


## Crossover and Commercial Dance: Race, Class and Capitalism on *The Jacksons Variety Show*

Elizabeth June Bergman 

*They have a musical capacity to reach a very wide audience, and I think that's what CBS was interested in. And that's what the Jackson Family is interested in. When you're on television, you have the capacity to reach out beyond the record buyers. You may sell two million records, but with television, you reach 30 million people.*

*What we have is a show for everybody. It's not a soul show, it's not a rock show. It's a variety show, a fast-paced variety show.*

-Ray Jessel, co-producer and writer for *The Jacksons*, as quoted by Bob Lucas in the June 24, 1976, issue of *Jet*

*Oh yeah, I'm interested in promotion. I want to do things that's never been done before. If it weren't for promotion, who would know about The Jackson Five?*

-Michael Jackson in a 1976 interview included in Spike Lee's 2016 documentary *Michael Jackson's Journey from Motown to Off the Wall*

**T**he *Jacksons*, which aired on the CBS channel throughout 1976 and 1977,<sup>1</sup> holds the distinction of being the first television variety show to be hosted by an African American family.<sup>2</sup> This achievement came at a crucial point in the family's career trajectory: after the success of the young brothers' vocal group, The Jackson Five, during the late 1960s and early 1970s under the aegis of the Black-owned independent music label Motown Records, but before the record-breaking commercial achievements of Michael and Janet Jackson in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite their phenomenal success under Motown's guidance, on June 30, 1975, it was announced The Jackson Five would leave Motown in 1976 to join the white-owned major label Epic Records, a subsidiary of the CBS company Columbia Records. *The Jacksons* television variety show, starring siblings Jackie, Rebbie, Tito, LaToya, Marlon, Michael, Randy and Janet, was conceived as a cross-promotional vehicle for the newly formed group The Jacksons; Joseph, their father/manager, also used the opportunity to promote his three daughters' careers. As the

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opening quotations make explicit, both CBS and the Jackson family were eager to sell as many records, and promote the family brand, to as many people as possible.

In the parlance of the musical recording industry, “crossover” describes an artist’s movement across the racialized boundaries of commercial music genres and the attainment of a broader consumer base across the segregated marketplace.<sup>3</sup> The notion of discrete consumer markets demonstrates the centrality of racial capitalism to U.S. commercial entertainment, in which racial classification and capital accumulation are inherently linked (Melamed 2015).<sup>4</sup> Marketing scholar Marcel Rosa-Salas draws on Jackie Wang’s *Carceral Capitalism* (2018) to pinpoint how segregation plays a crucial role in this socioeconomic regime: “Racial capitalism has shaped social relations by simultaneously ‘partitioning’ (or separating) as well as connecting people and geographies in order to buttress capital accrual” (2019, 43). In this article, my critical analysis of crossover reveals how the production of U.S. commercial entertainment is fundamentally shaped by the logic of racial capitalism. My use of the term “crossover”—and the gerund “crossing over”—posits it as a phenomenon with significant social, racial and economic implications. Building on the work of popular musicologists, dance scholars and the burgeoning field of race in marketing research,<sup>5</sup> I explicate how crossover, and its articulation of racial capitalism, has shaped the history of what is colloquially called “commercial dance.” In so doing, I offer both historical context and productive frameworks for the international field of dance studies to conceptualize the movements of commodified dancing across global marketplaces.

While many kinds and sites of dancing operate according to a marketplace economy and thus could readily be called commercial, my use of the term here refers to the for-profit or promotional dancing produced by the U.S. commercial dance industry, a subsection of the conglomerated entertainment, advertising and media industries with close ties to the popular music and recording industries. Despite its immense influence on global pop cultures and contemporary dance training,<sup>6</sup> the U.S. commercial dance industry and its prime movers have been relatively under-historicized within dance scholarship.<sup>7</sup> To counter these omissions, via a selective genealogy of popular dance programs on commercial television that preceded and informed the types of dancing showcased on *The Jacksons* variety show, I argue that crossover was a driving force for U.S. commercial dance throughout the late twentieth century and that key players who understood the value and logic of crossover marketing—and the underlying ideology of racial capitalism—indelibly shaped the contemporary industry’s aesthetic and cultural practices.

The Jackson family provides a particularly useful example of the potency of crossover marketing. For decades, their family brand emphasized their “rags to riches” trajectory, an aspirational ideal that appealed to American consumers of all backgrounds. Perhaps most saliently, the family’s self-produced television miniseries, *The Jacksons: An American Dream* (Arthur 1992) celebrates their hard work, discipline and struggle against social odds to achieve success, fame and wealth. To recount the famous narrative: amidst the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, Katherine and Joseph “Joe” Jackson and their nine children resided in a predominantly African American, working-class neighborhood in the steel town of Gary, Indiana. Joseph, a guitarist in a local blues band, set aside dreams of being a professional musician to work as a crane operator in the area’s steel mills. Recognizing that his sons’ musical aptitude could be a way out of the family’s poverty, he began to coach his eldest sons in the performance of rhythm and blues and soul music. Under Joseph’s strict guidance, The Jackson Five, first comprised of Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, Marlon and Michael, quickly outgrew local talent shows.<sup>8</sup> In the mid-1960s, the group began working with Chicago-based choreographer Clinton Ghent and started booking tours on the network of Black performance venues called the Chitlin’ Circuit.<sup>9</sup>

In its heyday from the 1930s through the 1960s, the Chitlin’ Circuit catered to Black audiences across the Midwestern, Southern and Eastern regions.<sup>10</sup> After honing their performance skills on the Chitlin’ Circuit, where the brothers were exposed firsthand to the stylings of performers

such as Jackie Wilson and James Brown, The Jackson Five became part of the Motown “family” in 1968. Motown founder Berry Gordy’s approach was premised on Black entrepreneurialism and racial uplift; his vision was similar to that of publisher John H. Johnson’s popular monthly magazine *Ebony*, wherein images depicting Black middle-class lifestyles appealed to Black consumers ignored by mainstream media (Chambers 2016). Yet Gordy’s vision for Motown’s commercial reach was far broader than African American demographics; he made crossover central to Motown’s sound, image and marketing strategies (Sykes 2016).<sup>11</sup> It was under Motown’s tutelage that The Jackson Five learned how to sell musical performances to different audiences and consumer demographics. I examine Motown’s crossover strategies in more depth shortly; here, suffice to say that the record label’s approach to marketing and publicity was foundational to the Jackson family’s understanding of how to appeal to multiple audiences through different forms and styles of dance.

In calling all the dancing featured on *The Jacksons* “commercial dance,” I point to the program’s promotional and marketing functions, preferring to categorize commercial dance not according to dance form or style but, rather, by its inextricable relationship to consumer culture.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, Colleen Dunagan’s analysis of the affective potency and meaning-making capacity of dance in commercial advertising informs my perspective on the function of sociocultural signifiers within commercial dance more broadly. In *Consuming Dance: Choreography and Advertising* (2018), Dunagan explains how dance-commercials act as “discursive assemblages” or “sites of discursive collage” that articulate a range of cultural codes and conventions, deploying “positioning strategies that seek to guide consumers in the creation of associative links between cultural meanings, products, and marketing points” (54). *The Jacksons* featured different dance styles to appeal to multiple consumer demographics across age, gender, race and class. By assembling different styles of dance, comedy skits and musical genres into a fast-paced half-hour program, the televised variety show “hailed” diverse audiences, deploying well-honed strategies related to race and class in its wide-ranging song and dance numbers.<sup>13</sup>

*The Jacksons* variety show is among the least critically acclaimed productions of Michael and Janet Jackson’s long careers. In one of the few scholarly articles to comment on the short-lived program, historian Matthew Delmont (2010) observes that *The Jacksons* demonstrated Michael’s evolution as a dancer and suggests that the program was instrumental in Michael’s understanding of how to appeal to different audiences, yet Janet’s early education and the production of the show’s dancing is not discussed in any depth.<sup>14</sup> Both Michael and Janet downplayed the program’s influence on their subsequent choreographic work and marketing acumen. In his 1988 autobiography, Michael dismissed it as “a stupid summer replacement TV series” that didn’t offer “time to learn or master anything about television” (118) and Janet has publicly suggested that she had no formal dance training prior to her role on the television series *Fame* in the early 1980s.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to their claims that the show was not significant, I argue the siblings’ work on *The Jacksons* showcases their embodied knowledge of a variety of dance forms as well as demonstrates their formative education in how different styles of dance could be used to broaden their consumer base.

In the two decades that followed *The Jacksons*, Michael and Janet Jackson achieved unprecedented popularity and commercial success as pop stars. Their dancing skills and tightly choreographed music videos recalibrated the public’s expectations for musical performers and laid the blueprint for ensuing generations of pop stars. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, alongside their many (largely unsung) choreographic collaborators from both studio and street dance backgrounds, Michael and Janet Jackson indelibly shaped the aesthetics and production culture of the U.S. commercial dance industry. This article seeks to highlight the connections between dance and commercial crossover in previous decades and Michael and Janet Jackson’s subsequent dancemaking strategies. As I will demonstrate, *The Jacksons* variety show built on historical precedents; the Jackson family and their collaborator, Hollywood choreographer Anita Mann, were well-versed in the cultural dynamics and aesthetics of popular dance of previous decades, especially as used

by the conglomerated musical recording, television and advertising industries to appeal to specific demographics and promote musical entertainers. To understand the logic by which the Jacksons and Mann deployed an array of sociocultural signifiers related to race and class in their danced efforts to gain mainstream popularity and commercial success on *The Jacksons*, I first explain how the phenomenon of crossover shaped the marketing of popular musical genres in the preceding decades before examining dancing's crucial role in musical crossover on commercial television.

## Moving Across Musical Marketing and Sociocultural Categories

Even the briefest of explanations of musical crossover reveals the profoundly inequitable political, cultural and economic particularities of U.S. society. The nineteenth century's most popular form of entertainment, blackface minstrelsy, which presented derogatory, dehumanizing stereotypes of Black people, casts a long shadow over the history of U.S. popular culture and entertainment. Minstrelsy's racialized caricatures, the bigoted creation of segregated cultural spheres and the enduring paradigm of white appetite for Black cultural expression shaped how musical entertainment was marketed in the early twentieth century even as damaging stereotypes, racial segregation and discriminatory policies were actively challenged by Black artists and producers.<sup>16</sup> While U.S. entertainment and popular culture history is largely characterized by vexed Black crossover to the white mainstream, the explicit commodification of music in the form of commercial recordings and the subsequent marketing and promotion of commercial recording artists distinguishes the broader cultural phenomenon from its instantiation in the commercial media industries.

From the earliest days of the musical recording industry, marketing has been organized around racialized conceptions of discrete musical genres, thus concealing the cultural hybridity of U.S. popular music. As recorded in the popular trade magazine *Billboard*, music produced by and marketed to African Americans was referred to as "Race Records" from the 1920s to 1940s, as "Rhythm and Blues" and/or "R&B" throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and as "Black" and "Soul" in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>17</sup> More implicitly, as "white" is not a descriptor in any popular musical genres, the marketing categories of "hillbilly music," "country and western," and "rock" have been largely coded as white genres despite having roots in Black vernacular expression. Following the logic of racial capitalism, the recording industry's marketing categories and sales charts reify racial division as the social norm. Such bounded categories obscure processes of intercultural exchange and generic fusion even as they index structural racism and the centrality of (often invisibilized) Blackness to mainstream U.S. popular culture.

According to musicologist David Brackett (2016), the term "crossover" was not common in popular musical discourse until 1973–1974, but the emergence of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s and Black recording artists' popularity with white teenage audiences led to the conflation of musical and social categories. Throughout the twentieth century, genre and race were discursively connected, suggesting that "musical choices from the perspective of both production and consumption had consequences and correspondences in social relations" (Brackett 2012, 170). From the 1950s through the 1980s, crossover produced ambivalent sociocultural and political ends. Historian Brian Ward (1998) suggests that crossover was seen by some as a portent of racial amity and Black opportunity in the early 1960s, but as cultural critic Nelson George (1988) has argued, crossover was detrimental to Black-owned music businesses and a sense of Black social cohesion.<sup>18</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, Black crossover to the white mainstream was hotly debated: crossover recordings and artists were variously praised as "boundary-breaking" or condemned as "watered down."<sup>19</sup> Although African American artists were praised for their ability to cut across previously foreclosed racial boundaries, crossing-over also ran the risk of accusations of "selling out" by pandering to white audiences and abandoning Black communities, either artistically or financially. While I locate the different styles of music and dance performed on commercial television within this discourse, my intention is not to evaluate the phenomenon of crossover in aesthetic terms nor focus on the appropriation, assimilation and authenticity debate.<sup>20</sup>

Rather, in the following section, I explore how the U.S. conglomerate entertainment industries, firmly moored in the logics of advertising and racial capitalism, traded in potent signifiers of race and class and how these paradigms shaped how different groups of people danced on commercial television in the decades preceding the debut of *The Jacksons* variety show.

## Dancing Crossover: Sociocultural Signifiers in Consumer Culture, 1950s–1970s

Throughout the twentieth century, different social groups used various signifiers of race, gender, age and class to move across established boundaries.<sup>21</sup> To contextualize *The Jacksons*' explicitly commercial crossover moves within the broader cultural phenomenon, I trace a genealogy of dance on commercial television from the racially segregated, appropriative 1950s teen dance shows like *American Bandstand* to the more integrated, "liberal" 1960s rock 'n' roll show *ShinDig!* to the Black cultural pride portrayed on *Soul Train* in the early 1970s. These examples, while not exhaustive of the kinds of dancing featured on commercial television during these decades, were chosen because the Jackson family, Anita Mann and other significant figures in U.S. commercial dance history were affiliated with these programs. Although there were meaningful shifts in media representation, social dynamics and modes of cultural expression between the 1950s and the 1970s, there are also continuities that should be recognized: most saliently, the deep imbrication of all types of televised popular dancing in ideologies of racial capitalism and consumer culture in the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

In her research on the 1950s and early 1960s, Julie Malnig (2018; 2023) reveals how many televised teen dance programs perpetuated conservative, segregationist values even as they broadcast the white, middle-class teenage rebellion made possible by the appropriation of music and dance styles originating in Black and working-class youth communities.<sup>23</sup> That is, white teens engaged the social signifiers of Blackness to stake out a space of "specialness" that differentiated them from their parents and other authority figures. Through this inequitable process, white teens gained a sense of community and what cultural theorist George Lipsitz calls "prestige from below" which Malnig defines as "a phenomenon in which the dominant class borrows what they perceive to be more authentic or liberating forms of popular culture from black or working-class styles" (2018, 172). Although so-called rock 'n' roll was an interracial phenomenon in some urban contexts, the majority of 1950s televised teen dance shows were racially segregated.

The on-air segregation of teen dance shows was largely decided by programs' advertising sponsors. The production and content of shows like *American Bandstand*, initially broadcast from Philadelphia to the suburban Tri-State region before its national syndication on ABC in 1957, illustrate advertisers targeting of white teenagers as a significant consumer demographic. Despite this burgeoning demographic's willingness to engage Black culture through their consumption of music and dance styles, the conservative views of elder generations determined the program's racial politics. In Matthew Delmont's historiography of *American Bandstand's* years in Philadelphia (1952–1964), he reveals that the show's *de facto* segregationist policies reflected the producers "choice to pursue a commercial model for teenage television in an era when advertisers and television networks studiously avoided offending the racial attitudes of white viewers" (2012, 5).<sup>24</sup> Contrary to host Dick Clark's accounts and myths spun by U.S. popular media, *American Bandstand* enacted discriminatory policies and practices that kept Black teenagers from appearing on the show even as dances they created were performed by white teenagers. *American Bandstand* "sought to maximize advertising revenue by shielding regional television viewers from images of young people of different races dancing and socializing" (Delmont 2012, 48). Although rock 'n' roll was invoked as a means toward social integration and civil rights by concert promoters such as Arthur Freed and Georgie Woods, the vision of teenage community articulated by *American Bandstand* in its early years in Philadelphia was one of consumer culture rather than racial integration.



When *American Bandstand* relocated to Los Angeles in 1964, corporate sponsors shifted their approach, or at least the optics, to match the teenage demographic's shifting expectations. Urban historian Domenic Priore suggests that "to appeal to the U.S. youth market, [the corporate world] would have to adopt, however superficially, the liberal values of rock 'n' roll, which espoused racial mixing and uninhibited sexuality" (2015, 18). These values were showcased on ABC's program *ShinDig!* (1964–1966) which featured an integrated audience and a diversity of performers.<sup>25</sup> The dynamics that mobilized the show's dancing remained similar, however; *ShinDig!*'s professional troupe of mostly white, female dancers, named the "Shin-Diggers," performed routines comprised of dances like the Monkey, the Jerk and the Watusi, all of which had origins in or were in mimicry of Black youth culture. Significantly, *The Jacksons'* choreographer, Anita Mann, was a Shin-Digger and served as an assistant to one of the program's choreographers, David Winters, whose work for television and film was largely founded on the theatrical staging of Black aesthetics inherent to so-called "jazz dance."<sup>26</sup> In a 1965 article in the Palm Springs newspaper *Desert Sun* (1965), Winters noted that all the "teen dance fads" he incorporated into his television choreography were "all variations of the Twist. Some became popular because a few of the young Hollywood crowd were seen doing the dances. But they were being performed in Negro clubs in the East five years ago." On commercial television in the mid-1960s, these Black-originated social dances served as shorthand for youthful, "all-American" vitality, evident on *ShinDig!* and in advertisements aimed at the rock 'n' roll demographic. In a particularly illustrative example, one of *ShinDig!*'s sponsors, The Dairy Council, produced a commercial in which three of the show's white teen performers, vitalized by drinking fresh glasses of milk, demonstrate their health and wholesomeness by cheerfully dancing the Monkey.

The different uses and theatricalizations of Black social dance on *ShinDig!* reveal the varying stakes for different groups who danced on the show. In a 1991 VH1 retrospective on the program, Mann explained the differences in approach between the Shin-Diggers and Motown Record's African American vocal groups: "The Temptations, you know, or those groups that were choreographed, were very tight and precise, where we were wild and loose and throwing ourselves all over the place" (Brandies 1991).<sup>27</sup> In contrast to how Black social dances of the 1960s signified youthful vitality or rebellious sexual liberation for the young, mostly white dancers on *ShinDig!*, in the mid-1960s Motown strategically employed class signifiers and "classy" dancing to sell the image of their Black vocal groups as elegant, genteel and urbane.<sup>28</sup>

Famously, Motown Records was modeled on the automobile industry in which Berry Gordy had labored before establishing the independent label in Detroit in 1959.<sup>29</sup> The company's dedication to the assembly line method of creative production and its integrationist ethos were central to the label's commercial success and social influence.<sup>30</sup> As historical musicologist Andrew Flory posits, "Motown's approach was calculated to transcend the R&B market, and before long its music was at the forefront of sweeping challenges to the record industry's longstanding practices of racial segregation" (2017, 2). The company's commitment to racial uplift and integration notwithstanding, the imperative to amass profits was a driving force. This capitalist imperative affected how their Black recording artists danced, performed and were marketed to white, mainstream audiences.

Motown's crossover strategies also mobilized the era's respectability politics. Motown "polished" its artists through lessons in bodily comportment, coaching them to eradicate mannerisms, behaviors or language associated with "rough" working-class status. Key figures in Motown's Artist Development department included etiquette coach Maxine Powell, who left the company in 1969, and Motown's vocal choreographer Cholly Atkins, who had been part of the famed class act Coles and Atkins (Atkins and Malone 2001).<sup>31</sup> Keeping in line with Powell's pronouncement that Motown artists were trained to perform at "Buckingham Palace and the White House," Motown vocal groups presented an image of sophisticated, classy refinement through their posture, dress and movement (George 1986, 88). In his analysis of Motown's presentation of the Supremes, scholar Phillip Brian Harper suggests class signifiers invited audiences to disregard race:

the bourgeois orientation signaled by the group's sophisticated performances made the question of race irrelevant, since according to the consumerist logic that drives the conception of the United States as a "classless" society in the late twentieth century, "everyone," "universally," could identify with the "stylish" presentation the group offered up. (Harper 1996, 87)

Even as Motown's crossover strategies promoted colorblindness for some viewing audiences, other audiences, as well as people who worked behind the scenes, clearly recognized the Black history of the moves that Motown artists performed as well as the discrimination that African American entertainers historically faced. In his role at Motown, Cholly Atkins repurposed or "versioned" vernacular and jazz tap steps from the 1930s and 1940s that would be welcome in "elite" venues, which delimited their offerings to certain musical genres and categories of entertainment.<sup>32</sup> Years later, Atkins explained the approach:

At Motown, they were developing artists for personal appearances in the regular supper club circuit, which was, at that time unheard of, because R&B acts just were not supper club type of artists. That was one of the reasons why they brought me out, because my experience with, with the Broadway and what Coles and Atkins stood for, in the sense of sophistication. (Selby 1991)

Atkin's choreographic invocation of "classiness" was firmly couched in a Black cultural ethos. His versioning transmitted Africanist aesthetics to a new generation of performers who embodied "elements of tap's class act tradition, minus the taps: precision, detached coolness, elegance, flawless execution, and dignity" (Atkins and Malone 2001, xix). In her introduction to the biography she co-wrote with Atkins, Jacqui Malone points out that Atkin's vocal choreography is characterized by polyrhythms. It is also characterized by polycentrism and the celebration of individualism within communal expression. In Atkin's routines, the groups' rhythmic stepping or, in the case of all-female groups, subtle hip movements, were counter-punctuated by simple gestures; unison moves demonstrated the groups' cohesiveness while each performer's individuality was showcased by slight variations in interpretation. While Atkins played an essential part in Motown's success in appearing in "elite" venues and appealing to white audiences, his choreography clearly articulated Black aesthetic principles and cultural values.

The sociopolitical and cultural effects of Motown's crossover moves were complicated, however. Thomas F. DeFrantz characterizes them as ambivalent, suggesting that "mediated presence in the 1960s offered an avenue of visibility for black Americans in the era of rising civil rights activism and simultaneously encouraged rhetorics of respectability and assimilation" (2012, 136). Significantly, the ways in which Motown promoted its artists influenced the broader U.S. entertainment and advertising industries. Indeed, Mark Anthony Neal suggests the strategies developed by Gordy were adopted by white-owned major labels in the 1970s and 1980s as they moved to cash in on the popularity of Black music with white audiences. White-owned corporations began "to market Soul music, if not Blackness itself, to a mainstream and youthful consumer base and as a purveyor of youthful sensibilities for older audiences," noting that soul music served as "a measurement of racial and social difference that could be constructed as enticing, appealing, or wholly repugnant, as market tastes demanded, particularly when mediated through the various prisms of race, class, age, geographical location, and sexual preference" (Neal 1997, 118).

For Motown, crossover was a multimedia effort as well as a sociopolitical, cultural and economic phenomenon. Crossover strategies were central to many of Motown's important initiatives, including the 1968 founding of Motown Productions, a television and film-oriented wing of the corporation in Los Angeles (nicknamed MoWest). As The Jackson Five signed with Motown and moved to Los Angeles that same year, the group benefited from the company's incipient use of commercial television to promote their artists to mainstream audiences. The Jackson Five, who had previously

performed covers of rhythm and blues and soul songs at talent shows, local bars and on the Chitlin' Circuit, were reframed by Motown as purveyors of "bubblegum soul" and marketed as wholesome entertainment.

Although The Jackson Five had been exposed to and deftly mimicked the Motown groups with whom Powell and Atkins had worked, the task of preparing The Jackson Five for white-dominated, mainstream audiences was given to Motown employee Suzanne de Passe. The siblings' education in such matters was immediately evident according to Matthew Delmont, who suggests the group's "ability to play to the preferences and desires of different audiences" was strengthened during their move from Black cultural spheres to mainstream realms (2010, 65). Delmont compares two televised performances from 1969: The Jackson Five's soulful performance for the locally broadcast Miss Black America pageant, which he argues highlighted their Chitlin' Circuit training, and the group's first national television appearance on the variety show *Hollywood Palace*, which showcased their newly "polished" Motown aura. Given the Black communities in which their performance skills were originally honed and Motown's practice of grooming their artists for appearances in majority white or integrated venues, the Jackson family was well-versed about what constituted the "appropriate" types of performance for different audiences.

The Jackson Five's training in how to appeal to different demographics occurred during a transformative moment for racial politics and representation in U.S. commercial media. In 1971, *Soul Train*, conceived by radio reporter and disc jockey Don Cornelius as a *Black American Bandstand*, became the first Black-owned television program to be nationally syndicated. It was also the first to be sponsored by an African American-owned corporation, Johnson Products Company. Concurrent with the Black Power movement, *Soul Train* broadcast Black pride, self-reliance and self-determination to television sets across the U.S.<sup>33</sup> Dancing played a central role in this phenomenon; as DeFrantz notes, "*Soul Train* referred to black social dance as a component of black identity and a strategy of simultaneous creative expression and cultural mobility" (2012, 133). While Black collective creativity and entrepreneurship were celebrated on the program, Naomi Bragin observes that "early *Soul Train* screened the intersection of black performance and commodity politics" (2015, 25). Despite their distinct racial and sociocultural politics, both *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train* "assumed the context of a marketplace that could spread recordings, capacities of dance instruction, fashion trends, and the fantasy of a glamorous, fun-filled and carefully controlled space centered upon social dance and popular music" (DeFrantz 2012, 132). The Jackson family played starring roles in this marketplace, with The Jackson Five appearing on *Soul Train* on multiple occasions between 1972 and 1975 (Thompson 2013).

*Soul Train*'s role in broadcasting and commodifying west coast social and street dance styles is well-documented in published hip hop, street dance and popular music histories.<sup>34</sup> The Jackson Five played a significant part in the transmission of the era's Black vernacular dances to the mainstream, both because of their stardom and their appearances on many types of television programs. For example, the dance known as the Robot was first performed on *Soul Train* by dancer Charles Washington but became a national craze only after Michael Jackson incorporated it into The Jackson Five's choreography for their 1973 hit "Dancing Machine," which they performed on various programs over the next several years including *Soul Train*, *American Bandstand*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Cher Show* and *The Tonight Show*. According to multiple accounts, Michael and his brothers learned the Robot from the young *Soul Train* dancers, who were often invited over to the family's home in Encino for dance lessons.<sup>35</sup>

The Jacksons also learned the dance style known as locking from *Soul Train* dancers. The fundamental move and style of locking is credited to Don "Campbellock" Campbell, who as the origin story goes, created the "Campbellock" or "lock" during a failed attempt at the Funky Chicken. Campbell, who was studying commercial art at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College at the time, developed the style in conjunction with other dancers honing their skills at Los Angeles dance



clubs like Maverick Flats and competing in dance contests throughout the region (Freeman 2023; George 2014). Campbell and his ballet-trained partner Damita Jo Freeman were among the first group of dancers to appear on *Soul Train* when it debuted nationally in 1971. Around the same time, Toni Basil, a white dancer-choreographer well-versed in 1960s rock 'n' roll and go-go styles, peer of Anita Mann, and mentee of David Winters, heard about Campbell's new style from a dance acquaintance and sought him out (Basil nd; Grubb 1988). Basil and Campbell subsequently co-founded The Lockers, using Basil's industry connections to professionalize as a group.<sup>36</sup> Throughout the early 1970s, the group appeared on many television programs including *Soul Train*, at Carnegie Hall, and in a Schlitz Malt Liquor commercial before disbanding, although Campbell subsequently formed different iterations of the group which performed throughout the decade. As was the case with The Jackson Five's "Dancing Machine," The Lockers organized locking moves into set choreography rather than freestyling as they did in the clubs. The Lockers' routines provided the movement vocabulary, costuming, and choreographic template for others to mimic, including, as the following section details, the Jackson brothers on the family's television variety show.

## "A Show for Everybody"

By the mid-1970s, The Jackson Five had appeared on dozens of television shows in promotion of their albums, concert tours and brand name. In addition to multiple performances on *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*, the group appeared on the prime-time program *The Ed Sullivan Show* and talk shows *The Mike Douglas Show*, *The Merv Griffith Show* and *The Tonight Show*. The Jackson Five continued to appear on variety-style programs including *The Flip Wilson Show*, *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* and *The Carol Burnett Show*. Variety shows were rooted in the traditions of vaudeville entertainment. Media scholar Henry Jenkins emphasizes this connection, noting that the "underlying logic of the variety show rested on the assumption that heterogeneous entertainment was essential to attracting and satisfying a mass audience" (2007, 4). Although the Jackson family cast their net wide, the variety show was arguably the primary format they engaged in their pursuit of commercial success.

The family's experience with the variety show format was not only on television, however. Throughout the early 1970s, Joseph Jackson had observed how Berry Gordy capitalized on Las Vegas's reputation as a bastion of "high-class" entertainment; he saw the commercial success of other Motown groups there as a template for The Jackson Five to grow their current market. Following Motown's crossover marketing logic, in 1974 Joseph attempted to rebrand The Jackson Five as a supper-club and cabaret-style act, formed the sister group "The Jacksonettes," and mounted several all-sibling shows called the Jackson Five Revue (Brown 1975; Robinson 1974). According to celebrity biographer J. Randy Taraborrelli, Gordy warned Joseph that the group lacked the experience "necessary to please a middle-of-the-road, predominantly white audience" (2009, 118). Despite Gordy's strong dissuasions, the Jackson family mounted two relatively successful runs of shows at the MGM casino in Las Vegas in 1974.<sup>37</sup> The variety-style cabaret show featured all the Jackson siblings including youngest son Randy and daughters LaToya and Janet and included performances of The Jackson Five's Motown hits, celebrity impersonations and tap dance numbers (Taraborrelli 2009). Janet and Randy, respectively eight and twelve years old, joined their older brothers on several television talk shows, including *The Merv Griffith Show* and *Dinah*, in promotion of their family revue.

The Jacksons also performed their variety-style show in early 1975 at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Eldest brother Jackie explained the approach to the Radio City performances in the *Village Voice*: "A Vegas show is a show that you play in front of an audience of people who have different ages—from the fifties on down—you know, all ages. So you have to satisfy all those people: you do a little of everything to get 'em on their feet" (Aletti 1975). The Jacksons' collective

understanding of the varying desires of different demographics and consuming publics was to be instrumental in the next iteration of their variety show.

The Jackson Five officially terminated their contract with Motown Records in 1975, citing the record company's lack of promotion, poor sales and denial of the brothers' request to take more creative control over their musical output.<sup>38</sup> A protracted legal battle between Motown, CBS and the Jackson family ensued.<sup>39</sup> One of the brothers, Jermaine, had recently married Gordy's daughter Hazel and decided not to leave Motown with the rest of his family. Randy, the youngest brother, was added to officially replace him. The reconstituted group, legally barred by Motown from using the name The Jackson Five, signed a new recording contract with a record label subsidiary of CBS, under the name The Jacksons. Since The Jacksons were also contractually banned from recording for CBS while their legal affiliation with Motown lasted, Joseph Jackson decided to fill that downtime by capitalizing both on the family's success in Las Vegas and their new contract with a half-hour weekly variety show on CBS's television channel. Following Motown's ventures into supper club performances and mainstream television programming, *The Jacksons* television variety show was intended to broaden the group's mainstream commercial appeal.

*The Jacksons* also needed to appease advertising sponsors who wanted their commercials to reach a wide span of potential consumers. Corporate sponsors and advertising agencies often determined whether a television show would stay on the air. Given advertisers' need to promote products and brands to viewing consumers, audience ratings could decide whether the program was considered worthy of further investment by advertising sponsors. As Michael complained in his autobiography, "The Nielsen ratings controlled our lives from week to week" (1988, 118). The array of guests and stylistic content of the show is evidence of the variety show's commercial strategy: each episode of *The Jacksons* was designed to attract and appeal to multiple demographics at the same time. Guest stars included comedians Betty White, Ed McMahon and David Letterman; television and film actors Carroll O'Connor, Lynda Carter and Mackenzie Phillips; and boxing champion Muhammad Ali. In addition to performances of The Jackson Five's soul, rhythm and blues, and disco hits, there were covers of pop songs and "middle of the road" ballads, a range of song and dance numbers, a series of cartoonish skits, various celebrity impersonations ranging from Mae West to Sonny and Cher, and a spoof of the cowboy television show *The Lone Ranger* (1949–1954) featuring the adventures of The Lone Banana and his lemon sidekick, Tonto. *The Jacksons* had something in each episode, including different styles of dance, to satisfy their existing fans and to entice older viewers, children and teenagers, and audiences encompassing multiple ethnic, racial and gender identities.

The first episode of *The Jacksons*, which aired June 16, 1976, included a tap dance number to the tune "Steppin' Out," written by Irving Berlin and made popular by the 1948 Hollywood film *Easter Sunday*, starring Fred Astaire and Judy Garland. Throughout the filming of the variety program, Michael Jackson was actively honing his tap dance skills, learning via both bodily and mediated means. In a 2018 Television Academy video interview, Anita Mann recounts that she taught Michael all of Astaire's choreographies from videotapes at the Jackson family home after long days of production meetings, rehearsals and taping on the CBS sound stages. Additionally, the family collaborated with tap dance legends Fayard and Harold Nicholas of The Nicholas Brothers, who appeared alongside the siblings on the episode that aired on February 9, 1977, and who likely taught Jackson and his siblings a few things during their time together.<sup>40</sup>

This intensive training is evident in "Steppin' Out," an elaborate all-sibling homage to tap dance as featured in Broadway musical theater and Hollywood films. The number opens with Michael dressed in a white top hat, tuxedo and shoes, holding a silver cane. He is spotlighted on a stage rimmed with footlights. The lavish set connotes "high class" luxury and wealth. As the opening bars of the music play, the camera zooms in on the posed asymmetry of his body, which is framed by a set of ornate sculptures, long pink curtains and towering mirrors. Michael bursts into a

sequence of quicksilver sidekicks, slides and jaunty steps forward, punctuating the end of the musical bar with a tight corkscrew spin. LaToya, clad in an elegant, sparkling dress fringed with pink marabou feathers, enters from the side, and Michael acknowledges her with a little bow. Arm in arm, the siblings step downstage, smiling broadly as Michael begins to lip-sync the lyrics: “Steppin’ out with my baby, Can’t go wrong ‘cause I’m in right. It’s for sure, not for maybe, That I’m all dressed up tonight.” Michael and LaToya walk and sway in time with the song as the rest of the Jackson siblings spill onto the stage for the next verse: “Steppin’ out with my honey, Can’t be bad to feel so good. Never felt quite so sunny, And I keep on knockin’ wood.” The eldest brother and sister, Jackie and Rebbie, and the youngest, Randy and Janet, are paired together, with Tito and Marlon flanking the youngest duo. In contrast to her older sisters’ bare-shouldered dresses and pink feathered hairdos, Janet wears a fluffy all-white dress with floor-length sheer sleeves and white and blue plumes in her hair. Strutting across the space, the Jackson siblings line up facing the audience and execute a series of rhythmic steps together. Following this unison moment, pairs are highlighted in quick succession, moving from center stage to the periphery and back again, before all the brothers perform a brief cane twirling and tapping sequence in which the canes “magically” disappear as a trick of post-production editing. The number, recalling a Broadway chorus line, ends in rousing unison downstage. Clapping and smiling at each other and the audience, the number ends with flourished wide-armed poses. The lights dim and brighten again as the siblings hold hands and take a bow in response to the live audience’s applause and cheers.

The Jackson family’s embrace of both Broadway and Hollywood dance aesthetics points to the complex ways that race and class have historically been represented within U.S. popular entertainment. “Steppin’ Out” illuminates the vexed racial politics of earlier periods of U.S. mainstream entertainment. In response to the pernicious legacy of blackface minstrelsy, African American entertainers in the early part of the twentieth century, including Ada Overton Walker, practiced a type of racial uplift on popular stages that preceded the class acts of the 1930s and 1940s and Motown’s careful grooming of their artists for “high class” venues (Jackson 2019; Harper 1996). The irony, of course, was that even as Black vernacular forms were theatricalized for mass consumption by performers from a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds, Black artists were denied the creative recognition and financial remuneration that their white counterparts who performed Black styles were given (Clover 1995; Gottschild 1996).<sup>41</sup> The Jacksons’ adoption of Broadway musical theater and Hollywood film aesthetics reflects the family’s exposure to and admiration for an array of entertainment traditions as well as the racial politics of the 1960s and 1970s, wherein Black artists were (re)claiming the fields from which they had been invisibilized (Hoffman 2014). Although *The Jacksons* also included homages to the famous white stars Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, *The Jacksons* variety show featured multiple tap dance numbers that recognized the Black vernacular origins of tap dance and featured celebrated Black artists, including The Nicholas Brothers, who despite their lauded sophisticated rhythmic virtuosity and elegant styling, were not rewarded with the same career opportunities provided to Astaire and Kelly.

While earlier instantiations of Black vernacular dance were included on the show by way of tap dance, the locking routine included in the February 2, 1977 episode points to the family’s proximity to and study of contemporary street dance forms. The number stars Randy, Michael, Marlon, Tito and Jackie alongside comedian Dom DeLuise. Clad in big hats, brightly colored vests, suit jackets and knickerbockers with striped knee socks, their costumes reference the street dance troupe The Lockers. The number opens with Michael doing the Robot, mechanically hinging his arms into angular shapes and moving across the floor with small gliding steps. Marlon jumps to land on his knees. The number features the brothers performing The Locker’s signature moves, including emphatic pointing gestures, the stuttering hesitations of the lock, and flashy acrobatic stunts. DeLuise, however, is not as agile as his younger companions. Gesturing and moving awkwardly, DeLuise talk-sings along to a backing track of K.C and the Sunshine Band’s 1975 disco funk hit “That’s the Way I Like It”: “Hi there, folks, they call me Disco Dom. I’m the one they learn the

disco from. Nothing to it, you just shake, shake, shake. What the heck, I know it ain't Swan Lake." His ungainly dancing pokes fun at his own lack of ability and the song's lyrics deny the intelligence, trained skill and effort required to perform locking. DeLuise collapses comedically as the Jackson brothers drag him back into their locking line, snapping in and out of the movement pattern known as the "stop and go."<sup>42</sup> Yelling "Gimme some skin!" the brothers and DeLuise perform a version of a stylized handshake that The Lockers often included in their routines. The Jackson brothers line up for some simple synchronized locking, jutting elbows akimbo and hips sideways in rhythm with the downbeat. Then members of the group perform brief solos: Michael repeats the Robot, Marlon jumps into and out of half-splits, and DeLuise spits his pink bubblegum bubble up into the air and catches it in his mouth. Following animated hat flips and locking steps, the group performs a canon, dropping into the half-splits. Whereas the jaunty Jackson brothers bounce back up nimbly, DeLuise does not come gliding back up but remains on the floor, hamming a groin injury. The joke throughout the number is that the white, middle-aged DeLuise is not "hip" enough to perform alongside the youthful Black Jackson brothers, who perform locking with skill and funky aplomb.

Both song and dance numbers I described above demonstrate how ideas about class, gender, age and race are associated with different kinds of dance. While by all accounts the Jackson family genuinely appreciated the various styles of dance included in the program, these two numbers also exemplify how potent signifiers of race and class were used strategically to appeal to multiple audiences and markets. The inclusion of dance styles invoking Broadway and movie musical history and contemporary Black street dance served to hail different consumer demographics: older, perhaps more conservative audiences nostalgic for a golden era of "elegant" and "classy" entertainment and younger, "hipper" viewers drawn to the funk-stylings of Black youth culture. The two numbers also hint at the assemblages of musical theater and street dance styles that would characterize much of Michael and Janet Jackson's later work and influence U.S. commercial dancing, and global entertainment, for subsequent generations.

## Toward the Music Video Era and Beyond

Focusing on why, for whom and how the dancing on *The Jacksons* was produced reveals important paradigms that continue to shape the aesthetics and production of U.S. commercial dance. Informed by the social and commercial crossover moves of previous decades, *The Jacksons* variety show assembled different styles of dance in order to forge associative links between various socio-cultural meanings and the Jackson family brand. The deployment of different music and dance genres—with their divergent significations of race and class—was an attempt to hail different audiences into weekly consumption of *The Jacksons* variety show and into Jackson family fandom more broadly. In parts motivated by the desire to promote the family's musical recordings and performances and the need to generate advertising revenue for commercial television stations, the Jackson family learned how to widely promote its brand on the soundstages of *The Jacksons*. Significantly, Michael and Janet Jackson's work experience on the televised program furthered their education as business-minded artists and instilled a deep understanding of dancing's critical role in effective crossover marketing strategies.

Tracing some of the neglected choreographic lineages and foundational production paradigms of the U.S. commercial dance industry reveals how Michael and Janet Jackson's (always collaborative) choreographic invocations of different dance genres built upon previous crossover marketing strategies, which were deeply rooted in ideologies of racial capitalism. This earlier history has been largely eclipsed by celebrations of Michael and Janet Jackson's "innovations" and crossover successes. Crucially, their superstardom and unprecedented financial profits in the 1980s and 1990s were fueled by promotional short films and music videos that typically featured racially and ethnically diverse choruses of backup dancers performing "new" assemblages of dance styles. The

dancing on *The Jacksons* foreshadows these later choreographies, which frequently invoked the traditions of musical theater and Hollywood musical films alongside the incorporation of new Black vernacular and street dance styles. Celebrated music videos/short films such as *Beat It* (1983), *Thriller* (1983), *When I Think Of You* (1986), *Bad* (1987), *Smooth Criminal* (1988) and *Alright* (1990),<sup>43</sup> all of which include dance styles connoting both cultural traditions, evidence Michael and Janet Jackson's earlier exposure to, and education in, crossover dancing. Seen from this perspective, both Jacksons' commercial dance works, while groundbreaking in many respects, may be most noteworthy for the sophisticated way they updated existing crossover marketing strategies. By bridging past industrial practices while establishing new molds for subsequent generations of dancing pop stars, Michael and Janet Jackson helped to reify the logic of racial capitalism as the foundation of commercial dance at a watershed moment in the history of the industry.

## Notes

1. Technically, the first season was a four-episode miniseries taped prior to airing during the summer of 1976. The show was picked up by CBS the following year for the entire season (Lucas 1976a; 1976b).

2. The African American entertainers Nat King Cole and Flip Wilson had, however, previously hosted television variety shows; The Jackson Five appeared as guests on Flip Wilson's program in 1971.

3. Crossover also indexes the broader cross-promotional imperatives of commercial entertainment and the capital-seeking conglomeration of U.S. media industries. For instance, the term is also used to describe television episodes that feature guest characters from other television shows in the hopes of enhancing additional viewership.

4. Racial capitalism, as coined and theorized by political theorist Cedric Robinson in the 1980s, is the articulation of the mutually constitutive nature of capitalism and racialized exploitation; his work, and related work of Stuart Hall, laid the groundwork for radical and activist engagement with these ideas. For a concise explanation of Robinson's ideas, see Robin D.G. Kelly's (2017) article "What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?" for the *Boston Review*. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/robin-d-g-kelley-introduction-race-capitalism-justice/>, last accessed February 8, 2024.

5. This recent field of study is led by Race in the Marketplace (RIM), "an international, trans-disciplinary research network dedicated to knowledge production on the historic, contemporary, and future interactions of race and the marketplace in research and practice." <https://www.rimnetwork.net/>, last accessed February 8, 2024.

6. The global influence of Michael Jackson's dancing, produced by the U.S. commercial dance industry, is evident in K-Pop (Anderson 2020), Bollywood dancing (Chakravorty 2017), and Chinese hip hop (Wilcox 2022). For astute insight into how commercial dance intersects with and informs U.S. competitive dance training, see Schupp (2019).

7. However, veteran commercial dancer Anthony R. Trahearn includes a brief historical overview and genealogy of key works and figures in his recently published textbook *Commercial Dance: An Essential Guide* (2023).

8. In the early days of The Jackson Five, two non-sibling members of the group including Johnny Jackson (not related) and Ronnie Jackson (a cousin) (George 1984; 1986).

9. According to journalist Jake Austen's research and several of the Jackson siblings' memoirs, it was after Ghent's retirement that The Jackson Five began to choreograph for themselves (Austen 2008; Jackson 1988; Jackson 2011).

10. I note that the Chitlin' Circuit should not be confused with the early twentieth century Black vaudeville circuit known as T.O.B.A. For more about the musical and entrepreneurial contexts of the Chitlin' Circuit, see Lauterbach (2011). For more on the production contexts of Black vaudeville and T.O.B.A., see George-Graves (2000) and Scott (2023).



11. In his autobiography, Gordy jokes “I guess I never saw black or white, I just saw record sales” (Gordy 1994, 245).

12. Significantly, my categorization differs from Trahearn’s (2023) characterization of the genre as the merging of Hip Hop and Funk Styles, Jazz Dance, and Club Styles.

13. My use of “hailing” indexes both an Althusserian interpellation into capitalist ideologies and Dunagan’s work on how advertising engages dance’s affect and invites viewers into decoding commercials’ multivalent texts.

14. Notably, in her book *On Michael Jackson* (2006), cultural critic Margo Jefferson references the variety show in her commentary on how both Michael and Janet learned how to please audiences according to the popular paradigm of the sexualized child star.

15. During the promotional cycle for 1989’s *Rhythm Nation*, when asked by an *Entertainer Tonight* reporter about the development of her dancing talent, Janet responded, “I’ve always loved dancing. I never took any lessons or anything, but I actually really started dancing when I was on *Fame*. I don’t think anyone can teach you how to dance. It’s something that you have to have within you. They can teach you the steps, the moves, but you know, you can interpret your own way” (Janet Journey, nd.)

16. For analyses of how African American entertainers and producers navigated and negotiated racist contexts in this era, see George-Graves (2000); Gottschild (2000); Jackson (2019); Robinson (2015).

17. Contemporarily, “R&B,” “Urban Contemporary,” “Rap,” and “Hip Hop” indicate musical genres that have primarily been created by Black musical artists and/or have a large Black consumer base.

18. In Nelson George’s influential book, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (1988), he details crossover’s diluting effect on Black musical production and cultural cohesion. George’s rigorously researched analysis focuses on the history of the record business from the 1930s through the mid-1980s; he pinpoints the period of 1975–1979 as the climax of crossover, citing the 1971 industry-produced “Harvard Report” as the impetus for the ensuing corporate takeover of Black music by white-owned major record labels. While he does critique the “whitewashing” of the music, his primary focus is on infrastructure: the collapse of Black-owned “mom and pop” record stores, the slow drain of talent from Black-owned labels, and the struggle of Black promoters and managers to survive given many Black artists’ crossover to the mainstream and subsequent employment of white personnel. Also see Neal (1997).

19. For example, crossover was the subject of a 1979 television program *Black and White Music: The Melting Pot Music*, a Tony Brown production directed by Michael Colgan. More explicitly, 1985 *Los Angeles Times* article written by Connie Johnson categorically compared ten of 1984’s top-charting crossover hits as either “Still Fiery” or “Watered Down.”

20. For nuanced considerations of musical crossover, see Brackett (1994; 2002; 2005; 2012; 2016), Colgan (1979), Garofalo (1993; 1994), George (1986; 1988), Harper (1989; 1996), Neal (1997), Perry (1988) and Ward (1998). Crossover as a corporeal phenomenon has been addressed in historical studies of twentieth century popular entertainment (Malone 1996; Trenka 2021) and rock ‘n’ roll dancing (Malnig 2018; 2023).

21. For analyses of crossover dance in social contexts, see Malnig (2023) and Robinson (2015).

22. I note that in contrast to the recording industry’s tracking of commercially released music, there were no weekly sales charts by which to measure the market success of popular dancing, although dancing became commodified and commercialized in multiple ways, including televisual capture and distribution. In this respect, it is significant that broadcast television in the U.S. followed extant radio formats that relied on advertising revenue and corporate sponsorship and thus, throughout its history, has primarily operated as a commercial endeavor.

23. Also see Wall (2009).

24. Finding advertising sponsors was an issue for contemporaneous television shows with African American hosts, such as the local Philadelphia program *The Mitch Thomas Show* (1955–1958) and the nationally syndicated *The Nat King Cole Show*, which only ran for the 1956–1957 season (Delmont 2012).

25. For behind-the-scenes information about *ShinDig!*, see Austen (2005), Banas (2011) and Winters (2018).
26. After appearing in the Hollywood film *West Side Story* (1961), Winters relocated to Los Angeles and began to work in the TV and film industries, primarily on rock ‘n’ roll programs such as the *T.A.M.I Show* and Elvis Presley films. Throughout the 1960s, Winters also taught jazz dance classes in Hollywood (Winters 2018).
27. Mann recognized the Black roots and white routes of the dances she was performing. When asked about the style of dancing performed on *ShinDig!* in a 2018 Television Academy interview, Mann describes it as “go-go dancing. So, but we also had to learn routines. I mean, we all had to be together whether it was the wobble, the pony, the jerk, the zonk, the monkey, the Philly dog, the—whatever. We knew every step of those days, of what, that’s what I would say is what the hip hop dances of today. We were very crafted at go-go dancing. And it wasn’t easy because when you’re a trained dancer and your back is, like, stiff, you have to let all of that go, and just become go-go.”
28. By the mid-1960s, Motown appearances on commercial television departed from earlier crossover marketing strategies; in 1961, The Marvelette’s record cover for “Please Mr. Postman” featured an image of a mailbox rather than a photograph of the Black group; this song became Motown’s first number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart.
29. The label was initially named Tamla Records after “Tammy,” a popular Debbie Reynolds song from 1957. It was incorporated as Motown Record Corporation in 1960.
30. For a theorization of how Motown and Michael Jackson embodied Fordist ideologies of labor and production, see Hamera (2012; 2017).
31. Atkins confirmed he “never worked directly with them, but they used to stand in the wings during performances, and at Motown they would sit on the stairs and watch me rehearse other groups” (Atkins and Malone 2001, 171).
32. For more on versioning in various Black cultural expressions, see Hebdige (1987), DeFrantz (2004), and Rose (1994).
33. My understanding of the program’s origins, production practices, and dance culture is informed by well-researched books by Blount Danois (2013), George (2014), Lehman (2008), and Thompson (2013), as well as the VH1-produced documentary *The Hippest Trip in America* (Goldberg and Swain 2010) and BET’s promotional “I was a Soul Train Dancer” (BET International 2019) segments that promote BET’s fictionalized show about the program, *American Soul*.
34. Among others, see Bragin (2015); Durden (2022); George (2014); Guzman-Sanchez (2012); Pond (2013); Thompson (2013).
35. Mentions of the Jackson’s learning directly from *Soul Train* dancers include a now-removed web article by *Soul Train* dancer and historian Stephen McMillan (originally posted in 2015), E. Moncell Durden’s hip hop documentary *Everything Remains Raw: A Historical Perspective on Hip Hop Dance* (published to YouTube in 2022), a July 15, 2022, Instagram post by Timothy “Popin Pete” Solomon (2022), a street dance pioneer and long-time Jackson tutor and collaborator, and a video interview with *Soul Train* dancer Damita Jo Freeman, which can be found on street dancer and street dance historian Alpha “Omega” Anderson’s “Street Dance Roots” YouTube channel (Anderson nd.).
36. Basil, who had previously choreographed for Dick Clark Productions, booked The Lockers their first television appearance on a Roberta Flack Special on ABC (Billman 1997). According to Basil, the original professional group included Fred “Mr. Penguin” (aka “Rerun”) Berry, Toni Basil, Don “Campbellock” Campbell, Aldolfo “Shabba Doo” Quiñones, Greg “Campbellock Jr” Pope, Bill “Slim the Robot” Williams, and Leo “Fluky Luke” Williamson. Also see Campbell’s own “Campbellock” timeline on <https://campbellock.dance/>.
37. According to the timeline on The Jackson’s official website, the first run was between April 9–24 and the second run was from November 20–December 3: <https://www.thejacksons.com/history/the-jackson-5-1974/>.
38. George notes that more money was likely more incentive than more creative control in the decision to part ways with Motown: when the Jacksons signed to Epic/CBS they were granted a 28 percent royalty on wholesale albums prices in the U.S and 24 percent internationally, which was roughly 500 percent more than their royalty rate at Motown (2.7 percent per record). Yet “CBS

retained almost as much control over selection of producers and material as Motown had” (1988, 149). Fortunately for The Jacksons, their new affiliation meant that they were contractually able to work with Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff of Philadelphia International Records, a Black-owned company which had a distribution deal with CBS. In archival footage included in Spike Lee’s 2016 documentary *Michael Jackson’s Journey from Motown to Off the Wall*, Jackson declares “with Epic, we can sell twice as many records.”

39. For more financial and legal details of their departure, see George (1984); Greenburg (2014); Knopper (2015).

40. Years later, Janet Jackson celebrated the Nicholas Brothers again, as well as entertainment icons Cyd Charisse and Cab Calloway, by featuring them in the music video *Alright* (1990), co-choreographed by Michael Kidd and Anthony Thomas.

41. Moreover, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2000) describes in her analysis of swing era adagio dance partners Norton and Margot, Black artists who chose to perform “genteel” style of ballroom dancing were discriminated against in white performance arenas.

42. I note that my knowledge of locking vocabulary is thanks to The Hood Lockers, an internationally renowned “group of brothers united in Funk who have devoted their lives to the cultural preservation and progression of Locking.” I am especially grateful to Andrew “Riot” Ramsey, whose drop-in classes I took at Urban Movement Arts in Philadelphia for over a year and a half as well as the deep collective knowledge shared in The Hood Lockers’ 2021 “Blueprint” online workshops. <https://thehoodlockersllc.com/>

43. While assistant choreographers and influential dance tutors are typically uncredited, official choreographic attributions for these works are as following: *Beat It*, choreographed by Michael Peters, *Thriller*, co-choreographed by Michael Peters and Michael Jackson, *When I Think Of You*, choreographed by Paul Abdul with staging by Michael Kidd, *Bad*, co-choreographed by Jeffrey Daniel and Gregg Burge, *Smooth Criminal*, choreographed by Vincent Paterson with additional choreography by Jeffrey Daniel, and *Alright*, choreographed by Anthony Thomas with additional staging by Michael Kidd.

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