

Dieter Wiesner

Michael Jackson

The True Story

For Michael Jackson
(1958-2009)

*"We are brothers, Dieter, we have to stick together,
don't let the system push itself between us."¹*

Michael Jackson



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Preface

An endless amount has been said and written about Michael Jackson. Some of it is true, others are not. During several years of his most important creative phase, I was lucky enough to be not only his manager, but also his closest confidant and friend. I stayed with him at the legendary Neverland Ranch and accompanied him to over 120 concerts on all continents. With this book, I want to correct, supplement and correct the public's image of Michael Jackson. I feel this is my task and debt to him. Michael was so different from what he is often portrayed, and there is still so much to tell about him. He was funny and lovable, joking and making a fool of me – then suddenly he turned to me, driven by fear and despair.

What many people don't know is that Michael Jackson faced a major upheaval in his life and work from 2000 onwards, and he confided in me his intentions, concrete plans and secrets – often in nightly conversations and telephone calls. This book is intended to show the "real" Michael Jackson and provide an insight into the life of one of the most fascinating pop stars of our time. A life in which Michael Jackson lost himself at some point and became a victim of those he believed he could trust. A life that ended far too soon. As an artist, Michael Jackson was on the verge of completely reinventing himself, as a person he was simply no longer able to meet the expectations that weighed on him. The news of his death on June 25, 2009 shocked the world. What would have become of Michael Jackson if he had only been allowed to be himself for once? I

am incredibly lucky to have actually known Michael Jackson and miss him very much. As a friend, as a person, as a star. With this I would like to give the world once again the opportunity to rediscover Michael and to see him with completely different eyes. Up close.

Dieter Wiesner in October/November 2011

Crocodile Rock

His estate was a dream, except for those crocodiles. It was hot, and a deep blue Californian sky stretched like a huge, protective roof over the expanse of Neverland Ranch. There was a silence that was not disturbed, but rather confirmed, by the occasional, soft fluttering of some birds and their chirping, by a lonely chirping cricket and the rhythmically twitching sound of a distant lawn sprinkler.

Michael came running across an infinitely wide meadow and seemed tiny at first from a distance, until his figure gradually came closer and closer and grew taller. He wore an open red shirt, a white T-shirt underneath and black pants. The heat was bearable because a gentle wind blew through the Santa Ynez Valley and carried cool water particles from the lawn sprinkler with it and spread them around like an atomizer. Michael's hair and shirt blew in this damp wind, his gait was fast, elastic and athletic, sometimes interrupted for a moment by a prancing jump. He looked in different directions, he smiled, he was in the best of moods on this wonderful summer day. He was in his kingdom. He was with himself. Suddenly he stood in front of me, crossed his arms behind his back, looked first at me, then up to the sky and greeted me laughingly with his inimitable "*Hi, Dieter!*" and added : "*God bless you! You're looking fine! Oh, what a wonderful day!*" He had noticed that I had gotten quite a bit of color on my face, and I told him that I had sat in the sun for a long time at noon on top of one of the mountains of Neverland, where there were thick boulders, to think. He looked down at me, pointed to my legs, opened his eyes wide and shouted in horror: "*Like this??? What are you*

doing?" He put a hand on my shoulder: *"Are you crazy? Are you nuts???"* He had noticed that I was standing barefoot and in sports pants in front of him. Neverland Ranch has often been described in the media as a paradise on earth, which it certainly was, full of butterflies, dragonflies and wildflowers. But what Michael meant were the rattlesnakes and scorpions that sometimes crawled out from under the rocks, and it was therefore incomprehensible to him that I was walking without shoes.

He put his hands to his head, warned me again about the insidious "rattlesnakes" and implored me with a serious face never to walk barefoot across the ranch again. Such rather dangerous creatures also belong to creation and have the right to a place card in Noah's Ark, and so he did not have them removed, but considered them part of his Neverland universe. Sometimes you could hear coyotes howling in the distance at night, strange and eerie lamentations. Michael then crossed his arms in front of his chest, made a gesture as if he had chills, and went to his son and daughter, Prince and Paris, to check on them and close the windows in their rooms. Even during the day, as a father, he made sure that he had an eye on the children and that they did not stray too far on the huge grounds. Because the coyotes were not only active at night.

After I had put on pants and sturdy sports shoes, we drank iced tea in the shade on a porch and then set off for a short walk around the ranch. What a beautiful afternoon! So we didn't talk about new projects or other business matters. On days like this, all worries were locked out on the ranch, and it suddenly seemed to me that a little idle boredom was

actually the greatest luxury a person can afford. Isn't life extended by those moments when you don't know exactly what you're going to do next, when all hectic is banished and time seems to stand still? We walked past ancient trees, the lake with the black swans, a peacock doing its wheel, and approached the aviaries and outdoor enclosures of Michael's private zoo. Probably we had instinctively simply followed the shrill sounds of the parrots. Finally, we stopped and leaned against the waist-high fence of the crocodile enclosure. As if you were in the jungle, after the silence before, I now enjoyed the exotic animal sounds of all kinds and looked around in all possible directions for their causes. I felt like I was in paradise. But suddenly, as if out of the blue, Michael – just calmly next to me – jumped over the fence of the crocodile pool with a huge leap from a standing position, ran to a corner of the pool and sat down very loosely on the boundary wall. In an almost high-spirited mood, he smiled mischievously and curiously watched the animals, the roommates of his very own universe. Like stuffed specimens, they lay lazily in the water, thick chunks, about 1.80 meters long. And exactly where Michael was sitting now, such a reptile lay very close below him with its head against the wall. I was a bit uncomfortable at the sight, but I didn't know if he hadn't sat there several times and made friends with the animal. Michael's legs dangled from the boundary wall just above the surface of the water. He looked at the completely motionless giant boy for a long time, still smiling, and then picked up a handful of pebbles and began to throw some of them at the crocodile's thick shell. That couldn't hurt the animal at all, if it noticed anything at all. The small stones that Michael threw produced a dull, deep and wooden sound when hitting this

resonating body, as if they were being thrown onto a thick tree trunk. It went on like this for a while, Michael giggled, he wanted to tease the animal, wake it up and lure it out of its reserve, perhaps something along the lines of: "If I already have crocodiles, then they should please do something interesting instead of lying around motionless all the time!" In the meantime, I had to smile about his unusual ideas, but at the same time I wanted to admonish him: "*Michael, be careful! Don't overdo it ...*", I whispered and jokingly added that he could probably forget his moonwalk if he continued like this. He didn't want to hear, the stones were still flying. But only briefly. Suddenly the water boiled and in a fraction of a second the animal shot to the surface. It opened its mouth with a deep hiss almost to a 90-degree angle and snapped at Michael's legs, which he was just able to pull up in a flash before the pointed rows of teeth in the reptile's mighty jaws crashed into each other with a sound like slamming the lid of a heavy chest. Michael had swung himself backwards back onto the wall. On it he stood now, and—I could not believe it! – bent over with laughter. He threw his head back and just couldn't stop. That's how he was.

Rodgau, June 25, 2009, 11:50 p.m. and thereafter

Outside the balmy wind of a quiet summer night blew. It was less quiet in my office, however, where the phones rang every minute, as they do every day. The workspaces are located on the edge of an industrial area that seems deserted in the evening. I have been working in this self-chosen seclusion for years now and can make business phone calls in peace and quiet until late at night, as required by the time difference to the USA. Less than an hour ago, a good acquaintance from L.A. had called me to tell me that Michael Jackson's health was very bad and his life was at stake. As macabre as it sounds, my first reaction was a loud laugh. That couldn't be! Never, not in the slightest, would it have occurred to me that there could be any truth in this news.

Instead, I suspected that this message was due to a tactic of Michael's that I was all too familiar with: To withdraw from the upcoming This Is It tour under the pretext of not being able to do so due to health reasons. Since the announcement of his big farewell tour on March 5 in London, all tickets for the planned show have been sold out. And Michael Jackson – as the greatest pop star of all time – was more than ever in the public eye. On July 13, 2009, in only 18 days, the tour was supposed to start. After the phone call, I was sure that it wouldn't be long before the tour was officially canceled due to "heart problems" or something similar. As far as I know, this tour was completely beyond his imagination for him, such undertakings were no longer on his agenda and he was reluctant to do so. He had let himself be carried away to ten concerts, but in the meantime the organizers wanted 50 performances. So the following day I

expected a press release that would have trickily released him from all this for the time being because of an "illness".

But I was wrong. Shortly before midnight, I received another call from the acquaintance who was staying in Michael's villa and had more detailed information in the meantime. Something terrible has happened: Michael is dead. The blood froze in my veins, for the tone in which the news was communicated to me left no doubt. I was in shock and couldn't hold back the tears. I was paralyzed and unable to continue the phone call.

Accustomed to solving every problem that arose immediately and energetically, this time I was filled with boundless powerlessness. As if through a veil, I looked at all the posters, photos and memorabilia of Michael Jackson in my office, which he had given me as a thank you for the work together. Throughout my life, I was also considered a loner and, at least some claimed, an experienced strategist in business, and yet I had more than just a long-standing business relationship with Michael Jackson: That night I lost a friend.

As soon as I received the message, it went around the world, and within a few minutes I couldn't save myself from emails and calls. The situation became dramatic, and it was no longer possible for me to think clearly. The phones rang every second, my mail account collapsed, and it was hopeless to meet all interview requests at the same time. In addition, there were the mails and calls of numerous deeply shocked fans who could not and did not want to believe the news of Michael Jackson's death. I quickly realized how much this news moved the whole world, how deep the shock was, but also what disbelief his death caused in

many in the first few days. Michael Jackson dead: That could, that shouldn't be! However, I was able to answer one question that I was asked again and again that night with a clear "no": No, Michael Jackson had certainly not committed suicide. Not only because Michael loved his children more than anything, but also because he had planned so much in his life, a voluntary end simply did not suit him. Michael wanted to live. Sleep was out of the question that night, still shocked, I suddenly had countless memories of the time spent together: our first meeting, the hours of conversations, the HIStory tour, all the terrible, but also beautiful experiences I had shared with him. I lost track of time, but at some point – it was already dawn – I sat in my car and drove home through the deserted landscape.

The next morning, the enormous extent of the flood of requests and expressions of condolence from all over the world was revealed, which had not stopped overnight. But not only that: Many of the fans seemed so shocked and desperate that some of them even threatened to commit suicide. And even today – more than two years after Michael's death – I still receive countless e-mails that bear witness to the great vacuum that Michael Jackson left behind – that ask about the real Michael, that want to know more and that do not let go of the circumstances of his death.

Since Michael's death, the voices of his notorious critics have also fallen silent, and contemptuous terms such as "Wacko Jacko" have been respectfully replaced by "King of Pop". For many people, the anniversary of Michael Jackson's death is one of the collectively experienced key

dates, of which it is said that the world has never been the same since then. Everyone still knows exactly what they were doing at the time they heard the news and where they were. Everyone has their own story about Michael Jackson's death, because, whether you were actually a fan or not, his much too early death tore a gap in the music world. The shock was followed by a period of paralysis. During the days that followed, the millions of fans, employees, friends and relatives of Michael tried to come to terms with the fact of his death and become aware of it in a quiet, desperate mourning process. As much as his death affected and occupied me, I refrained from contacting his family in the first few days. No one wants to be confronted with expressions of condolence, no matter how well-intentioned it may be, when they themselves are still in shock.

It wasn't until a few days later that I called Michael's father Joe. It was a brief, quiet and sad conversation with a good acquaintance whom I knew as a robust businessman who was never at a loss for a joke or a bold suggestion. During the conversation, however, he suddenly seemed like a broken man. At that time, it was still completely unclear to him how he and the rest of the Jackson family should present themselves to the media in order to react to the death of the most famous and successful family member by far. He asked me if I would come to Los Angeles for the funeral. I wasn't sure, but when it gradually became clear afterwards what dimension the celebration would take, I refrained from it. On July 7, the official farewell to Michael Jackson took place at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, former companions such as Diana Ross, Berry Gordy or Brooke Shields paid their last respects to him and, last but not least, of

course, the family. Millions of viewers worldwide watched the farewell ceremony on screen. She didn't leave me cold either, but I was happy to be able to say goodbye to Michael later in a much quieter moment.

I was in contact with Joe Jackson again and again after Michael's death, which continues to this day. It is known from fathers whose sons died far too early, for example in wars, that they are often dominated by a feeling of inner emptiness, in which the normal succession of generations has been reduced to absurdity and their own existence now seems meaningless. In any case, Joseph Jackson, the father, always asserts how much he loved and loves his son – as difficult as their relationship may have been at times. At some point I asked him about the heavy chain around his neck, on which there is a large silver amulet in the shape of a bird. The lowered wings and the tail feathers at the bottom center form an "M". *"This is Michael ..."*, is the explanation of the decoration above his heart, *"my son!"*

Michael Jackson died at a time when he had long since lost control of his own life. Due to the tricky actions of the system that surrounded him, he simply had no way out, he had been forced to perform and carry out the This Is It tour, he himself had no influence on the decision. He had been pushed into a corner from which he could not escape.

A well-known writer was once asked how he felt on his 75th birthday, and he answered: "It's like driving into a garage, and the wall is getting closer and closer." In this case, such a statement may be due to the indispensability of old age – the inevitable progression of time from which

no one escapes. Michael's time, however, was not yet up – biologically speaking. It was not advanced age that kept him from life, but a system of lobbyists that had taken on a life of its own over the years and left him little room for his own concepts and ideas.

Some may therefore think that death was a redemption for him – as sometimes with the terminally ill – or the only possible escape from his prison. In my opinion, however, this is not the case. The world could have seen a new, a different Michael Jackson for many years. A Michael who never tired of developing new business models and drawing strength from himself and his almost infinite creative potential.

Even today, I sometimes think: Man, I have to call him! Only to realize a second later that this will never be possible again. I was nine years older than him and once I jokingly asked him, should the time come, to please come to my funeral. And what a crowd and press hype there would be in the small, quiet town where I live because of him. After a short laugh, he replied very seriously: *"Please don't talk about things like this!"*

The Beginning – Los Angeles, September 1995

The flight from Frankfurt to L.A. was quiet. After I had dozed off a bit in the machine, I woke up with the question of what I was actually doing here. That's right, I was on my way to becoming an extraordinary artist, the biggest pop star in the world. I would never have believed that I would meet Michael Jackson in person and now I was even on the verge of presenting him with a business idea that I helped develop! For years I had been active in the merchandising business, had worked with large companies such as Lufthansa or Haribo and successfully implemented a number of marketing ideas from the partners. About eight months before this flight to L.A., an acquaintance had come to see me who had worked at Red Bull and had now specialized in developing new energy drinks. The topic was very much in vogue in the mid-1990s. He asked me how to best market the new drink he had developed. At that time, however, I had no idea about such drinks and their potential for success and expressed my doubts at first. But after several conversations, we came up with the brilliant idea: You would have to associate the energy drink with a pop star. *But with whom? Why not start with the largest in the world? – Michael Jackson!* But shortly afterwards we had to laugh, because of course we didn't give the idea any serious chances.

The drink – elaborately designed by the comrade-in-arms and the Wild company in Heidelberg (Capri Sonne) – had an interesting "Peach Flavor", a peach flavor, very refreshing and extraordinary when drunk ice cold. It was, in keeping with the spirit of the times, an isotonic "Healthy Drink", and we quickly came up with the name "MJ Mystery Drink", in

reference to Michael Jackson's upcoming HIStory World Tour. As a container, we finally came up with a particularly trendy Slim Line tin in gold, printed in red: "fresh – cool – magic". Even today, empty cans are traded at a high price by fans, there are even unopened ones at a price of 800 dollars, with a content that can be described as almost antique, 15 years past the expiration date. After we offered the product Sony/USA and sent the letter for it, however, I almost forgot about it and thought the whole thing was more of a joke. All the greater our surprise when about half a year later an invitation arrived from Sony with the suggestion to present the new drink properly on site and to meet Michael Jackson on this occasion. After all, it was his person and his name that would stand for the drink, and therefore he was the first to be convinced. On the flight, I kept thinking how strange it feels when dreams come true.



The can with which it all began.

The fight for the artist and his market value was very big at the time, Michael Jackson was a product with which there was a huge business to be made beyond his music. Ever since Jay Coleman negotiated the Pepsi deals for Michael Jackson in 1983 and 1985 for five and ten million dollars respectively, the artist's connection to a youthful soft drink has been repeatedly discussed. Coleman's stroke of genius was to associate the pop star's aura, freshness and youthfulness with the Pepsi brand, which suddenly made Coca-Cola look quite old, and brought Pepsi millions in sales. We had now developed a new, very own drink for Michael Jackson – independent of a large beverage company. Given the volume of the Coleman deals, I knew which area we were in. But I'd have to lie if I said I was already a fan of Michael Jackson back then. Sure, if I walked through any city on a summer evening in the 1980s or early 1990s, in Europe or on any other continent, I couldn't escape the music of Michael Jackson. Whether "Thriller", "Beat it" or "Billie Jean" – his songs echoed through the streets and city centers like echoes at the time, Michael Jackson's music seemed to be the soundtrack of an entire generation. That's why I knew him, he was a phenomenon! However, I only became a fan of his music later.

When we arrived at Sony, we, my business partners and I, had to undergo a strange procedure in an isolated office floor. With security guards, we were supposed to practice getting up and sitting down to greet the world star. Actually, this seemed a little ridiculous to us, but of course we went along with it so as not to spoil the meeting so close to

the finish. But while we were still practicing getting up again, the door suddenly opened quietly and Michael Jackson suddenly stood in the middle of the room: Michael Jackson right in front of me! The greatest artist in the world was smaller and slender than I had expected, but seemed incredibly energetic and elastic. Instantly we fell silent and looked only at *him*. Get up? Set? None of us thought about it anymore, because now it was too late anyway. Michael Jackson himself was already in front of us. Close enough to touch! Later, I understood that his sudden appearance was part of his staging. On stage as in real life: Michael loved the performance. The sophisticated timing, the rehearsed choreography, his sudden appearance out of nowhere (often after hours of waiting) – all this was an indispensable part of his appearance and his personality in public. In doing so, he staged an aura of aloofness that surrounded him mysteriously and respectfully, an invisible distance, which he immediately broke through with friendly words, thus dissolving the tension of reverence and respect that was sometimes almost unbearable for the bystanders to their relief.

Michael Jackson wore a black hat, sunglasses and black trousers with gold bands on the sides, plus a black shirt that hung over his trousers. After a moment of silence, he bowed respectfully in our direction. We were also top-styled in dark suits with ties. He let himself sink onto a cantilever chair, on which he now rocked up and down like a boy, his legs casually crossed to start the conversation. He was extremely nice, very shy, almost shy, at least very different from what I had imagined the King of Pop to be. He spoke quietly and concentrated and got straight to the point. He would very much like to see our "MJ Mystery Drink". So we

proudly presented the tins with the gold glittering design and the sparkling logo. Already thrilled by the sight of the can, Michael Jackson started to test the actual core of the whole project, namely the Peach Flavor drink itself. He was just about to open a can when his security guards jumped up and knew how to prevent this – faster than we could look. They took the can out of the pop star's hand, as if we were trying to poison a king with it. Even Michael Jackson had to laugh, as soon everyone in the room, because they were well aware of the unintentional comedy. Why should we poison the very person who should only stand for the success of our product?

As strange as the situation was, it also gave us a first impression of how much the megastar was actually controlled by his surroundings. Even then, he no longer decided many things himself. Whoever he did business with or met in person – his whole life was determined by interests that were not always his own.

With Sony's promise that the joint merchandising project was on the right track, we left again. Michael Jackson himself had spoken positively, although he had not even had the opportunity to taste the drink.

The drink was then also circulated at some concerts on a trial basis, including a very elaborate presentation in Amsterdam. In the end, however, it was never realized. After believing that we had Michael Jackson himself on our side, we were of course a bit disappointed and frustrated. There was even a wonderful promotional video for the drink, shot by the "Torpedo Twins" (DoRo film production, Rudi Dolezal and Hannes Rossacher), who were very successful in the 1980s and 1990s. High royalties had been paid for our MJ Mystery Drink so that it could be

marketed through Michael Jackson, but Sony did not stick to the agreement and withdrew from the announced support. Even then, I noticed that the artist was under the strict control of a system that strictly prohibited any access to career changers, even if, as in our case, payments had already been made.

After all, I had made the acquaintance of the greatest pop star of all time.

How many people could say that about themselves?

But should this be the end?

Munich, Spring 1996

As someone who doesn't give up on a project so quickly, I waited in the lobby of the Hotel Bayerischer Hof, where Michael Jackson had been accommodated during a visit to Munich. I had managed to call his security chief a few times, who helped me arrange a second meeting. Sony had strictly forbidden any contact between outsiders and the star, but after about ten minutes, Wayne Nagin, the head of security, picked me up and took me to Michael's suite. I took a seat on a couch and waited for almost half an hour until he came to me in the room after a few phone calls he had made. And again he made an extremely polite and courteous impression. We sat down, and now he had the opportunity to try a sip of the health elixir for the first time. With a big "Wow!!" he was immediately enthusiastic. The peach flavor hit his nerve. I told him about how Sony had prevented my people and I from launching the MJ Mystery Drink and how career changers were apparently completely blocked. He made it clear to me that he knew what was going on behind the scenes, and I soon had the impression that he wanted to help me.

We talked about all kinds of things for almost three hours, and gradually the drink almost didn't matter anymore. One topic led to another. In a few months, on September 7, 1996, the big HIStory World Tour was to start in Prague, with which he would travel worldwide for a good year. Finally, he suggested that I just come along and accompany him. He was very serious, he invited me. When I left the Bayerischer Hof hours later, I first walked a bit aimlessly through the streets near Munich's main train station. I didn't quite know what had happened to me and felt a bit dazed,

but also very happy. People came towards me, but I hardly noticed them. If only they knew! Just a few minutes ago I had sat with the biggest pop star of all time and now I would even accompany him on his tour. But no one took notice of me, why should they? Of course, you couldn't see my experience, but inside there was a kind of state of emergency in me. Unconsciously, I probably felt how much the encounter with Michael Jackson would change my life.