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Music: George Michael's "Faith" And The Era Of The Blockbuster

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It was the era of the blockbuster. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, pop music became dominated by a new phenomenon: albums that released a seemingly endless string of smash hit singles, spawned massive worldwide tours and sold a ton of albums. Huge selling albums came before and after this era, of course. What made this period so special was the new phenomenon of an album putting three, four, five or even seven smash hits and the fact that the albums were massively appealing to so many different audiences and the fact that they dominated the charts and pop culture for literally years AND the fact that they were actually good.

Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA*. Prince & The Revolution's *Purple Rain*. Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. The Police's *Synchronicity*. The Bee Gees-dominated soundtrack *Saturday Night Fever*. Madonna's *Like A Virgin*. U2's *The Joshua Tree*. Whitney Houston's debut. And George Michael's *Faith*, to name some of the most notable. Faith has just been reissued in two versions, a 2 CD set from Epic/Legacy for roughly \$12 and a deluxe edition in a hardcover, slipcased set with 2 CDs and a bonus DVD featuring the album's videos, a half hour promotional clip made for his world tour and an hour long interview done at the time for British TV by Jonathan Ross, two substantial essays including a new interview with Michael an lots of photos for \$40.

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All critically acclaimed. All dominating radio like few albums ever did before in history -- and almost never for that long. Albums transformed from a release with one or two singles that would be supplanted six or nine or 12 months later by another album by that same artist into the leading vehicle of a mammoth publicity campaign that circled the globe and lasted two or three years.

Remarkably, this phenomenon of the blockbuster was also happening at the movies. Instant smash hits that reached a huge audience seemingly overnight began in the modern era with *The Exorcist* and *The Godfather*. The really wide release was pioneered by *Jaws*. And the popcorn blockbuster *Star Wars* definitively changed the way Hollywood did business. Summer and holiday blockbusters opening to a wide audience became common-place, often with a string of merchandise in their wake, including video games and t-shirts and toys. And they were good! Hollywood for a good decade had the Midas touch and the result were movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Ghostbusters*, *Back To The Future*, *Grease*, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Tootsie*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Rain Man*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and on and on. It was an endless series of smash hits that were also exceptionally well-crafted. Today, a summer blockbuster is more likely to be *Twilight* or *Transformers* or other movies that everyone sees but no one actually likes very much except for a tiny core of fans.

In a way, the era of the blockbuster began during one week in 1977. It was Saturday, June 18 when Fleetwood Mac officially reached #1 for the first and only time on the singles chart with their hit "Dreams" of the album *Rumours*. For the next seven days, "Dreams" would reign at Number One. It was that very week that *Star Wars* became the #1 film in the country. It had opened on Wednesday, May 25 and was the #2 film in the country behind first *Smokey and the Bandit* and then *The Deep*. But while "Dreams" was dominating the airwaves, *Star Wars* was steamrolling and by the following Friday June 24 it was the #1 film in the country by a country mile.

Star Wars would remain the #1 film in the country for the rest of the year -- on December 16 it would be supplanted by a reissue of *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* and *Saturday Night Fever*. it changed forever the way movies would be made and marketed and how much money Hollywood expected to earn from them.

Meanwhile, Fleetwood Mac was revolutionizing the music business. Before *Rumours*, studio albums typically released one or two big singles (and sometimes not even one). *Rumours* became the first studio album in history to release three Top 10 singles: "Dreams," "Don't Stop" (which hit #3) and "You Make Loving Fun" (which hit #9).

The Beatles had strings of hits on numerous compilations and American versions of UK albums that merged tracks from various sources, including three or four Top 10 hits on *Magical Mystery Tour*, which was a mishmash of previously released singles and two EPs. Also, the Supremes had the landmark *Where Did Our Love Go* album, which spun off three #1 singles, but was not technically an album of all original studio material but another compilation of previously recorded and released songs alongside new material. Still, all those #1s were new songs placed on one studio album. So here's the real difference: the Supremes released six albums in 1964 and 1965, featuring eight hit singles including six #1 hits. And yet none of the albums even went gold.

So essentially, *Rumours* was something new since the LP had supplanted the single. An album could spin off a string of hit singles to dominate the airwaves, the artist could tour the world on what was literally a magical mystery tour and the album at the center of it all could sell and sell and sell. *Rumours* has sold 19 million copies in the US...and counting. Record labels realized they could go to all the bother of making



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ten different albums go platinum...or they could just sell one album ten million times.

By the 1980s, releasing three or four or five singles from an album and seeing them all hit the Top 10 or Top 20 became so commonplace, it was hardly worth mentioning anymore. Culture Club had three Top 10 hits from their debut album. Then they had three more from their second. Cyndi Lauper scored four Top 5 hits from her debut (and another song in the Top 30). And they were successful, but not on the same scale as the genuine blockbusters.

Saturday Night Fever spawned four #1 singles -- including three from the Bee Gees. Prince had four Top 10 hits on *Purple Rain*. Bruce Springsteen had seven Top Ten hits on *Born in the USA*. Michael Jackson had seven Top Ten hits on *Thriller* (the first time in history so many singles had even been released from one studio album) and then five NUMBER ONE hits on *Bad*. Madonna had four Top Five hits on *Like A Virgin*. All of these albums sold more than ten million copies in the US alone. Sometimes a lot more. it was a remarkable era when widely appealing popular fare swept through music and movies, scoring big at the cash registers and with critics.

George Michael's *Faith* is a perfect example of the blockbuster era. Achieving a worldwide smash is typically a once in a lifetime event. Often, producing a blockbuster album exhausted an artist creatively or commercially or both. But for one brief moment, they united pop culture and quite literally held the attention of the world. That was certainly the case with *Faith*, which has just been released in two newly remastered editions. The statistics are astounding. In the US, *Faith* produced six Top Five hits and four of them went to #1. The album itself has sold 10 million copies in the US and a total of 20 million copies worldwide. The Faith tour spanned the globe and took so long Michael was out of the UK for a year and decided to use that fact for tax advantages, something he said he'd never do in the interview featured on the DVD.

Like so many other blockbusters for so many other artists, it appeared to be the beginning of a massive new phase of his career but in fact marked a peak which he would never come close to reaching again. (This is less true in Europe, where Michael remained a far more potent commercial force.)

He's not the only one. Fleetwood Mac followed *Rumours* with the murky (if brilliant) *Tusk* and then safer and safer fare that never came close to blockbuster status, though of course they could tour for the rest of their lives. U2 maintained their pace briefly with *Achtung Baby* and then slid into solid albums backed by massive tours. Springsteen quickly came back down to earth commercially and creatively, with the occasional spark touted by the faithful and -- again -- making his bread and butter on tour. Prince remained a potent draw on tour, but emptied his vaults time and again with increasingly sprawling two and three disc releases. Like many of the others, he would once in a while hit another creative home run (*Sign O' The Times*, *Parade*), but essentially he was done. The Police had Three Top Ten hits (plus a fourth in the Top 20), realized it was all downhill from there and just walked away from it all.

Not many artists can talk intelligently about the craft or the business of pop music. George Michael can do both. The quotes and interviews found on the deluxe edition bear this out. Jonathan Ross is an excellent UK talk show host and his substantial chat with Michael just as *Faith* was being released and while "I Want Your Sex" was creating controversy is fascinating. He gets Michael to open up about celebrity and the desire for fame and what drives him. As Michael says, there are no accidental superstars. You have to work with ferocious dedication in order to achieve worldwide fame.

As he had before, Michael talks about being an overweight kid with acne as defining his need for acceptance by the masses. "It's not the something extra that makes a star," Michael tells Ross in the interview. "It's the something missing." Of course, now we know that Michael was also closeted, so that too was a factor. Ross also gets Michael to joke about a gossip item claiming he'd been going to a fitting for a dress and even asked Michael if he used condoms. (Yes, you'll be happy to know.)

In the promo clip for his upcoming world tour, Michael astutely notes that every megastar in the pop world had done at least one massive, globe-spanning tour. He saw it as an essential piece of the puzzle -- something that videos and smash hit singles were no substitute for. People wanted to see their superstars in person and up close and Michael was going to give it to them. He studied the stars that preceded him, looked at what worked and set out to conquer the world.

As far as the critics were concerned, Michael had nothing to prove with his official solo debut album. He trafficked in pure pop, usually not the source of love from critics. But time and again, reviews of his music during the Wham! era would say something like, "Acts like Wham! don't get any respect, but in fact George Michael is a brilliant songwriter...." The funny thing was that everyone was saying this. In his



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classic single "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go," Michael included the delightful couplet "You take the grey skies out of my way/ You make the sun shine brighter than Doris Day." That may be the most quoted lyric of his career. But it's far from the only tune that would have him compared to Motown greats like Smokey Robinson and other pop songsmiths. "Everything She Wants," "Freedom," "I'm Your Man," "The Edge Of Heaven" and the holiday single "Last Christmas" are the highlights that make a Wham! compilation essential for any lover of pop.

Then Michael planned his solo launch with care. First came a Wham! single "featuring George Michael" (as if they ever featured anyone else). That was the ballad "Careless Whisper," yet another tune that critic after critic declared a gem. Then came his official solo one-off "A Different Corner," another ballad. Those songs set up Michael as a solo act.

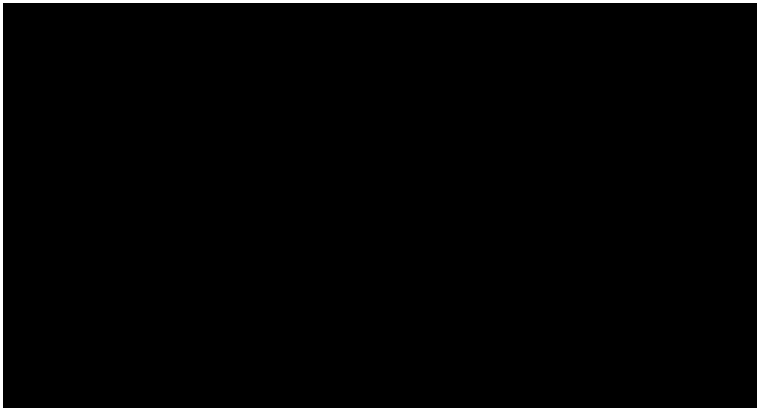
Then came the single that didn't appear on Faith but was essential to its overall success in many ways: "I Knew You Were Waiting For Me," a duet with Aretha Franklin that hit #1 in the US and UK. We see glimpses of the video, where Michael is first seen looking up adoringly at Aretha's image on a big screen, paying homage to one of his idols. Michael is genuinely thrilled (and rightly so) to be singing with the Queen of Soul, as he says at one point or another in the extras on this album re-release. But it also got him out of the rather "older mum" category of his first two hints at a solo career. Michael realized he didn't have to be drippy and adult to be taken seriously as a solo artist. (At least, he believed that for a while.) And world domination wouldn't come via a string of ballads.

Just as importantly, Michael established his bona fides with black audiences and paid due respect to a legend. As Michael says in the liner notes and on the DVD, his music has always had an r&b and gospel feel to it. ("Father Figure" anyone?) That's when his music is at his best. So the r&b fans are both ones he yearned to be accepted by and ones it pays to win over. Michael did both and seeing his album top the R&B charts remained one of the symbolic highlights of his career. And of course, a worldwide #1 smash was a terrific way to get people interested in what you would do next.

Next of course, came sex. Or rather SEX. Michael freely admits to Ross that he knew he was pushing buttons with his first single from Faith. "I Want Your Sex" was designed to get people talking, though Michael clearly didn't expect quite the hysteria that greeted the tune. It's a curious (and debatable) fact that a number of these blockbuster albums debut with one of their weakest singles. Springsteen began with the atypical and synth-heavy "Dancing In The Dark." Michael Jackson kicked off Thriller with "The Girl Is Mine." But marketing clearly trumps artistry. Jackson's tune was a duet with former Beatle Paul McCartney and made it an event. Springsteen's tune was an unabashed stab at a smash hit single. And "I Want Your Sex" generated mountains of headlines. And then the music took over.

FAITH

1. "Faith" -- The album begins with a very cheeky, clever wink at the idea of growing up: an organ instrumental spin on "Freedom," that sounds like you're in a church until you realize the tune that's being played. Michael has always been in control, of course, but here he tweaks all the hype of his breaking up Wham! and going solo. And that's just the first 35 seconds. Then he launches into the Bo Diddley riff of "Faith," the best song on the album and surely one of the purest pop tunes of all time. It sounds boldly simple at first: an acoustic guitar, finger snapping and that aggressive voice. The second verse throws in a tambourine, some mysterious percussion, Michael backing himself with more vocals and then the country and western twang of the guitar solo. Pop, soul, country, gospel and the blues all in one delirious tune. Lyrically, it's the perfect counter-punch to the furor around "I Want Your Sex." Michael is singing about having the patience to wait for true love. It doesn't get sexier than that, especially if you think you might be the one he's waiting for.



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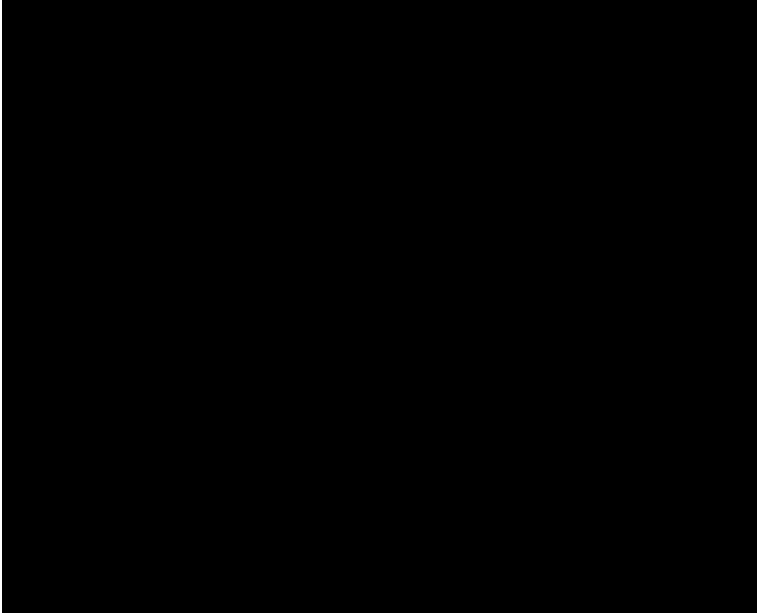
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I vividly remember the first time I heard this song. I was in college at the University of Florida, driving with the girlfriend of one of my best friends (then and now). The radio announced they'd play the new single and we both listened intently to the entire tune. During the song, we reached our destination, but I kept the radio going and we both listened to it all without saying a word. I was delirious with pleasure -- what a great song! How unbelievable catchy! Genius! Before I could say anything, as it faded out she turned to me and said, "Well, that was underwhelming." My jaw dropped and we shared an amusing moment when she realized I liked it a LOT more than her. I knew then she wasn't the one for my friend (they were pretty serious at the time) and I proved right. I'd hate to have a pop song come between me and my best friend's wife, but luckily it never came to that.

2. "Father Figure" -- Another gem and easily the moodiest, most intriguing song on the album. It takes Michael's love of gospel and puts it to the forefront all wrapped around a song with the slightly pervy chorus "I will be your father figure." What could that mean? It's sexy, a little dangerous, a little comforting and much more. Again, the sound is spare and clean. Like Prince, Michael is utterly confident about creating a stellar track with the simplest of elements. It also happens to be the song which boasts of the best video Michael ever made. Unlike most of the others, the video for "Father Figure" has an elusive sort of storyline, with Michael as a taxi cab driver who either stalks or romances a super model he gives a lift to one night. It doesn't end well, with Michael staring her down menacingly (or helplessly) while she struts herself onstage.



3. "I Want Your Sex" -- Nowadays, this tune seems rather harmless, but at the time of AIDS it was genuinely a flash-point for controversy. Was Michael sentencing people to death by encouraging them to have lots and lots of sex? Of course, anyone who actually listened to the song could hear that Michael was actually directing his desire towards one particular person. Michael freely acknowledges he was too infatuated with Prince on this tune. Its real power comes not from the funky instrumentation but the amusingly blunt lyrics. "Sex is natural, sex is good/Not everybody does it, but everybody should" is so silly it makes you smile. And "sex is natural, sex is fun/ Sex is best when it's one on one" is about as straightforward as they come in not calling for orgy-like sex parties. Michael drove the point home with his videos, which came in a censored and uncensored version that included Michael writing "Explore Monogamy" across the body of a beautiful woman. The promo short for his tour also includes a glimpse of the black and white intro Michael recorded for the video in which he said that monogamy used to be a matter of personal choice but now [with AIDS] it could be a matter of life and death. That's how much fuss the song and video created.

His vocals are the best thing here. "Don't you think it's time you had sex with me? Huwahhhhh!" Never

one of my favorite songs on the radio, I loved the album where the tune segued into a horn-heavy, almost big band version that proved the melody was more durable than I imagined.

4. "One More Try" -- The final track on Side One (remember them?) and a more triumphant conclusion is hard to imagine. Michael correctly describes Side One of Faith as exceptionally strong and he's right again. Many, many critics hailed Michael's skill at writing ballads and this gospel-tinged number (more r&b) is a prime example. It's almost the flip-side of "Father Figure," with one tune asking to be your father figure and the other saying, "Teacher, there are things that I don't want to learn." He's vulnerable and afraid to grow used to holding and touching his lover because he knows won't last. "So when you say that you need me/ That you'll never leave me/ I know you're wrong, you're not that strong/ Let me go." Heartbreakingly, he spends the entire song recognizing that it won't learn, that the person he loves won't be in it for the long haul. He insists he has his pride. He begs her to let him go. And then in the very last moment, he gives in and says, "Maybe just one more try." And it's all wrapped up in a melody that twists and turns but is also somehow indelible.

No wonder the entire first side of the album would be released as a single. Despite my minor reservations on "I Want Your Sex," it's compelling, memorable music.

5. "Hard Day" -- Side Two starts off with a fine tune that isn't quite as memorable on any level. The funky backing vocals ("Don't bring me down!") are a nice opener and the mournful fog horn of a synth creates a plaintive mood. But there's no hook or distinctive idea driving the tune, just elements like his "Yeowwww" squeals, the clever lead-in to the bridge ("Won't you give me a break/Somebody give me a break NOW!") It just doesn't add up to a great song.

6. "Hand To Mouth" -- This gets things back into a groove. Michael makes his first stab at modest social commentary, a look at hard times for lesser folk. "I believe in the gods of America," he sings, only to find out they don't believe in anything. A crazed gunman, a dead hooker and the new generation that leaves them behind while grasping for money. It doesn't really add up. But what a gorgeous, slinky melody -- it makes the tune float by effortlessly and sticks in your brain long after the mild lyrics have faded away. Michael would improve dramatically on lyrics like this with *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*

7. "Look At Your Hands" -- This is the third song in a row that wasn't released as a single. Perhaps it's no surprise they're the three weakest tracks on the album. But just as "Hand To Mouth" was saved by its melody, this tune has a catchy chorus and another strong arrangement. "No no no no baby/ Look at your hands" and "Betcha don't betcha don't betcha don't like your life" are infectious enough to get past the story of a guy taking pleasure in his girlfriend's miserable existence now that she's dumped him and finds herself married to a drunk and saddled with two fat kids. (Hey Michael, you used to be a fat little kid, too! They can be lovable!)

8. "Monkey" -- Michael pulls himself together for the home stretch. Here we have perhaps the funkiest track he ever recorded. Nominally about addiction of one sort or another, it's just an excuse for a ridiculously souped-up track with Michael's vocals wonderfully confident as he demands, "Why can't you do it?/Why can't you set your monkey free?/ Do you love the monkey or do you love me?" It's no surprise you'll find three different versions of this song on the bonus CD, including the marvelous Jam & Lewis remix, the single version and a fascinating a capella version.

9. "Kissing A Fool" -- The final proper track on the album and another drop-dead stunner of a ballad. Like "One More Try," it builds and builds emotionally to a gorgeous final line. He's chiding a lover for not having the courage of following her heart. Why did she let other people talk her out of trusting him? He might reach this peak again but Michael would never sing better. It moves beautifully, with a slightly jazzy feel echoed in the black and white music video where Michael looks very sophisticated while he sings the tune with a trio backing him up. But just when we think we know where the song is going melodically, it explodes with emotion to mirror the genuine anguish in his heart. "But remember this, every other kiss/ That you ever give, long as we both live/ When you need the hand of another man/ One you really can surrender with/ I will wait for you, as I always do...." And then at the end, he calms back down and admits that the fool she was kissing was him. Gorgeous.

10. "A Last Request" -- This is more of a fade-out than a proper tune, a way to ease you out the door after that emotional finale.

Somehow, the album as a whole is greater than its parts. Technically, a third of the songs (3 out of 9) are merely good or okay, with serious flaws. But the six that are good are so good, it's like getting a greatest hits album in one CD. That was exactly what it felt like for fan after fan from the late Seventies through the end of the Eighties. You'd heard so many songs on the album, what risk was there in buying it?

Massive blockbusters of course came before and after this era. But the combination of great artistry, a string of singles that dominated the airwaves and a world-spanning tour would come to an end. Pearl Jam sold a ton of albums, but were grandparents and grandkids listening to the same album? No. Garth Brooks was a megastar in many ways. But did his music dominate the radio? He had one Top 10 hit. N Sync and Backstreet Boys appealed mostly to teenagers, no matter how great some of their singles truly are. Symbolically, it came to an end in 1990 with MC Hammer. Like Paula Abdul in 1988 (who worked as choreographer on Michael's world tour) and Milli Vanilli in 1989, MC Hammer would follow the blockbuster formula and sell tons of albums (8 million each for the first two, 10 million for Hammer) and tour the world and rake in money. All with music that no one would remember even five years later, much less today. But for a brief period at the movies and in music, artistry and radio and concert tours combined to create massively popular films and music that were also genuine works of art.

If you're considering [adding Faith to your collection](#) or more likely buying it again for the excellent remastered sound, [the two CD set from Epic Legacy](#) is the way to go. It's very reasonably priced and contains a booklet with all the lyrics and track info, as well as the bonus disc with remixes.

If money is no object, you'll certainly enjoy the [Epic Legacy deluxe box](#). But little snags keep it from being ideal. I love that the set is basically CD-shaped so it will fit on the shelf alongside your other CDs. The hardcover booklet is beautiful and filled with two substantial essays and lots of photos. But the text is very tiny and hard to read. Further, the entire set is bizarrely devoid of basic info. There are no track listings for either CD or the DVD. Not on the discs themselves, not on the sleeves they sit inside, and not in the 40 page booklet. Lyrics? Nope. Artist info, such as who played what? Nope. (All of that can be found on the cheaper set but not here.)

The DVD also has problems. It's nicely remastered with the Ross interview, the half hour promo video for the tour and all the music videos looking excellent. Fans will really savor what's here. But Michael is so savvy I really was disappointed that the only interview was in the booklet. It's very good, but a full-on documentary about the making of the album would have been great. Even what's here is not presented in an ideal manner. You get seven videos (including two versions of "I Want Your Sex" and five others) but annoyingly the menu doesn't offer the option of just playing all of them. Instead every time you watch a video you have to go back to the menu and click on the next one you want to watch.

As an aside, I'd point out that the music videos aren't terribly interesting. Michael was always accused of being image-obsessed, but in fact most of the videos are pretty straight-forward and unremarkable. It really was the music that made the videos interesting, not the videos that made the music.

Plus, there are no details - not even at the end -- as to who directed and edited and worked on those videos. Surely that should be there. Michael makes a passing reference at one point to getting better at directing and editing by the time he made "Father Figure." Good heavens, did he direct it? The video stars Vogue model Tania Coleridge but you have to go online to find that out. And yes, Michael did co-direct that music video with Andy Morahan. They won an MTV Video Music Award, not that you'll see a clip on this set. [I discovered that on Wikipedia](#).

So what's on the deluxe box is very good indeed. But those little, easily corrected faults (not counting the lack of a major new documentary or clips from MTV and the like) keep it from being ideal.

What's next for Michael? Hopefully, more music. He sadly says that he just interested in creating absurdly catchy pop songs any more, which is surely our loss. When Aretha Franklin is fully recovered, maybe Michael could pull a Jack White and do for Franklin what White did for Loretta Lynn and Wanda Jackson. Maybe writing for someone else would free Michael up to deliver the pop goods he's so capable of - and focusing on someone else might be just the creative outlet he needs right now. Imagine George Michael writing a batch of songs and overseeing a new Aretha Franklin album that they would both be determined to see a career-capper for her. The possibilities are thrilling, if only he'd seize them.


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