

Black Music Month 2014: June 10 musical salute to Lauryn Hill



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It's Black Music Month. Enjoy the 2014 series. Support the artists. Buy their licensed music. And turn up as you dance along.

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Photo by Jason Miller

Brief history: In 2010, I wrote a music series honoring Black Music Month on Associated Content's site (republished on **Examiner**). The focus was to honor new R&B singers, veteran R&B singers, solo rappers, and evenly split the musical salute between female and male rappers. The only artists I was not willing to split up were Salt n' Pepa because they worked as a unit. In 2014, it's about time to salute more artists, but in the spirit of Salt n' Pepa's legacy, R&B groups and rap groups will be included. The pattern in 2014 will be newer R&B singers (from 2000 to present), R&B and/or hip-hop groups, veteran R&B singers, and then solo rappers, still evenly split between women and men.

Black Music Month Turn Up Factor "Turn down for what?": How you gone win when you ain't right within? That's what Lauryn Hill asked and answered, too. There are a selective few female hip-hop artists who were able to reach the level that they deserved to be at without selling their souls to popularity. With or without the Fugees, Lauryn Hill deserves every ounce of respect she gets as a lyricist, a singer and an actress, too. There are so few artists who can sing as well as they can rap: Missy Elliott, Erykah Badu and Queen Latifah being the rest of the handful. (Of course there are a few guys, but the focus is on women here.) The closest female artist out to date who understands the appeal of Lauryn Hill is Janelle Monae, but I don't think there will ever be someone as uniquely gifted in the hip-hop industry as Lauryn. She didn't feel the need to strip down to her underwear, wear skin tight clothing, put on a pound of makeup, brag about the cost of her clothing or the number of karats in her jewelry, get any plastic surgery, call herself all kinds of bitches and hoes, or give lap dances to be known. Talent propelled Lauryn Hill straight to the top.

My Connection/First Memory to Artist: Tax troubles or not, this is a woman who can rap circles around the most popular female rappers today. Lauryn Hill initially caught my attention in "Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit" in 1993. I knew of the Fugees, but I was paying more attention to Wyclef Jean than her and Pras at the time. But seeing her battle with Whoopi Goldberg's character in that flick made me pay more attention to her musically. And considering the radio stations wore her singles out, it wasn't like I had to try hard to find out more about her. She belted out a remade version of Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly" in 1996, and I've been in awe of that song ever since. As someone who grew up listening to female hip-hop artists who demanded respect instead of trivial, material things, Lauryn Hill is one of the best representations of what today's hip-hop should be for both men and women. She isn't/wasn't shy about being smart and would throw light jabs when need be. My favorite line (although I hate the n-word) is from "Zealots": "I add a 'motherf**ker' so you ignorant n****s hear me."

Numbers Don't Lie: As a solo artist, she had three huge singles, "Everything Is Everything" (18 weeks in the Top 100, peaked at number 35), "Ex-Factor" (22 weeks, peaked at number 21) and "Doo Wop (That Thing)" (21 weeks, peaked at number one). With the Fugees, "Fu-Gee-La" lasted on the charts for 20 weeks (peaked at number 29) and "Nappy Heads" lasted 16 weeks (peaked at number 49). For the Radio Songs charts, "Killing Me Softly" lasted 35 weeks (peaked at number two) and "No Woman, No Cry" lasted 16 weeks (peaked at number 38).