

Janet in command



By Michael Grecco, Outline
ON THE BEAT: Janet Jackson re-enlists in the pop infantry with her new album 'Rhythm Nation 1814.' 'I just want my music and my dance to catch the audience's attention.'

Highlights of a rhythmic life

- ▶ 1966: Born May 16, youngest of nine children.
- ▶ 1977: Made TV sitcom debut in *Good Times*; went on to roles in *Diff'rent Strokes* and *Fame*.
- ▶ 1982: First album, *Janet Jackson*, peaked at No. 63. Follow-up *Dream Street* (1984) got only to No. 147.
- ▶ 1984: In August, married musician James DeBarge; marriage annulled seven months later.
- ▶ 1986: The LP *Control*, a statement about being in charge of her life, sold 5 million copies and hit No. 1.
- ▶ 1989: *Janet Jackson's Rhythm Nation 1814*, No. 1 for four weeks, sells 3 million copies in four months.

COVER STORY

Jackson rules her own 'Nation'

She steps out and scores another musical coup with a top-selling album

By Jefferson Graham
USA TODAY

HOLLYWOOD — Back when they were growing up, the nine Jackson brothers and sisters were close. Closest of all were Michael and his youngest sister.

They took care of the family pets, went to movies together and sat in the music room, Michael playing piano and singing, and Janet —

nicknamed "Dunk" — harmonizing.

Michael went on to become a recording superstar — CBS Records' top-selling artist. While none of the brothers has come close to 31-year-old Michael's success, Janet, 23, has established herself as a force to be reckoned with.

Her chart-topping fourth album, *Janet Jackson's Rhythm Nation 1814*, has sold nearly 3 million copies in four months. She is now A&M Records' biggest selling artist; the trade magazine *Radio and Records* just tagged her *Miss You Much* as Top 40 radio's No. 1 record of 1989.

The shy ex-tomboy clearly has stepped out of Michael's shadow.

"I've always wanted an identity of my own," she says, in her first interview since 1987. "That's the reason I did the *Control* album on my own, and this record on my own."

In March, she'll embark on her first solo tour, a nine-month global trek, backed by six dancers, singing songs

Please see COVER STORY next page ▶

Michael gave her the earring key

Continued from 1D

from her smash 1986 album *Control* and *Rhythm Nation*.

Like Madonna, Paula Abdul and Bobby Brown, Jackson is a recording star whose popularity is fueled by video-perfect dance moves.

Like her competitors, she works closely with strong producers (Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis) who write or co-write most of her material, play most instruments on her hit LPs and bring out the best in her.

But unlike most Top 40 hit-makers, Jackson's records say something. *Control* was about taking charge of her life after a bad marriage; *Rhythm Nation's* theme: Music and dance can change the world.

"My mother said that ever since she could remember, I've always been concerned with other people before myself," she says. "I'm not naive — I know an album or a song can't change the world. I just want my music and my dance to catch the audience's attention, and to hold it long enough for them to listen to the lyrics and what we're saying."

"Hopefully that will inspire them, make them want to join hands . . . and make some sort of difference."

Critics point to Jam and Lewis as Jackson's Svengalis, but Jam says Jackson's input has increased since *Control*. "She's grown up. . . . She's moved out of her family's house and she's started to experience different things. Her confidence level is way up."

Jackson spent seven months in Minneapolis with the former Prince sidemen working on *1814*.

"Our part of the deal is to get the most out of her and we do that," Jam says. "But in the final analysis, this is a Janet Jackson record. She can sing any kind of song with no limitation, and she's also the consummate video artist."

For the interview, Jackson is alone in a dark office at A&M Records. The only light is the glare of the TV (*Yo! MTV Raps!*) and a slit of sunshine through the curtains. She is a mirror image of her *1814* LP cover, dressed in black, except for a military-style blue blazer.

She rises, says "Hi, I'm Janet Jackson," and offers a vise-grip handshake, not the kind you'd expect from someone so soft-spoken. Friends call her shy, but Jan, as intimates refer to her, sees herself differently.

During the interview, she apologizes for talking so much. "I don't think I'm shy at all. I thought I had a big mouth. That's what my mom always told me."

Father Joe Jackson encouraged Janet to sing, just like her brothers and sisters. She began piano lessons at 7, but gave them up when her brothers quit. "I was a tomboy, and if they were going to play by ear, then I had to play by ear."

At 10, Janet joined her six brothers and two sisters on *The Jacksons*, a summer variety series. In 1977, she stepped away from music and joined the cast of the sitcom *Good Times*.

She co-starred as Rob Lowe's housemate in the short-lived sitcom *A New Kind of Family*, joined the cast of *Different Strokes* as Todd Bridges' girlfriend, and in 1984 her new career jelled when she was cast on the series *Fame*.

"It was on *Fame* when everybody first got a chance to see me dance. That's when I decided I wanted to incorporate dance with my music." By then, she had been signed to A&M Records and released two unsuccessful solo albums.

"While I was on *Fame*, someone mentioned this girl, who was a Laker Girl at the time, and also my brother Jackie's girlfriend, and that's how it (superstar video dancing) came about."

The Laker Girl, of course, was current pop sensation Paula Abdul, the ex-basketball cheerleader who made a name choreographing the stunning Jackson videos for songs like *Nasty* and *What Have You Done for Me Lately*. Abdul went on to become a video/recording star in her own right.

As Abdul's star has risen, there has been talk of rivalry between the pair, who haven't spoken much to each other in the past year. Jackson denies such talk, saying Abdul is like a sister. "We try calling each other once in a while to congratulate each other, but we keep

missing each other. I sent her flowers when she went No. 1, and she sent me flowers when I went No. 1. We keep in touch with our flower-sending messages."

She does keep in touch with brother Michael. Ask her why Michael and Janet are the biggest successes of the family, and she's thrown for a loop.

"God . . . I don't know . . . I really don't know. You know what would be really silly to say is that it's because we're the most alike. . . . I know that we both eat, sleep and breathe what we do, especially Michael, he's very dedicated. I feel that I am as well."

Sister La Toya has made headlines by posing nude in *Playboy* and for planning to write a no-holds-barred book about the family, which Michael reportedly offered to pay her not to write.

"I really don't like to talk about that subject. It's such a touchy thing," says Janet, adding she still speaks to La Toya. "A lot has happened, but she's my sister."

The other question frequently asked: What the numbers in her *Rhythm Nation 1814* album title stand for. R is the 18th letter of the alphabet, and N is the 14th, she confirms. It also has something to do with the year 1814, but she won't say what. "Not just yet," she says. "But even if you get the hint, there's still the story behind it, and there will come a time when I'll tell."

As for the key she always wears on an earring, the original came from the cage of a baby deer that Michael and Janet took care of. He put the key in Janet's earring one day and she's worn a key ever since.

Jackson lives in Los Angeles with Rene Elizondo, the executive producer of a home video based on *1814*. She says she'd like to get married again at 30 (her first marriage ended in an annulment after seven months) and have 12 kids.

At home, she spends a lot of time watching cartoons — especially Daffy Duck and the Jetsons. "When I watch cartoons it just puts me into another world," she says. "Sometimes you have to get away from it all."