ed against Michael. He felt the weight of the Jackson 5's survival on his shoulders. But even after he left the Jacksons to further his own career, the need to do better than anyone else on earth stayed with him.

You can't say he hasn't done it. Look at the competition: Prince, whose outlandish, inspired creativity rather than his record sales keep him in the biggest of the big league; Madonna, whose major recording career is kept in perspective by her insistence on pursuing a dreary film star dream; Beyond these there's only Elvis and a few other dead guys. Michael Jackson is the biggest and best, to everyone but himself.

But for every declaration of admiration in the media for Michael, there must be at least ten denunciations of Whacko Jacko. The man who wants plastic surgery to look more like Princess Diana. The man who is being blackmailed by someone who took a photograph of him dancing with the Elephant Man's skeleton. The man who sleeps in an oxygen tank in the hope of staying alive for a century and a half...

The most interesting thing about Michael Jackson's celebrity is, let's face it, not his music but his outright strangeness—even if you ignore the rumours, his non-conformist dress, visage and crotch-grabbing antics are hard to deny. Yet Middle America tolerates Michael presumably because nothing succeeds, or in this case, neutralises like success—that is, money. White America, on the other hand, might not be too sure what effect Michael has on black America. On the Entertainment Tonight report the day after the video for Black or White was first aired only black parents were interviewed about the effect they thought Michael's window-smashing pseudo-masturbatory actions would have on their children.

It could be assumed that one reason Michael can 'get away with it' is that he never formally acknowledges that he is at all odd: his shy and reserved nature (he never gives interviews) pulls him back from fuelling the fire of his own notoriety. Yet in fact Michael does fuel the fire, constantly, by playing on his own public persona in song titles. Speculation on his relationship with 'mother, lover' Diana Ross led to Dirty Diana. The accusations that Michael, not content with a caucasian nose, was bleaching his skin to appear less of a negro surfaced in Black or White. In the Closet, Man in the Mirror and even his current album's title, Dangerous, can hardly be seen as anything other than self-referential.

It's possible that Michael Jackson is laughing at all of us even as he desperately tries to curry our favour. Perhaps the man-boy—also a very shrewd businessman, don't forget—is less of an innocent than he appears. Maybe all that stuff about believing that ET is a real person and that we can fly if we learn the right way to control our minds is just a hoax. Maybe Michael, like his hero, the imageering Walt Disney, has us all sussed out.

Either way, I desperately hope that rumours Michael will be toning down his act for the sake of sales aren't true. I want to believe he really does dance with the Elephant Man's skeleton. Because as long as he remains so unbelievably whacko, there's hope for dedicated nonconformists, freeform freakouts who refuse to come to the party and shy retiring types everywhere.

DAVID NICHOLS recently put the finishing touches to the Hit Songwords Special Edition.