

# ARRAIGNING THE KING OF POP

by Matt Kettmann ~ photographs by Paul Wellman

**D**edicated fans, media vans, and very public grandstands. A small-town courthouse surrounded by hordes of microphone-toting international correspondents. The front gates of a luxurious yet lonely ranch lit by the flames of prayer candles. A powerful prosecutor hunting down his most elusive prey—an amazingly famous man whose influential entourage and throngs of followers maintain both his innocence and good conscience. And charges, extremely serious charges punishable by up to two decades in jail, that this man, the undisputed King of Pop, molested a little boy after getting him drunk.



The whole world was watching last week when Michael Jackson, the umbrella-toting King of Pop, was arraigned in Santa Maria.

**T**ogether, these are the makings of a most compelling 21st-century pop culture soap opera, a story of how one man's celebrity status—exalted by adoring fans and reported ad nauseam by an ever-intrusive media—ran headfirst into the tough arm of the law. But on the flip side, whether the charges prove true or false, there's a tragic tale to be told, as the loss of one man's childhood set the course for a bizarre pattern of behavior that may have, in turn, ruined another boy's young life.

All these elements converged last week in Santa Barbara County, as Michael Jackson was arraigned in a Santa Maria courtroom on Friday. As most of the world already knows, Jackson—the 1970s childhood star of the Jackson 5, whose celebrated solo career through the 1980s and early '90s turned him into an international icon of dance, song, and do-it-your-way individualism—is being charged with child molesta-

tion, a frightfully serious allegation.

Over the span of 24 hours, from Thursday to Friday afternoon, January 15-16, Santa Barbara County endured just the beginning of what will be the blockbuster of all celebrity trials. In an age where mass media is increasingly everywhere—from shacks in Third World countries to airports of cosmopolitan cities—the case of *The People v. Michael Jackson* has already been catapulted to the upper echelon of all-time news story juggernauts.

The buzz started back in November, when Jackson's Neverland Ranch in the Santa Ynez Valley was raided and District Attorney Tom Sneddon enthusiastically announced the charges to the international press corps. It intensified when Jackson turned himself in to be arrested, posted bail, and was released. The fervor regained momentum last week, with public displays of support in Santa Barbara and Santa Maria, vigils and parties at Neverland, and, of course, the events sur-

rounding the arraignment itself. Television screens and newspaper headlines from Tokyo to Oslo informed the world of the day's events, most importantly announcing that Jackson had officially entered the plea of "not guilty."

It was quite a spectacle—the cult-like fan following, the three-ring circus atmosphere of the media crews, the protective procession of the Jackson cabal, and the seriousness conveyed by the judge inside the courtroom. No one could really offer a decent comparison; nothing before had ever sparked such a bizarre union of fanaticism, media, legal drama, and human tragedy.

As a reporter for *The Independent*, I was in the eye of the strange storm. I covered Thursday's protest and candlelight vigil at Neverland, stayed overnight at a Solvang hotel where the fans hid out, and got up before dawn to head up to Santa Maria for the arraignment. And then, as more than 1,000 fans cheered outside, I found myself in

the front row of the courtroom, at arm's reach from Michael Jackson and his family.

Saying the experience was surreal misses the point, because even that word calls to mind some sort of comparison, be it eerie landscape or uncommon experience. But it wasn't like either of those. It was weird, touching, stupid, fascinating, serious, solemn, funny, and fitting all at the same time, for one of the modern world's most celebrated characters ever was facing the proverbial music.

## The Fan's Eye View

For millions of pop culture fans around the world, Michael Jackson is an ingrained phenomenon. Since his sweet voice hit the airwaves in the late 1960s, Jackson has imprinted himself on the world's musical psyche. Baby boomers met him on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, while subsequent generations learned to dance by watching the Jackson 5 and were introduced to main-

stream music when his *Thriller* became the biggest album of our lives. So, that he has broad-based fan support should not surprise anyone. But the support that showed up last week—a mostly young mix of equal parts foreign and American—and the downright religious fervor with which they proclaimed his innocence was unexpectedly strange, as if Jackson had cast a spell over them.

Last week's fanfare began Thursday afternoon at the courthouse in downtown Santa Barbara. Outside District Attorney Tom Sneddon's office, some 30 sign-wielding protesters chanted "No Evidence! Michael's Innocent!" and called for Sneddon to appear. Though fans had come from as far away as Poland, France, and Japan to protest, the media managed to outnumber them by three to one. The fans sang the song "D.S.," which Jackson wrote about Tom Sneddon after the prosecutor's thwarted attempt to try the pop star on unrelated child molestation charges in 1992. But the fans didn't use the D.S. pseudonym that Jackson employed, instead singing, "Tom Sneddon is a cold man!" One young girl in the crowd was dressed as the pop star did in his "Smooth Criminal" music video, with telltale white glove, black fedora, and fake arm cast, dancing and singing in an impromptu impersonation.

Some in the crowd—including Najee Ali of Project Islamic HOPE, who led the protesters with his megaphone—began to assert that racism lay behind the charges leveled at an African-American man who'd managed to amass money and power. Santa Barbaran Marjorie Brandon said, "Of course it's racist. In this community, it always is. And when it comes down to the system in Santa Barbara, African-Americans are outnumbered."

But those allegations and the heartfelt support failed to mask that there was something about the protest that seemed contrived, as if the singing and dancing was aimed more to entertain video cameras than to influence the court of public opinion. After checking out the display briefly, most passersby, police, and media types were reduced to laughter.

But if the courthouse protest was silly, the candlelight vigil at Neverland that evening was touching. Outside the gates of the ranch, close to 100 fans assembled with their own candles, carrying signs and singing another Jackson song together in unison: "You are not alone. I am here with you. Though we're far apart, you're always in my heart."

Almost uniformly, the fans claimed that Jackson was innocent and that the charges were brought vindictively by Sneddon, who they claim is still peeved because he didn't get the singer in 1992. (Sneddon denies charges of a personal vendetta.) Seemingly sane fans such as Cecilie of Norway, Marta and Aneta of Poland, Pascal of France, and Charlotte of Bristol, England—all of whom came from halfway across the world to show support—believe that it's all about taking away his money and power. "Look into his eyes and you can see he's innocent," said Lisa, a thirty-something from London. "He would never harm a child."

Every fan I spoke with wanted to know what I thought, as if my views would be a litmus test for what I wrote. I told them that, as a professional journalist, I officially had no opinion. But as a fan of Jackson's career—"Beat It" was my first favorite pop song, the "Thriller" music video my first scary



(Top to bottom,) Fans surged around the star as he entered and left the courtroom, with famous family members such as sister Janet Jackson in tow. A touching vigil was held the night prior to the hearing outside of Jackson's Neverland Ranch. Fans impersonating Jackson at the ranch held candles and sang aloud. And in Santa Barbara, pro-Jackson activists bombarded the office of District Attorney Tom Sneddon on Thursday, eager to show their message of contempt and courage.

onscreen experience, moonwalking my first attempt at dancing, and even today, his older songs always make me turn up the volume—I hoped he wasn't guilty.

What I didn't say was that I feared Jackson's own troubled upbringing—where an overbearing father pushed his young children to work harder than most grownups—had led to his ongoing attempt to regain his childhood. And that lifestyle has sculpted a unique behavior toward all children, which he has spoken honestly about on television. And right or wrong, it's that behavior—specifically, sleeping in the same bed with children not his own—that has been deemed unacceptable by the rest of society and that, I believe, led to the charges of child molestation.

As a fan, I understand why so many publicly support him. But I also understand the process of law, so I was irked by the blind faith of fans who know nothing about the investigation yet swear by his innocence anyway. And while I tend to share their critical views on the media saturation of the case, I was equally bugged by their simultaneous hatred of, yet dependence on, the press.

Their ire has included poison-laced attacks on the tabloid and mainstream media, primarily for treating Jackson as if he's guilty before proven to be. Said one man at the courthouse protest: "There's a journalistic code of ethics. Maybe some of you should read it!" That was echoed with more vitriol at the otherwise mellow vigil when the crowd began chanting, into the faces of such outlets as the *Celebrity Justice* TV show and *People* magazine, "F\*\*k the press! Michael is the best!" Ironically, most fans were eager to speak to reporters, if reluctant to provide their last names.

The next day, the fan crusade hit a crescendo, with more than 1,000 gathering outside the Santa Maria courtroom in the predawn hours. Court officials passed out lottery tickets to the crowd for the chance to view the hearing, scheduled for 8:30 a.m. Sixty ticket-holders got the good news that they'd be allowed either into the courtroom or the overflow room, where the hearing would be televised on a closed-circuit broadcast.

One of these was Griselda Diaz of Santa Maria—lucky number 292—a young woman who looked as if she'd skipped her high school classes for the day. But to my surprise, she told me about her two-year-old son, who already loved dancing to Jackson tunes. She supported Jackson because he "gives everybody love and support." Right next to her in line was Tomoko Satomura, number 246, who came all the way from Japan just for this hearing. Looking much like a tiny schoolteacher with wire-rimmed spectacles, Satomura's Japanese accent was thick but her message clear: "I believe in Michael's innocence. He couldn't do anything wrong with a child."

## The Media Zoo

As the sun rose Friday morning, the local, domestic, and international media put the finishing touches on their makeshift village, a wire-wrapped, satellite-fed, camera-packed area stretching from the outhouses behind the courthouse to the roof of the attorney's office across the street, where on-air correspondents filed the earliest of pre-hearing reports. The smell of coffee and tri-tip were in the air, as entrepreneurial vendors tried to cash in on the mass migration to Cook and

continued ►

# Inside Neverland

by D.J. Palladino

Neverland's hold on the imagination is its mystery. Who hasn't heard the rumors? Like, there's an exact replica of Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean ride on the property. False, I learned last week.

While covering Jackson's arraignment in Santa Maria, I found on the ground an invitation to a party at the ranch, which read: "In the spirit of love and togetherness, Michael Jackson would like to invite his fans and supporters to his Neverland Ranch. Please join us Friday, January 16, 2004. Refreshments will be served." Everybody in the press had been whispering about it. My editors were thrilled. I drove right over to the ranch and had a 15-minute wait in a line of cars. It wasn't that hard to get in. I didn't mention that I was a journalist to the burly Nation of Islam guards. Nobody asked. But a waiver was proffered. I guessed it forbade me from writing what I saw. Game over, I thought. Instead, it released Jackson from paying me if I was filmed on his property. Women were not allowed to bring in purses—no cameras or cell phones were allowed. We were frisked electronically, then allowed in. (Too bad about the cameras, as a beautiful valley runs the length of the property.)

A small train, exactly like the one that circles the Santa Barbara Zoo, waited like magic transport. We boarded the train and set off due north. A lake surrounded by blue-green grass meadows dotted with life-sized statues of children, mostly boys. Pan figures—both Peter and the satyr god. Boys in Norman Rockwell pursuits, playing on stilts and other games even children my age never played. Even without the charges against Jackson, the level of youth fetish seemed alarming.

Next we came to the playground surrounding the house. Perfect with a pool, high dive of course, trampolines, seesaws, and jungle gyms. And I thought for a second, how cool is this? And then, but it's all for *him*. Michael Jackson was born August 29, 1958, in Gary, Indiana, which makes him 45—old to play on a jungle gym, maybe. The other striking features entering the ranch are the open faux scrolls and portentous fake books inscribed with somewhat mawkish poetry—a *child's smile can overcome a dictator's hardened heart*—that kind of thing. All penned, of course, by Jackson. Monumental showing-off, literally. But, again, to whom? In mythology, Narcissus was a stripling boy so feminine in appearance both men and women wanted him. He lived in his own world, too.

The train next took us to the amusement park area. There are a dozen rides; the most impressive is a duplicate of the Disneyland Fantasyland carousel. There's a giant rippling slide, bumper cars, a schooner that rocks centrifugally like the one at Magic Mountain, and a host of small carnival rides like the Zipper. Also in the park area is a tiny movie theater replete with a snack bar in which two employees were handing out candy and popcorn free to all takers. Lunch, consisting of fruits, Caesar, pasta, fried chicken, and turkey hot dogs were served from six stalls; waiting was minimal. The McCrary Family, a gospel-tinged soul group, meanwhile entertained boisterously with songs like the Staples' "I'll Take You There." It was an idyllic, Sunday-come-to-meeting scene. Everywhere were "Michael Is Innocent" T-shirts, and the crowd was beneficently mixed. Everybody was smiling—except for the Nation of Islam men—and Jackson's employees smiled the hardest.

Some 500 feet up the valley we came to the zoo. On the way, however, were strange bus shelters. (Does a city bus come through here?) Near these were big movie posters like you see in downtown Beverly Hills. Big rocks hid speakers that piped Beethoven string quartets. Back toward the zoo, the Santa Ynez Valley Ranch terrain appears to take over. The corral holds llamas. There are two elephants, three giraffes, and two huge orangutans moping around for peanuts on their ranch-style cages. The herpetarium is the scariest I've ever seen. Two cobras arch behind one window, a huge rattlesnake rattling away across the way. This is a little-boy thing, maybe—monsters behind glass, charming. On the way back down, I got into a discussion with one of the animal workers. I asked if this busy, devoted worker slept near the animals. He looked surprised. "Nobody sleeps here. Well, Michael does. There are security people 24 hours a day, but only Michael sleeps here," the worker said.

Coming back down, I went over to the house. There are three structures, if memory serves. A big house, a smaller one further away with guards hovering, and one house that serves as a video parlor. Behind the house is the most bizarre spectacle: On the hill is a perfect replica of Disneyland's train station. Near the house a group of people was gathered; a rumor that Michael was inside and might come out stood unchallenged for half an hour, until a guard suddenly asked people what they were waiting for. I heard that a few people were admitted in, though, and that Michael did speak to them.

I'll never know because after three hours, I had to leave. Walking toward the cars, though, I spotted Jackson's new attorney and then, suddenly, Eddie Griffin. The comedian was surrounded by people and cheerfully signing autographs. I came up and said something pleasant—then on a whim I asked if Michael Jackson was innocent. He looked at me, incredulous. "Of course he is," said Griffin, gesturing at the child-friendly universe that Jackson built. ■

Miller streets in Santa Maria.

Those who had the coveted media pass for the courtroom waited in the jury building for their credentials. Veteran reporters who had dealt with high-profile cases in Los Angeles were surprised to find how well the Santa Maria courthouse was organized to handle the media mass. I was happily surprised to learn that members of Santa Barbara County news organizations were given preferential treatment, including a front-row seat in the courtroom.

Meanwhile, on the street, young men held various "Michael Jackson Is Innocent" T-shirts — some were selling them for \$10, others were giving them away to true fans. Rumor had it that Jackson's camp had paid for the buses that cruised by, full of fans from L.A. and bumping some of Jackson's hit songs. Among the assembled media outlets, French, Japanese, German, Danish, and accented English were being spoken, and camera crews milled about, interviewing Jackson impersonators, cute little kids, people with the best signs, and anyone else who looked like they had something interesting to say. (These included, among other people, a woman with a gray parrot on her shoulder, a man with a dog on his, ex-Sheriff Jim Thomas, members of the Nation of Islam in charge of security, and reporters from foreign outlets.) Photographers jockeyed for position along the impromptu alley of chain-link fences where the pop star would walk into court. News reporters scribbled in their notebooks. Those with coveted credentials began lining up to run the extensive security gauntlet — no bags, cell phones, pagers, cameras, or suspicious items on your key chain — and pass through the temporary metal detectors set up in the courthouse.

For most outlets, the news had become the news, with pundits and so-called experts remarking with surprise when shots of the media sea aired. Every channel mentioned with a sort of disdain the camera-carrying crowd that had assembled, critical of others but apparently not realizing their own responsibility for the situation. A grand stage had already been built by the hands of the world media,

and now everyone was waiting for the star.

## In the Courtroom

Inside the courtroom, the mood was much more grim. Despite the conversational murmur, it seemed unlikely that anyone was unaware of the gravity of the situation. The most unique of celebrities was about to walk in and face the most disgusting of charges. We were about to become the eyes of the world for the start of a case about lost childhood — and there's nothing more sobering than that.

Soon, the jovial mumbling fell silent and Joe Jackson, the pop star's father, entered the courtroom. He was followed by mother Katherine, brothers Jermaine, Tito, and Randy, and sister Janet, a superstar in her own right. Then came the lawyers. First were attorney Theodore Boutros and his assistant, who represented the media's interest on opening the search warrant to public view and stopping the proposed gag order. Next were DA Tom Sneddon and his sure-faced team of Gerald Franklin and Ron Zonen. Then came Jackson's lead attorney Mark Geragos with Steve Cochrane (Jackson's civil attorney), Benjamin Brafman (a new addition from New York, famous for getting Sean "P. Diddy" Combs off on gun charges), Robert Sanger (criminal defense attorney from Santa Barbara picked up for his local knowledge and sponsorship of Brafman), and Leonard Muhammed (Nation of Islam big shot with no known legal background).

Finally, to the gasps of the fans in the crowd, Michael Jackson entered, dressed in a neat blue suit with white piping, a white armband, a medallion, dark shades, black rhinestone boots, and a bobbed haircut with a flip. He stopped briefly to greet his parents and family, and then took his seat next to his lawyers. Before the judge entered the room, Jackson was fingerprinted. As he wiped the ink off his fingers, I realized that the craziness outside was a mirage atop the stark reality of the courtroom.

The bailiff ordered "All rise!" as the honorable Judge Rodney Melville entered. With glasses, gray hair, and a stubbled goatee, Melville, who speaks softly yet carries a stern

demeanor, appeared to be annoyed by the fanfare. He set the tone by admonishing the tardy pop star. "Mr. Jackson," he said, "you started out on the wrong foot with me. The hearing was set for 8:30 and you were late. I will not put up with that. It's an insult to the court. From now on — consider this a polite warning — you must be on time." The chastising of Jackson was just the first on Melville's list, as he later chided almost every attorney in the room. The tone of the court of Melville was clear: Forget the ruckus outside and remember that this is a court of law and the judge is the boss.

Unwaveringly serious, Melville read aloud the nine felony charges — seven for molestation, two for giving an intoxicating substance to a child — to which Jackson, in his soft, barely audible voice, pled "Not guilty." A second hearing was then set for Friday, February 13 — a fittingly bizarre date — to discuss and schedule the preliminary hearing dates.

Next was the media attorney's argument for opening to public view the search warrant used for the Neverland raid, a move that Geragos opposed. Melville decided to keep the more than 80-page document closed to public viewing, explaining that he believed opening it would not answer questions, but simply raise more speculation.

Then everyone argued about the gag order proposed by Sneddon and opposed by the media that bars anyone involved in the case — attorney, defendant, witnesses, or other — from speaking publicly about the trial. Geragos spoke from experience that gag orders could hurt defendants when outlandish rumors hit the airwaves and could not be officially denied; he argued that some concessions should be made for such cases. Melville agreed, but imposed the full gag order temporarily until both sides presented what conditions would warrant concessions to the order. (Those were turned in on Tuesday.)

Then, toward the end of the nearly two-hour hearing, Jackson had to use the restroom. Melville let him go, and almost a third of the courtroom got up to follow him. All of his family, except for Joe Jackson, got up and left as well, as did some of the media and fans, while the bailiffs tried to restore order. Meanwhile, the attorneys were arguing about a different point, which they resolved by the time the commotion died down.

Yet Melville wasn't done. "I assume Mr. Jackson had to use the restroom. So do I," he said to Geragos in his soft-spoken yet stern style. "Did you see the disruption that made? I think you need to address liquid intake." While it came off as joke-like, Melville was serious — hinting that Jackson won't be getting on his good side anytime soon. Court was then adjourned.

## The People Parade

Once outside, the sober atmosphere of the courtroom quickly morphed back into a circus, as Jackson was escorted by a team of sturdy representatives of the Nation of Islam down the chain-link alley, past fans and photographers, and toward his waiting SUV. The mid-day crowd had surged past capacity and spilled onto the street, where a caravan awaited the Jackson entourage. High-pitched screams erupted at the sight of Jackson, who blocked the sun with a large black umbrella as he touched fans' hands on his way to the street.

After watching him emerge from the court building — where, I was told by a bailiff, he did in fact use the restroom — I made my way around the courthouse, past the media vans parked in the \$250 spots, and toward the street. Diehard fans mixed with curious onlookers as Jackson slowly moved toward his vehicle. I could determine where he was only by locating the most active part of the crowd. But then, to everyone's surprise, he jumped up on top of his black SUV and gave the crowd a wave and a little dance.

The businesslike mood of the courtroom — where I sat unfazed and unmoved just a few feet from Jackson, the man who introduced my generation to music — had evaporated. All of the sudden, I had chills — my professional demeanor was instantly blown. In the previous 24 hours, I'd laughed at fanatical fans, cursed the overblown media coverage, and questioned the motives of both the accusers and the accused. But it was with sincerity that I smiled as Jackson thanked his fans from atop his car last Friday, recognizing the genuinely heartfelt connection between the über celebrity and his dedicated followers. Maybe he's guilty, maybe he's innocent — but it was clear to me last Friday he will always be the King of Pop. ■

**Members of the Nation of Islam protected the pop star during his entry into and escape from the courthouse (left). The surrounding circus was part freak show, part love brigade, as lookalikes paraded around the streets of Santa Maria (right).**

