

during sentencing when I kept hearing the term 'make the IRS whole'... The entire time, I thought, who has made black people whole? Who has made recompense for stealing, imposing, lying, murdering, criminalising... taking them against their wills, destroying their homes, dividing their communities, stealing their destinies..."

It is abundantly, painfully obvious that Hill has only herself — and not some sinister conspiracy — to blame for many of the woes that afflict her. To not pay taxes is always a risk; to carry on not paying when the IRS is after you seems peculiar. Her own explanation, outlined in court, so unnerved the first judge to handle her case that Hill was ordered to undergo mental-health counselling.

During the years when she didn't file tax returns, Hill explained to the court, she had gone "underground" to protect her family from the "suppressive force" and "insidious manipulation" of the music industry.

Her failure to pay taxes had not been about living lavishly: "There were no exotic trips, no fleet of cars," she asserted. She only stopped paying the government when it was "necessary to withdraw from society", and she had always intended to "get this situation rectified".

But there's more to the Lauryn Hill story than a deluded diva. In her past lies the shadowy figure of a spiritual adviser whom she called "Brother Anthony". He appeared in Hill's life around the time she receded from public view, and was, according to Pras Michel, her former bandmate in the Fugees, into some "real cult shit".

The New Jersey suburb of South Orange is a strange place for a rock'n'roll drama. Its neat lawns and Tudor-style mansions wouldn't look out of place in Cheltenham. Yet a couple of miles or so down the road, it turns into Newark, and the gardens give way to one of America's most violent ghettos.

Lauryn Hill was lucky enough to grow up on the right side of the tracks, to a middle-class couple with roots in Haiti. Her father was a management consultant, her mother a teacher. "She didn't run with gangs, drink, do dope or blow off school," says Marc Shapiro, one of her early biographers. "She was raised on a steady diet of virtue, truth, reality and God."

She was still in high school when her magnetic appeal landed her a role as a runaway teen in a television soap opera. For a while she seemed destined for Hollywood, where in 1993 she was cast alongside Whoopi Goldberg as another troubled teen in *Sister Act 2*. In one scene in that film, Hill performs an



THE HIT FACTORY
With her bandmates in the Fugees, Wyclef Jean (left) and Pras. Below: with Rohan Marley and family in 2011

SHE HAS SIGNED A NEW RECORD DEAL TO PAY THE TAX SHE OWED

impromptu rap as her classmates gape. It was the first public sign of her musical gift, and it was not long after that she met up in New Jersey with Prakazrel Michel, known as Pras, a Brooklyn-born Haitian-American. Pras introduced her to his friend, Wyclef Jean; the Fugees — short for refugees — were born.

After a couple of false starts, the trio produced a hit for the ages with their 1996 album, *The Score*, built around Hill's electrifying reinvention of the Roberta Flack classic *Killing Me Softly with His Song*. The subsequent collapse of Hill's illicit romance with Jean — who was married to someone else — was widely blamed for the Fugees' break-up the following year. Around this time, she fell in love with one of Bob

Marley's sons, Rohan, who went on to father five of her children. Although they never married, they stayed together for 13 years.

In 1998 came Hill's solo masterpiece, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, which drove music critics to raptures, propelled her onto the cover of *Time* magazine and went on to sell more than 18m copies. She was part the reggae beat of Bob Marley, part the soul of Aretha Franklin. She mixed quick-fire raps with slower, throaty ballads. She was stylish and sexy, but also serious and sometimes angry. The *New York Times* hailed her as a "visionary".

In retrospect, it's clear that the anger consuming her now was just as pungent then — but a little more subtly expressed. Songs such as *Mystery of Iniquity* in 2002 railed against a "crooked system...legal extortion...counterfeit wisdom...empty pursuits".

It was one thing to set her complaints to music, but it was quite something else when Hill started showing up late for concerts, singing harsh, unrecognisable versions of her hits. She sacked her management team and became obsessed with Brother Anthony, with whom she attended regular Bible classes. "I met someone who has an understanding of

1994



Joins Wyclef Jean and Pras in the Fugees

1996

The Fugees sell 17m copies of second album *The Score*, but Hill and Wyclef are having a stormy affair. Wyclef says police had to break up one row

1997

The couple splits; so does the band. Hill's solo album the following year, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, goes on to sell 18m, earning her five Grammys

2000

Meets a mysterious preacher, Brother Anthony. Withdraws from the spotlight, later claiming 'veiled threats' forced her underground

2009

Her 13-year relationship with Rohan Marley ends. He has said that there was a 'third party' in their relationship: 'That can't work for me'

JULY, 2013



jailed for three months for tax evasion

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," she told MTV. Such was his influence that Hill began many of her sentences with the words: "Brother Anthony says..."

"It was like she was being brainwashed by this man," a friend told *Rolling Stone* magazine, although others in her entourage have dismissed this as nonsense.

There was endless speculation about — and occasional preparation for — a Fugees reunion, but by 2007, Pras was sick of Hill's antics. "Before I work with Lauryn Hill again," he said, "you will have a better chance of Osama bin Laden and George W Bush in Starbucks having a latte."

It is not clear why Hill's relationship with Rohan Marley ended. Some reports blamed Brother Anthony, who seems to have since disappeared not only from Hill's life, but from any public view. In any event, Hill let it be known that Marley was not the father of her sixth child, born in 2011.

Nor were all her concerts disasters. After one in London in April last year, she moved a reviewer to conclude: "Heaven and earth should be moved to get Hill's career back on track."

The following month, she took her children to the Caribbean and gave three unpublicised concerts on behalf of a charity for impoverished adolescents in the Dominican Republic.

"We were absolutely blown away," Jonathan Wunderlich, who runs the charity, told me. "She had a golden opportunity for positive PR at a time she really needed it, but she didn't want any of that stuff." He went on: "I know all about that diva stuff, but I just found her a hell of an interesting person. I won't pretend she's perfect, but I think she's highly intelligent, probably with a genius IQ, and she decided way back she was not going to say things just to stay popular."

Hill remains notoriously private and profoundly suspicious of media intrusion. But the portrait that emerges from conversations with people who know her — several of whom, including Stevie Wonder and Alicia Keys, wrote to the judge pleading for clemency on her

behalf — is both poignant and sympathetic.

"So many people are appalled that she is going to jail, especially as she is the mother of a 20-month-old infant," says Hafiz Farid, a long-term family friend who has known Hill since she was a child. "Lots of people don't pay their taxes but don't end up in jail. All she's ever done is try to be an artist in a pimp industry that treats the artist as a whore."

A few weeks after the sentence was handed down, a surprise post appeared on Hill's blog. One Saturday night in mid-May, she announced that she would be singing in Brooklyn four evenings later for a final concert before going to jail.

For once, the crowd was not disappointed. Hill turned up, more or less on time, in an unglamorous black smock, looking a little greyer and heavier but still strikingly beautiful and still boasting tonsils that could set the place on fire. She delivered what *Billboard* magazine described as a "commanding performance — Lauryn Hill appears to have found herself back on her feet".

When Hill mentioned that she intends one day to "share" the so-far unpublished music she'd worked on during her years of seclusion, "the crowd roared," said Lathleen Ade-Brown, a New York writer who was in the audience.

Hill's newest songs are scarcely Top 10 material. Her last one, *Black Rage*, loosely inspired by *My Favourite Things* from *The Sound of Music*, was all about "victims of violence/both psyche and body/Life out of context is living ungodly." Even that was easy

listening compared to her newest single, called *Neurotic Society (Compulsory Mix)*, about "people not being, or not able to be, who and what they truly are", but which also earned Hill criticism for seemingly anti-gay references to "girl men" and "social transvestism".

Nevertheless, the reinvention of Lauryn Hill has already had a positive effect. She spared herself a much longer jail term by signing a new record contract with Sony and paying off the nearly \$1m she owed the IRS before she was sentenced. Inevitably, Hill got short shrift from the judge, Madeline Cox Arleo, when her lawyers reported that her tax debt had been paid off. Arleo snapped: "The defendant does not deserve a get-out-of-jail card for deigning to pay what she owes."

Hill's new contract is likely to produce a new album within the next year — it would be her first in 11 years. Is a comeback possible? The real question is whether Hill can compromise; whether she can find a livable balance between the radical views she espouses and the majority of fans who simply want to hear her sing.

"When I heard she had signed a new contract with Sony, after all she has said about the evils of corporate control, I thought, are you kidding me? That can't be a good place to be," says Janell Hobson, a professor at the University of Albany who studies the role of black women in popular culture.

Thus far, prison appears to have softened Hill's outlook, judging by a recent blog post from behind bars in Connecticut: "Although it has taken some adjustment, I cannot deny the favor [sic] I have encountered while in here, and general warm reception from a community of people who despite their circumstances, have found unique ways to make the best of them."

Will the experience turn Hill into a chastened, gentler soul ready to sing about love and flowers? Not if her previous blog post is anything to go by.

"Don't dare tell me that I don't have a right to speak my mind," she wrote. "And don't presume to know my story in totality, because you watched a few videos or read a couple of articles." ■

