

The Mystery of Lauryn Hill

She made one of the greatest albums of the Nineties -- then what happened?

By Toure



"One day she said, 'Fuck it.'"

In 1998, when Lauryn Hill was recording her debut solo album, she was on a mission. "She was aiming for big hits so she could outshine the Fugees and outshine Wyclef," says someone familiar with the sessions. Her 1996 album with the Fugees, *The Score*, had sold more than 17 million copies and made her rich and famous, but something was missing. After *The Score*, many perceived Wyclef Jean as the group's musical genius. Hill began plotting an album of her own that would change that. "Her solo career wasn't based on 'I wanna do an album,'" says Roots drummer Ahmir Thompson. "It was based on not being

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Wyclef's side girl."

Twelve million people bought *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, and Hill was established as one of the great female MCs, a quadruple threat: a rapper as well as a world-class singer, songwriter and producer. She was critically acclaimed and extremely rich. In 1998 and '99, sources say, Hill grossed \$40 million from royalties, advances, touring, merchandising and other revenues, and pocketed about \$25 million of that. When Hill was thirteen years old, she already knew she would grow up to become an entertainer. In '98, Hill became an international superstar. Hollywood beckoned her onto the A list. Sources say she was offered a role in *Charlie's Angels*, but she turned the part down, and Lucy Liu took the job. Hill met with Matt Damon about being in *The Bourne Identity*, with Brad Pitt about a part in *The Mexican* and with the Wachowski brothers about a role in the last two films in the *Matrix* trilogy. She turned down lots of work. "Lauryn wasn't trying to do anything," says Pras Michel of the Fugees, almost lamenting. But she did begin developing a biography of Bob Marley in which she was to play his wife, Rita; started producing a romantic-comedy film set in the world of soul food called *Sauce*, in which she was to star; and accepted a prize part in the adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* but had to drop out because she got pregnant. The doors were open for Hill to create a multimedia entertainment empire of the sort that J. Lo, Janet and Madonna have built. Hill could have been J. Lo with political substance. Someone who once worked with Hill says with regret, "She woulda been bigger than J. Lo." Instead, she disappeared.

"I think Lauryn grew to despise who Lauryn Hill was," a friend says. "Not that she despised herself as a human being, but she despised the manufactured international-superstar magazine cover girl who wasn't able to go out of the house looking a little tattered on a given day. Because Lauryn is such a perfectionist, she always sought to give the fans what they wanted, so a simple run to the grocery store had to have the right heels and jeans. Artists are a lot more calculating than the public sometimes knows. It don't happen by accident that the jeans fall the right way, the hat is

cocked to the side just so. All of that stuff is thought about, and Lauryn put a lot of pressure on herself after all that success. And then one day she said, 'Fuck it.' "

In 2000, Hill became close with Brother Anthony, a shadowy spiritual adviser, then abruptly fired her management team and the people around her. In 2001, she recorded her *MTV Unplugged 2.0*. Few bought the album, but many talked about how she could be heard on the record breaking down in tears and saying, "I'm crazy and deranged. . . . I'm emotionally unstable," and repeatedly rejecting celebrity and the illusions that make it possible. "I used to get dressed for y'all; I don't do that anymore," she said on the album. "I used to be a performer, and I really don't consider myself a performer anymore. . . . I had created this public persona, this public illusion, and it held me hostage. I couldn't be a real person, because you're too afraid of what your public will say. At that point, I had to do some dying." Her honesty was both touching and confusing. She was rejecting so much of what she'd spent years being. The only thing that was clear was that she was suffering. "Artists do fall apart," a record executive says. "The most commonly held falsity in the game is that they have it all together. They fall apart. Look at Mariah, Whitney, Michael, all the great ones. They all have a moment where you go, 'Are they really all there?' And I think Lauryn chose to expose that to the world."

Until recently, the twenty-eight-year-old Hill lived in a high-end hotel in Miami with Rohan Marley, the man she called her husband, and her four children. Her fourth child was born this past summer. Sources say that not long ago, Hill moved out of the hotel and that her relationship with Marley may be over.

She now insists on being called Ms. Hill, not Lauryn, and is working on a new album, albeit very slowly. "I heard from a friend that she don't really wanna do music right now," Pras says. "I heard from another friend that she wants to do a Fugees album." So what caused the Lauryn Hill of *Miseducation*, viewed as regal and brilliant, to morph into the Lauryn Hill of *Unplugged*, seen as possibly unstable, and then into someone willfully absent from the public? Confidential conversations with more than twenty friends and industry figures and a lengthy interview with Pras have clarified much of what has happened during the five years since her zenith. "I don't think she's crazy," Pras says. "People tend to say that when they don't understand what someone's going through. Walk in her shoes, and see what would you do."

Hill was born in 1975 and raised in middle-class South Orange, New Jersey. By her teens, she was determined to have a career in entertainment. At thirteen, she sang on *Showtime at the Apollo*. The audience was rough on her, and after the show she cried. In 1998, her mother, Valerie Hill, told *Rolling Stone* about her post-Apollo talk with her young daughter. "I said . . . now, if every time they don't scream and holler you're gonna cry, then perhaps this isn't for you," Valerie recalled. "And she looked at me like I had taken leave of my senses. To her, the mere suggestion that this wasn't for her was crazy." At seventeen, Lauryn had a role on the daytime soap *As the World Turns*; two years later she appeared in *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit* and had a small role in Steven Soderbergh's *King of the Hill*. Meanwhile, she was also spending nights working on music with friends Wyclef Jean and Pras Michel. She was eighteen when the band's 1994 debut, *Blunted on Reality*, flopped, but, two years later, with *The Score*, the Fugees' cover of "Killing Me Softly" made her a star. She was sex-symbol beautiful, and her music and public persona seemed politically savvy and spiritually aware.

After the explosion of *The Score*, Jean began recording a solo album. Hill and Pras supported him emotionally and creatively. But when Hill started writing her own songs, Jean showed no interest. Pras says, "I remember when Pepsi wanted her for a commercial, and they were like, 'All we want is you. We don't need the other two cats.' She said, 'Without them I'm not doing it.' There's a lot of things she didn't do because of the group. Then when she goes to work on her [music] and she doesn't

have the support, that can have an effect mentally. She felt -- this is based on conversations we had -- she felt there was no support on that angle. When you feel the ones you stuck your neck out for ain't doin' the same for you, it brings a certain animosity and bitterness."

Once, the three Fugees were close friends, but now Pras has little good to say about Jean. "He's the cancer of the [Fugees]," Pras says. "He's the cancer. You can quote me. He's the reason why it got wrecked to begin with, he's the reason why it's not fixed." Is he the reason for Hill's troubles? "Maybe, indirectly, she's where she's at because of him," Pras says. "Maybe. But not directly." Jean politely declined to be interviewed. "I'm somewhere else in my head," he says on the phone from his studio. "Certain things I don't talk about. I'm in another zone." He pauses. "I wish it didn't go down the way it went."

Hill responded to an e-mail request for an interview. "I am not available for free interviews at this time," she wrote. "The only interviews I will consider are those that amply compensate me for my time, energy and story." It was signed "Ms. Hill." She asks for money, friends say, because she feels she's been exploited by the media and the record industry. When *Oneworld* magazine contacted her about a cover story, she demanded \$10,000.

People close to the fugees say there has always been competition between Jean and Hill. "Not competing for something in particular," says one. "It's more competing just who's better, who's greater." Hill's solo music was intended to settle the matter. When Jean finally came around and offered his production assistance on the record, she no longer wanted it. "She said [to Jean], 'I'm thinking about working with this producer and that producer,'" a friend says. "He said, 'Oh, no -- I'm producing your whole album.' She chewed on that for a minute and then said, 'Nah, I got my own vision.' That's when Lauryn really is started to take form."

At the same time, Hill's love life began to get really complicated. For years she'd been clandestinely dating Jean. Their relationship started long before he married his current wife and continued afterward. But Pras says, "I think he was kinda, like, playing with her emotions."

But in the summer of '96, when the Fugees were on the Smoking Grooves Tour, she met Rohan Marley, who was on the tour with his brother Ziggy, both sons of Bob Marley. At first Hill was uninterested in Rohan -- a former University of Miami football player -- because she was still seeing Jean. "Honestly, she didn't even want the relationship," says a friend. "Everyone was pushing her towards [Marley] to get her out of the other thing. They pushed her towards him, like, 'Why don't you give him a chance, come on, go out on a date. Just do it,' not knowing that this man had all this other baggage and drama in his life."

Pras singled out Hill's first pregnancy as a turning point for the group. "When she got pregnant, definitely things started goin' on," he says. "Things got crazy." While Hill's stomach grew, the Fugee camp wondered whether the baby was Marley's or Jean's. Says a friend, "The conversation between everyone on the low was no one knew until that baby came out." The day Hill went into labor, Jean told a source he was flying to her side to see his new child. "People don't know how calculating she can be," a friend says. "Lauryn used Ro to pull herself out of the relationship with Clef, and she happened to get pregnant. She hoped that baby was Wyclef's, because it would've forced his hand. But it wasn't." Hill named her first child Zion Marley. For years, Hill claimed that she was married to Rohan Marley, but at some point after Zion was born, Hill got another surprise: Someone told her Marley already had a wife. On March 18th, 1993, when he was a sophomore at the University of Miami, Marley married an eighteen-year-old woman from New Jersey in a ceremony in Miami. "The reason [Hill and Marley] aren't married is because Ro is already married," says a friend. Sources say Marley has two children from the marriage.

Hill decided to ignore it. "I think she was kinda like, 'Put it in the closet and don't even pay attention to it,' " says a friend. Rolling Stone could find no record of the dissolution of Marley's marriage, and even now it's unclear whether Hill and Marley were ever married in a conventional sense. "She has her own rules about life," another friend says. "According to her, she's married. Marriage to her is not a piece of paper, and it's not part of some civilization -- civil-lies-ation. If you say to her, 'You're not married,' she'll say, 'What, do I have to get a government official to tell me I'm married?' "

It was critical that on "Miseducation," Hill was credited as the sole auteur. "That was why she had to be seen as doing it all herself," says someone familiar with the sessions. "To show, 'I'm better than [Wyclef]. He's getting credit as the genius in the group. I'm the genius in the group.' "

But when musicians collaborate in the studio, it's often difficult to establish exactly who has written what. "It gets real gray in the studio," one artist says. At the time, people close to her suggested Hill needed documentation that would define everyone's role, but she was against the idea. "Lauryn said, 'We all love each other,' " a friend says. " 'This ain't about documents. This is blessed.' "

The album was released crediting Hill with having produced, written and arranged all the music except one track, and Hill was established as a self-contained musical genius. Then she was sued by four men who had worked on the record who alleged that she had claimed full credit for music that they'd been at least partly responsible for. Her label, Columbia, urged her to settle, but she wanted to fight. "She felt settling would've been an admission of guilt," says a friend. "She was very concerned about credit. It's what eluded her from the past success [with the Fugees]. She didn't wanna be just a pretty face and a pretty voice. She wanted people to know she knows what she's doing." But she had to go into depositions and discuss making her art with lawyers. "That fucked with her," another friend says.

Eventually, Hill settled the suit. A source says the four producers were paid \$5 million. It wasn't nearly as painful financially as it was emotionally. A friend says, "That was the beginning of a chain effect that would turn everything a little crazy." She was far from the first recording artist to have a crisis of faith and career, but few have had such a crisis so publicly.

She was a working mother of two, who, according to many, was unhappy in her relationship. She felt pressure to look like a model every time she left the house. She had several members of her family working for her or being supported by her. "To have your whole family depend on you for their well-being, that can be a lot of pressure," says Ahmir Thompson. "I said, 'If I was in that situation, I would snap.' " And she felt betrayed by the musicians she'd thought of as family and thus was increasingly mistrustful of people in general. Friends say she wanted to get out but didn't know how. "It was tough for her to admit all that to someone," a friend says. "So I think she spoke to God, and maybe it wasn't God, but somebody showed up." Another friend says, "A person came in, and they divided and conquered. They destroyed this whole thing." Around this time, Hill met a religious figure named Brother Anthony, a tall black man in his forties. Within three months she was going to Bible study with him two or three times a week. A friend says Brother Anthony taught Hill that "she should be whoever she wants to be, because she doesn't owe her fans anything. God didn't create us to be beholden unto people and entertain them. God holds us to be the people that we want to be."

The two became inseparable, and Hill began starting many of her sentences with the words, "Brother Anthony says . . ." Shortly after recording *Unplugged*, Hill told MTV Online, "I met someone who has an understanding of the Bible like no one else I ever met in my life. I just sat at [his] feet and ingested pure Scripture for about a year." But Hill's friends found Brother Anthony bizarre. "His whole demeanor was

real possessive, aggressive and crooked to me," a friend says. "You know how people are slick? He's a quick talker."

No one was certain what church he was from or what religion he belonged to. "I don't think he had a religion," a friend says. "I think he was more like, 'My interpretation of the Bible is the only interpretation of the Bible. I'm the only one on earth that knows the truth.' "

"Brother Anthony was definitely on some other shit," Pras says. "I had a tape of [his teachings]. That shit is ill. Fucked me up. I can't really explain it. It was some weird shit, man. It was some real cult shit. When I heard the tape, I couldn't believe that this dude was really serious. He was sayin', 'Give up all your money.' I don't know if that meant 'Give it to me' or whatever, but on the tape he said, 'Money doesn't mean anything.' "

Many believe Brother Anthony drove a wedge between Hill and the rest of the world. "It was like she was being brainwashed by this man," a friend says, "believing everything he was saying and tellin' her what to do." Another friend says, "I think he's just looking at a cash cow."

She recorded her *MTV Unplugged 2.0* in July 2001 while she was pregnant with her third child, Joshua. In a rehearsal the day before, Hill ripped up her throat but refused to reschedule, and on the record her voice is raspy and ragged. She accompanied herself on guitar, the lone instrument on the album, which was courageous given that she hadn't been studying very long. But a veteran industry executive says, "Anyone with ears can hear there are only three chords being played on every song. I saw it with a roomful of professionals, and someone said, 'I feel like jumpin' out a window.'"

"A lesser artist, it would've never been released," an industry insider says. "A lesser artist would've been shot and thrown out the window." *Unplugged* sold just 470,000 records, a failure. Another industry insider says, "I'm sure Columbia lost money on it." In the past few years, Hill has been in Miami, where she's working on a new album. She's determined to get full credit this time. "A lot of different people have been called down there and had strange experiences," says an industry figure. Sources say the musicians are required to sign a waiver giving Hill sole writing credit for the tracks they work on. The sessions have gone slowly. A few people spoke of her flying in a gang of top-flight musicians, putting them up in a nice hotel and paying for their time. But for more than a week they sat around each day, expecting to play, then getting a call saying, "We'll start tomorrow." Eventually they all left without ever getting into the studio. While no one is clear what stage of completion the tracks are in, those who've heard the music describe it as thrilling. "What she's doing and where she's going with it, ain't nobody even touching her," says an industry insider. "Nobody's even thinking that way. In the sad state of music we're in, I feel deprived knowing that she's got some real flavor that she's holding back." "She gonna sit down and record until she feels happy," a friend says. "Whoever can't wait, she don't care." Some sources say she's spent more than \$2.5 million, and Columbia has cut off her recording budget. The label denies this and maintains that Hill's new album will be out next year.

"Plenty of artists spend \$2 million," says an industry insider, "but she had to fly all these people around and she had to build a studio in her Miami apartment, because she couldn't drive half a mile to the studio. Columbia bent over backwards for her, in pure self-interest, and I think they still believe in her, but you can't abuse the system like that. You can't do that."

Several of Hill's friends and associates are clearly worried about her. "She's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," one says. "But not, like, two faces but, like, eight faces of that. You don't know who you're gonna get from one hour to the next. Not just one day to the next but one hour." Others recall Hill talking entirely in Bible-speak, "quoting

Scripture, fanatically religious," one friend says. She sometimes answers business questions by saying things like, "We'll see what God has in store." A few tell a story in which Hill asked people to work with her on the new album, but when they asked how much they would be paid, she said, "Do it for God," meaning, do it for free, and God will reward you.

"I feel like she's lost," a friend says. "Something's not right. I just feel like she's sad and lonely and alone. I think she wants to cry out for help, but she has too much pride."

Others disagree. "Really, it's about restructuring her life and her lifestyle," an associate says. "I think maybe for a long time she thought she knew what she wanted. But, in reality, she didn't. She's gonna come through it, but she doesn't think anything's wrong with her. She used [Brother Anthony] to get rid of stuff in her life that she didn't wanna struggle with. She used him to her advantage, then she went too far, and she doesn't know how to come back. It'll be a process. It'll be a couple of years."

"She wants to do another album," a friend says. "Deep down, Lauryn is still Lauryn. She always wanted to be famous, she always wanted to sing, she always wanted to hear the applause. That's what she grew up to do. So to now not want it, that's not believable. She wants it the way Brother Anthony thinks it should be. His opinion is the only opinion that matters to her."

Many still have faith in her. "Sometimes people gotta find themselves, man," Pras says. "I don't believe that's crazy. People go through certain things, they gotta fight certain demons, and she's entitled to do that. Because her life isn't to please people. At the end of the day, Lauryn is not happy with herself. She's not gonna do some disc because she gotta make money for Sony. It just so happens that she's done something that captured a moment in people's lives. They want more of that, but she's not ready to give that."

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