert. It was meant to be. It's been waiting for you."

Months later, Buzz was there in the studio at Ocean Way when Jackson recorded the song. As usual, Jackson sang in the dark to fully immerse himself. Sitting by engineer Bruce Swedien at the control desk, Buz got goosebumps as he listened. The lyrics were about the beauty, transience, and fragility of life. The words could easily devolve into cliché and sentimentality in the hands of an ordinary performer, but Jackson was no ordinary performer. "He put his soul into it," recalls Buz. "There was no exaggeration or affect. It was real emotion."

Unknown source (July 25, 2011) ([mirror](#)) ([archived mirror](#))

The song as originally written for a television special called "Here's Television Entertainment". It was done as a tribute to TV Variety performers who had passed away, and was sung on the special by Dionne Warwick. Michael Jackson, who was a friend of mine since the age of 12, called me that night after watching the special and said how much he loved the song and that someday he would record it. I had worked with Michael writing songs and specials for him and the Jacksons and I knew that he would often prepare 40 songs for an album that would only accommodate 13 or 14 cuts, so I didn't hold out too much hope that he would actually record "Gone Too Soon" any day soon.

Many years later, in 1991 I believe, I had read where Michael had promised to do something special for his friend Ryan White, who was afflicted with AIDS, once he passed, and I called my friend Paul Seuratt, who had compiled and catalogued all of Michael's TV appearances and personal film library, and asked him to put together all the footage he had of Michael and Ryan whenever they were together and a camera was rolling, and just lay the soundtrack of "Gone Too Soon", from the original Dionne Warwick version from the old TV special underneath the pictures and send it to Michael. A bit later, Michael called me and said that was the perfect song to pay tribute to his friend Ryan upon his passing, but he said he doesn't do cover records, and he asked me if anyone else had recorded the song in the interim since it was first on the air. I told him a number of performers, including Dionne, Patti LaBelle, Donna Summers and others had sung it at charity events, and wanted to record it, but never did.

I said my people have a word for that, and that word is "bashert" which means it was meant to be, and I felt it was meant to be for Michael to record it and he agreed. He did record it and I was in the studio with him during the process, and it ended up on the "Dangerous Album (cut 13) and paid tribute to his friend in a most meaningful way. Over the decades since then, it has had great significance to countless people who have lost loved ones who were, "gone too soon".

Richard Lecocq interview. From Chris Cadman's "Michael Jackson the Maestro"

Speaking to Richard Lecocq of mjdatabank and author of "KING" Kohan said:

"Next day I get a call from Michael. In essence he said, "Buzzie Wuzzie, (Michael's nickname for Buz) I got the tape you had Paul send of "Gone Too Soon", and it is the perfect memorial for Ryan. The only thing I have to know, since as you know I don't do "cover records", is, has anybody else recorded this since you."

Kohan replied: "Michael my people have a word. It is "bashert" which basically means, "It was meant to be".

Teddy Riley, producer (not for this song)

"Another innovative track. I think he was trying to reinvent himself and become more credible; more commercial and he achieves that here. It reminds me of a more worldly version of She's Out Of My Life. With this album he's hinting at his past songs as well as trying to reinvent himself."