



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on July 2, 2009

Michael Jackson and Our Modern Celebrity Culture

And as it was with Camelot, there has been no shortage of reactions to the King of Pop's untimely end. Fans have been saddened. Critics have, understandably, been muted. And the media have been reporting at a fever pitch, trying to capture television ratings and Web traffic. But my thoughts are a bit different: our reaction to Jackson's death — and life — speaks volumes about our society.



Some Jackson fans have registered shock, making comments about how they cannot believe he is gone. But is it really that surprising? Entertainers often live fast and die hard; their stories are legion. Just to name a handful, actors John Belushi, Chris Farley, River Phoenix, Heath Ledger, and Brad Renfro all succumbed to drug overdoses; actor [Jonathan Brandis](#) and rock star [Ian Curtis](#) hanged themselves; and Australian actor [Mark Priestley](#) committed suicide by leaping from a hi-rise hotel. Half of these men never saw the age of 30; the other half weren't much beyond it. And Jackson seemed as troubled as any of them.

In many ways, Jackson can be called an American success story and an American tragedy. The seventh of nine children of steel worker Joseph Jackson, he achieved fame, glory, and riches far beyond the dreams of most from such humble beginnings. But it came with a price. Jackson was as well-known for his bizarre behaviors as for his singular talent, sharing his bed with pubescent boys and mutilating himself with unnecessary plastic surgery. Many would say that his problems were not due to the trappings of success but his father's physical and emotional abuse — which Jackson spoke of himself. This is true, in a way, but we must add some nuance. Abuse takes many forms, and overlooked is that allowing a child to be assailed by the corruptive influences of the entertainment industry is itself abuse. Just consider what Jackson was exposed to while still sporting baby teeth and as a member of The Jackson Five. As Wikipedia [writes](#), "The band toured the Midwest extensively from 1966 to 1968. The band frequently performed at a string of black clubs and venues collectively known as the '[chitlin' circuit](#),' where they often opened for stripteases and other adult acts." This obviously is not a good environment for a child.

Nor is it an unusual environment for such children. When I watch modern movies and shows, I'm always struck by the influences to which young actors are subjected. Although many won't appreciate this analogy, they're much like child soldiers in Africa who are forced to perform dirty deeds the adults



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controlling them deem necessary. The show must go on, and to create the salacious material entertainment disgorges, child actors sometimes must be involved in sexual scenarios and use profanity. As ProfessorHouse.com wrote on the matter:

Many child actors will perform in innocuous television commercials or PG movies, but many also will help to create characters in films or television shows that are geared for an adult audience. This means that no matter how much they are shielded from the dark side of the entertainment industry, they may still be exposed to heavy subject matter that is difficult to process at a young age. This may force them to grow up a little too soon and can have negative effects on their adulthood down the road.

In point of fact, it's hard to imagine an actor rising to prominence today without being sullied, and there is great pressure not to draw lines. As an example, when *Growing Pains* star Kirk Cameron refused to portray certain behaviors, some complained that he was trying to impose his Christian values on the show. We should note, however, that Cameron has reached almost 40 years of age without getting involved in drugs or scandal.

Moreover, we only see what makes it onto the screen. But what happens behind the scenes sometimes cannot even manage an R rating. For example, a documentary reported that [Rick Nelson](#), the late singer, musician, and actor, lost his virginity to a prostitute at the tender age of 13 (and this was Ozzie and Harriet's boy and the 1950s). And I don't think this is at all unusual. The entertainment industry is notorious for its party-and-drugs climate; it is very much one big occasion of sin.

Thus, while there are good people in entertainment, it nevertheless vaguely resembles an asylum of the weak, weird, and wounded. This is why it's so tragic that we exalt celebrities the way we do. And mankind didn't always do so. In the Roman Empire, actors were placed down near the level of a prostitute. Even as recently as the early 20th century, they were held in low esteem. Theirs was a career that could never be the calling of a lady or gentleman.

Today, however, fame is the greatest credential you can have in our Perez Hilton culture. It's common to hear people say now that many worship celebrity, and this characterization can almost be taken literally in post-Christian America. For it is a place wherein celebrity has filled a void, the one left when people stop believing in the supernatural and then have nothing but the superficial. Another way of saying it is that when people cease believing in the Deity, they often deify other men. Barack Obama, anyone?

This evidences itself in so many ways. There were those partisans at campaign rallies who fainted upon beholding Barack Obama. As for Jackson, Deepak Chopra [opined](#) that he gave people that "God feeling," and there are stories of his fans actually committing suicide in the wake of his death. Perhaps that is what you do when your god is dead. Then there are again those who just can't believe he is gone. Sure, it's often just a figurative remark, but still, one almost has to wonder: did they expect him to be immortal?

Yet, deified or not, celebrities' often ungodly behavior has its effect on them — and on us. And this is the danger of exalting a group whose members are so often tragic and twisted. When people entertain us, we start to like them, and then there is a tendency to legitimize what is associated with them. This can sometimes be positive, of course. When black boxer Joe Louis knocked out German Max Schmeling during the Nazi era, millions of white Americans cheered him on. Louis also was a consummate gentleman, always comporting himself with dignity and class. I believe his celebrity status did a lot for



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race relations.

Yet, sadly, this phenomenon seems to work mostly for ill today. People came to love Elton John's music, Martina Navratilova's tennis, and Ellen DeGeneres'... well, whatever it is she does. Then, slowly, homosexual behavior ceased to seem as bad as it used to. Goldie Hawn, Madonna, Katie Holmes, and Michelle Williams became pregnant out of wedlock, diminishing the stigma against it all the more. And while appearing on a television talk show recently, Mel Gibson announced that his mistress was in the family way, evoking a round of applause from the audience. So forget about fame meaning that you'll never have to say you're sorry. It actually may mean you're ensuring that there is less to say sorry for all the time.

As for Jackson, let's be blunt: he was a troubled but also a very twisted and strange man. He hurt himself and, in the process, couldn't help but hurt the society that exalted him. It would be better if people prayed for him than, in a manner of speaking, to him.

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