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Joe Jackson: Still The Man

By [Sheri Quirt](#)

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My older sister was never interested in MTV. So when she would stop turning the dial every time [Joe Jackson](#) appeared, singing his 1983 piano-driven hits "Steppin' Out" and "Breaking Us in Two," I figured perhaps I should pay attention.

For the benefit of those youngsters reading this, Joe Jackson circa 1983 was a goofy-looking character with pasty skin, thinning strawberry blond hair, and a hangdog expression; you knew he had been the kind of kid who got the crap beaten out of him regularly, was prone to respiratory ailments, and whose schoolmates tormented him by playing keep-away with his violin case. (All this and more was confirmed by the singer in his engaging 2000 memoir "[A Cure for Gravity](#)," wherein he recounts how he scraped himself off the barnacled pier of Portsmouth, England to chase his destiny.) But he telegraphed that important human truth: that sometimes nerds are cool. And he played an actual, identifiable instrument-one that didn't require a power supply or a degree in computer science-at a time when this was not so common. So that earned him some points.

Moppets like me didn't realize he was already a star, having broken out five years earlier with "Is She Really Going Out With Him," the still-sparkling single from his debut LP, "Look Sharp!" Some years later, I was on a bus traversing Morocco's [High Atlas](#). Of all things, a Jackson mix tape was piped in on repeat play over the PA. I heard "Real Men" and "Not Here, Not Now." I was old enough now to confirm that he was the real deal.

Fast forward to my delight upon seeing his name on posters advertising his June 20 show at the Moore Theatre, immediately followed by shock at the gaunt, ghostly figure bearing an alarming resemblance to Sissy Spacek with a buzz cut. But hey, we're all getting older. And Joe was never about the mimbo good looks of Wham! et al. In the days of eyeliner on guys and NFL shoulder pads on girls, Joe Jackson was just an ordinary bloke playing the piano. And that was enough.

The plain packaging contains a complicated performer. His spare keyboard style is at odds with his passionate vocal delivery, at turns angst-filled and tender as he expounds on topics from the de rigueur relationship dramas to gender roles and the endearing whackjobs who populate New York City (the affectionate "Stranger Than You" from 2000's "Night and Day II"). A serious music scholar (and Schroederesque Beethoven groupie), Jackson is accomplished in a plethora of styles. Never mind the ballads-the man can groove: Try to sit still through the moody, exotic soundscape of "Beat Crazy" or the genius thrasher "I'm The Man." From the post-punk sigh of relief "Sunday Papers" to the assured arrangements of "Body and Soul" and beyond, the lad from Pompey covers all the bases.

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