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DISTR **A**CTION

J C K S O N

BY MATT KALKHOFF

Janet Jackson believes George W. Bush used "Nipplegate" to keep the nation from focusing on his job performance. Guess who she's voting for come November?

HERS WAS THE BREAST THAT LAUNCHED 500,000 COMPLAINTS. On Feb. 4, 2004, at the climax of the Super Bowl halftime show, former boy-band heartthrob Justin Timberlake grabbed a panel of Janet Jackson's black bustier, gave it a hard tug, and exposed her right boob to a TV audience of 90 million. Almost immediately, angry calls to the CBS switchboard began pouring in, half a million strong. The next morning, pundits and politicians, seizing an opportunity for moral outrage, began calling for an investigation. The FCC threatened the network and 20 of its affiliates with a \$550,000 fine—and began coming after TV and radio stations that it felt were crossing the line of decency. Even First Lady Laura Bush weighed in on the brouhaha, calling the incident "unfortunate" in a CNN interview. Broadcasters clamped down on nudity, profanity and sexuality—fearing they'd join the Eye network, Howard Stern and other targets the FCC had in its sights. NBC even pulled a shot of an old woman's breast from an episode of *ER*.

And Miss Jackson? Well, she had a new disc, *Damita Jo*, slated for March 30 release, so not unexpectedly, she hit the promotional circuit and released a video statement where she explained that her wardrobe malfunction was completely accidental and apologized to any viewers who were offended.

For the first time in her two-decade career, the 38-year-old Jackson was playing the role of contrite pop star.

What she didn't realize at the time, Jackson now says, was that she was also playing a second role—that of decoy, a woman whose momentary nudity was used to distract a nation from the record of an election-year president whose approval ratings had begun to slip in the wake of an increasingly unpopular war and a sputtering economy. Indeed, the Bush camp and the FCC may not have found WMDs in Iraq, but they found a WM-double-D inside Houston's Reliant Stadium, and they worked overtime to keep the scandal alive, Jackson claims.

"I truly feel in my heart that the president wanted to take the focus off of himself at that time," Jackson says. "And I was the perfect vehicle to do so at that moment. They really took it overboard, calling it 'Nipplegate' and all that. I mean, it's a bunch of bullshit. When you see *Fahrenheit 9/11*, it just confirms it."

In Jackson's mind, the outrage over her bared breast was the worst kind of hypocrisy. "I think it's all stupid. I think it's all dumb, it's all so contradictory," she says, especially in an era where commercials for beer and Viagra are both "very sexual" and practically omnipresent. (An FCC spokesperson declined comment for this story.)

What's more, Jackson now says she's *not* sorry for the Super Bowl incident. "You don't apologize for an accident," the singer

"Do I vote? Yes, I do. Will I be voting for Bush? Hell, no!"

says. "It just makes you look guilty. I wish I wouldn't have apologized, but you know what? It is what it is."

Jackson's comments may prompt howls of disbelief and outrage among socially conservative backers of the Bush-Cheney ticket, but at least one media observer, *Village Voice* gossip scribe Michael Musto, thinks she's on to something. "Janet became a symbolic Joan of Arc to burn at the stake," Musto says. "I actually do think her breast was used as a diversionary tactic—I'm not sure to distract from Iraq specifically—but it did distract from important issues, from things we actually *should* be appalled by. The story got an undue amount of attention when the fact is, nobody has proved how her breast harmed anyone."

But public relations guru Howard Rubenstein, who has helped

a wide range of clients including Kathie Lee Gifford, Lizzie Grubman and Mike Tyson cope with scandal, says Jackson should stick to music, and stay out of politics. "To try to spin the reaction—the sense of outrage [over Nipplegate]—by the general public, in the media, and suggest it was somehow fueled by the Bush administration, it stretches way beyond what any publicist would think to dream up," he says.

On the other hand, Musto says that unlike the legions of scandalized NFL-watchers who complained to CBS about the ta-ta-tastic telecast, he found the whole spectacle delightful. "It was the first time I'd ever seen a breast," Musto says with a chuckle. "I'd like to see the other one!"

While Jackson's left breast is likely to stay undercover for now, the artist is no longer afraid to expose her left *side*—at least in terms of this year's presidential election. Asked if she's at all a political person, Jackson replies: "To a certain degree, yeah. Do I vote? Yes, I do. Will I be voting for Bush? Hell, no!" Then she bursts into a hearty laugh.

One thing Jackson definitely didn't find amusing, though, was the fallout she suffered at the hands of her colleagues in the entertainment community in the weeks following the Super Bowl.

For starters, says Jackson, she was stunned to find that she wouldn't be allowed to introduce a tribute to longtime friend Luther Vandross at last February's Grammy Awards. "I was uninvited by NARAS [National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences]—point blank," Jackson recalls. "I thought I was still doing the show right up until I got the call. How could they uninvite me, when Justin [Timberlake] was still allowed to present and perform? It was extremely unfair."

To add insult to injury, a few weeks later, she got dumped from the starring role in an ABC biopic about Lena Horne—by Horne herself, who was reportedly incensed by the Super Bowl shenanigans. "I just wish she would have taken a little more time to think about it," Jackson says. "I'm sure she faced adversity in her career at some point as well."

While Jackson bounced back on the acting front with well-received turns on *Saturday Night Live* in April and *Will & Grace* in September, her album sales have not been as resilient. After its first 19 weeks on the *Billboard* charts, *Damita Jo* has sold only 919,000 copies, compared to 2.2 million for *All For You* and 1.4 million of *The Velvet Rope* in the same time period; and her new work has received tepid response at radio.

"A lot of people objected to what Janet did," says PR guru Rubenstein, and more importantly, he adds, *where* she did it—in the middle of what is arguably the nation's most popular sporting event, one that typically draws entire families (including children) to the boob tube. "The way a lot of people protested was to not buy her record," Rubenstein suggests.

But Geoff Mayfield, Director of Charts at *Billboard*, argues that Nipplegate wasn't the problem. "*Damita Jo* just doesn't connect the way previous Janet Jackson albums have. After all, there are people who have been accused of far worse things than what happened with her at the Super Bowl, who have gone on to enjoy tremendous radio play," he says. "R. Kelly, for one, has had at least two really significant releases since his scandal. [The soul singer has been accused of having had sex with a minor, and videotaping the act.] The fact is radio wasn't saying no to Janet Jackson; it was saying no to this material."

Either way, Jackson takes the album's sales figures in stride. "Of course, everyone wants to sell records and be number one," she concedes. "And I think that's important. But for a lot of artists today, it's all about the money as opposed to the art. What happened to artists creating this wonderful body of music that touches people and changes their lives?"

OH MY GOD, CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT I SAW ON THE TV THIS EVENING
Janet experienced her "wardrobe malfunction" in front of Timberlake and 90 million viewers.



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Certainly, if there's any group that can vouch for Jackson's musical output over the last two decades—from *Control* and *Rhythm Nation* right through to "All Nite (Don't Stop)," it's her gay fan base. And the diva showed her gratitude this past June with a surprise performance of the latter track, plus a new version of "Together Again," during New York City's Gay Pride festivities.

Jackson says she's been aware of her queer following for as long as she can remember, but it was with the 1997 release of *The Velvet Rope*, that she began directly reaching out to us. "I've never been afraid to talk about homosexuality in my music with songs like 'Free Xone' and [a cover of Rod Stewart's] 'Tonight's The Night,'" says Jackson. "Even the record company tried to talk me out of [the latter] because it's directed toward a girl. But I love the song the way it is. And it's reality for a lot of people."

Still, controversy erupted in the gay community after Jackson recorded the duet "Feel It Boy" in 2002 with Jamaican dancehall artist Beenie Man, a Virgin Records labelmate whose early work advocated the killing of gays—something for which he only recently offered a tepid apology under mounting pressure.

Jackson, for her part, says she never knew Beenie Man was homophobic. "To be completely honest with you, I did not know that [about him]," she insists. "This is my first time hearing that. Truly, if I would have known that, I would not have worked with him. It's shocking to me—we're on the same label, so I

should have known. But at the same time, I wish someone from the company would have told me, knowing how supportive you guys have been to me and how I feel about the gay community."

Jackson is far more supportive of another embattled figure in her life, brother Michael. While she won't get into specifics, she will say this much about his recent legal problems: "I support him not just because he's my brother, but because he's innocent. That will be proven."

And as a wild and controversy-filled year comes to a close, there's one other man Jackson is talking about, her boyfriend, R&B producer Jermaine Dupri.

"They all start out great," says the twice-married singer of romantic relationships, "But to stay happy in it? This is the first time. Honestly, I've gone through a lot in my life. And I think a lot of people find that really hard to believe. They feel like I grew up with a silver spoon in my mouth, so what worries could I possibly have in the world? You know, it's not about that. It's not about the money that you have or how wealthy your family is. Pain is pain. You still have your issues, and this is the first time I've ever been truly happy in a relationship."

"Good or bad, everything happens for a reason, and I believe it all has made me the person who I am today. And I really like this person," Jackson adds. "I wouldn't do it any differently."

And we wouldn't have it any other way. **G**

CONTRIBUTORS



MICHAEL T. LUONGO

Writer, "Toppling Walls in Kandahar," p. 64

While he's visited more than 75 countries, Michael T. Luongo says he prefers off-the-beaten-path destinations that challenge the definition of being gay. The series editor for Haworth's new *Out in the World* gay travel literature program and editor of *Between the Palms*, a gay travel erotica collection, is currently writing a book titled *Men with Guns and Smiles* (a look he models, left) based on his Afghanistan trips. Check out more of his essays and photography at www.michaelluongo.com.

STEPHEN CIUCCOLI

Photographer, "Aero Dynamic," "Oh, Porter..." and "Le Sport Sacs," pp. 37-40

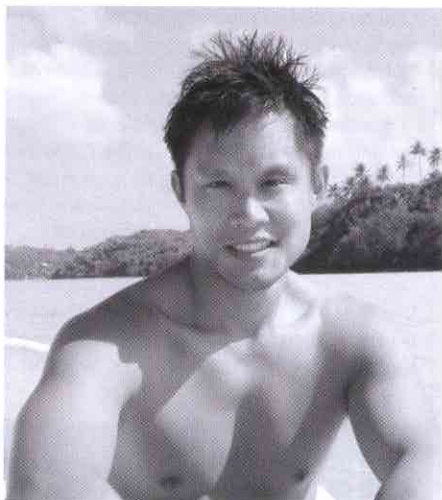
Stephen Ciuccoli specializes in still-life photography, but he's no passive observer. "I like to get right in there and design the shot," explains Ciuccoli, who lives in the middle of the woods in western Connecticut and admits to getting excited every time he gets to an airport. At press time, he was packing his very own designer luggage for Key West.



STAN WU

Writer, "African Queen," p. 88

Stan Wu's many adventures in travel journalism have included seeing a homoerotic fashion show at a Turkish leather factory, dancing the male-male tango in Buenos Aires, and cruising on one of the last ships to ply the waters of China's Yangtze River. Still, the wanderlust editor of westhollywood.com says his recent trip to Cape Town ranks as one of his most memorable, thanks to the "inclusive spirit and infectious optimism of the culturally diverse people."



MATT KALKHOFF

Writer, "Distraction Jackson," p. 48

Music lover Matt Kalkhoff has interviewed many of the industry's hottest DJs, producers and artists, including Victor Calderone, Paul Oakenfold, Junior Vasquez, Peter Rauhofer, Kristine W, Paul van Dyk, Jonathan Peters, Razor 'n' Guido and Ultra Naté. Kalkhoff, whose work has appeared in *Billboard* and *DMA*, and on gaywired.com, also writes a monthly nightlife column for the *New York Blade* and contributes regularly to New York's *Next*.

