

"E.T. Storybook" and "Thriller" Album Covers Photoshoot

Date range assessed by the fact that Zimmerman met Michael at Westlake "three quarters of the way through finishing [the 'Thriller' album]"; the Westlake sessions were from August - Late October 1982. ("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." and "once Michael had heard the material from the other writers, he finally showed Quincy what he had been working on over the previous year ("Billie Jean")" and "the final days [of recording were] in late October") (Mike Smallcombe, Making Michael)

Dick Zimmerman, "Thriller" album cover photographer. "MJ Data Bank" (December 5, 2007) ([archived](#))

The First Meeting

"I first met Michael Jackson at a recording studio on Beverly Blvd. in Hollywood, where he was three quarters of the way through finishing what would be the largest selling album in history. CBS records indicated that the project was between myself and another very well known photographer whose identity was never divulged to me.

Michael wanted to personally meet both candidates before deciding who he wanted to work with on the album package. I know now after having worked a substantial amount of time with Michael on other projects since, that he needed someone that was at the top of his profession, wasn't egotistical, was trustworthy and creative. But most importantly someone who would treat him with delicacy and consideration, who wasn't threatening or offending.

My first impression of Michael as he slowly and carefully moved through the studio doors where our meeting would take place was that he was taller and thinner than I had expected. His handshake was very delicate with hardly a squeeze, and I was very conscious to return the same.

As we talked, Michael would ask me questions in his whispered voice about my likes and dislikes. I could tell from the way he poised his questions, that in a sly way, I was being highly scrutinized. That's when I first realized how important it was to Michael to work with the exact kind of person that would make him feel comfortable. Our meeting lasted about twenty minutes and we parted with a cordial good-bye.

The Call Back

Three days later I received a phone call from CBS Records saying that phase one was over and now Michael wanted to come to see my studio and look at my photographs. My studio entrance has a loud buzzer, but instead there was a very gentle knock at the door. Rather than have my secretary answer the door, I wanted to answer it myself. I wanted Michael to know that I was real and approachable and also wanted to avoid anything that may have had the potential of creating an uncomfortable situation for Michael. Evidently I passed the test as I received confirmation two days later from CBS that Michael had selected me to do the honors, and the album shoot was scheduled to take place in two weeks.

My fee from CBS was to be \$4,000.00 - which was very good back then (and just about top dollar for an album cover). During the next two weeks I had various meetings with the creative heads from CBS and Freddie Demand, Michael's Manager at that time. The purpose was to create a visual direction for the album that everyone agreed on.

Shoot Day

The day of the shoot arrived, I had hired one of the best fashion stylists in LA to gather a large variety of wardrobe, and we began the arduous process of selecting attire for the cover and inside spread. After about an hour of weeding through the clothes, Michael couldn't find anything he was crazy about. I started to panic for a moment, then I noticed Michael looking at the white suit I was wearing. He asked if we had anything like it. We didn't, so I asked him if he would like to wear mine. Considering his choices, this was exactly what he wanted. Fortunately for the shoot and the time involved, the suit fit.

We had decided prior to the shoot that Michael would have a tiger cub in the shots so we had a selection for him to choose from. He loved a six week old cub but was very squeamish about letting it get too close to his face because of possible scratches from its claws. Throughout the shoot I had to get Michael to forget about the possibility of getting scratched, and to focus his attention on me and the camera.

During breaks Michael would stand in front of a full length mirror and practice continual spins, the legendary ones that are now so familiar to us all. He would come alive in front of that mirror. It was fascinating, because he had such a shy and subdued manor throughout the photo session. For lunch he ordered a special meal brought in from a vegetarian restaurant ..the ----- on 3rd Avenue, which is his favorite in town. In fact, a few months later he would hire that chef as his personal cook, and to this day.

The shoot lasted about 6 hours with no particular problems out of the ordinary. At the days end, we said good-bye, and arranged to meet in a few days to go over the results. About four days later the photos were ready and we met at Michael's recording studio on Beverly Boulevard. Michael was in the middle of finishing up one of the tracks, so I set up my light table and spread out the transparencies so he could see them all at one time.

The Album Cover

Michael walked into the studio - he was in a very good mood. He looked over the transparencies and was very excited and pleased with what he saw. He said "There are so many good ones here, how can I ever make a decision?" He told me to hold on a minute, and went to the back of the studio. After a moment, he came back out with Quincy Jones. Quincy took one look at the transparencies and without any hesitation pointed to one, and said "That's the cover!"

That was the fastest I have ever seen anyone pick a final transparency for anything, and it was a good choice. I was happy, Michael was happy, the label was happy, and I guess the world was happy."