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What You Should Know About the New Michael Jackson Documentary

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Singer Michael Jackson Performing on Stage at Madison Square Garden (Photo by Rick Maiman/Sygma via Getty Images) Getty

Disclaimer: this article is not intended as a review of *Leaving Neverland*, which I have not seen, but rather of the context behind the allegations in the documentary.

When Michael Jackson died in 2009, Wade Robson—the former choreographer whose allegations of abuse are at the center of a controversial new documentary, [Leaving Neverland](#)—wrote in [tribute to his friend](#):

"Michael Jackson changed the world and, more personally, my life forever. He is the reason I dance, the reason I make music, and one of the main reasons I believe in *the pure goodness of humankind*. He has been a close friend of mine for 20 years. His music, his movement, his personal words of inspiration and encouragement and his unconditional love will live inside of me forever. I will miss him immeasurably, but I know that he is now at peace and enchanting the heavens with a melody and a moonwalk."

Robson was twenty-seven years old at the time. Four years earlier, he [testified at Jackson's 2005 trial](#) (as an adult) that nothing sexual ever happened between them. Prior to the trial Robson hadn't seen Jackson for years and was under no obligation to be a witness for the defense. He faced a withering cross-examination, understanding the penalty of perjury for lying under oath. But Robson adamantly, confidently, and credibly asserted that [nothing sexual ever happened](#).

What changed [between then and now](#)? A few things:

In 2011, Robson approached John Branca, co-executor of the Michael Jackson Estate, about directing the new Michael Jackson/Cirque du Soleil production, *ONE*. Robson admitted he wanted the job "badly," but the Estate ultimately chose someone else for the position.

In 2012, Robson had a nervous breakdown, triggered, he said, by an obsessive quest for success. His career, in his own words, began to "crumble."

That same year, with Robson's career, finances, and marriage in peril, he began shopping a book that claimed he was sexually abused by Michael Jackson. No publisher picked it up.

In 2013, Robson filed a civil lawsuit and creditor's claim, which some sources claimed could be worth up to [\\$1.6 billion dollars](#). While the exact amount would not have been clear until after a trial, an enormous amount of money was at stake. Soon after, James Safechuck reached out to Robson's attorneys and filed his own lawsuit and creditor's claim. Safechuck claimed that he only realized he was abused after seeing Robson on TV. A probate court dismissed his claim in 2017.

In 2019, the Sundance Film Festival premiered a documentary based entirely on Robson and Safechuck's allegations. While the documentary is obviously emotionally disturbing given the content, it presents no new evidence or witnesses. The film's director, Dan Reed, acknowledged not wanting to interview other key figures because it might complicate or compromise the story he wanted to tell. Both Robson and Safechuck's lawsuits remain under appeal.

It is tempting for the media to tie Jackson into a larger cultural narrative about sexual misconduct. R. Kelly was rightfully taken down [by a documentary](#), and many other high-profile

figures have been exposed in recent years, so surely, the logic goes, Michael Jackson must be guilty as well. Yet that is a dangerous leap—particularly with America's history of unjustly targeting and convicting black men—that fair-minded people would be wise to consider more carefully before condemning the artist. It is no coincidence that one of Jackson's favorite books (and movies) was [To Kill a Mockingbird](#), a story about a black man—Tom Robinson—destroyed by false allegations.

The media's largely uncritical, de-contextualized takes out of Sundance seem to have forgotten: no allegations have been more publicly scrutinized than those against Michael Jackson. They elicited a two-year feeding frenzy in the mid-90s and then again in the mid-2000s, when Jackson faced an exhaustive criminal trial. His homes were ransacked in two unannounced raids by law enforcement. Nothing incriminating was found. Jackson was acquitted of all charges in 2005 by a conservative Santa Maria jury. The FBI, likewise, conducted a thorough investigation. Its [300-page file](#) on the pop star, released under the Freedom of Information Act, found no evidence of wrongdoing.

Meanwhile, dozens of individuals who spent time with Jackson as kids continue to assert nothing sexual ever happened. This includes hundreds of sick and terminally ill children such as [Bela Farkas](#) (for whom Jackson paid for a life-saving liver transplant) and [Ryan White](#) (whom Jackson befriended and supported in his final years battling AIDS); it includes lesser-known figures like [Brett Barnes](#) and [Frank Cascio](#); it includes celebrities like [Macaulay Culkin](#), Sean Lennon, Emmanuel Lewis, Alfonso Ribeiro, and Corey Feldman; it includes Jackson's nieces and [nephews](#); and it includes his [own three children](#).

The allegations surrounding Jackson largely faded over the past decade for a reason: unlike the Bill Cosby or R. Kelly cases, the more people looked into the Jackson allegations, the more the evidence vindicated him. The prosecution's case in 2005 was so problematic *Rolling Stone's* Matt Taibbi [described it like this](#):

"Ostensibly a story about bringing a child molester to justice, the Michael Jackson trial would instead be a kind of homecoming parade of insipid American types: grifters, suckers and no-talent schemers, mired in either outright unemployment... or the bogus non-careers of the information age, looking to cash in any way they can. The MC of the proceedings was District Attorney Tom Sneddon, whose metaphorical role in this American reality show was to represent the mean gray heart of the Nixonian Silent Majority – the bitter mediocrity itching to stick it to anyone who'd ever taken a vacation to Paris. The first month or so of the trial featured perhaps the most compromised collection of prosecution witnesses ever assembled in an American criminal case – almost to a man a group of convicted liars, paid gossip hawkers or worse..."

In the next six weeks, virtually every piece of his case imploded in open court, and the chief drama of the trial quickly turned into a race to see if the DA could manage to put all of his

witnesses on the stand without getting any of them removed from the courthouse in manacles.

What's changed since then?

In Robson's case, decades after the alleged incidents took place, he was barbecuing with Michael Jackson and his children. He was [asking for tickets](#) to the artist's memorial. He was participating in [tributes](#). "I still have my mobile phone with his number in it," [Robson wrote in 2009](#), "I just can't bear the thought of deleting his messages."

Then, suddenly, after twenty years, [his story changed](#) and with his new claims came a massive lawsuit.



In this Jan. 25, 2019, file photo Brenda Jenkyns, left, and Catherine Van Tighem who drove from Calgary, Canada stand with signs outside of the premiere of the "Leaving Neverland" Michael Jackson documentary film at the Egyptian Theatre on Main Street during the 2019 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Michael Jackson's family members said Monday, Jan. 28, that they are "furious" that two men who accuse him of sexually abusing them as boys have received renewed attention because of a new documentary about them. The family released a statement denouncing "Leaving Neverland," a documentary film featuring Jackson accusers Wade Robson and James Safechuck. (Photo by Danny Moloshok/Invision/AP, File) Danny Moloshok/Invision/AP

As an eccentric, wealthy, African American man, Michael Jackson has always been a target for litigation. During the 1980s and 1990s, dozens of women falsely claimed he was the father of their children. He faced multiple lawsuits falsely claiming he plagiarized various songs. As recently as 2010, a woman named Billie Jean filed a frivolous \$600 million paternity lawsuit against Jackson's Estate.

As someone who has done an enormous amount of research on the artist, interviewed many people who were close to him, and been granted access to a lot of private information, my assessment is that the evidence simply does not point to Michael Jackson's guilt. In contrast to Robson and Safechuck's revised accounts, there is a remarkable consistency to the way people who knew the artist speak of him—whether friends, family members, collaborators, fellow artists, recording engineers, attorneys, business associates, security guards, former spouses, his own children—people who knew him in every capacity imaginable. Michael, they say, was gentle, brilliant, sensitive, sometimes naive, sometimes childish, sometimes oblivious to perceptions. But none believe he was a child molester.

Update:

I want to make clear that I am deeply sympathetic to victims of sexual abuse. I also believe deeply in the principle of due process, particularly, given America's history, for people of color. This article was intended to offer some context regarding the allegations against Michael Jackson. However, since I was not there, I ultimately cannot speak to Wade Robson and James Safechuck's experiences. It is my sincere hope for all involved that the truth will prevail and all who have been hurt will find healing.

Update 2:

This article has been updated to clarify that while Robson and Safechuck share the same law firm, their claims against the Michael Jackson Estate were filed separately. It also clarifies that the exact monetary compensation of their lawsuits/creditor's claims would not be known until after a civil trial.