

The Tortured Poets Department and the Taylor Swift phenomenon

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Taylor Swift is inescapable at the moment. The singer has released 11 albums, four of them in the past four and a half years. She recently completed the highest-grossing tour of all time, which was crowned with the highest-grossing concert film of all time. These processes have made her a billionaire. At the Super Bowl, she kissed her boyfriend Travis Kelce of the victorious Kansas City Chiefs before what was estimated to be the largest television audience since the 1969 moon landing.

The press analyzes Swift's lyrics for references to her private life, and waits expectantly (or anxiously) for her to endorse a candidate in the 2024 US presidential election. A professor at Harvard is teaching an English class about her.

But Swift's music does not justify her record-shattering success and adulation. *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), the singer's latest album, makes this clear. The extended version of the album includes 31 nearly indistinguishable songs and lasts for more than two hours. It is largely tedious, rapid and self-centered. Instead of the poetry that the album title promises, the lyrics resemble teenage journal verse, including the inevitable pretentiousness.

From the second track, "The Tortured Poets Department":

And who's gonna hold you like me?
(Who's gonna hold you? Who's gonna hold you?)
And who's gonna know you like me?
(Who's gonna know you?)
I laughed in your face and said
"You're not Dylan Thomas, I'm not Patti Smith
This ain't the Chelsea Hotel, we're modern idiots"
And who's gonna hold you like me?
(Who's gonna hold you? Who's gonna hold you?)

Swift is best understood not as an artist but as a creation of the music industry and a reflection of the present state of cultural decline. She was born in West Reading,

Pennsylvania, in 1989. Her father is a former stockbroker for Merrill Lynch, and her mother worked as a mutual fund marketing executive. When she was growing up, Swift enjoyed the privileges of America's financial elite. She spent summers at her family's vacation home in Stone Harbor, New Jersey, where the median price of a house is \$2.5 million.

Swift was groomed for the music industry from a young age. Her parents began taking her to auditions when she was only 11 years old. After her parents had given her guitar lessons and a talent manager, she was offered an artist development deal in Nashville at age 13. The family moved to Tennessee, and Swift was teamed with professional Nashville songwriters.

By age 15, the singer had a record deal with a company in which her father bought a stake. Swift began cowriting songs with industry professionals for her debut album. *Taylor Swift* (2006) found an audience primarily among teenage girls who listened to country music and reached No. 1 on the *Billboard* Country chart. It was the first in a string of commercial successes.

Swift branched out into other musical styles on subsequent albums. *Speak Now* (2010) and *Red* (2012) ventured into rock. The latter also essayed synth-pop, which Swift plumbed further in *1989* (2014). Other successful albums included *Folklore* (2020), which explores a folkly vein, and the mellow, retro *Midnights* (2022).

Though Swift's musical style has varied, her lyrics have largely focused on herself (specifically, her feelings, her relationships and her reception by fans and the media). In any important way, the outside world hardly makes an appearance in Swift's songs. Nor has her perspective matured appreciably over time, which is perhaps not surprising for someone who was absorbed by the music industry at age 13.

If *The Tortured Poets Department* is Swift's bid to cement her reputation as a serious artist, then it fails. The atmosphere is soporific, the accompaniment anonymous, the tempos moderate to slow. The keyboards and drums evoke

easy listening from the early 1980s, and song follows nondescript song ad infinitum.

Swift's singing, although adequate, shows no emotional or dynamic variation. Her delivery is little more than a sigh for most of the album. Florence Welch of Florence and the Machine sings with Swift on "Florida!!!" Welch's self-serious theatricality is usually hard to stomach, but here she provides welcome relief.

The bulk of the album is given over to love songs. But for a thirtysomething woman, Swift has remarkably little interesting to say about romance. In fact, her often purple lyrics do not go much beyond the adolescent level. Many of the songs center on one or another cliché, like "I Can Fix Him (No, Really I Can)" and "imgonnagetyouback." Swift doesn't describe these romances in memorable or original ways. Nor does she show genuine insight into human relationships or her own feelings.

The smoke cloud billows out his mouth
Like a freight train through a small town
The jokes that he told across the bar
Were revolting and far too loud
They shake their heads saying, "God, help her"
When I tell them he's my man
But your good Lord doesn't need to lift a finger
I can fix him, no, really I can
And only I can
("I Can Fix Him (No, Really I Can)")

Instead of showing self-knowledge, Swift indulges in self-dramatization and self-pity. She presents herself as a victim seeking vengeance in "Who's Afraid of Little Old Me?" "I Can Do It with a Broken Heart," is a superficial song about Swift's travails as a megastar. In one song, she even compares herself self-servingly to a martyred Cassandra ("They knew, they knew, they knew the whole time / That I was onto somethin").

Swift uses other songs, such as "The Smallest Man Who Ever Lived," to settle scores. Rumored to be aimed at fellow media personality Kim Kardashian, "thanK you aMee," includes the rather pompous taunt, "I built a legacy that you can't undo."

How has Swift achieved such phenomenal success with albums like this? To some extent, her rise can be attributed to the persona she has cultivated, together with the music industry. In the interest of mass appeal, the singer offers something to everyone: a little bit acoustic and country, a little bit electric and urban, a *souppçon* of sexiness, a pinch of feminism, and a lot of spectacle. At the same time, Swift has

taken pains not to offend anyone and to remain relatively "apolitical." She won't "corrupt the youth" or inspire critical thinking, which is music to the ears of the industry.

In addition, many of her fans are young people with little experience of life and still developing critical faculties. The themes of romance and adolescent struggles in her lyrics may resonate with them. They see Swift as a cheerful and nonthreatening "rebel" who validates their outlook without challenging it. To some extent, young people project their own desires and fantasies on the singer, a cultural lowest common denominator. In any case, what popular music have they heard in recent years? The backwardness of hip-hop doesn't appeal to everyone, but what choices does the mainstream music industry offer?

Swift also arises out of the remarkable and ongoing monopolization and narrowing at the top of the music industry. Record companies, artist management, broadcasting and concert ticketing and promotion, respectively, have come to be dominated by two or three corporate goliaths each. Of the 2 million artists on Spotify, less than 4 percent account for over 95 percent of streams. In 1982, the top 1 percent of artists took in 26 percent of total concert revenue; by 2017, the number was 60 percent.

This process has sharply reduced not only corporate competition but also the range of artists who enjoy exposure to mass audiences. It has resulted in the flattening of the cultural landscape and the narrowing of tastes.

In short, Swift's great success is a symptom of the decay in popular music over the past several decades. It reflects an official culture unwilling or unable to look at itself critically and honestly.

There are indications, however, that the situation is changing. Shaken by ongoing war, inequality, fascism and genocide, artists have begun to speak out. Macklemore's forthright denunciation of the genocide in Gaza, and of Joe Biden for his role in it, is a healthy sign. *Hind's Hall* has gone viral, indicating a thirst for music with serious, substantive messages. Though they have the backing of the entire music industry, artists like Swift cannot satisfy this thirst. But others will.



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