



Letters from a Black Widow

Anyone who's followed Judith Hill's story will recognize *Letters from a Black Widow* as one jaw-dropper of an album title. The tabloid-coined phrase "Black Widow" arose after the overdose deaths of her two star-making collaborators, Michael Jackson and Prince. It became a term of abuse that internet trolls hurled at the celebrated artist, driving conspiracy theories and shame campaigns – trauma that nearly ended a career that includes a Grammy for her role in the Oscar-winning documentary film "20 Feet from Stardom."

"For years the Black Widow was such a dark presence in my life that was too looming and intimidating to even talk about," Hill says. But a year into the pandemic, she had time and space for a momentous reckoning. "Being forced to stop allowed me to reach a deeper place, to really marinate and figure out what's at my core, what I really needed to talk about. I found I had the courage and strength to face all this – to be authentic to my core, to dive into the whole experience, and turn an ocean of darkness into expressive fire."

If Hill's previous album, *Baby, I'm Hollywood*, was the rowdy coming-of-age tale of a mixed-race child of bohemian California, *Letters from a Black Widow* is a formidable battle cry – an album-length soul/funk/gospel passion play that's spectacularly written, arranged, and performed.

One signal moment in Hill's writing process came during a visit with friends to a hot spring outside of Los Angeles, where a communal psychedelic experience wound up shunting her off into a more private and terrifying realm. "An entire mountain appeared before my eyes," she recalls. "And I knew it represented all the trauma in my life that I hadn't realized was still there."

I could feel the mountain/I close my eyes and it appears... Hill chose that vision as the album opener in "One of the Bad Ones" because she wanted the first chapter of *Letters from a Black Widow* to acknowledge that which she is most afraid of – her own maleficence. "We're in a culture where we judge words and people on this binary of whether they're good or bad, when everyone is more complicated than that. I wanted to explore that question, and communicate it

with music that was orchestral and expansive, yet filled with pain and yearning.” In a sense, “One of the Bad Ones” plays like a précis for the entire album. *Letters from a Black Widow* is a theatrical, soul-funk song-cycle a la *Inner Visions* or *What’s Goin’ On*, which takes listeners on a journey from private pain to communal transcendence.

Her antihero energy truly ignites on “Flame,” a song that evokes the raw vocal power of a young Aretha Franklin, stabbing every syllable of the declaration, *Give me chaos and give me pain/but you can never kill my flame*. Hill says this is the kind of power she could only access by moving through that mountain.

“All the guilt, shame, and paranoia can get to be like a cancer growing in you,” she shares. “You feel like nobody will understand, nobody will really care, and this becomes your whole reality. Making songs about it means giving yourself permission to even speak. It’s a kindness to yourself to even pick up the paintbrush and draw it, and it can take on a momentum of its own.”

Hill drew on conversations with her opera/theater director and friend Alexander Gedeon, which inspired the theatrical experimentation that runs throughout *Letters from a Black Widow*. Emotions reach their fullest expression in the titular song “Black Widow,” where Hill confronts the malign figure that haunted her for years.

This album’s new stories of discovery, resistance, and redemption all share the same unshakable soul and funk foundation Hill has enjoyed for most of her life. Searing guitar solos are evermore impressive by the fact that the guitar is one more instrument the confoundingly talented musician recently “just sort of picked up,” during the songwriting process. “To me, the guitar is like a new character, the wailing, screeching core of me, a voice that just wants to be heard,” Hill explains.

While creating *Letters from a Black Widow*, Hill said she often changed up her writing style. “Some songs are about getting the story right, the tone, and the voice, almost like I’m writing a scene in a movie. Others begin with music... I’m with my guitar or bass just finding a groove, looking for what I need to drive the song,” she says. All live in the imaginative, often surprising spaces Hill renders with prodigious composing and arranging skills. “I trained in composition and always strive to figure out how to bring that exploration into my world as a blues-soul person.”

Funk-riddled songs like “My Whole Life Is in the Wrong Key” and “Downtown Boogie” marry playful metaphor to sonic complexity and an unstoppable low-end groove. “Funk music is associated with sexy party vibes but it can also be ironic,” Hill says. “Sometimes what makes it funky is the irony of it.” Irony shades into righteousness with “We Are the Power,” which recalls the neo-soul erudition of Meshell Ndegeocello – *I see a river full of little green money flowing/It’s running, running out of all the penitentiaries*. “It’s saying that, even if they cut the microphone cord, we still have power sources within us. I wanted the same sense of defiance and empowerment you hear in “Flame” to run through the album, because we’re much stronger than we actually realize we are.”

While the album often takes buoyant and playful turns, all the songs are deeply anchored in Hill's current reality, as a 39-year-old career artist grateful for the people who made her, and deftly aware of the bumpy path she's chosen, and the force she's becoming.