

Chicago, New York (Victory Tour)

October 13, 1984 Concert

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It would have been a perfect Saturday night, heavy with fog and drizzle, to curl up with a good book and go to bed early.

Instead, I found myself planted on a wet plastic folding chair in soggy, foggy Comiskey Park, about 300 feet from home plate in deep right center field.

I admit I asked for it. I got carried away at a Better Boys Foundation charity auction a few weeks back and found myself the proud and somewhat bewildered possessor of four tickets to a Michael Jackson concert. That's right, you know, *the* Michael Jackson.

So that's how I ended up last Saturday night with my wife, Martha, and two daughters, Marthie, 24, and Hope, 11, at a major league ballpark on a night when any sort of tolerably sane game would have been called off. At least it wasn't cold.

I must tell you all about it. For me, it was a genuine happening. I did something like it once before. Exactly 20 years ago, I took my first born, Sarah, then 14, and a friend to the International Amphitheatre to hear the Beatles. Actually, the din and general chaos that night were so ear-splitting I couldn't hear much of anything, but I do remember it vividly. The former Daily News, later Tribune columnist and onetime mayor of Glenview, Jack Mabley, was the emcee that night, and I've never forgiven him.

Anyway, here we were last Saturday night at Comiskey Park with a chance to experience the fabled Michael Jackson and his entourage. Hope was vibrating with sheer excitement, while Marthie, excited, too, kept saying Michael Jackson just *wasn't* Bruce Springsteen, which is about all I knew for sure.

Walking out onto the field, which, after being churned into muck for three straight nights, can't possibly be ready for baseball next April, was in and of itself awe-inspiring for a kid from Hamilton, Ohio, whose taste in music runs to Cole Porter, Rodgers & Hammerstein, and Lena Horne.

Out in left-center field was a massive stage whose superstructure stretched nearly 100 feet to the top of the upper deck, where majestic home runs occasionally land. Above the stage was a huge video screen. On each side of the stage was a gauzy, curtain-like panorama featuring two gnarled, spreading oaks set rocky terrain. This prompted a certain amount of early ooh-ing and ah-ing, barely a pale sample of what was to come.

We proceeded across the sodden, gummy field to our folding chairs, each properly molded to hold a generous puddle of water. We found ourselves little more than feet from the stage, a bit off-center, with the giant exploding scoreboard before us. Early on, Martha, my observant wife, spotted five blue "porta-potties" within easy striking distance. This instantly banished claustrophobia and made her evening.

It was still night when we arrived. We had been warned that traffic would be horrendous, so we started very early, naturally encountered no delays or obstacles whatsoever, and arrived at 5:45 for a 7 p.m. kickoff, even though there was to be no batting practice. Like everybody else, we were "frisked" by metal detectors.

At this point, the old ballpark was fairly empty, and people were trickling in. Hucksters were selling ponchos made, I'd guess, from old Kleenex, and what they called "binoculars" for \$6.00, take your choice. The glossy, oversized program, with Michael and his five brothers unaccountably clad in safari gear on the cover, went for a cool ten bucks. The regular ball park food fare, hot dogs, popcorn, cokes, and the like, were sold at standard White Sox prices. Wisely, there was no beer.

The evening started quietly. The early arrivals were docile and curious, milling around without purpose, wide-eyed as they viewed the monster stage and high scaffolding out front which held eight spotlights on swivels aimed at stage.

By 6:30, people were pouring in, many on the young side, but not exclusively, a surprising of families, fairly even mix of black and white. My three ladies hunkered down under their green purple raingear, watching and waiting, while I meandered about in the mud. Two banks of powerful baseball lights along the third base line pierced the fog and cast an eerie glow over the scene.

I was feeling a little glum. After all, I had expected earlier this very day to be watching the Cubs shellac the ultimate world champs from Detroit, Harrumph. Michael Jackson.

At 7 sharp, with fair smattering of seats unfilled, the lights went out and the crowd started screeching. This must be it, I surmised. Onto the darkish stage came a solitary figure. The audience cheered wildly as the spotlights revealed a quite ordinary, pale, youngish man in a shiny red-and-black costume.

To the beat of some unfamiliar (to me) music, he started juggling. You know, juggling, what a juggler does, That's right, a juggler. At a Michael Jackson event, mind you.

Anyway, he went on for 20 minutes or so, his juggling enhanced by psychedelic, ever-changing lights, his whole act seeming incongruous and quite mundane on this night of nights. Still, we were moving inexorably toward the big moment.

But not quite yet. We would first be treated to a new "torture" video presentation by CBS on the big screen above the stage. Somebody--presumably The Jacksons--began screaming, "It's torch-ass", as a surrealistic ritual unfolded, complete with claw-like fingernails, jungle beat, bejeweled masks, dancing skeletons, and lethal blades emerging in narrow passageways--amid much loud sound, gore, and colored smoke. Can you picture all that?

Lights on again... 7:30 now, The low-hanging cloud cover takes on a yellowish hue as the city lights reflect up against the canopy of the mist... tension mounting, only a few empty seats, a little snapping and squabbling in the muddy aisles... one family of four evicted because their tickets were for *last* night. (Boy, did that lady chew out her husband!) One young thing with fluorescent green hair prances down the aisle... another with glitter sprinkled on bare shoulders... still another in black leather pants that must have been sprayed on... a boy of six or seven, eyes dancing, wearing a sparkling white Michael Jackson glove and a saucer-sized button, in a wheelchair. Lots of restless milling and unease now. All in readiness, on with the show, clap, clap, clap... My-kel... My-kel... My-kel...

An hour has dragged by and now the stage is dark again until a shadowy figure appears with a green light stick to stir the crowd into a frenzy for the big moment. We are nearing the moment. Now it is here, and it defies description.

Earth begins to rumble. Thunder rolls ominously. Purple light colors, thick smoke curling about the stage. Great, ugly, hairy creatures lumber into view to the beat of frenetic music. Lights play on a glittering sword embedded in a giant stone. Who shall pull it out? (Three guesses, and only the last one counts. Several pretenders fail. A terrible simulated storm ensues, with lightning flashing, laser beams in gaudy colors piercing the sky. Those great oaks painted on the curtain sink to earth. Many in the audience are screaming and stomping.

Calmly, a heroic, shrouded figure, face covered, appears to tug at the sword. Effortlessly, he removes it from the stone and plunges the blade into one of those giant beasts. Off comes the mask, and Michael--who else?--stands before 35,000 adoring fans and a handful of skeptics. This by any standard is an extravaganza which succeeds only by continually outdoing itself. The sound is often raucous, the staging riveting, the tempo exhausting.

Now it is Michael and his five Jackson brothers rising on platforms above the stage, silhouetted against blinding white lights punctuated by colored lights, Michael in glittering field marshal jacket, tight black pants, spats, and, oddly, black loafers, exhibiting a form of turbulent kinetic energy, his features smooth and almost girlish, his soprano voice piercing. The other Jacksons are mere foils.

The focus always is on Prince Michael, dripping from the frenzy of his movements. With rare force, he belts out a song whose title sounds to me like, "Human Nature". The uncompromising light bathes a face that is unmarked, childlike. Laser shafts of fuchsia, turquoise, gold, and aqua radiate out from the stage and dance across the Comiskey stands and light towers.

This is an irrepressible showman. The lights turn to deep blue. Michael exhibits all the supple moves, incisive kicks, head fakes, rubbery legs, his celebrated "moonwalk"--all part of an endless repertoire.

We are transported into a surrealistic otherworld. The beam solely on Michael, he suddenly, unexpectedly to gentleness, at once emotional, plaintive, grieving, vibrating, eyes closed tight in exquisite anguish.

"She's out of my life", he intones, writhing, tortured by his lost love. It is vintage stuff from this callow talent, a matchless showman standing alone in the burgundy mist, head bowed. The song ends.

Many in the audience, including everybody ahead of us, are rocking and bobbing, stomping and standing on their chairs, caught up in the excitement. It seemed mainly a natural exuberance.

We saw no booze, smelled no pot, saw nothing "suspicious".

After 35 minutes, Michael drifted offstage and Jermaine, a bigger, rugged Jackson in tight, form-fitting turquoise leotard, took over. His is an older face, a still harsher beat, a more conventional, less subtle style. But he clearly has his fans.

Soon, Michael lopes back, refreshed, reinvigorated, possibly showered as well. The audience, rapt, comes alive again, chanting, clapping, rocking.

One skeptic turns to me and mutters, "I'll give 'im three years, and nobody'll remember 'im."

A change of pace, as spider-like monsters with lighted tentacles and gleaming blue eye descend from the sky on Michael. Trapped, he is enveloped and presumably dead. A satin sheet is placed over him, as the music turns mournful, but that is not to be. In a blinding flash of light, smoke, and noise, the sheet is whisked away, and our hero reappears, bedecked in red

and gold lion-tamer jacket with epaulets. He seems none the worse for wear, and the audience thinks it's all pretty exciting, certainly not easy to doze off at Michael rendezvous.

One of his big numbers, I was told by my daughters, is called "Beat It". I couldn't pick up the words and innocently asked Hope if he was singing "Peanut". She silenced me with a withering look.

The Jacksons returned to their "first" number--"I'll Be There"--sentimental, cool, more wrenching emotion, unrestrained sadness--the gamut of human feelings packaged to sell. Michael, I thought, dancing, moving, showed the lithe, graceful, effortless coordination of a gifted athlete, in motion, a master of ballet, a gazelle. The stage is suffused with red smoke, and The Jacksons seem swallowed by flames.

The colored lasers reach the crowd and touch the light towers, the beat gets more intense, and it is over.

Martha and I are limp. Hope is giddy and glassy-eyed. Marthie still thinks Springsteen is better. We've witnessed glittery tableau, a fleeting page from a history our times. I'm glad. It has added added one more facet to our lives.