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INTERNATIONAL  
Music News

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# And next. . .an encore?

## Jacko could come back, but that will be a hard sell

By PHIL GALLO

The article was updated at 10:02 p.m.

Now that he's a free man, can Michael Jackson put his empire back together?

So far, only one offer is being negotiated that would add to the income generated by his catalog and music publishing interests.

That's come from a casino to stand next to the Trump Intl. Hotel & Tower in Las Vegas. Being built by billionaire Phil Ruffin, Donald Trump's partner in the Tower, the unnamed casino-resort will be open in 2007 or '08.

Reps have been quoted saying Jackson would draw more than \$80 million, and a long-term residency similar to Celine Dion at Caesars Palace is being discussed.

"My perspective, by looking at '07-'08, is that Americans love a comeback story, and everyone would want to see the regentrification of an icon," said Jack Wishna, Ruffin's partner, who is putting together the entertainment side of the casino business.

A Santa Barbara County jury of eight women and four men, which had spend 14 weeks listening to testimony and arguments, found Jackson not guilty Monday on all 10 counts in the child molestation and conspiracy case against him. They deliberated for seven days before delivering a verdict around 2 p.m. Monday.

Jackson is one of three superstar artists to whom Wishna has reached out for a long-term booking at the not-yet-named resort, which will sit on 45 acres at the north end of the Strip. The showroom will be a 2,000-seater, and performers will receive "direct and passive income" from the site.

As a bonus, Ruffin's casino, which is fully financed, will be privately held.

Getting in business with publicly held companies, several people in the music and entertainment industry said, could be problematic. Across America, there will be shareholders who will object if their company contemplates an association with Jackson.

That leaves the rest of the world, where Jackson has been able to ply his trade over the last decade. His is still immensely popular in Asia and Australia, and he could certainly build a career performing away from the U.S.

But that would require developing a strategy and raising financing to assemble a show, which runs contrary to the indecisiveness that has been a driving force in Jackson's career.



Michael Jackson is a free man after being found not guilty of the ten charges filed against him.

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*Admitting that he is no longer the King of Pop in his home country may be a blow to the ego that Jackson will refuse to accept.*

*And with his contract with Sony Music's Epic Records at or near its conclusion, Jackson will have a hard time finding a deep pocket to finance his recordings or tours, which have often been among the most expensive for rock or pop artists.*

#### **Debt's a drag**

*Most important, Jackson needs to find a way to pay down his \$270 million debt, now overseen by Fortress Investment Group, which purchased Jackson's loans from Bank of America in May. His 2,700-acre Neverland Ranch costs an estimated \$20 million a year to operate. And his defense in the molestation trial could cost him as much as \$10 million.*

*His only current income comes from catalog album sales and royalty payments related to his half of the Sony/ATV Music publishing catalog that controls 251 Beatles songs and his own Mijac, which publishes his compositions and owns the Sly and the Family Stone catalog.*

*He has used both catalogs as collateral for loans and has refused all offers to sell any portion of Sony/ATV.*

*Fox News reported in April that Jackson was presented with -- and rejected -- a deal whereby he would sell his 50% interest in exchange for payment of the Bank of America loans and elimination of debt at Neverland Ranch.*

*Loans against Mijac would also be paid off and Jackson would wind up with \$10 million in cash plus continue to receive about \$7 million a year from Sony/ATV. Debt-free, Mijac would be worth more than its current estimated value of \$100 million.*

#### **Trial took toll**

*On Monday, Jackson looked gaunt and distressed as he weakly waved to his fans before entering and while leaving the courtroom in Santa Maria. He has had health problems throughout the trial -- a bad back and the flu -- but a number of TV pundits who have watched the trial said his appearance has aged 10 years over the last five months.*

*Jackson gave his lawyer Thomas A. Mesereau Jr. a hug after the verdicts were read; one of Mesereau's assistants cried after the first "not guilty" was read.*

*For Jackson, the verdict was a vindication -- a decision that went along with his contention that he was the victim of mother-and-son con artists and an aggressive prosecutor.*

*According to many observers, Santa Barbara District Attorney Tom Sneddon was hell-bent on pursuing charges against Jackson despite obvious deficiencies in the case. While the molestation charges were graphic and disturbing, the victim and his family were terrible witnesses.*

*Mesereau was able to portray them as con artists who thought they had found their biggest score.*

#### **'Wacko grifter family'**



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Well-known criminal defense attorney Harland Braun said Sneddon, who failed to indict Jackson in 1993 when an earlier victim settled with Jackson, had become too emotionally involved in the case to be dispassionate about the evidence. "He was too anxious to jump into a case with this wacko grifter family," said Braun.

The case was very weak, with not enough credible evidence, added Braun, even with the advantage of an unusual California law that allowed the prosecution to introduce evidence of other molestations with which Jackson had never been charged.

The turning point in the case, said Braun, came when Jackson's attorneys were able to show that a \$152,000 settlement the family received from J.C. Penney was the result of a fraudulent lawsuit. The family claimed that security guards roughed them up and groped the mother. On cross-examination in the Jackson case, the defense showed that the boy had been coached to give false statements and that the mother actually had been beaten by her abusive ex-husband.

As the verdicts were read, Jackson looked straight ahead and showed no visible reaction as he was repeatedly found not guilty. Outside, where fans had been remarkably quiet, they greeted the verdict with relief, cheers and the pumping of fists; one woman released a dove after each "not guilty" was read.

### **Media tunes in**

With no television crews allowed inside the courtroom, media outlets around the world carried the voice of the court clerk reading not guilty verdicts for charges of conspiracy to commit a lewd act upon a child -- a 13-year-old cancer survivor -- committing a lewd act upon a child and providing alcoholic beverages for minors. Jurors also acquitted him of conspiring to imprison his accuser and the boy's family.

Local and national news media made varying decisions on breaking into scheduled programming when the court announced around 12:30 p.m. that a verdict would be read in about an hour. CNN and Fox News immediately switched to Santa Barbara County and brought in their pundits; MSNBC stuck with a plane crash in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Among Los Angeles broadcasters, Fox 11 covered the pre-verdict proceedings by offering aerial views of Jackson's Neverland Ranch and the King of Pop's entourage of four SUVs making its way to the courthouse, while KABC 7 went with coverage from the newsroom. KNBC 4 went with a split screen between Santa Maria and the regularly scheduled soap opera; KCBS stuck with its soap opera until members of the Jackson family arrived at the courthouse.

The jurors, identified only by their numbers, gathered for an hourlong news conference after the verdicts were read. "We expected better evidence, something that was a little more convincing," said one woman. "It just wasn't there."

**(Janet Shprintz and the Associated Press contributed to this report.)**

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