

"My Weekend at Michael's Neverland Valley Contest"

Date confirmed in ["Los Angeles Times"](#) ("It's noonish Saturday [June 19, 1993], and the MTV camera crew is arriving to shoot spots with the winners.")

John Norris, MTV host, ["MTV News" \(June 26, 2009\) \(archived\)](#)

"MTV had a contest where they asked fans to submit completed videos for the song 'Who Is It.' I don't remember whether MTV put the fan-made video into rotation — I have a feeling they didn't. The three finalists got to come spend a weekend at Neverland, and Michael would pick the winner there. At the tail end of that weekend, we came in. I was VJing at the time, so I was there more as a VJ, but we also had a news crew and a promo crew. The deal was that Michael was going to join me and the three finalists on the grounds of Neverland to reveal his choice for the winner. We were there to shoot several segments, first with the finalists and then with Michael.

"Neverland is huge. It's a ways to get to — you have to go up this long winding road through the mountains. It's probably a 15-minute drive up from the main road. And there's no mistaking when you get there, because there's a beautiful ornate gate. We didn't even see the entire spread, but passing through I saw a fort with a bunch of tree houses — you really get the sense you're entering the grounds of an amusement park. The house is an old Tudor style house with some guest houses, where the finalists stayed over. So they set us up on the perimeter of Michael's amusement park. There are probably half a dozen rides. There was one of those big spider-looking things, there was a huge slide and definitely a Ferris wheel. When you're on the grounds of Neverland, you really get the feeling that he thought of himself as a child. I mean, the damn place is called Neverland.

"So anyway, we got set up and did a few segments with the finalists and we were waiting for Michael. Finally he shows up, and he arrives on a little train that ran around the edge of Neverland. And he shows up with a couple of little kids. And I'm talking little — they could not have been older than 6 or 7. A boy and girl, and I don't remember if he introduced them or not. "Bob Jones was our point person, and he was Michael's longtime publicist. Bob came over to me beforehand and said, 'You know, John, you know the agreement is that Michael is going to reveal the winner, but you're not going to talk to him.' I knew I wasn't going to be doing a sit-down interview, but I was like, 'What do you mean I'm not supposed to talk to him?' And he said, 'You can talk to him before we start shooting, but once we're rolling, just don't ask him any questions.' I said OK, but I said to myself that it was not right.

"Before we started shooting, Michael walked up and was really friendly and we started chatting. He asked if I had seen the zoo and I said I hadn't, but I'd love to see it. But the people in charge of us being there told us we had to stay in the one area where we were shooting. We didn't go in the house or anything. He said that he knew me from MTV and told me he enjoyed watching me. I was only a few years into being a regular on-air person, so the fact that he would even know who I was seemed crazy to me. I was amazed that he watched television or did anything that would fall into the scope of normal behavior. Then he started talking about Janet's record, which was about to come out and I hadn't heard yet. He heard it and said it was great.

"When we shot our first segment, I really grew a pair at that point, so I said, 'Michael, thanks for having us here this weekend. I know it's meant a lot to these guys. WHAT DID YOU THINK OF

THE FINALISTS?' A real probing question, isn't it? So he mustered 'I liked them all.' And I said, 'I know you have to choose a favorite later on, but was there one that really jumped out at you right away?' And he said, 'No, you know, they were all great.' I knew I wasn't going to be getting much more than that, so I wrapped up the segment.

As soon as we shot it, Jones runs over to me and says 'What did I tell you?' And I was like, 'That's out of line? Are you serious?' I think he wanted me to talk *about* Michael with him standing right there. 'Look, here's Michael Jackson! He's standing right here! Look at him!' But Michael sees what's going on and says, 'It's fine, it's fine.' I feel like in that moment I realized that Michael was way more cool with actual human interaction than his handlers think he is. "And that was it. He picked a winner, we ate lunch and we left."

["Los Angeles Times" \(June 23, 1993\) \(archived\)](#)

Toto, I don't think we're in Encino anymore.

It's been four years or so since Michael Jackson moved into his private preserve about an hour north of Santa Barbara and just a few fulfilled fantasies south of Oz. His place, the Neverland Valley Ranch, is like a cross between the old family homestead in the San Fernando Valley, which was apparently not the happiest place on Earth, and a certain Anaheim attraction that likes to believe it is.

... "It's like Disneyland two minutes before it opens. Everything's on, but no one's here," says Ralph Linhardt of Irvine, lollygagging contentedly a few yards from the 2,700-acre estate's empty but continuously spinning Ferris wheel.

This is one of the most famous amusement parks on the planet--and certainly its least accessible. To get on the Neverland Valley guest list, it helps to be either a movie studio chief or a beleaguered child. The great majority of us who fall into the cracks between privilege and underprivileged stand about as good a chance of wrangling an invitation as child-ophobic Captain Hook himself, or LaToya's husband.

But with the public loosening up of Michael Jackson in near-full swing, even Neverland is no longer quite so hermetically sealed from the view of average Joes.

"It's a Willy Wonka *deja vu*," remarks J. Randall Argue, 30, of Lake Forest. Argue is one of three MTV contest winners whose prize was a weekend stay here with their guests (Linhardt came with Argue). A few journalists were also invited to tag along on the chocolate factory--er, ranch--excursion for an afternoon.

It's noonish Saturday, and the MTV camera crew is arriving to shoot spots with the winners. Jackson may or may not take part. Any sign of the proprietor yet?

"No," says contest winner Eddie Barber, 36, of Sherman Oaks, looking around the unpopulated sprawl. "But we saw a movement in his bedroom window when we were walking up from the cars, so we know he's here."

Well, either him or Norman Bates' mother.

Sorry. It's almost impossible not to crack wacko-celebrity jokes at an estate where there are Peter Pan logos everywhere you turn. But then, the longer you hang around Neverland, the less oddball it all seems and the more a creeping acceptance begins to take over. Maybe those 360-degree high-altitude spins on the Zipper ride in the noonday sun do something to your

equilibrium. But you begin to think you sort of even understand what Liz Taylor meant when she boldly described Jackson to Oprah Winfrey as “the most normal person I’ve ever known.” Neverland Valley Ranch isn’t so much about superstar weirdness run rampant as it’s about some sort of *heightened* remembered normalcy. Most everything is redolent of the Middle America a lucky kid might’ve grown up in decades ago--white gazebos, ornate street lamps, huge lawns and flower beds, lakes, trains, treehouses, multiple playgrounds, a zoo, a make-believe Indian tepee village.

A model T sits in the driveway outside the movie theater. A sign along the train tracks announces “Mac and Mike’s Waterforts”--as in Macaulay Culkin’s and Michael’s special water-pistol range.

The Disneyland comparison is inevitable, what with orchestral soundtrack music constantly blaring out of speakers disguised as garden rocks. But it’s as if Jackson--belying his tech-head rep--only got as far as Main Street U.S.A. and begged off Tomorrowland. By modernistic standards, the joint is somewhat modest.

Even the infamous amusement park area--with the tilt-a-whirl, merry-go-round, bumper cars, et al.--reeks of nostalgia, its classic rides borrowed from state fairs, not modern theme parks. Lest anyone inevitably find this whole retreat ripe for deep psychoanalysis, it’s been done for you. Even Jackson’s staff will readily inform you that this estate is the erstwhile boy wonder’s way of re-creating the childhood he never had, just as casually as they’ll direct you to the nearest free candy counter.

Denial, *schlemial*. Anyone who ever grew up dysfunctionally or otherwise in the Midwest watching “Father Knows Best” and reading Boys Life would have to love the place just as readily as the busloads of poor and/or handicapped urban youngsters Jackson has out to the ranch as a humanitarian service.

MTV was jazzed and surprised that Jackson so readily acceded to the request for the ultimate exclusive prize: a two-night sleep-over in the happy part of the Twilight Zone. “It was the chance to send our viewers where only Oprah had gone before,” notes programming VP Andy Schon. Finally, Jackson emerges into sunlight from the movie theater where he’s been holed up. Contest winners Argue, Barber and Bill Green of Hampton, Va., and their companions try not to stare. Not surprisingly, Jackson has a few small-fry around him, and seems playful enough. Once the buffer of children is removed, though, and he has to step in front of the MTV camera to film a few brief spots with the contest winners, he turns into a stiff. Veejay John Norris gamely attempts a few questions, asking what Jackson thought of the contest entries, in which viewers were asked to make their own amateur videos for the single “Who Is It,” the finalists judged by the star himself. Norris’ queries are mostly met by near-whispered, one-word answers like “good” and “yes,” or knowing nods.

The shy deal is no act: Held at bay on camera, the pained King of Pop is politely suffering his worst torture.

So you can feel the relief among Jackson’s people and MTV folks alike when the camera goes off. Soon Jackson’s joining everyone over on the Sea Dragon, rocking out, his trademark stray bangs blowing out from under his black hat in the breeze as the sound system blasts sister Janet’s new single, “If.”

Soon after, Jackson takes off on a golf cart with his small friends. It's up to MTV's Norris to announce the top winner, as selected by Jackson. The \$10,000 prize and a chance to direct a clip for Epic Records go to Barber, a cameraman and inventor whose crowning video entry features--surprise--lots of dancing kids.

The indefatigably high-spirited Barber is going home a winner but his victory is bittersweet: The night before, the girlfriend he brought along as his guest had turned down the engagement ring he proffered, as if to prove that the Neverland magic wears off once Peter starts trying to woo Wendy. Tinkerbell sabotage and all that.

Barber's spurned marriage proposal may explain why he's so full of nervous energy all weekend. The MTV crew members rib Barber about how obnoxious he's being. But he knows he's on solid childish footing: "They said I could come here and act like a kid, and I'm acting like a kid."

That's more long-winded than the ranch master might be about it, but it's in the right theme park.