

SAM

Gordy Barry sounds like a 1970's hockey player.

NICK

Hang on.

(Types into his laptop. Reads what Google has given him.)

Oh wait. "Did you mean Gordy BERRY". My bad. Yes. Click, and... oh.

SAM

(looking over his shoulder)

See? Berry Gordy. Junior.

NICK

Gordy comma Berry.

(squints at the screen, realises he's wrong.)

Are you kidding me? Aw, come ON. I talked about how Gordy Barry invented Motown when I was out with that musician chick last month.

SAM

(moving back to the kitchen, opening cupboard doors)

Oh the irony! Why'd you swipe right with someone you had nothing in common with?

NICK

Eyes.

SAM

(mostly to himself)

Where's the wok?

(back to the subject)

Anyway, Gordy founded the Motown label: he didn't invent much.

NICK

God damn it. I went on a ten-minute tangent about the history of American music, based entirely on vague memories of MuchMusic. No wonder she never called back.

(reading again)

Berry, huh? Seems strange for a first name. Hey, check it: he was the third Berry Gordy in his family. Like some kind of... berry farm!

SAM

Nick, you know it's said with love when I say you're a better writer than stand-up, right? Let's stick to the track.

(Opening more cupboards, looking for his wok.)

Okay. Start with the title.

NICK

(musing)

"I Want You Back". Demanding. Like a four-year-old's tantrum.

(momentum)

It's right there in the title: I want you back. Me me me. It's a selfish statement.

SAM

Wow.

NICK

(undeterred)

Right? What I want. And speaking of want - I want you back. Not I would like you back, not could I please have you back, but I want. Want want want.

SAM

People want things. We can want things, can't we? Is saying "I want a cup of coffee" selfish?

NICK

Depends on the context. Introspectively, as a realisation of what would benefit you at that moment, fine. Grammatically it's a bit off, but it's fine. If you tell a barista "I want a cup of coffee", you're a monster.

SAM

I love when your Canadian shows.

NICK

(starts to type some notes)

So when Michael Jackson -- at like, eleven or twelve years old -

SAM

How old was he, exactly? When this song came out?

NICK

Hang on.

(Googles)

Uh... born August 29, 1958. He was eleven in 1969. When eleven-year-old MJ says I WANT you back, he's clearly aiming it at another human being for their interpretation. It's for them to hear and respond. I want YOU back. Not her or him -

SAM

(still crashing around the kitchen looking for materials)

Is that a child abuse reference? Come on, man... Old dead weird Bubbles-owning Neverland-living HBO Special-having Macaulay Culkin-befriending Michael Jackson isn't on trial here. We're talking about fresh-faced cute Gary-Indiana Michael with the afro. Singing strangely mature songs with

his brothers, where, as you've established, he shoots his song at you - the girl he once had but no longer has, as we can tell from the fact that he wants her back. Okay. So, what you're saying, in this incredibly aggressive approach, Mikey doesn't ask the girl to take him back, just that he wants to *have* her back, like some kind of conquest.

NICK

Right. A conquest. For an eleven-year-old. Don't you think that seems a little out of character for a little kid?

SAM

Yeah, I guess.

(back to looking through cupboards, getting more and more irritated)

NICK

What if we sidebar about the conquests of most eleven-year-olds?

SAM

Long division? Hockey cards?

NICK

For me it was learning how to Ollie. And jerk off, I think.

SAM

Hopefully not at the same time.

NICK

No, that was later. So, you're in?

SAM

To your Jacksons conspiracy? Sure, why not.

(fridge is open, looking inside)

Dammit Beth, I told you to get more parmesan!

NICK

(typing)

Great. So. We are positing a world in which our singer is such an early starter he's had someone long enough to lose them for long enough to want them back...

SAM

Right, we have no reason to think this is the first girlfriend...

NICK

- and he's only eleven years old.

SAM

(gives up his search, pulls out a saucepan. Looks into it with disdain, then starts putting the chopped vegetables into it)

We should establish he didn't write the song. Motown had contract artists sing any number of songs, not only their own.

NICK

Michael's eleven-year-old songs were probably about discovering how to jerk off.

SAM

(concedes)

He was a pretty messed up kid.

NICK

I know, right? I saw the TV mini-series about them all. No wonder he grew up the way he did.

SAM

What kind of damage would that do to a kid's brain, singing those adult songs at eleven?

Indicates NICK should type as he starts looking through the cupboards, pulling out rice and seasoning

And there was the first glimpse the world got of the Jacksons: little Michael out front of his brothers, beaming and singing his little heart out. Remember how he used to smile when he sang?

NICK

Otherwise dad would cut a switch.

SAM

Yikes. He had a lot to answer for, but I guess if your goal is to get out of a poverty situation and you have these five little meal tickets...

NICK

More than five. There's the girls too.

SAM

Right. Janet and...

NICK

LaToya. She did Playboy in the 90's. With a snake. Even after I discovered jerking off, the snake didn't work for me.

SAM

And then they...

NICK

(singing)

"Can ya feel it, can ya feel it, can ya feel it"!

SAM

That's later. Right.

(Imitating the bass line of The Jacksons'
'Can You Feel It')

"Ba-dum-dum-dumdum, Ba-dum-dum-dumdum, bleebleebleeee". I think by then they were just "The Jacksons" because of all of the additions and hangers-on.

NICK

Wait. Okay.

(Typing as SAM measures rice and flips
the stovetop on)

Let's run through the line-up. So there's Michael. Tito. Jermaine.

SAM

Marlon. And...

(on the tip of his tongue)

NICK

I'll look it up.

SAM

No, no, we'll get it. Michael. Tito. Jermaine. Marlon. Uh...
(He's got no idea, so starts throwing
around joke names)

Wyatt? Percy? Gavin?

NICK

(he's Googled it)

Uh. Randy?

SAM

(success!)

Yes! Randy.

NICK

(chuckling)

Gavin.

(back to business)

So.

(typing)

Michael, Tito, Jermaine, Marlon, Randy...

SAM

Wait, wasn't there a brother with a repetitive name? Jackson Jackson? Jack?

NICK

(Peering at his Google page again)

Jackie?

SAM

Jackie! I forgot Jackie. Oh, now I'm confused. "Help me, Siri, you're our only hope!" "Hey Siri!"

(Siri beeps. He speaks into the phone like a walkie-talkie)

"Who. Was. In. The. Jackson. Five."

SIRI

"Okay. I found this."

SAM

It's always a win when she understands me on the first try. Right! Jackson... five. Michael, Tito, Jackie, Jermaine, and Marlon. Randy came later.

NICK

(typing)

To make The Jacksons. The Jackson Six looked crappy on a marquee, I guess.

SAM

(scrolling)

And there was also Janet...

NICK

Wardrobe malfunction.

SAM

LaToya...

NICK

Snake.

SAM

And Rebbie.

NICK

You're making that up.

SAM

Nope. She was apparently successful in her own right.

NICK

Before our time?

SAM

Way. 1984. Had an album called Centipede.

NICK

Centipede like the arcade game or the bug or *The Human Centipede*?

SAM

I'm pretty sure Michael Jackson's sister didn't release an album about *The Human Centipede*.

NICK

I don't know dude, the Jacksons could do whatever they wanted in the 80's. I think if they released an album about *The Human Centipede* people would buy it.

SAM

Thank you for not saying 'eat it up'.

NICK

(lets this sink in, processes the mental image. Wishes he hasn't)

I am genuinely disgusted at you right now. And you get on my case!

SAM

You're rubbing off on me. Anyway. We have...

(counting again)

six, seven, eig... nine Jacksons. And the first release they had was... lo and behold, *I Want You Back*, recorded October 1969, hitting number one on January 31, 1970.

(Putting the phone down, rapidly putting the rice on the stove and seasoning the vegetables. NICK gets up and exits abruptly, stage left, to go to the bathroom.)

MJ is a tiny eleven-year-old, bopping around -

NICK

(calling from the other room)

Right!

SAM

(singing to himself)

'Bampf, budda dudda dudda dudda bampf, budda dudda dudda bampf, budda budda dudda bling blong bling blang blang blang.'

NICK

(calling out)

Are you guys taking a trip?

SAM

What?

NICK

A trip! Are you taking a trip?

SAM

(missing the point)

That'd be nice...

SAM takes a big slug of his beer. The toilet flushes in the next room. Ten second pause before NICK enters, wiping his washed hands on his shirt.

NICK

When's Beth due home?

SAM

If we're lucky, she's working late. Okay. Let's pencil out these lines. Scribe, if you will...

(NICK sits back down and readies to type)

Right. We've covered the title, background, artist. Lyrics next. Okay.

(Turning his back to the audience, tending the cooking vegetables)

We have the fun groove to start with, but it serves a darker purpose. It's announced right there in the first lines of the song:

(turning back around, reading off his phone)

"when I had you to myself, I didn't want you around."

(Considering)

Like, what?

NICK

Exactly. It's never sat well with me. Makes me think about all those women who never really seemed interested in the nice guy.

SAM

(faux sympathy)

Aw, Nicky!

NICK

It's true! You're a total asshole and you have Beth! I'm as nice as I can be and no one looks twice.

SAM

When I was a younger man, I played the role of the sensitive, ideological guy.

NICK

Like an asshole.

SAM

(Ignoring him, imperious)

Chicks loved it. Beth loved it. Monogamy has meant such postures are no longer a priority to me, which allowed me to lapse into apathy and grumpiness, still on the fumes of what got me where I am. Now I'm just a man who's forthright and independent.

(VH1 Behind the Music voice)

In this song, Michael Jackson is that kind of man.

NICK

Agreed.

(Beat.)

And we're just in the middle of saying the Michael Jackson figure is some kind of sociopath.

SAM

(back to the grill)

Sociopath's a strong word. Let's stick with asshole.

NICK

Right. So this asshole, or at least the guy who wrote the song - and it's definitely a man, I'd say...

SAM

Oh, for sure.

NICK

...says this woman, this possession of his, who he had all to himself, as though that's a burden on him, was something so disposable he didn't want her around. Not only that, but the phrasing means he's TELLING this poor woman this fact. "When our relationship was exclusive, I didn't want you anywhere near me." Get out of my space, let me be the one who decides when you come and go. How MALE is this?

SAM

Preach, sister.

NICK

Remember feminist theory?

SAM

With Henson? Those readings gave me 'sensitive new age guy' mileage for most of my twenties.

(TV voice)

"Come for the disproportionate male-female ratios! Stay the lifetime of ammunition!"

NICK

What if we looped some of those theories through our analysis? Might broaden our reach a bit.

SAM

Good. Really good. Let's go in with the soft angle, rather than going straight for Steinem and Butler.

(Taking the saucepan off the heat,
turning to think.)

How about Adrienne Rich?

NICK

Remind me.

SAM

The re-visioning of history. About how if we don't look back at old art through the discourses of contemporary thought, then we betray the past by privileging the old constructs.

NICK

Great. Okay, we're cooking now.
(Picks up his phone and Googles.)

SAM

Yes! Because...
(Warming up, pacing again)
to re-vision the misogyny of these Motown tracks is to realise what we accepted as appropriate in the past, which is our only way to understand the fight for the future. We can't just make our future versions of artistic expression inclusive and universal, we need to look back at the past. To re-vision it. And that includes beloved yet apparently entirely inappropriate tracks from the Jackson Five.

NICK

Then we can include some discussion about people who accepted the track at the time - this could be a whole series.

SAM

Right. A society labouring under a patriarchy so pervasive it was impossible to see, let alone resist. We have the tools now to re-educate ourselves on what we accepted.

NICK

Or, in other words, the tools to ruin things our readers never thought much about.

SAM

Exactly! Thank us later!

NICK

(holding his phone up)
I found out who wrote the song - not one man, but a group of them.

SAM

(pushing through the stir-fry pan with a spatula: he's not happy with how they've cooked)

A group!

NICK

Yep, a pack of writers and producers known collectively as 'The Corporation'. Our old friend Berry Gordy is in there, along with three other guys. Assembled specifically to write songs for the Jackson Five.

SAM

Snap.

(Pausing his cooking, brain ticking over.)
So a group of grown men get together to write songs for a bunch of teenagers, in a kind of pack-mentality approach to filtering the content of their work through an unassailable medium. People are so dazzled by the phenomenal energy of the Jacksons that this song would be judged purely on their performance and the groove they produced.

NICK

It says here the song was first considered for Gladys Knight and the Pips, and later, Diana Ross. The song was called 'I Wanna Be Free' then.

SAM

So it was an entirely different song! Ha! I mean, empowering Gladys or Diana to be free is one thing, but to ask Little Michael to demand the return of his adolescent property? He's a Misogyny Mule.

NICK

(trying something out which comes out clumsier in reality to how it sounded in his head)

Tro-gend' Horse.

SAM

What?

NICK

Like a Trojan Horse, but with gender?

SAM

Points for the concept, zeroes for execution. What about Trojan Discourse?

NICK

So... puns aren't our strength.

(beat)

Hang on, just to keep us on track: I want to make sure we haven't entirely shifted our argument from an analysis of a song to a conspiracy theory about subliminal messages.

SAM

Hey, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck...

NICK

...it must be little Michael Jackson.

SAM

Right. Or, at least, The Corporation.

NICK

Christ, it sounds like something from Orwell.