

Beyoncé Is The 21st Century's Master Of Leveling Up

Bey Hive, forgive me, for I have sinned: I used to despise Beyoncé.

But it's complicated. She's been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I was all of 8 years old when she made her official debut as the lead singer of Destiny's Child in 1997, with the single "No, No, No." It was unobtrusive, a song that was catchy enough to bop along to while listening to the radio, but not quite a Billboard Hot 100 topper. (It did get close, peaking at No. 3.) As the frontwoman, Bey sparkled, but she wasn't fully illuminated — even so, it was clear as day that a star was on the horizon.

In the beginning, it almost felt like Bey held back. As a member of a teen R&B/pop group, she didn't seem focused on rocking the boat. She was merely hoping to be welcomed into the industry. And she was, much to my chagrin. Which brings me back to my sin.

Beyoncé and I come from the same state, Texas, but our cities of origin couldn't be more different. She's from Houston, with all of its culture and influence and many shades of characters; I'm from a small town, Seguin, hundreds of miles away, with its simplistic, vanilla existence and striking similarities to a black hole.

Coming from a place that had a Walmart as its central point of entertainment, my main escape was television. Seeing Bey's face on the TV screen within Destiny's Child was easy enough to roll along with. To be frank: She was a black woman singing pop songs for the masses. Nothing could be more appealing to a young black girl. It was inspiring.

It was obvious to me where Bey was headed, and why. She was surrounded by dark-skinned faces — LaTavia, Kelly Rowland — plus the medium-toned LeToya Lueckett and eventually Michelle Williams. But Bey was always in the middle, always the lead. It wasn't lost on me that this central figure passed the brown paper bag test, and the others around her did not. I, myself, did not. Because no matter how well you sing, no matter how beautiful you are, if you're not of a certain color, a certain skin tone, there's a commercial barrier that you just can't climb over. So when Bey stepped out to go solo, it was expected. I saw it as the closest chance a black woman had to being an international pop star.

As exciting as the thought of that possibility was, it wasn't enough to make me roll with Beyoncé into this new stage of her career. Instead, I hated, mightily, from afar. It seemed like this feeling emerged out of nowhere, but it had always lived just beneath my skin. Going through puberty while Beyoncé was in the midst of her glo-up was... trying. Mostly because the town I grew up in didn't exactly lift up dark-skinned black girls, like me, in their beauty. Bey was #goals, before #goals was a thing. She was like a fair-skinned princess in the fairytale of life, the kind that would get rescued by the perfect prince charming. There was just one issue: She was so badass that she didn't need rescuing.

I felt like I did. I was the youngest of three, raised on Section 8 by a disabled single mother. To say that money was tight was a severe understatement. Meanwhile, Bey — one of two children raised in a two-parent, upper middle-class home — was making her own money, paving her own path in both music and pop culture. On top of her otherworldly beauty, her light skin and blonde hair, I felt like it was simply unfair comparing her life to mine. So I shifted my personal frustrations onto her. Anytime anyone tried to exalt her in my presence, I was quick to shoot them down. With an eye-roll, I'd ask: "Is she really that talented? Or is she just light-skinned and good enough?"

The honest truth is, I disliked Beyoncé because I wanted to be her, flaws and all. It would take years before I understood the internalized colorism that affected my perspective of Beyoncé. And it was Bey herself who would teach me this lesson.

The first breakdown of my wall against Bey came through her embrace of women while preparing for her 2007 *The Beyoncé Experience* tour. The year prior, she put out a call for musicians to try out for her all-female band. Ten women eventually made the cut after a grueling audition process, becoming an essential part of Bey's intricate and demanding live experiences. At the time of this grand undertaking, I felt myself morphing from adolescent to young woman, and with that conversion came a more cemented understanding of the dynamics between men and women in any given occupation — in this instance, the dominant presence men held over women in the music industry. With this experiment, Bey was deliberating stepping beyond the lines of normalcy, in pursuit of a woman-focused future — at least in her own orbit.

Seven years later, during the *Mrs. Carter Show World Tour* and at the 2014 MTV VMAs, Bey would stand in front of the word "FEMINIST" emblazoned on a large screen in all caps. But she was my introduction to feminism before I even knew the word existed. For the majority of her career, she has expressed this advocacy through her actions; by the time she arrived at the *Mrs. Carter* era, her message was crystal clear. Her dedication to female empowerment became more apparent the deeper she progressed into her career. It is a fervor that has vibrated consistently, just below the surface of her lyrics, filling up her songs over more than 20 years. From "Upgrade U" to "Irreplaceable" to "Run the World (Girls)," Beyoncé has continuously spoken direct words of encouragement to women and maintained a strength that she's sought to pass off to her fans.

Since her *Destiny's Child* days, Bey's ability to project understanding has penetrated and advanced her development as an artist. With this skill anchoring her career, she has been able to nudge her listeners toward the concept of intersectional feminism. Every moment she's been in the spotlight has been spent refining the infrastructure of her fanbase. With a careful hand, she has taught her listeners how to love not just her, but also love and understand people who aren't like them. Love — of others, but most importantly of the self — has been a consistent theme in Bey's repertoire, even in songs that ostensibly sound like club bops. When Beyoncé sings, it sounds like she has a word of advice that she genuinely feels could change your life, if only you took heed. Bey has always spoken and sang with a humble but undeniable confidence; for more than two decades, her delivery has been more impassioned than the pop princesses that surrounded her.

She built a voice that was sellable to every radio station, every TV channel, every market — and she found a way to cater to audiences across the board. Her music never strikes directly in any genre, but she has made it a point to move closer and closer to her black audience. Closer to me.

The latest version of Bey that we've seen is the wife of hip-hop god Jay-Z, on their joint album *Everything Is Love*. There, she raps — well — and it seems like she's light years away from her beginnings. Beyoncé has gone from making benign pop songs about bills and bugaboos to laying down her most private, s***-stirring thoughts over trap beats. She's actually been dropping bread crumbs of this evolution for a minute now. Similar to her exploration of feminism, it was subtle at first, then more direct. As an early performer, she collaborated with influential hip-hop figures like Houston hometown heroes Bun B and Slim Thug, and even earlier with New Orleans rap mogul Master P, who would later appear as an astute cultural narrator on her sister Solange's black experience-heavy opus *A Seat At The Table*. In particular, the past two to three years have illustrated a most obvious prioritizing of Bey's blackness; it came to a head with "Formation" in 2016, with lyrics like "I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils" and visuals that notably featured black women dancers wearing Afros, and Bey herself in waist-grazing cornrows.

With *Lemonade*, for which "Formation" was the lead single, she reclaimed genres birthed by black people — rock with "Don't Hurt Yourself" and country music with "Daddy Lessons" — and presented us with a 21st century black female perspective.

Beyoncé stepped up and called attention to the life of a person of color with *Lemonade*; after all, she made a song called "Freedom." But the visual album in particular centered black women and their lack of visibility. It was made especially clear when she included an excerpt from a 1962 speech from Malcolm X: "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman." In that moment, I felt seen. In that moment, it felt like my sister and my aunts and cousins and friends were seen. The veil of separation between me and Bey was lifted and I realized (or perhaps remembered) that no other popular artist on Beyoncé's scale had ever positioned us as a priority.

Embedded on the *Lemonade* album itself was one small detail that stood out as one of the most significant steps toward centering blackness she's taken thus far as a pop artist. On the album's second single, "Sorry," she delightfully says, "I ain't sorry / N****, nah." She says it casually, as if it's the most-used word in her vocabulary. This is a global superstar with millions of fans, many of them non-black. This is a person who has built her brand on inclusivity. And yet here she is, using this very particular piece of exclusively Black slang. It's a word that has long frolicked in her husband's lexicon, but had seldom presented itself via Bey herself.

Bey's ability to have laser-focused attention on the black experience didn't happen overnight: It took years for her to amass a following first. She then constructed a platform strong enough from which to make such bold statements. And since *Lemonade*, Bey has continued to make a concerted effort to put black bodies in her visuals, and call attention to the importance of black women and black love. The album cover for *Everything Is Love*, for example — a photo of her black dancers, Jasmine Harper and Nicholas 'Slick' Stewart, in

the midst of an intimate hair maintenance session in the Louvre — is an intentional decision. It's not for fun; it's to make a statement that putting her own spotlight on blackness is her foremost goal with her career at this point.

After two decades of indirect but enlightening, demonstrative actions, she is showing us that there are more levels to her artistry than we could have imagined. And she's using those levels — the ones we don't yet have access to — to break down why it's important to acknowledge the existence of every kind of black woman. On the surface, Bey might seem like the closest thing we've had to a perfect pop star. By all means, she appears to be the hardest-working entertainer alive, judging by the set parameters of the industry. Instead, while we've been praising her songs and singing her praises, she has widened her creative stance, occupying considerably more space than she was given at the start of her career. The title "pop star" doesn't fit anymore: Bey has weaved together an entirely new matrix of celebrity. With a status like that, she still finds new ways to surprise listeners of every variety, from stans to casual fans — and even haters. She surprises us in the literal sense, with new material, but she continues to catch us off-guard by putting her foot down and delving further into her personalized elevation of black people, and black women specifically. Our issues have become her issues. She represents me, us. Her arrival at this point was a slow build. And it's given us all time to recognize that belonging to the Bey Hive means accepting Beyoncé's journey to the heart of what it means to be black in 2018.

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