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Michael Jackson Trial

Jackson has potential to rebuild his career

Great music, or another 'brilliant' performance, could spur comeback

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A young Michael Jackson fan holds an album cover earlier this year at the courthouse in Santa Maria, Calif. A small but die-hard core of fans offered support throughout Jackson's trial. But does he have enough fans to revive his career?

NEW YORK — Michael Jackson's career has often been declared dead, but a day after the pop icon was acquitted Monday on all charges in the child molestation case against him, industry insiders believe MJ can make a comeback.

Jackson's family remained silent Tuesday, his attorney Tom Mesereau Jr. told NBC only that the entertainer would [no longer allow boys to stay in his bedroom](#) — a primary cause of Jackson's legal woes — and his official Web site simply flashed messages proclaiming his legal victory: “Innocent,” “V is for Vindication.”

After facing charges that he molested a young cancer patient and enduring a graphic trial featuring an avalanche of porn and allegations of sex with young boys, many now wonder if Jackson's career can rebound.

But music executives are quick to point out that Jackson still has plenty of potential.

“He can have success,” said Antonio “L.A.” Reid, chairman and CEO of Island Def Jam. “I would say that he has to just make great music and concentrate on nothing else but making great music and making great live performances.”

When his success as a child wunderkind fronting The Jackson Five was waning, some doubted whether he could make it as an adult star — and were proven wrong. And when he had hits again with his brothers as part of The Jacksons, others questioned whether he could become a solo success — and they were wrong.

After Jackson became one of the most popular entertainers in history — and saw his image tarnished by a 1993 allegation of child molestation — many doubted that he would have a No. 1 hit again. But he did.

The public hasn't concentrated on Jackson as a musical figure for a long time. His last album, a greatest hits project, was released the day of his arrest on child molestation charges in 2003. For the past year and a half, news around Jackson has centered on allegations of sex with children, giving them alcohol, and other questionable behavior at Neverland Ranch.

“People have been fascinated with Michael as a celebrity,” says Jack Isquith, head of label relations at AOL Music, which premieres the videos, concerts and singles by the top pop acts.

“He has declined in terms of his record sales and his musical standing ... there's no question that Michael has been perceived on the wane,” Isquith said. “(But) if Michael Jackson were to play the Apollo and it was monumentally brilliant ... I think that would really register a lot of focus on Michael as a musical (figure).”

Las Vegas might be a possibility for him to make that great live performance. On Tuesday, Jack Wishna, who has a minority interest in Trump's New Frontier Hotel and Casino, said he had been in talks with Jackson before the trial to perform on the Strip, and hopes to continue those negotiations.

“I am still interested in bringing his talents to Las Vegas,” he said in a statement.

Backseat to bizarre behavior

Even before the allegations, Jackson's musical career had taken a backseat to his increasingly bizarre behavior — from extensive plastic surgery to holding his infant son over a balcony. And his career was seriously damaged by the 1993 child molestation accusation.

That case went away when Jackson paid a multimillion-dollar settlement while maintaining his innocence, and no criminal charges were filed. Since then, Jackson has released just two albums that have sold about 2 million copies each — great numbers for most artists, but considered a flop given Jackson's previous stellar sales.

He has retained his star power — a 2001 concert paying tribute to his 30 years in music featured a who's who of celebrities and legends, including Destiny's Child, Marlon Brando, Liza Minelli, Whitney Houston, 'N Sync, Britney Spears and Elizabeth Taylor.

"To sell two million records says a lot," Reid noted. "By the way, I'm not sure how many records Madonna sold, but I don't think it's very much more than that, probably about that."

Actually, it was less — her 2003 album "American Life" struggled to reach 1 million in sales.

'Ick' factor

Yet, there is a considerable "ick" factor when it comes to Michael Jackson. Though acquitted of child molestation, most people have been repulsed by his admission to sleeping in the same bed with children, even if it was non-sexual. He also carries plenty of baggage given his eccentric behavior over the years and plastic surgery that has reduced him to a disturbing visual image.

"This man has been in decline, psychologically and physically, for over a decade," said veteran New York-born DJ and music historian Paul Gambaccini.

"We don't want to see a Judy Garland," Gambaccini told the BBC, referring to the Hollywood actress who struggled with addiction to prescription drugs and alcohol in her later years.

But negative publicity — no matter how unseemly — doesn't necessarily mean the end of a career anymore.

Take R. Kelly. In 2002, videotapes circulated showing a man bearing a striking resemblance to Kelly having sex with what appeared to be an underage girl — and then urinating on her. Later that year, he was charged with child pornography, and pundits declared his career over.

A year later, he released the critically acclaimed "Chocolate Factory" — which debuted at the top of the charts. Since then, he has released two other platinum projects, and worked with several top acts, including Britney Spears and Jay-Z.

DJ Paul Cubby Bryant, of New York City pop radio station Z100, said that if Jackson put out new music, he would let the audience decide its fate. "I think we would test the waters, and play it and see what the reaction was," Bryant said.

Need to find label

Of course, Jackson faces plenty of challenges in making a comeback. First, he doesn't have a label home — his commitment to Sony Music is just about over, and given the acrimony that relationship devolved into in recent years, he won't likely be recording a new album for them.

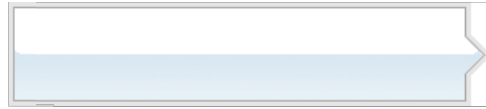
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