



From the Vault #5: Michael Jackson rewrites “Billie Jean” for Pepsi’s new generation

Description



Over the two last weekâ??s of From the Vault weâ??ve looked at celebrity cameos in TV spots, so this week we thought weâ??d bring you the mother of celebrity endorsements. Pepsi has always been in the shadow of Coca Cola, but in 1984 it struck a massive blow recruiting Michael Jackson in his prime to appear in their â??Pepsi Generationâ?? campaign. As if that wasnâ??t big enough they were also able to get Jackson to rerecord and perform a variation of the hit â??Billie Jeanâ?? replacing the original lyrics with those relating to the soft drink.

The ad begins with the distinctive, straight 4/4 beat that ushers in the aforementioned track, set against a classic downtown New York City street. The ad follows Jackson and his brothers leaving a convenience store only to be met on the street by a group of young kids, who resemble their older counterparts down to the sequined gloves and red leather jackets. As the ad continues the two groups dance their way down the street pulling their best shapes at one another. Using the distinctive melody of “Billie Jean”, the lyrics are altered with Michael singing “you’re a whole new generation”, “you’re the pepsi generation”.

The spot is an incredible snapshot of that particular epoch and would rouse the nostalgia of anyone growing up as a kid through the early 80’s. From a licensing point of view it’s an incredible achievement and shows what can be done if you basically have an unlimited budget (the endorsement spanned a decade and broke the record for celebrity endorsements coming in at \$5 million USD). What made it even more impressive was creative input of Jackson who suggested using “Billie Jean” as the jingle and rewrote the chorus to “You’re the Pepsi generation/Guzzle down and taste the thrill of the day/And feel the Pepsi way”.

The song, (which at the time was a well established hit), was then strongly associated to the product and suddenly all Michael Jackson fans (there were quite a few of them) became Pepsi drinkers. To demonstrate the success of the campaign, IN 1984 Pepsi had sales of \$7.7 billion and an increase in market share while Coca-Cola’s dropped. You can imagine that after the ad campaign there would have been more than a few people confusing the lyrics, not able to remember which were from the original and which were from the spot.