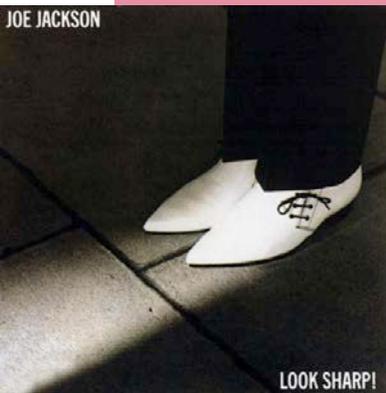


JOE JACKSON



Joe Jackson

"Happy Loving
Couples"

Look Sharp!

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A&M

On "Happy Loving Couples" by Joe Jackson

Steve Goldberg

I was a Junior in college before I had my first real girlfriend.

I probably don't have to add that this extended delay was not by design.

In high school, I'd never fit the physical mold that most teenage girls were attracted to; I was short, wore a mullet, had no fashion sense and my raging hormones never diminished the belief that girls would never be interested in a boy like me. I was shy, lacked confidence and knew I could never assume the cocky poses the seemingly successful guys at school took.

But I seemed to have a natural gift for becoming friends with girls. I was smart, I apparently could be funny and witty (though not flirty) and this led to several platonic study sessions and friendships.

By mid-senior year of high school, thanks to the influence of one of these girl "friends", I finally discovered new wave and punk rock, cut my hair short, shaved the sad worm on my upper lip, and started wearing 501s, Ramones t-shirts and Doc Martens. But my reputation as a sexless "nice guy" had already been defined, and no amount of outward disguise would change that. "Sixteen Candles," the classic John Hughes teen comedy, had just hit the theaters and I identified with Jon Cryer's "Duckie" so much, the crush of doppelgangerdom pounded in my chest. That Duckie eventually found a nerdy girl to pair off with at the very end of the film did nothing to assuage the feeling that I'd never be seen by girls through rosy, romantic glasses.

I had been caught in the sticky-trap label of girls' best friend. Always ready, at all hours, to listen to Amy or Shelly or Cindy complain to me over the phone about how Adam or David or Brad was such an ass, how their boyfriends seemed only to want sex, and never listened to them.

"I wish they were more like you, Steve," Amy Nelson would whisper to me, late at night over the phone, as I imagined her lithe body draped in a skimpy silk nightgown sitting up in bed. "Sensitive, in touch with their feelings. In touch with my feelings."

I knew she didn't really mean it. I knew I was only the equivalent of one of her girlfriends, but with the added bonus of giving her the guy perspective. "I know Brad really likes you Amy," I'd say, putting all my misplaced energy into keeping the Brad/Amy relationship alive and strong. "He's told me so. He's just not so good with words."

I was like Cyrano de Bergerac, writing love notes for the word-challenged dolt, when all along he'd actually felt the words he'd written for his friend. Living vicariously was better than not living at all, right?

"Steve, you're gonna find the perfect girl someday," Amy would say whenever the subject ever switched back to me, which was rare. "You're one of the good guys." And as she said this, I was not comforted in the slightest.

As I felt the possibility that any of the girls I had crushes on might like me “that way” slipping further and further, a tiny part of me felt grateful that I had such front-row insight into what girls wanted and liked.

I had one other thing in my favor. I liked to dance. I never went to Junior or Senior prom, but I did attend dances that were organized through my Jewish youth group, for which I happened to be president. We’d hold fundraising dances for other Jewish teens in the wider Los Angeles area and often a couple hundred kids would attend. It was a blast, and I often got to create the playlist for the DJ at the dances, where I would suggest my favorite danceable records, like New Order’s “Blue Monday,” Billy Idol’s “Dancing with Myself,” and Joe Jackson’s “Steppin’ Out.”

Most teenage boys, or at least the ones I knew, considered dancing with girls a necessary evil, which would hopefully lead to subsequent makeout sessions. They would move their limbs around a little, do the white-man’s overbite, go through the motions, while hoping they wouldn’t be expected to dance to more than one or two songs at best.

Since most of the songs I’d chosen were fast-paced, having a partner to dance with wasn’t necessary. I’d just join the masses on the floor, feel the music seep into my skin and bones and muscles and ligaments, and let biology take its course. All the self-consciousness and doubt that consumed me throughout most of my waking hours was gone; I had the music in me and I didn’t hold back. I’d sink, “down, down, down” as Fred Schneider ordered in “Rock Lobster,” rising back up as the song’s iconic guitar line chimed back in. I’d spin on my toe in a perfect, tight circle, as Berlin’s “Metro” filled the dance hall.

Girls would come dance with me, happy to see a guy that seemed to actually want to be dancing. Often the ratio of girls to boys on the dancefloor would be 10 to 1; I’d take advantage of this imbalance by spreading myself around, giving each girl a few seconds of my attention before flitting off to the next. It was Just Like Heaven.

But at the end of the night, the magic would wear off and I’d be heading home by myself, sweaty and awkward, wondering if I just needed to come to accept the fact that I would be alone, forever.

Luckily, there was music to get me through these hormonally challenging times. I could always find a song that resonated with me for every emotional situation. Loneliness. Heartbreak. Anger. Confusion. But there was only one song that spoke to the boy who seemed to never have a girlfriend, who struggled to find his footing while watching all his friends pairing up.

Whenever I would feel especially depressed about my solo status, I would turn to one album — Joe Jackson’s “Look Sharp” — and one song in particular: “Happy Loving Couples.”

The song starts off with a loose upbeat reggae groove —bass, snare and sharp guitar— before Joe darts in with:

*I've just been to see my best friend/
he's found another girl/
says she's just about the best thing/
in the whole damn world*

And in the next verse, one that still resonates with me today:

*And he says can't you see what the little lady's done for me/
says it like he thinks I'm blind/
but the things that you see ain't necessarily the things you can find*

Joe's narrator doesn't let the "poor me" tag stick. He doesn't mope around feeling sorry for himself. He responds to his friend, and later his pressuring mother, and finally society as a whole, with a confident chorus:

*But those happy loving couples make it look so easy/
Happy loving couples always talk so kind/
'Til the time that I can't do my dancing with a partner/
Those happy couples ain't no friends of mine*

The song resonated for me initially as a virginal, nervous teenager, but it's expanded its musical-emotional influence over me to include pretty much any time I've ever been single and feeling lonely. Annoying, happy loving couples exist in the lives of the uncoupled through all stages of adulthood.

Even though I did eventually (phew!) meet a girl who liked me "that way" when I moved from southern California to go to college at UC Santa Cruz, I would go on to have many periods of singledom throughout the following decades (until meeting my wife at age 37, she, my editor for this piece, reminds). And without exception, I would always turn to the smart and prophetic wisdom of Mr. Joe Jackson to help me deal with these often lonely times with humor and self-acceptance.

*Want to be, want to really be/
What my friends pretend to be/
Be it in my own good time/
Being kind to myself/
'Til I become one of two of a kind*