

Michele Lallai

TAYLOR SWIFT THE ONE

reading copy

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Taylor Swift – The One

A special thanks goes to Stefania Tramonte
who has made her rich archive with kindness and enthusiasm.
Thanks also to Duygu, who always knows how to support me
and help me to bring out my best self.
A small thank you also to Zelda for the purrs.

Cover: Taylor Swift arriving to the 2023 Video Music Awards at the Prudential
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www.pendragon.it

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Introduction

PENNSYLVANIA. An area with a dramatic and complex history, home to important native tribes such as the Iroquois and Shawnee, the location of brutal battles, and the site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, which gave birth to the United States of America. Then there are the Appalachian Mountains, tornadoes, the first oil well, the Delaware River. Pennsylvania has been a fertile land of fortune for many and the scene of great misfortune for others. Either way, it is a land of history - and stories.

The story in these pages begins on December 13, 1989, when Andrea Gardener Finley and her husband, Scott Kingsley Swift, first held baby Taylor in the maternity ward of Brampton Civic Hospital in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. A fragile creature saying hello to life, a baby girl like many, but with a special destiny. No one could have imagined on that day that within a few years she would become one of the most famous women, one of the most creative and prolific artists, a symbol for millions and one of the richest businesspeople on the planet.

Thirty-four years later, as this book is being written, Taylor is literally on top of the world. She is crisscrossing the planet with *The Eras Tour*, while she is securing the rights to her previous albums with unprecedented legal and commercial deals. The world has been following her for 18 years and is inspired by the stories scattered between the notes of her songs: words Taylor addresses to herself, but also messages to people who want to listen to her, empathize with her, and recognize themselves in the reality of a woman who is indeed extraordinary, but like everyone else, full of strengths and weaknesses, highs and lows, successes and disappointments.

As you read this book, you will realize, line by line, that Taylor Swift's story has the features of a fairy tale, but drained of the

more frivolous part and enriched by a realism that forces you to come to terms – along with the magic and the wonder – with the flipside, made up of sweat and suffering.

But her life is also a coming-of-age novel: a child prodigy with music running through her veins, growing up with those who listened to her and supported her, witnessing the transition from young country promise to world-renowned pop artist, with everything in between as she matures from child to woman.

And then there is the music. Everything in Taylor's life revolves around musical notes; they are the element that keeps Planet Swift in balance: despite her popularity and the obligation to live up to her image, Tay is a thriving plant that does not wilt, constantly nourished by her art and her music scores, which have roots firmly planted in the fertile soil of her world.

One cannot write about her character without considering the artist, and vice versa, so in the following pages you will read a narrative of life and music that are inseparable. This is the only way to tell her story, to understand that we are living with her one of the most remarkable examples of musical and social history of the last thirty years.

To maintain a linear narrative and to follow the genesis of each album, only the tracks included in the original first editions of each album are analyzed in this book, ignoring reissues, bonus tracks, and special editions. Have fun reading!

How a Star is Born

TAYLOR WAS A HAPPY CHILD, in a stable family situation and she enjoyed a direct, healthy relationship with nature. Mum Andrea and Dad Scott were well-off and were able to settle on a four-and-a-half-acre estate used for growing Christmas trees. In the large house built by her grandfather, Taylor lived the first years of her life in a tranquil atmosphere, free to explore and experience the wonders of life. She was a curious little girl, watching the plants grow, studying the flowers, birds and insects buzzing all around.

Every activity Taylor performed on the property was a scientific experiment – even stepping barefoot in a puddle to feel the soft, wet texture of the mud was a small step forward in increasing our knowledge of how the world works. In this setting, creativity exploded in a thousand shapes and colors, the stimuli for traveling with the mind and constructing stories were potentially endless.

In the song “The Best Day” (from the second album “Fearless”), Tay paints a portrait of this time: she mentions pumpkins, tractors, and sunsets among the sweet words she devotes to her mother. When she sings “*I have an excellent father, his strength is making me stronger,*” she also sends a clear and direct message of love to her Daddy; these are words every parent would like to hear.

Scott and Andrea were close, far from a perfect couple, but able to feel and convey genuine love. They met on a business trip to Houston, Texas, when Scott was running his financial firm, The Swift Group, and Andrea was the head of marketing for a mutual fund. They both had a background in finance, and it was a real family affair for him: both his father and grandfather were in the same business, and his business took off following an excellent education. The Swift family has excellent skills in organizing,

managing and investing capital, perhaps not the most creative of jobs, but certainly one that has provided several generations with a life of prosperity and economic stability.

Andrea is also excellent in business; she is a self-confident woman capable of reaching high positions in corporate hierarchies and assuming important responsibilities. In the U.S. of the 1980s, finance was an almost entirely male-dominated field, and Andrea's success was driven by a strong determination and desire to assert herself; therefore, when her path crossed Scott's, the idea of a family was immediately put on the back burner, far removed from either of their professional priorities.

But love, when it enters the chemistry of a relationship, is like a river that overflows over everything and there is no way to resist it. Scott and Andrea were married on February 20, 1988, and moved from Texas to the Swift family estate in Pennsylvania. Andrea's belly began to swell, and in December of the following year, she gave birth to the family's firstborn, Taylor Alison.

“What a character! She knows what she wants and how to get it”. These were the words of a nurse who worked with her in the early days, a first sign of Taylor's innate sense of achievement, a constant that would continue to make a difference along her personal and artistic journey.

At the age of two, amidst cuddles and somersaults on the lawn, Taylor hummed, or rather made sounds, trying to replicate what she heard on the radio and television. It was an uncertain, halting singsong and certainly not so pleasant for Mom Andrea to hear, especially if repeated for several hours during the day.

Taylor was a newcomer to the world, constantly exploring, getting used to the air coming out of her lungs and vibrating her vocal cords, moving her tongue to change the sound, running it through her mouth and nose. Pure experimentation and stimulation of the senses, an activity that requires perseverance and a desire to learn – and masses of fun. She listened to the songs, processed them, and tried to repeat them again and again, until those sharp, uncertain sounds became more and more like notes and melodies.

So many moments have been captured by the family in home movies, which now stand as a wonderful testimony to her growth, including her first songs, uncertain in tone and lyrics: little Tay's voice is somewhere between a squirrel's squeak and a frog's croak, tender enough to melt the heart, but already free and pure as artistic expression should be.

Summers and winters passed in Berks County, and she never stopped singing. As she grew up, her ability to quickly and effortlessly learn both melodies and lyrics became apparent. After an evening at the movies watching a musical, she would sing entire sections of the soundtrack almost verbatim on the way home, to the amazement of her parents. The talent was there for all to see, unmistakable.

In Andrea and Scott's evening conversations, before they turned out the lights and ended another day, their thoughts turned to their daughter, for something was blossoming in her. She was a radiant child who had not experienced any serious childhood trauma and had always lived in a setting of love and harmony, without too many faults or limitations on expression. Her relationship with her little brother, Austin, born a few years after her, is also caring and fun-loving. What she shows with her voice is pure expression of her essence, a creative personality that comes out through music.

Tay has always had someone by her side to listen to her in her time of need, to hug and comfort her when she is sad, and to share the joy of the most beautiful moments. Her singing is not about wanting to attract attention, on the contrary, it is the feeling of a child so comfortable in the bosom of her family that she lets her creativity explode without restraint, even at the risk of being boring at times, but free to reveal herself because she is protected and loved.

Taylor's talent was nurtured in an open and comfortable environment, fertile ground for turning the desire to tune notes into a true passion. The dream of writing and singing her own music would then be a logical consequence.

Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Swift had very different visions of her

future when they first held her in their arms. In the conversation about “what she’s going to do when she grows up,” the world of money and investing seemed to beckon: three generations of brokers and financial advisors on her father’s side, a career as a skilled marketer in the same industry for her mother, and a shared passion for the investment world which set the stage for a happy marriage. Tay herself, when she found out what her parents did outside the home, was to realize that a significant part of her world revolved around these issues. It didn’t take much imagination to figure that out.

What no one had considered was that traits, tendencies, and abilities influenced by genetics, can also make a generational leap, and that is where Marjorie Moehlenkamp Finlay, Andrea’s mother and Taylor’s loving grandmother, comes in.

Marjorie is the wild card in this story, the extrovert figure outside the logic of the typical American family, who played a key role in Taylor’s artistic growth. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1928, she showed an early interest in singing, earned a degree in music from Lindenwood College in 1949, and shortly thereafter joined the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. In between stage appearances and a job as a bank teller, a long-awaited opportunity came when she entered a contest and won the chance to lend her voice to a commercial. This earned her a 15-month radio tour that opened up new perspectives and acquaintances, major music studies, and an engagement to Robert Finlay that culminated in marriage and a series of trips around the Americas – Cuba, Puerto Rico, Caracas, and finally back to the U.S. with two beautiful little girls... one named Andrea.

Marjorie became popular in Puerto Rico, where she hosted a TV show and performed in concerts, operas and exclusive clubs. She recorded an LP in Mexico and also brought her music to the U.S., performing several famous arias in the early 1960s.

At a young age, Marjorie was a long-limbed woman with a typical American pin-up charm. Her long neck, voluptuous figure and sweet facial lines are aesthetic characteristics that live on in her granddaughter today.

The relationship between granddaughter and grandmother developed right from the start on a dynamic of complicity and kindness. They both sought each other out, had fun together, and Marjorie saw herself again in the eyes of this little blonde girl, cheering her on to never stop, singing with her, leading by example as an artist who had dedicated her life to music, loving every single day. Taylor proudly sings that she has the same look as her mother, but everything else comes from her grandmother, and she understood that early on.

Marjorie was to die in 2003 at the age of 74, and it would be a huge blow to a 14-year-old girl on the verge of success who would have wanted to share every single milestone with the person who inspired her most.

Marjorie left this world just as another life was beginning to blossom, marking a handover that made Taylor's artistic and personal journey even more meaningful. Without her grandmother, her career might not have been the same, and this is underscored in the track Marjorie from the album "Evermore". In the chorus, Taylor repeats: "*What dies doesn't stay dead, you're alive inside me*" and "*Your closets full of backward dreams, you left them all to me*".

Little Taylor's dreams, however, did not embrace the notes of classical music and opera, but took the form and voice of country artists such as LeAnn Rimes, Faith Hill, Shania Twain, and the Dixie Chicks. For a kid growing up in rural Pennsylvania, surrounded by a community that tended to be conservative, and a family with Christian principles, country music in the 1990s was the soundtrack to every single day, heard on radio, television, and at local events.

It is difficult for Europeans to understand the phenomenon of country music: it is a genre that has hardly ever left the shores of North America and is still part of the rural traditions and social fabric and is popular especially away from the big cities of the West and East coasts.

Acoustic guitar, banjo, everyday American life told as if it were a story, perhaps with the artistic use of the twang, that is, the accent marked by a very nasal voice typical of the rural

areas. Country is the folk music that everyone can identify with, including Taylor, who had been listening to it since elementary school.

Among Taylor's favorite artists, all the ones I mentioned are women, but they were obviously not the only musicians she listened to (her family also listened to pop and rock, including Def Leppard, with whom she would have a future collaboration), but the greatest inspiration came from a young girl's immersion in a strongly male musical context that only opened some doors to the opposite sex at the end of the millennium. Female participation in the industry has boosted the media power of the genre, which has brought a strong feminist voice to American conservatism, with new stories about women written by women.

Tay is fascinated by the charisma of these female artists and the stories of emancipation, love, resistance, and pride. These voices and words resonate with her: "I can see myself in these lyrics, it's a gut thing". They are stories of strong women, in which she can see the tenacity of her mother, who stood out in a man's world of finance, or perhaps the dreamy life of her grandmother, who sang of her own freedom all over the world.

Inspired, she did not wait long to pick up a pen and begin experimenting with stanzas, even diving into the fun of composing rhyming poems. "Writing became a necessity, I began to do it obsessively, searching for the perfect combination of words, syllables and rhymes that could bring out emotions and moods".

Between the ages of nine and ten, she filled notebook after notebook with sentences, even winning a writing contest with the poem "Monster in My Closet", inspired in part by the fantasy readings of those years. That prize is the recognition that gave her a strong push toward songwriting, as if small signals from the future were guiding her hand between the lines.

Write, make mistakes, erase, try again. Notebook after notebook, the talent for writing stories slowly moved towards the talent for singing. During a summer vacation, Taylor wrote

a 350-page short story (who knows if it will ever be published), and the excellent grades when she returned to school only confirmed a mastery of the English language superior to that of her peers.

Stories of love and friendship among Christmas trees, forests, animals and fictional characters. The world of dreams meets the everyday life of the country, including the hardships of growing up and the first insecurities.

Sentences of self-criticism and introspection appeared: Taylor was already taller than average compared to her classmates, and this caused her social discomfort, which fueled a stern view of herself. She could be very hard on herself at times, harder than her mother ever was, and this self-questioning would remain a prominent feature of her personality, both in a positive sense, always pushing her to improve herself, and in a negative sense, often blaming the low blows that fame brings.

In between stories, Taylor didn't stop singing, and with her family she took part in karaoke nights at local bars, finding it thrilling to receive applause for yet another beautifully performed song. The next step for her was to enter and win competitions. There was determination in her decisions, and her parents decided to support her, noting that the thrill of performing in front of an audience was like a dopamine shot – she couldn't get enough!

One of these nights, she won a competition singing “Big Deal” by LeAnn Rimes. The prize was to be the opening act for American music legend Charlie Daniels. This performance gave her some exposure, and Tay was invited by some soccer teams to sing the American anthem before the game. It may seem like a small thing, but these games drew tens of thousands of people. Just her, without filters or music, in the total silence of the crowd, was a big test that she passed with flying colors, demonstrating excellent anxiety management skills and remarkable self-control.

In addition to these performances, Taylor also dabbled in theater, performing in small-scale musicals. During an audition

on Broadway, New York, she met vocal coach Kirk Cramer, who began to support her as a manager and succeeded in finding her both more musicals and the opportunity to record some songs.

For her first tentative contact with a recording studio, Taylor chose to interpret songs by Dolly Parton, LeAnn Rimes and the Dixie Chicks with a solid approach to what she was beginning to see as something serious.

Music became more and more prominent in Taylor's daily life. Andrea, Scott and her brother Austin were active supporters and enthusiastically accompanied her from event to event. At no point did her parents put pressure on her, but they did what they could to meet her requirements, and as Taylor herself says, "I was often the one who was annoying and boring, while they were always encouraging me to be calm. They supported me because they believed in me".

Amidst the constant chatter and daydreaming, one placename kept coming up: Nashville. The city on the banks of the Cumberland River is not only the capital of Tennessee, but also the capital of country music. This is where the genre was born, where its biggest stars were raised, and where most of the specialized record labels are based. In fact, they are all in one neighborhood, Music Row.

Tay had a lot of passion, a lot of experience with audiences, and a CD of recordings ready to be heard by a producer. In her bedtime thoughts, just before falling asleep, she realized that the next step was already in front of her eyes: trying to break into the orbit of the record companies that matter – in Nashville.

With her mind focused on the goal, she decided to take guitar lessons from a computer technician, a family friend who offered to help her with her first efforts with the instrument. Her thin fingers, stained with ink and worn with calluses from hours of practicing on the strings, began to form the first stanzas of a song that Taylor dedicated to a boy, a neighbor, whom she gazed at with dreamy eyes but who did not pay much attention to her. The first disappointment materialized as she poured out her feelings in the form of lyrics and melody.

At the age of eleven, Taylor filled her schoolbooks with phrases and rhymes, practiced guitar every day, and continued to dream of Music Row. The obsession to go to Nashville became like a tormenting jingle in Andrea and Scott's ears, so much so that they finally gave in.

Andrea agreed to take them to the country music capital for a tour of the major record companies, but on one condition: she, Taylor, would have to do everything, from presenting the demo to exchanging contacts with agencies. It was as if the family has placed the fate of her future career in Taylor's hands, making her responsible for her own decisions and distancing themselves from those manager moms, o "momagers", whose overprotective attitude often ruins bright young talents.

Floating on cloud nine, Taylor prepared a few copies of her demo, printing her photo on the cover and writing her phone number on the back. You can imagine her excitement at the thought of breathing the air of Music Row, the neighborhood that for years has been idealized as hallowed ground, the end point of a 650-mile road trip with mother and brother in tow. Way better than a trip to Disneyland.

"I was on a high, I got there, I could see the record company buildings and I wanted to stop at every front door. I walked into Mercury Records, so excited, and I said to the receptionist, 'Hi, my name is Taylor and I want a record deal... call me!'"

The phone didn't ring for a few weeks, until one of the companies got in touch: "Keep it up, don't stop," was the message. No concrete suggestion, but the advice to do something to stand out, perhaps by offering something original and not just covers.

Taylor decided to double down and alternate between practicing her guitar and spending evenings with pen and notebook in hand. She realized that "You don't get to Nashville by chance; to grab their attention, they have to see me as something different from the hundreds of other people who are trying to make it".

After one of her now frequent performances at a football game, she was approached by a man named Dan Dymitrow,

who, intrigued by her voice, left her a business card with a request to hear more. He was the manager of another talented young woman, Britney Spears, and the opportunity was incredibly lucrative for Taylor. With her father, she decided to put together a little homemade video: her singing a few verses on the guitar, the cat, the couch, and the cozy family atmosphere. This was the real context of Taylor's life, and what emerges from the home movie is genuine, adding to the authenticity of her music.

Dan's interest was definitely piqued, and confirmation with a small live performance in the manager's studio was a mere formality. Taylor immediately entered a new milieu by taking part – as a somewhat awkward model – in a photo shoot for Abercrombie & Fitch. This appeared in the pages of "Vanity Fair", which hailed her as a rising talent in American music.

That was certainly not the path Taylor wanted to take; image and the desire to appear in public came second to her wish to make it as a songwriter: "Right now, music is my whole life, and I want to touch people's hearts with my songs." Dan then pointed his compass back to Music Row, and after the re-release of one of her songs on the Maybelline cosmetics brand's "Chicks with Attitude" compilation, Tay was being well received in the offices of several major labels.

They liked the girl, that's for sure. Within weeks, RCA Records, one of the country's largest record companies, offered her a "development deal": the company would take over the artist's development until they felt she was ready for her recording debut. "Oh my God, one of the biggest companies in the business wants to sign me up, I can't wait!" was her immediate thought, leading to the signing of the deal.

Within a few days, the world around Taylor began to spin much faster. Andrea and Scott had a long talk and decided that the best thing to do was to pack up and move to Nashville. Mr. Swift's job didn't require him to be tied to one city, and the move would be like a breath of fresh air for the family.

The weight of responsibility fell on Tay's shoulders. Although the family was fully supportive of the move and tried not to

dwelt too much on the enormity of such a decision, she knew that everyone was making a real effort: “Even though they haven’t put any pressure on me, I know I’m the only reason we’re moving to Nashville. They are changing their lives so that I can live my dream”.

Dad Scott fell in love with a lakefront home in a smart Nashville neighborhood and decided to buy it sight unseen. It would later prove to be a spot-on decision that everyone in the family would appreciate.

Taylor and Austin immediately began attending the neighborhood school, Hendersonville, and things immediately looked different. In the Music City environment, Taylor’s passion was appreciated by her new friends, and she quickly gained support from her schoolmates for her new commitment to RCA.

It was a far cry from Pennsylvania, where her unique personality and decidedly off-beat interests had earned her the label of “weirdo”. The open-mindedness of the young people in the new town was like a breath of fresh air: it helped to instill courage and motivation into the everyday life of a 14-year-old girl who, like all developing personalities, sought acceptance and comfort in the social sphere.

Time passed, the whole family adjusted to the new life, and the contract with RCA no longer seemed as advantageous as when it was signed. The company did not support Taylor in making new music, but merely kept an eye on her, intending to have her record her first album after she turned 18.

She was disappointed; like any teenager, the idea of waiting four years before she could accomplish anything was hard to swallow. Fortunately, life smiled on her with her first real friendship, the friendship with Abigail, her first kiss with Brandon, and the chance to enter some music competitions with songs she had written. As she grew up, she began to take an interest in adult literature, and Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird” is a book that will stay with her forever. On cold winter evenings, she also began to frequent a small circle of writers with whom she shared ideas, viewpoints, and

manuscripts. Her creativity in Nashville was pushed to its limits by the open-minded environment, which led her to develop a small repertoire of 15 original songs, born from the stimuli of those days.

One in particular, written with the assistance of the circle's most experienced member, Liz Rose, would become the first real single of her career: "When You Think Tim McGraw". It is nothing more than a bittersweet tale of a love ending, inspired by her first crush on Brandon, with a simple but confident melody arising from a moment of distraction during math class.

It was a creative period; "Lucky You" and "Teardrops on My Guitar" were also created as a mirror of the daily reality of a young girl who felt that in a world as big and exciting as Music City, she was one step away from realizing her biggest dream, but first she would have to get out of the development deal with RCA.

Obviously, Taylor's unhappiness stemmed from a stagnant relationship with the label, which continued to keep her on the sidelines. After discussing the matter with her parents, she decided to terminate her contract and look for other opportunities, actively seeking out a record company through the contacts she had made during those months. She soon found an agreement with Sony, who hired her as a writer for the label's other artists. "It's amazing, I'll be working for one of the most important companies in the industry and writing for other artists who are much bigger and more experienced than me".

Soon after, however, the real golden ticket arrived: during a gig at the Bluebird Cafe, a Music Row venue frequented by major headhunters, she was spotted by Scott Borchetta, a record executive who has just finished his stint at Universal Records.

Enthused by her unplugged performance, he delivered his knockout line: "Taylor, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I want to sign you to record an album, the bad news is that I just left Universal ... but I have an idea in my head".

That idea was Big Machine Records, a new record company run by Scott, who had already figured out who it would be spearheaded by.

It was 2005, Taylor had not yet turned 16, and she had just entered a new phase in her life, one that would lead to the release of her first album.

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Red and blue

Taylor is a synesthete. The term "synesthesia" refers to situations in which an auditory, olfactory, tactile, or visual stimulus is perceived in relation to another sense that enhances the information with additional details. It is present in many people and is often due to the fact that our senses, although autonomous, do not operate in complete isolation from one another. In most cases, it refers to images and colors associated with specific feelings, memories, or elements of everyday life; for example, for certain people, each day of the week and each month is marked by a specific color.

In the narrative context, Taylor expresses the relationship between her emotions and a well-defined color palette that has always accompanied her entire discography, distinguishing the different Eras with specific hues and color combinations. Colors are often mentioned in her lyrics, and two in particular stand out: red and blue. The former is clearly what inspired "Red". As she herself said, the title of the album comes from the fact that all the emotions described in the lyrics of the LP are identified with the color red, both positive and negative, which in this case defines the concept of the album. In the title track, the relationship between the two colors is obvious: *"Losing him was blue, like I'd never known / Missing him was dark gray, all alone / Forgetting him was like trying to know / Somebody you never met / But loving him was red"*.

In her view of the world, red represents intense passion, while blue is a color that denotes the spectrum of negativity and sadness. Blue appears more often than red in the second part of her career and is also associated with tracks that speak of pure love (dedicated to Joe Alwyn), but with a note of melancholy due to the fear of losing that particular state of grace that can be read between the lines. However, colors are well described throughout her oeuvre, with plenty of space for white and gold as well.

1989

From heaven to hell

WE HAVE CLOSED THE chapter on “Red”, but we cannot talk about “1989” without mentioning the aftermath of the previous album, which was fundamental in the making of the album that would decree Taylor’s complete artistic turnaround and her arrival at a new way of looking at music and fame, one that would take her both to the peak of her career (in terms of numbers and popularity) and to the lowest point in the span of a single album.

“Red” is everything we have talked about in the previous pages, but it is also symbolic of one of the biggest disappointments of her career, when she did not get the Album of the Year award at the 2014 Grammy Awards. The moment when Alicia Keys opened the winner’s envelope and pronounced the letter “R...”, causing both Taylor and the entire production team to jump out of their seats for a second, went around the world. The prize, however, went to Daft Punk’s “Random Access Memory,” which shares more or less the pronunciation of the first two letters with “Red”, and very little else.

Taylor got a shock, not because she thought she deserved it more than the French DJ duo, but because she recognized that R.A.M. is a superior album in every way, an authentic piece of music history, cohesive from start to finish, with a distinctive sound and incredibly refined musical production.

And as someone who is eternally dissatisfied, someone who always strives to be the best version of herself, the decision to make an album that was more diverse, that raised the bar of production quality once again, and that could become a milestone in her career, could only come. She wanted perfection in every way, and while she did not find it once again (not

because she was unable, but because it does not exist), we can undoubtedly say that she came very close.

“1989”, released on October 27, 2014, is for many the masterpiece of her career, the best pop album of the entire decade and the beginning of a story within a story, that of the turning point as an artist, celebrity and person. With this album, her life accelerated stratospherically, and everything was magnified by the pace of her success: the interaction with fans, exposure due to social media, hatred towards her and business interests focusing on her. With this album, new elements were introduced that had always been a part of Taylor’s life but were now beginning to carry much more weight: money and media influence, two things that Tay handled differently and that in both cases would cause her numerous headaches.

But let’s take one thing at a time and talk about the music, because basically “1989” is this: a concentration of synth-pop tracks that break through barriers, pushing Taylor’s creativity further and finally aligning it with the true artistic potential that had been fully realized in previous productions.

1. *Welcome to New York* – 3:32 (Taylor Swift, Ryan Tedder)
2. *Blank Space* – 3:51 (Taylor Swift, Max Martin, Shellback)
3. *Style* – 3:51 (Taylor Swift, Max Martin, Shellback, Ali Payami)
4. *Out of the Woods* – 3:55 (Taylor Swift, Jack Antonoff)
5. *All You Had To Do Was Stay* – 3:13 (Taylor Swift, Max Martin)
6. *Shake It Off* – 3:39 (Taylor Swift, Max Martin, Shellback)
7. *I Wish You Would* – 3:27 (Taylor Swift, Jack Antonoff)
8. *Bad Blood* – 3:31 (Taylor Swift, Max Martin, Shellback)
9. *Wildest Dreams* – 3:40 (Taylor Swift, Max Martin, Shellback)
10. *How You Get The Girl* – 4:07 (Taylor Swift, Max Martin, Shellback)
11. *This Love* – 4:10 (Taylor Swift)
12. *I Know Places* – 3:15 (Taylor Swift, Ryan Tedder)

13. *Clean* – 4:31 (Taylor Swift, Imogen Heap)

A characteristic of these new 13 tracks (the number 13 comes back to the forefront) is the 80's inspiration her recent listening has given her, and hence the title of the album, which is also the year of her birth. Filtered vocals, typical 80's beats and synthesizers throughout the whole, from first to last song.

It is a celebration of the golden age of pop, used by Taylor to present herself in a different, lighter and more carefree guise than in the past, with a new way of dealing with the (usual) theme of suffering love, trying not to take herself too seriously and being ironic about sentimental misfortunes. A way of reacting to everything that revolves around this theme, from her eternal dissatisfaction to the extreme pressure she receives from the media, which now finds more and more reasons to pry into her private life and embroider speculations about it.

It starts with "Welcome To New York", a track co-written with Ryan Tedder (singer of One Republic) and produced by Noel Zancanella (who worked with One Republic and Timbaland), with a powerful, bassy synth accompanying the drums, actually an electronic drum machine, and a keyboard sound that wouldn't be out of place on a Kraftwerk album. More than a celebration that Taylor has officially moved to the Big Apple, it sounds like a demonstration of what the listener will hear on the next twelve tracks, something completely new and unprecedented, done in a way that is nothing short of extraordinary. It's no coincidence that Taylor sings "*It's a new soundtrack*" in the first verse, a completely new way of interpreting her music, just as new is her approach to life, from the heights of a luxury apartment in the world's most famous city: "I wanted to start the album with this song because New York is an important place in the story of my life. I dreamed of moving to New York, I was obsessed with the idea of moving here, and then I actually did it. The inspiration I found in this city is hard to describe and hard to compare to any other creative drive I have had in the past. I approached the move with great optimism and in a way you can hear the element of desperate anticipation in this first song". And that is exactly

what it is, this first track is not a masterpiece in itself, but it works as a warm-up for what is to come, it warms up the atmosphere.

Not least because right after that, “Blank Space” kicks off, which we can only describe as one of Taylor’s biggest hits ever and the first in the listening order to completely break the rules of the game. Why? Taylor sends a message to all the haters and those who speculate about her relationships, and she does it with an irony that goes far beyond simple lyricism. The references here are not literal, but interpretation is the key to understanding, with lyrics about a relationship that starts well and then falls apart (with the lines “*Oh, my God, look at that face / You look like my next mistake*” to underscore her many mistakes in love), ironic in its self-criticism, but also biting at all those who condemn her for having too many relationships with famous people. But it doesn’t end there, because the chorus, which we’ve all sung at least once in our lives, goes: “*Got a long list of ex-lovers / They’ll tell you I’m insane / ‘Cause you know I love the players / And you love the game*”.

The references are to the numerous accusations that she is emotionally unstable, incapable of sustaining relationships, or a possessive and paranoid chick who intimidates her partners. With “And you love the game,” she closes the chorus by pointing out how much people actually enjoy prying into her life, which has become something of a staple in tabloids around the world. And they can’t help but mention the “*long list of exes - Starbucks lovers*” meme that continues to roam internet and social media a decade later.

I also particularly like the line “*Cause, darling, I’m a nightmare dressed like a daydream*”, with which she emphasizes her dark, vengeful side, which is no longer that of the little girl who childishly insults those who broke her heart as in “Picture To Burn”, but moves on to more concrete threats, knowing full well that with words and her enormous success, she can even ruin the lives of those who make her suffer if she so chooses.

And all this within a metaphor that fans know well, that of a

relationship falling apart, perfectly produced by trusted new collaborators Max Martin and Shellback, and enhanced by the video clip for the song directed by Joseph Kahn, in which she plays the role of a rich, classy woman who meets an incredibly handsome man until she goes really crazy, smashing walls, vases, glass and his Shelby Cobra, which races away in fear. The smudged makeup on her cheeks and the freaked-out look is a vision that is a far cry from the early America's Sweetheart. This little girl has grown up, made fun of everyone, including herself, stopped taking everything around her seriously and used it as the basis for an artistic and personal rebirth that took her back to the top of the world, higher than before. "Blank Space", the second single from the album, debuted at #18 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and reached #1 in its third week on the chart, aided by the release of the video. Among other things, it stole the top spot from her other single, "Shake It Off", making Taylor the first and only woman in the history of the Billboard Hot 100 to knock herself off the top spot. "Blank Space" stayed at the top of the Billboard Hot 100 for seven consecutive weeks.

After this opening with a bang comes "Style", and here we find all the 80s panache the title promises. Opening with a distorted funk-like guitar, very much in the style of Neil Rodgers (who, along with R.A.M.'s Daft Punk, robbed her of the Grammy for "Red"), Style is preceded by a totally inspired rhythm part with a powerful bass line and synthesizers bordering on synth-wave. If these tones remind you of The Weeknd, it is because the producer who worked on the track with Martin and Shellback is Ali Payami, the creator of some of the synth-pop artist's hits.

In the lyrics she talks about a guy who wears his hair long and has a James Dean look and a white t-shirt. The song is about Harry Styles and their past relationship, which was marked by several breakups and bounce-backs, which is also emphasized in the chorus "*And when we go crashing down, we come back every time*", until the appearance of another girl finally ends the game between the two. Obviously, the reference to "Styles"

is in the title, the fact that the lyrics then talk about style, dresses, skirts and T-shirts is the pretext for the pun.

“Out Of the Woods” follows, starting with a looped “ohh”, followed by a drum machine pumping out the bass, accompanied by a tight, electric synth, a low frequency buzz that sets the tone for a song that is a bit hard to pin down because it is not very 80s, but not modern pop either. The sound is different from Max Martin’s style, and in fact the producer here is Jack Antonoff of the band Fun (the “We Are Young” band that inspired the muffled sound of the beat). Linear from start to finish, it focuses heavily on the words of Taylor, who also sings in a lower key: “One of the goals I set out to achieve with this album was to faithfully represent the emotions I felt when I wrote the lyrics. This song is about the fragility of some relationships that you live in every day, wondering where it’s going and if it’s really going anywhere or if it’s just coming to an end. This piece sounds exactly like the fears and questions of the moment, but even though it’s such a story, it doesn’t mean that it’s not worth trying and that it doesn’t hide good times”. Again, the references to the relationship with Styles are not as overt as on the previous track. For example, in the verse “*Remember when you hit the brakes too soon / Twenty stitches in a hospital room*” she’s talking about a snowmobile accident that cost him a night in the ER, with no injuries for her but a few stitches for him.

Is there a little more room for Harry on this album? You bet there is, and “All You Had to Do Was Stay” is another reminder of their relationship, her openness to getting back together and his tendency to not commit, to run away when things got serious. “I had this dream where you’re ridiculous and embarrassed, basically humiliated. In the dream, my ex had come to the door to beg me to talk to him or something, and I responded indifferently with something normal, and then shouted “Stay! in an almost operatic tone. When I woke up, I immediately recorded that sound on my phone as I remembered it, and then we turned it into something beautiful for the song. In pop, it’s fun to play with sounds”.

And that's basically what stimulates Taylor's art in the making of "1989" – to be able to pull a sound – even an absurd sound – out of a memory or a dream is something creatively powerful. And she absolutely loves it.

The most interesting part of the song is undoubtedly the chorus, perhaps one of the most catchy on the entire album, although the piece overall is not among the most radio-friendly: in fact, it has rather closed tones that make it one of those pieces that grows slowly in the hearts of fans and ends up in the long list of Taylor's songs that grow on you slowly, the ones that are appreciated with one listen at a time.

Another peculiarity is that this is a track 5, but for the first time we are not assaulted by raw, stinging lyrics, or slow, heavy notes that indicate difficult feelings. No, this is something completely different, and although there is a note of intimacy in the musical composition, it is very difficult to tie it in with the list of other track 5s we've heard so far. Whether this was intentional or not, we don't know, but this is the least "5ish" of them all, as well as a track that is still being talked about on forums and in groups dedicated to Taylor, precisely because of this lack of consistency with the tradition.

Bringing everything together again is the sixth track, the first single ever from "1989" and perhaps the most successful one even many years later: "Shake It Off".

I can't give a simple analysis of this song but let me be guided by the pure feeling of affection I have for "Shake It Off" and especially for the video clip that introduced me to Taylor and allowed me to see her in a different way.

With this song, Taylor reaches into people's hearts and not just fans' hearts, she reaches deep into the hearts of everyone who hears the song or watches the video with a message that has the power of a tsunami. And it does so in such a sharp, direct and lighthearted way that people cannot help but love it and smile. Shake it off, shake your body and let all the negative energy fall to the ground. Whatever makes your life a living hell will not rob you of the joy of living, of appreciating what you have, of enjoying the presence of those who love you, of hoping

and convincing yourself that all things will be well.

“*Haters gonna hate / ... / Heartbreakers gonna break / ... / Fakers gonna fake*”, the world is spinning and will continue to spin with all the crap it brings, and we can’t afford to be overwhelmed by all the crap around us. We are bombarded every day with a thousand different stimuli, impossible ideals of beauty, unattainable examples of success, unrealistic loves, moral rules, and fashions that don’t allow us to be in harmony with ourselves. They take us away from who we really are, from our true desires, when what we deserve is to close our eyes and trust what we feel, knowing that life is a wave of ups and downs, and that after the rain comes the sun. Everything will work out in the end because it just works out the way it is supposed to, and if we take ourselves too seriously, we only make fools of ourselves.

And that is exactly what happens in the video, directed by Mark Romanek, in which Taylor, surrounded by dancers and athletes with precise, harmonious movements, pokes fun at herself while trying to be convincing while failing miserably, without stopping having fun for a single second.

The video is a series of takes from a longer shoot, with Taylor’s funniest moves ending up in the final montage. What should have ended up in bloopers is the heart of the video, and irony accompanies all the “Shake” (the word is repeated a mind-blowing 70 times in 3:39) from start to finish: “Towards the end of the video, I finally find space and dance with people who dance like me, badly. All the people you see in this scene are fans we picked off of Instagram and Twitter and invited to the video shoot, but they didn’t know what was going to happen”. The result? Exceptional, a fantastic overall feel, so that even the video and its creation are not taken that seriously.

“Shake It Off” is also an example of musical simplicity and efficiency: there is a beat, there are recurring trumpets which, outside of the chorus, create no real melody but an accompanying sound to the drums. Martin and Shellback found perhaps the most effective instrumental part possible to accompany this manifesto, creating a masterpiece of Taylor’s career and one of

the most important pop songs of all time. “Shake It Off” shot in at No. 1 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 chart, where it stayed for two weeks, then moved to No. 2 for eight consecutive weeks and back to No. 1 in its tenth and eleventh weeks on the chart. It also conquered the Billboard Pop Songs, Adult Top 40 and Adult Contemporary streaming charts. The song sold 3.43 million digital copies in the United States in 2014, making it one of the best-selling singles of the 2010s. As of October 2023, the single “Shake It Off” remains Swift’s biggest chart hit on the Hot 100, where it spent nearly six months in the top ten and 50 weeks in the top 100.

On track 7, Antonoff’s hand is back, again recognizable by the filtered and reverbed rhyme part alongside a high-pitched effect guitar, punctuated by a deep synth and bass in the chorus that takes you back to the 1980s. The track is called “I Wish You Would” and is about regretting breaking up with an ex: “Jack sent me the track while I was on tour and I listened to it on my laptop, recorded the vocals on my phone while I sang and sent it back to him. Eventually this track popped up, born out of a kind of weird way of working on a new song”. Of course, exes are mentioned, so the first thought is immediately which of the past relationships is dragged up this time, but in this case, it is an imaginary story, as confirmed by Taylor herself. The gist of the lyrics is in the passage “*I wish you would come back / Wish I’d never hung up the phone like I did / I wish you knew that / I’d never forget you as long as I’d live*”. Exes are not easily forgotten, and this is what she is trying to tell us, or maybe she is just masking her fond longings for one of her past loves?

“Bad Blood”, track 8 of 1989, is twofold, because in addition to being released as the fourth single from the album with Taylor’s vocals alone, it was also released as a version featuring rapper Kendrick Lamar, and the latter was chosen for the video clip that has become a cult favorite far more than the original song itself.

For the first time, it is not about exes or love, but about a very famous colleague with whom she had an understanding, but

whose behavior has now made her blood boil, to use the same metaphor as the title. The artist in question is Katy Perry: Taylor accuses her of trying to sabotage Red's stadium tour by offering dancers and staff the chance to abandon her concerts and join Katy's. An attempt to sabotage or just a misunderstanding? It matters little for the purposes of the attack that has now been unleashed on the public. A series of tweets between the two has further inflamed the rivalry, which has only recently begun to cool down. But we'll come back to that later. On the subject, Taylor said, "Anyone who has listened to my previous four albums would think this is about a guy who broke my heart, but that couldn't be further from the truth. It was important to me to show that losing a friendship can be just as damaging to a person as losing a romantic relationship".

Returning to the song and video, they travel on two parallel tracks, as the Martin-produced track and Shellback from the album have an energetic and rhythmic edge, with a strong rhythmic base but less aggressive verses than the rapped verses in the clip. The choice of collaborating with Lamar for the clip, directed by Joseph Kahn, is appropriate, with action movie content that for 4 minutes entertains far better than any Marvel movie.

Two female gangs battle it out in perfect superhero style, complete with uniforms, nicknames, guns, fistfights, explosions and motorcycles. Co-starring with an increasingly convincing Taylor are a slew of jet-set women: models Martha Hunt, Lily Aldridge, Gigi Hadid, Karlie Kloss, Cara Jocelyn Delevingne and Cindy Crawford; singers Selena Gomez, Hayley Williams and Ellie Goulding; and actresses Zendaya, Jessica Alba, Hailee Steinfeld, Lena Dunham, Ellen Pompeo and Mariska Hargitay. An epic cast for a video so over-the-top and well-crafted that it became an instant classic. The video racked up a record 20.1 million views in its first day. It unseated the previous record holder, Nicki Minaj's *Anaconda*, which had 19.6 million views in 24 hours. At the time of writing, the video has chalked up a staggering 1.5 billion views on YouTube and won the 2016 Grammy for Best Music Video. There is no doubt that in this

case, the video exceeded all expectations and the success of the album track itself, while also bringing to light a new gossipy vein that has filled pages and pages of magazines: Taylor's relationship with female friendships, which have now become almost exclusively relationships between American jet-set celebrities.

"Wildest Dreams" hits you with a completely different atmosphere, sounding like something new, with melancholic and muffled electronic sounds. This new way of understanding ballads, uniquely crafted with electronic sounds and deep synths, is very reminiscent of the style of Lana del Rey or Lorde, the latter being present in Taylor's close circle of friends.

The song was once again written and produced by Martin and Shellback, and the key to the lyrics is a much more realistic reflection on romance than in the past: "I think the way I used to approach relationships was very idealized. I used to go into relationships thinking we were going to get married and have a family, something that could last forever. Now it's different. How much time do we have before something can really be born?" There is a bit of disillusionment in both these words and the song's lyrics, as if Taylor has to an extent resigned herself to the fact that all of her love stories are going to go wrong, and the relationship insecurities that have marked all of her previous stories reappear. Perhaps she is more realistic now, but not yet able to fully understand the world of love.

The video is a small cinematic masterpiece, once again directed by Kahn, in which a decidedly sexy Taylor makes love and fights with actor Scott Eastwood in the magical setting of a 1950s movie set on the savannah, surrounded by giraffes, lions and elephants. The video was criticized for its use of wild animals and for the lack of people of color (it was filmed in Africa), but Kahn responded that he only wanted to represent what the film industry was in those years – exclusively white – with no intention of whitewashing. Pretty convincing.

"How You Get the Girl" is a typical 2010s pop song, with Taylor's echoing vocals accompanied by a guitar (almost always absent on this album) and a pounding beat with a synthesizer

providing the bass line, a hallmark of Martin and Shellback's productions.

The whole point of the song is in the title: a little guide on how Taylor thinks a girl should be won over, what words to say and how to act. Logically, these are the phrases she would have liked to hear from her exes, from all those failed attempts to create something strong and lasting, based on commitment and trust, in good times and bad, both when the flame of love burns brightly and when difficulties make the relationship unstable. Staying and not running away. A concept she has repeated many times in her songs and which is reinforced here by a number of other phrases: "I'm addressing all those guys who broke up with their girlfriends and came back six months later with their tails between their legs. Getting her back is not as simple as sending a message like, 'How are you, I miss you. It doesn't work that way, you have to do all the things I say in the lyrics". Hard to fault her here. When a relationship breaks down, you really need to show what you are willing to do to get it back on its feet. Words matter.

For "This Love", Nathan Chapman returns to compose the perfect copy of the previous four albums, and the result is a ballad in perfect Taylor style, but with ethereal electronic sounds accompanying a gentle guitar. The leitmotif of the synthesized bass line is still present, but in a softer way than on the other tracks, as is the rhythmic part, which remains more hidden here, punctuating the rhythm while leaving the lead role to the vocals. The song is a reminder of the longing for love, the feeling inside her that she cannot fully express: it is the only track on the LP written by Taylor alone, and the chorus sounds like a kind of short poem: "*This love is good, this love is bad / This love is alive back from the dead / These hands had to let it go free / And this love came back to me.*" These lines were written in her personal diary just two days before the release of "Red". Reasonably, it could only be on the following album.

One Republic's Ryan Tedder returns to co-produce "I Know Places", and the song's most interesting surprise is a rather

dark atmosphere provided by the piano and drums, which create an erratic rhythm during the intro and verse, with snare drum and toms with an almost jazzy sound and rhythm. The chorus explodes into a much catchier pop, accompanied by a nice bass line and Taylor's voice, which opens up into an echoing chorus towards the end of the song.

In this song, Taylor describes the difficulties of pursuing a relationship when the paparazzi (referred to as "vultures") start following you everywhere. Throughout the lyrics, Taylor expresses her impatience with her growing overexposure, and no matter how much she adapts to the reality of the situation, changing her outfits four or five times a day, no matter where she goes, always looking her best, perfectly made up and coiffed, it is difficult to keep up with the image. The nervous and emotional breakdown is only a stone's throw away, and these are the first warnings, a text Taylor writes for herself and to give her courage. Behind the lines it seems to be saying that this is the life of celebrity, and you have to give it your best shot all the time because it can't all be rosy.

"1989" closes with the track "Clean", which begins with a very distorted bass, reminiscent in some ways of some of Muse's intros, but the tone of the song is very different from English rock and is another melancholy ballad, with synthesizers, not yet heard on this album, accompanying an ethereal voice that sings between verse and chorus. The voice is that of Imogen Heap, an English singer-songwriter, who puts her stamp on the production of this track with her style of elaborate electronics and sounds that come straight from the world of dreams. The lyrics are a metaphor for getting out of a drug addiction and getting out of a relationship: "A person with a broken heart is unlike anyone else. His time flows at a different pace than ours. It is a mental, physical, emotional pain that creates an inner conflict. Then time passes, new habits are formed, and suddenly one day you're in London and you realize you've been in the same city as your ex for two weeks -- and you're fine. When I realized that, the first thought that came to my mind was, 'I'm finally clean'".

Listening to “1989” leaves a lasting impression, for it is not just a synth-pop album, but a riot of issues that come to light along with personal growth and explosion as an artist and worldwide celebrity. “Red” had brought with it a lot of criticism, mainly related to musical choices, while “1989” is an almost untouchable work from an acoustic point of view, though criticized in terms of songwriting, which is less elaborate and “heartfelt” than in the past, although it has songs that open up to more complex discussions and broader arguments than just one girl’s love life.

In “Shake It Off”, she teaches us that there is no point in taking ourselves seriously; in “Bad Blood”, she launches an openly feminist message; and in “I Know Places”, she writes an open letter of impatience with the invasion of one’s private life by gossip and paparazzi.

What about love? In “1989”, it is no longer dreamy as in the early albums, nor even realistic and aggressive as in “Red”, but almost disillusioned and heartbroken, something that cannot find a place in the overly chaotic life of an international star trying to make everything fit and always live up to the world’s expectations.

After the 2020 Miss Americana documentary, Taylor opened up about the image issues that led her to develop an eating disorder: “It wasn’t good for me to see pictures of myself every day. There were pictures where I would see my belly was too big and comments asking if I was pregnant. They would trigger something in me and I would just stop eating. It didn’t happen often, but it did happen. We live in a world where if you have a butt that’s too small, you’re not attractive, but if you put on a little fat there, your belly is bound to grow.” Add to that the extreme stress of overexposure, the never-forgotten dissing of Kanye West (whose tweets calling Taylor a “snake” allowed her fans to bombard Taylor’s Instagram profile with snake emoticons for a long time), and the increasingly harsh criticism of her love life, which in the 1989 era saw her in a relationship with DJ and music producer Calvin Harris, which lasted just over a year.

In between, there was the 1989 World Tour, a magnificent spectacle organized with so many celebrities as guests on her stage. Taylor even invited them to her home and to a suite in London to preview “1989”. Finally, the stressful lawsuit against American DJ David Mueller, who was accused of sexually assaulting her backstage at a show during the Red Tour. A lawsuit that Taylor later won, ruining the guy’s career and setting an important precedent for the #metoo phenomenon that would come a few years later.

In all of this, Taylor made a huge mistake: she thought she was strong enough to withstand any backlash, forcing the projection of a public self-image that could not keep up with the incredible hordes of paparazzi at her heels. During the aforementioned “1989” period, Taylor was able to change her outfit up to four or five times a day, coming out of the gym as if she had just been to the beautician to avoid any criticism of her physical appearance. No matter how hard one tries, it is not humanly bearable, and it is not surprising that she suffered burnout during those two years, which led to a temporary exit from the scene and the genesis of “Reputation”.