

Andrew Lloyd Webber: 'Michael loved the tortured Phantom and wanted to play him'

The first person to call me to say Michael Jackson had died was my 17-year-old son. I had an awful feeling that one should almost have seen it coming. After the sadness came the disappointment that I was never going to see him again.

I first met Michael when he came to see *Phantom of the Opera* in New York when we'd just opened in 1988. He was clearly interested in the piece. He saw it several times and used to come backstage, often without the entourage that followed him around in later life.

The story got to him. I think he had a connection with the lonely, tortured musician. He found the idea of somebody working through music and having a girl as a muse very intriguing – and he loved that there was illusion in the show.

Michael became interested in playing The Phantom himself, in a movie version of the show. We talked about it a lot, but we'd only just opened and, at the time, I felt that it

was too early for it to become a film. I felt his interest in *Phantom* was because he was interested in doing something theatrical himself.

He was a highly theatrical animal. I remember him saying to me that he'd seen *Cats* and how happy he was that dance was making a comeback in the theatre. He certainly talked about theatre a lot, and when he was last in London, he went to see *Oliver!* Of course, he was a great showman himself, but he found the whole



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stagecraft of musicals extraordinary.

Seeing clips of *Thriller* on the news this week reminded me what an extraordinary dancer he was. He really brought dance and staging into the pop world, through his videos and concerts. Nobody before him had really done anything much like that. He was ahead of his time with all that he did.

I saw him a couple of times in concert. *Thriller* was probably the best stage event I've ever seen. From my musical-theatre perspective, I could see that he was bringing a completely new vision about dance to the stage. A tremendous amount of what he was doing then you see in musicals now.

Musically, Michael was also different to anyone before him. He was clever at taking pop hooks and using them in original ways, developing them theatrically. It's an influence that is now everywhere today. I remember listening to a Justin Timberlake album and hearing Michael's influence.

Young people still keep coming to his music because

so many of his songs are classics. In the history of pop, *Thriller* will possibly stand out more than *Sergeant Pepper* because there were even more stand-alone hits on it. It's right up there with the all-time great albums.

Similarly, I would absolutely put him up there with the all-time greatest performers. I've seen most of the top rock acts – I saw Elvis several times – but with Michael's concerts, his showmanship was consummate. Very few rock singers have such quality.

Everybody was so looking forward to seeing what he would do when he came back to London. From what I was hearing, he was going to push the boundaries of what we'd seen in a rock arena much, much further.

The debts, all the court cases, and the trouble he got himself into, it was all so sad. But you can probably say already that his music has transcended all of that. Nothing sticks to him. In the end, the music will always survive.