



Back In Time

Over the course of her remarkable career thus far, singer/ songwriter Judith Hill has shared her musical gifts in a variety of ways. The Los Angeles native has been a background singer for such legends as Stevie Wonder, Elton John, Ringo Starr, and the late Michael Jackson, serving as the latter's duet partner on the classic ballad, "I Just Can't Stop Loving You," which later became a highlight of Jackson's posthumously released film *This Is It*. (Hill's deeply moving performance of "Heal the World" was an indelible moment during the singer's public memorial service.) She also appeared in the Oscar-winning documentary *20 Feet From Stardom*, a behind-the-scenes look at the lives of several acclaimed background singers, including Hill, who earned a Grammy Award for "Best Music Film" for her participation. Post-*This Is It*, Hill appeared on *The Voice*, where she began to cement her identity as a solo artist with a series of knockout performances that showed her ability to put her own distinctive, captivating spin on familiar songs.

Hill's global fanbase has gotten to know her through these high-profile performances. However her biggest champion these days, yet another music legend, did not. "Prince did not see me on *This Is It*. He had not seen *20 Feet from Stardom*. He had not seen me on *The Voice*. He saw me on some random TV interview where I was asked who I'd want to collaborate with and I said him," Hill says with a laugh. After doing a bit of research, Prince called Hill personally and said he'd love to work with her. "Right out of the gate it was an artist-to-artist conversation about music," Hill recalls of the call, during which Prince also extended an invitation to the listening party for his latest album, *Art Official Age* and, a few weeks later, to his studio in Minneapolis. "There were no plans," she says of her first time at Paisley Park. "It was just an invitation to come hang out. I jammed with his band. I played him some of my songs. That's when we began to start talking about music and creating. That's really when it all began."

After hearing her original songs and watching Hill sing live, Prince knew he was in the presence of a genuine talent, just as Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson realized before him. He offered to play on and produce her debut solo album, *Back in Time*, which was offered as a free download for two days in March on LiveNation.com and quickly attracted 200,000 downloads. The album is a

showcase for Hill's soulful, powerhouse voice and considerable songwriting prowess, with smart, deeply felt songs about racial injustice ("As Trains Go By") and overcoming struggle ("Angel in the Dark," "Beautiful Life," "Cry, Cry, Cry") nestled comfortably alongside supremely funky party jams ("Turn Up," "My People," "Wild Tonight") that Hill says are a celebration of music, community, and family.

"I had written some of these songs a long time ago and had been performing them for a while," Hill says. "Prince helped give them a whole new makeover. He would say, 'You can make a stadium song. Picture yourself in a big stadium singing this. How big is the song? Is it going to register to the person in the very back?' There are ways to make that happen, like simplifying the structure or brightening up the chords. I used to play 'Beautiful Life' with minor chords. It was a bit more melancholy. Prince said, 'Why don't we try it with major chords?' All of a sudden, the song opened up in an epic way."

Sonically, *Back In Time*'s amalgam of soul, funk, blues, and jazz has an appealing retro quality thanks to the duo's production. "I told him that it needed to be a classic-sounding record," Hill says. "I want people to feel like they're listening to something that was done in the '70s. We did it all in analog, recorded to tape, the old-fashioned way. It was fun doing that with Prince. He would tell me old stories about how he recorded things. It was very cool to work with a legend who understands that world better than anyone. Oftentimes, newer producers are just trying to recreate a way of doing things. With Prince, it was the real deal. It was like a time machine. That's one of the reasons why the record is called *Back in Time*. The sound of the record, the style of it, the way it was recorded — all of it was back in time."

Hill says the recording sessions at Paisley Park, which took place over a few weeks in January, often felt like flashbacks. "It reminded me of how I grew up, jamming with my family for hours. My brother was on the drums, my mom on the keys, my dad on the bass, and I would sing. So it was like going back to my roots." Hill's father, Robert "Pee Wee" Hill, is a pioneering funk bassist known for his work with such artists as Sly Stone, Jimmy Smith, and Bob Dylan, while her mother, Michiko Hill, is an accomplished keyboardist, with credits that include Rufus & Chaka Khan, Wayne Shorter, and Billy Preston. In addition to their steady session work, the Hills also own and operate Master's Crib Recording Studio in Los Angeles. "My bedroom was actually the vocal booth for their first little home studio, so I always had singers in my room," says Hill, adding that one visitor was Sly and The Family Stone's Rose Stone, who became one of her early mentors. Hill wrote her first song at age four and eventually began singing in school choirs and in the studio with her parents. "I couldn't help but sing," she says. "It really came from within."

Her passion eventually led her to earn a degree in music composition at Biola University, where she wrote her first symphony as well as pieces for piano, vocal groups, chamber ensembles, and string quartets. After graduating, Hill spent a year in Paris, singing background vocals for French singer/songwriter Michel Polnareff. Then in 2009, Hill was tapped to join Jackson on his comeback concert tour *This Is It*, but the star died less than three weeks before the tour was scheduled to kick off. “Michael unlocked my imagination in a big way,” Hill says of her time with Jackson. “Seeing such an incredible show put together right in front of me made me realize that there's so much more to be explored and discovered as an artist, and that we, as artists, have the power to transform lives and impact them in a major way. Michael showed me that I can dream big. I began to ask myself, ‘What do I really want to say to an audience?’”

Hill considered that same question while making *Back In Time*. “I want people to remember good times when they listen to it,” she says. “It’s good old-fashioned music and I hope people will experience it that way. I want them to be happy. I want them to dance. I want them to feel encouraged. I want it to be the soundtrack to their lives.”

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