

I wrote that

It's more than twenty five years since Rod Temperton penned *Thriller* for Michael Jackson. He talks to Gordon Masson about making songwriting history.

Rod Temperton is one of the unsung heroes of British songwriting. Or should that be, one of the most sung geniuses?

His earliest successes, as writer and keyboard player for 70s funk outfit, Heatwave, first caught the attention of Quincy Jones, who hired Rod for an album he was producing for Michael Jackson.

Rock With You, *Burn This Disco* and title track, *Off The Wall*, were the fruits of the collaboration between the Motown supremo and the Cleethorpes-born songwriter. It was a collaboration that would lead to Jackson's best selling album, so it was no surprise that Rod was approached for the follow up.

Michael loves movies, so I came up with the idea that I should write something really theatrical

'I got to know Michael,' explains Temperton. 'He loves movies, so I came up with the idea that I should write something really theatrical. I'd been really impressed with Michael's participation in the rhythm section when recording *Don't Stop 'Til You Get*

Enough, so I wanted to write something with the same power, but a really dramatic melody structure.'

And so began Temperton's creation of the track that would come to define Michael Jackson's career.

'I remember messing around with bass patterns and drums until I came up with the core bass line that runs through the piece,' he says. 'Then I started building chords on top to grow the tune to its climax. I wanted it to build and build - a bit like stretching an elastic band throughout the tune to heighten suspense.'

But making the demo wasn't easy. 'I lived in Germany and I was recording with a two-track Revox, so

I'd put the drums on one track then play the bass live and bounce back the drums and record that on the other track. I did the same with guitars, keyboards, vocals.'

The result was one of 40 ideas Rod took to America - the *Thriller*

tune (its working title, *Starlight*) was an instant favourite.

'In my writing I hear all the musical parts before I ever get to the lyrics. This was clearly such a production number that it had to be the title track - but there were no lyrics and *Starlight* just wasn't good enough. It had to be mysterious to match Michael's evolving persona,' says Temperton.

'I'd go back to my hotel every night and start writing titles. One night I came up with *Midnight Man*. Quincy said I was going in the right direction, but it still wasn't right. The next morning it came to me - but it was a really crap word to sing: *Thriller*. It sounded terrible. However, we got Michael to spit it into the microphone a few times and it worked.

'Once I had the title, the lyrics were written within a couple of hours.'

With the end section requiring dialogue, a friendship between Quincy's wife Peggy and Vincent Price led to the latter's involvement.

Quincy suggested that Rod give Price a script to work from. Time was short and so the two extra verses were written in the taxi from the hotel to the studio. They were finished just as the Hollywood icon's limo pulled up outside.

'I told the driver to drive round the back of the studio and I raced in, told the secretary to photocopy what I'd written and was able to walk into the studio and calmly hand a copy to Vincent, who recorded it in two takes. He was just fantastic.'

As is Temperton himself, who's currently in the process of moving back to England and building a studio. He's also just finished writing for George Benson, 'for the first time

in 20 years.'

As for remaining ambitions, his mantra is simple. 'I love to write. It doesn't matter if anyone wants it or not. I'll be doing it until my dying day.'



Thriller
written by xxxx
Published by xxxPublishing



Rod has also penned songs for a plethora of artists including Aretha Franklin and Maria Carey. He was Oscar nominated for his music on *The Color Purple*. On returning back to the UK, we welcome Rod back to PRS for Music.

