

Janet Damita Jo
Jackson, 2011
Photographed by
Matthew Rolston.
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Janet Jackson

SHE BECAME ONE OF THE
MOST SUCCESSFUL AND
GROUNDBREAKING ARTISTS OF
THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES

BY AMY LINDEN

No, my first name ain't baby; it's Janet, Miss Jackson if you're nasty." ¶ The youngest of Joseph and Katherine Jackson's nine children, Janet Damita Jo Jackson (born May 16, 1966, in Gary, Indiana) was already a seasoned vet by the time she recorded what would become her breakthrough and mission statement, the 1986 album, *Control*.

At the age of 7, she appeared on *The Jacksons*, her brothers' TV variety show, stealing hearts as a pint-sized Mae West – at her famously controlling father's bidding, she later recalled; as a preteen, she had supporting roles on the series *Good Times* and *Fame*. Guided by her father/manager, teen-aged Janet released two moderately successful, albeit somewhat generic solo albums – but something was missing. At 19, she found herself at a point where she wanted to establish herself as more than a Jackson. Severing all ties with Joseph, and with the encouragement of new management, she joined forces with hitmakers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. In the past, Janet had been handed off to producers and songwriters who literally put words in her mouth, but Jam and Lewis took a different approach, looking at Janet not as a client but as a collaborator, encouraging her to dig deep into herself, express what she was going through and turn those feelings into lyrics. The result was *Control*.

As funky as it was fired up, *Control* was a mission statement and a direct rejection of the familial and societal restrictions that had marked – and, to a great extent, limited – Janet's career. In *Control*'s spoken-word intro, Janet softly but firmly announces, "This is a story about control. My control. Control of what I say. Control of what I do, and

this time, I'm gonna do it my way." Just like that, the Jacksons' cute, bubbly kid sister was history and in her place was a young woman discovering who she was and mapping out who she wanted to be.

Armed with a series of smash singles and multiplatinum albums, Janet Jackson became one of the most successful and artistically groundbreaking artists of the eighties and nineties, her swagger, popularity, and clout matched only by Madonna and big brother Michael, who, up until Janet's ascent, reigned as both the King of Pop and musical scion of the Jackson family.

The statistics are staggering. Among her honors: Academy and Golden Globe Awards nominations, eleven Billboard Awards, three BET Awards nominations, eleven American Music Awards, nine MTV Video Music Awards, over a dozen Grammy nominations – including Album of the Year – and five wins. She is among the top female artists to have the most consecutive top-ten entries on the *Billboard* Top 100 singles chart and worldwide album sales of more than 100 million. Critic Simon Reynolds credited Janet's music as "drafting a new blueprint for dance/pop" and such artists as Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Bruno Mars, and Robyn cite her as an influence. In 2014, *Out* magazine's Les Fabian Brathwaite observed, "Any female pop singer working today owes a huge debt of gratitude to Janet. Anytime you see a choreographed dance troupe, a toned bare midriff, an elaborate music video, a blockbuster stage show, a film role in between albums or an ear [headset] microphone, Janet's fingerprints are all over it."

Though *Control* was her third album, it had the immediacy of a debut, and in many ways it was: It presented the first opportunity to hear the real Janet. Drawing inspiration

The family Jackson, c. 1977:
Janet, Randy, Jackie, Michael,
Tito, Marlon, LaToya, and Rebbie
(clockwise from bottom row)



In 1990



from pivotal events in her life, including the annulment of her marriage to singer James DeBarge and the ongoing schism with her father, *Control* was a diary set to music. It was also a hit right out of the gate, selling more than five times platinum domestically and ten million worldwide. Incorporating elements of the synth-stoked Minneapolis sound of the Time, R&B, hip-hop, and pop, *Control* yielded five Top Ten hits, including “The Pleasure Principle,” “What Have You Done for Me Lately,” “Let’s Wait Awhile,” the title track, and “Nasty” – during the latter of which Janet, over a brutal electro funk beat, succinctly put some trifling man in his place. Boy, bye.

With Janet sharing cowriting and coproduction credits with Jam and Lewis, *Control* set into motion an enduring partnership. But when it came time for Janet’s fourth album, the creative team did more than retrace its steps. *Janet*

Jackson’s Rhythm Nation 1814 (1989) added a tougher, more industrial component with songs that addressed social injustice, AIDS, poverty, and sexual inequality. In 1990, Janet told author David Ritz, “We have so little time to solve these problems, I want people to realize the urgency. I want to grab their attention. Music is my way of doing that.”

In the spirit of Funkadelic’s “One Nation Under a Groove,” Janet tapped into the cross-racial, liberated, and revolutionary power of the beat. Conceived as a concept album, *Rhythm Nation 1814* was nominated for a Grammy for Album of the Year and sold more than seven million copies, making it the best-selling album of 1990. It yielded seven Top Five singles, and the supporting tour was the most successful debut headlining tour in history. The videos helped establish Janet as an MTV powerhouse. The stark “Rhythm Nation” featured Janet and her dancers in jackboots and



The A-Team:
Jackson with
producers
Jimmy Jam (left)
and Terry
Lewis, 1996



The uniform and
the groove: The
Rhythm Nation
1814 Tour, 1989

“I want people to realize the urgency. I want to grab their attention. Music is my way of doing that.”

paramilitary outfits, the lockstep choreography echoing Public Enemy’s cadre S1W. On the flip side was “Love Will Never Do,” which oozed sunshine and sex, as a laughing Janet, rocking jeans and a halter, kissed up on by then-model Antonio Sabato Jr.

Her next work, *janet.* (1993), smoothed out some of *Rhythm Nation*’s harder edges in favor of a slinky, jazzy, and slow-burning vibe. Janet was now in her mid-20s and as she told *Rolling Stone*, “sexual communication is the name of the game.” The title signaled a complete break from her family; it was Janet. Period. “That’s the Way Love Goes,” which won the Grammy for Best R&B Song, typified the album’s overall mood. Janet was happy, in love – and, as it would turn out, married for the second time – and it showed. The year 1993 also saw Janet make her film debut in John Singleton’s *Poetic Justice*, costarring Tupac Shakur and A Tribe Called Quest’s Q-Tip. Four years later, Tip – along with Joni Mitchell – were featured in 1997’s “Got ‘Til It’s Gone” on her release *The Velvet Rope*, hailed by *Billboard* as “the best



Live in
London, 1992

American album of the year and the most empowering of (Janet's) last five": *The Velvet Rope* became Janet's eighth Number One hit and sold six million copies worldwide.

Provocative and passionate, *The Velvet Rope* was Janet at her most fully realized, introspective, and erotic, as she sang about same-sex relationships and the emotional issues she had privately battled. The album also cemented Janet's status as both a sex symbol and a gay icon, the latter in great part because of "Together Again," hailed as a pop song for the post-AIDS generation.

The juggernaut came to an abrupt and inexplicable halt in 2004. Janet was headlining the NFL Super Bowl Halftime show when Justin Timberlake joined her on a duet of his "Rock Your Body." As the song neared the end, Timberlake ripped open Janet's top and exposed her breast – for less than a second – on live television. Janet issued an immediate apology, explaining that the "wardrobe malfunction" was unintended and that Justin was only meant to pull away at the bustier and leave her bra intact. But the damage was done. Along with CBS paying a hefty fine to the FCC, Janet became the target of sexist jokes, over-the-top moralizing,



Clockwise from left: Costarring with Tupac Shakur in *Poetic Justice*, 1993; Super Bowl XXXVIII Halftime Show, 2004; kicking back in 2018; happy days with brother Michael at the Grammy Awards, 1993.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Janet Jackson
1982 (A&M)



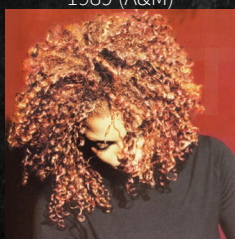
Control
1986 (A&M)



**Janet Jackson's
Rhythm Nation 1814**
1989 (A&M)



janet.
1993 (Virgin)



The Velvet Rope
1997 (Virgin)



All for You
2001 (Virgin)



Damita Jo
2004 (Virgin)



Unbreakable
2015 (Rhythm Nation)

and public humiliation as she alone took the heat for what became known as "nipplegate." The incident effectively put her career on pause as Les Moonves, the now former head of CBS (parent company to Viacom and Infinity Broadcasting), enforced a blacklist of Janet's music and videos. She was also disinvented from CBS's broadcast of the 2004 Grammys, although tellingly, Timberlake appeared. The end result of the calculated suppression was that *Damita Jo*, which received strong reviews and had been expected to outpace 2001's *All for You*, was all but dead in the water. The sharp contrast between how Janet and her male collaborator were treated made her, in the words of cultural commentator Michael Musto, "a symbolic Joan of Arc to burn at the stake."

And still she persisted; recording, performing, and acting throughout the aughts. Janet continued to advocate for the LGBTQ community, survivors of domestic violence, and marginalized and disenfranchised folks. In 2018, a year after having her first child with her third (and now former) husband, Janet played a handful of high-profile festivals and was honored with the Rock Star Award at the Black Girls Rock! ceremony. She also dropped the infectious single "Made for Now," featuring reggaeton superstar Daddy Yankee. Its airy vocals and one-love sentiment introduced Janet to a new generation, while reminding those who have been with her since the 1980s that she remains relevant today – and forever in control.

