

“The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill”--Lauryn Hill (1998)

Added to the National Registry: 2018

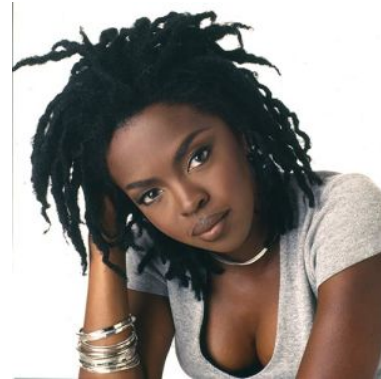
Essay by Paula Mejia (guest post)*



Original album cover



Original label



Lauryn Hill

When Lauryn Hill released her solo debut album “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill” on August 25, 1998, both fans and critics were taken aback. That was intentional. “It’s supposed to throw people off,” the vocalist and MC explained on the heels of its release. “It’s not anything that my teachers should take offense to, because it’s not really about me being miseducated. It’s more about me finding myself.”

While writing “Miseducation,” Hill reckoned with heartbreak, the public dissolution of her group, the Fugees, and ruminated on life as a new mother. She distilled those struggle into a gripping collection of songs, and it was through her tenacity and this landmark statement that a generation also found themselves. “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill” broke the record for best-selling debut week for a female artist within a week, garnered ten Grammy nominations (five of which she took home), and propelled Hill to international superstardom. It’s Hill’s only solo record, to date. And with it, she provided a seismic social and psychic shift in hip-hop.

Hill already commanded a central presence on the world stage in the 1990s, along with Wyclef Jean and Pras Michel, as a founding member of the hip-hop trio The Fugees. The group’s multi-platinum album, “The Score,” is a high watermark of hip-hop that both helped shape this era and transcended it. On it, Hill outshone her peers, showing the world that she was capable, at the turn of a phrase, of both spitting fierce rhymes and singing with devastating soul. Independently of one another, her dual talents are astonishing. Together, they are the makings of genius.

The Fugees unraveled in 1997, and Hill, who had aspirations to set out on her own, took the opportunity to do just that. The idea was to write songs, as she told “Rolling Stone,” that “lyrically move me and have the integrity of reggae and the knock of hip-hop and the instrumentation of classic soul.” In her native New Jersey, Hill put together a group of musical creatives, including a programmer named Vada Nobles; a pianist, Tejumold Newton; the guitarist Johari Newton; and Kilo Rasheem Pugh, who helped her write hooks and lyrics. She dubbed them New Ark. The album also featured the vocals and musical flourishes of other

luminaries, including Mary J. Blige, Carlos Santana, D'Angelo, and John Legend, who was still in college at the time.

What's remarkable about "Miseducation" is that Hill fluidly melds reggae and hip-hop, along with R&B and neo-soul, while deftly moving through lyrics that were cutting and compassionate all the same. On the unstoppable "Final Hour," for instance, she breaks down exactly why it is that she's one of the finest wordsmiths of her generation: "I treat this like my thesis / Well-written topic, broken down into pieces / I introduce then produce / Words so profuse it's abuse how I juice up this beat," she raps, showing us a glimpse into her process. On the smash hit "Doo Wop (That Thing)" (at the time, the first debut song in history to chart at #1 on the Billboard charts), she delivers measured, clever warnings to both men and women of what the opposite sexes are capable of doing in pursuit of *that thing*.

"Miseducation" is very much informed by reggae, too—not least because much of it was recorded at Bob Marley's Tuff Gong Studios in Kingston, Jamaica. The album also features guest vocalists from dancehall artists such as Shelley Thunder, nods to formative records such as Sister Nancy's "Bam Bam" (which Hill samples on "Lost Ones") and is sprinkled with patois, too. At the time, Hill was pregnant—Rohan Marley, Bob's son, was the father. While dealing with the pressures of fame and the Fugees fallout, she faced dissenters who told her to abort her child, an experience she immortalizes on the joyous "To Zion," which is named after her son: "But everybody told me to be smart / Look at your career they said / Lauryn, baby use your head / But instead I chose to use my heart," she sings.

But Hill's heart went through hell to get to the other side. She pours out her soul into the harp-inflected "When It Hurts So Bad," a poignant tale of unrequited love. It's followed by "I Used to Love Him," a harmonic reflection on a regrettable relationship channeled through a spiritual plea: "Father you saved me and you showed me that life / Was much more than being some foolish man's wife," she sings. And on the ebullient single "Everything is Everything," Hill lays bare the injustices that the black community has faced and continues to face: "It seems we lose the game / Before we even start to play / Who made these rules? / We're so confused." In spite of this enraging history of violence and injustice, she reminds listeners that "after winter, must come spring." And in light of that, she's still standing: "My practice extending across the atlas / I begat this / Flipping in the ghetto on a dirty mattress / You can't match this rapper slash actress / More powerful than two Cleopatras," she raps.

While Hill schools everyone with these verses on "Miseducation" (particularly and on the likes of "Superstar," where she rails on musicians who lose sight of the music itself), she also makes it plain that everyone still has something left to learn. Consider how the album kicks off with a teacher alphabetically calling roll. He reaches Hill's name, calling it out several times. She's nowhere to be found, so he moves on and begins to teach. Ras Baraka, a poet, eighth-grade teacher, and later mayor of Newark, led the lesson (which is interspersed throughout the album, tailing the ends of songs such as "Lost Ones") to a group of kids sitting in Hill's living room. She wanted them to discuss love, what it sounds like, what it feels, what it evokes, how it's depicted in art and music.

To listeners, this improvised discussion becomes an auditory study in the language of love, which asks us to consider tough questions: What *do* we talk when we talk about love? What's left unsaid? A lot of things, Hill tells us. One of those harsh lessons is that the people who love us often hurt us the most, which she contemplates on "Forgive Them Father": "Beware the false motives of others / Be careful of those who pretend to be brothers / And you never suppose it's those who are closest to you," she warns, with sadness and savviness in every breath.

It's hard to overstate just how rapidly (and rightfully) "Miseducation" entered the realm of the sacred, in households and holy house alike, upon its release. "Churches were substituting God in the lyrics," said D'Angelo of the unflappable "Nothing Even Matters," on which he's featured. Reflecting on the album years later, Nas wrote:

It represents the time period—a serious moment in Black music, when young artists were taking charge and breaking through doors. It cleared the way for rap music to be what it is today. We demanded that the whole world pay attention, so the music had to be that dynamic, and she represents that.

The influence of "Miseducation" can be heard, and felt, in music made by Beyoncé to Adele, Kanye West to Kendrick Lamar and more.

With "Miseducation," Hill made an untouchable album that reached beyond tales of broken hearts and betrayal. The way that she sung and rapped about those experiences captured lightning in a bottle, and in turn, changed the game entirely.

Paula Mejia is a writer and editor for "Atlas Obscura." Her work on arts, culture, and other ephemera has appeared in "New York Magazine," "The Paris Review," "Rolling Stone," and other publications. Her first book, a "33 1/3" series volume on the Jesus and Mary Chain's "Psychocandy," was published October 2016.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.