On November 7, 1989, Queen Latifah released her groundbreaking debut album “All Hail the Queen” at just 19 years old. While this was Latifah’s first real release, it was far from her first rodeo. The Newark, New Jersey, native (born Dana Owens) was a natural-born performer, skilled at singing, rapping, and acting. At just eight years old, her cousin crowned her with the stage name “Latifah,” translating to “gentle” in Arabic. Who would’ve known that she would completely flip the meaning of her stage name just ten years later, when she first entered the rap scene as the majestically tough emcee known as Queen Latifah? While Latifah cut her teeth in high school musicals like “The Wiz,” her earliest rap beginnings started with beatboxing in a group called Ladies Fresh. That didn’t last very long, as Latifah was destined to lay her words upon the mic. She linked with local collective Flavor Unit, a combined posse of emcees and producers, with DJ Mark the 45 King at the helm. With the help of Flavor Unit, she cut her demo of “Princess of the Possee,” a punchy track that showcased a star clearly on the rise. Produced by DJ Mark the 45 King, the song made its rounds, ultimately reaching the ears of Tommy Boy Records employee Dante Ross who urged that Latifah be signed to the growing Hip-Hop record label. In 1988, “Princess of the Possee” was on a double release alongside the single “Wrath of My Madness,” and a year later “All Hail the Queen” arrived.

…and the rest, as they say, is history.

But that’s just the truncated version of the story and all of the moves that Queen Latifah had been making during what many regard as Hip-Hop’s Golden Age. If you ask any seasoned Hip-Hop head, they will point to 1988-1989 as the true genesis of that magical era that would span well into the ‘90s. Hip-Hop was in an experimental state during that time. Then 15 years old, the commercialization of the art form came to fruition around 1984, so by the start of this Golden Age, artists were just getting into their groove of melding the mainstream world with the original purity of the culture. For Latifah, her notoriety was spanning the globe—a feat for any emcee let alone a woman. By the time “All Hail the Queen” was ready to drop, it came with loads of sounds that many had never combined before. It was arguably the blueprint to which other rap
artists would follow when searching for the Gold Standard of how to seamlessly blend genres while remaining true to Hip-Hop’s tenets.

There were a few factors at play when Latifah was piecing together “All Hail the Queen” that dramatically set it apart from her peers. For one, Latifah had made a sojourn to London for a mini-tour prior to recording her album. It was where she first met London native turned New Yorker Monie Love, as the two decided then and there that one day they would collaborate. But to have that international viewpoint proved priceless for Latifah. There in the UK, she witnessed a whole other burgeoning scene, fueled by Dance music combined with an infatuation with Hip-Hop coming from the Bronx. It gave Latifah a different kind of perspective, one that we hear on tracks like “Come Into My House,” featuring British group Quasar. The song ushers in a dancey, House music vibe, as Latifah still rides the beat with precision. That’s not to say that Latifah was inspired by one particular geotag; it was, in fact, the opposite. She understood before most that rap was not created through one singular wire and that the power truly existed in finding ways to switch it up, just as the listener reached their comfort level. We hear that further on the project with a song like “The Pros,” where she blends Reggae and Dancehall and slides her bars right in between.

She flips the entire script again on “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children.” Flanked by De La Soul, Latifah leans into another faction of that era known as the D.A.I.S.Y. Age, with “D.A.I.S.Y.” short for “Da Inner Sound, Y’all.” This age is most associated with jazzier production and empowering, positive, Afrocentric lyrics, as Latifah was a part of another crew called Native Tongues who were known as the torchbearers of that D.A.I.S.Y. style. By this point, Monie Love moved stateside and was the other female counterpart in Native Tongues. The two delivered on their initial promise in London, releasing the legendary feminist anthem “Ladies First.” Here was a song that not only gave the world a glimpse of what women could do behind the mic, it commanded the attention and respect of the world.

Horns are omnipresent on “All Hail the Queen,” punctuating tracks from the opener “Dance for Me,” all the way to deeper album cuts like “A King and Queen Creation” and its fellow regal follow-up “Queen of Royal Badness.” There are also moments where Latifah is straight spitting bars of fire—evidenced on songs like “Latifah’s Law” and “Evil That Men Do,” both serving as a stark reminder that she may play around with sounds, but Queen Latifah doesn’t play on the mic.

To say “All Hail the Queen” was one of the most well-rounded releases of its era would be a drastic understatement. Before leaving her teenage years, Queen Latifah devised an artistic formula on this debut that became her handshake throughout her entire career. It’s one of power, potential, and potency, with unbridled experimentation mixed in. It was a bold move, as most artists committed to one style per project, with rare deviation. Not Queen Latifah. She took in her influences, brought boundless ambition and crafted an archetypal masterpiece that few in Hip-Hop have ever touched by comparison. She understood the assignment and harnessed the powers of Jazz, House, Pop, and of course Hip-Hop together to change the game when others were just learning how to play it, thereby being crowned as the originator and innovator of risk-taking in rap.

Ladies first, indeed.
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