

“MUSIC IS SUPPOSED TO INSPIRE”: HOW THE MISEDUCATION OF LAURYN HILL REVOLUTIONIZED THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

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Abstract: The singer, songwriter, and rapper Lauryn Hill is considered one of the most famous music icons of all time. Former Fugees band member, Hill was already a well-known talent in the industry. However, the release of her solo album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* turned her into a household name and changed hip-hop culture permanently. This article results from the research made for the final activity of the class “Língua Inglesa VI”, offered in 2023 for English graduates at “Universidade Federal de São Paulo” (Unifesp), which aimed to provide an overview of popular music in English from 1960 to 2020. This student’s final evaluation occurred through an analysis of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. During the research, it was noticed that hip-hop had become one of the most influential cultural movements in the United States and that Lauryn Hill has and still is occupying an undisputed place in the cultural industry. Later, the author of this paper went on to study the interurrences between music and literature, the research of which continues to this day. Therefore, this article intends to expand on the topics of literature and womanhood in *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, and how the voice of Lauryn Hill has impacted the music industry.

Keywords: Hip-Hop; Music; Lauryn Hill.

“MUSIC IS SUPPOSED TO INSPIRE”: COMO THE MISEDUCATION OF LAURYN HILL REVOLUCIONOU A INDÚSTRIA MUSICAL

Resumo: Cantora, compositora e *rapper*, Lauryn Hill é conhecida por ser um dos mais famosos ícones de música de todos os tempos. Ex-membro da banda Fugees, Hill já era um talento conhecido na indústria musical. Entretanto, o lançamento de seu álbum solo *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* a fez atingir o estrelato e transformar a cultura do *hip-hop* de modo permanente. Este artigo é resultado da pesquisa feita para a atividade final da aula “Língua Inglesa VI”, oferecida em 2023 para os graduandos do curso de Letras — Português-Inglês da Universidade Federal de São Paulo (Unifesp), cujo objetivo era apresentar um panorama da música popular em inglês, de 1960 a 2020. O trabalho final desta estudante ocorreu por meio de uma

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análise do álbum *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Durante a pesquisa, foi observado que o *hip-hop* se tornou um dos movimentos culturais mais influentes nos Estados Unidos e que Lauryn Hill ocupou e ainda ocupa uma posição indisputada na indústria cultural. Posteriormente, a autora deste artigo continuou a estudar as intercorrências entre música e literatura, cuja pesquisa prossegue até o momento. Portanto, este artigo tem a intenção de expandir nos tópicos de literatura e *womanhood* em *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, identificando como a voz de Lauryn Hill impactou a indústria musical.

Palavras-chave: *Hip-Hop*; Música; Lauryn Hill.

Introduction

"This is crazy, because this is hip-hop music" was Lauryn Hill's start of her acceptance speech, after it was announced that *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* won Album of the Year in the 1999 edition of the Grammys. Later in the same night, she would also be awarded four additional golden gramophones, becoming the first rapper to win "Album of the Year" and the first woman to be nominated for ten different categories in the same edition. Twenty-five years later, Hill has been called on stage again in 2024, this time for the first place in the "100 Best Albums" ranking list, crafted by Apple Music's team of experts.

Hip-hop is a cultural movement founded around the 1970s as a merge of New York's black culture and the selection of specific qualities from various styles famous in urban communities, such as the philosophical take of reggae and the complex vocals of soul music. Added to the popularity of electronic devices used in studios at the time, it became one of the best-selling genres and started a movement reaching audiences in and out of African-American communities. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, hip-hop reshaped itself into a tool of social observation, through rapping lyrics with complex metaphors and support for other topics such as gangsta rap and political militancy. According to the professors Derrick P. Alridge James B. Stewart, "Hip hop has encompassed not just a musical genre, but also a style of dress, dialect and

language, way of looking at the world (...)”².

Right at the awaited turn of the decade and after the death of two major rap references - Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. – the release of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* touches on two concepts unexplored by most rappers, which are aimed to be investigated in this article: literary references and the concept of “womanhood”.

Literary References

“Miseducation” is, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, “the fact or process of educating people in a way that is not correct”³. The title of the one and only Lauryn Hill studio album is by itself heavy with meaning but also takes appropriation from two references. The first, *The Education of Sonny Carson*, is a 1974 film adapted from an autobiographical novel of the same name, both of which pictured the life of Sonny Carson, from his early years in Brooklyn and involvement with gang activities to him later becoming a racial civil rights activist and using his life experiences to help others in his community. Although the movie was not much praised, Hill takes inspiration from the real story of Carson and hints that themes such as coming of age in New York and being black in the U.S. would be relevant experiences later in the album.

The second main inspiration for the album's title is *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, a book published in 1933 by the educator Dr. Carter G. Woodson, in which he presents his argument upon the consequences of slavery in the U.S. educational system and reflects on his experience as a teacher and criticizing the conditions of formal education for black students. In addition, he encouraged and supported autodidacticism, so that black people could learn values for themselves and seek knowledge outside of the colonizing system, a take which has a direct relation with the album's creative format, and its first track “Intro”.

² ALRIDGE, Derrick; STEWART, John. Hip hop in History: Past, Present, and Future. *Journal of African American Studies*, [s.l.], v. 90, n. 3, 2005. p. 190.

³ MISEDUCATION. In: CAMBRIDGE Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus. [S.l.]: Cambridge University Press, [2005]. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/miseducation>. Accessed on: 19 Nov. 2024.

Before commenting on the album, it is important to note the importance of Lauryn Hill incorporating those culture and literary references in her discography. The aspect which unites Hill, Carson and Woodson are their position as black individuals in a white hegemonic world and their care for evidencing the disparities in a society that is supposed to welcome, encourage and protect all. According to Foucault⁴, the body is directly involved in the political field and an object for relations of power and domination, hence its value is contained in the qualities of productivity and subjection.⁵ Therefore, when black individuals decide to confront those hegemonic ideologies and to state their values as humans outside of societal structures, those movements are marginalized. That is the reality for most works elaborated by minorities, and Lauryn Hill's achievements become more notable when it is observed that she was able to succeed in a majorly white industry, while elaborating her lyrical and literary *corpus* based on relevant black productions that are commonly forgotten over time.

The Miseducation's opening song is initiated with the sound of a school bell, accompanied by the voice of a teacher encouraging students to say their names out loud for the roll call. A guitar is delicately strummed and creates a relaxed atmosphere while the teacher starts listing students' names. He is Ras Baraka, an eighth-grade teacher invited by Hill, along with other twelve students, to participate in the dialogues added to the end of many songs in the album. There is a feeling of normality, until the moment Lauryn Hill is called and no one answers to it, led by the music fading out. If it is either an absence or just a choice for staying silent, it is not known - and the clue to that ambiguity might be in the title of the record: there is a misbehaving attitude, that states a protest, but also showcases the vulnerability of acquiring life experience. While 'Intro' presents the concept of miseducation, the following songs invite the listener to attend lessons with Hill, as she explores her values and perspectives, outside of the academic venue.

The fusion of cross-cultural musical genres and powerful statements

⁴ FOUCAULT, M. *Vigiar e punir: nascimento da prisão*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2013.

⁵ FOUCAULT, M. *Vigiar e punir: nascimento da prisão*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2013. p. 29.

scattered in many lyrics evidence that Hill can rap, sing, and bring intricate messages in an album appealing to the public. Literary references are recognizable not only in the title and introduction but throughout the whole album — and many of those references take shape in religious meditations.

Lauryn Hill is openly a spiritual person and grew up singing in her school's gospel choir much before joining the Fugees, and that experience is reflected in the album through diverse religious references. "Lost Ones", for example, is a great song to dance to in the club, but also to reflect on, in which the narrator ponders on a relationship breakup and expands on all she could not express before, in biblical metaphors. While the narrator's ex-lover achieves fame but is not able to cope gracefully with the changes, she can see through his facade and assures that the way he is acting will come back to him eventually.

Gained the whole world for the price of your soul (...)
Now you're all floss, what a sight to behold
Wisdom is better than silver and gold⁶

In a series of statements, Hill breaks her silence through lyrics inspired by Bible verses and stories. "Gained the whole world for the price of your soul" is a breakdown of Mark 8:36, in which is written "For what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his own soul?".⁷ Later in the song, it is mentioned that riches could not be compared to the quality of wisdom, an allusion to Solomon, a character from the First Book of Kings known for his wisdom and his riches.

"Forgive Them Father's title rephrases the words inscribed on Jesus' cross ("Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"⁸), and the song connects a social critique of the evil in the world with the Scriptures, instrumented in an interpretation of "Concrete Jungle", a Bob Marley composition. "Final Hour", as well, joins layered instrumentation to a lesson, for the wealthy to be prepared for when the "final hour" comes and prove that their material possessions don't matter compared to values and morals. It also

⁶ HILL, L. *Lost Ones: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* [1998]. Disponível em: <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-lost-ones-lyrics>. Accessed on: 27 Mar, 2025.

⁷ HOLY Bible: New International Version. [S.l.]: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984. Mark 8:36.

⁸ Luke 23:34.

touches on the topic of maintaining faith while being in the music industry; and it is crucial to emphasize that black religious culture and hip-hop have received contrasting treatments in the popular media, even though both carried similar discussion themes. In *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (2004), Richard Yarborough, director of the Center for African-American Studies at UCLA, argues:

Black religious culture never became fodder for the mainstream commodity economy the way hip-hop has. It provided a central role for black women while the role of women in hip-hop is still problematic. Black religious culture was associated with the moral high ground, while hip-hop is too often linked to criminality.⁹

In this regard, Lauryn Hill encounters a middle ground between her identity as a woman, artist, and religious individual. Through her songs, she is able to establish her moral standpoints and take agency of her own narrative, while also displaying her skilled literacy and writing.

Womanhood

In the 2023 New York Times article *The Future of Rap is Female*, the argument is made that there is a current duality in the hip-hop scene: while “gangsta rap” has been creating a relevant movement of men depicting the hardships of being young and black, women in rap are in the process of establishing their names by exposing their takes on sexual independence through high energy beats¹⁰. “Playfulness” is a keyword in the topic: at the moment, men in rap tend to relate to heavier social subjects and adhere to sound choices that reflect it, and women rappers have been sticking to the spirited and often comical side of music, which has been crucial to the hip-hop movement since the beginning. It is enough to compare the aesthetics of two of the best-selling albums of the latest years: Kendrick Lamar’s *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers* and Nick Minaj’s *Pink Friday 2* have both been released and highly streamed in 2023, but with nearly opposite concepts.

⁹ FORMAN, Murray. *That's the joint!, The Hip Hop Studies Reader*. England: Routledge, 2004. p. 314.

¹⁰ ORR, Niela. *The Future of Rap is Female*. *The Guardian*, England, 2023. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/09/magazine/female-rappers.html>. Accessed on: 21 Mar. 2025.

Both aesthetics are well-liked as they explore the products of social expectations posed in each gender - and women, men, and companies have been profiting from this exploration. It would seem, superficially, that both the public and the producers have evolved in ways of accepting diverse perspectives. Unfortunately, the way that the hip-hop scene rewards black men and women tends to rely mostly on a very dual basis: men make the most money when talking about violence, materialism, and abuse; and women make (almost) equal paychecks if they adhere to patriarchal and colonizing ideas. In her essay "Misogyny, gangsta rap, and The Piano", bell hooks precisely points out the problem with reducing gangsta rap to "problematic music":

The sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. As the crudest and most brutal expression of sexism, misogynistic attitudes tend to be portrayed by the dominant culture as an expression of male deviance. In reality they are part of a sexist continuum, necessary for the maintenance of patriarchal social order.¹¹

At the peak of the gangsta-rap movement in the 90s, Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean, and Pras Michel decided to create the "Fugees", a musical group heavily influenced by jazz rap, R&B, and reggae. While the band's debut album *Blunted on Reality* did not fall in favor of the public and it took a while for the trio to gain recognition, Hill was instantly noted as the headliner and her authenticity shined through at the time, but also later in her solo debut.

Lauryn Hill has been important for representing women in the cultural industry and was capable of rising above the objectifying depiction of women in music. In her solo debut, she does not criticize inequality in the way most men rappers do, but also does not participate in the "female rage" trend very much seen in productions made by white women. The privilege of lashing out in a moment of fury is not conceded to Hill, because she understands the message she wants to convey has to be mature in order to be accepted by diverse

¹¹ hooks, bell. Sexism and Misogyny: Who Takes the Rap?: Misogyny, gangsta rap, and The Piano. *END ZMAGAZINE*, New York City, 1995. Available at: <http://challengingmalesupremacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Misogyny-gangsta-rap-and-The-Piano-bell-hooks.pdf>. Accessed on: 21 Mar. 2025. p. 1.

audiences. Her position as a black woman does not limit her perspective, but it is understood that her words bear more weight than most peoples' and could affect her career and image in a more defining way.

Exceptionally, Lauryn Hill offers insights on topics that were brought out before in rap music, such as materialism and discrimination, but adds themes that could be expanded only from her standpoint and criticizes both genders in the ways they have been carrying themselves in the contemporary days. In "Doo Wop (That thing)", for instance, she warns both boys and girls on how to act when feeling pressured to do 'that thing'. It is a lively song but with a powerful message, especially to women. The lyrics encourage exercising self-criticism when committing to sexual intercourse; all laced up with a R&B catchy rhythm. As a woman, prone to being in a vulnerable social position in a relationship, Hill chooses the way of wisdom, and opts for using her personal experience to teach the younger generation how to navigate the love dynamics. It is no wonder that "Doo Woop" is still a staple in pop music worldwide.

The challenges of womanhood are also a main topic in "To Zion", a tribute to the discovery of her pregnancy and the joy she felt after her first son's birth. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* was written by a pregnant twenty-three-year-old Lauryn, and this specific song frames a moment in which she struggled to make peace with the public's perspective as to her career and personal life. Despite difficulties, she expands beautifully on her unique experience as a mother, in harmonizing vocals and a groovy South American touch brought up by guitarist Carlos Santana.

I knew his life deserved a chance
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 heart¹²

At last, in "I Used To Love Him", a new musical partnership emerges in *The Miseducation*: Lauryn Hill and Mary J. Blige, known as the 'Queen of Hip-Hop Soul', engage in heartfelt harmonies when talking about love. Just as Hill,

¹² HILL, L. *To Zion: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* [1998]. Disponível em: <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-to-zion-lyrics>

Blige is a master in catchy chorus and mixing different genres into songs; and in this song there is a respectful atmosphere, in which both voices push each other for their best performance. The song represents a figment of a bigger picture: Hill and Blige went on to become friends and help each other through struggles, such as during Hill's pregnancy.

Conclusion

Lauryn Hill's debut is an unusual album: from its 'love dialogues' excerpts in between songs to the experimentation in different genres throughout the album. Even the context of writing *The Miseducation* is unique: at twenty two years old, Lauryn Hill started working on her solo debut during her pregnancy and the dissolution of her band, along with facing major public backlash. Neither of those events stopped Hill from speaking up for honesty and ethics, for her close relationship with faith, and for her care for portraying different experiences with sensibility. And, in 1999, on the stage of an international award, Lauryn Hill got the well-deserved acknowledgment that established the popularity of hip-hop, a movement that would continue to appease and inspire many around the world.

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