



Back to The things of Michael Jackson

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As comeback artists go, Michael Jackson has them all beat.

Elvis Presley looked fantastic for his 1968 NBC TV special. Shortly thereafter, fab went to flab. Frank Sinatra was still alive — to a degree — for his various comeback efforts in the '70s. But by then the end was near.

But Jackson — who died on June 25 of last year — is kicking into high gear again with his estate's recent \$250-million (U.S.) deal with Sony. A new album is due this fall, with new material and the promise of more releases to come.

The deeper process of re-evaluating Jackson's genius continues, too, with *Neverland Lost: A Portrait of Michael Jackson* (Steidl, 96 pages, \$45 U.S.) by Henry Leutwyler, a 48-year-old Swiss-born photographer living in New York.

Leutwyler's Jackson "portrait" comes from a suite of 60 photographs showing the singer's fetish objects, stage props and clothes, in some cases with collars showing sweat stains. Each object is framed as if to provide documentation of a rare species shipped to Jackson's Neverland Ranch from some exotic place beyond ordinary imagination.

When not shooting the likes of Michelle Obama and Julia Roberts, Leutwyler is his own kind of investigative photographer, compiling individual celebrity profiles only from objects connected with his subjects, such as the gun used by Mark Chapman to kill John Lennon.

"My approach is a mixture of archeology and police investigation," he says. "After unearthing something, the idea is to turn it around and look at it differently. There is always something behind something.

"Objects talk to you more than people do. When you photograph a model, so many people are involved you are not in 100 per cent control. But to photograph an object, a still life, you are responsible for all your actions. If I don't understand it I have only myself to blame."

The shots of the gloves are something else. Each is positioned with the thumb on the left, its fingers rising like four tinsel spires jutting out of some unimaginable new excess in Las Vegas architecture. The first is silver and studded with sparkly things. The next is gold, then there's the amber one, then one that's mostly mauve, then a number in a variety of blues, followed by one, with spangles, that looks like a claw.

The book's visual strategy as executed by designers Ruba Abu-Nimah and Kevin Ley pumps up the wonder elicited by these objects, whether it's the Capt'n Hook figurine, the jeweled key or the glittery sock. Each object seemingly floats out of a black background, as if coming from a dream.

Neverland Lost also suggests a sense of loss. While embracing show business, Jackson felt he could do no wrong. He was unprepared to acknowledge that his precious stuff, some 2,000 pieces in all, was about to be auctioned off last year along with the ranch. Eventually he



Wizard of Oz figurines, part of Michael Jackson's collection of items as documented in *Neverland Lost*.

Neverland Lost: A Portrait of Michael Jackson by Henry Leutwyler

fought to keep everything and won. The auction was halted only two months before his death. “Jacko Keeps His WEIRD Stuff,” screamed one headline.

“I am not a historian,” Leutwyler says. “I’ve never read Michael Jackson’s biography. But to me, the Neverland Ranch was the result of him not having a long-lasting childhood. It took him 15 years to build up the collection he had in Neverland. Then to see it all being sold! Ahh. I told my assistant that if I had seen everything I felt about my childhood go on the block, as he did, I would be suicidal.”

Leutwyler originally intended to shoot only one of Jackson’s white performance gloves for a magazine before they were auctioned off. But once he had got to the warehouse housing all the items — it’s shown in passing in *Neverland Lost* — the photographer was staggered by stories he felt were being told by the singer’s memorabilia.

Canadian-born photographer Robert Polidori, one of Leutwyler’s New York friends, phoned Gerhard Steidl on Leutwyler’s behalf. The publisher and Leutwyler quickly developed a mutual understanding of the book.

“When I eventually got longer access to the material, and had more time, I realized I wanted to tell a story,” says Leutwyler. “The sequence of the pictures tells the story.”

Actually there are two stories. One is Jackson as the little boy lost. The other is Jackson as an astute show-business insider with a penchant for self-indulgence and the high life. In *Neverland Lost*, their paths cross, which possibly account for the way book equally suggests a Victorian family album and a pricey give-away offered by a Las Vegas jeweler.

“You have to be respectful,” says Leutwyler. “Because after the thrill of touching the glove, a certain sadness set in. This sadness comes when you look at the book.

Neverland Lost: A Portrait of Michael Jackson is available at steidville.com. Peter Goddard is a freelance writer. He can be reached at peter_g1@sympatico.ca