

MICHAEL JACKSON
CONSPIRACY

APHRODITE JONES

FOREWORD BY TOM MESEREAU

aphroditejonesbooks

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Author's Note

The day Michael Jackson was exonerated, I was asked what I really thought about the verdicts by FOX star Bill O'Reilly. For months, I had been commenting about the trial for *FOX News*, saying many things against Jackson, leading viewers to believe the pop star was guilty. When O'Reilly pressed me for an answer on the "not guilty" verdicts, I was stammering. O'Reilly wanted a straight answer, and I finally said I thought the jury did the right thing.

But part of me was still in shock.

As I made one of my last public comments on the case, I realized that I had become one of the media folks who had predetermined the outcome of the trial, wrongly. Many people around me were so sure of Jackson's guilt. Certain reporters had slanted TV and radio coverage to suit the prosecution, and I was one of the people who followed that dangerous trend.

Somehow, I had missed the truth.

When I read the accounts of the NOT GUILTY verdicts in all the newspapers, I felt ashamed to have been part of the media machine that seemed hell-bent on destroying Jackson. After I thought about it for a few hours, I contacted the jury foreman, Paul Rodriguez, who talked to me about Jackson, who asserted that Jackson had been a target. The jury foreman said Michael Jackson was truly not guilty of the charges. He felt Jackson had been victimized by the media.

Writing a book about Jackson's innocence never crossed my mind, not during the trial in Santa Maria. I respected Tom Mesereau as an attorney, and I came to see why the jury voted not guilty on every charge, but I had no intention of revealing my own slanted news coverage. Beyond that, I certainly didn't want to expose any of my media "friends" as being one-sided and unfair.

To make it clear: there were twenty-two hundred credentialed media people at the trial, and less than a handful of people admitted their deliberate attempts to

portray Michael Jackson as guilty. Some of those media folks were a part of my inner circle. I have not named names of any media person in this book, other than Mr. Martin Bashir, because it would be in bad taste to point fingers. Viewers who followed the trial know who the culprits are.

I must admit that there was a point during the trial, toward the end, when I came to feel sad about Jackson, when I felt the whole media world was against him. I wanted the fans to know that I wasn't happy about the media coverage and decided to go down to the gates of Neverland to make peace with his fans. I went to tell people that I wasn't trying to be unfair to Michael, that I was just reporting the facts. I tried to convince them that I didn't have an agenda.

But the fans didn't believe me. They'd seen my newscasts, and many thought I was lying. I stayed for quite a while, trying to tell people that I wasn't out to smear Jackson, but they weren't interested.

As I listened to his fans, who had flown in from places like Spain, Ireland, and even Iran, they told me their side of the story. I heard them insist that the American media was tainted, that Americans hated Jackson for all the wrong reasons. Some people brought up the race card. Others talked about Michael's friendships with children as being acceptable in any part of the world—other than America.

His fans impressed me. Yes, there were a few overzealous people—one woman called me a whore in Spanish—but at the same time, many of his supporters were good-hearted. Some wanted to give me the benefit of the doubt.

I appreciated that.

I took pictures with a few fans at the front gates of Neverland, which was covered in hearts by those who loved Michael. After a while, a small group of us began to laugh about the Arvizo clan and their crazy rebuttal tape. We were mimicking Janet Arvizo, who, on tape, supported Michael Jackson as her only "family." On the rebuttal tape, Janet wondered why, after the airing of the Bashir interview, there were so many people suddenly showing care and concern for her, when really, only Michael was supportive of her family.

In unison, we repeated Janet's lines:

"*Where were they*, when I couldn't feed my children, even a box of cereal?"

"*Where were they*, when my children and I would weep?"

"*Where were they*, when my children and I were lonely?"

"Where were *they*, when I didn't have enough money to pay for bus fare?"

"Where were they?" we asked over and over, and we laughed about Janet's melodramatic rantings.

Because of this visit to Neverland, my reportage took a slight turn. I became more open to the idea that Michael Jackson was not guilty, and I tried to stay

away from the negative commentary that filled much of my earlier newscasts. Not only had I been one-sided on TV, I had contributed to Michael Reagan's radio show (the adopted son of President Ronald Reagan) and had spent weeks on Reagan's national program—bashing Michael Jackson.

If there was a media conspiracy, I was guilty.

Some weeks later, as every last TV truck pulled out of Santa Maria, I found myself alone there, lost without the presence of Michael, lost without the comfort of having my media "buddies" to help me through another day. I felt upset.

Santa Maria was a nice place, but it became an empty shell for me. The Jackson "event" was over, and I became a stranger in a small town. I thought about my media friends and realized that many of them weren't my friends at all. They had made use of my input and had already gone off to the next hot story. Some were reporting live from Aruba, in search of a missing teenage girl.

Luckily, I wasn't worried about the next news tidbit. I had a bigger picture in mind and had compiled all kinds of data. I still wanted to write a book about Jackson, because after all, I wasn't at the trial simply to report the news. I was there, primarily, as an author.

Since I was at the trial as a freelance TV reporter, I was left on my own to get myself shipped out, to get everything shipped back home. Sitting in Santa Maria with my thoughts, trying to determine what to do with all the documentation and stacks of notes I'd written about the trial, I decided to ship every last thing, just in case the book materialized.

As I made my journey back to the East Coast, I thought about the financial waste that so many people, especially California taxpayers, had been subjected to. It was impossible to calculate the exact amount of dollars wasted, but the numbers had to be in the millions. The Jackson trial was one of the largest events in U.S. history. The amount of money spent on security alone, was simply outrageous.

I considered the expensive "impact fee" I was asked to pay to Santa Maria, something I never encountered in any trial I attended in the history of my crime-writing career. I wondered why I was asked to pay so much money to be seated at a public proceeding that was supposed to be open to any U.S. taxpayer.

And finally, I wondered why some folks in the mainstream media seemed to think of me as "less than" a reporter, especially when there were people like Marcia Clark, who unsuccessfully prosecuted the O. J. Simpson trial, standing outside the Santa Maria courthouse as a reporter for *Entertainment Tonight*. It was amazing to me that certain network talent saw me as incapable of doing a TV reporting job. Even though I'd been a TV reporter and TV commentator for

years, all throughout the Jackson trial, I knew I was being trashed behind my back. Sometimes I was attacked verbally by reporters, even to my face.

I wondered why I had been put through so much drama and expense and agony—all for nothing. When I traveled to New York, I discovered that no American publisher wanted to touch any Michael Jackson book at all—especially one that would be an account of Jackson’s side of the story.

I was devastated.

But then I thought about Michael.

I wondered how *he* felt, and realized that he was the one who’d been through hell. He was the one who was subjected to a mainstream media machine that wanted him destroyed. *He* was the one people trashed behind his back.

Less than a month after his acquittal, I learned that Jackson, his three children, and their nanny, had moved to the Persian Gulf Kingdom of Bahrain, and I understood why. At least as a guest of the royal family’s Sheik Abdullah, Jackson would have his privacy back, and he could find a way to recuperate, to unwind, and to think about a comeback. Reportedly, the star was being asked to open a vineyard or an amusement park, but Jackson wasn’t interested. Michael Jackson had bigger plans, but for the moment, he just wanted the nightmare behind him.

Months later, I contacted Judge Rodney Melville, who wrote a court order allowing me to review and photograph all the evidence from the criminal trial. I spent time making numerous trips to Santa Maria, pouring over documents, taking pictures of Michael’s private Neverland, recording all the evidence that I’d seen during the trial, requesting copies of transcripts. Readers should note that all of the quoted testimony in this book comes directly from the trial transcripts.

I had an epiphany when I sat in the Santa Maria Superior Court Complex basement, reviewing hours of never-released footage. With a court clerk monitoring my notes, I paused at that moment when the accuser told police that he “wasn’t sure” about certain things. I rewound the tape of the police interview with the accuser, and asked the court clerk what she thought about it. I wanted to know if she had sons, if boys age thirteen already know about their sexuality. The court clerk looked at me and shook her head.

“Of course boys know about that,” she said, “certainly by age thirteen.”

With that, I had my answer. I decided to contact a Jackson advocate, Pearl Jr., who also covered the Jackson trial, and we had lunch together in Los Angeles.

Pearl Jr. encouraged me to write the book about the Jackson trial, however, I still felt I would be fighting an uphill battle.

A few weeks later, I happened to run into Tom Mesereau, not once, but twice. And I took it as a sign.

I felt that, no matter what the media, the skeptics, and even my friends and family had to say, I needed to stand up for Michael Jackson. As I began to write, I noticed that people everywhere were making fun of me. *A pro-Jackson book?* Impossible.

The more people poked and prodded me, the more I became infuriated. As I struggled through thousands of pages of trial transcripts, with people discouraging me from the start, I began to think the book would never get done. It became my most arduous work, ever, and at times it felt like I had the whole world on my shoulders.

I wondered if Michael lived his life this way.

To keep my spirits up, I kept thinking about the time that Michael said hello to me during the trial. It was in the hallway during a break, and I was staring at him like he was a wax figure. Suddenly Michael looked at me and said, "Hi!"

When he spoke, it startled me.

He was being funny, and I loved it.

People always ask me if I've ever met Michael Jackson, and I tell them yes. But really, I never introduced myself, and he certainly doesn't know me.

Only once did I ask him a question from the media pen. It was early on, when Jackson was still responding to media questions, and I asked him if he was talking to his fans at the gates of Neverland. Michael was already past the media throng, but he turned, and looked back at me and said, "I love my fans, I love my fans!" It was as if they were the only people who mattered.

I hope this book reaches beyond Jackson supporters, and gets to the millions of folks who've been trusting the tabloid media, way too much. If the truth prevails, then one way or another, people will open their hearts.

Aphrodite Jones
March 1, 2007

Foreword

When I first observed journalist Aphrodite Jones at the Santa Maria, California, Courthouse in the Michael Jackson case, I turned the other direction. I wanted nothing to do with Ms. Jones. The first time my eyes met those of Ms. Jones, I threw her a deep, cold stare. If looks could kill, she was buried.

I associated Aphrodite Jones with an international media juggernaut that was heavily invested in seeing Michael Jackson convicted and destroyed. Never in my life or career had I found myself in the middle of such a crazed, dishonest, and manipulative feeding frenzy. Despite the presence of many honorable journalists, the ghost of profit seemed to overshadow much that was truthful, accurate, and careful.

Approximately one year after Michael Jackson was acquitted, I unexpectedly met Ms. Jones at an art gallery in Beverly Hills to celebrate the publication of a series of sketches of high-profile trials. For the first time, I had a candid discussion with Ms. Jones. I told her that I had watched television during the Scott Peterson trial and observed her aggressively place her head on Defense Counsel Mark Geragos' shoulder. This appeared on all of the evening newscasts about the Peterson trial and, in my opinion, looked terrible for the defense. Nothing like this was going to happen to me.

Ms. Jones told me she understood completely and greatly respected my style and approach in the Michael Jackson defense. She claimed she was having second thoughts about the way the media treated and reported on the Michael Jackson trial. She even indicated she felt some guilt for the way she had been caught up in the media frenzy to portray Michael Jackson in the worst light possible. Ms. Jones said she was considering writing a truthful book about the reality of the Michael Jackson trial and the distortion of much of the media reporting.

When Aphrodite Jones asked if she could interview me for this effort, I was skeptical. My law partner and cocounsel in the Jackson defense, Susan Yu, was adamant that I have no part of Ms. Jones' literary efforts. Nevertheless, something told me that Ms. Jones was being truthful, courageous, and professional in her desire to set the record straight about the Michael Jackson defense.

I interviewed with Ms. Jones and reviewed some of the initial drafts of her proposed book. Surprised by her candor and effort to go against the media flow surrounding Michael Jackson and to tell the truth, I agreed to assist, as long the effort came from an honest place. I refused to tell her what to write or how to write it and have no financial or profit interest in this book or foreword. As someone who strongly believes in the power and values of ideas and disagreement, I appreciate views different from my own, as long as they come from a place of integrity, intelligence, and accurate information. In the Michael Jackson case, most media conclusions were shallow, misinformed, and self-serving. I know in my heart of hearts that Michael Jackson was not guilty of any of these grisly charges.

My purpose in writing this foreword is to underscore how important it is to truthfully report the workings of our justice system. For the last fifteen years, American society has been riveted by media treatment of high-profile trials. Television coverage, documentaries, reenactments, television series, movies, and books (both fiction and nonfiction) have found a massive audience when the subject is our justice system. The amount of revenue—literally billions of dollars—that has been generated around the world is staggering. It is critical that professional journalists maintain their values and ethics in the middle of this gargantuan explosion. I believe this did not happen, for the most part, in the trial coverage of Michael Jackson.

When over seventy Santa Barbara sheriffs raided Michael Jackson's home at Neverland Ranch in November of 2003, I was returning to Los Angeles from a much-needed vacation. I was in the final stages of preparation for the defense of actor Robert Blake, who was charged with murdering his wife. Within minutes of activating my cell phone after a nine-day hiatus, it started ringing off the hook with calls from associates of Michael Jackson. They wanted me to immediately fly to Las Vegas and be his attorney.

I declined the offer because I did not feel I could ethically cover both the Blake and Jackson cases at once. The Blake murder trial was set for February of 2004 and would consume all of my time. I had managed to free Robert Blake from jail in a preliminary hearing, during which every American legal expert said obtaining bail would be impossible. I succeeded in having the conspiracy charge against

him dismissed in a subsequent hearing and was able to shift public opinion in his favor after cross-examining the prosecution's witnesses at the televised hearing. I was positive he would be acquitted.

Three months after being asked to be Michael Jackson's lawyer, on the eve of the Blake trial, Robert and I had a serious falling out, which the trial judge could not resolve. I removed myself from his defense. Approximately five weeks later, Randy Jackson, Michael's brother, called me and asked if I would reconsider. I had known Randy for many years, and we had gotten together socially from time to time. I told Randy that I was free and willing to meet Michael Jackson. Randy arranged for me to fly to Florida for this purpose and the rest is history. All of our lives were radically changed by Randy's request.

Prior to my entrance into the Michael Jackson case, I was appalled by the theatrics surrounding the Jackson defense. His lawyers were traveling to Santa Maria by private jet and appeared to be having too good of a time. Michael was late for his first appearance, marched on top of an SUV for his fans, and hosted a party for the media at Neverland later that day. A meeting of Jackson's legal and financial advisors, whom local newscasters referred to as Michael's "Dream Team," was held at the posh Beverly Hills Hotel. Michael Jackson and his counsel appeared on *60 Minutes* with disastrous results, and Jackson's Nation of Islam security detail was receiving dramatic publicity in the conservative Santa Maria community. I didn't like any of this.

I chose to tone down everything. I opposed courtroom cameras and supported the trial judge's gag order and sealing of salacious pleadings. I removed provocative individuals from the defense, either immediately or gradually. Certain people I did not trust were frozen out of key meetings or denied access to important information. My focus was on thirteen people—the judge and twelve jurors. I liked the Santa Maria community, who my instincts told me would be fair to Michael.

The Michael Jackson defense had to cope with three primary challenges: the prosecution, the media, and the legion of mediocre advisors surrounding the vulnerable, innocent Michael Jackson. I am happy to say that we successfully coped with all three hurdles.

The prosecution spent more money and time trying to convict Michael Jackson than any prosecution in history. In the early 1990s, District Attorney Tom Sneddon initiated the convening of two grand juries, Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, to investigate and indict Michael Jackson. Both refused to charge Michael with any crime. In the mid-1990s, Mr. Sneddon traveled personally to at least two countries looking for alleged victims of Michael. He couldn't find any.

Mr. Sneddon arranged for a Web site at the Santa Barbara sheriff's department for information on Michael Jackson and hired a PR firm. This was absurd.

In 2004, a third grand jury was assembled in this case, and Michael Jackson was indicted. The prosecution had nine fingerprint experts in this case—more than I have seen in any death penalty case. The fingerprint evidence went nowhere. They recklessly hired every conceivable expert in areas such as accident reconstruction, computer graphics, DNA, forensic accounting, finance, criminalistics, telephones, acoustics, security systems, child molestation, psychology, pathology, and jury consulting. They pulled out all the stops in an effort to bombard the jury with any conceivable fact that might help convict Michael. This included hiring a jury consultant who had successfully helped the prosecutors convict Timothy McVeigh, Martha Stewart, and Scott Peterson.

One will never really know how much money and how many employee hours were spent by the district attorney's office. Numerous mock trials were conducted and law enforcement agencies around the world were contacted. Of course, all of this was at the expense of the taxpayers of Santa Barbara, California.

More accredited media from around the globe covered this trial than the total number of reporters who covered the O. J. Simpson and Scott Peterson trials combined. There has never been a trial covered to this extent, and there probably never will be again. Unfortunately, it was believed that enormous sums of money would be made in films, shows, reenactments, and books about the rise and fall of Michael Jackson. However, a conviction was necessary to successfully complete any of these projects. If Michael Jackson had been sent to prison, it would have generated more media coverage than any event in history. Billions of dollars hung in the balance.

Because he is the world's best-known celebrity, Michael Jackson attracts an endless array of starstruck "wannabes." These include lawyers and non-lawyers alike. He was constantly subjected to mediocre and shortsighted advice from self-anointed experts about how to defend himself. People were willing to say anything they thought would propel them into the event, and dealing with this sea of fools was distracting and dangerous.

As an illustration, consider the role of the accuser's mother in the trial. I decided very early that she was going to be a main target of our attack. During my opening statement, I informed the jury that I would prove that the mother had orchestrated these false allegations. Having examined her for three hours in a pretrial hearing, I knew she would be a disaster for the prosecution on cross-examination. I informed everyone associated with the Jackson defense that no efforts were to be taken that might discourage her from testifying for the pros-

ecution. I specifically forbade anyone from reporting her to the Los Angeles district attorney when I learned she had committed welfare fraud. Under California law, she could have refused to testify.

Despite my clear admonitions, certain lawyers, none of whom were going to examine a single witness in the trial, reported her to Los Angeles authorities. As I expected, she then refused to testify, and it took the prosecutors weeks to convince her to take the stand in their case. Had she hung firm, she could have refused any testimony under the United States and California constitutions. This would have dealt a serious blow to our defense.

I do not believe that the lawyers who reported her intended to hurt Michael Jackson. In my opinion, they simply lacked vision and insight. They wanted to be part of the event and tried to appear strong to a vulnerable client. In reality, they didn't belong anywhere near this case.

Fortunately, I had two exceptional lawyers on my team: Susan Yu and Robert Sanger. Although we all had different backgrounds, styles, and perspectives, we made a good team. Ms. Yu and Mr. Sanger were always focused and driven to see Michael Jackson acquitted. They knew that a team effort was required. No matter what differences we ever had, we always resolved them in a manner which focused on victory. I also regularly consulted with my dear friend Jennifer Keller, a brilliant criminal defense lawyer in Southern California. These are the lawyers who won the case with me.

We also had very professional staffers and assistants. Investigators Jesus Castillo and Scott Ross were outstanding. We kept away from the media and never allowed the lure of stardom to interrupt our focused defense. This was a case where the potential for distraction was everywhere. I had watched lawyers in other cases get carried away with the camera and, in my opinion, they hurt their clients' interests. Fortunately, that never happened with Ms. Yu, Mr. Sanger, or me.

I have reviewed Ms. Jones' book and commend her for her efforts. To anyone who wants to learn what happened in the Michael Jackson courtroom, this is the book to read. It explains in clear and moving detail why an innocent, kindhearted musical genius was acquitted by a conservative jury in Santa Maria, California. Justice was done, and I am very proud to have been Michael Jackson's lead counsel.

Thomas A. Mesereau, Jr.
Los Angeles, California

“ABC ... IT’S EASY”

It was the final judgment day, one of the biggest verdicts in world history, and thousands of people were flooding the streets around the courthouse. The arrival of Michael Jackson was imminent, and sheriff’s deputies treated the crowd like they were in a Nazi boot camp, demanding everyone stand behind strict lines, demanding order out of the chaos. As some of the media stood outside under the main “commander” tent, waiting to see who would be given a seat, people felt exhausted and emotional.

After five months of covering the case for every network under the sun, media folks couldn’t agree about what kind of justice was being served in the case of *The People of the State of California v. Michael Joe Jackson*. Throughout the week that the jury deliberated, cable networks were fueling public fire, flashing images of Jackson’s potential jail cells. Some people expected the superstar to fail to show up for court, expected that Jackson would try to elude his fate.

It was midday on Monday, June 13, 2005, when final notice was given that the jury reached its verdict. Media from around the world were pumped up, and additional TV people and filmmakers had arrived with new demands and new camera angles to decipher. A mass of Jackson fans had set up various camps surrounding the courthouse: fans with camcorders, fans with cell phone cameras, fans with every conceivable high-tech digital device. People were competing for the best view of Michael, the best photo of Michael, the best T-shirt of Michael, the best poster of Michael. It was madness.

People who camped out in Santa Maria were of every race, size, shape, color, and age. Waiting for breaking news, there was a frenzy among fans, complete with a half dozen Jackson impersonators and a handful of women who wished

they were “Billie Jean.” Representatives were there from perhaps half of the countries around the world, and they were adamant about Jackson’s innocence.

For the Jackson fans who stood outside every day, the trial provided a rare opportunity to put aside differences. People from every corner of the planet became united in their fight for justice. They believed that Michael was a media pawn, and had shown up in droves to support him. People loved Michael as a brother, as an entertainer, as an icon—but to the media, Jackson’s fans seemed excessive and eccentric. They were easily dismissed.

As everyone waited for the verdicts to come in, each passing hour seemed like an eternity. Fans were growing antsy. When the gates of the courthouse opened to the public, the crowd came closer to the fences, pressing toward the row of deputies, and a few chosen lottery winners were allowed through the gates. They filed in quietly, the thirty-five members of the public, and were wanded, patted down, and given warnings about outbursts. The lottery winners were escorted inside by armed deputies. They took their seats in the public seating area, barely making a sound.

For each person there, the anticipation of the verdict had grown to mass proportions. Of the twenty-two hundred credentialed media people who covered the trial, only about three dozen would have insider seats. A few dozen producers would watch the verdicts on closed-circuit TV, housed in an overflow room, isolated from fans, but the bulk of the media opted to stay just outside the courtroom doors, guarding their individual tents, with their on-air talent ready to report the “Jackson” news.

The media throng kept looking for any juicy tidbit, anything that might titillate their audience, but all was quiet. And as the world’s anticipation for the verdicts kept getting more intense, news producers were suddenly bombarded with a growing number of fans who began to shout, “Michael’s innocent!”

And just then, like clockwork, the Jackson family arrived, complete with Katherine and Joe, Janet, La Toya, Rebbie, and Michael’s very famous brothers. As his handlers, his bodyguards, and his glamorous family were being greeted by Michael’s defense team, one thing stood out clearly: all of these people put together were completely outshined by Michael.

It was Michael, hiding behind mirrored sunglasses and his trademark umbrella, who emerged as the superstar of all superstars. As Michael approached the court, stepping out of his black sport utility vehicle, the wails of screaming and tears of emotion from everyone around him—made it seem like the whole earth stood still.

Whatever his health condition was at the time, whatever toll the trial had taken on him—Michael didn’t show it. He waltzed up to his lead attorney, Thomas Mesereau, and, just before he walked behind the closed doors of the court, Michael stood up tall as he waved to his fans, happy to see them out in full force. For the people behind the gates and cyclone fences who were screaming and cheering, there seemed to be a communion. Something about Michael made hearts pound. Everyone in his presence could feel the music. They could feel the dance.

As it happened, just as the last media person was allowed into the tiny courtroom, being wanded and scrutinized by deputies at the metal detector, Michael appeared around the corner, and, for the first time in the proceedings, the superstar looked nervous. His face looked strained. He no longer had a smile. He no longer seemed invincible. In that moment of vulnerability, people could see that the trial had taken its toll on Michael after all. It was obvious that he wanted it to be over.

Michael’s attorney later confided that their team felt confident Jackson would be acquitted on all counts, insisting that the subject of prison had not come up very often. Tom Mesereau was unshakable in his belief that Jackson was being prosecuted for crimes he did not commit, and Michael’s friends and family certainly believed in him. Still, when Michael was standing at the threshold of the courtroom for those few seconds, being wanded all alone behind the metal detector—the superstar looked scared.

Inside the court, there was an eight-woman, four-man jury who had been presented with six hundred exhibits, who had witnessed what seemed to be a smear campaign launched by the Martin Bashir documentary, who had listened to twelve years of Jackson’s private history, all laid bare for them by the Santa Barbara District Attorney Tom Sneddon. In all, Sneddon and his team had presented eighty witnesses in an attempt to portray Jackson as a serial criminal, and had been permitted to delve way back into Jackson’s life in an attempt to show the jury a pattern of criminal behavior.

As people inside the courtroom awaited the jury’s verdicts, the world seemed incredibly small. Every face was strained, every eye was focused. The Jackson family was only given six seats in the courtroom, and Janet, being gracious, opted to wait outside during the proceeding, allowing brothers Randy and Tito and sisters La Toya and Rebbie, to sit directly behind Michael.

Eleven armed deputies spread out around the room, ready to take care of any outbursts, and at 2:10 PM, Judge Rodney Melville finally began to open up the verdict envelopes. As each envelope slid open, the judge’s face remained still. Not a word was spoken in the court, but a few female jurors had tears in their eyes. Time stood still. It seemed like forever. And then, suddenly, the Superior Court Clerk Lorna Ray actually read the words:

“Count One—conspiracy—not guilty.”

“Count Two—lewd act upon a child—not guilty”

“Count Three—not guilty.”

“Not guilty” were the words being read over and over, fourteen times in all. As the verdicts came down, Katherine, who had never missed a day of the trial, had tears in her eyes. Tito reached over and kissed his mom. The rest of the family hugged and squeezed each other. As the news began sinking in, Michael’s fans sobbed quietly in the back rows. And the media crowd, for the most part, sat dumbfounded. They seemed really quite surprised that Jackson hadn’t been convicted of anything at all. From the looks on their faces, clearly some media members had been banking on seeing the superstar put behind bars.

Judge Rodney Melville, who had handled the case with such dignity and clarity, who had kept everyone safe and sound, who had not tolerated any disruptions whatsoever, now read a statement to the court:

“We the jury, feeling the weight of the world’s eyes upon us, all thoroughly and meticulously studied the testimony, evidence, and rules of procedure presented in this court since January 31, 2005. Following the jury instructions, we confidently came to our verdicts. It is our hope that this case is a testament to the belief in our justice system’s integrity and truth.”

With those words, Michael, from behind the defense table, resumed his vast composure. In some strange way, Michael seemed to have the appearance of an ancient king. There was something imperial about him. So absolutely commanding with his presence, Michael listened with quiet intent as the statement from the judge was being read. With his head held high, the superstar remained motionless. Only those who could see him close up, could detect a slight tear running down Michael’s face.

“Mr. Jackson, your bail is exonerated and you are released,” Judge Melville said.

And with that, Michael realized the jury of twelve had rejected the criminal allegations against him on all counts. The King of Pop dabbed his face with a tissue, hugged and thanked his defense attorneys, and slowly proceeded to leave the room. As he walked out of the court, passing Katherine, Joe, and his siblings, he showed little emotion. Michael floated out of the courtroom, as if he were on air, and would soon be gone, like a puff of smoke.

Outside, Michael’s fans, who’d heard the verdicts over the live television feed that surrounded every inch of the courthouse, were on the street, dancing and screaming, and going wild. One woman released white doves, others released balloons, some threw confetti, and hundreds of people screamed and cried tears of joy. The Jackson family, now in unity, walked past the thousands of reporters

from around the world who were hoping for an interview. With one hand clasped to his heart, Michael Jackson blew a kiss to his fans, then disappeared into a black Yukon SUV—a free man.

As people dispersed, certain folks in the media agreed that after all was said and done, the trial had become yet another hurdle for the pop star—one that might continue to hurt his career. Media folks gossiped about the allegations against Jackson, focusing on hateful rumors—the rumors and innuendos that had millions of people talking trash about the icon.

To his fans, the ugly trial against Jackson just didn’t seem fair. But for the majority of the media, the Michael Jackson trial had provided great sound bites. His image was manipulated with a new twist every day, and news reports had gone on *ad nauseam* about Jackson’s “special relationships” with children.

The court of public opinion shared the same attitude of many journalists. People were certain that Jackson violated children. It occurred to some media observers that—even after he’d been exonerated—the superstar would forever be defending his private life.

Most people thought Jackson’s image had been sacrificed beyond repair.

As the media prepared themselves for their last broadcasts on the case, many wondered if Jackson would recover from this witch hunt. Beyond all else, some folks had to admit that they had unwittingly taken part in the DA’s scheme to reduce Jackson’s life to a public circus. But rather than feel sorry that they’d been part of a group that was so anxious to ruin the pop star, most reporters seemed to bask in Michael’s downward spiral.

People loved to hate him, and, as long as the media could perpetuate the image of Jackson as “weird,” their ratings stayed high. It wasn’t until after the trial was all over that a few media insiders admitted that Jackson’s fans had the last laugh. Throughout the trial, his fans yelled at the media, screaming, “You don’t ever report the truth!”

Perhaps they were right.

As select media people began to rethink the five-month trial, re-examining some of the details divulged about Michael’s personal life in the courtroom, folks agreed that Jackson was able to withstand a scrutiny that most people could never have survived. Jackson had been through hell, and everything about his life, with the exception of the photos of his private parts, had been sprawled out before God, the courtroom, and all the media in the world.

All along, Jackson fans had insisted that the pop star had fallen prey to a greedy family and an angry prosecutor, but their comments were completely ignored. Instead, the media seemed happy to report allegations from prosecutors,

anxious to drag Michael's image through the mud. In the end, a hungry media was unable to see what twelve ordinary citizens had seen all along: there was no proof that Michael Jackson had committed any crimes at all.

Throughout the criminal trial, the media had been called upon to recount the most sordid details, to report the dirty accusations being made against Michael Jackson, many of which had been sold to the tabloids long before they were revealed in court. But it wasn't until the "not guilty" verdicts were being read aloud in the courtroom, that people realized that the icon who stood before them—was a person being charged with criminal acts, without any real proof.

Suddenly, it seemed that the case against Jackson was all smoke and mirrors. It occurred to savvy media folks that the case against Michael Jackson amounted to nothing more than a tax-paid scandal. But of course, that was never mentioned in news reports.

Looking at Michael on that last day of court was like looking at two people. There was Michael the man, in real life, and then all around him was this media image that people were creating, a distorted version of Michael, like a twisted reflection in a "fun house" mirror. The media was selling one thing, and they used specific camera angles and lighting to accentuate his nose, his cheeks, his skin tone. And then there was the real Michael, who was a well-dressed, highly poised man, who seemed to be a humble spirit. In person, he was a shy and quiet guy who had no relation to that tabloid character, whatsoever.

On the day of the verdicts, looking at his face, his body language, and his aura, it was clear that the man known as the King of Pop—was a kindhearted soul who had become a victim of his own fame. There was nothing arrogant about him. There was nothing weird about his facial features, nothing so crazy about his clothing, armbands and all. What was crazy was the mentality of the media who were looking to slice and dice Jackson in every way possible. People were taking shots at Michael. People had no problem ripping Jackson to shreds.

Michael Jackson had become an illusion set by a media machine. It was a machine that made millions by perpetuating the notion that Jackson was a freak. It was a dangerous machine that ultimately tried to bring the icon down, and after all, it was a media effort, the Bashir documentary, that landed Jackson in the Santa Maria court in the first place. Martin Bashir had made a name for himself based on Jackson's goodwill, and somehow Michael Jackson had been brought to face criminal charges because of it.

For people like Martin Bashir, with the bashing of Michael Jackson, a career with *ABC News* was launched. Bashir had promised to tell the truth about Jackson. Bashir played on his candid reportage, and his one-on-one interview with

Princess Diana—in order to get Michael's complete cooperation. Yet Bashir's documentary, which was presented in full at the start of the criminal trial—later appeared to be the cruel and manipulative effort of a self-aggrandizing British journalist who had been officially reprimanded in England for "unfair" journalistic practices.

Nonetheless, once Bashir's "Jackson" documentary had aired around the world, irreversible damage had been done. The exoneration of Jackson didn't seem to matter, certainly not to the mainstream media. For over a decade, the media had built an industry around "the freaky life" of Michael Jackson, and because the Bashir documentary affirmed everyone's suspicions, there was little effort to question the objectivity of the Bashir piece. It seemed most of the media had a vested interest in reporting trash about the pop icon. Trash earned them dollars and won them ratings.

With Jackson walking away triumphant, the media had been trumped.

After the verdicts were reported, the media pulled up their tents and wires, their satellite dishes and campers, and their hair and makeup teams. The town of Santa Maria seemed ghostly. Tabloid media looked for dirt. Some tried to follow Jackson to the hospital to get photos of him looking run down and sickly, but they had no luck.

There was some cursory reportage from the gates of Neverland to show the jubilation of the fans, but in the final analysis, the media was all about the *grit*. The media was all about the *nasty*. With nothing more salacious to report, the media had moved on. For everyone who had access to a microphone, the news about the trial was reduced to a mini-sound bite.

The days of stomping on the King of Pop had come to a grinding halt.

As for the people in the DA's office, they seemed disappointed that the court of public opinion didn't translate into a conviction. In his own press conference, Tom Sneddon blamed Jackson's exoneration on his "star power" and insisted that his fervent pursuit of Jackson in the Santa Maria trial—had nothing to do with his past history regarding Michael Jackson.

Tom Sneddon's innuendo—that Michael Jackson had been cleared because he was a superstar—was coming from sour grapes. The idea that the criminal case had no merit, was something that the DA and his team would never accept. When it came to Michael Jackson, Tom Sneddon had a specific agenda. The prosecutor mistakenly believed that slanted media coverage would further his cause, would help put Jackson behind bars.

But it didn't.

“MUSIC AND ME”

Long before there was a trial in Santa Maria, the media seemed to have taken sides, having convicted Jackson for unspeakable acts based on accusations that were floating around the world, all over the Internet, all over the tabloids. Most media reports seemed to revel in the negative cloak which shrouded the pop star, and there was little Jackson could do about it.

In order to sell papers and get ratings, news reports dehumanized him in every way possible, and journalists took every opportunity to report the newest “dirt” about Michael without bothering to corroborate the details. During the trial, even when people took the stand to testify about Michael’s good deeds, that side of Michael Jackson was never reported by mainstream media.

Without realizing it, many people in the media had become part of the conspiracy to tear Michael down. People covering the trial seemed to be focusing on the prosecution, telling a one-sided story. And news producers encouraged that. The news machine was interested in ratings, and it seemed TV producers wanted reporters to talk about *anything* that was anti-Jackson. The more negative the commentary, the more attention the story got. It was a vicious cycle that almost everyone in the media got caught up in.

But seeing Michael interact with fans, his family, his attorneys, the law officials, and even the media—one thing was undeniable—the aura of Michael Jackson. The pop star seemed to have a white light around him that transcended all the hoopla. Michael didn’t seem the least bit concerned by the lurid allegations being set forth in the courtroom. In fact, his facial expressions inside the court made the prosecutors look like a team of desperate people. The DA seemed to be

grasping at straws, and Michael’s reaction to their “evidence” seemed to let jurors know that.

As for Michael’s fans, who held vigils and camped out around Neverland and at the courthouse, they were irate about the charges and felt Jackson had become the object of an angry mob mentality. Outside the gates of Neverland, some described Michael by making a parallel to Princess Diana, another icon whose every move had been turned against her in an effort to make sensational headlines. Fans felt that the media wanted to use Michael Jackson like a science experiment. To the fans, Jackson had become like an insect caught in a glass jar who could be poked and provoked—never allowed to live freely. Unlike Diana, whose life ended tragically when the media swarmed her, with Michael, the media wanted to keep him alive, to keep their ratings going up forever.

His fans insisted that Michael had become a victim of a media machine that refused to see the truth—even when it was presented in a California Superior Court. Fans talked about the worldwide media appetite that had somehow decided Michael Jackson was “free game” for every rumor and innuendo, for all the mudslinging in the world.

As it turned out, virtually everything that Sneddon and his team had presented in court had been discredited by Thomas Mesereau and his defense team. An imposing figure who was not out for media attention, not a self-promoter in any way, Tom Mesereau had become known as the white-haired defense attorney who meant business. He himself did not want to be the focus of media trial coverage. Unlike other high-profile defense attorneys, Tom Mesereau wasn’t interested in the cameras and the bright lights. Mesereau was interested in justice and he believed in Jackson’s innocence wholeheartedly.

On the day that Jackson was exonerated, Tom Sneddon became the “Emperor Who Had No Clothes.” It was Tom Mesereau who exited the courtroom with humility and grace.

As the truth started to sink in, fans close to Jackson wondered why the public-at-large knew nothing about the actual facts of the case. They wondered why the most significant witnesses had been ignored and passed over by the media. The tabloids were hell-bent on wrapping Jackson in a cloak of vulgarity. They made him out to be almost demonic, accusing him of the worst crime known to man, but no one had proven anything like that in court. Rather than report the details that exonerated Jackson, rather than highlight the specifics from the boys who came forward to say that nothing sexual ever happened in their times spent with Jackson, the media was fixated on trivia. There were major headlines about Jackson coming to court in his pajamas. There were quips about Jackson having a

close relationship to his pet chimp, Bubbles. There were endless clips shown of Jackson holding his infant son over a Berlin hotel balcony.

Fans were angry because the media never fully examined the testimony by over a hundred people in the courtroom, testimony which showed that there was no proof about anything sinister in Jackson's personal life. Fans felt that the testimony and photo evidence presented in court—proved that Michael Jackson was more down-to-earth, childlike, and caring—than anyone could have imagined.

But the media wanted to ignore that.

After the trial was over, Tom Mesereau confided that he was informed that Jackson's exoneration actually cost the worldwide media billions of dollars. Apparently, had Michael Jackson been sent to prison, the tabloid business would have started a cottage industry of reports about Jackson's safety in jail, about Jackson's life behind bars, about Jackson's suicide watches, about Jackson's prison inmates, and the feeding frenzy would have continued. Mesereau was told that certain media people had made arrangements to follow Michael's everyday schedule behind bars. Whoever was visiting Michael Jackson—would have created a story a day. Wild rumors would have abounded, selling people on the idea that Jackson was crazier than ever before—fueling supermarket tabloids in perpetuity.

As it was, days after the verdict, *Star* magazine falsely reported that Jackson had plans to throw a party at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, making it seem like Jackson intended to have a victory celebration with his fans. It was ludicrous. The media reports were based on thin air.

Another tabloid, London's *Daily Mail*, splashed headlines that Jackson was "hiding in the Middle East desert," reporting that "he now faces yet more sex claims." As it turned out, the allegations were made by an unsavory man in New Orleans—and they were completely discredited. The man claimed he had been physically assaulted by Jackson with a razor blade, that Jackson had drugged him, among other things. The court in Louisiana wanted Michael Jackson, or a representative, to show up at a public hearing on August 17, 2005, even though the accuser had a criminal record for harassment and was an admitted bigamist. Some time later, the case was dismissed completely.

It was an example of yet another frivolous case against Michael Jackson, one that would mean more humiliation, more damage to his public image, and more problems in U.S. courts for the King of Pop. Because of his unusual conduct, his tremendous wealth, and the nature of his business, Michael Jackson had become the world's greatest target, and the pop star would find himself in court more and more.

As for the criminal trial, what had come before the court was a case that was actually a result of Michael Jackson trying to help heal a ten-year-old boy with cancer. Jackson became involved with the boy, Gavin Arvizo, after he had been diagnosed with stage-four cancer, and had been given a death sentence by a team of doctors in Los Angeles. Since it was Gavin's dying wish to speak to Michael Jackson, Michael had been calling Gavin's hospital bed from all over the world, holding hours-long conversations with Gavin about video games, toys, and the beauty of Neverland.

It was Jackson who had given the boy a reason to live. It was Jackson who helped the boy find the strength to hang in there, even though the cancer had eaten up a number of the kid's organs, including his spleen and one of his kidneys.

At that point, the sickly boy and the rest of his family had visited Neverland while he was still undergoing chemotherapy treatment. On that first visit, Gavin Arvizo was in a wheelchair, suffering with hair and weight loss. Among other things, Gavin suffered from a lack of self-esteem as well, but it was Michael Jackson who would help transform all that.

In Gavin's own handwriting, this was the note in the guest book after his first visit to Neverland Valley Ranch:

"Dear Michael: Thank You for giving me the courage to take my hat off in front of people. I love you Michael. Love, Gavin."

It was Michael who gave Gavin and his family the sense of hope they needed. It was Michael who encouraged Gavin to find the strength to leave the sick bed. It was Michael who offered Gavin and his family the thrill of having a stretch limo bring them from an East LA barrio to the splendor of Neverland Valley Ranch. Yet all of Michael's good deeds had been twisted around by the media, had been used against him by a money-hungry family.

Tom Mesereau was miffed that the media spent hours broadcasting damning accusations, never once reporting anything about all of Michael's charity efforts devoted to children. Throughout the trial, Mesereau continually pointed out that Michael was a humanitarian who had helped hundreds of thousands of children around the world, who had never done a concert without visiting a children's hospital first, but no one in the media picked up on that. When the trial was over, Mesereau became vocal about the unfairness of the trial media coverage. To Mesereau, the slanted trial coverage was yet another aspect of the harsh and unusual ways that Jackson had been misrepresented.

Once the criminal trial was over, Tom Mesereau spoke about the approximate \$20 million settlement made to Jordie Chandler and his family, and the effect

that settlement had on others who were looking for easy money from Jackson. In the case of the Chandlers, Mesereau believed Michael Jackson had been the victim of bad advisors. Mesereau was convinced that Jackson was listening to business associates who were only interested in Jackson making more money. Back in 1993, his business advisors weren't writing the checks, Michael Jackson was, and in comparison to the earning capacity Jackson had at the time, the dollar amount of a settlement didn't seem to matter to those who stood to earn big bucks on future deals.

Back then, as always, everyone around Jackson had a scheme to produce new Jackson products, new Jackson music, new Jackson videos—and they wanted him to go on with business as usual. Jackson's advisors seemed to have had no concern about what kind of effect a settlement of that size would create in the court of public opinion.

On the flip side, many of Jackson's fans had long been convinced that there was a corporate conspiracy to destroy Michael. Fans were certain that powerful people at Sony had helped spread rumors in order to ruin Jackson's career. Some fans believed that Sony executives wanted to force Jackson into the sale of his stake in the SONY/ATV catalogue. Many fans stood outside the courtroom each day, holding up signs about Sony, screaming, "Fight, Michael, fight!"

Fans believed that the campaign to destroy Michael's public image stemmed from corporate greed—which not only fueled the Santa Maria trial—but had been behind the accusations by other young boys and their families as well.

For the record, transcripts of secretly recorded tapes—some of which date back to 1987—hint at dubious conduct by many of the people who'd made lurid allegations against Michael Jackson in the past. Many of these tapes and their corresponding transcripts are now being held by the U.S. federal government for an existing federal case against Anthony Pellicano, the private investigator to the stars, whom Michael Jackson's team once hired to discover the truth about the Chandler family.

As for Michael, the superstar has long been public in his claims that conspirators have been trying to ruin him as part of an attempt to regain control of his large stake in the SONY/ATV music catalogue, which includes songs by Elvis Presley and the Beatles. Jackson made reference to a conspiracy which appeared in a nasty *Vanity Fair* article that hit newsstands just days before the verdicts in Santa Maria. The *Vanity Fair* piece mocked Michael Jackson's alleged belief that the accuser and his family were being paid by "enemies" who wanted to take over the SONY/ATV music catalogue. The vicious article poked fun at Jackson, who believed that former Sony Records president, Tommy Mottola,

and the “powers-that-be” at Sony Records—along with DA Tom Sneddon—were the “main conspirators” against him.

About all this, Michael Jackson’s defense attorney, Tom Mesereau, has remained somewhat neutral. Though Mesereau had no actual evidence to prove Jackson’s theory that he’d been the victim of a corporate conspiracy, the defense attorney agreed that it was perfectly possible that a “subconscious conspiracy” between Sony and the Santa Barbara DA might have existed.

“What Michael said about a conspiracy makes logical sense, but I have no evidence of it,” Mesereau confided. “If Michael were in jail or in prison, how would he defend his ownership in the catalogue? How would he defend all these frivolous lawsuits? Sony had so much to gain if there was a conviction, and Sneddon would have gained celebrity status. These people didn’t have to actually sit down to conspire together. They might have helped each other on an unplanned level—because they had a common interest.”

Ironically, if a conspiracy did exist against Jackson, perhaps it was being led by former employees with personal agendas, fueled by unusual houseguests who wanted to cash in, and fortified by certain members of law enforcement who had their own egotistical reasons for wanting to tear Jackson down.

With Michael Jackson being, perhaps, the most famous person ever to face felony charges, authorities wanted to open up Jackson’s eccentric life for public inspection. The Santa Barbara DA took pleasure in trying to shame him.

For obvious reasons, the King of Pop made very few statements and gave very few interviews regarding his criminal trial. Early on, Michael broadcast a statement about his innocence on the Internet. Jackson invited Geraldo Rivera to Neverland for a brief audience, and later an interview with Jackson appeared on *FOX News*, though Geraldo’s contention that Jackson was being set up by the Santa Barbara DA—was not well received by the press. During the trial, Jackson spoke to his fans via the radio on a few occasions, but for the most part, the pop star stopped saying much to the media at all, making a single exception for his friend and spiritual advisor, the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

In a one-time radio broadcast, which aired on Easter Sunday, 2005, Michael told Reverend Jackson, “I’m totally innocent, and it’s just very painful.”

Over the radio, Michael hinted that he was a victim of racism, stating that he was one of many “black luminaries” who had become a victim. Jackson said he found strength in the examples of Nelson Mandela and Muhammad Ali. Jackson said he felt he was being discriminated against as a person of color. When Jesse Jackson asked about a possible Sony conspiracy that might have been behind the allegations in the criminal trial, Michael had very little to say. Reverend Jackson

asked Michael to detail exactly what was in the SONY/ATV catalogue, but Michael didn't want to go down that road.

As Jesse Jackson tried to get information about problems surrounding Sony and the pop icon, Michael was clearly afraid to discuss the subject. When asked about the tug-of-war over the Sony catalogue, Michael was cagey. There was only one thing Michael would say about the SONY/ATV catalogue: "It's very valuable. It's worth a lot of money. And there's a big fight going on as we speak about that. I can't comment on it. There's a lot of conspiracy. I'll say that much."

But whether or not anyone at Sony conspired to ruin Michael Jackson (and there is no evidence to that effect) really was not the concern for Tom Mesereau in the criminal case. What Mesereau was sure about—throughout the course of the trial—was that he was dealing with a whole set of people who acted in a joint plan, a conspiracy, to destroy Michael Jackson's image.

These were people, Mesereau would prove, who were out to gain any kind of fame and fortune for themselves—and Michael Jackson was their vehicle. Having made the decision to fight Tom Sneddon and the DA's office once and for all, Mesereau was the first person to see the games being played behind the scenes. He came to consider the entire case against Michael Jackson, in itself, a conspiracy.

According to Mesereau, it was the accuser's family, acting in accordance with DA Tom Sneddon and prodded by certain members of the media, who engaged in a highly thought-out plan to try to bring Michael Jackson to his knees. Attorney Mesereau, who has long been a champion for civil rights in the African American community, confided that when he first looked at the evidence, when he sat down and studied the thousands of pages of discovery, he was able to draw his own conclusions.

"The media was basically saying, 'You can't win this case. There's no hope,' and I didn't really care what they said, to be honest," Mesereau confided. "I just looked at the evidence, as I always do, and I got to know the client. I decided that this was a winnable case, and also decided that we could get a fair trial in Santa Maria."

The public officials never considered the possibility that many people in Santa Maria would have a positive view of Michael Jackson. As it happened, certain residents confided to Mesereau that they felt Tom Sneddon had a serious vendetta against the pop star, though Sneddon consistently denies this. Santa Maria residents felt that Jackson was a great asset to their community, and they expressed a positive sensibility about Jackson. Still, without cameras being allowed into the

courtroom, with biased reporting being the only way the public at large could grasp a sense about the trial—the smear factor was inevitable.

At his sensational trial, one hundred thirty-five witnesses testified in all. They ranged from child friends to film stars—from CSI experts to forensic accountants. The amount of experts and staff who testified was enough to boggle the mind. So much money was spent on the effort to place everything about Michael's life under a microscope. Everything he owned was questioned—every book, every piece of art, every item in his laundry. It was all subject to public scrutiny.

By the time all the evidence had been presented, people had proof that Jackson was different—that he led his life in a way that no one would have dreamed possible. More than ever, people saw that Jackson lived in a self-created dream world, in a world where being a child was a part of who Michael was. The jury learned that Michael trusted people too much. Among the details the jury was shocked to discover: Michael had signed over his power of attorney to German advisors apparently without understanding the possible consequences of his childlike actions.

To the outside world, news reports would have people believe that Jackson's Neverland was filled with dark undercurrents, with sinister games to lure children into a trap. However, inside the courtroom, where it really counted, it turned out that the pop icon, through his own privately recorded statements, had convinced the jury that he was an innocent pawn.