

Michael Jackson: media, mourning, music and monstrosity

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Martin and Michael

The [sudden death of singer Michael Jackson](#) reminds us of the often-ghastly and always compelling dance between news media and fame.

The BBC News struggled to get the tone right in its description of a best-selling freak and giant of popular culture. At one point last night Sky was not sure if he was in a coma or deceased. Twitter went into frantic overdrive and some functions collapsed. The tabloids knew what the message is: [Jacko Dead](#)

He may simply have died from the toll exerted by a damaged and damaging lifestyle. Or the poison of a warped mind and shattered soul may be more directly responsible.

Michael Jackson was not a celebrity in the sense of being famous only for being famous. His fame was built on very real biographical and professional facts. He was the outstanding popular musician of the last 25 years in a world where the music dance video has become the predominant commercial art form. His was the relatively bland but insistent soundtrack to millions of lives.

His abused childhood, his changing appearance, his bizarre and pathetic 'family' life spoke volumes to fans who often had their own scars inflicted by modern life. The seductive sparkle of so much of the music and the packaging was counter pointed by the weird, sometimes wonderful, and always oddly raw reality of his personal world.

So he was not a cheap celeb, famous for 15 minutes. He was a persistently gripping persona who sought the limelight only to retreat to a somewhat sordid fantasy secret life. The news media reveled – quite rightly – in the painful contradictions of that dualism.

[Martin Bashir's brutal but brave documentary](#) sought to reveal the price that others paid for Jackson's own suffering, but in the end it was Michael who got the sympathy. We love our legends to be tarnished, dramatic and dangerous. We don't like to think about quite how dark their lives might be.

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