

The Michael Jackson memorial: A mostly tawdry affair

By David Walsh
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Given the circumstances surrounding Michael Jackson's memorial held in Los Angeles Tuesday morning—the singer's immense celebrity and notoriety, the self-serving aims and motives of some of the participants, the generally circus-like atmosphere created by the media—how could the service not have been a bizarre, and, sadly, often tawdry, affair?

A collection of performers, preachers and politicians entertained or addressed a crowd of some 20,000 people in the Staples Center for slightly more than two hours. The overall tone of the event, streamed live over the Internet by numerous outlets and watched by a large global audience, was sentimental, religious and oriented to a version of identity politics.

The singers, who performed renditions of Jackson's songs or his favorites by others, included Mariah Carey, Lionel Richie, Stevie Wonder, Jennifer Hudson, Jermaine Jackson (one of Michael's brothers) and Usher. Tributes were offered by actresses Queen Latifah and Brooke Shields, Motown records founder Berry Gordy, basketball stars Kobe Bryant and Magic Johnson, and Motown singing legend Smokey Robinson. Robinson also read out messages from singer Diana Ross and South African leader Nelson Mandela.

The central political themes were heavy-handedly delivered by an official delegation of African-American politicians and personalities: Texas Democratic Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, Martin Luther King III and his sister, Bernice King, and, offering the main eulogy, the Rev. Al Sharpton. Their collective remarks constituted a transparent effort to shore up the Democratic Party, its minority wing in particular, and transform the funeral service into something of a rally for Barack Obama.

Jackson's death, at the age of 50, on June 25 had an

undoubted impact on a great many people around the world. He was, for a combination of reasons, one of the best known personalities on earth. The entertainment and tabloid media, which hounded and derided Jackson in life, has bestowed on him—in death—nearly divine status.

This speaks to their manipulative and corrupt character, and has little to do with the singer. An immensely gifted performer, with a deeply troubled and reclusive personality, Jackson, because he was so genuinely unknown to the public, now invitingly offers something of a blank slate on which various social elements are attempting to inscribe their agendas.

The artistic and social claims being made on his behalf—they reached something of a crescendo in the emotional, hothouse atmosphere of the Staples Center (“the greatest entertainer on earth,” “the healer of the world”)—are simply false. And this falsity largely extended over and dominated the affair. Genuine and spontaneous moments were few and far between. In regard to his family members and friends, this is perhaps understandable. In some cases, however, the tributes were dishonest and politically motivated.

Any quasi-objective assessment of Jackson's life, his strengths and weaknesses as an artist and a human being, was out of the question.

Queen Latifah sounded a note that would be repeated often during the event, observing that Jackson had opened doors for other African-American performers like herself. “Michael was the biggest star on earth,” she told the crowd. “He let me know that as an African-American, you could travel the world—there was a world outside of America, other people.”

Motown's Berry Gordy, whose concerns, one imagines, are always bound up with ongoing commercial interests, concluded his remarks with the

following: “The more I think about Michael Jackson, the more I think ‘The King of Pop’ is not big enough for him. I think he is simply the greatest entertainer that ever lived.” Such exaggerated claims simply do Jackson a disservice.

Al Sharpton asserted that Jackson’s “dream... had changed culture all over the world.” The singer, Sharpton declared proudly, had prepared the way for television personality Oprah Winfrey and golfer Tiger Woods. Moreover, the comfort level Jackson created among a multi-cultural audience of young people led them “to being 40-year-olds [who were] comfortable to vote for a person of color as president of the United States.”

Martin Luther King’s daughter, Bernice, a conservative fundamentalist minister, who has been active in anti-gay work, told the audience that “it is only God’s love that will sustain you and move you to a higher ground, far above the noise of life.”

Rep. Lee from Texas held up a framed document, which, she explained, was “a resolution, to be debated on the floor of the House, that claims Michael Jackson as an American legend, a musical icon, and a world humanitarian.”

All of this had a political purpose—to paint America as a land of opportunity, even for the most oppressed, to promote the Obama administration, and, bound up with that, to divert attention from the devastating social crisis. The state of California is essentially bankrupt, and the city of Los Angeles was obliged to create a special web site to solicit funds to pay for the costs associated with the Jackson memorial service.

Whether the event had the desired effect on popular consciousness is questionable. The effort to recreate the real or exaggerated hysteria that surrounded the death of Princess Diana in Britain in 1997 seems destined to fall flat. There is no doubt a certain amorphous and not entirely healthy fascination about Jackson’s life and fate, but it hardly goes farther than that for the vast majority.

Predictions of a crowd of 250,000 people or more showing up around the arena where the memorial was held failed to materialize. The *New York Times* reported that aside from journalists “and those with tickets to the memorial service, the crowd around the perimeter of the Staples Center numbered only about 1,000,” according to Los Angeles Deputy Police Chief

Sergio Diaz.

“We asked people not to come out and just be on the street and spectate from a distance, and it seems to have worked,” Diaz said. That large numbers of people did not risk the inconvenience of terrible Los Angeles traffic to be near the event speaks to their somewhat diminished level of commitment and obsession.

Other, more practical and mundane questions—jobs, health care, education, recession—are likely to be uppermost in a great many minds.

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