

Michael Jackson had lofty ambitions when he went into the studio with producer Quincy Jones in April 1982. After childhood fame as a member of his family's band, the Jackson 5, Michael's 1979 breakthrough album *Off the Wall* had shown his potential for success as a grown-up. Now, at 24, he was ready to complete his evolution from cute kid singer to mature solo artist. But Jackson probably never imagined how much those sessions would change his career—and pop music history. The album he released the following November, *Thriller*, shattered worldwide sales records (estimates range from 65-110 million), won eight GRAMMYS, and yielded seven top-10 singles.

But it was the title track's long video (released in 1983) that completed Jackson's coronation as the "King of Pop" and elevated music video production from afterthought to art form. At the time, most music videos were loosely based on live performance. The artists might be lip-synching to the track on a weird-looking set, but they weren't acting in a *movie*. At nearly 14 minutes, "Thriller" was different. For one thing, it had a script co-written by Jackson and director John Landis, whose credits include feature films like *The Blues Brothers* and *An American Werewolf in London*. It had scenery, costumes (Landis' wife designed Jackson's famous red jacket), zombies, and a voiceover by iconic horror movie actor Vincent Price. But most of all, it had amazing choreography and Jackson's charismatic presence. "It was one of those defining moments that come along once in a generation," Mike Celizic wrote for NBC's *Today Show* in 2008. "If you were young then, the 'Thriller' video and Jackson's music became part of your DNA. But even if you were older, you knew when you turned on MTV and saw Jackson's breathtaking performance that you were seeing something that had never been seen before." Its vast influence on pop culture inspired the Library of Congress to make the "Thriller" video—which sold 9 million copies—the first-ever music video to be included in the National Film Registry in 2009.

» December 2, 1983

"Thriller" Makes Pop Music Video History