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THE WEEKEND ESSAY

LISTENING TO TAYLOR SWIFT IN PRISON

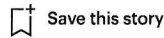
Her music makes me feel that I'm still part of the world I left behind.

By Joe Garcia

September 2, 2023



Illustration by Isabel Seliger



The first time I heard about Taylor Swift, I was in a Los Angeles County jail, waiting to be sent to prison for murder. Sheriffs would hand out precious copies of the Los Angeles *Times*, and they would be passed from one reader to the next. Back then, I swore that Prince was the best songwriter of my lifetime, and I thought Swift's rise to teen-age stardom was an injustice. I'd look up from her wide-eyed face in the Calendar section to see gang fights and race riots. The jail was full of young men of color who wrote and performed their own raps, often about chasing money and fame, while Swift was out there, actually getting rich and famous. How fearless could any little blond fluff like that really be?

In 2009, I was sentenced to life in prison. Early one morning, I boarded a bus in shackles and a disposable jumpsuit, and rode to Calipatria State Prison, a cement fortress on the southern fringes of California. Triple-digit temperatures, cracked orange soil, and pungent whiffs of the nearby Salton Sea made me feel as though I'd been exiled to Mars. After six years in the chaos of the county jail, however, I could finally own small luxuries, like a television. The thick walls of Calipat, as we called the place, stifled our radio reception, but an institutional antenna delivered shows like "Access Hollywood," "Entertainment Tonight," and "TMZ." I was irritated by the celebrity gossip, but it was a connection to the outside world, and it introduced me to snippets of Swift's performances for the first time. Here and there, I'd catch her on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" or "Fallon," and was surprised by how intently she discussed her songwriting. I didn't tell anyone that I thought she was talented.

Podcast: The New Yorker Radio Hour

Listen to Joe Garcia read "Listening to Taylor Swift in Prison."

In 2013, when my security level was lowered owing to good behavior, I requested a transfer to Solano state prison, the facility with a Level 3 yard which was closest to my family in the Bay Area. I got the transfer, but my property—a TV, CD player, soap, toothpaste, lotion, food—was lost in transit. I shared a cell with someone in the same situation, so, for months, we relied on the kindness of our neighbors to get by. Our only source of music was a borrowed pocket radio, hooked up to earbuds that cost three dollars at the commissary. At night, we'd crank up the volume and lay the earbuds on the desk in our cell. Those tiny speakers radiated crickety renditions of Top Forty hits.

During that time, I heard tracks from "Red," Swift's fourth studio album, virtually every hour. I was starting to enjoy them. Laying on the top bunk, I would listen to my cellmate's snores and wait for "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" to come around again. When it did, I would think about the woman I had lived with for seven years, before prison. I remembered bittersweet times when my sweetheart had visited me in county jail. We'd look at each other through security glass that was reinforced by wire. It didn't seem fair to expect her to wait for me, and I told her that she deserved a partner who could be with her. But we didn't use the word "never," and deep down I always hoped that we'd get back together. When I heard "Everything Has Changed," I had to fight back tears of exaltation and grief. Swift sings, "All I knew this morning when I woke / Is I know something now / Know something now I didn't before." I thought back to our first date, and how we had talked and laughed late into the night. We had to force ourselves to get a few hours of sleep before sunrise.

After several months, my belongings, including my CD player, finally caught up with me. I was getting ready to buy "Red" from a catalogue of approved CDs when I learned that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, or C.D.C.R., had placed me on another transfer list. I didn't want the album to get stuck at the prison after I had been transferred, so I resorted to a country station that regularly featured Swift. Sometimes, hearing Southern drawls and honky-tonk medleys, I'd laugh out loud at myself. But that was the station that played the widest variety of her music, from "Tim McGraw" to "I Knew You Were Trouble." There was, in her voice, something intuitively pleasant and genuine and good,

something that implies happiness or at least the possibility of happiness. When I listened to her music, I felt that I was still part of the world I had left behind.

Hitting a new yard—in this case, the prison known as the California Men’s Colony (C.M.C.)—means finding new friends and allies. Each table and workout area was claimed by a different gang or ethnic group. I’m Asian and Hispanic, and I chose to join the Asians in a cement workout area. When they asked me what kind of music I liked, I confessed that I was anxiously waiting for a Taylor Swift album. Everyone laughed. “Oh, my God, we’ve got a Swiftie on the yard!” Lam, a muscular guy, told me. “You in touch with your sensitive side? Are you gay?” He especially loved to heckle me in front of his buddy Hung, who spoke little and laughed almost silently.

I was waiting for “Red” to arrive when I saw Swift perform “All Too Well” at the 2014 Grammys. That became the song that I played first when I peeled the plastic wrap off the disc, and the song I’d stop at and repeat whenever I spun the album. (Her ten-minute version is even better.) As Swift sang about love’s magical moments, how they are found and lost again, I thought about a time before my incarceration, when I briefly broke up with the woman I loved. She came to my house to return one of my T-shirts. When she hung it on the doorknob and walked away, I was on the other side. I sensed that someone was there, but, by the time I opened the door, she was gone.

When “Red” arrived, I finally found out why Lam had been clowning me in front of Hung. “Red” was the only Swift CD that Hung didn’t own—because he considered it a misguided pop departure from the country greatness of “Fearless” and “Speak Now.” Eventually, Lam outed himself as a Swiftie, too. For six months, the three of us would work out and debate which album was best. Then Hung transferred out of the prison, taking his CDs with him.

Around the time Swift dropped “1989,” I acquired an old-school boom box. Technically, exchanging property and altering devices is against C.D.C.R. rules, but every prison has guys who fill their cells with radios, TVs, and speakers to repair and resell. I looked out for one guy, G.L., when he first hit the yard, and he became one of the best electronic fix-it guys I’ve ever met. He loved reconfiguring different speakers to get the best sound. He rewired the boom box for auxiliary cables and gave it to me. At C.M.C., I had a cell to myself, so I’d turn up the music enough to drown out obnoxious sounds outside my cell. Of course, some people always think that Swift *is* the obnoxious sound. “What’s up with the damn Taylor Swift?” a neighbor yells out. Another voice chimes in with requests: “Play ‘Style.’ That song’s tight right there.” By the time the song ends, someone new will admit, “That girl’s got jams.”

When you transfer between prisons, you can’t take any undocumented property with you. At the end of 2015, I gave that boom box back to G.L. and left C.M.C. for Folsom prison. After a year, I landed at San Quentin. I started working at the San Quentin *News*, the in-house newspaper, for a quarter an hour. Around that time, C.D.C.R. started allowing a vendor to sell us MP3 players for a hundred dollars. They charged \$1.75 per song and ten dollars for a memory card. Eventually, I asked my family to order one and would call my cousin Roxan with requests. “What’s up with all the damn Taylor Swift?” she’d say during phone calls. By the time Swift released her album “*Lover*,” in 2019, I had almost every song she’d ever released. And, when the MP3 players were restricted because crafty folks were using the memory cards in illegal cell phones, mine was grandfathered in.

One of my homies at San Quentin had a pristine radio that played CDs and cassette tapes. When he earned parole, everybody hounded him for it. He knew how much I’d appreciate such a luxury, but I didn’t join the herd of pesterers making offers, and I think he appreciated that. He gave it to me as a parting gift. I was even able to have it officially documented on my property card. The MP3 player clipped neatly into the cassette door, so now I could see my playlists while I listened. My neighbor, Rasta, was the weed man for the building, so I played Swift to drown out the guys who were lighting

up outside. Rasta made fun of me, but the crowd always liked her “Bad Blood” remix, featuring Kendrick Lamar. “That’s the shit right there,” they’d say. “Who would’ve thought?”

Seven months after “Lover” came out, C.D.C.R. shut down all programming because of the COVID pandemic—no indoor group interactions, no volunteers from outside the prison, no visitors. C.D.C.R. brought the coronavirus into San Quentin when it moved some sick guys from another prison in. By the end of June, 2020, hundreds of us were testing positive and getting sick, including me. I lugged all my property to an isolation cell in a quarantine unit, where I shivered and sweated through a brain fog for two weeks. My only human contact came from nurses in full-body P.P.E., who checked my vitals, and skeleton crews of officers—the ones who weren’t sick themselves—who brought us intermittent meals. I followed San Quentin’s death tallies on the local news. Would I die alone in this cell, suddenly and violently breathless? I made a playlist of Swift’s most uplifting songs, listening for the happiness in her voice.

Alone in a prison cell, it’s virtually impossible to avoid oneself. As my body and mind began to recover, I started to question everything. What really matters? Who am I? What if I die tomorrow? I hadn’t been in touch with my sweetheart in more than two years, because she had told me that she was trying a relationship with someone who cared about her. Now, though, I wrote her a letter to see if she was O.K.

A week after I mailed my letter, I received one from her. Prison mail is slow enough that I knew it wasn’t a response—we had decided to write to each other at the same time. “The lockdown has afforded me plenty of time to reflect on all sorts of things,” her letter said. “I’ve been carrying you with me everywhere.” Reading it brought to mind Swift’s lyrics in “Daylight”: “I don’t wanna think of anything else now that I thought of you.” She was single again, and we started talking every week. In lockdown, between paltry dinner trays, I did pushups, lunges, squats, and planks in the twenty-two-inch-wide floor space in my cell. The twentieth year of my incarceration was approaching.

In 2020, the California legislature passed a law that made anyone who served twenty continuous years, and who was at least fifty years of age, eligible for parole. I’m fifty-three, and I’ll get my first chance at release in 2024. I couldn’t help but think of “Daylight” again. “I’ve been sleeping so long in a twenty-year dark night,” Swift sings. “And now I see daylight.”

These days, I call my sweetheart as often as I can. Officers can shut down the phones with the flick of a switch, and technical glitches often take the system offline, so I treat each call as if it were my last. It often feels like she’s waiting to hear from me. She tells me that it’s complicated and confusing for her, speaking to the ghost who disappeared twenty years ago. But, leaning against a wall, next to all the other guys talking with loved ones on the phone, I don’t feel like a ghost. I feel alive. Just recently, she told me, “Talking like this over the phone so much, I think we’ve gotten to know each other way better than before.” We talk about how much we have changed. “You might not even find me attractive anymore,” she tells me. “I’m not the same person I was back then.”

One morning in October, 2022, I had breakfast in the chow hall and made it back to my cell in time for “Good Morning America.” My TV doesn’t have any speakers, so I plugged it into my boom box. Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice singing an unfamiliar chorus: “It’s me, hi / I’m the problem, it’s me.” The anchors on the broadcast were giddy to announce Swift’s new album “Midnights,” and play clips from the music video of “Anti-Hero.” Swift appeared as a larger-than-life figure, arguing with different versions of herself. I laughed to myself. Here we go again.

Our MP3 distributor was always slow to release new music, so I spent a couple of weeks hearing about the album on the news, waiting for my chance to listen. Then, out on the prison grounds, I bumped into a volunteer whom I’d known and worked with for years. We were walking through the yard together when they started looking around to make sure no one was watching. After confirming that the coast was clear, they slipped me a brand-new copy of “Midnights” and wished me a happy birthday. The gesture nearly brought me to tears. That evening, after dinner, I peeled off the plastic and brushed a bit of dust

out of the boom box's CD player. "Lavender Haze" played as I read the liner notes. "What keeps you up at night?" Swift writes.

For the past two decades, sleep has not come easily to me. Often, when I get into bed, I think about the day I was arrested at the scene of my crime. Some neighbors called 911 and reported gunshots. I can still see the grieving family members of the man I killed, staring at me in the courtroom at my trial. I'm guilty of more than murder. I abandoned my parents and my sweetheart, too. There's no way to fix this stuff.

Taylor Swift is currently the same age, thirty-three, that I was when I was arrested. I wonder whether her music would have resonated with me when I was her age. I wonder whether I would have reacted to the words "I'm the problem, it's me." Hers must be champagne problems compared with mine, but I still see myself in them. "I'll stare directly at the sun, but never in the mirror," Swift sings, and I think of the three-by-five-inch plastic mirrors that are available inside. For years out there, I viewed myself as the antihero in my own warped self-narrative. Do I want to see myself clearly?

In "Karma," Swift sings, "Ask me what I learned from all those years / Ask me what I earned from all those tears." A few months from now, California's Board of Parole Hearings will ask me questions like that. What have I learned? What do I have to show for my twenty years of incarceration? In the months ahead, when these questions keep me up at night, I will listen to "Midnights." The woman I love says she's ready to meet me on the other side of the prison wall, on the day that I walk into the daylight. Recently, she asked me, "If you could go anywhere, do anything, that first day out, what would you want us to go do?" That question keeps me up at night, too. ♦

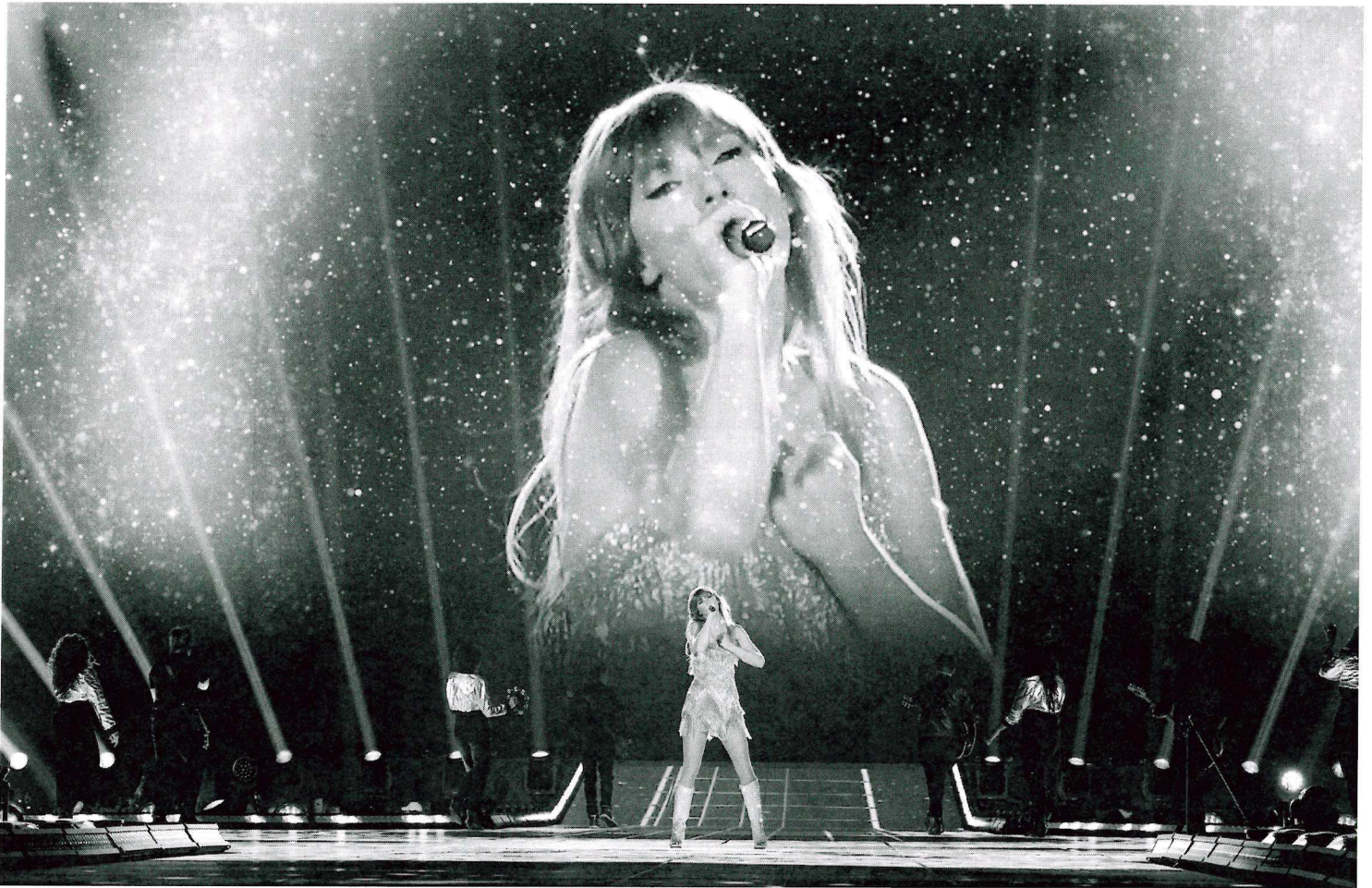
CULTURAL COMMENT

LOOK WHAT TAYLOR MADE US DO


In the age of Taylor Swift's Eras Tour, we are all extremely online.

By Tyler Foggatt

June 3, 2023



Perhaps the most impressive part of the Eras Tour is seeing Taylor Swift take a show fit for a late-career Las Vegas residency and bring it from one N.F.L. stadium to the next. Photograph by Kevin Mazur / Getty

 Save this story

There was a moment, about twenty-five minutes into Taylor Swift's first Eras Tour show, in Glendale, Arizona, when fans began to realize that the concert was much grander than they had anticipated. In the lead-up to opening night, there had been a lot of speculation about the format of the show. The premise was ambitious: the show would span Swift's entire musical career, which is so varied that each album constitutes its own "era." Presumably, this endeavor would involve Swift performing one song or so from each of her ten albums. But it was also hard to imagine her leaving so many others on the cutting-room floor. On Reddit, a few psychos speculated that Swift might be onstage for three hours or more, like a one-

woman jam band. It was the only way, they argued, for her to come remotely close to hitting everything. More world-weary fans, though, listed a variety of logistical concerns, including ordinances banning fireworks and loud music late at night. Legality aside, three hours just seemed like a lot. “3 hour performances would be incredibly hard on her voice,” a user named ellisoph wrote.

“Agreed!” the original poster replied. “I’m just sharing dreams.” (Swifties are notoriously nice—at least, to one another.)

In Glendale, which changed its name to Swift City in honor of the event, Swift opened with six songs from the “*Lover*” era—an explosion of pastel hues, bubblegum pop, and L.G.B.T.Q. allyship. After that, she played three songs from “*Fearless*,” then five from “*evermore*.” As the show wore on, hellopizzafap wrote on Reddit, “ID LIKE TO POINT OUT WE ARE 30 SONGS DEEP AND STILL HAVE 3 ERAS TO GO.” In Glendale, things were starting to fall apart. “The stadium ran out of water,” one person complained afterward. “Like the entire stadium.” Swifties with tickets to later stops on the tour began recalibrating their plans: one woman wrote that she might switch out the dress she’d wanted to wear for a pair of glitter pants, in order to hide her compression socks. There was one attendee, live-streaming the concert, who had seemingly anticipated that Swift would be putting on the show of a lifetime: “Don’t worry about my fucking battery, bitches,” he told his audience on TikTok. “I got two phones and a power bank.”

Swift performed forty-four songs in total, for an approximate run time of three hours and fifteen minutes. There were sixteen costume changes, most of which happened onstage; she took no real breaks. Fans were in disbelief, but they also seemed genuinely concerned for her health: “This bitch is literally going to die doing all of these shows,” one person wrote. It was the first night of the tour, but it also felt like an ending. “This is what I imagine a farewell concert to be,” another wrote. “Like, the last show you do in your life. I have no idea how she’ll do this again tomorrow.”

Taylor Swift has done to stadium shows what Beyoncé did to Coachella, and to millennials what Bruce Springsteen did to baby boomers. She has crafted a spectacle—a long-form, real-life experience in an age that is otherwise dominated by short-form online content—though the tour is also perfectly designed to be consumed online. The show’s length, and its emphasis on albums, might be suggestive of something more old school, but there are parts of the tour that feel developed for the algorithm, such as Swift’s performance of the song “Bejeweled,” which incorporates part of a viral TikTok dance, or when she references comments that she’s read about herself online, including the phrase “mother is mothering.” I, like many fans, have been following the tour through an endless stream of content since that first show in Glendale.

Swift’s fan base skews female, millennial, and white, though there’s plenty of diversity within: take the Gaylors, a contingent of Swifties who are convinced that the artist’s lyrics are sapphic, or the rapper Azealia Banks, who is famous for hating everyone *except* Swift, of whom she is oddly protective. (“Taylor, this guy is gonna give you scabies,” Banks recently wrote on Instagram, of Swift’s alleged boyfriend, Matty Healy. “He’s not on the level of powerful puss u worked HELLA Hard To build.”) Ultimately, Swifties are united by two main qualities: perpetual onlineness and sleep deprivation, because Swift often saves important announcements for late at night. (While rolling out her most recent album, “*Midnights*,” she dropped a series of TikToks at the titular hour; one of my friends, complaining that the gimmick had ruined her sleep schedule, lamented that the album had not been called “9 P.M.s.”) In the dead of the night, like many Swifties in the Eras Tour era, I lie awake watching videos of Swift sprinting across the stage barefoot and nearly falling off the edge. As the sun rises, I bookmark an Instagram Reel recommending high-quality concert earplugs, having read horror stories about Eras Tour-induced tinnitus.

Even organic parts of the concert—such as Swift moving the mike away from her face, in a clip that has gone viral, in order to sneak in a cough—seem to serve a higher purpose. They are proof that Swift, who for most of her career has released an album every two years, like clockwork, is a real person with surprising vulnerabilities. Some conspiratorially minded Swifties have speculated that these unplanned moments are just as orchestrated as the rest of the show. At every concert, Swift performs two acoustic surprise songs; after watching the artist forget the lyrics to one of her most beloved songs, and mess up the bridge of another, some fans took this as a sign that even the right clock is broken twice a day.

Swift, who is thirty-three, has now been famous for exactly half the time she's been alive. (She released her debut single, "Tim McGraw," seventeen years ago.) But, for more than a decade, she managed to be both commercially popular and puzzlingly uncool. Her earnestness, along with her insane work ethic, made her subject to suspicion. When Kanye West interrupted her at the V.M.A.s, a moment that might have earned her some sympathy, it seemed instead to throw her carefully curated persona into sharp relief. Today, though, the world has come around. Even music snobs begrudgingly respect the poeticism of "folklore" and "evermore," Swift's critically acclaimed indie albums. Former haters have chalked up their previous feelings to an internalized misogyny. For some, this epiphany may have come when Swift launched a feminist crusade against the label executive Scooter Braun, the owner of her masters, and began rerecording her first six albums. At an Eras Tour show in Nashville, she announced the impending release of "Speak Now (Taylor's Version)", and the crowd spent the next several minutes screaming and sobbing—a remarkable display of excitement for an album that already exists.

Swift's fans lovingly refer to her as a "capitalist queen." The success of the rerecordings and the Eras Tour have made her the second-richest woman in music, with an estimated net worth of seven hundred and forty million dollars, according to Forbes. In the original Ticketmaster sale, Eras Tour tickets were supposed to cap at around five hundred dollars, but resale demand instantly inflated them, in some cases, to as much as ninety thousand. She sold two million tickets in one day, a record that caused the platform to implode. The resale market has been rife with grift; I've seen several videos of people showing up at the stadium only to discover that their secondhand stubs are fake. Not that being outside the stadium is the worst place to be: thousands of fans have knowingly set out on pilgrimages that end in the parking lot, where they can listen—and sing along—to the show, from a distance. Swift has matched her fans' loyalty to her with an equal devotion to them. When a lightning storm began on the night of her third Eras Tour performance in Nashville, she decided to wait it out instead of cancelling the show. Attendees were kept in a holding area of the stadium until the weather had passed, and, online, they posted stories of absolute mayhem: young girls peeing their pants, adults passing out, a lactating mother yearning for a breast pump. Swift eventually came onstage at 10 P.M., and performed until 1:30 A.M., as rain poured on her and the crowd.

Perhaps the most impressive part of the Eras Tour is seeing Swift take a show fit for a late-career Las Vegas residency and bring it from one N.F.L. stadium to the next, where she must grapple with bad weather, mid-concert injuries, and occasional production malfunctions. The tour is, in some ways, a cudgel, demanding the respect of critics who once dismissed Swift's talents as a live performer, back in the early days, when her voice got warbly on high notes and the choreography was charmingly awkward. But it is also, of course, for the fans. While introducing "mirrorball," one of the surprise songs in Glendale, Swift described the track's inspiration to the crowd. "I was trying to think of sort of an eloquent way to say that I love you, and I need your attention all the time," she said.

"She's finally going to therapy," a fan wrote on Reddit, with a praying-hands emoji.

A few Saturdays ago, I travelled to Philadelphia to attend one of the Eras Tour shows at Lincoln Financial Field. I took an Amtrak train from New York, which was full of other people who were going to the concert. Many passengers were carrying transparent tote bags, the only kind allowed in the venue, with their most precious belongings: phones, phone chargers, and packets of Liquid I.V. In the seat next to me, a young woman scrolled through TikTok videos of the previous night's performance; she watched all of them at full volume, with no headphones.

As I arrived at the stadium, I began to worry that I had spoiled the Eras Tour for myself, having digested way too much content about the set list, the costumes, and the choreography. I was wrong. One thing that social media cannot properly capture is the transformation of a football stadium, typically a center of male aggression, into a sanctum of gleeful femininity. It was like the Women's March, but with sequins instead of pussy hats, and probably the same number of male allies. The men's bathrooms became women's bathrooms—because, why not?—and the trash cans overflowed with sanitary products, as if, within minutes of entering the stadium, all of our periods had synched. One might say that we were all in our "Red" era, though I've also read multiple stories of pregnant women going into labor after the concert. ("Motherhood era?" one headline read.)

Every person I spoke with at the show was the nicest person I'd ever met. The security guards, the hot-dog salesmen, the bartenders, the audience. They were all so nice that I found myself manufacturing excuses for interaction, asking how to find my section even when I knew where it was. Parents have said that they like Taylor Swift because her lyrics are clean enough for their children to sing along to, but anyone can write family-friendly music; only Taylor Swift can turn the Philadelphia Eagles' stadium into a safe space.

In line for the men's bathroom, one girl asked me to guess her age. I said fifteen; turns out, she was twelve. "Your daughter is very precocious," I told her mother, who nodded, solemnly. The twelve-year-old, who had never been to a Swift concert before, said she was hoping that Swift would bring out a special guest—Katy Perry, perhaps. Swift is known for this kind of stunt; on her previous tours, members from the cast of "Friends," Kobe Bryant, and an entire women's soccer team have appeared onstage. During the "1989" World Tour, she brought out Mick Jagger. ("I text Mick and I said, 'Hey, are you in town? I'm playing a show tomorrow. Do you want to come out and sing 'Satisfaction?'") But the Eras Tour is not a testament to celebrity; it's a testament to Swift. Though the crowd tends to reduce each "era" to an aesthetic—"Fearless" is gold, "Red" is red—Swift clearly sees each one as a representation of a distinct musical persona. Celebrity appearances have been carefully chosen with an eye toward cementing her own lore. When Jack Antonoff, her frequent collaborator, joined her onstage for her first show in New Jersey to perform "Getaway Car," they nodded at a behind-the-scenes clip of their original songwriting process, which has become something of a meme.

In 2011, Swift told *The New Yorker* that she has long been "fascinated by career trajectories"—the idea, as she put it, that " 'this artist peaked on their second album. This artist peaked on their third album. This artist peaked with every album.' " She went on, "I sometimes stress myself out wondering what my trajectory is." Swift has traded in this self-consciousness for a self-awareness, one that has likely been facilitated by the therapeutic process of rerecording, and reclaiming, her older works. She has built a tour solely devoted to the idea of a trajectory—that of a career, of a musical identity, of a life—that can be traced cleanly from one "era" to the next. It's a funny way to reach an understanding of oneself, and there are some notable gaps: for example, there is no music from Swift's first album, the only era that is not part of the tour. And though Swift's task might be more easily accomplished on a therapist's couch, it's extremely entertaining to watch her do it onstage, in front of tens of thousands of people.

One of the most surprising elements of the concert was how some of the Swift songs that I've always found irredeemably cringe—for example, "You Need to Calm Down" and "Look What You Made Me Do"—were the most exciting to watch live. During the latter, Swift performed with several digital versions of herself and with background dancers dressed in the garb of her various eras; at every show, she picks a different era to hold up a "loser" hand sign to—either a completely random choice, or a genuine reflection of whichever part of herself she hates that day.

As Swift finished performing "champagne problems," a woman in my row excused herself. "I'm going to go to the bathroom because the next song is my least favorite on the set list," she said, as the opening notes of (the perhaps appropriately named) "tolerate it" began to play. As the concert went on, I noticed more than one person checking "Eras Tour" playlists on Spotify, as if consulting digital playbills. A video recently went viral of a woman (likely the uninformed parent of a Swiftie) reading from a large stack of papers during the concert; she had printed out the lyrics for all of the songs in advance. At the show's close, confetti blasted throughout the Eagles stadium, and, as I was leaving, I noticed dozens of fans scooping it up and dumping it into their transparent bags. Where some see a keepsake, others see a money-making opportunity: the bags have started going for forty or fifty dollars on eBay, often purchased by Swifties who weren't able to get tickets.

In the days after the concert, I noticed some Swifties posting on Reddit about a new phenomenon: some are struggling with a post-Eras Tour depression, in large part because they went to the show but are unable to remember it. It's not that they were drunk, or that they weren't paying attention; they just don't remember. "It's strange," one person wrote, saying that, despite having attended two Eras Tour performances, she could recall only a few details, like Swift's outfits, "but nothing about me being in that moment experiencing it." Others mentioned having similar out-of-body experiences and blurred memories. A user named bellahadidpizza, who had also blacked out during the concert, consoled the group by noting that "high sensory

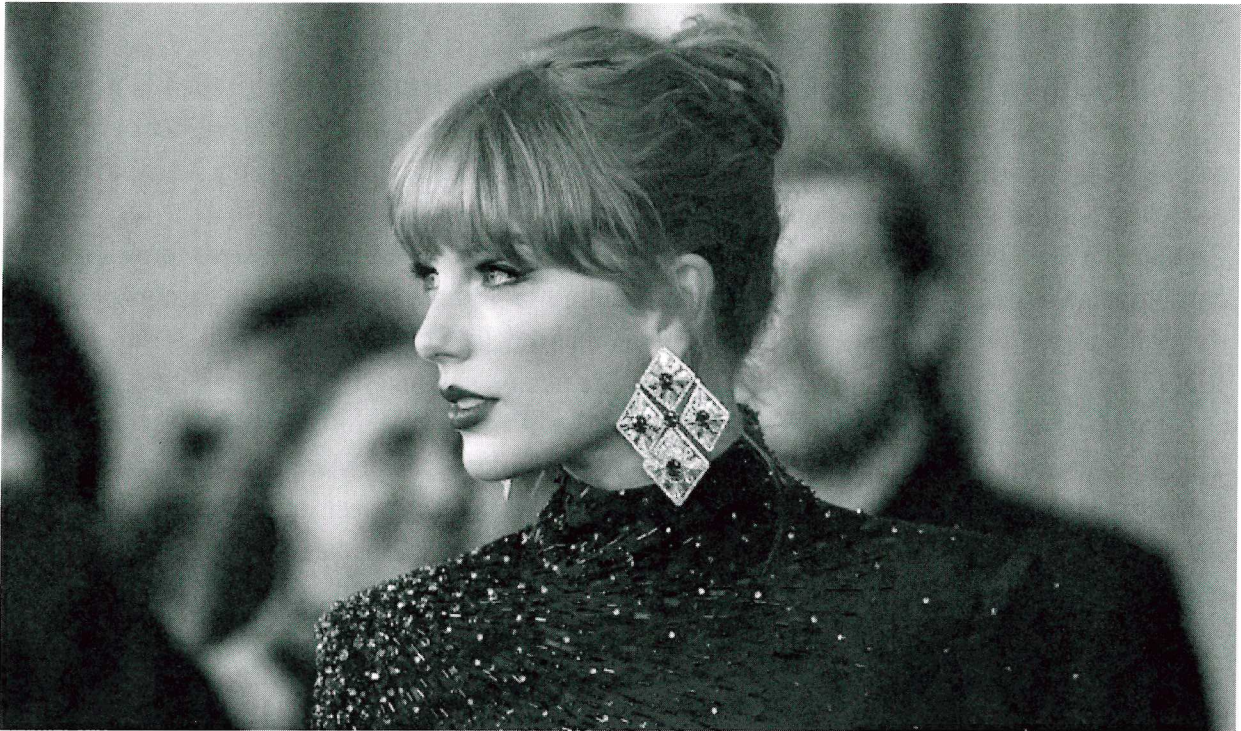
experiences” have been known to cause amnesia. (One commenter said the same thing had happened to her during her wedding.) No one had a good solution. But many had returned to consuming footage of the show, hoping it might spark something. As one person wrote, “I’ve done nothing but cling to the videos I took to take me back.” ♦

A woman dressed similarly to Taylor Swift gets ready to head out the front door.



“I’ll be there in three All Too Wells.”

Taylor Swift Is Coming for Your Daughters



Taylor Swift at the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, Calif., February 5, 2023.(David Swanson/Reuters)

By ARMOND WHITE

June 9, 2023 6:30 AM

What's behind the promotion of a pop demagogue?

The closest to negative criticism that pop star Taylor Swift ever received came in June 2019 when she released “You Need to Calm Down,” a song displaying her crafty mix of adolescent sensibility and political correctness. Her fans — Swifties — couldn’t decide whether she was preempting Gay Pride Month or appropriating it despotically. Swift doubled down on her exploitation/appropriation, performing the song again at a Chicago concert during her “Eras” tour timed for this year’s Pride events. It revealed her noxious but effective career strategies.

Not just a popstar with a catchy knack like Dua Lipa or Bruno Mars, ex-country singer Swift is undeniably political, a candidate for public worship with all the prevarication, duplicitousness, egotism, and menace that such a role implies. In her Chicago stump speech, she advocated,

This is a safe space for you. This is a celebratory space for you. . . .There have been so many pieces of harmful legislation that have put people in the LGBT community at risk. . . . That's why I'm always posting, "This is when the midterms are. This is when those important key primaries are."

And the media dutifully report her instigations. Veteran proto-feminist scribe Robert Christgau sized up Swift as "America's Ingenue" while his peers treat her as a favored daughter or a phenomenon of artistic significance no less than the Beatles or Michael Jackson. This bizarre heroizing typifies mainstream media's habitual partisanship.

Fact is, at 5 feet, 11 inches, Swift joins the lineup of the criminal cultural avatars Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama, who personify the envious ambition of the masses, earning recognition through dubious accomplishment. Her stilted manner recalls a high-school valedictorian with RBF. That's why "You Need to Calm Down" is not personal expression, but a con job.

This song-as-rant, in Swift's usual bubble-gum style, works especially well on adolescents who haven't learned to distinguish thoughts from enthusiasms. Swift appeals to the teenage need for identification. She's coming for America's daughters, and this makes her songs specious and dangerous.

Even *The Atlantic* complained that "queer folks have a right to feel queasy from the song," charging that "You Need to Calm Down" "hijacks queerness." Swift (whom one pop critic called "lyrically deft") rarely lets her pop skills get out of control, but the song's "gown/crown/loud" rhymes blatantly expropriate drag-queen lingo. A shout-out to gay media ("Are you mad / when you can be GLAAD? / 'Cause shade never made anybody less gay") hints at hidden animosity and veiled homophobia — signifying a diva's haughty bluff and resentment. She can't shake off that part of her act; it's her most human reflex. Swifties took the lyric "Are you okay?" to express concern because they didn't catch on to her sarcasm.

But 33-year-old Swift also hijacks adolescence, the proving ground of pop-music fanaticism. The bulk of her catalogue is a series of revenge songs, teaching girls how to think — not for themselves, but about only themselves. Boasting of serial monogamy yet always smarting over bad breakups, she uses boyfriends "as foils," one young male filmmaker objected.

On "I Forgot That You Existed," from *Lover*, the lyrics are just mean: "It isn't love, it isn't hate; it's just indifference." Her self-pleased chuckling "I thought that it would kill me, but it didn't" lacks Billie Holiday's noble masochism, noble because it was loving, stronger than it was painful, and sung with great, beautiful artistry that brought both women and men to heel — and maybe to heal.

Nothing Swift has written comes close to Holiday's wounded female experience or the great quizzical love lyrics of Bryan Ferry's "A Really Good Time," Morrissey's "This Charming Man," or Joni Mitchell's "Car on a Hill." Instead, her bratty voice fosters misandry. On "(I'd be) The Man" she snipes, "Like Leo in St. Tropez," showing the pettiness of a DiCaprio groupie. Then she humble-brags feminist spite: "I'd be a fearless leader / I'd be an alpha type." But the drag-king routine in Swift's self-directed video for that song (dialogue voiced by Dwayne Johnson) is pointless since, for her minions, she is already an alpha type.

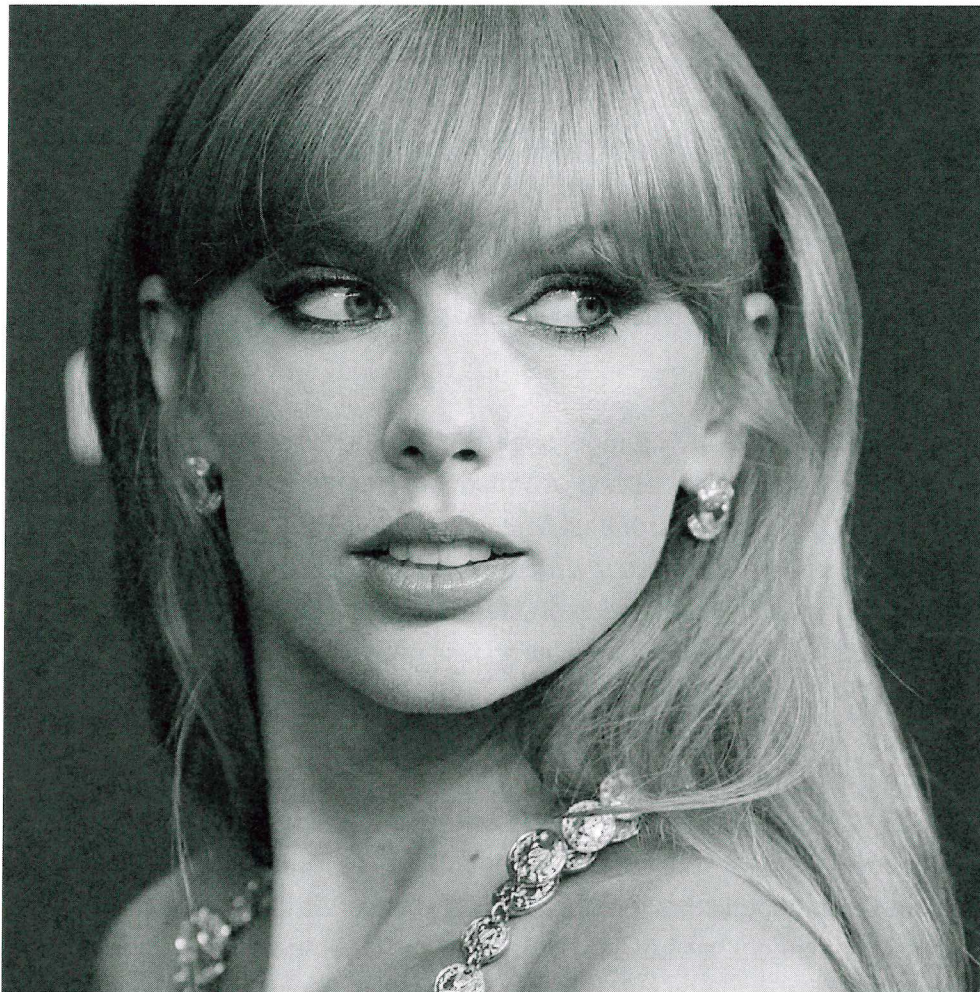
As one of the elites, Swift may be the obvious icon for the TikTok era, attracting Swifties who are media-addled victims of her demagoguery (a fan/celebrity dynamic that amounts to systemic peonage). But if Taylor Swift is an ideal, the state of modern girlhood is in trouble.

Is it coincidence that Swift's will-to-power (2008 to the present) coincided with Hillary Clinton's biggest ambition? Or that Kanye West was once her Obama-opponent (eventually conquered around the same time that #MeToo put the kibosh on Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby)? "Closure," from the album *Evermore*, repeats "I don't need your closure" in a voice like angry-wifey Hillary — if Hillary were ever candid or honest. Disingenuousness is Swift's trademark.

Manipulation is a Millennial ploy central to Swift's self-conscious media mania (re-recording her albums for contractual ownership, "directing" her music videos in the same anomic way that actress Olivia Wilde delegates feature films). It recalls how Spice Girls mania manipulated '90s feminists who you'd think were mature — but they harbored age-old regrets. Plus, there's always residual hostility within progressives, and Swift plays to that defensiveness, reigniting teenage insecurity and hostility for those adults in the media who make sure their princess is always prominently promoted.

Taylor Swift: The Good, The Limits, and The Ugly—Analyzing the Landscape of Music’s Biggest Star

By Matthew Ziko
Medium June 5, 2023



Taylor Swift is on tour. Many people in music think it’s the biggest tour in decades. Some are mentioning the unmentionable: Taylor Swift’s year has been bigger than: Elvis Presley’s arrival in 1956, The Beatles in 1964 (*A Hard Day’s Night*), and Michael Jackson’s 1983 (*Thriller*). Taylor Swift is about as famous as a musician gets. But how did it get this way? What has Swift done to surge her popularity like it’s 2015 all over again? What comes next?

Swift is a childhood star. She's always been famous. She signed an artist development deal with RCA at thirteen years old. It only took one lead single to realize that she was born for this. Not only to be a musician, songwriter and singer, but to be a star.

Ten studio albums later, Taylor Swift is at the top yet again. She's reached the point where she enchants the entire music industry. The fact is, right now, Swift sets the tone, and everyone else follows.

So let's talk about Swift, the environment surrounding her amazing run and a few things about the future.

The Good

Swift is a terrific songwriter, blending simple, and often similar, chord progressions into vastly different musical melodies, themes and arrangements. There's no doubt her music can often provide a limited amount of musical variability, but who needs complex mixolydian polyrhythms that most people don't even understand. The fact is, she has the things that really matter, you know... the things that speak to people: the vocals, the melodies and the lyrics. Everything else is gravy.

Swift may be good, or even great, but in my opinion, she's not an all-time songwriter. She doesn't ooze off the page like McCartney, Simon or Wilson. Her songs don't seem to reach the musicianship of "Blackbird," "Bridge Over Troubled Water," or "God Only Knows." Yet, she's just as much of a cultural force as all of those songwriters.

For years, I've been wondering what it is that makes Swift so special. There's no doubt that her career is turning into something truly unbelievable. Her release of *Midnights* this past year finally helped me understand.

Swift is so captivating because she is exceptional at being an artist. What do I mean by that? Everyone watches what she does. She's the first headline on every tabloid: music or personal life. She is her own Hollywood. Some actors are actors, and others are movie stars. That's not to say that "movie stars" aren't also good actors, but there's a difference. Anthony Hopkins is an actor. Brad Pitt is a movie star. Daniel Day-Lewis is an actor. Mark Wahlberg is a movie star. Taylor Swift is the music version of a movie star. It's just that she has the music skills to back it up. I want to be clear: she is the furthest thing from a fraud. The music skills may be her materials, but the stardom is her catapult.

She plays her career like a chessboard. She's constantly probing to make moves without making them. Frankly, she's the best CMO in the music industry. It's just that she doesn't run a company; she runs her career.

She collaborates, complementing her writing with folk and indie legends like Justin Vernon, Aaron Dessner and Jack Antonoff. The result was a splash at the Grammy and an awesome album with folklore.

She's playful. She empowers her fans at every moment. She builds new ones. She fuels drama. Her fans dedicate themselves to her. Being a Taylor Swift fan isn't a detail. It's a personality trait. It's a lifestyle.

Everything Swift touches turns into gold.

Take The Eras Tour happening right now. She's playing one or two cult-classics every night—each time a different one than last. It's keeping the diehards, and the world, on their toes. One night it's "Getaway Car." The next it's "mirrorball." Then "Tim McGraw."

"I was at the show when she played 'Maroon'."

"I was at the one when she brought out Ice Spice for 'Karma'."

She's aware of her influence, and she's leveraging it at every moment to propel herself even further than imaginable.

Swift has also been around for a long time. Now, she harnesses an impenetrable audience. It would be an executive's dream to have a market as wide reaching. She has the new Gen Z fans with her latest songs. She has the 20–30 year olds who were growing up when she was in her musical prime. She has the parents. She even has the male attendees too. Mac Jones. JJ Watt. Aaron Rodgers. It's frankly undeniable at this point. Dave Portnoy is vlogging after a Taylor Swift concert, yet he's hush hush about the courtside sports games he attends. From a guy who founded a company based solely on "the Boys," that tells you all that you need to know. She has millions of people in the palm of her hand.

Her concert is a spectacle. It's like an elongated Grammy performance. She's up there for over 3 hours, playing 40+ songs. I guess being a performer for this long allows her to be able to do this every night. Hard work pays off. It might be the most impressive thing I've seen her do. I'm really wondering what Sir Paul has to say about this. Sure, the Beatles could pull it off today, but there's no doubt what Swift is doing live is nothing short of incredible.

I've always watched Swift from the outside. I've never considered myself a fan directly, but there's no doubt that she has some amazing pop songs and albums. I think "Mean" is about as perfect as it gets for a mainstream pop song. But it's because of this outside mentality that my fascination with Swift's career has been double-sided—all of the things above (the good) and all of the things (the other) below.

The Limits

I went back through a bunch of artists' catalogs to try to rank their best songs. With most of the greats, I have little to no problem at least narrowing it down to 20. For Taylor, it's really difficult: "Do I like 'Blank Space' or 'You Belong With Me?' What about 'Enchanted' or 'New Year's Day?'" Maybe I like 'Champagne Problems' more than 'All Too Well'." There's such a wide range of acceptable answers. I guess that's the game you play when everything is structurally the same. In fact, I'm often confused how she can write the same chords over and over, and still continue to say the same thing but in a different way. Ultimately, that's the central job of a songwriter; she deserves great praise for this. At the same time, it's cool for a couple of albums, but after a while, it all blends together. It gets stale.

She's floating back and forth between what she wants musically. She crushes these acoustic, barebones country pop songs, and then has to do something different. From a person who is sick of the boundaries, I get it. But with *Lover* and *Midnights*, it's almost becoming a lever for her to pull when things are getting too down the middle. It's as if she's trying to mask her songs' oversimplicity.

I guess you could say this is "bad," but it's also something that I've known about Swift for years. She is who she is. She has her limits, but people dig her. So who cares? Bingo. Who cares is right.

I'm bringing this up because I've held Swift to a higher standard than 95% of other artists. She deserves to be. As of now, she still has yet to break into that coveted "all-time" musician category, and it has nothing to do with her popularity. She doesn't have a *Dark Side of the Moon*, a *Zeppelin IV*, or an *In Rainbows*. If *Midnights* turned out to be her last hoorah (which it isn't), then I'd still want more out of her discography.

Aside from the music, there's also a lack of thematic depth with Swift's catalog, and an over focus on romantic love. I can't tell you how many times I've completely understood a Taylor Swift song after the first listen. Sure, the lyrics are obvious, but they're also predictable; you know what you're getting when you turn on a new Taylor Swift song. It's great for making a hit, or tugging on the heart strings, but it leads to songs fading quickly. If there's nothing to discover, listeners move on. With the greats, you have no idea what their next project will bring. It's an element I really wish Swift had. Her best counter, and it's a damn good one, is to constantly come out with new material before people get bored. She's hyper-aware.

Again, I'm being picky here. But history has shown that with these great artists, there's an evolution of songwriting that comes with age. Their need for complexity grows, and they pretty much always come through — their music is who they are. I'm still waiting for Swift to get there.

On the career end, Swift called off her relationship with Joe Alwyn recently. From a person who doesn't follow her day-by-day, it was kind of a shocker. He was supposed to be "the 1" that propelled her into marriage for good. At least that's what my Swift fan friends had told me. He wasn't famous. He wasn't a playboy. And he wasn't a dick. It was perfect. Now, she's reconnecting with the 1975's Matty Healy. I'm wondering who will be next. I cannot believe this rodeo is still going.

We know the memes. We know the stories. We know "All Too Well" is about Gyllenhaal. We know "Style" is about Styles. We know "Dear John" is about Mayer... I mean she wasn't very secretive about that one.



Swift is 33 years old now. If she took some truth serum, she'd tell you that she's done with all of the Hollywood relationship stuff. Yet, she's fueling her own Hollywood relationship stuff (again, CMO of Swift Enterprises). You think her mouthing the same thing Matty Healy mouthed at her show was a coincidence? Think again. This stuff is real, but it's also planned. It's both. That's show biz. It's the WWE. You start to become what you are on stage, what you are in the media, and what you are in culture. Sometimes it's to the person's detriment, and you lose yourself in the process.

After this tour, this incredible run with *Midnights*, I hope she can take a step back for a long amount of time and move into a new era for good. We thought it was coming with Alwyn, but now it looks like this run is going to be extended. I have no idea what her personal life is like, but I can't imagine there are a whole lot of rainbows. For her, I'm worried about the old songwriter's quandary: Sometimes the songs start to write you.

John Mayer Responded To Several Harmful Messages, Including Death Threats, From A Taylor Swift Fan After He And Jake Gyllenhaal Received Backlash For Their Treatment Of Her Following The Rerelease Of "Red"

"I'm not upset, I just tend to have a curious mind and feel compelled to ask. Do you really hope that I die?" John wrote in response to several messages sent on Instagram.

Dua Lipa says she was sent death threats from Taylor Swift fans

Scooter Braun Asks Taylor Swift for Resolution After Receiving Death Threats

Scooter Braun took to Instagram to ask Taylor Swift for resolution to their feud after his family received death threats.

The Ugly

I've stayed away from this for years, and I never want to shine light on people who desperately want light to be shined on them, but this is becoming all too prominent recently. It's no secret that Taylor Swift fans are a powerful force on the internet. There are some diehard fans within "the Swifties" that can be weaponized into a bloodthirsty mob. They defend her every action. They deny any wrongdoing. They've even sent out threats to people in Swift's personal life. It's a crazy parasocial relationship. They argue for stuff that they don't know about.

This is what songwriters do. They tell stories. They dramatize. Songs aren't supposed to be objective, or fair. If you're reading the lyrics of "Lavender Haze" to prove that Joe Alwyn is a bad person in court, you might want to find something else. Take it from Swift herself: "I'm the problem, It's me."

The tough one is "Dear John," the longest studio song Swift has ever released. The song is about John Mayer, it's in the title. Although she still plays dumb that it's about him. It's a nasty, crooning Mayer-ified ballad that crushes for a listener. It's perfect for what she was aiming to do. It has his sulking guitar parts all over it (Listen to the lead guitar from 2:27 to 3:00. That might as well have been John himself playing those lines. Ouch!). It has the obvious lyrics. It goes right at the heart of his actions. It is one of the hardest hitting revenge songs I've ever heard.

Here is the Rolling Stone article on Mayer's reaction:

John Mayer says that he was "really humiliated" by Taylor Swift's song "Dear John," which the country-pop star allegedly wrote about him. "It made me feel terrible," Mayer says in the new issue of Rolling Stone, on newsstands Friday. "Because I didn't deserve it. I'm pretty good at

taking accountability now, and I never did anything to deserve that. It was a really lousy thing for her to do.”

Swift’s song, which appeared on her best-selling 2010 album *Speak Now*, was released shortly after Mayer went on a two-year hiatus following his controversial interviews with *Rolling Stone* and *Playboy*. “Dear John, I see it all, now it was wrong / Don’t you think 19 is too young to be played by your dark twisted games, when I loved you so?” Swift sings on the tune, a staple of her live set.

Swift and Mayer were romantically linked before the song’s release, and in an interview conducted shortly after, the singer indicated that the song’s subject would be apparent. “There are things that were little nuances of the relationship, little hints,” said Swift. “Everyone will know, so I don’t really have to send out emails on this one.”

Mayer now tells *Rolling Stone* that he learned about Swift’s feelings directly from her song. “I never got an e-mail. I never got a phone call,” he says. “I was really caught off-guard, and it really humiliated me at a time when I’d already been dressed down. I mean, how would you feel if, at the lowest you’ve ever been, someone kicked you even lower?” When asked about the song’s line, “Don’t you think I was too young to be messed with?” Mayer says, “I don’t want to go into that.”

Mayer also takes issue with “Dear John” as a musician. “I will say as a songwriter that I think it’s kind of cheap songwriting,” he says. “I know she’s the biggest thing in the world, and I’m not trying to sink anybody’s ship, but I think it’s abusing your talent to rub your hands together and go, ‘Wait till he gets a load of this!’ That’s bullshit.”

I wonder if Swift smiled when she read that. In fact, I know she did.

She plays into all of the John Mayer stereotypes. She knew this song would crush him. She knew the media would pounce on him like a cheap suit. Oh John, those damn “Vultures” hiding right outside your door.

My issue with all of this is not about Swift, and it’s not about Mayer. It’s not about the details. It’s not about “was she too young John?” Yes, she was too young. I’m certain Mayer is aware of that now.

My issue isn’t with Styles, or Gyllenhaal, or Jonas, or Alwyn, or whoever the next guy will be. This public flogging even happens for Dua Lipa and Scooter Braun (two non-romantic Swift figures). It can happen to anyone at this point. Where do we draw the line?

My issue is that people get so passionate about a side that they feel the need to send death threats to people or incessantly spread false information to prove that their side is the right one. With Hollywood relationships... who the fuck knows. Stop acting like you do.

Now that may sound obvious, but I promise, there are regular people who read this gospel. It's the price to pay for the fame, the money, and the legacy. But I'm bummed that these people get to win just off of the sheer volume of comments, posts and tweets. If you control the dialogue, you control the narrative.

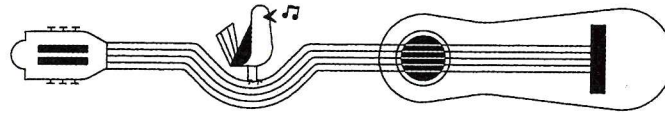
Obviously, Taylor asks for none of this craziness. She appreciates their support, but would never stand by some of the things these fans say. Or at least, wouldn't publicly. Still, she benefits from it. She can stay radio silent, and her name continues to grow.

She's too smart, and too good of a brand manager to ever touch anything related to this. After all, these are the people who would throw themselves off of a cliff if they had to. Don't bite the hand that feeds you. Most of all, it's an incredible illustration of how rampant a fanbase Swift has created.

I'm waiting for the day when she makes a bad move. But, I'm becoming more and more convinced that a bad move might not be in the cards. We're almost 20 years into this. That's a really long time. And it's not an in-and-out 20 years. It's an unquivering 20 years at the top. Through it all, time will only tell how long this run goes. I wonder if we'll be looking back wishing she could've hung it all up sooner. I wonder if she takes another leap in her songwriting. I wonder if she ever marries for good.

There are so many fascinating unanswered questions surrounding her run at the top of music. But for now, let's just enjoy the ride, and keep our eyes peeled.

THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

THE STORY OF US

The startling intimacy of Taylor Swift's Eras Tour.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

Critics are always bellyaching about the death of the monoculture—we no longer consume the same cultural objects at the same time or in the same way, and as a result we feel disconnected, adrift, lost. The mind-boggling inescapability of Taylor Swift's latest endeavor—a sixty-date stadium romp known as the Eras Tour—offers one enormous exception. The tour recaps all ten of Swift's studio albums, presenting each as an epoch, with its own elaborate sets, costumes, and vibes. (The scope of the show reinforces the hysterical demands on twenty-first-century pop stars: be something new every time you show up, or don't show up at all.) Swift cancelled her previous tour, in 2020; the sweeping concept of this one, combined with the long delay to see her live again, guaranteed that the demand for tickets would be preposterously high. Ticketmaster bungled the rollout so badly that the company received a public talking-to from Swift herself. Not long afterward, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing to investigate whether Live Nation Entertainment, which owns both Ticketmaster and many major concert venues, has an illegal monopoly. The tour, which concludes in November, could, by some foggy estimates, make Swift a billionaire.

I attended a show at MetLife Stadium, in New Jersey. It was a warm Saturday evening in May, and I wore a cardigan. My daughter, who is about to turn two, had picked out my socks, which had cats all over them—a little wink to the fans, I thought. (Swift loves cats.) Let me tell you: no one was looking at my socks. This crowd had made it fashion. The fits were shimmering and often be-

spoke. The eye makeup was elaborate. The pavement outside the stadium was dappled with thousands of fallen sequins. Strangers were mouthing the word "slay" to each other. Forearms were wrapped in bracelets featuring Swift-isms spelled out in lettered beads. I was seated in front of two people dressed as fully decorated Christmas trees. (Swift was brought up on a Christmas-tree farm in Pennsylvania.) The crowd was ecstatic, doting, and very sober. The line for chicken fingers was, per my calculation, fifteen times longer than the line for beer.

Swift has for years been a savant of what I might call "you guys" energy, a chatty, ersatz intimacy that feels consonant with the way we exist on social media—offering a glimpse of our private lives, but in a deliberate and mediated way. When Swift addressed the seventy-four thousand people who had gathered to see her, I felt as though she was not only speaking directly to me but confessing something urgent. After one long applause break, she said, "There's nothing I can say that can accurately thank you for doing that. You just, like, screamed your head off for an hour and a half. That was insane." Maybe it's her savvy use of what feels like the singular "you." When I attempted to explain this feeling to other people, it sounded as though I had been conned. Yet I'd prefer to think of it as an act of kindness: Swift sees each of us (literally—we were given light-up bracelets upon entering) and wants us to know it.

On TikTok, fans discuss each concert with a fervor and knowledge that reminds me of the grizzled heads who spend years analyzing old Grateful Dead set lists. Swift's show is famously long—

more than three hours. By the end, mothers were carrying out sleeping children. I found Swift's stamina astounding. (She is onstage the entire time, save costume changes.) Some eras translate better than others to the shape and echo of a football stadium. The lusty bite of "Reputation," for instance, overpowered the aching ballads of "evermore." There were some nice surprises: Phoebe Bridgers came out to sing "Nothing New," a wounded song from "Red (Taylor's Version)," and the Bronx-born rapper Ice Spice performed on a smug remix of "Karma." Toward the end of the set, Swift does two acoustic songs, on piano or guitar. It's the only part of the show that reliably changes. That night, she performed "Holy Ground" and "False God." The latter is one of Swift's most carnal songs. "I know heaven's a thing/I go there when you touch me," she sings.

Swift's voice has become richer and stronger over the years; its clarity and tone foreground her lyrics. Played on piano, absent the R. & B. production of the studio version, "False God" felt, suddenly, like a reflective song about resigning yourself to failure. Love and sex are a trap, its lyrics suggest; never trust the fantasy sold to you by pop songs:

We might just get away with it
The altar is my hips
Even if it's a false god.

Swift is sometimes described as "professional," which feels like a pejorative—it suggests decorum, efficiency, steadiness, and various other qualities that, in general, have nothing to do with great art. She has perhaps been unfairly dismissed as too capable and too practiced,

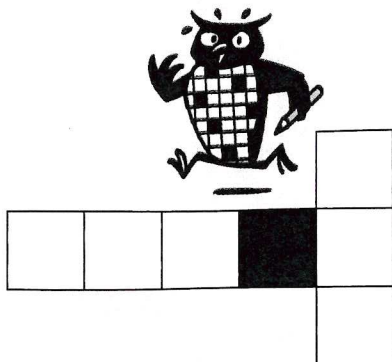
SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB LEVEY / GETTY; OPPOSITE: ERRATA CARMONA



Online, fans discuss Swift's concerts with a fervor reminiscent of the grizzled heads who analyze old Grateful Dead set lists.

ILLUSTRATION BY CECILIA CARLSTEDT

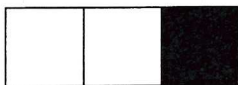
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an overachieving, class-president type. I'll admit that I've struggled, at times, with the precision of her work. If you're someone who seeks danger in music, Swift's albums can feel safe; it's hard to find a moment of genuine musical discord or spontaneity. Over time, though, I've come to understand this criticism of Swift as tangled up with some very old and poisonous ideas about genius, most of which come from men slyly rebranding the terrible behavior of other men. (Swift sees it this way, too. On "The Man," she imagines life without misogyny: "I'd be a fearless leader/I'd be an alpha type.")

The intense parasocial bond that Swift's fans feel with her—the singular, desperate throb of their devotion—can swing from charming to troublesome. When Swift debuts new costumes, as she did in New Jersey, a wave of glee washes over Twitter. But when she puts out a new song ("You're Losing Me") with lyrics that suggest romantic turmoil ("And I wouldn't marry me either/A pathological people pleaser"), it can provoke vitriol—in this case toward the actor Joe Alwyn, Swift's former partner. (Weeks earlier, Swifties were outraged after one of Alwyn's co-stars posted a photo of him on a scooter, which was read as an egregious slight because Swift has been in a public battle with a music executive named Scooter Braun.) It's hard enough to understand a relationship when you're inside it; trying to piece together a narrative via song lyrics and a few paparazzi photos seems like a fundamental misunderstanding of human relations. Swift was recently rumored to be dating Matty Healy, of the British rock band the 1975. Healy is, depending on whom you ask, either an irascible provocateur or a disgusting bigot. Some of Swift's fans deemed him a racist torture-porn enthusiast, owing to comments he made on a podcast, and groused about him after he and Swift were photographed together. Though it would be easy, and maybe even correct, to dismiss this sort of hullabaloo as ultimately innocuous—just people being hyperbolic online, in the same way one might tweet, say, "Taylor Swift can run me over with a tractor"—the swarm-and-bully tactic feels at odds with Swift's music, which has always lionized the misunderstood underdog. Maybe Healy deserves it. Alwyn, at least, seems innocent. This is the obvious flip side of Swift's

purposeful cultivation of intimacy. From afar, her fans' possessiveness appears both mighty and frightening.

Still, the intensity of her fandom manifests so differently offline. Swift's performance might be fixed, perfect (it has to be, of course, to carry a tour so technically ambitious), but what happens in the crowd is messy, wild, benevolent, and beautiful. I was mostly surrounded by women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. As Swift herself once sang, on "22," that particular stretch into post-adolescence is marked by feeling "happy, free, confused, and lonely at the same time." The camaraderie in the audience invited a very particular kind of giddiness. My best friend from childhood had accompanied me, and when she returned from the concession stand carrying two Diet Pepsis so enormous that they required her to bear-hug them for safe transport, I started laughing harder than I have laughed in several years.

As the night went on, I began to understand how Swift's fandom is tied to the primal urge to have something to protect and be protected by. In recent years, community, one of our most elemental human pleasures, has been decimated by COVID, politics, technology, capitalism. These days, people will take it where they can get it. Swift often sings of alienation and yearning. She has an unusual number of songs about being left behind. Not by the culture—though I think she worries about that, too—but by someone she cared about who couldn't countenance the immensity of her life. In her world, love is conditional and frequently temporary. ("You could call me 'babe' for the weekend," she sings on "t'is the damn season," a line I've always found profoundly sad.) On the chorus of "The Archer," she sings, "Who could ever leave me, darling?/But who could stay?" Toward the end of the song, she adds a more hopeful line: "You could stay."

As she sang that "you" on Saturday, she raised an arm and pointed directly to the audience. Swift has written many songs that describe her devotion as a punishment to be endured. "I love you, ain't that the worst thing you ever heard?" she bellows on "Cruel Summer." She believes that the force of her affection will push people away. But her fans have remained. They have buoyed her; in turn, she has given them everything. ♦