

“Thriller” / “Starlight” (Demo)

*Date range assessed by the fact that Bruce Swedien says the song was recorded “at Westlake”, and, “In August 1982, Michael, Quincy, Bruce Swedien, the returning songwriter Rod Temperton and the rest of the team gathered at Westlake’s Studio A to begin recording the follow up to Off the Wall... Temperton’s demos were the first the team worked on.”, and “the final days [of recording were] in late October” (Mike Smallcombe, “Making Michael”)*

Rod Temperton, songwriter, “The Yorkshire Post” (January 27, 2006) ([archived](#))

[Rod Temperton and Quincy Jones] collaborated with Michael Jackson to create his first solo album in four years, Off the Wall, in 1979. How the follow-up, Thriller, came together in 1982 indicates Rod's relish for the challenge of tight deadlines. He had sketched out 35 to 40 ideas, boiled those down to five tunes and then set off with Quincy Jones for Michael Jackson's house to make a demo and put a voice on it. Three of Rod's pieces were eventually selected for recording but what was to be the title track still needed more work.

Rod went home and wrote down 200 to 300 titles with the favorite being Midnight Men and then went to bed. "In the morning I woke up and said this word 'thriller'. I thought 'this is the title'. I could visualise it. I could see the merchandising." The idea was for Vincent Price to perform a sort of Edgar Allen Poe rap in the vein of a Hammer horror movie at the end of the album. The actor and the studio were booked but when the day for recording arrived, there were still no words for Price to read. "I had one verse done," says Rod.

"Then I started writing more in the back of the taxi to the studio. When we got there I saw a limousine and out stepped Vincent Price, so I told my driver 'go round the back'. I gave the words to the secretary to photocopy. Vincent Price sat down with it and got it in two takes. Amazing."

[Telegraph \(November 25, 2007\) \(archived\)](#)

Originally, when I did my Thriller demo, I called it Starlight. Quincy said to me, 'You managed to come up with a title for the last album, see what you can do for this album.' I said, 'Oh great,' so I went back to the hotel, wrote two or three hundred titles, and came up with the title 'Midnight Man'. The next morning, I woke up, and I just said this word... Something in my head just said, this is the title. You could visualise it on the top of the Billboard charts. You could see the merchandising for this one word, how it jumped off the page as 'Thriller'.

...When I wrote Thriller I'd always envisioned this talking section at the end and didn't really know what we were going to do with it. But one thing I'd thought about was to have somebody, a famous voice, in the horror genre, to do this vocal. Quincy's [then] wife [Peggy Lipton] knew Vincent Price so Quincy said to me, how about if we got Vincent Price? And I said, 'Wow, that'd be amazing if we could get him...'

[Thriller Special Edition \(2001\) Interview](#)

Yeah, it was quite a funny story. When I wrote Thriller, I'd always envisioned this kind of talking section at the end, and didn't really know what we were going to do with it. But one thing I'd thought about was to have somebody, a famous voice, in the horror genre, to do this vocal. Quincy's [then] wife [Peggy Lipton] knew Vincent Price, and so Quincy said to me, "How about if we got Vincent Price?" And I said, "Well, that'd be amazing if we could get him." So he spoke to his wife and they got it together and Vincent said he would love to do it, so it was all setup that

he would come in and do it. And the idea was gonna be that he would just talk some horror talk from the type of lines he would deliver in some of his famous roles, and right up until the night before the session. And just before I went to bed, Quincy called me, and said, "You know, the session's at 2:00 tomorrow afternoon, and I'm a bit scared because Vincent's never been on a pop record before. I don't know that he's ever recorded in such a manner, with music tracks and headphones and everything. And it may be difficult for him to come up with something to do, so perhaps you better write something for him to say, just in case we get stuck." So I said, "Ok, no problem, I'll get up tomorrow morning, and write it before we come to the studio." So, I went off to bed. And the very next morning, at 9:00, the bell rings, and I totally forgotten this, but my publisher from England had come over to America and it had always been planned that we would have breakfast that next morning. And he came and arrived and I thought, "Oh my goodness, I'm supposed to write this thing, but I've got this lengthy meeting." And so I had the breakfast with my publisher and had a long business meeting, which went up 'til noon, and the session was at 2:00. And finally, my publisher left. And about 10 [minutes] past 12, the phone rings and it's Quincy, says "How are you doing? Have you got something?" And I said, "Yeah, well, don't worry about it, I'll have something. I'm just finishing it off" [laughs] So I hung up, got a piece of paper, and frantically started to write some stuff. And, just one of those lucky times, it just flowed out of me. I'd written all the lyrics for the song, and the theme of the whole thing was so strong anyway, that it's quite easy to visualize all these kind of lines that Vincent would say. And so I started writing, and I wrote one verse there, while I was waiting for the taxi, and then I got in the taxi, and while I'm going to the studio, I wrote two more whole verses. So I wrote three verses of poetry or rap, and we only needed two in the end anyway. And as I arrived at the studio, I saw a car pull up, and out steps Vincent Price. And the taxi pulled around the back of the studio, and I dived out of the cab, raced to the backdoor, said to the secretary, "Photocopy this quick!", and they put it on the music stand, and he walked in, and sat down in his chair, and off we went.

["The National" \(Abu Dhabi\) \(September 25, 2013\) \(archived\)](#)

After completing the melodies, it took a while for Temperton to come up with the appropriate the lyrics to match the song's drama. "I never write lyrics until the very end," Temperton said. "So Thriller was actually called Starlight and that was just some rubbish word I put down to demonstrate to Michael how the melody went. Then during breakfast the next morning, the word shot into my head. It was like electricity and immediately I started thinking of the lyrics. That's how Thriller came to be."

Bruce Swedien, studio engineer

I tried all sorts of things with Michael - for instance, he would sing the main vocal part and we'd double it one time and then I'd ask him to step away from the mic and do it a third time and that really changed the acoustics in the room so it gave Michael's vocals a unique character ... We recorded some of those background vocals in the shower stall at Westlake.

[Gearslutz forum post \(September 22, 2006\)](#)

When I begin reminiscing about recording the song "Thriller", one of the first things that comes to mind is the Vincent Price "Rap". Quincy's wife, Peggy Lipton, knew Vincent Price. So Quincy and Peggy got it together and called him. Vincent said he would love to do it. I remember Rod's

idea, at first was that Vincent would just talk some horror talk from the type of lines he would deliver in some of his famous roles.

Well, the night before the session with Vincent Price, I remember Quincy and Rod on the phone, talking excitedly about something to do with Vincent's part in "Thriller". I was getting the track ready for Vincent to overdub on for "Thriller", so I only overheard bits and pieces of Quincy and Rod's conversation.....

The next day at about 12:00 noon, Quincy shows up at the studio, looking like the 'Cat That Swallowed The Canary'! Q looked at me and said, "'Svensk', (Quincy's nickname for me... It means, "Swedish Man", in Swedish.) Vincent Price is going to be here at 2:00 pm! Rod is writing Vincent's "Rap" lyrics in the taxicab on the way here to the studio!"

Quincy told me, "I don't think that Vincent has ever been on a pop record before. This should be interesting..." I get chills just thinking about it!

The next thing I knew, Rod came roaring into the control room with several sheets of paper in one hand, and a Marlboro cigarette with a two-inch ash ready to fall over the floor, in his mouth... Out-of-breath Roddy said to me, "Bruce, quick... He's here! I saw a car pull up, and it was Vincent Price! He's on his way in!" He thrust the papers in my hand and said, "Give these to the secretary -Have her photo-copy these quick!"... This was done, we put the 'Rap" lyrics on the music stand... Vincent walked in, sat down on his chair, off he went, and it was all done in about two hours.

Vincent Price had never used earphones in his work before. He reluctantly put them on, and when the music track for "Thriller" started, he jumped up from his stool with a very startled look on his face. I know he had never heard anything like that before. He asked Rod Temperton to come out in the studio with him and help him by cueing him where to come in and speak his verses.

Rod actually wrote three verses for "Thriller", for Vincent to do. We recorded all three but only used two. I have that unused verse in my tapes somewhere.

Vincent experienced a huge resurgence in his career commensurate with the incredible success of "Thriller".

About six months after the release of "Thriller", Vincent appeared on the "Johnny Carson, Tonight" show. He told about being in Paris and walking down the street and having a group of young people recognize him and chase him down the street to get his autograph.

To me, the miraculous thing about the Vincent Price 'Rap" on "Thriller", is that Rod Temperton wrote a brilliant ... Edgar Allan Poe style spiel... in the Taxi-cab on the way to the session! When the chips are down, that's when you find out what true genius is all about!

Of course, speaking of unquestionable genius... Vincent's performance was remarkable! Obviously, Vincent Price was in his element on "Thriller"... Timing, inflection... And he did it in two takes! Michael's vocals' are more than wonderful as well... What an experience!

Quincy Jones, album co-producer. [Telegraph \(November 25, 2007\) \(archived\) \(mirror\) \(archived mirror\)](#)

Vincent [Price] did it in two takes - I'm telling you, it was so difficult [technically, to talk over the music track]... it was fabulous, man.

Greg Phillinganes, keyboardist, [Atlanta Magazine interview](#)

Atlanta Magazine: When casual music fans ask you to point out one specific Greg Phillinganes musical moment on the “Thriller” album, which of your many contributions do you point them to?

Greg Phillinganes: Probably the title track “Thriller” written by Rod Temperton. There are just layers and layers of keyboards on that. There’s so much ear candy on that song. I did the synth bass part, those high-pitched synth parts, I did the Rhodes [keyboard] part and even did the pipe organ that Vincent Price does his rap over. It was crazy! When I listen to it now, I just think about all the fun we had creating all those layers in the studio.

Bruce Cannon, sound effects, [Telegraph \(November 25, 2007\)](#) ([archived](#)) ([mirror](#)) ([archived mirror](#))

Quincy called me and said he was doing this Michael Jackson record and he needed sounds for the Thriller song. I went to as many sound editors as I could and listened, found - what was it? - a creaking door, thunder, feet walking on wooden planks, winds, howling dogs, all that. These were really good editors and I think they recorded some of the effects themselves. Things like the lightning may have come from old Hollywood movies - we’ll never know which movies - but the best sound-effects editors do go out in the desert and find a coyote, so I have a feeling that was a real howl...

Michael Jackson, 1993 Mexico Deposition

Atty 1: I’d like to talk now about the song *Thriller*. Are you familiar with the song *Thriller*?

MJ: Yes.

Atty 1: Who wrote *Thriller* Mr Jackson?

MJ: A guy named Rod Temperton.

Atty 1: Did you have any role in connection with the song *Thriller* at all?

MJ: I sang *Thriller*.

Atty 1: Did you have any role in writing the song?

MJ: No.

Atty 1: When did you first hear the song *Thriller*?

MJ: I first heard the song, it was called... it was a different title. I heard it in Encino, at my house in Encino, it was under a different title.

Atty 1: What was that title?

MJ: *Starlight Sun*.

Atty 1: And who brought you that song under that different title?

MJ: Rod Temperton

Atty 1: Did he come to your studio... did he come to your house alone or was he with someone?

MJ: He came with Quincy.

Atty 1: Before Rod Temperton brought you this demo of *Starlight*, did you have any contact with him in connection with the song *Starlight*?

MJ: No.

Atty 1: When he got to your house what did Mr. Temperton do in connection with the song *Thriller*?

MJ: He had ... he came with a keyboard machine and I kind of admired the way he worked. He had all the sounds already programmed inside the machine so when he made the sounds to another keyboard or to the main board that's in the studio, which is the audio board umm.. they would play the sounds and the performance that he had performed somewhere else. It could have been Switzerland or Germany, so all the parts were there inside that machine done and performed already.

Atty 1: At some point did you learn the song *Thriller* or *Starlight* at the time. Let me withdraw that. At some time did you learn the song *Starlight*?

MJ: Yes.

Atty 1: How did you learn it?

MJ: Well he sings it on a tape and it's his voice singing against uhhh..a demo.

Atty 1: And again, what was the name of the song that was on that demo?

MJ: *Starlight Sun*.

Atty 1: In your performance of what eventually became *Thriller* did you make any changes in connection with your performance or the music?

MJ: (*Long pause*) Not that I can think of.

Atty 1: Did you play any role whatsoever in writing the music underlying the lyrics of *Thriller* that go "It's close to midnight and something evil's lurking in the dark?"

MJ: No.

Atty 1: Who wrote the lyrics for *Thriller*?

MJ: Rod Temperton.

Atty 1: Who has writing credit for *Thriller*?

MJ: Rod Temperton.

Atty 1: Did you get any writing credit for *Thriller*?

MJ: No.

...

Atty 3: Now then, you recall when Mr Temperton for the *Thriller* album?

MJ: No I don't.

Atty 3: Do you recall where it was that you first heard the songs that he brought for the *Thriller* album?

MJ: Yes.

Atty 3: Where were you?

MJ: Encino house.

Atty 3: At your residence?

MJ: Yes. My studio.

Atty 3: And who was present?

MJ: Quincy Jones, Rod Temperton, Bruce Swedien and myself.

Atty 3: Who is Bruce Swedien?

MJ: Bruce Swedien is the Engineer.

Atty 3: When he and Quincy came to your studio to present the songs?

MJ: He played on cassette, which we went I think it was Quincy's car or my van.. because we don't have a cassette machine system in my studio but he came with a keyboard and in the keyboard is his performances of the different sounds, he can (inaudible) these

sounds and put them up on tape, a 24 track and put them on tape and it was a way of testing to see if I liked the songs or not. With my voice, trying different harmonies, trying the songs. Like I said we did *Thriller* which was called *Gimme Some Starlight*, *Starlight Sun* (03:12:02. *begins to sing "Starlight, Starlight Sun to the same tune of Thriller, thriller night*).that's how it went, so it was a way of just testing of what I wanted to do.

Atty 3: Now, okay, he laid the very structure of the songs out in front of you, and you sung each one of them, is that correct?

MJ: Yes.

Atty 3: And among the ones you had sung was *Starlight*?

MJ: Right.

Atty 3: Did you make any changes to that *Starlight*?

MJ: Yes, the lyrics and the title and we added Vincent Price's voice, we changed it into *Thriller*. He did ask me which would I like better? To be a song about you know, let the sunshine in type of thing or *Thriller*, and I thought kids would enjoy something more fun like *Thriller (smiles)* so we went with the *Thriller* idea.

Atty 3: Did you change *Starlight* musically?

MJ: Umm.. yes, somewhat, musically it was the same but we added other sounds and things like that.

Atty 3: After you made the changes, do you know whether or not Mr. Temperton created a lead sheet what was now *Thriller*?

MJ: I don't think he reads music, he doesn't use a lead sheet.

Atty 3: Did Quincy Jones create a lead sheet for what was now *Thriller*?

MJ: I don't think so. At least I didn't see one.

Atty 3: You sang the other songs as..... (end of video)

### Mike Smallcombe. Making Michael

Temperton's demos were the first the team worked on. After Temperton whittled his ideas down from 40 to five, he went to Hayvenhurst with Quincy to present them to Michael. The demos were mostly complete, with the beginnings of lyric schemes and several different titles for each track, and included 'Baby Be Mine', 'Starlight', 'The Lady in My Life' and 'Hot Street'.

Michael and Quincy saw potential in the 'Starlight' demo; Temperton said the title was 'just some rubbish word' he used to demonstrate to Michael how the melody went. After leaving Hayvenhurst Temperton went back to his hotel and wrote two or three hundred alternative titles, one of which was 'Midnight Man'. During breakfast the next morning, the word 'Thriller' suddenly shot into his head. "It was like electricity and immediately I started thinking of the lyrics," he said. "That's how 'Thriller' came to be."

The original hook lyrics were 'Starlight! Starlight sun...', but when the title was changed to 'Thriller', the line was rewritten to 'Thriller! Thriller night...' With both titles in hand, Temperton asked Michael which one he would prefer. "I thought kids would enjoy something more fun like 'Thriller', so we went with the 'Thriller' idea," Michael explained.

The team spent a great deal of time creating the spooky intro to 'Thriller', which features creaking doors, wind, footsteps, thunder and wolf howls. Bruce Swedien, who worked on the sound effects with film editor Bruce Cannon, even wanted his own Great Dane, Max, to make a

cameo after seeing a similar dog in the Sherlock Holmes movie *The Hound of The Baskervilles*. “We bribed Max with hamburgers, we put him out by the barn to listen to the coyotes at night, but Max wasn’t interested in being part of ‘Thriller’,” Swedien said.

When Temperton wrote ‘Thriller’ he envisioned a spooky horror rap to come in at the end of the track, and wanted a famous voice in the horror genre to perform the vocal. Much to his delight, Quincy’s then wife Peggy Lipton knew Hollywood horror film actor Vincent Price, who agreed to participate. “The idea was going to be that he would just talk some horror talk from the type of lines he would deliver in some of his famous roles,” Temperton said.

Temperton planned to write the rap verses on the morning of Price’s studio session, but a lengthy business meeting meant he had only two hours to complete them. “I frantically started to write some stuff, and it was just one of those lucky times that it flowed out of me,” Temperton said. Some of the verses were written in the back of a taxi on the way to the studio. “As I arrived at the studio I saw a car pull up, and out steps Vincent Price, and the taxi pulled me round the back of the studio and I dived out of the cab, raced in the back door and said to the secretary, ‘Photocopy this quick’. They put it on the music stand and he walked in, sat down in his chair and off we went.”

The session was completed in around two hours, and Price did his part in only two takes. Although he had performed on a record before, Price was still a little out of his comfort zone in the recording studio. “When the music track for ‘Thriller’ started, Vincent jumped up from his stall with a very startled look on his face,” Bruce Swedien recalls. “He asked Rod to come out of the studio with him and help him by cueing him where to come in and speak his verses.” Price was offered either \$ 20,000 for his work, or a percentage of the album royalties. He chose to take the money upfront, a move he would later regret.