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By JOHN ROCKWELL

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Since he caught the public's fancy as a bouncing, spinning, piping, 11-year-old mini-superstar in 1970, Michael Jackson has been a fullfledged celebrity, living a celebrity's life. That's worth remembering, because it means that today, one must guard against the assumption that he is a mature, fully formed artist and human being. He is certainly a seasoned veteran: His whole life has been shaped by entertainment, and he is a practiced — sometimes *too* practiced — performer, recording star and film actor. But he remains a young man, and with luck he will continue to mature.

One begins a review of Mr. Jackson's new LP, "Thriller" (Epic QE 38112), with this curious cautionary note because it is certainly possible to point out flaws in Mr. Jackson's seeming perfection. Yes, he sometimes allows Quincy Jones to depersonalize his individuality with his superbly crafted yet slightly anonymous production. Worse, he sometimes hides his emotionality behind smoothly indistinctive pop songs and formulaic arrangements, defenses so suavely perfect that they suggest layers of impenetrable, gauzy veils.

But these are quibbles. "Thriller" is a wonderful pop record, the latest statement by one of the great singers in popular music today. But it is more than that. It is as hopeful a sign as we have had yet that the destructive barriers that spring up regularly between white and black music — and between whites and blacks — in this culture may be breached once again. Most important of all, it is another signpost on the road to Michael Jackson's own artistic fulfillment.

Even though the family group from which he emerged, formerly the Jackson Five and presently the Jacksons, still shows signs of some sort of life, Mr. Jackson has long since established himself on his own. As an actor, he accomplished that with a charming performance in the film version of "The Wiz." On records, his big breakthrough as a solo artist came with his last LP, "Off the Wall," in 1979. It

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Lynn Goldsmith

Michael Jackson—His new album is another signpost on the road to his artistic fulfillment.

stayed high on the charts for nine months, spun off several top-selling singles and sold millions of records and cassettes.

There were solid reasons for such success. Chief among them is Mr. Jackson's ethereal tenor. His deployment of that voice, which he mixes subtly with all manner of falsetto effects, is the greatest example of this sort of erotic keening since the heyday of Smokey Robinson. Ever since the craze for the castrato in the 17th century, high male voices, with their paradoxical blend of asexuality and sensuousness, ecstasy and pain, have been the most prized of all vocal types, and Mr. Jackson epitomizes such singing for our time better than anyone, in any musical genre.

A second reason for his success is his personality. One may legitimately wonder how Mr. Jackson, locked inside a celebrity's cage since child-

hood, could possibly understand the everyday dilemmas of life. But most such dilemmas are universal, and artistic empathy is hardly the prerogative of poor folksingers. Mr. Jackson seems, on the basis of his interviews, to have a genuinely childlike and emotionally open attitude toward life. Sometimes his fame seems to insulate him, but it also elevates him to fantasy status for his fans.

A third source of his success lies in his creative relationship with Mr. Jones, his producer. Quincy Jones's work seems curiously variable. As a hyperactive record producer, he can slip into formulas inappropriate for the artist at hand, as in his efforts on Donna Summer's last album. But with Mr. Jackson, his refined synthesis of the latest trends in soul, funk, rock and pop works very supportively.

It is that synthesis that offers a broader cultural hope. Black music
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lurks at the heart of nearly all American pop, but it is an old, old story that blacks tend to be slighted by white audiences, a few established older superstars partly excepted. Black performers' mass success waxes and wanes, and in recent years it has been waning. The dangers of isolation — more particularly, of whites being cut off from the roots of what they perceive as their own music — have only been reinforced by radio, with its “demographic” playlists that reinforce a musically insensitive and morally indefensible segregation.

Mr. Jackson's appeal is so wide, however, that white publications and radio stations that normally avoid “black music” seem willing to pretend he isn't black after all. On one level, that's admirable, in that color distinctions are often best avoided altogether. But Mr. Jackson is black, and while he sings a duet here with Paul McCartney, enlists Eddie Van Halen for a guitar solo and observes no color exclusivity in his choice of backup musicians, he still works hon-

orably within the context of contemporary black popular music at its fervent, eclectic best. If this album is anywhere near as successful as “Off the Wall,” it may remind white audiences of what they are missing elsewhere.

“Thriller” follows the same rough pattern of “Off the Wall” in its predominantly brisk first side and a second side with a greater preponderance of ballads. There is no one show-stopping lament here on the order of “She's Out of My Life,” from “Off the Wall.” But there is a subtler mixture of fast and slow — fast songs with caressing vocals, medium-tempo songs and slow songs with a catchy undercurrent — and one or two songs in which Mr. Jackson can deploy the full sensuality of his singing.

Perhaps the most striking of those songs is called “Human Nature,” which occupies the same spot on the disk — third song on the second side — that was allotted to “She's Out of My Life.” This is a haunting, brooding ballad by Steve Porcaro and John Bettis with an irresistible chorus, and it should be an enormous hit.

But there are other hits here, too, lots of them. Best of all, with a pervasive confidence infusing the album as a whole, “Thriller” suggests that Mr. Jackson's evolution as an artist is far from finished. He is, after all, only 24 years old. ■