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A Cremonese “Thriller”

The masterpiece - Beppe Cantarelli tells what has gone on behind the scenes in the making of Michael Jackson’s most sold album in history. Our composer in the recording studio with friend and producer Quincy Jones.



An album released in 1982, still amazing, trendy and record breaking. A few days ago, for the first time in history, RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) awarded “*Thriller*” the 30th platinum award. A new achievement for an album that was already the most sold record ever, with over 100 million copies sold worldwide, 8 Grammy Awards and 37 weeks number 1 on the Billboard charts. The umpteenth gem – though posthumous – that the “King of Pop” can add to his crown. But how was it born this masterpiece that changed the history of music and wrote a new path in the recording language (just think about John Landis’ video)? Beppe Cantarelli – guitarist and composer from Busseto (*cremonese* by adoption), who had the fortune to share many moments of that extraordinary experience – unveils some of the unpublished secrets behind the scenes...

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Roberto Codazzi

ROBERTO CODAZZI: Beppe Cantarelli, a few days ago the album “*Thriller*” by Michael Jackson knocked out another record as it received the 30th platinum (3rd diamond) award from RIAA, the Recording Industry Association of America, therefore is the first album to reach such a result. What do you think?

BEPPE CANTARELLI: It is an album that will always be a part of music history – it has been for over 30 years now – so, no wonder if it is still a ‘selling’ product.

R.C.: You were privileged to be in the recording studio, due to your collaboration with Quincy Jones in 1982 in Los Angeles, when Michael Jackson recorded that legendary album. Would you like to tell us about that unique experience?

B.C.: I had just ‘emigrated’ to the United States and, since I had a chance to attend to several recording sessions of that album as well as others that my ‘idol’ Quincy Jones (with whom I was working as solo guitarist in his U.S. Budweiser Tour), was then producing, I took advantage of that experience to see first-hand how all the recording, mixing, mastering, therefore artistic and creative producing, was coming all together. What really impressed me – which is like a brilliant idea that seems obvious in retrospect perhaps always so forgotten and underestimated by the recording and music publishing industry – was the so called, choosing of the repertoire. After the release of the single-duet with Paul McCartney, “*The Girl Is Mine*”, at the end of that summer the recording company was anxiously waiting for Mr. Jones to deliver the master tapes of the entire album, right on time for the approaching Christmas release. In the meantime, Quincy had given out, to friends and collaborators, some audio-cassettes (it was 1982 and there was no digital support such as CDs, PCs; USB hardisks, etc.) with the first rough mixes of the album tracks, in order to get some useful feedback; in that first collection, 3 songs were ‘missing,’ songs that will later turn out fundamental: “*Beat It*”, “*Billie Jean*” and “*Thriller*” itself! Try to imagine that album without those 3 songs! Going against Michael Jackson’s recording label (Epic) while getting the most awful and sometimes even discrediting critics, Quincy Jones showed the courage and the conviction/artistic discipline, to postpone the album release and send the artist, along with all the other writers involved in that project such as Rod Temperton, Steve Porcaro from Toto, Michael Sembello (who already had one cut in the album, cut that then didn’t make it to the final master!), to write some more material... And that’s how they got the above mentioned 3 ‘missing’ songs of which the third one will also give the title to arguably the most popular album in history! A priceless experience that understandably enriched me at all levels, starting from the professional and artistic ones.

R.C.: Was there from the beginning the perception and the awareness that an extraordinary album was having birth and that it would change the language of music as well as its worldwide history?

B.C.: “*Thriller*” was the second album that Quincy Jones was producing for Michael Jackson as he went solo after the Jackson Fives; this after such an album as “*Off The Wall*” that had already been a worldwide mega-hit with over 8 million records sold in the U.S. alone. It’s obvious that there was not only the expectation but also the strong will by the production and the artist – along with the record company – to produce a follow up album that would capitalize and possibly do better than the previous one. Notwithstanding from comments and artistic feedback that, as I was saying earlier, were buzzing around, the phrase I kept hearing was, “this is a breaking ground project.” But I don’t think that anyone would’ve expected such tremendous and unprecedented sales!

R.C.: “*Thriller*”, 33 years later, is now celebrated for its numerous records, for selling over 100 million copies worldwide, for staying for 37 weeks number one on the charts, for the 8 Grammy Awards, but it was also forerunner of a new style and approach, let us think for example about that beautiful video by director John Landis, a short film by all means...

B.C.: That's exactly what I was saying, they tried to produce something 'new' so everything that's been created, composed and produced as far as the audio support, it has consequently been 'visualized' following the same direction and parameters; therefore – investing heavily into the creative promotional efforts as well – some great ideas were developed, ideas that later became the various videos 'ala MTV' where, contrary to all the other videos that just started to flood the air and cables after the arrival of MTV and other similar music video channels, wanted to be – and I believe they largely achieved that! – not the usual video but something more, a short film by all means.

R.C.: Today *“Thriller”* still sounds so contemporary and not updated at all, as if it has just been produced and printed. Why do you think is that?

B.C.: When whatever creative form of 'art' (musical, visible, literary, etc.) is not a mere commercial effort affected by the fashion or trends of the moment but – besides offering the buyer what he or she likes – it's rather an effort to also 'educate', therefore offer something really new and 'breaking ground', it is very possible that such a creation will last and continues to maintain a strong modernity.

R.C.: Then Michael Jackson's personal life events took some other turns but you, who knew him, can you tell us what happened really?

B.C.: Through the years, also during numerous interviews with your various papers, tv and radio media, I always refused to believe – even if I do not have any real proves – that such a sensitive person who really loved children as was Michael Jackson, could even remotely think to conduct himself with such an immoral and cold-hearted behavior like the one that he's been accused of. On the other hand, I've always believed that the parents' behavior was highly immoral and unacceptable and was the real cause that provoked such particular and squalid cases of which we have unfortunately heard all over the news. My only regret was once more to watch american justice proceed fully steamed 'in the name of mean and base money' rather than just... And, as far as I'm concerned, just would've been to investigate and prosecute those pseudo-parents. While if there was a 'fault' – if we can call it a 'fault' really – it was the fact that Michael (according to a lot of people who knew him well) acted so naïve and unprepared notwithstanding some of his closest friends and collaborators (maybe too few of them...) often warned him and suggested him to be cautious, especially after the first settlement in the disgusting amount of 23 million dollars that Michael preferred to pay to some pimp parents 'n lawyers rather than having to show up in a court of law – as he ended up doing the second time around, anyway! – and defend himself against such ignominious and unfounded accusations.

R.C.: Do you think there could be another Michael Jackson? Do you think there could be another phenomenon like *“Thriller”*?

B.C.: Through the years we've witnessed many 'attempts' by some artist who revealed themselves – though some of them sometimes achieved great commercial success – 'artistically laughable' in comparison, ergo... to the blue print (more or less successful), I always prefer the original!

R.C.: Though it seems like for years the record business has been in bad shape, we are now witnessing the arrival of some new and unexpected phenomenon such as Adele who brings new life to the industry and the numbers. Are these fast burners or is it a new renaissance?

B.C.: “Vox clamantis in deserto”... or even better, “the exception to the rule”... As I was saying earlier, “to the blue print (more or less successful) I always prefer the original!” And since we're talking about soulful voices, I can not avoid to think about the various Aretha Franklin, Tina Turner, Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Holiday, just to name a few female voices, even though there are many more,

both males and females! I mean, are we talking about the real thang here or what?!?? An entire specific and detailed interview about this, I'm not sure it'd be enough to fully answer your question!... Without even mentioning – talking about female voices – your illustrious fellow citizen also known as the Cremona's Tiger (Mina)! And if it's possible to print it, allow me to add a slogan that I've been using for years now (even before your current President of the Italian Government got to do it so often on Twitter and other social networks, for lack of programs and policies!...), a slogan that seems to be more current by the day, "Enough with idiots, we want real emotions!" (I'm sorry, in English it does not sound as good as in Italian, perhaps because of the rhyme!... "Basta con i coglioni, vogliamo le emozioni!")

R.C.: You too, as a composer-songwriter, sold over 60 million records with such songs as “*I Still Believe*” by Mariah Carey or “*Another Night*” by “Queen of Soul” herself, Aretha Franklin, just to name a few. Do you think that your experience with Michael Jackson and Quincy Jones was useful for that matter?

B.C.: I'd love so veeery much to believe that! As I also believe it with respect to many other collaborations with great artists that I had the fortune to work with, learn and 'absorb' from like a sponge, *in primis* your national treasure and icon, Mina!

R.C.: A record like “*Thriller*,” what legacy does it leave to the history of music and arts generally?

B.C.: As I've mentioned earlier, the requirements and parameters that allow us to create a good balance, an acceptable perhaps optimal compromise in between marketability and creativity. Necessary and unavoidable ingredients not to be just a 'media phenomenon' and/or a 'commercial' one, but to consider even pop music a full time form of 'art,' an artistic expression on its own rights and not only fast food... that in America – and now also all over the world for that matter – has been very explicitly renamed, 'junk food'...

R.C.: And what do young generations of musicians owe to this masterpiece, nowadays?

B.C.: ... Remember and/or try to understand that when you want to savor some real culinary art, it's useless to try and/or hope to do that at a McDonald or at any other such food franchise... Luckily still exist some down-to-earth and organic 'trattorias' where culinary craftsmanship is not foisted on to us, disguised on an industrial scale... As I still want to hope for great 'artisans' to exist and wanting to create real music that is not only entertainment but also art... 'real' music & lyrics and not just 'plastic' ones. As I was saying, "Enough with idiots, we want real emotions"... "Enough with gold records, more or less pleasant and well produced... We want some great and tasty 'culatello'!!!"... And here we go again, the Italian version sounds definitely better... "Basta con i dischi d'oro, più o meno belli... Vogliamo i culatelli!!!"

R.C.: What is now Beppe Cantarelli up to?

B.C.: He basically retired to 'private music'... We'll die poor but so veeery happy! After the recent release of a sort of an impromptu and quiet wild and reckless (but luckily very well accepted, if I may say so!) book of mine, called “*Mina Canta Cantarelli, Cantarelli Canta Mina*” (www.minacantacantarelli.com), I am in the middle of post-production for a film-oratorio, “*AKIROPITA (Angels In Time)*”; a musical film created on a bilingual concert-oratorio of mine (English & Italian) that wants to be “*a musical tribute inspired by Artistry and Culture from the Italian Renaissance.*” At the same time I'm already on pre-production, preparing myself to record a new album flavored with acoustic “blues, rock & soul” along with inspired “classical-crossover”, tentatively called “*I Asked A Falling Star.*” As you can easily understand from the title itself, we

sure are 'old stray dogs' but not yet without dreams! Dear Mr. Codazzi, the civil registry is getting a little bit 'tired' here... but the white flag ain't up yet!

R.C.: When are you going to come back to Cremona, perhaps with a new project?

B.C.: Cremona is practically my second Italian residence. Ever since my very first musical experiences in this historical city, while I was in high school with such friends and musicians as Franco Neva (first Mina's drummer in her Happy Boys all *cremonese* band), up to more recent times with his son Stefano (with whom we've also founded a quadraphonic vocal group called – what'else but – Stradivarius!!!), I practically never 'unplugged' from this literally 'vibrant' city. It sure is a realistic possibility to vibrate some of our 'strings' once more, back in my old country; and if that's going to happen, why not in Cremona, the historically celebrated 'homeland of music!'

R.C.: Mina, with whom you had a vast & long collaboration, left Cremona some 40 years ago: do you think she will ever return under our Torrazzo (worldwide famous cathedral bell tower in Cremona)? And what about you, would you like to work with her once more?

B.C.: Anyone who read my book "*Mina Canta Cantarelli, Cantarelli Canta Mina*", has found extensive and colorful answers to this inevitable and more than 'necessary' question. Due to obvious editorial logistics, I've decided to answer your question by sending you one of the comic strips (designed by another *cremonese* artist, Edo Sandri) from this same book and by asking you another question of my own, "Are we ever going to see this Pope – as good, sociable, willing and modern as he is!... – throw himself in an unchained-super-duper-hip-hop-break-dance choreography right in Saint Peter's Square?!?!??"... Hallelujah!!!

Love & Music,

Beppe Cantarelli

