

"Life" Magazine Interview

["Life" magazine \(June 1993\)](#) (Scans currently unavailable)

"Michael in Wonderland"; by David Friend, Photography by Harry Benson

The Peter Pan of pop takes LIFE inside the gates of his own magic kingdom.

A video game arcade, an old-style movie house, a museum of Michael memorabilia

He has seen "Aladdin" six times. He knows the lyrics to most lullabies, though he hasn't yet mastered the "Barney" theme ("I don't wake up early enough to watch it"). He says his favorite toys are "jack-in-the-box, rocking horses, and Peter Pan--anything Peter Pan."

No wonder, then, that when Michael Jackson planned his own private wonderland, he chose to design it as a kind of Peter Pan theme park, dotted with fanciful sculptures (LEFT) in homage to J.M. Barrie's fable about a kid who refuses to grow up--a kid not unlike the pop star, now 34, ever striving to reclaim the youth he lost in pursuit of celebrity.

Set on 2,700 rugged acres north of Santa Barbara, Calif., Jackson's Neverland Valley Ranch supports its own zoo, its own railway system, its own full-scale amusement park. Certain areas are off-limits, like Jackson's upstairs private quarters in his 25-room Tudor mansion (above). But the rest of the ranch is open to occasional guests, such as illusionist David Copperfield and child actor Macaulay Culkin. Says Jackson: "Macaulay Culkin spends all his vacations here." Until now, Neverland has never been in such detail by outsiders, except for busloads of children, many terminally ill, whom Jackson invites for field trips. On these pages, Michael guides 10 youngsters, the children of some of Neverland's 70 full-time employees, on a grand tour.

The dominant piece in Jackson's art collection is a painting by David Nordahl that looms over the entrance foyer. Two stories tall, the canvas is one of six tableaux in the mansion showing Michael in a sea of children.

Everywhere are gaily painted pushcarts. Guests simply help themselves to Sno-kones and soda, peanuts and cotton candy.

"This is pretty much how I imagined it", Jackson says, surveying his personal amusement park at dusk (ABOVE). "We're also building a roller coaster." The complex includes a dozen attractions that have dazzled such visitors as Hollywood moguls Barry Diller and David Geffen. All the rides are manned by attendants eager to repeat the mantra: "Wanna go again?" The Ferris Wheel (NEAR RIGHT) is buffed and spotless as a showroom model. The Sea Dragon pendulum (BELOW, RIGHT) seesaws to the beat of Jackson's hit "Remember the Time." The harum-scarum Zipper sports amoeboid carts that upend passengers heels over head over heels.

Huge oaks ring the fairgrounds, their gnarled branches festooned with little lights. WHEN night falls, these twinkling trees provide an otherworldly sensation. Up in the Ferris wheel, viewing the vista below, a rider may feel as if he is suddenly, magically starbound. Jackson admits that on those nights when he is alone at the ranch, he samples ride after ride, reaching for the stars, all by himself. He does it, he says, "all the time."

Under Jackson's bumper-car tent, smoke wafts up from two fog machines embedded in the floor; disco balls are suspended from the rafters.

Julie Andrews' voice comes trilling from 300 flower beds.

Music envelops every corner of Neverland Valley Ranch. Inside the mansion, when Jackson isn't playing his piano (ABOVE), loudspeakers blare songs from Disney soundtracks. Outside, Jackson prefers a homegrown brand of "rock" music--tunes that waft from stereo speakers disguised as rocks, hidden in the hedges (RIGHT) every few hundred yards.

Welcome to the monkey house. And the reptile center, ostrich barn, giraffe pen, and petting zoo. Jackson's 200-creature menagerie would dwarf many city zoos. The more imposing inhabitants keep to themselves: alligators, giraffes, and Gypsy the Asian elephant, a 7,000-pound present from Elizabeth Taylor. Some of the tiniest residents (Linus, the two-foot-tall sheep, Cricket, the 34-inch stallion, and Petunia, the pot-bellied pig) are decidedly Jacksonian--bred so they will never grow up. Though Neverland has everything from alpacas to wallabies, children seem most taken with the exotic-animal wing that houses a 12-foot albino python named Madonna (BELOW). Why the name for one so viperous? "She's blond", Jackson says mischievously, "but *I* didn't name her that." Visitors often travel by golf cart to get to the nature center on Neverland's outskirts. Says Jackson, in a black and purple vehicle (RIGHT), one of a dozen he uses to putt-putt around the grounds: "This is the cart Macaulay [Culkin] rides when he's here. The colors are from the Foot Clan of the Ninja Turtles. If he knew we were driving it, he'd be mad."

THE PLACE THAT POP BUILT

A whistle. A blur of lollipop red. And suddenly a three-car train appears from behind a row of trees, ready to chug Michael Jackson around his ranch. The tiny train is rimmed with lights. Its overhead speakers pipe Mickey Muzak.

As Jackson approaches, Captain Al, the conductor, doffs his cap to bless the afternoon: "Just another day in paradise."

Jackson turns to a companion and remarks, "I'm getting a steam locomotive that carries three hundred. It'll take an *hour* to go around the whole place." He seems happiest when dreaming up ways to make Neverland grander still. "I love daydreaming", he confesses. "I spend most of my time daydreaming."

Jackson's retreat sits midway between Disneyland and San Simeon, the area's paradigm of opulent seclusion. The location couldn't be more fitting. Jackson's Santa Ynez Valley ranch, purchased four years ago for a reported \$28 million, combines the inviolable luxury of press lord William Randolph Hearst's castle and the innocent spirit of Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom. When touring the compound with Jackson, one senses that rarely before has one man managed, in his own backyard, to realize his fantasies more fully.

The first stop, in fact, is Jackson's backyard, which is literally the breadth of the Rose Bowl. The patio garden is ablaze with marigolds. (Forty groundskeepers tend to Neverland's 128,000 flowering plants.) From the terrace, a guest can spot an enormous playground, a pool, a trampoline. In the distance, a pristine lake sparkles. On one shore rest twin Jet Skis; on another is a swan-shaped ferryboat. On the island in the middle, Jackson sometimes sits and meditates. Nearby is Neverland's two-story arcade, crammed with 35 state-of-the-art video games--no

coins necessary. A faux starship whips voyagers, in gyroscope fashion, around a computer screen exploding with meteors. Upstairs are antique fortune telling booths; downstairs is a jukebox set in the grille of a '53 Chevy, stacked with CDs by the Beatles and Jackson's sister Janet.

A short Moonwalk beyond is the gazebo in which Jackson gave away Elizabeth Taylor, whose wedding he hosted almost two years ago. "This Christmas I came back from [touring in] Japan", Jackson recalls, "and Elizabeth had decorated the whole house. It was wonderful I'd never celebrated birthdays or Christmases before. Not one. It was always, Work! *That's* why I believe in Neverland.

"My fondest memory here", he continues., "was one night [when] we had a houseful of bald-headed children. They all had cancer. And one little boy turned to me and said, 'This is the best day of my life.' You had to just hold back the tears."

Moved by the memory, Jackson bounds through the mansion for a breakneck tour: the beam-ceilinged living room, the country kitchen (countertops are laden with baskets of snacks, including cookies frosted with the Neverland logo), the study. "I sit there and feel the presence of every book", he says of his favorite room. (Recent reads have included a volume on UFOs, one on serial killers, and a lavishly illustrated edition of "Peter Pan".) Upstairs, where no cameras are allowed, Jackson shows off a library of kids' books, a bedroom brimming with antique dolls and a playroom that could pass for Santa's workshop, its tabletops neatly lined with games for the grabbing.

Back outside, Jackson, occasionally breaking into song, continues the circuit on golf cart and on foot. (He wears one orange sock and one yellow.) He passes horse corrals, two basketball courts, countless swings that hang from tree limbs. Security guards shuttle past in vans, speaking softly into walkie-talkies. ("Bravo Six, going up to the petting zoo. Ten-four.") In a forest clearing, he comes upon a mock Indian village, complete with tepees. "We have a campfire here [some nights]", says Jackson, who then points to the Waterfort up ahead--rigged with cannon-like squirt guns. "Macaulay Culkin and I designed it", he says, cracking his chewing gum.

In the hills that form Neverland's perimeter, "a lot of natural wildlife roam--coyote, bobcat, bear", says ranch manager Lance Brown. Jackson confidant Joe Wilcots remembers the day he looked out the window of a house on one of the hills--and met a mountain lion's gaze.

Last stop is a 40-seat movie theater with a candy counter that offers free treats. Inside are swivel seats and an outsize Oscar. And set into the back walls, on either side of the projectionist's booth, are two suites with full-length windows. Each contains a hospital bed, facing the screen, so that children too ill to sit up can watch films in relative comfort.

It is here, standing next to the hospital beds, that one understands the essence of Neverland. To its owner, amusement is hardly the point of the place. This is actually the world Jackson would fashion were it left in his charge: safe and clean and timeless as a fable. In fact, Jackson's global vision is as dreamy as his private paradise. In the fall, he plans to open Neverland to a World Congress of Children, inviting kids from 100 nations. By launching his children's foundation, Heal the World, and announcing plans for a children's TV network, he wants to share the spirit of his backyard with Everykid. More Pied Piper than Peter Pan, Jackson truly

believes, with refreshing if astonishing naiveté, that by forging a fantastical landscape on this ridge in California, he is furthering his master plan for helping children in need around the world. "I have a plan for a *new* Neverland", Jackson says. "No name yet." On the drawing board is an even more ambitious complex--high-tech rides, virtual-reality attractions--for disadvantaged kids. "It'll be farther off, on the other side [of the property]", he says. "A whole colony of enjoyment. This is how I'd like the world to be."

Harry Benson, photographer, "[Architectural Digest](#)" (October 31, 2009)

Michael was easy to work with and delighted in showing me his home. All the photos were done quickly. That's the thing people forget—you have to work quickly so that your subject doesn't become bored. When Michael asked what I wanted him to wear, I said, "Just be yourself. Wear what you feel comfortable in."

One could see how Neverland could take Michael's mind off all his worries and transport him from the reality of his stressful life. He had everything he wanted there. I got the impression that in no way was Michael a recluse. He read the papers and kept up with the news. Once he asked me what I thought of the Reagans, who were in the White House at the time. He was also curious to know what the Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was like, as Michael had seen my photograph of him. Michael made a point of knowing who was who, while all the time those sad eyes were searching, looking closely at me. Occasionally, he would break into a laugh, but mostly he was just looking.

Although I wasn't close to Michael, we were friendly and respectful of each other, and that's really all you want, someone who allows you to do your job. I will miss him. We will all miss his immense talent.

"[Rolling Stone](#)" (December 9, 2016)

I always got on with Michael Jackson. I liked him. He was very thoughtful, and Neverland was really quite a lovely place – well-run, nice flowers and that. ...My way is that I photograph anything I see. And what you see should inform. I'm following a camera, and they know why you're there. And he took me in the house, which the publicists and all of them said, "No way do you go in the house!" They kept saying that. But Michael couldn't care less. I photographed him a few times and he never gave me any trouble. The people around him would give me problems, but I knew how to get around them.

"[AARP The Magazine](#)" (October/November 2017)

Although I had photographed Michael Jackson before, this was the first time I had visited his home, which he called the Neverland Ranch. Photographing him inside his home, in front of his very own amusement park, with his beloved animals and with the children of his employees — it really was a never-never land.