

I Bet You Thought Her Life Was About You (Ms. Lauryn Hill)

By Krystal Nylle Roberts / Atlanta, GA

Remember that band or artist whose album you played over and over again because it never got old? Whose songs of which you knew every single lyric? Whose message you identified with as if you had both written and delivered it yourself? And even today, you need only to hear the first note of their most memorable melodies to identify the song and return to the place where it made its most profound impact upon you.

Lauryn Hill is that artist for millions and myself. Her solo debut, the *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, is that album. And 1998 is that place we return to every time the album's first single, "Doo Wop (That Thing)," comes blazing out of nearby speakers. It gave us everything: love, disappointment, pain, hope, fulfillment, and healing. So upon every listen we go back to that moment when, on every song, she allowed us to examine the contents of her heart, which somehow allowed us to relate to and acknowledge, admit, confront, and celebrate those things within ourselves. When she convinced us that it was okay to embrace our beauty, individuality, truth, and power as young men, and certainly as women. When she became the voice that we hadn't been sure we could have until she arrived. When we came to know her beyond Lauryn Hill and beyond her moniker L. Boogie. When she became Lauryn, and eventually just L.

But that was thirteen years ago. We're older now. She's older. We've changed. It's only natural that she has changed too. So, though important, and certainly transformative, that year: 1998, that sound and that Lauryn, was *just* a moment. Yet, we can't help but indulge in the nostalgia of the past when she was our advocate. Our hip-hop Joan of Arc. And so, *The Miseducation* has been our manna in the desert as we've waited for her to take us back to when it felt like our collective dairies or journals had been seized, and used as her lyrical content. A moment so proud and groundbreaking that tragically nothing she's done since has been able to return us to that place that had its most profound impact upon us.

But maybe that's not the tragedy or the unfortunate thing at all. And perhaps to believe that is to expose the truth about ourselves. Quite possibly, the tragedy and unfortunate thing is that we, her fans, have continuously sought to recapture a moment that happened thirteen years ago—a moment we wallow in at every play of *The Miseducation*, and one we've decided must go on. To insist that Lauryn in some way recreate, recapture, or extend that period is to deny her artistic liberty, experimentation, and growth. It is also to deny ourselves the consumer power of choice. And to believe that she would for some reason comply with such a one-sided demand may very well say more about us than it does her.

And so to acknowledge this is to rightfully concede. To concede to the fact that in 1998 Lauryn Hill's seemingly self-assured waltz into stardom: dreadlocked, brown-skinned, and full-lipped gave us the audacity to consider notions about ourselves long ago denounced by predetermined concepts of beauty. Notions that maybe our natural, kinky, curly, or locked hair could too be beautiful—accepted; notions that being Black, female, intelligent, and talented was in reality not just an urban myth; that being hip-hop was really synonymous for being community builders, educators, and life givers; that we were not alone in our heartache, hidden insecurities, mistakes, and unattained love. We were validated.

But then Lauryn left, and perhaps so too did our belief in the notions that she had just proven to the world we were rightly entitled to have. Maybe, after uplifting us, inspiring us, then turning around four years later and outright denouncing all that represented her former self, indirectly denounced

us too. When she changed her style, her music, and her method of sharing with us, could it be that our identification with who we thought her to be was suddenly lost, which meant that who we thought ourselves to be was also lost. It became her fault and our burden because so quickly and unexpectedly, there it went: a glorious image of Black womanhood and hip-hop. And since we identified so closely with who she was, or with whom we thought her to be, finding out that it was a lie, maybe made us consider the possibility that within ourselves dwelled the same lie. But we couldn't face it. We won't face it.

And thus the grip on our collective *Miseducations* continues to tighten as our devotion and resentment exposes the strange dichotomy of our unresolved relationship with her. One that in reality functions by way of an illusion anyway, because she is no longer Lauryn or L. She is now Ms. Hill—as she prefers to be called—and appropriately so, because Ms. Hill replaced Lauryn long ago, sometime before she strolled into the small intimate Times Square studio to record the *MTV Unplugged* special. That evening she sang, “I gotta find peace of mind/that old me is left behind.” And if we had any doubts, the last ten years should have proven to us that “Lauryn” has indeed been left behind.

Now, maybe over these years we have not been seeking peace of mind, but certainly we too have left our old selves behind, or at least parts of ourselves. Or, maybe we really haven't left our old selves behind at all. Perhaps we've somehow managed to remain the same. It would certainly explain our fury towards a woman and artist who decided to be *only* the person she wants to be. And make *only* the music she wants to make because her artistic integrity, her experience, her God, and her growth required it of her.

Ms. Hill outright told us on *Unplugged*, “I gotta be who am.” Yet, either in our denial, disappointment, or bitterness, we've used the full range of the Internet as our sounding board to air our grievances. And at every mention of her name there were— and still are—our voices expressing our confusion, anger, and disillusionment about her disappearance, return, and failure to release a “proper” follow-up to *The Miseducation*. And now that her voice sounds more raspy than smooth, her band more funk-rock than soul, her performances more improvisational than rehearsed, and her classics more reinterpreted than rehashed, we moan as if she made a promise she failed to keep. Our accusations of disloyalty and betrayal have become more intense; our vows of boycott more threatening; our condemnation of her rearranged classics more furious, as we've deemed them unrecognizable.

So why did we show up at her shows, despite mixed reviews? Why did we even waste our time and money? Why did we continuously show up earlier than the scheduled door time when reviews warned that she would be on much later? Why did we bother to wait hours for her to grace the stage, leave after three songs, and then testify of how awful a show she gave? And why did we go back for more in Atlanta, and in Chicago? In all of our disappointment and disgust, why did we take time out of our day to Google her name to get the latest updates of her tour? Why did we care to know? It seems for no other reason than the anticipation that Ms. Hill would recapture that moment that “Lauryn” once provided us. By again validating us and legitimizing both our hopes and our fears. The same hopes and fears from years ago, and the ones our obsession proves still exist today. For what other reason would we inflict such apparent anguish upon ourselves? How can we explain ourselves? Perhaps first by addressing ourselves—even as Lauryn did. 1998 was just a single period in time, not to be understated or discarded, but a period that should have sprung us forward. It most certainly sprung her forward. Though Lauryn has been replaced by Ms. Hill, we should not mourn, protest, or pine, as if what we experienced all those years ago has been replaced, changed, or even lost. It has merely passed. And that is okay.

But what is not okay is one woman being held responsible for reflecting us to us. It is not okay that our own mirrors have not been sufficient in doing that job. If Ms. Hill started her shows on time, if she consistently gave even, and vocally sound, performances each night, sang her songs the way we remember them, changed her attitude for us or just gave us new music, we would be happy with her. But what about with ourselves, would *we* really be happy? The answer would likely be startling if we would dare to ask ourselves that question, and dare further to answer it honestly.

It is likely that the facade “Lauryn” created, the unhealthy relationship that was forged with us has been replaced by a more realistic one of which all we can do is engage or extricate. In the first line of “Ex-Factor” Ms. Hill sang, “it could all be so simple/but you’d rather make it hard.” Perhaps from this lyric we should take our queue. We could very well make this simple: carry that moment from 1998 in our memories or CD players, but relinquish it from the clutches of our expectations. If we continue to make it hard by holding on, and railing against our unmet expectations, then just as we paint Ms. Hill as a self-absorbed, bipolar, hypocrite “who doesn’t care about her fans,” we do the same of ourselves. Self-absorbed: as we declare, “I want the old Lauryn back” or “I want a new album” in the face of a changed woman with a stated responsibility to her family. Bipolar: as we celebrate with elation her return and just as quickly denounce her when she does. Hypocritical: as we exercise our right to be who ever we choose to be, but crucify her for doing the same, showing ourselves as fans who don’t care about Ms. Hill.

Ultimately, as Ms. Hill ignores our acts and statements of entitlement, we appear as children crying out for the attention and acknowledgement that she couldn’t possibly give to us all even if she cared to; that we ourselves could never give to 12 million people if we tried, unless we would be willing to give up our humanity to that of people’s fickle compulsions; attention that most of us fail to give to our own families and loved ones because, well, in the fragility of our own humanity we just could never realistically be ourselves and at the same time meet the expectations of everyone who dares to place them upon us. We should be clear that Ms. Hill has unapologetically made a choice between her and us. Not out of contempt but out of necessity. And so we should not feel offended that she chose herself over us. Rather, we should feel offended that we have yet to make the same choice: ourselves over Ms. Hill. Not out of resentment but out of preference -- if she has, in fact, surpassed our musical and professional sensibilities. Perhaps, once that choice is made we will hand the responsibility of this tumultuous decade-long relationship to its proper owner.