

The MJCast – Episode 054: CJ DeVillar Special

If using any of the below text, please reference The MJCast and display the following podcast URL. Thank-you.

<http://www.themjcast.com/episode-054-cj-devillar-special/>

CJ DeVillar: I engineered a bunch of stuff [for Glen Tipton], so I took the bass credits, and the same thing sorta happened with MJ. Actually, almost exactly the same happened with MJ on "A Place With No Name". I mentioned I can play, I brought my bass down, it was kind of a fluke. And just--Michael loved what I was playing, so...

The MJCast: Share *that* story then!

DeVillar: That was a lot of fun. I mean, working with Michael alone, what a thrill that was. The energy of the man is--it's true, it's just--the musical aura of this guy is huge and, of course, I grew up with Michael, so I had a different, maybe a more powerful reception to that, but I was also in production for many, many years, so I wasn't starstruck anymore. So I can't say that I was starstruck with Michael, I just felt that he really was a real musical power. So, when I was working with him--I had only been working with him for a couple months.

MJCast: How did you come to first work with him?

DeVillar: Well, that was an interesting story. I was at the Record Plant, and I was one of the chief engineers there, so they always put me on the tweaky sessions, on the ones that were difficult, or people were hard to work with, or things like that, so Rose Mann-Cherney, she--Rose was booking the Record Plant, and she was running, booking, and part owner of the Record Plant. And she put me on a session with Michael, where Michael was going to test out engineers. He was looking for an engineer, he was looking for somebody to work with... Rose put me on the session as a second engineer, so basically I come with the room. I make sure you have a smooth session no matter what. So this was the--maybe the second or third time I worked with Michael as a second engineer. I worked with him a few years before that with Eddie Delana. So Michael explained to me, he says, "We're gonna check out some of these guys"--I'm paraphrasing, I can't remember exactly what he said, but basically, "We're gonna check out some of these guys, we're gonna go through the motions. I'm gonna check out these engineers." I said, "Great, what am I gonna do?" So he kinda had a schedule, these guys kinda coming in, he was gonna meet them. He was gonna work with them for a second, he was gonna let them go. And that's what we did. So, first guy came in, and it's good that I can't remember their names, 'cause they would be embarrassed with the stories. But these were guys who had Grammys, and things like that. And so, the first cat came in. Michael sat down at the chair, and Michael just was throwing questions and production things at the guy. He was trying to figure out the level of sophistication of technology, 'cause Michael really wants someone to perform in the room. And so he asked him to do something very unusual. Now Michael, one of the main things Michael does, is to comp vocal tracks, so Michael will sing a bunch of tracks and we'll construct a vocal take out of many takes. And so he asked this engineer to do it in a very unusual way on the SSL console. He said, "I want to comp a vocal on the console", and that was very unusual. I knew that right away, that Michael was throwing this guy a curve ball. He was just testing him, so here's a test, dude! Sink or swim! And so the dude was already sort of like going, "Oh, damn". [laughs] I could see him going, "Ohhh, ok". So he was sorta poking at it, and then ten seconds later, nothing was happening, so the guy was sort of stuck. Well, just by the mere nature of why I was there, working as a second engineer, I stepped over the guy's shoulders and I hit the correct buttons and got him going. And then he sort of got moving again with Michael, practicing some button switches for the comp. And then the guy got stuck again, I

leaned over and hit the correct buttons. So I was sort of keeping the session going, even though Michael was sort of testing this guy. I couldn't help it, it's kinda what we do, you know? So the guy got out of his chair and said, "You do it"... And the guy did the right thing, because he knows that there's somewhat of a code, I guess, you can call it a code--no matter what happens, the session doesn't stop. Michael is the point. So when two engineers are in a room, whoever can do it is gonna do it. So he naturally got up out of the chair and said, "You do it", and that would naturally happen because we're trying to get a session going for Michael Jackson, and that was sort of what was--and so the guy was correct in his--it was the astute thing to do. But it wasn't what Michael wanted, obviously. So they worked a little more and they had a nice conversation, and Michael is always very gracious and a very sweet man, and he sent him on his way. And that was the day for that. That took a few hours to get through. And I thought that was very interesting for me, as an engineer, in the room. So Michael and I parted ways for that day. We came back the next day, and there was a new guy. And this happened three times, but the other one was kinda like this one. This is kind of a similar story. So another guy came in, had the exact same chat, but this time Michael threw a different technological issue on him, but this was easier. And this was comping on this Sony recorder, it's called a 3348, and has all these buttons--a million buttons on it, and of course, I was very fluid on it. So the guy was sitting down and he kinda should've been fluid on it I thought, and he was kind of, same thing, kind of not--you know, Michael's very *clap, clap, snap, snap* Michael's very--you can tell that it's--the thing has gotta be snappy. I mean, Michael is not--you gotta go fast [laughs]. As fast as Michael is the whole idea. So the second engineer was trying to get through it, and I kept leaning over, hitting the right buttons, and that guy, of course, being the astute engineer that he was, did the exact same thing. Got out of his chair and said, "You do it". So I got out of the chair and I started comping with Michael, and so Michael's looking at me, like, "Dude". I was like, "Oh, well, you know". So the same thing, he finishes the conversation with that man. Three or four days later, after one more guy--we only tested three guys--it was kinda the same deal. Michael looked at me and said, "Why don't you be my engineer". And I said, "Yeah". [laughs] "Yeah! I'm ready, let's do this, let's work Michael, I want to get to it." And he's going, "Great". And that was it. The next day, some assistant from some attorney plopped a 30-page contract in front of me, and I signed it, and that was it. The next day I was working in the studio with MJ.

MJCast: Now at this point... as far as studio stuff, were you guys working on digital yet, or was it still tape?

DeVillar: It was digital tapes, so it was both. Yeah, it was the Sony 3348, that was Michael's favorite machine. And believe it or not, it was 48 tracks on half-inch, and it was a gorgeous-sounding machine. They probably weigh about 800 pounds. Back in the day, they probably cost \$150,000.

MJCast: Yeah, those things are pretty massive.

DeVillar: Yeah, you can't *give* 'em away now. You can't *give* 'em away. They're just throwing 'em in the ocean now, at this point. So yeah, that was Michael's preferred format, We were doing a little bit of Pro-Tool-ing, but back then, we were, let's say, transferring. We were taking stuff off of the Sony machine, putting it into Pro Tools, doing our edits, and going back to the Sony machine, and that was kind of Michael's M.O. (modus operandi) back then. He wasn't sold on staying in Pro Tools totally yet.

MJCast: Would that [work on Michael Jackson material with Eddie Delana] have been during sort of the mid to late nineties?

DeVillar: Yes, exactly right. That would have been '94ish.

MJCast: Yeah, so that would've been for the HIStory album probably.

DeVillar: Probably. That was at Royal Tone Studios, to be exact. And Michael kind of constantly works, and then those songs turn into records, so I would say it was definitely that grouping of songs.

MJCast: Ok, you worked on those songs with him, and then later sort of came back for "Place With No Name"?

DeVillar: "Place With No Name" was fall of '98 was when I played bass on that... "Blue Gangsta", that was '98, '99. The story for the bass playing--so I was working with Dr. Freeze, who is a real awesome cat, man. He did "A Place With No Name"... he did "Poison", those early New Jack Swing hits back in the day. So he was working on--he was Michael's producer, one of Michael's producers, and we were dropping in some rough vocals. Michael was still kinda writing lyrics with Freeze, and we were dropping in some quick, rough mix lyric stuff... they said, "Oh, maybe some real bass", they meant live bass, 'cause Michael is usually on a synth bass... So they mention that, "Well, maybe I want live bass" and then--so Freeze thought that was a good idea. Well, the minute I heard that, of course, I was like, "Ok, well I play bass... Listen, I've played for years, and I can drop in, see if you guys like it at least, maybe you hear something... I can bring my bass down."... And they said, "Yeah, bring it down". So same thing, I bring it down, and I take it out of the case, and I sit it in the corner so they can see it. 'Cause I'm not gonna mention it again, you know what I mean? I don't want to be forward and rude, I don't want to be discovered, I don't want to be forceful, you know? So Freeze says, "Hey man, this might be a good time to drop in and try out some ideas". Well, it was a bit early, and I knew Michael was still in the lounge, 'cause I didn't--Michael didn't know me as a bass player even though I mentioned it to him. I didn't want him with me while I did it. I wanted--that would be a major distraction to have Michael Jackson in your face while you're trying to work out, "What am I gonna play?" You want to go there in your mind, you know? So I told Freeze, "I wanna wait 'til he goes", and he said, "Yeah, ok". So, a few hours later, it was later in the evening. Michael's always gone by then, but we don't check up on him, like, "Have you gone yet, Michael?" We're not gonna do that. So I just figured he'd left, 'cause he had never been there that late, for a while at least. So I strap on my bass, I plug in, I get myself a sound, I'm going through modules and things, and I find a sound, I'm like, "This is pretty heavy, I kinda like this". And then I hit play on the recorder, and Freeze is right there... I'm just sort of jamming around, trying to get some sounds. I'm sort of feeling around, I think I have something I want to do, and then I see Michael walk out the door of his lounge. Now there's nothing but glass in all these booths, so Michael has to go through two rooms of glass before he comes in our third room. So there's a long walk from Michael leaving that room, walking into the studio, 'cause I'm like going, "Awww, damn" [laughs] "Awww, so I'm not even gonna get a chance to play. This is it. I'm gonna have to put the bass down, he's gonna want to do something else" My moment--I already was like, I was resigning to it, like going, "Oh well". I was pretty good, I gave it a good shot, you know? So he walks in, I stop tape immediately, like I got caught. He's going, "What are you guys doing?", and I'm like, "Just laying down some bass". And he's like, "Can I hear it?" And I'm like, "Yeah, ok." So I didn't record anything, so I go to the top, I hit play--I'm on input again--so I'm playing along, playing the idea, and he's going, "Yeah, ok". So I'm coming up with this lick at the same time, I'm still searching for notes and it was a very simple thing. And simple is hard. If anybody hears a musician, being original and simple are the two hardest things you can put together. And so Michael is in my face while I'm trying to do this, and he's going, "Are you recording any of these ideas?" And I said, "No". And he's like, "Oh my God!, What are you doing?" He's like getting mad at me, and I'm like, "Ok, ok, ok, ok". But he was excited, he wasn't mad, he was just like, "Let's do this! I'm liking it!" And so I hit record, and I just take off like I'm a rock star, so I'm playing, and he is just--he's grooving with me, he's playing air guitar, he's biting the lip, he's getting in the face, he's clapping, he's throwing up his arms, he's like--he's jumping up and down

with me. It was really kind of throwing me at first, [then] I realized that he's trying to get me going. He--this was after the session, I realized, that he was all about inspiration, and he just wanted to inspire me... I gotta say, I guess he did, because I ended up coming up with the part kinda during that. And so I stopped tape at the end of the song, and he's going, "Oh, I love that, that's so stinky, CJ, it's so stinky". Stinky for him was like, "Awesome! I love it!" and he goes, "Let's do it again!", so I go to a new track, I drop in, I'm playing, I'm trying some different ideas, and I'm all over the place though, I'm having fun, because I'm playing slides, and I'm in his face too. We're both... it was kinda like being on stage with Michael. That's what we were doing on the studio floor. It'd be like if you saw a show with him, and he's got the guitarist, and he's in the guitarist's face, and we're like, "Yeah!" so it was that kind of a thing. So I dropped in three or four more times, and I laid down another one that was really solid, because I knew as a musician, like "Oh wait, it's not all there". There's sections I didn't play, and if they try to put this together, it won't all be there, so I played a really solid track, so they can at least assemble something. And then that was the one I used for a quick mix. So after I was done, Michael was ecstatic. I was going, "What the hell's going on" at that point, 'cause I was like, "Oh my gosh, he's loving what's--" I mean, in thirty minutes, I did all this, you know? So I did a quick mix, and he thanked me again, and he left the studio. And that was the last I heard of it. That was it. I was like, "Well, that was fun. There's no way I'm ending up on this record, but that was fun". That's what I thought. And then that was it until... TMZ leaked thirty seconds of that song, right?

MJCast: Yeah, that's correct. That happened just after he passed away, I'm pretty sure.

DeVillar: That's right, that's right. And then a friend of mine played me that, and I said, "Oh my gosh, that's the song. Oh my gosh, that's me playing bass", so I'm like, "What is going on". This is ten years later. So I was really excited to hear that. "Wow, I'm on a little thirty second clip with Michael Jackson." I took that as like, "I'll take that. That's cool". I got *that*, I got a story, I got a clip, everybody--'cause I was telling the story, but I had nothing to--I had no proof.

MJCast: Nothing to back it up. Everybody's like, "Yeah, sure you played with Michael Jackson."

DeVillar: Right? I didn't get a *whole* lot of that, but you get that in everybody's mind. Or it wasn't solid enough. So then I heard he was making a record, I heard there was a record coming out, and I realized that, "Wow, what if they put this song on there? How do I get a credit?" I had no idea how to get a credit. I tried to call the camp, everybody was different. I tried to get to the managers and the Estate people, no one can get me a call there. I called an attorney friend of mine, and I said, "Listen, I'll pay you, just badger these people, let them know I played bass on this song". And he said, "There's nothing I can do. They're just--it's locked up right now." And I said, "It's crazy"...I was calling at the exact time they were working all this stuff out, which is really--that's when the doors sorta close. People are jockeying for positions, it's highly politicized, getting a credit on an MJ record. And I was already sort of--I worked on "Break of Dawn", and I didn't get credited on that... I had no power. I had nothin'. I didn't have representation, I didn't have an attorney, I was kind of a loose punk rock engineer at the time. I wasn't--I didn't have my shit totally together, fellas... I was swimming with these big stars, but I was on my own. You know what I'm saying? Anyway, at that point, I think it was a couple years before then, I wanted to tell my story, right after the TMZ clip came out, so I wrote a post. I wanted to tell my story, I wanted to tell it in a way, because I was getting a lot of emails about it and what was going on, so I wrote out that story as best as I could. I'm not really a story-teller, but I wrote it myself. It reads ok still, but I wish I could change it... And then, to make that long story short, the record came out, and there I was. I'm just thrilled, and the engineering stuff's good, I got engineering credits on a couple songs, that's great. But the bass one is the one, because it was with Michael, we did it together, it was inspired. I mean, literally, I don't know what to think of it, other than I come up with these little factoids, I think, in my mind, like "That has to be the quickest bass session on any Michael Jackson record ever." [MJCast crew laughs] I mean, this guy takes

five years to make a record, you know? And that was literally, it went down in five recording passes. That went down in thirty minutes, you know? And then he worked on it for ten years. I was reading some of Freeze's stories, and they were going to studios with it, and when I read the stories after the fact, I was like, "Oh my gosh!" Michael had all the chance in the world, and all the means in the world, to put somebody else on there, to change the bass, to get the greatest, to get whoever on there, and he never did. So I get a big thrill out of that. So the bass credit is the one. It's the creative credit. It was a creative process with Michael Jackson is what I cherish the most about the whole thing...

MJCast: When we got to hear the original, oh my God, it's such a good track...

DeVillar: Michael loved that song, I mean, who didn't love that song, especially if you grew up during that time. It's still a huge classic. Michael is a real artist's artist's artist. He wants to work on things just 'cause he wants to. I don't think Michael sort of much makes plans with music, I think he sort of just muses and goes forward, and just lurches, and has fun with music, and we get the benefit of doing what he wants to do, so I think he just loved that song so much, and so did Freeze, and the hip-hop culture, it's very natural to flip anything. Just flip any song you want... That was Michael and Freeze just putting love into it. I don't think they went after that track like it was supposed to be put on a record. I think it was even more personal than that. Although I think Freeze tells it a little different, that they went after it in a way... I would go with what he says over what I say, but the feeling I got during the time was that they were just having so much fun trying to play with this melody and the lyrics, and the music, and really having a good time flipping this classic track. And a successful flip isn't easy, and I thought that was just wonderful. I thought it was great when I heard it too.

MJCast: Well, America liked it as well. They had great things to say about the new version.

DeVillar: Yeah, and I suppose it helped me, loving that song, when I was playing the bass I suppose. 'Cause before I played on Michael's version, I had heard that song ten thousand times since I was a kid, so I gotta wonder if that wasn't in my spirit, so to speak, while I was playing, while Michael was in my face trying to inspire me too. I almost channeled that bass part, I think, through all those things at that moment... Studio magic, I'm a firm believer in it. It seems kind of a little magical thing to say, but that's what those people are all about, those people. Huge stars or huge music makers, they understand how to get inspiration down to disc or whatever you want to call it, and that's what matters. And Michael, I think, may have been the greatest at that. Another thing I noticed about him was that musical energy was relentless. I don't know--he was like a child in a discovery sense. Like, usually, a guy around his age is somewhat jaded, kind of over it, the studio's old, you're like going, "Come on". Your ears are a little like--you're a snob. I mean, you can't help it as you get older, especially for--Michael and I were in our--he was in his forties at that point, just in his forties, but he still had that wide-eyed, like searching for magic thing, and it was very obvious, and every time I worked with him, he was reaching for that, and so few people do...

MJCast: I think [Stargate] actually probably would have went the direction that you guys were going, like they were supposed to, if they would've heard [your version] beforehand.

DeVillar: A thing they could've done with that particular mix that--it would've been ok, other than they took all the backgrounds out of the hook. They just made it kind of solo Michael singing a hook. And when you hear the original hook, it's got the huge ridiculous Michael pad that we've all grown up with. And if they would have had the huge Michael--let the bigness come into his vocals, it would've been--I'm getting a little production-technical here--but I felt going through the solo voice was a little too stripped down. I don't know, they sort of missed the mark on some other areas. Also, if you're gonna go with that big [unintelligible], that doesn't translate on a lot of systems that people would normally listen to a Michael Jackson song. It's kind of a thumper that really won't translate over smaller systems, so it sounds a little empty on systems that don't

bump. I don't know, it was okay. I kinda like the fact that everybody likes the version I played on best. I can play that a little bit, I'm not exactly mad...

MJCast: Another song that you worked on was "Blue Gangsta", do you have any stories about that process, or with that song?

DeVillar: No, that was pretty straightforward. I recorded mainly the instruments on that, and some of Michael's scratch vocals, which were amazing. I thought Michael's detail with the vocals was really gorgeous with that. When I heard the finished vocal, I was really--I heard Michael Jackson at forty-something being great. You know what I'm saying? That super-mature, like Jordan, he doesn't need to be fast anymore, but he can still beat you because he knows where to go, because he's forty. You know what I'm saying? So Michael kinda had that super-experienced sound, even though the youthfulness may have been off the edge a little bit. There was a different kind of experience in his magic. So I heard it on "Blue Gangsta". So I really enjoyed hearing that. I think [Mike Gang?] did most of the vocals on that, and I did all the instruments on that, and some of Michael's scratch vocals.

MJCast: Michael was working a lot with Brad Buxer and Michael Prince [on that track after your work]. Did you have much involvement with those two guys as well?

DeVillar: Not with Michael Prince. We passed in the halls occasionally. He knew who I was, I know who he is. You know, Michael had several engineers going at once, so there was a few engineers caving in a studio somewhere, and we would see each other at a distance, so that's how I knew Michael [Prince], and maybe a quick chat at a party. But Brad, I worked with quite a bit beforehand. So I knew Brad very well, and we were in the same circles, we had some of the same friends.

MJCast: I always felt like, later on down the line, "Blue Gangsta" kinda had that Timbaland-feel to it, like it was supposed to be made by Timbaland or something. [laughs]

DeVillar: Well, I gotta say, man, what he did to that was amazing. I can't believe it, I mean the remix version of it is stunning. So I guess it lent to his--it played into his hand a little bit. I loved what he did. With a lot of people getting mad at the remixes, I'm not mad at the remixes at all. The only one I'm mad at--I shouldn't say "mad" at--but the one I thought they missed a little bit was the "A Place With No Name" one. I thought that was a bit of a miss for me. But that's a very young-sounding track too, and I'm an older guy, so maybe that's an issue... But the other tracks, stellar. I mean, really great, Michael would have loved them.

MJCast: The orchestral introduction to "Blue Gangsta" is really magical.

DeVillar: Oh, wonderful. Yeah. I mean, on "Blue Gangsta", Jerry Hey--he did the horns on it--and he did a wonderful job, and Timbaland kind of mixed them out, and he had to. So poor Jerry Hey, those horns on the original are just absolutely ridiculous, I love horns. But yeah, Timbaland's remix is ridonkulus, so I thought it was great. And the vocals sounded great too. Wonderful.

MJCast: I want to ask a little bit about a song that you worked on that's quite mysterious still in the Michael Jackson fan world, and the song is "Monster".

DeVillar: Yes, yes.

MJCast: There's still a lot of misinformation out there about it, and that kind of thing. I'd love for you to take us through the journey of "Monster" and what you did on it, and Michael's vision for it.

DeVillar: When I got to it, it was pretty involved. It was already over a hundred tracks, and I was at Record One, and we recorded vocals on it. So I made a work reel. So basically, we were in the room that had--I don't know, it had like 102 input SSL, and we needed that actually. I had two Sony machines that were full, so that was 96 tracks. So the orchestra--there was an orchestra laid out, huge amount of percussion, there was flies buzzing, there was--it was very experimental, it sounded like a very personal Michael Jackson song to me, very personal. And

it--I would say, and I use this analogy often, but it's not exactly inaccurate, but it's very much--I kinda took it like--kinda one of his Sgt. Pepper songs. That he went kind of art instead of trying to hit us over the pop noggin, like he's great at doing. He reached down into some kind of a different place for this song. I guess more challenging to listen to would be the best way to put it. So it was very interesting. So I had to take all those tracks, I did a mix, he was coming into the studio occasionally, but then I had a long two-day period where I didn't see him, and I was at Record One, so I mixed up, for as long as I could, and then made a work reel, which means I took those 96 tracks and I got a third Sony machine, locked all three up, and I put eight tracks down to the work track. So I had two tracks of drums on it, two tracks of effect, two tracks of keyboards, two tracks of percussion. And then that released 40 channels. So then that was our vocal reel. So after I made that, Michael would come into the studio and would sing on "Monster". I guess "Monster"'s the name of it.

MJCast: Yeah, yeah.

DeVillar: The hook I recorded, he sang "You created a monster", was the hook that he sang.

MJCast: That's right, yeah.

DeVillar: So maybe that's the title. Maybe it was just "Monster".

MJCast: On that note, I've heard this song before; I don't know what sort of state of completion I've heard it in, but the accounts are right. It sounds, instrumentally, probably, in my opinion, the most complex Michael instrumental I've ever heard. There is so much going on, it's incredible. But the vocal I've heard--the version I've heard--there is only the hook you described in the chorus. There's no other vocal. Did you record any other Michael vocal for that song?

DeVillar:... Now, I definitely recall the hook, 'cause you get a huge stack. We did a lot of stacks. Then we did--yeah, we--I remember filling a lot of stuff. Now, we did a lot of experimented vocals, he may have sung some verses. I don't know if they were experimental to him. I don't know--let me put it this way... I recall almost filling that reel, 40 tracks. Now, was it with verses and a bridge? I don't know. Maybe had some skeletal ideas of that, but I know we practically filled it... I actually had a problem. He's so fast that he remembers where he is in tracks and stuff, and he wants to go back and he wants to record an idea, and then he wants to go to this section of tape and record an idea, and then he wants to go here. Now, we're on tape, so this is when I made the money. I was paid right, you know? Because what made that difficult is that we weren't in Pro Tools, so you can't see the audio about to come up. You don't get to see audio, it's only tape and needles bouncing. So he would ask me, "Oh, there's a section of tape here, I want to record something". Well, right after that, is the bridge. So I have to be careful to take it out of record when he sings on a section that has something after it. So the vocal session was--after about a week--was getting complicated. There [were] parts flying around all over this reel, including the hook that you mentioned, and I remember he was singing something, and I can see a note I wrote, 'cause I was furiously writing notes, 'cause I couldn't keep up with Michael. It's like--I also had to keep *him* from making a mistake... It's part of my job, too, is to help him not screw up, you know? So he was singing, and we were coming up to a part that I was about to record over. So I was, like, I was--had a catch-22. I had to drop out. So I had to drop out in the middle of a vocal. And so I dropped out, and he goes, "What are you doing?" And I'm like, "Oh my God, Michael Jackson's yelling at me, first of all" [laughs] And I'm going, "Michael, Michael. The beatbox was right on that--it was right after". He goes, "[sigh of relief] Ohh, thanks for dropping me out". I was like, "Oh my gosh". I was like, "Dude", you know? And so, by that story alone, that meant we were cramming the tape. So, I have to say, there was a lot of stuff. In the rough mix you heard--I mean, maybe the vocal session I had with him--it's hard to say, I did that in '99.

MJCast: Did Michael ever talk to you about the song "Monster" and his vision for it, and where he wanted it to go?

DeVillar: No. No, he did--he liked my mix a lot. He liked it so much that he made me put it to a half-inch analog machine, which I thought was kinda funny. He just loved it in his headphones so much. I had two days to work on it, so I wanted to give him a mix in his headphones to sing against, that he would enjoy, so I really made something that'd be fun to sing against, and, evidently, he responded to it. So he liked it enough to print it, so maybe that's what people are hearing. And I may have done it with just the hook in it, I don't know. 'Cause I did some rough mix versions for him, so he could take it home and maybe sing in the car, or whatever, so Michael probably had 30 versions of it.

MJCast: As someone that does enjoy sitting and listening to records and music, like you said earlier, sort of--out of Michael's catalog of work, have you got some real standouts that--yeah, you might not have worked on, but they really stand out that are favorites for you?

DeVillar: Oh, ok. Right now? "Dancing Machine" still kills me. I don't get it. And I gotta go to YouTube, and watch the robot middle 8. I gotta do it. I guess "Blue Gangsta", both versions I like. I sort of have--I kind of have a random playlist that I go through sometimes that I have some of the things I worked on and I like, but "ABC", the early Motown sessions just... they still destroy me. I mean, I'm a nostalgic listener, you know? I don't--I'm kind of a lo-fi engin--like I can make a pristine--I can make a record like you wouldn't believe. But if I don't have to, I like making lo-fi records. I like getting energy, I like hearing early sounds. I listen to old jazz. I like grimy recordings. They're hard to do--that's why I like--they're hard to do in an artful way. I mean, you didn't have to try back in the day, they were automatic. They sounded old 'cause it was forever ago. But I like putting a lot of character in records, so I don't listen technically anymore, I listen purely nostalgically. Like if an old Michael Jackson song comes on, I'm bouncing around, I'm not like drilling down with my ears, trying to hear James Jamerson--no, I'm not doing that. I'm bouncing in my seat, singing the lyrics. So, even though I'm an engineer/producer, I like going *there*, you know what I'm saying?

MJCast: I like some of that stuff from the late '70s, early '80s, that really organic slap bass kind of sound. The stuff Louis Johnson was doing on "Off the Wall" and "Thriller".

DeVillar: Thank you! Yes, yes, yes. Yeah, because it was really hard to manipulate tape back in the day. You hear--it was just more real, because it was very played. Those records, there were--had musicians, drummers played those disco beats. Click-tracks weren't exactly popular back then, and then we can only edit a little bit by cutting up tape. We cut tape a little bit back in the day, between drum takes and things like that. But generally, those records that you like, I like 'em for the same reasons. You plug in, you play, and that was the deal. So we like how they're unadulterated. They're not Pro Tools, they're not tuned, they're not timed out, they're not--you know? You had to drop in, you had to craft those records before you mixed 'em. Now you make 'em when you mix.

...

[On artists taking a long time on their records] Michael takes too long, you know? But Michael can, you know? And I don't mean to digress, but when I was working with Quincy Jones, I asked him--I actually had a lot of guts back then, I should've been fired from a few sessions--but I asked Quincy to this face, "How come you don't work with Michael anymore?" And he says, "Because I like to finish" [MJCast laughs] And I thought that was brilliant, you know? And Quincy was a bit incredulous, he was like, "Oh my gosh, Michael takes forever to make records", like I heard that come out of him, but Quincy takes a second to make a record. Quincy is writing it, composing it, handing out the music, people recording it, and he's mixing it, and he's on to the next thing. And that's Quincy's thing, because he's so prolific that he's just darting forward. Michael wants to let his spirit just dwell on it, until he can't anymore. That's really how he makes records. He will take forever. So, on that note, Michael was definitely--left to his own accord, Michael was a super-duper editor, tweaky recording guy, no doubt about it.

MJCast: You think that was his perfectionism that sort of slowed it down, and maybe got in the way? Is that what your experience sort of was?

DeVillar: Well, he only got in the way of time and money. He didn't get in the way of his own records. I don't think he ever did that. I think he got in the way of his managers and his label wanting to save money. And Michael didn't think money. I don't think he ever thought about figures. I think his whole life--I'm guessing, don't go to me on this, but--just judging by the way he worked and how he is, and other people who I know that kind of have that kind of money, and that kind of power, is that he didn't--he didn't have figures and dollar signs and when things cost. He just did them until he felt they were right. It bugged other people 'cause it cost *them* money, or they had to figure out how to get the money. 'Cause Michael didn't want to have to pay for his own records, that was for the label to do, and the management to do. So they were watching his budget, he never watched his--he never did. There was no way he ever watched his own money. And it wasn't because he didn't have any reverence for it, it was just because he wanted to do what he wanted to do. So the record was done when it was just done. He finished when--I think he was sort of forced into it more than anything 'cause, probably, contractually, he was going to lose something big, and that's when he finished. I bet you, 'cause he probably would've taken longer if he could've, but contractually, he may have been up against some serious penalties if he didn't hit a few dates at the right time. Because obviously, there was coordination between records getting done, tours, and advertisement. So there's huge liabilities, and things like that involved, so I think when you get investors involved and things like that, it gets weird. But I don't think it got weird for him. He just made the records and--I think if Michael bought anything with his money on the records, he bought magic in time. He bought inspiration. He was waiting for that, trying to get with that, and when he got enough of that, his record was finished. And that's what makes him magical. And also what makes him--he's such a brute in the studio, you know? He is strong. He's got a lot of power, musically. And he uses it. And, you know, it costs money.

MJCast: So did he ever have any expert advice that he gave you, or do you have anything that you might have learned from him?

DeVillar: He--no, he was never direct like that. We talked about like--I was interested in anthropology and science, and things like that, so I would read the paper, or things like that. I would chat with him about things that I was interested in that maybe--'cause sometimes he was really just sort of quiet a lot of the time. But little things that happened would be like--he would mess with me a little bit. When we were working on "Monster", at that point, he was driving himself down to the studio with Prince, with his little boy. And he was driving this kind of a blacked-out Dodge Ram truck, it was bright red. It was totally tinted out, and that's what--Michael was open-bed truck, and that's what Michael was driving to the studio. And he would just put Prince in a seat next to him, and he would just walk in the studio with Prince in hand, and Prince was maybe a year old, maybe 18 months, a toddler, just wearing a diaper, fuzzy head, you know? And Michael would just walk in for a vocal session with no babysitter. So I had to put Prince on my knee with my arm around his belly, so I had his baby on my left knee, and I had my right hand on the remote for the recording. So I'm recording Michael Jackson's vocals, I got a baby in my left hand, and then of course--not only that, I'm recording Michael, which is hard, I mean recording him is really hard because he's fast, you don't want him to break flow, you're trying to keep his flow going, so I'm huffing and puffing, the kid is squirming around. A couple times he hit the button in the middle of a vocal and cut the vocal, you know? And then Michael's like, "Oh Prince, oh, you're so silly". And I'm smiling, having a great time to Michael, but in my mind, I'm going, "Oh, God. How do I--damn baby is messing up my job!" [laughs] That's how I was feeling at the time, I was getting so frustrated. But Michael knew that, and it

was cracking him up. And he knew I was sweating, trying to keep up with the session, and huffing and puffing, babysitting and recording a vocal. He liked watching me go through that.

MJCast: That is an incredible story, just to hear--that's a very, very different Michael Jackson--the real Michael Jackson. That's a different Michael [than] sort of what the media portrayed, like a guy just driving himself down to the studio in a ute (Australian term) with his son.

DeVillar: I got another one, I've got one more story, it's my favorite story. I've told this to a couple reporters, but they won't print it, I think, 'cause it's a little risqué, I guess. And I threaten to write it down on a blog post sometimes, but I'll tell it to you anyway, 'cause it's absolutely hilarious. It's my greatest Michael Jackson story. And it's kind of pertinent right now. Ok, so it's a bit risqué, so I know some of his listeners are really sweet people, so I don't want to harm their ears, but I know you guys are going, "Yes, yes"

MJCast: Yeah, absolutely. We are ready, we are ready [laughs]

DeVillar: So this was at the Record Plant, and I believe we were working on "A Place With No Name" actually. And it was during that exact time, during those sessions. This was the time when Bill Clinton--the Monica Lewinsky dress was getting tested for Bill Clinton's DNA. You remember that?

MJCast: Yes. Yep.

DeVillar: So it was huge news, and of course everybody was waiting--the whole world--was waiting for the DNA report. Is it Bill Clinton's on the dress? So I show up the Record Plant early, get ready for a session with Michael, and Michael's already there. I'm like, "Oh my God, I can't believe Michael Jackson beat me to the studio. I feel like an idiot", right? So, I'm like, "Oh my gosh", so I walk in the studio, and Michael is walking right at me, he goes, "CJ! CJ! You won't believe at what just happened!" I'm like, "Yeah?". He goes, "Bill Clinton, his dress, the DNA, it's his DNA! It's for real!"... I mean, he is like, "Oh my gosh". He's just beside himself. And he's looking at me like I should respond, and I'm like--and of course, I already had my views about it, it was already in the news for weeks or months at a time, he was getting impeached, and this other stuff. And I go, "Michael, I know. All this mayhem over a lousy blowjob". And then Michael doesn't like hearing bad words, I forgot. But I was incensed, because I was like, "All this stupidity over this", you know? And so, when I said that, Michael hit the ground, he screamed out loud a blood-curdling scream, and he was on the carpet. He fell to his knees, and put his face in his hands right in the carpet, and screamed out loud in laughter. So he was like, full-on boisterous, huge haha's, and so he's there, right at my feet, down in the carpet, laughing, and I'm standing up. And I'm thinking I'm fired. I throw up my hands, and I'm looking down at Michael Jackson crying, practically, and I'm like, "Oh CJ, you blew it". That was a mistake, 'cause I get too comfortable sometimes with people. I do what I do, I'm who I am. So he gets up, slowly, and he's [in an exasperated voice] "Oh my God, oh my God", he's like that. And I'm like, "Michael, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that." He's going, "No, no, that was so funny." And then he's walking away, laughing, wiping, he was crying, he was laughing and wiping his face, and he walks into the lounge and closes the door. And I'm like, "Okay". I didn't feel like I was--he didn't let me off the hook, I felt like I'm fired anyway. He's going to be nice to me, and then in two hours, I'm gonna get a call from the manager, and I'm out. So I waited [laughs] and a couple hours later, I didn't get the call, and then we kept working, and then we worked for a few more months. So I didn't get fired. But I gave him a big belly laugh though, he thought that was hilarious.

MJCast: What a story!

DeVillar: Yeah, very funny.

MJCast: He was friends with the Clintons. There's some great shots of Bill meeting Michael's kids and hanging out with Michael.

DeVillar: Oh ok. Yeah, yeah, ok, well then it's come full circle, has it? But yeah, I guess he was excited about that news because it wasn't him, and it was very sensationalist. It was very sensational, and it was huge, epic news. Everybody was waiting for this. Who doesn't like to hear a test result like that? Ridiculous news, and ridiculous amount of time spent on the news cycle, it was just ridiculous. I was incensed by it, but obviously it's hilarious and it's sad fact of how it turned out, but it was comedy at the time. It certainly was.

MJCast: That was a terrific, terrific story. Thank you.

DeVillar: [Laughs] You bet. It's my favorite... Other little things--he wasn't very conversational, so to speak, unless it was at the moment, so he was a pretty private guy. I got that from him right away. I kinda felt that Michael Jackson was an alone guy, but happy with it, you know? Definitely, I think one of his favorite things to do was to be in the studio, because he was animated there. I mean, he was somebody else, in a way, in the studio sometimes. He was just kind of sweet, laughing, fun, kind of not worried about people. So when I saw him like that, I tried to help him with that as much as possible. Like I didn't--like I don't have any photos with Michael, and I wish I did. But I never asked him, because everybody was asking him for photos, everybody.

MJCast: He actually probably appreciated that.

DeVillar: Man, I would like to think he did, and I would like to think I got the job because I never jocked him for stuff like that.

MJCast: The thing is, you might not have any photos with him, but you've got music with him.

DeVillar: That's the one, too, that's the one. I did introduce him--one little story I have with Brandy [Norwood], I had recorded Brandy some months before... I had ran into her at the front desk at the Record Plant, and she knew Michael was there, she knew I was recording Michael, and she had never met Michael. And she walked up to me like a fan, wide-eyed. "Oh my God, you gotta introduce me to Michael! Can you introduce me to Michael, please?" I'm like, "Oh my gosh." I'm like, "First of all, it's her, and I want to keep working with her", so I'm like--anybody else, I'd say no, 'cause I'm also there catching stuff for Michael for him not to get bugged. It's kind of what I do also, right? But now I'm like trapped. I'm like, "Ok, it's Brandy, and maybe Michael would want to know." I justified it like that. So I was like--I rarely knock on his lounge door, so I knocked on his lounge door, and he opened it up. And I said, "Michael, Brandy's out here, wants to meet you, she just desperately wants to meet you. She won't leave me alone". And he's going, "Oh. Oh my gosh, but I'm so stinky". And he meant that in the real way, because when he gets in the studio, he's like us. I can tell that he's just rolling out of bed, putting on the t-shirt he had on the chair, throwing on some shoes with no socks going to the studio. He did that sometimes. So he had on--I mean, Michael, you know, he may... sometimes--he needed a shower sometimes, guys. Ok?

[The MJCast crew laughs]

DeVillar: And so--and he was like, "Oh my gosh"--and he knew it too, so he was like, "Oh, I'm not--", he was like he wasn't together, you know. But he said, "Ok" anyway. And so he had this wrinkled-up old t-shirt on, he'd probably been wearing it for three or four days, and no socks, penny loafers, and some regular old pants that he'd probably been wearing. 'Cause he was in--kind of in work mode. You know, get up, go to the studio, go home, sleep, get up, you know. You know how we do that. We're just like, you know? And so I showed her to his door, and he invited her in, and they chatted for a couple hours. But he was so sweet, you know? He was like--he didn't care, guys. You know what I'm saying? So he wasn't that much of a perfectionist for his own--I don't have the right word for it, but he was more sacrificial in his time with people than he was compared for himself. Like he could've said, "No, I'm not ready" or "I need to take a bath in the sink" or whatever he needs to do... So I always thought that was a little thing that I liked about him, that he accommodated anybody that wanted to talk to him...

MJCast: Out of that meeting, they did little bits of work together. He did some amazing background vocals on one of her tracks called "It's Not Worth It".

DeVillar: Oh, that's sweet.

MJCast: So, nice job, thanks!

DeVillar: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah, yeah, she was a sweet person too. I really liked her.

MJCast: Some great stuff in her catalog too.

DeVillar: Oh, yeah. She was great.

MJCast: I think she did backing vocals on one of Michael's song, didn't she? On Invincible?... I think she's on "Unbreakable", I think.

DeVillar: Really? Oh, that's good to know. Oh, fantastic. I'd like to think I had a little something to do with that...

MJCast: So do you feel like you work more like Quincy, or more like Michael?

DeVillar: [Laughs] I work more like Michael! I do, 'cause nobody's Quincy. Quincy is like-- Quincy's got that thing where there's no process between his thought and finishing. Quincy knows what it's gonna be before Quincy even knows. His mind is made up before he records, so when Quincy records, it's just work, and then you finish. So it's already in his mind. With Michael--a lot of people would say, "Oh, it's Michael's vision". Michael's vision wasn't set, it was a vision that he followed. He followed vision, not a vision. You get what I'm saying? I mean, Michael--no one really knows how their stuff's gonna turn out. Except maybe Quincy... So that's what I was getting to with that. I mean, Quincy's such a musical, magical beast in that aspect of being--playing with Miles, and Ray Charles, and being able to score an orchestra. That kind of stuff, that kind of level. Bananas.

MJCast: I'd like to know what you think about how Michael Jackson should be remembered?

DeVillar: Just enjoy the songs, that is it. I mean, what else should there be? As over-simple as that may seem, and as disappointing that answer might be, really, I think Michael would say the same thing. So, I mean, if all you had were his songs, wouldn't that be enough? And then on the next level, we have his lyrics, and then the next level of that, if you add up everything he sings about, you can tell that there is a thing that he's into, and it's love, and it's just everybody being cool to each other... So I think, on that, I don't think he can help being remembered that way, so I think he's going to be fine. As far as people who think of him negatively, I think they'll fall by the wayside in time. I have famous friends and wealthy friends and things like that. When you start getting up to the point of the pyramid with your power, the people knocking you down--it just increases exponentially. So for the size of artist that Michael was, the size of the crap he gets is a ratio that's directly involved, and it's the same for everybody. The bigger, and more hardcore you get, just--the more you're gonna get that thing from--that negativity... I think Michael will survive all that--I think he already has. I don't think it's an issue. Just people tend to like sensationalistic news. And also, I'm really pissed off at the people who worked for him, that they go after him. I don't like the detractors. As a matter of fact, when I was working with him, I thought his entourage--like when I was working with him in '95 with Delana, his entourage was huge. Must've been seven people... I felt the entourage was a bigger problem. I felt some of the--when you hire all kinds of people you don't know, you're gonna get into some issues, so I think Michael got an unfair shake from people that he had to trust. Michael had trust issues, obviously, I mean, what could he do? He had to play games, and find out what people were all about. So I think maybe some of the lengths he had to go through to find trust got him in trouble possibly, I don't know. [Maybe] some of the people he hired weren't who they said they were, but he has to hire and fire quickly, so you get what you get. But I think Michael will be remembered for one thing, and that's the music.

MJCast: Throughout his career, if people would have just paid attention to the music, and not paid too much attention to his personal life, I think things would've went a lot better for him, as far as later on in life, so good answer.

DeVillar: Thank you. And he would say the same thing. I mean, he put all his effort into it. I mean, he made videos, and got invested in films and things like that, but Michael's medium was the song, so he would say that. He would say, "Just listen to my music. Don't listen to anything else. Just listen to the songs." Everything he's about is in there.

www.themjcast.com