

CHAPPELL, MADELYN CAROL M.M. *The Year of the Girl: Nostalgia and Girlhood Portrayed in the Music of Taylor Swift.* (2024)  
Directed by Dr. Guy Capuzzo. 78 pp.

American singer and songwriter Taylor Swift is known to be one of the most successful artists within the music industry. Her successes have been attributed to her songwriting capabilities as well as her skills in performance. Swift also has one of the most loyal fan bases that contribute to her success. Swift enjoys interacting with her fans through social media, dropping “Easter eggs” (or hints) about when her next album will be released. Swift also enjoys playing with her fans’ sense of nostalgia by incorporating themes of girlhood not only in her lyrics, but in her marketing and her performance. In this thesis, I examine how Swift uses nostalgia and themes of girlhood in various ways within her music to build and maintain a large fan base. In my first analysis chapter, Chapter II, I focus on Swift’s use of country twang as it relates to nostalgia. In Chapter III, I examine nostalgia and themes of girlhood in Swift’s songwriting and in her performance, looking specifically at different breathing techniques she employs. In the final analysis chapter, Chapter IV, I provide a larger context, focusing on themes of girlhood found in various areas of not only the music industry, but in the entertainment industry as well. 2023 was a significant year for women because it allowed women to embrace ideas of girlhood in confidence. Swift is only one piece to the larger puzzle of 2023 being “The Year of the Girl.”

THE YEAR OF THE GIRL: NOSTALGIA AND GIRLHOOD  
PORTRAYED IN THE MUSIC OF  
TAYLOR SWIFT

by  
Madelyn Carol Chappell

A Thesis  
Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Music

Greensboro  
2024

Approved by

---

Dr. Guy Capuzzo  
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Madelyn Carol Chappell has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

---

Dr. Guy Capuzzo

Committee Members

---

Dr. Gavin Douglas

---

Professor Emily Milius

April 24, 2024

---

Date of Acceptance by Committee

March 13, 2024

---

Date of Final Oral Examination

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Guy Capuzzo for his unwavering support, dedication, patience, and guidance in this project. I also would like to thank Dr. Gavin Douglas and Professor Emily Milius for their guidance and expertise as well. I would love to thank my parents Patrick and Michelle Chappell as well as my fiancé, Chris Campolieta for loving and believing in me, and always supporting me in my education. Finally, I would like to thank God for blessing me with the opportunity, perseverance and strength to pursue my dream of earning a master's degree in music.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	v
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	vi
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Taylor Swift's Country Voice.....	4
Nostalgia and Taylor Swift .....	8
<i>(Taylor's Version)</i> .....	13
CHAPTER II: TWANG AS SCHEMA ( <i>TAYLOR'S VERSION</i> ) .....	16
Twang as Schema.....	18
Country Twang vs. Pop Sound .....	20
CHAPTER III: EMOTION IN PERFORMANCE.....	26
Defining Girlhood .....	28
Taylor Swift's Breathing .....	30
“You're On Your Own, Kid” .....	31
The Breathiness of the Adolescent Voice.....	33
“Would've, Could've, Should've”.....	35
Crying Portrayed in “Would've, Could've, Should've” .....	38
CHAPTER IV: 2023: THE YEAR OF THE GIRL.....	45
“Barbie” .....	46
The “Eras” and “Renaissance” Economic Boom.....	48
The “Eras” Tour and Girlhood.....	49
“Used to be Young” by Miley Cyrus .....	58
“What Was I Made For? [From the “Barbie” Movie]”.....	67
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION.....	70
REFERENCES .....	73

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.0. Spectrogram of “Sparks Fly” .....	21
Figure 2.1. Spectrogram of “Sparks Fly (Taylor’s Version)” .....	21
Figure 2.2. Spectrogram of “Mean (Taylor’s Version)” .....	22
Figure 2.3. Spectrogram of “Fearless (Taylor’s Version)” .....	23
Figure 2.4. Spectrogram of “Vigilante Shit” .....	24
Figure 2.5. Spectrogram of “You’re Losing Me (From the Vault)” .....	24
Figure 3.0. Spectrogram of “You’re On Your Own, Kid” .....	34
Figure 3.1. Spectrogram of the Chorus of “Your On Your Own, Kid” .....	35
Figure 3.2. Transcription of “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve” .....	40
Figure 3.3. Spectrogram of Opening Breath in “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve”. .....	42
Figure 3.4. Spectrogram of Shaky Breathing in “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve” .....	43
Figure 4.0. A Reddit Post of an “Eras” Tour Outfit.....	50
Figure 4.1. A Reddit Post of an “Eras” Tour Outfit.....	51
Figure 4.2. Transcription of “Used to Be Young” .....	61
Figure 4.3. Reddit Post About “Used to Be Young” .....	64
Figure 4.4. Spectrogram of “What Was I Made For? [From the “Barbie” Movie]. .....	68

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration 4.0. Scene from Taylor Swift’s “You Belong with Me” Music Video. ....	52
Illustration 4.1. “Eras” Tour Friendship Bracelets.....	53
Illustration 4.2. Swift’s Lucky Number 13 .....	54
Illustration 4.3. Swift Singing at her “Eras” Tour .....	56
Illustration 4.4. Swift’s Heart Gesture .....	57
Illustration 4.5. Cyrus Twerking in “We Can’t Stop” .....	59
Illustration 4.6. Photograph from “Used to Be Young” Music Video .....	66

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no doubt Taylor Swift is one of the most successful and accomplished songwriters of all time. From her 14 Grammys to her 23 Video Music Awards and 10 Country Music Awards, as of 2023 she has been recognized for her music spanning multiple genres. A huge part of Swift's success has been her ability to connect and maintain a relationship with her fans. Interestingly enough, however, her fan base does not consist of just one age group. As a 33-year-old woman Taylor Swift has maintained a large millennial fan base, simultaneously gaining popularity amongst younger generations. Richard Elliot wrote,

What struck me then, and still does now, is Swift's ability to offer messages relevant to people at many different life stages, a reminder that reflection on the passing of time is something with which we're always engaged. There's a mixture of escapism and realism in her work that inhabits a place we all need to go to at various points in our life.<sup>1</sup>

One way that Swift gains and maintains these cross-generational connections is through nostalgia and shared ideas of girlhood within her music and her brand.

Nostalgia can be defined as a powerful emotion that triggers memories.<sup>2</sup> Nostalgia was first studied in medical science and psychiatry, and Johannes Hofer first coined the term in 1688. The word "nostalgia" was used to describe a condition of extreme homesickness among the Swiss army in battle. Hofer referred to homesickness as a medical condition, or "a painful yearning to return home."<sup>3</sup> Nostalgia is also studied in marketing and advertising and can be

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Elliott, "A Blank Space Where You Write Your Name: Taylor Swift's Early Late Voice," In *EMP Pop Conference: From a Whisper to a Scream: The Voice in Music* (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Srivastava, Sivakumaran, Maheswarappa, and Paul, "Nostalgia: A Review, Propositions, and Future Research Agenda," *Journal of Advertising* 52, no. 4 (2023).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



defined as a preference toward experiences that are associated with objects from when one was at a younger age.<sup>4</sup>

In her article, “She isn’t whoring herself out like a lot of other girls we see’: Identification and ‘Authentic’ American Girlhood on Taylor Swift Fan Forums,” Adriane Brown interviews a 17-year-old Swift fan. Brown states the lyrical content of Swift’s songs are “real,” meaning they are based on real-life experiences as a child, teenager, and young woman.<sup>5</sup> The Swift fan explains that if Taylor Swift’s lyrics were not “real,” “...then it wouldn’t be nearly as special to me. That’s one of the main reasons I love her. She gets it what girls specifically are going through.”<sup>6</sup> This fan talks about the idea of a shared girlhood: A girlhood that is relatable and based on shared experiences amongst young girls and women. These experiences may include one’s first breakup, first kiss, or first day of high school. For Swift fans, their idea of a shared girlhood is best defined by Brown as an “American girlhood” or a girlhood that, “Swift represents, constantly and implicitly privileges a vision of ‘authentic’ girlhood that is invested in whiteness, heterosexual monogamy and romance, and middle-class propriety and consumption.”<sup>7</sup> This type of “American girlhood” will be most relevant to my research as it encompasses the large majority of her fan base. This is not to say all Swift fans belong in this category as other ideas of girlhood do exist. Girlhood is an individual and personal experience in which many factors such as race and social class amongst others play a huge role in one’s experiences of girlhood. Other artists, including Miley Cyrus, have recently recorded songs with the same ideas

---

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Rossman, “Taylor Swift, Remediating the Self, and Nostalgic Girlhood in Tween Music Fandom,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 38 (2022), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/2287/3017>.

<sup>5</sup> Adriane Brown, “She isn’t whoring herself out like a lot of other girls we see’: Identification and “Authentic” American Girlhood on Taylor Swift Fan Forums,” *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 5, no. 1 (2012): 166.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 162.

of nostalgia and girlhood. In the same year as Cyrus' "Used to Be Young," The Barbie Movie, directed by Greta Gerwig, was released, and Swift's very successful "Eras" Tour began. These performances each include similar themes of girlhood. The year of 2023 is known by the media and the entertainment and music industries to be the year of the girl.

In my research, I argue that Taylor Swift creates nostalgia through her music as a powerful method to maintain her large fan base. In my analysis, I first show how her use of country twang in her re-recorded albums creates nostalgia in her vocal timbre. I argue twang can be identified as a vocal schema because it is essential to country music, which Swift contributed to in her early years as a musician. For Swift fans, Swift's twang evokes feelings of nostalgia and girlhood, bringing her fans back to the beginning, the days in which Taylor Swift wrote and sang country music. Using spectrographic analysis, I aim to capture the differences in vocal timbres between Swift's country and pop songs. These spectrograms reveal the presence and absence of twang in Swift's voice. Next, I focus on the nostalgic lyrical content of Swift's songs and how Swift manipulates her breathing to further express the meaning of her lyrics. Swift creates this nostalgia through stories and images of girlhood within her lyrics. Using spectrographic analysis and phrase analysis, I reveal different breathing effects Swift uses in two of her pop songs from her 2022 album *Midnights*. Finally, I argue 2023 was a significant year for women in the music industry. Women not only made a large impact in the music industry in 2023, but also and more importantly made a large impact on women and young girls through their music in 2023. I analyze Miley Cyrus' 2023 song "Used to Be Young" from her album *Endless Summer Vacation* as it creates some of the same nostalgia presented in Taylor Swift's music. The year 2023 was a year of all things girlhood with the release of Cyrus' song, Swift's *Eras* Tour, Beyoncé's *Renaissance* Tour and the release of the *Barbie* movie.

Swift's ability to connect through social media and maintain almost personal relationships with her fans sets her apart from most artists. Swift's craft extends beyond her abilities in writing her lyrics as she plays with different timbres and vocal techniques. Her success as a songwriter involve much more than just the musical and lyrical content of her songs. She incorporates various techniques to encourage feelings of nostalgia within her music, setting her apart from other artists. As one of the most successful artists and songwriters of all time, Swift's methods in maintaining these large fan bases should be studied, allowing one to understand how a 33-year-old pop star is just as relevant to adolescent girls as she is to her 33-year-old fans.

### **Taylor Swift's Country Voice**

One cannot deny vocal schemata exists. However, there is little scholarship involving them within and outside of music. Vocal schemata exist in the everyday lives of people, but can vary across different cultures. Schemata are defined by David Rumelhart as,

The building blocks of cognition. They are the fundamental elements upon which all information processing depends. Schemata are employed in the process of interpreting sensory data (both linguistic and nonlinguistic), in retrieving information from memory, in organizing actions, in determining goals and sub goals, in allocating resources, and, generally, in guiding the flow of processing in the system.<sup>8</sup>

A schema is knowledge that is organized and packed into units. Each unit of knowledge contains more information about how the it is to be used.<sup>9</sup> Vocal country twang, like portraying emotion through the voice, can be considered a vocal schema.

---

<sup>8</sup> David Rumelhart, "Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition." In *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence, and Education*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (1980): 33–34.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Twang is an essential characteristic of country music.<sup>10</sup> Twang, according to Jocelyn Neal, is “simultaneously pejorative and obsessively complimentary, which identifies a sound that fans love and detractors loathe.”<sup>11</sup> Neal aims to explore twang as a musical timbre, examining its sonic characteristics, how listeners interpret twang, and why audiences value twang as an important feature of country music. She explores how twang invokes the musical history of the genre of country music and why twang matters. About twang, she says,

It appears in use as both noun and verb...the word describes both the act of plucking a string and the resultant sound of said plucked string...Common reference sources offer a second definition as a characteristic of vocal performances that rely heavily on what is casually described as nasal resonance, especially combined with a ringing tone and a harsh, tinny emphasis on high frequencies in the sound. From its earliest documented appearances, we find yet a third definition: in certain contexts, it is deployed as a term of contempt. Taken together, these uses have become representative of an aesthetic within the genre of country music, and that aesthetic functions as a fourth definition. These four meanings in combination summarize the ways in which the term has been deployed in the past few decades within country music, both complimentary and contentious.<sup>12</sup>

For Swift, vocal twang and twang as the act of plucking a string are most present in Swift’s earliest country albums, as well as their corresponding re-records. When plucking a string, the string is stretched and displaced. “The string’s length, tension, and mass determine the frequency of the vibrations or, in musical terms, the pitch of the note.”<sup>13</sup> There are many more variables to consider such as pick size. However, this description is a quick one for how twang is created when plucking a string instrument. Neal describes this process, saying,

As the displaced string is suddenly released, it generates a sharp attack or pop, the string’s initially chaotic vibrations settle and slide toward a steadier pattern, the stretched string rebounds in shape, sliding under the left-hand’s finger, and picks

---

<sup>10</sup> Jocelyn Neal, “The Twang Factor in Country Music,” *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, edited by Robert Wallace Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (2018): 43.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Neal, “The Twang Factor in Country Music,” 44.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

up sympathetic resonances from the rest of the instrument as the pitch evolves, and the entire system rings as the sound decays toward silence.<sup>14</sup>

In Swift's case, this type of twang appears throughout Swift's earlier country albums including her debut album, *Taylor Swift, Fearless*, as well as *Speak Now*.

Vocal twang is a combination of a nasally, tight throat, Southern drawl, and a rural Southern accent. This vocal sound is one of the most distinct country music stereotypes.<sup>15</sup> Neal states there are clear analogies between the vocal and instrumental practices of twang. She describes vocal and instrumental twang as,

the emphasis on a tight tone, a tinny sound or buzz, and higher frequencies in the timbre, especially those that result from nasal resonance and a constricted pharynx; second, the constant aspect of change, both through elongated vowels with diphthongs in a single word and through different tone qualities from one note to the next that country singers allow and even cultivate in their performances; and third, a wider range of pitch bending, alterations, and imprecisions, such as the scoops, slides, blue notes, yodels, and falls that country singers routinely employ, connecting vocal practice especially to techniques of slide guitar, steel guitar, and fiddle playing.<sup>16</sup>

For the purpose of my research, it is important to remember we as listeners recognize an instrument by its characteristics in the same way we recognize the characteristics of a voice. When listening one may identify a specific instrument by the characteristics of its timbre, in the same way one can identify someone's voice. For example, one may describe the characteristics of someone's voice as bright, breathy, or gravelly. The recognition of these characteristics allows one to make assumptions about the person behind the voice—e.g., whether they are male or female, young or old. Without looking, when one hears the voice of their mother, they are able to immediately identify the person behind the voice. As for a singer, we tend to associate their voice with a specific genre or cultural identity. With twang, we do this through pronunciation of

---

<sup>14</sup> Neal, "The Twang Factor in Country Music," 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 50.

lyrics.<sup>17</sup> Neal states, “twang in the voice meant being grounded, authentic, rural, honest, and empathetic, with an ear in country music’s past.”<sup>18</sup> Taylor Swift’s days of country music and twang have associations with her teenage days as a singer/songwriter in Nashville. Her twang is not the only vocal characteristic to have these connotations of adolescence.

Diane Pecknold describes the “badness of adolescent girl vocality.”<sup>19</sup> She uses artists such as Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus as examples to support her research claiming teen girl singers have been praised when their failures of their voices are heard as “representing the material truth of the teen girl.”<sup>20</sup> Pecknold describes the teen girl voice as,

In the teen girl voice, the physical failures of closure and transition associated with the mutations of puberty—the rasps, breaks, breathiness, straining, and other failures to connect or cohere—sonically project an infinite state of restless becoming whose endpoint is never determined.<sup>21</sup>

The teen girl voice has been used to describe artists like Swift, Cyrus, Kesha (previously spelled Ke\$ha) and Rebecca Black. In the case of Swift, Pecknold writes, “Defenders of Taylor Swift regularly argued, even as she herself grew into adulthood, that her voice was central to her ability to embody the teen girl, a personification that made her music meaningful and appealing.”<sup>22</sup> Pecknold’s research provides insight into how the adolescent female voice is most likely to be perceived by audiences both young and old. Swift’s voice may have been essential to her early success as an artist, allowing her fans to identify with her. This connection between Swift and her fans could potentially be a reason that Chelsea Burns attendees found Swift’s re-records to be

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Neal, “The Twang Factor in Country Music,” 51.

<sup>19</sup> Diane Pecknold, “These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice,” In *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music*, edited by Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, 77, New York: Routledge, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

“intensely nostalgic.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, longtime Swift fans feel nostalgia when hearing Swift’s country singing voice. Swift’s re-recorded albums will be discussed later in this chapter.

Pecknold claims that if pointing out failures of the teen girl voice and the vocal techniques that are understood as the “teen sound” are criticized, they have also been recognized as authentic representations of teenage girls and their bodies.<sup>24</sup> Many years later, Swift uses her “teen sound” to her advantage, incorporating it into her own breathing to further convey the meaning of her lyrics as discussed in Chapter III. Swift’s “teen sound” is essential to her songwriting tactics in creating nostalgia for her fans.

### **Nostalgia and Taylor Swift**

Nostalgia and images of girlhood are essential to Taylor Swift’s songwriting, performance, and brand. In her article, “Taylor Swift, Remediating the Self, and Nostalgic Girlhood in Tween Music Fandom,” Margaret Rossman claims Swift chooses to highlight tangible objects to play with the imagery of nostalgia, pointing at Schindler and Holbrook’s definition of nostalgia as a preference toward experiences that are associated with objects when one was younger.<sup>25</sup> These nostalgic objects may include old letters, birthday cards, vintage landline telephones, vintage films, or embroidered handkerchiefs. Swift uses objects like these to increase her record sales. In her article, Rossman focuses on physical album sales and on ways that Swift gains and maintains her success. Here, she chooses to use Swift’s 2019 album, *Lover*, as an example. Inside the cover of the album, Swift includes the following forward,

When I found my old diaries from my childhood and teen years, they were covered in dust. I'm not just saying that for poetic effect, they were truly dusty,

---

<sup>23</sup> Chelsea Burns, “Make it Old: (Taylor’s Version) and the Art and Experience of Re-Creation (unpublished manuscript).”

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Schindler and Holbrook, “Nostalgia for Early Experience As a Determinant of Consumer Preferences,” 277.

with pictures drawn of first day of school outfits and inspirational quotes I used to retrace over and over through my doubtful moments.<sup>26</sup>

Swift focuses on physical objects that most women and girls would deem nostalgically significant such as, old diaries, dust, pictures, and first day of school outfits. Most girls had or still have one or more of these objects. Rossman writes,

Swift defines herself by markers of girlhood and femininity that her audience embraces, even when not always falling strictly into the demographic of “girl.” Swift unites her fandom within this girlish social space, playing off tropes that can best be defined by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's concept of bedroom culture.<sup>27</sup>

Bedroom culture is the young, feminine culture of the teen girl and how teen fandom manifests within the walls of the teen bedroom.<sup>28</sup> Swift takes advantage of this teen bedroom culture by creating nostalgia through performing emotion or sharing her emotions through her writing.

Rossman writes,

Through the reproduction of her diaries in the deluxe album journals, Swift recontextualizes her work as a labor of love...While relying on nostalgic connections may seem superficial or simply calculated, there is also value in how Swift restates this celebrity narrative through the lens of girlhood.<sup>29</sup>

One way Swift accomplishes performing emotion is by creating multiple versions of her albums that include physical objects that are nostalgic. For her album *Lover*, the physical deluxe edition contains photocopies of Swift's own diary entries.<sup>30</sup> According to Rossman, when sharing her journal entries Swift allows those moments of embarrassment and celebrates expressions of all emotions, allowing her fans to grow closer to her. Rossman writes,

---

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Rossman, “Taylor Swift, Remediating the Self, and Nostalgic Girlhood in Tween Music Fandom,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 38 (2022), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/2287/3017>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



Most media reports recognize that adult audiences who consume tween media are not tweens, but they are nonetheless implicated in the ideas of tween-ness—particularly its girly attributes. Many Swift fans have grown up alongside her and her music, meaning that while no longer tween-aged, their long-term fandom is embedded with nostalgia of their own girlhoods. In addition, Swift constantly evokes these feelings to court adult fans eager to return to their younger years.<sup>31</sup>

This strategy encourages fans to buy the physical copies of her albums. Therefore allowing Swift to compete with streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music. Swift promotes the purchasing of her physical albums by using various social media platforms to encourage fans to “collect” these deluxe editions.<sup>32</sup> These deluxe editions sometimes include bonus tracks that are not available on streaming services, for example, “You’re Losing Me (From the Vault)” from the deluxe edition of her 2022 album *Midnights*, which is yet another a strategy to encourage fans to purchase physical copies. When Swift released “You’re Losing Me (From the Vault),” her fans were outraged because the song was not available on streaming services. Fans purchased the physical deluxe version of *Midnights* and uploaded illegal recordings of the song via YouTube. Several months later after sales slowed down, Swift released the deluxe edition to streaming services as a “birthday present” to her fans on December 13<sup>th</sup>, Swift’s birthday. Like the inclusion of nostalgic items within her deluxe albums, Swift uses nostalgia in non-musical forms to increase sales, as well as to grow and maintain her fan base.

Similarly, John McGrath chooses to focus on non-musical nostalgia in relation to Taylor Swift. In his article, “The Return to Craft: Taylor Swift, Nostalgia, and Covid-19,” McGrath coins the term “craft” or the “return to craft” meaning,

“[a] folkloric mode of contemporary Western society, one that has arisen in response to the cultural issues raised in part by the Covid-19 pandemic, but also

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

by neoliberalism, homogenization, austerity, and the anxiety brought on by climate change.”<sup>33</sup>

Using Swift’s *folklore* album as an example, McGrath argues the reason for Swift's change in style and aesthetic is to represent a societal change during the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike Rossman who revealed Swift’s use of nostalgia as a brand and marketing tool, McGrath explores Swift’s use of nostalgia as an aesthetic. In times of turmoil, the return to craft becomes an escape for those who are in a state of uncertainty or difficulty. Swift’s return to craft during the pandemic was a very successful move, as many people during the pandemic were dealing with sickness, loss of loved ones, and fear of the present and future. According to McGrath, the return to craft is the combination of a reconnection of simpler times, minimalism, and nature.<sup>34</sup>

Nostalgia is not always a pleasant escape and heavily depends on the past experiences of the affected person. For example, one may have experienced past trauma when they were younger such as abuse, abandonment, or mental illness that may contribute to their feelings of nostalgia. In a perfect world, nostalgia would be a positive experience for everyone. However, it can be highly triggering for people with a history of traumatic experiences.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, obsessions and fascinations with past-time activities and objects become popular (e.g. baking, coffee-shops, old movies and music, cassettes, vinyl records)<sup>35</sup> During the pandemic, there was a resurfacing of these past-time activities as people were largely confined to their homes with little to no human interaction. According to McGrath, the largest example of this return to craft during the pandemic was *folklore*. McGrath describes the album as,

---

<sup>33</sup> John McGrath, “The Return to Craft: Taylor Swift, Nostalgia, and Covid-19,” *Popular Music and Society* 46, no.1 (2023): 70.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

a departure for Swift; a stripped back low-key production of authenticity, reinforced by its surprise release without fanfare and the Arcadian, cottage-core artwork of the sleeve – also on vinyl, of course. Swift’s press release depicts the solitary artist in country tweed amidst a misty wilderness.<sup>36</sup>

At the time she released the album, Taylor Swift posted to Instagram, saying,

A tale that becomes folklore is one that is passed down and whispered around. Sometimes even sung about. The lines between fantasy and reality blur and the boundaries between truth and fiction become almost indiscernible. Speculation, over time, becomes fact. Myths, ghost stories, and fables. Fairytales and parables. Gossip and legend. Someone’s secrets written in the sky for all to behold. In isolation, my imagination has run wild and this album is the result, a collection of songs and stories that flowed like a stream of consciousness. Picking up a pen was my way of escaping into fantasy, history, and memory. I’ve told these stories to the best of my ability with all the love, wonder, and whimsy they deserve. Now it’s up to you to pass them down.<sup>37</sup>

Here, Swift admits to escaping her own reality into memories by creating songs in times of uncertainty and confusion. She creates vivid imagery through her lyrics, which have nostalgic significance such as “rust on your door,” “vintage tee,” and more.<sup>38</sup> Swift does not stop with her lyrics, however; nostalgia is present within her music videos, album covers, and other visuals as well. Swift even adopts a new way of dressing herself, wearing little to no makeup, and wearing her natural curls in her hair. The last time one saw Swift’s natural curls was during the time of her 2010 album, *Speak Now*, released 10 years before *folklore*. For both *folklore* and its sister album *evermore*, the album covers are very muted and earthy in color, vintage, and minimal, fitting the nostalgic theme.

It is important to understand that nostalgia presents itself in more ways than one when it comes to Taylor Swift. Swift uses nostalgia as a way to connect with her audiences, promote sales, and to reflect on current events that are occurring within a society, such as the Covid-19

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> McGrath, “Return to Craft,” 79.

pandemic. Swift also uses nostalgia as a product of replication, as seen within her recent re-recorded albums.

### *(Taylor's Version)*

Taylor Swift began re-recording her previous albums in the Spring of 2021. The first of Swift's re-recorded albums, *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, was recorded in 2021 creating a 13-year gap between *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* and its original album, *Fearless*. In her upcoming article, "Make It Old: (Taylor's Version) and the Art and Experience of Re-Creation," Chelsea Burns claims Swift's motives behind her re-recorded albums were a "visible act of control over her work and her body, and defiance against men with privileged positions in the music industry."<sup>39</sup> By re-recording these albums, Swift gained ownership over these top-selling albums, with the hopes to replace the albums she had publicly lost her rights to. As of December 2023, Swift has re-recorded four of the six albums she lost her rights to. These re-recorded albums include *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)*, *Red (Taylor's Version)* and *1989 (Taylor's Version)*. Each album contains a few additional songs labeled "From the Vault" that Swift claims to be songs left off of the original record. Adding to the nostalgia, Swift releases these "From the Vault" songs many years later, singing of memories and themes of girlhood and adolescence.

In a social media post made by Swift dedicated to the man who sold her masters, also known as ex-manager Scooter Braun, Swift wrote, "my musical legacy is about to lie in the hands of someone who tried to dismantle it."<sup>40</sup> Although Big Machine Records owned her masters, Swift retained the publishing rights to the albums because she was the main songwriter

---

<sup>39</sup> Chelsea Burns, "Make it Old: (Taylor's Version) and the Art and Experience of Re-Creation (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

of all of the songs on each album. Burns explains Swift is trying to make an exact replica of each record in which only a small handful of noticeable differences were found between the original and re-recorded tracks. In her paper, Burns gives an account of her experiences when she first presented her paper's draft at a conference. The feedback she received led her to believe that many attendees "mentioned that they felt an intense nostalgia, or pangs of their own adolescence and the opportunity to reflect upon it."<sup>41</sup> She does not go into further detail about what characteristics within or surrounding the music caused these feelings of nostalgia. With this feedback in mind, it is easy to see not only the impact the original album had on these individuals in their younger years, but also the nostalgia Swift has worked to preserve and include within these re-recorded albums.

Burns also reveals the sonic differences between Swift's original versions and re-recorded versions, specifically involving her voice,

In *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, Swift uses a somewhat different vocal style than in her other recent releases. In recent albums, her vocals tend to be grainier than they were in her teenage years. Her performance style is different, and the notes don't ring quite as much as they used to. In the 2008 album, there is an effortless and bright tone to the vocals, a sound that Swift still references sometimes, but in recent recordings, she tends to reserve an approximation of this sound for particular moments at choruses.<sup>42</sup>

Burns comments on the many changes in Swift's vowel sounds and brighter tones. These changes to the maturity of the adolescent female voice can be compared to Pecknold's article.<sup>43</sup> Swift's changes in maturity with age, vocal timbre, and vocal style are relevant, allowing her to further connect with her audiences and their individual experiences, namely their remembrances

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

of girlhood. Swift's voice is essential in expressing these themes of girlhood that are found profoundly within her lyrics.

## CHAPTER II: TWANG AS SCHEMA (*TAYLOR'S VERSION*)

Growing up on a Christmas tree farm in Pennsylvania, Taylor Swift began writing music around the age of 12. At 13 years old her family moved just outside of Nashville, Tennessee to allow Swift to devote her time to her music and sign a record deal. At 14 years old Swift signed with Big Machine Records releasing her debut single in 2006, “Tim McGraw.” Swift opened for multiple big-name country musicians such as Tim McGraw, Kenny Chesney, and George Strait. Shortly after the release of her debut album, Swift received the Horizon Award for best new artist at the Country Music Awards. Swift continued writing country music, recording three, and arguably four country albums in total. One characteristic that is consistently present in all of Swift’s country albums is twang, both vocal and instrumental. After the release of four country albums, Swift officially acknowledged her transition from country to pop music. Swift’s fourth album, *Red*, caused some controversy, as some critics labeled it a country album while others claimed it to be pop. Swift did not officially announce her transition from country to pop until her fifth album, *1989*. *1989* was unmistakably a pop album. According to Nate Sloan,

The stylistic shift marked big news, with publications like the *New York Times* heralding the album as ‘a farewell to twang.’ Swift had been moving towards a pop sound since 2012’s *Red*, but announced *1989* as her ‘very first, documented, official pop album.’ Swift explained her transition from country to pop as a natural extension of her changing tastes and interest, but many critics saw it as a calculated re-branding to maintain her relevance and grow her audience. Her ‘leaving’ country amplified a discourse that had been present throughout Swift’s country career, questioning whether she represented ‘real’ country music to begin with.<sup>44</sup>

As Swift moved towards the pop music genre, critics attempted to label her country music as inauthentic. One critic stated in *Vulture* magazine, “lyrics about Chevy trucks and bedtime prayers and slammin’ screen doors, sung by Swift in a Dixie drawl, an accent she couldn’t

---

<sup>44</sup> Nate Sloan, “Taylor Swift and the Work of Songwriting,” *Contemporary Music Review* 40, no. 1 (2021): 13—14.

possibly have picked up in the Keystone State”.<sup>45</sup> Swift was considered by many to be inauthentically country, or to only be toying with country music. Sloan states,

Maintaining the standards['] of country may be an asymptotic goal, but Swift is no interloper for dabbling in nasal twang, lyrical cliches, and a timbral arsenal of banjos and violins. She evinces mastery over the formal language of country, how a song is structured.<sup>46</sup>

Swift’s move from country music to pop was arguably as much of an expansion of songwriting craft as it was clever rebranding.<sup>47</sup> As Swift’s music transitioned genres, so did her vocal style and vocal timbre.

In this chapter, I argue Swift’s use of country twang can be considered a vocal schema. Swift creates nostalgia through her music as a powerful method to maintain her large fan base. I focus on nostalgia as vocal timbre within Swift’s re-recorded country albums. This schema is essential to country music in which Swift was a part of for many of her early years as a musician. For Swift fans, or “Swifties” as they like to call themselves, Swift’s twang embodies feelings of nostalgia and girlhood, bringing her fans back to the beginning of her career, or the days in which Swift wrote and sang country music. First, I compare two spectrographic analyses of the following songs: “Sparks Fly” and “Sparks Fly (Taylor’s Version).” Through these analyses, I show how Swift’s vocal timbre has changed over time with age and experience. I then compare four spectrographic analyses including two of Swift’s country songs: “Fearless (Taylor’s Version),” “Mean (Taylor’s Version),” and two of Swift’s pop songs: “Vigilante Shit” and “You’re Losing Me (From the Vault).” Through these analyses, I demonstrate the differences in Swift’s country voice and pop sound.

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



## Twang as Schema

As stated in Chapter I, vocal twang refers to the characteristic of vocal performances that rely on nasal resonance, combined with a ringing tone and a harsh, tinny emphasis on high frequencies in the sound.<sup>48</sup> In Swift's case, vocal twang as well as twang as the act of plucking a string are most present in her earliest country albums, as well as their corresponding re-records. In Swift's country albums, twang appears mostly in the guitar, banjo, fiddle, and most obviously, her voice. For the purpose of my research I focus on Swift's voice.

Vocal schemas appear within music and outside of music. In their article, "The Expression and Recognition of Emotions in the Voice Across Five Nations: A Lens Model Analysis Based on Acoustic Features," Petri Laukka et. al. examine evidence for universal and culturally specific schemas in both the expression and perception of emotion. They claim that speakers have culturally nuanced schema for enacting vocal tones (acoustic cues) and that listeners have culturally nuanced schema in judging those vocal tones stating,

like facial dialects, paralinguistic dialects should involve subtle yet systematic differences across cultures in the style of expressing emotion, in this case via acoustic cues in the voice. In addition, consistent with dialect theory, we argue that individuals tend to judge the vocal expressions of other people based on their own cultural style.<sup>49</sup>

In a similar way, country twang is easily recognizable by those who grew up or have lived in the United States. Those who live and were born in Europe for example, might not have the schemata to recognize a southern drawl if they heard one. According to Neal,

twang in a vocal utterance is generally a combination of a tight throat, a nasal whine, and diction that features a Southern drawl, a rural Southern accent, or

---

<sup>48</sup> Neal, "The Twang Factor in Country Music," 44.

<sup>49</sup> Laukka, Petri, Hillary Anger Elfenbein, Nutankumar S Thingujam, Thomas Rockstuhl, Frederick K Iraki, Wanda Chui, and Jean Althoff, "The Expression and Recognition of Emotions in the Voice Across Five Nations: A Lens Model Analysis Based on Acoustic Features," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 111, no. 5 (2016): 687.

another marked regional accent that carries associations of rurality and working-class identity.”<sup>50</sup>

Twang is a necessary characteristic in deeming a country song “authentic.” This may not be true for all country subgenres. According to Geoff Mann, country singers who are not from the south or do not have a southern drawl will often fake one when they sing in order to be a successful country musician.<sup>51</sup> In his article, “Why does country music sound white? Race and the voice of nostalgia” Mann writes,

Twang – lyrical and/or musical – is thus self-referential in country music, it avers a song's authenticity like a badge or bumper sticker: when a song is musically arranged along lines more conventionally associated with ‘rock’, rhythm ‘n’ blues, or soul (to name the most common hybridizations in commercial country music), accented vocalization ‘saves’ the song for country radio.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, listeners hear twang in a song and immediately recognize it as country music.

Furthermore, in his study of schemata and cognition, David E. Rumelhart states,

Schemata are like theories in another important respect. Theories, once they are moderately successful, become a source of predictions about unobserved events...So it is with schemata. We need not observe all aspects of a situation before we are willing to assume that some particular configuration of schemata offers a satisfactory account for that situation.<sup>53</sup>

When listening to Swift’s re-recorded country songs, the listener immediately hears twang, and recognizes the song as belonging to the country music genre without having to listen to the entire song. Twang can be thought of as a schema because a listener makes these assumptions upon listening.

---

<sup>50</sup> Jocelyn Neal, “The Twang Factor in Country Music,” 49.

<sup>51</sup> Geoff Mann, “Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 79.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> David Rumelhart, “Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition.” In *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence, and Education*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (1980): 37.

## Country Twang vs. Pop Sound

According to Chelsea Burns, in Swift's country re-recorded albums she uses a somewhat different vocal style than in her original records. As mentioned in Chapter I, her vocals tend to be grainier, and the notes do not have the same "ring" as they used to.<sup>54</sup> In her 2008 album, *Fearless*, there is an effortless and bright tone to her vocal sound—a sound that Swift still uses occasionally—but in recent recordings, she tends to reserve an approximation of this sound for particular moments at choruses.<sup>55</sup> Burns comments on the changes in Swift's vowel sounds and brighter tones, tying these changes to the maturity of the adolescent female voice.<sup>56</sup> Young girls typically begin puberty around the age of 12. For many years it was assumed that the voices of young boys were the only voices affected by puberty. During puberty, the female voice also changes, however, as a mature chest voice is developed.<sup>57</sup> Swift released her debut album when she was 16 years old, a few years after the average age of puberty in young girls. As Swift grew older, the maturity in her voice changed with age, allowing her to sing more comfortably in a lower register, which can be heard in her more recent pop albums.

When comparing Swift's original records with their corresponding re-records, one may notice the differences in frequencies. The following spectrogram analyses are Swift's isolated vocals to depict instances of vocal twang in Swift's music. Each spectrogram depicts the very beginning of its respective song. I preface these analyses by stating each spectrogram reveals only Swift's isolated voice.

---

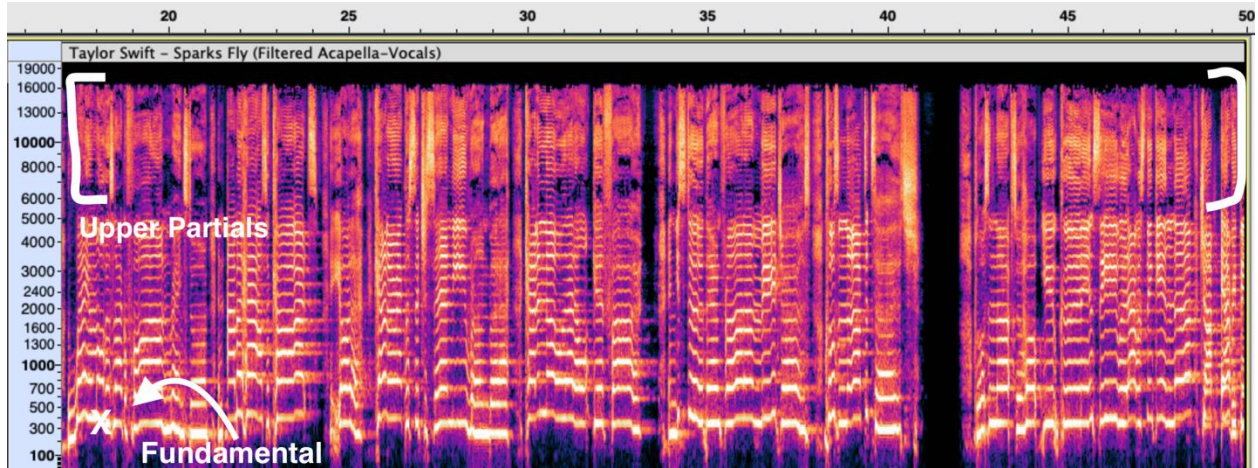
<sup>54</sup> Chelsea Burns, "Make it Old: (Taylor's Version) and the Art and Experience of Re- Creation (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

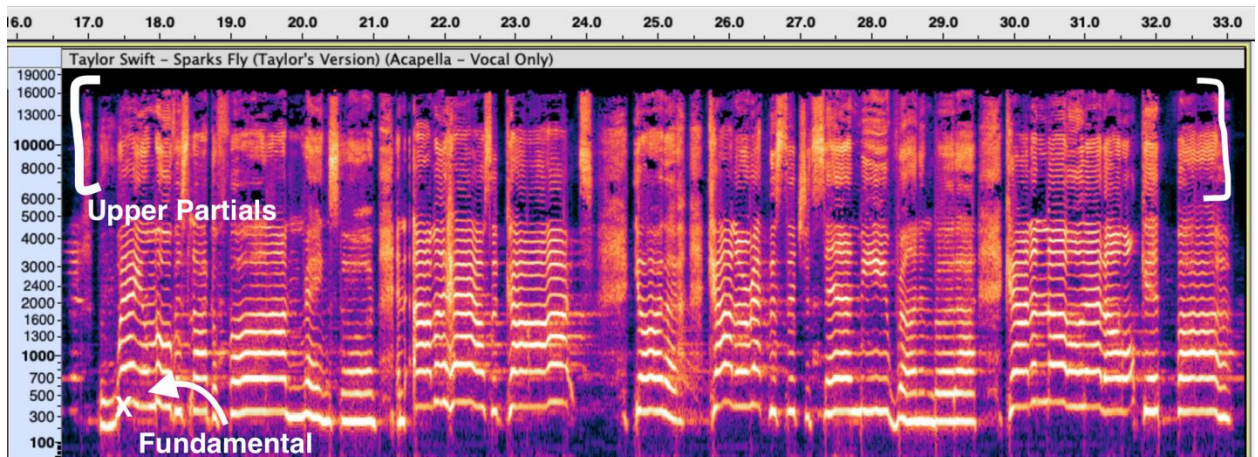
<sup>57</sup> Barbara Fox DeMaio, "Girls and Puberty: The Voice, It Is a-Changin'; A Discussion of Pedagogical Methods for the Training of the Voice Through Puberty," In *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music*, edited by Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, New York: Routledge (2016): 99.

**Figure 2.0. Spectrogram of “Sparks Fly”**



*A spectrogram analysis of “Sparks Fly” from her album Speak Now. The spectrogram begins at 00:17 seconds, just before the first verse.*

**Figure 2.1. Spectrogram of “Sparks Fly (Taylor’s Version)”**



*A spectrogram analysis of “Sparks Fly (Taylor’s Version)” released 13 years after the original song. The spectrogram begins at the same exact place in the song at 00:17 seconds, just before the first verse.*

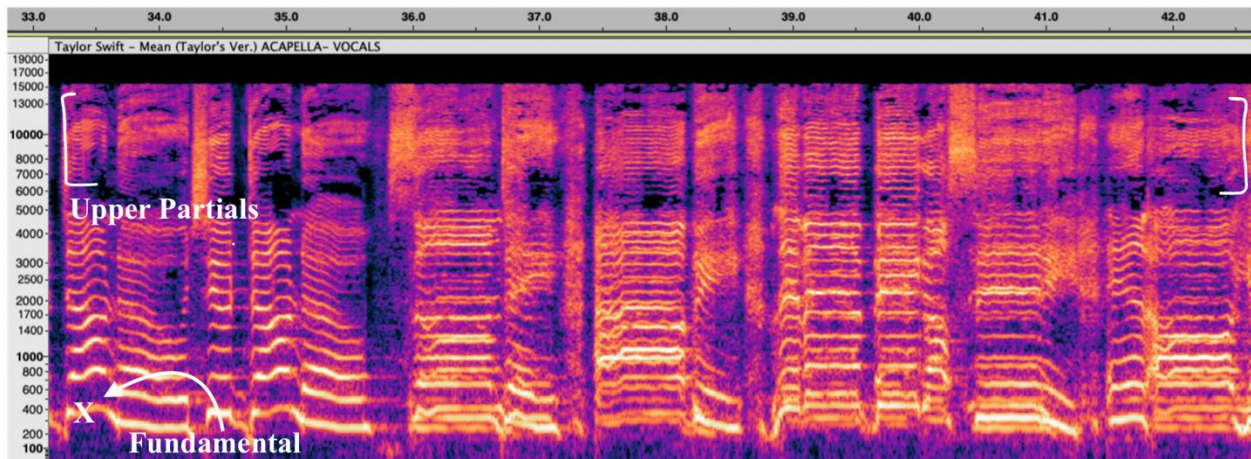
Although the differences in frequencies may be subtle, there is no doubt Swift’s voice in the original recording had more of a “ring” as Burns described. The fundamental pitches, labeled as “X” are stronger in the original recording, and there is less empty space the higher the frequency. There is also more saturation of color in the upper partials of the original recording in

comparison to the re-record. When comparing Figures 2.0 and 2.1 one can see the effect maturation has on the adolescent female voice.

It is important to remember that listeners recognize an instrument by its characteristics in the same way we recognize the characteristics of a voice. Therefore, we associate that voice with a specific genre or cultural identity. With twang, we do this through diction and pronunciation of lyrics.<sup>58</sup> Swift’s days of country music and twang have associations with her adolescent, teenage days as a singer/songwriter in Nashville. Therefore, when Swift fans hear twang in her voice, they immediately feel a sense of nostalgia.

When comparing spectrograms of Swift’s country songs and pop songs, it is easy to see the differences in overtones between a song with and without vocal twang. As Neal includes in her definition of vocal twang, there is an emphasis on high frequencies within the sound of twang, revealed in the following spectrogram analyses.

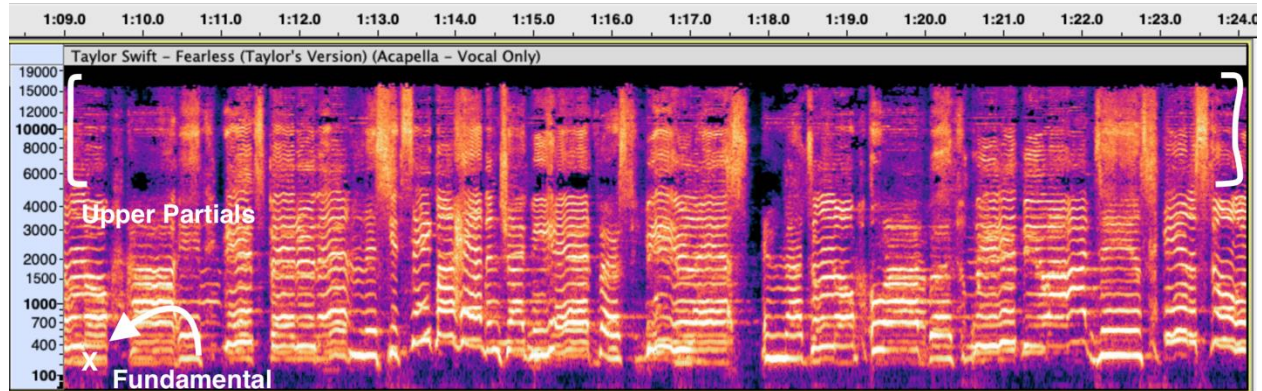
**Figure 2.2. Spectrogram of “Mean (Taylor’s Version)”**



*A spectrogram of Taylor Swift’s “Mean (Taylor’s Version)” from Speak Now (Taylor’s Version) originally released in 2010, later re-recorded in 2023. The spectrogram includes vocals only; instrumentation is not included. This spectrogram begins at 00:33 seconds just before the first chorus.*

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 2.3. Spectrogram of “Fearless (Taylor’s Version).**



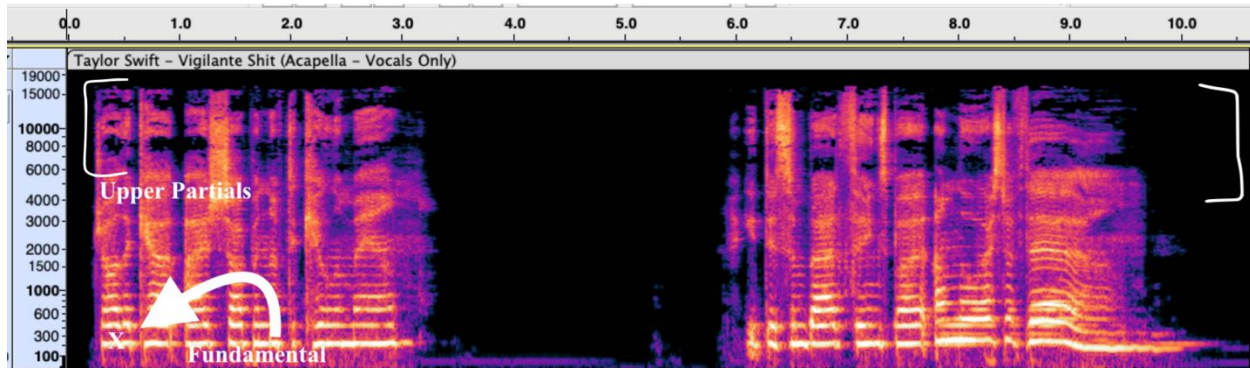
*A spectrogram of Taylor Swift’s “Fearless (Taylor’s Version)” from Fearless (Taylor’s Version) originally released in 2008. This spectrogram begins at the first chorus, 01:09.*

Figure 2.2 depicts the end of the first verse, leading into the first chorus beginning at 00:33.

Figure 2.3 begins at 1:09, just before the first chorus. In Figures 2.2 and 2.3 the fundamental vocal line is unsteady, implying twang is present. There is more color saturation of the upper partials, especially in Figure 2.3. As previously mentioned, the number of overtones produced are much greater and occur at a higher frequency in Figures 2.2 and 2.3 than in Swift’s pop hits “Vigilante Shit” and “You’re Losing Me (From the Vault)” in Figures 2.4 and 2.5. Sundberg and Thalén’s study revealed that when twang is compared to a neutral vocal timbre both the pulse amplitude and fundamental line are weaker, as revealed when comparing Figures 2.2 and 2.3 with Figures 2.4 and 2.5.<sup>59</sup> The overtones do not reach the frequencies of Figures 2.4 and 2.5, therefore, twang is not present in Taylor’s pop sound.

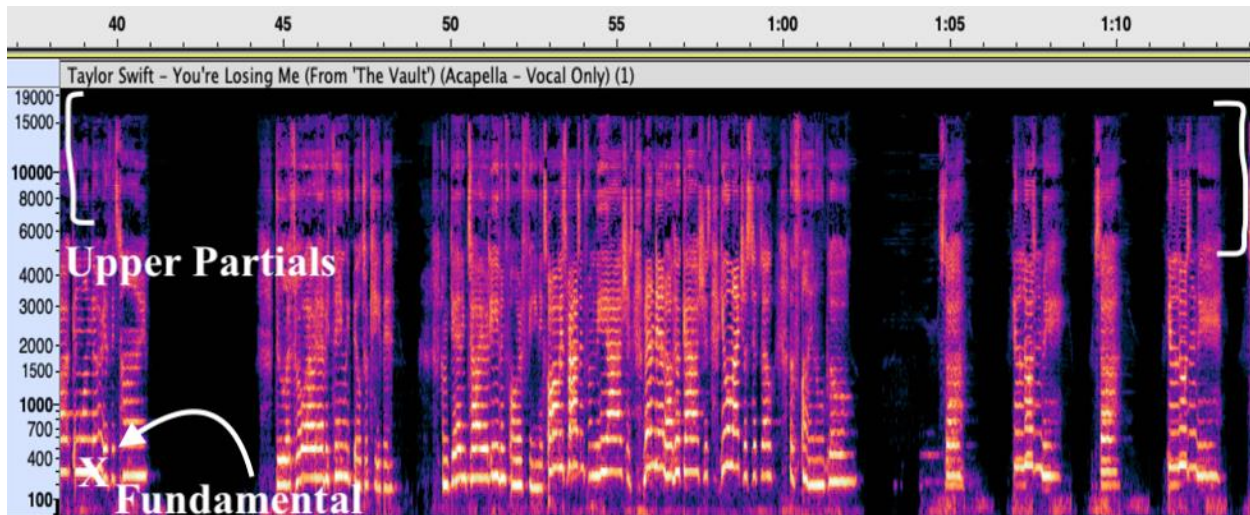
<sup>59</sup> Johan Sundberg and Margareta Thalén, “What is “Twang”?” *Journal of Voice* 24, no. 6 (2010): 654.

**Figure 2.4. Spectrogram of “Vigilante Shit”**



*A spectrogram of Taylor Swift’s “Vigilante Shit” from *Midnights* released in 2022. The spectrogram includes vocals only; instrumentation is not included.*

**Figure 2.5. Spectrogram of “You’re Losing Me (From the Vault)”**



*A spectrogram of Taylor Swift’s “You’re Losing Me (From the Vault)” from *Midnights* released in 2022. The spectrogram includes vocals only; instrumentation is not included. This spectrogram begins at 00:38.*

Figure 2.4 reveals the middle of the chorus of “Vigilante Shit,” beginning at 00:33. Figure 2.5 begins at 00:38 just before the first chorus. When looking at both pop spectrograms, one may notice a vast difference in the steadiness of the fundamental vocal line in comparison to Figures 2.2 and 2.3. Here, the fundamental line is much steadier, even completely straight in some areas.

Differences are evident between Swift's country twang and pop sound. Swift manipulates her voice to produce twang as a way of creating nostalgia for her fans to experience. How might "Mean (Taylor's Version)" or "Fearless (Taylor's Version)" be perceived by fans without the use of twang? Without twang, it would not be an exact replica of the original "Mean" or "Fearless" as Burns reveals. The song may also not produce feelings of nostalgia amongst fans. With the absence of country twang, critics and fans would possibly no longer consider it to be a country record anymore. Nostalgia produced by her re-records stems from the remembrance of Swift's country beginnings.

There is little scholarship involving vocal schemas within music. Swift's use of country twang can be considered a vocal schema because listeners are able to immediately recognize and make predictions based on the vocal timbre they are hearing. This schema is essential to country music. Throughout Swift's career she has progressively strayed away from using country twang in her voice to fit within the pop genre, making the genre of her fourth album, *Red*, controversial. When it comes to her re-records, Swift creates nostalgia through her use of twang as a method to maintain her large fan base. Without twang, fans would not have the same experiences listening to the re-records as they did years ago when the original record was released. Therefore, the album would not produce the same sense of nostalgia. Through analyzing spectrograms one can see the differences in her voice from a country song to a pop song, almost as if there is one artist singing country and another singing pop.



### CHAPTER III: EMOTION IN PERFORMANCE

Taylor Swift is known to use various different extra-musical effects in her music. From the sound of a beating heart in “You’re Losing Me (From the Vault)” to the sound of windshield wipers and slamming car doors in “Cornelia Street,” Swift uses these effects to further express the meaning of her lyrics. Swift not only uses these various sound effects to text paint her lyrics but also uses different breathing techniques to portray the emotion and meaning of the song.

Swift’s ability to build intimate relationships with her fans ultimately begins with her lyrics. Many fans will admit Swift’s talents do not predominantly lie in her abilities as a vocalist, but lie instead in her songwriting capabilities. Swift is known to write her lyrics based on her own personal experiences, as well as the feelings and emotions caused by those experiences. One may ask, is Swift the only artist who writes her lyrics this way? Beginning in the 1970s, a new movement known as the confessional singer-songwriter movement appeared in the music industry. Beginning with artists such as James Taylor and Joni Mitchell, the artists of this movement focused on storytelling through their lyrics.<sup>60</sup> According to Anastasiya Byelousova,

Distinguished by its introspection and autobiographical effect, this confessional style of music humanizes the artist, leaning into our shared experiences as people. Yes, while one may recognize the artist as a celebrity with millions of fans, the music makes it seem as if the artist could very much be a close friend of theirs because one feels seen, heard, and understood by them. True, the term “confessional singer-songwriter” has negative implications, particularly for female artists, as it can be used as a dig, as a way to diminish their artistry into nothing more than overly emotional ranting. It has been and continues to be used to fuel conversation about sexism in the music industry and the importance of the feminist movement in this context... Still, this writing style has catapulted many artists into stardom, and it is easy to understand why: confessional lyrics serve as

---

<sup>60</sup> Anastasiya Byelousova, “Staying Fearless: A Text Analysis of Vulnerability & Connection Through Taylor Swift’s Artistry,” (Honor’s Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2020), 1.

a bridge between an artist's public persona and their personal lived experiences, offering a more authentic form of connection.<sup>61</sup>

As one of the greatest and most successful singer-songwriters of all time, Swift's confessional writing style "catapulted" her into stardom, earning her a huge list of loyal and faithful fans. While Swift's lyric writing abilities are significant, Swift incorporates other effects and techniques within her music, resulting in a constant expansion of her fan base. In this chapter, I will focus on one effect used multiple ways, Swift's breathing.

In this chapter, I argue Swift uses her breathing as a way to further express the meaning of her lyrics. It is common for Swift to include themes of girlhood and nostalgia in her writing, in fact, it is an essential strategy in growing and maintaining her fan base. However, Swift takes her performance of these songs one step further by manipulating her breath to further capture these themes. I examine Swift's use of breath in two songs from her *Midnights* (2022) album. First, I study Swift's breathiness in "You're On Your Own, Kid," showing how it relates to Swift's experiences of girlhood. Then, I examine Swift's use of gasping and shaky breathing in "Would've, Could've, Should've." It is important to note that these are not the only instances in which Swift uses her breath in these ways. Swift has used this technique in many of her songs across many different albums. I chose these two particular examples because they belong to her most recent album, *Midnights*. I selected this album because of its significance discussed in Chapter IV. Swift's use of different breathing techniques allows one to further understand her craft in performance. Her craft extends beyond the lyrical content of her songs, using special effects to cue nostalgic memories or experiences.

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

## Defining Girlhood

In her study of 1990s transnational feminism, Catherine Vanner claims girlhood originated as a Western construct, articulating the subject of girlhood studies as white, middle-class, heterosexual females who speak English and live in a Western country. Western concepts of girlhood have imposed an experience of Western girlhood on non-Western cultures. This creates a false binary between Western and non-oppressive Western cultures and oppressive non-Western cultures.<sup>62</sup> According to Vanner,

This framing constructs non-Western cultures as backward, traditional, and violent toward women and girls, while ignoring violence perpetrated against girls and women in the West, much like the global sisterhood movements that transnational feminism subverted.<sup>63</sup>

Experiences of girlhood are shaped by various social processes and complexes, oppressive standards that are experienced by girls of Color and other marginalized constructs of class, heteronormativity, and able-bodiness.<sup>64</sup>

As previously defined by Brown, *Western*, and more specifically, American girlhood can be defined as, “[a] girlhood that is invested in whiteness, heterosexual monogamy and romance, and middle-class propriety and consumption.”<sup>65</sup> This definition is important to my research as it fits Swift’s identity as an “authentic” and “American girl,” well. On online fan forums and various social media platforms such as Taylor Connect, Instagram, and Reddit, fans uphold Swift as a perfect example of all-American “girlhood perfection.”<sup>66</sup>

Western ideas of girlhood slowly changed throughout time. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Girlhood was categorized by race and class identity. Girls belonging to the lower class existed in

---

<sup>62</sup> Catherine Vanner, “Toward a Definition of Transnational Girlhood,” *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 2 (2019): 120.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Adriane Brown, “She isn’t whoring herself out like a lot of other girls we see,” 162.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 173.

a binary system of child and adult, while girls belonging to the middle class and higher had a third category of “young lady.” It was not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century where the idea of tween and teenager came about.<sup>67</sup> According to Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, there are three specific characterizations of ones’ girlhood. One characteristic, innocence, is maintained in girlhood as a cultural ideal by allowing some girls to remain innocent while others are sexualized. As previously mentioned, girlhood is categorized by class and race, therefore positioning working class and girls of color as larger targets of sexualization and sexual violence. Meanwhile, we maintain the cultural ideal by allowing white, upper and middle-class girls to remain innocent.<sup>68</sup> Not only does childhood innocence depend on class, religion and race, but in a patriarchal society, characterizations of innocence position girls differently from boys. Many cultures sexualize girls while simultaneously labeling them innocent, and men find sexual pleasure in this innocent image.<sup>69</sup> The second characteristic, helplessness, involves mechanisms of subordination to men. Girls are taught to see themselves as helpless, the final characteristic, which in turn leaves them vulnerable.

As for Swift, her “authentic” image validates the perception of Swift being the subject of her songs. In other words, people perceive that she experiences what “normal” teenagers do.<sup>70</sup>

According to Brown,

Her image produces the normative expectation that there is a universal experience of adolescent girlhood love and romance. Swift’s positioning as an “authentic” American girl subject is wholly tied to her status as a white, middle class, heterosexual, normatively feminine girl—characteristics that are repeatedly shored up through the lyrical and visual elements of her music and music videos

---

<sup>67</sup> Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*, Counterpoints, V. 245, New York: Peter Lang, 2005: 11–12.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 162.

and through fans' insistence that she is a "good girl" whose infallibility makes her a good role model for young girls.<sup>71</sup>

Swift's use of imagery of recollections of girlhood allows her to further connect with her fans because of shared girlhood experiences. Swift takes these images of girlhood one step further by using her breathing as a way to further capture these experiences and the raw emotions produced by them.

### **Taylor Swift's Breathing**

In most mainstream music genres, singers typically inhale at the end of phrases. However, Swift's breathing does not always occur in this way. According to Mitch Ohriner, inhalations typically coincide with cadences in the music as well as phrase endings.<sup>72</sup> Ohriner discovered excessive inhalations in popular music as well as country. Ohriner defines "excessive inhalations" as "inhalation in the midst of the sentence or line [that] disrupt the processing of the meaning of the sentence. I don't mean this pejoratively—such disruptions...often have expressive affects."<sup>73</sup> According to Ohriner, like rising country artist Megan Moroney, Swift is known to interrupt phrases with excess inhalations, creating a disruption in the flow of the song. Sometimes these excessive inhalations are very short, creating a quick gasping effect. According to *Merriam-Webster*, the act of gasping is defined as, "a sudden loud intake of breath with one's mouth because of surprise, shock, pain, etc."<sup>74</sup> Another breathing technique Swift uses in her songs is breathiness. Breathiness can be defined as, "characterized or accompanied by or as if by the audible passage of breath."<sup>75</sup> Fans are aware Swift uses different breathing techniques to

---

<sup>71</sup> Adriane Brown, "She isn't whoring herself out like a lot of other girls we see," 162.

<sup>72</sup> Mitch Ohriner, "Excess Inhalations in Taylor Swift's *Midnights*" (2022), Unpublished Manuscript.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "Gasp," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gasp>.

<sup>75</sup> "Breathy," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/breathy>.

further express the emotions of the song. According to a Reddit post made by user @loversickgirls13, about “Haunted” from her 2010 album, *Speak Now*,

I also love Haunted, the panicky breaths help add to the emotions in the song so well. It truly is an amazing song and I love all of the feeling in it. I honestly love the breathy effect too, when used well it adds such wonderful dynamics to songs. And there’s so many ways it can be used, like in a happy dreamy way or in a sad desperate kind of way. I’ve heard many songs utilize it before, but I love the way Taylor does her breathy parts because they always enhance the song.<sup>76</sup>

Swift fans love these breathing effects as they add emotion to the song.

### **“You’re On Your Own, Kid”**

“You’re On Your Own, Kid” is a collection of memories from Swift’s girlhood. In the first verse of the song, Swift describes a vivid memory of a crush she had on a boy when she was young. However, her feelings were never reciprocated. By the second verse Swift ponders on memories of how her songwriting began: “I picked the petals, he loves me not. Something different bloomed, writing in my room.” Swift uses her own previous and current romantic experiences as inspiration for her writing, often putting herself in the song. Here, she recalls writing songs in her bedroom when she was much younger. As her career began, she writes, “I played my songs in the parking lot, I’ll run away.” It is unclear whether she means playing her songs on the radio while sitting in her car that is parked in a parking lot, or performing her songs in parking lots before making it on a stage. Nevertheless, after earning her first bits of fame Swift came to the realization that there are many aspiring young stars all after the same thing, to make it as a big-time musician in Nashville. She writes, “I search the party of better bodies, just to learn that my dreams aren’t rare.” The first two verses of “You’re on Your Own, Kid” are short recollections of Swift’s adolescent girlhood and as the song progresses, so does her age. These

---

<sup>76</sup> @loversickgirls13, “Songs where you can hear Taylor “breathing in” as she sings” (2022) [https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/r5cioi/songs\\_where\\_you\\_can\\_hear\\_taylor\\_breathing\\_in\\_as/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/r5cioi/songs_where_you_can_hear_taylor_breathing_in_as/).

adolescent memories align with the breathiness of Swift’s voice as discussed in the following paragraphs. In the third chorus of the song Swift has made her career as a songwriter and performer. She writes,

From sprinkler splashes to fireplace ashes,  
I gave my blood, sweat, and tears for this.  
I hosted parties and starved my body,  
Like I’d be saved by a perfect kiss.

The jokes weren’t funny, I took the money,  
My friends from home don’t know what to say.  
I looked around in a blood-soaked gown,  
And I saw something they can’t take away.<sup>77</sup>

Here, Swift writes about a new chapter of her life including the hardships she endured and what it took to make it as a successful musician. The music intensifies as Swift grows from teenager to young woman. In this section, Swift abandons the breathiness of her voice as she approaches the bridge. Swift writes,

‘Cause there were pages turned with the bridges burned  
Everything you lose is a step you take  
So make the friendship bracelets,  
Take the moment and taste it,  
You’ve got no reason to be afraid.<sup>78</sup>

Swift uses the bridge to express the main point of the song. She is no longer describing memories of the past; she is giving the listener advice based on past experiences. The lyric “So make the friendship bracelets” will be significant in Chapter IV as it relates to themes of girlhood in Swift’s 2023–2024 “Eras” Tour. In this last section all breathiness is gone as she drives the point home.

---

<sup>77</sup> Taylor Swift, Jack Antonoff, and Billy McCarthy, “You’re On Your Own, Kid” (Sony Music Publishing and Universal Music Publishing) Copyright (2022).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

### **The Breathiness of the Adolescent Voice.**

When listening to “You’re On Your Own, Kid,” one may notice what some fans refer to as the breathiness of Swift’s voice. In comparison to the other songs on her *Midnights* album this vocal feature is unique to “You’re On Your Own, Kid.” Although this is the only occurrence of breathiness in her album *Midnights*, Swift has used breathiness in other albums for different meanings such as her song “Wildest Dreams,” from her album *1989*. As for “You’re On Your Own, Kid,” the song progresses from images of adolescence to stories of her fighting her way to become a singer/songwriter in Nashville.

Pecknold quotes Lynn Gackle, attributing breathiness to the adolescent voice, stating, “Popular music criticism has followed vocal pedagogical wisdom in its “recognition of and resignation to the breathy, thin and often colorless adolescent girl’s voice.”<sup>79</sup> Swift received much criticism in her early days as a singer for her lack of breath control and “unpleasant nasal tone.”<sup>80</sup> It is in “You’re On Your Own, Kid” that Swift uses breathiness in her voice to further capture the adolescent themes created by the imagery of the lyrics.

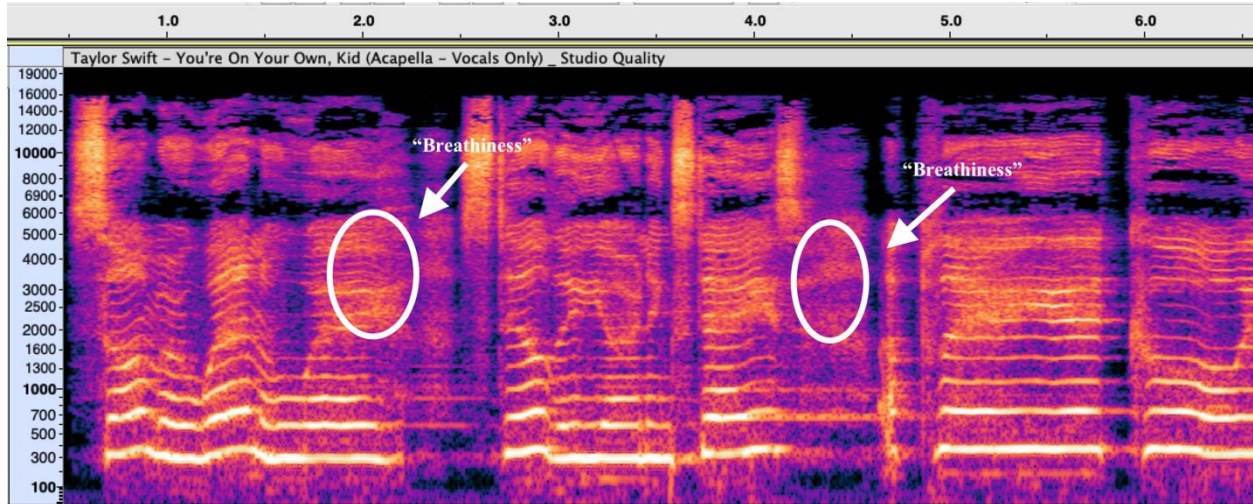
---

<sup>79</sup> Diane Pecknold, “These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice,” In *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music*, edited by Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, 79, New York: Routledge, 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



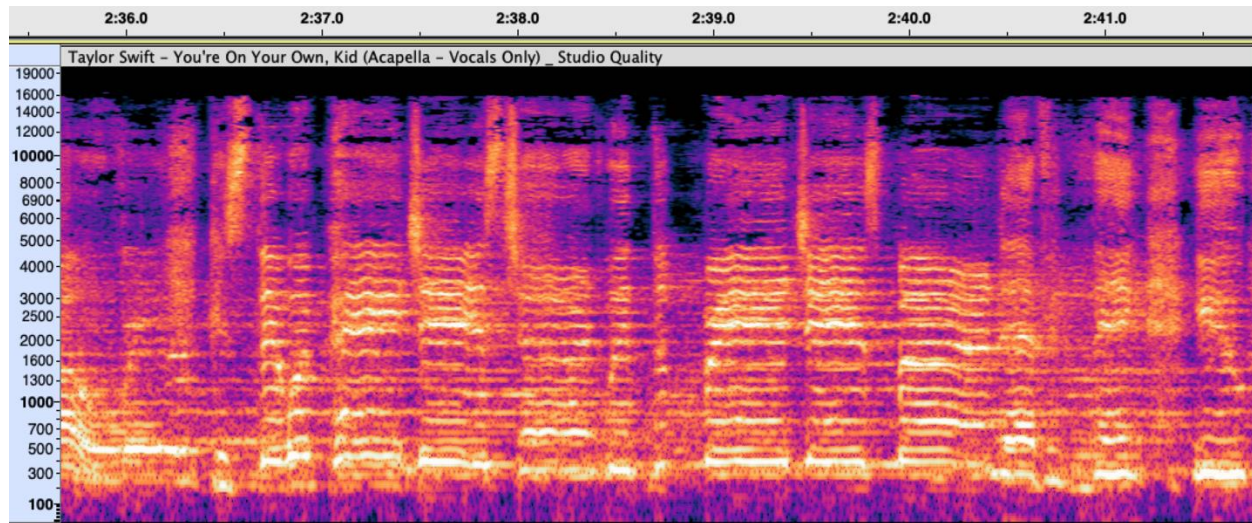
**Figure 3.0. Spectrogram of “You’re On Your Own, Kid”**



*A spectrogram of Taylor Swift’s “You’re On Your Own, Kid.” This spectrogram consists of Swift’s voice only, starting at the beginning of the song.*

When looking for breathiness on a spectrogram, it appears in the fuzziness or blurring between lines and of the upper partial lines. In this spectrogram one can see where Swift’s breathiness occurs. The fundamental line is strong, and the upper partials appear fuzzy. In most cases, it is easiest to see the breathiness at the ends of phrases as Swift’s voice tapers off of each phrase; however, her breathiness occurs during phrases as well. As the song progresses, Swift abandons the memories of adolescence while simultaneously abandoning her use of breathiness. When she sings about the battles she endured as a young woman to become a successful musician, her voice changes.

**Figure 3.1. Spectrogram of the Chorus of “You’re On Your Own, Kid”**



*A spectrogram of Taylor Swift’s “You’re On Your Own, Kid.” This spectrogram consists of Swift’s voice only, starting at the beginning of the bridge.*

As one may notice in comparison to the beginning of the song, there is no more fuzziness or blurring of the upper partial lines. Therefore, there is no more breathiness present in Swift’s voice. In the bridge Swift is no longer describing memories of girlhood; therefore, there is no need for her to use her voice to further capture ideas of adolescent girlhood. Instead, here is where the music hits its peak, and Swift belts the bridge, which contains the song’s main idea.

Swift expresses girlhood by portraying adolescence in her own voice when singing of memories as a young girl writing songs in her bedroom. As Pecknold stated, breathiness is a quality typically found within the adolescent, female voice. Therefore, Swift sings “You’re On Your Own, Kid” with a breathy quality to portray girlhood beyond the lyrics. This song is not the only instance in which she uses her voice and breathing in such a way to get the point across.

### **Recollections of Girlhood in “Would’ve, Could’ve Should’ve.”**

Swift’s “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve” tells a story of a 19-year-old girl who was pursued romantically by a man much older than her. In the song it is clear the young girl regrets

and even resents their inappropriate relationship, stating “would’ve, could’ve, should’ve if you never walked my way.” The song is believed by fans to be the story of Swift’s previous relationship with musician John Mayer. When Swift was 19 years old, she openly dated Mayer who was 32. This is not the first song Swift has written about Mayer. In 2010 Swift released “Dear John” as part of her album, *Speak Now*. “Dear John” tells the story of Swift and Mayer’s relationship. Swift writes the lyrics, “Don’t you think I was too young to be messed with?” and “Dear John, I see it all now it was wrong. Don’t you think nineteen’s too young to be played by your dark twisted games...” Almost exactly 12 years later, Swift writes another song about Mayer, releasing “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve” as part of her 2022 *Midnights (The Til Dawn Edition)* album. In “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve,” Swift never claims she pursued or even wanted the relationship, writing, “if you never saved me from boredom, I could’ve gone on as I was.” Here, Swift writes as if she was not interested in beginning a relationship with Mayer, stating she only dated him out of boredom. Swift portrays Mayer as a ghost that haunts her memories stating, “and now that I’m grown, I’m scared of ghosts. Memories feel like weapons...I regret you all the time.” Here, Swift is reflecting on experiences of her girlhood that were negative and traumatizing.

Throughout “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve” Swift uses many religious references that are not particularly common in her music, especially not as common in her recent pop albums. For example, she writes lyrics such as, “God rest my soul” and “I never would’ve danced with the devil, at nineteen.” Swift blames her much older ex-lover, claiming he knew that pursuing a 19-year-old girl was inappropriate; however, because he was a male of high-status in the music industry, he got away with it. Swift writes, “if you tasted poison, you could’ve spit me out at the first chance.” The language in this line hints at the fall of Adam and Eve found in the Old

Testament of the Bible. In the biblical story Eve is persuaded by Satan to eat of the “forbidden fruit” condemned by God, therefore committing the first sin of the world. This “forbidden fruit” language is commonly used when sexualizing innocent teenage girls. Here Swift uses the idea of “forbidden fruit” to further the religious imagery used throughout the song.<sup>81</sup> As described by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, this is an example of the dichotomy between eroticism and innocence in girlhood. Swift is a young, 19-year-old girl being pursued romantically by a much older man in what seems to be in an almost predatory way. Swift writes,

If I was some paint, did it splatter  
On a promising grown man?  
And if I was a child, did it matter  
If you got to wash your hands?<sup>82</sup>

Here Swift refers to herself, explicitly claiming she was only a child. As the song progresses, her sadness slowly becomes anger. She writes, “living for the thrill of hitting you where it hurts. Give me back my girlhood it was mine first.” Here, Swift explicitly blames Mayer for stealing her girlhood away from her and demands he give it back. At this point in the song the music stops building, reaching its climax, and Swift is clearly angry as she belts the bridge. Finally, the anger settles into regret as Swift writes,

God rest my soul, I miss who I used to be,  
The tomb won't close, stained glass windows in my mind,  
I regret you all the time.<sup>83</sup>

Swift ends the song with, “I regret you all the time” as if she is singing it directly to her Mayer.

---

<sup>81</sup> Mark Regenerus, *Forbidden Fruit : Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2007): 3–6.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor Swift and Aaron Dessner, “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve” (Sony Music Publishing and Universal Music Publishing) Copyright (2022).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

### **Crying Portrayed in Breathing in “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve.”**

Swift begins “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve” as if she is reliving some of the most painful memories from her own girlhood. Her breath is shaky as she takes breaks in the middle of phrases, while she quickly gasps for air in the middle of other phrases. One may recognize her breathing as the same kind of shaky breathing or gasping one may experience when crying. This is not the first time Swift has incorporated this breathing effect into her music. “Last Kiss” from her 2010 album *Speak Now* is one of her most intimate breakup songs. In some of its most vulnerable moments Swift includes shaky breathing as if she is crying during the song. According to Reddit posts, Swift’s fans love this breathing effect. User @kuspu writes, “Yeah especially the broken breath between “I hope the sun shines [breath] and it’s a beautiful day” and “and something reminds you [breath] I wish you had stayed” is heartbreaking. I really love hearing raw emotion even in studio versions.”<sup>84</sup> However, this effect is not found within its corresponding re-recorded version, leaving fans outraged. Reddit user @Tsukiakari\_12 writes, “yes[s] the famous shaky breath, may it rest in peace.”<sup>85</sup> In my personal opinion, I believe Swift did not keep this shaky breathing effect in its corresponding re-record because she has healed from the experience that caused those intense emotions of sadness. In other words, Swift is no longer heartbroken from a relationship that occurred 12 years ago. As for “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve,” the emotions may still be relevant to Swift, as she “can’t let this go.” Swift incorporates both shaky breathing and gasping as a way to further express the meaning of her lyrics within the song, allowing fans to connect on a much deeper, emotional level.

---

<sup>84</sup> @kuspu, “Taylor Crying in Last Kiss,” [https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/cbjf1i/taylor\\_crying\\_in\\_last\\_kiss/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/cbjf1i/taylor_crying_in_last_kiss/).

<sup>85</sup> @Tsukiakari\_12, “Last Kiss Taylor’s Version” (2023) [https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/153wtwk/last\\_kiss\\_taylors\\_version/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/153wtwk/last_kiss_taylors_version/).

In the first verse of “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve,” Swift begins by taking breaths in the middle of sentences versus at the breath mark, disrupting the processing of the meaning of the sentence. If one was to read the first verse aloud to a friend, inhaling in the same places that Swift inhales, the listener may have a hard time following and processing what is being said because of the frequent disruptions. In everyday speech, it is unlikely one would inhale in the middle of a sentence.

Figure 3.2. Transcription of “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve”

## Would've, Could've, Should've

Taylor Swift

The image shows a musical transcription of the first verse of Taylor Swift's song "Would've, Could've, Should've". It consists of four staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The lyrics are: "If you would've blinked, then I would've looked a way at the first glance. If you tast-ed poi-son, you could've spit me out at the first chance. And if I was some paint, did it spla-tter on a prom - is - ing grown man." The transcription uses a treble clef and includes various musical notations such as quarter notes, eighth notes, and rests.

If you would've blinked, then I would've looked a -  
way at the first glance. If you tast-ed poi - son, you could've\_ spit me  
out at the first chance. And if I was some paint, did it spla-tter\_ on a  
prom - is - ing grown man.

*A partial transcription of the first verse of Swift's "Would've, Could've, Should've" from her 2022 album *Midnights* (The Til Dawn Edition).<sup>86</sup> Transcription begins at 00:10.*

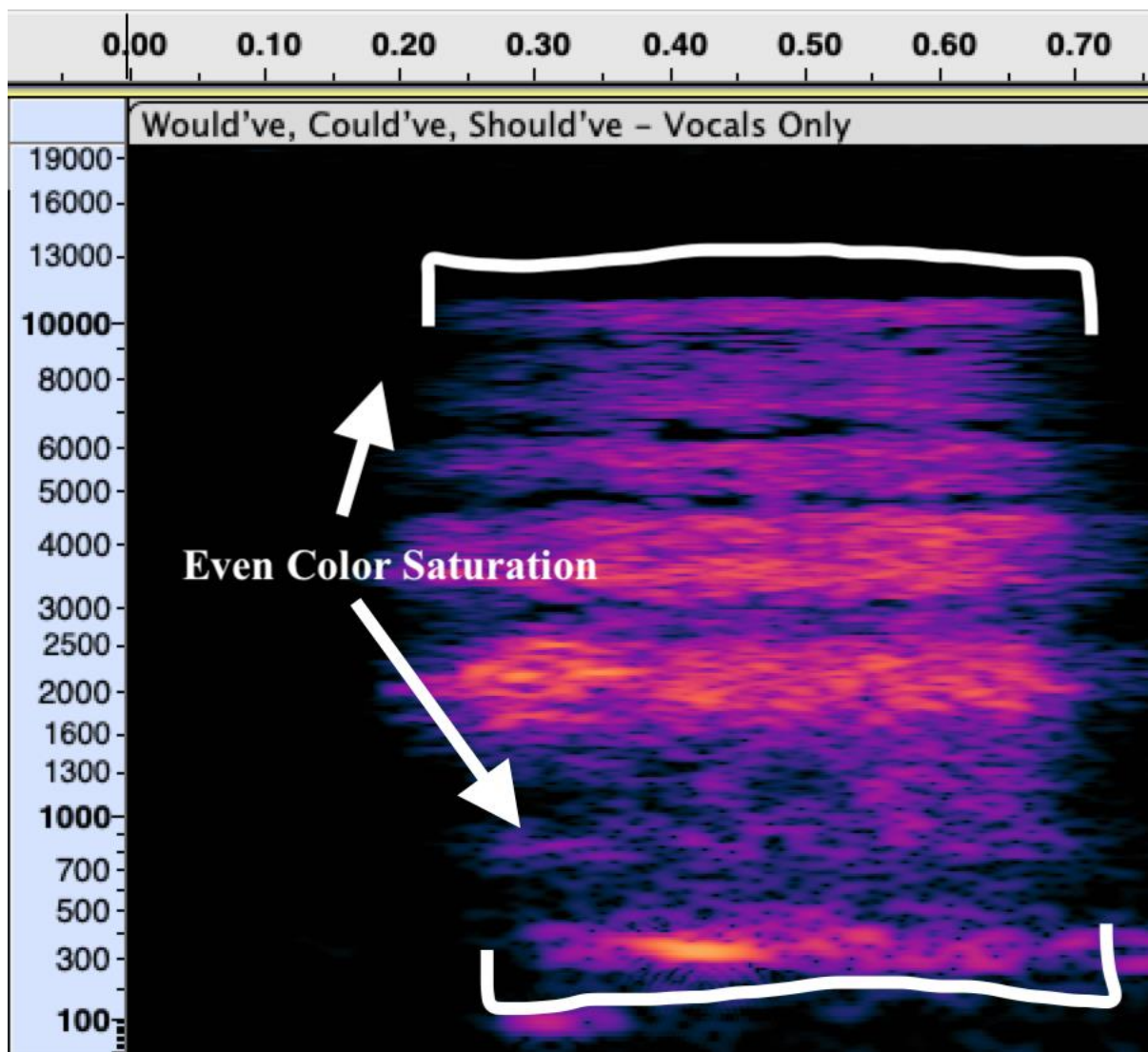
<sup>86</sup> Taylor Swift and Aaron Dessner, "Would've, Could've, Should've" (Sony Music Publishing and Universal Music Publishing) Copyright (2022).

As transcribed in Figure 3.2, in the verse Swift gasps for breaths in the middle of sentences, right after the lyrics “would’ve,” “could’ve,” and “splatter.” For Swift, the gasp is not necessary as she has two to three full beats to inhale as needed. In other words, Swift has plenty of time to inhale; however, she chooses not to utilize that time as shown by the breath mark in the transcription above. Therefore, there is no practical reason as to why Swift waits until the last possible moment or half-beat to quickly inhale or gasp for breath. The short gasps between phrases in combination with the shaky breathing are used to further express the emotions of possible fear and intense sadness within the song.

I preface the following spectrographic analyses by saying in order to hear the shaky breathing produced by Swift, it is very helpful to wear high-quality headphones or use a high-quality speaker. In the first verse, Swift incorporates shaky breathing in almost all of the places she gasps, just before the lyrics “spit” and “on a promising.” When visually comparing these shaky breaths with her longer, more stable breaths there are noticeable differences between the two spectrograms.



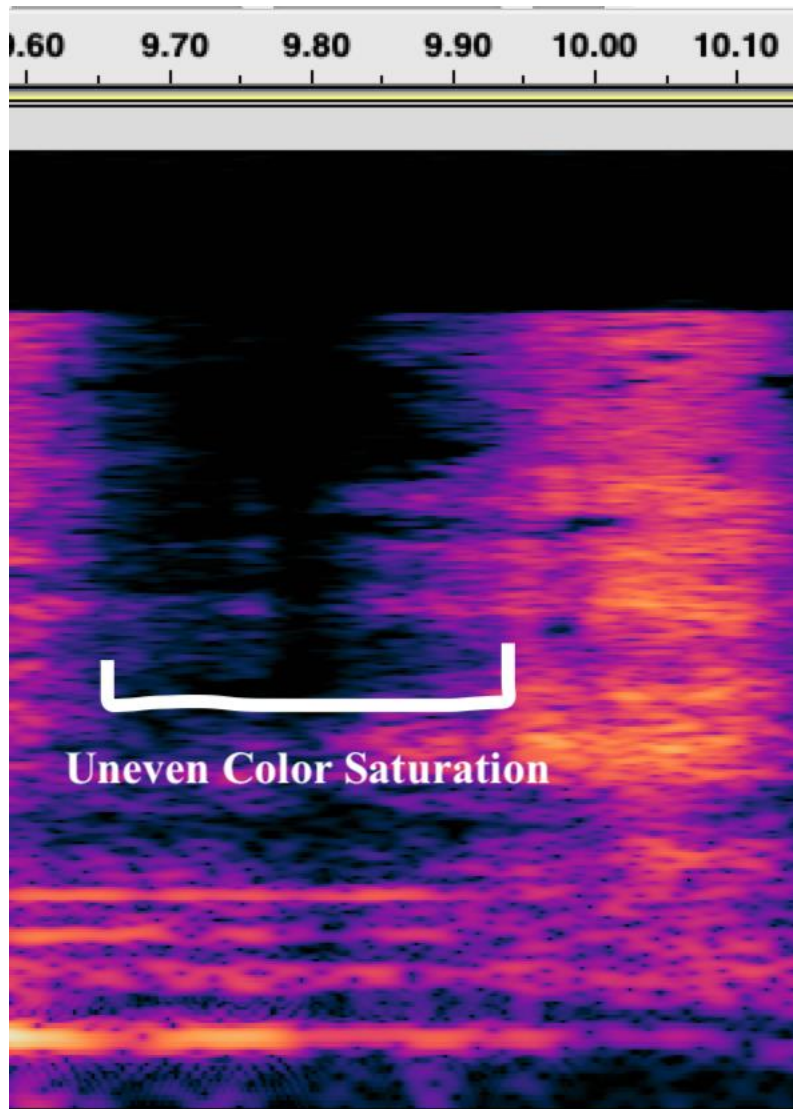
Figure 3.3. Spectrogram of Opening Breath in “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve”



*A spectrogram of Swift’s opening breath in “Would’ve, Could’ve Should’ve” from her 2022 album, *Midnights* (The Til Dawn Edition). Spectrogram begins at 00:00.*

Figure 3.3 is a picture of Swift’s opening breath, just before the lyric, “If you would’ve blinked, then I would’ve.” Here, you can see the breath is more drawn out and stable with equal color saturation shown horizontally across the breath, indicating there is hardly any variation in the intensity of the breath. When Swift inhales with a noticeable shakiness to her breathing, the spectrogram looks slightly different.

**Figure 3.4. Spectrogram of Shaky Breathing in “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve”**



*A spectrogram of Swift’s breath occurring at 00:09.6 in “Would’ve, Could’ve Should’ve” from her 2022 album, *Midnights* (The Til Dawn Edition).*

Here, one may first notice the uneven color saturation horizontally across the breath, as well as the exclusion of the upper partials. The shakiness is evident in the uneven color saturation, meaning her breath fluctuates in its intensity throughout the entire breath. Like “Last Kiss,” Swift uses this breathing effect to further convey the emotion she was going through at the time

the song was written. Nevertheless, Swift uses these breathing techniques in hopes to deepen the emotional connection fans may experience when listening.

Swift's various breathing techniques are not incorporated into her music by chance. Swift carefully and purposefully uses her breathing as a tool to further express the meaning of her lyrics. In "You're on Your Own, Kid," Swift uses her breathiness as a tool to reflect the themes of girlhood within her lyrics. As the song progresses, the girlhood theme slowly disappears as Swift grows into adulthood; therefore, the breathiness of the adolescent voice slowly disappears as Swift becomes a young adult in the song. In "Would've, Could've, Should've," Swift uses shaky breathing and gasping to portray sadness as if she is crying in the song, allowing her fans to connect to Swift and the song on a much deeper, emotional level. Swift's craft as a songwriter extends beyond the lyrical content of her songs. Her successes may in part involve more than just the musical and lyrical content.

## CHAPTER IV: 2023: THE YEAR OF THE GIRL

The year of 2023, according to *ELLE* magazine, was “The Year of the #Girl.”<sup>87</sup> From the release of the *Barbie* movie, to Taylor Swift and Beyoncé’s very successful album tours, to the abundance of women nominees at the Grammy’s, the year of 2023 was all things girly. The word “girl” can sometimes anger people as it has a long history of entrenchment in sexism. “Girl,” when placed in the wrong hands, has the potential to make one feel naïve, underestimated, or belittled.<sup>88</sup> “There is a sense of freedom in becoming yourself—before the domesticity and labor of adult life—that I think is always worth reconnecting with,”<sup>89</sup> Claire Marie Healy, founder of archival practice and research studio Girlhood Studies, tells *ELLE* magazine. “How one does this may vary, from watching coming-of-age films to [listening to] certain music. It's not always this simplistic nostalgia: it’s about our layered selves.”<sup>90</sup> 2023 was the year of reclaiming the term “girl” and owning it in confidence.

With 2023 being the “Year of the #Girl,” it makes sense that the vast majority of nominees for the 2024 Grammys were women. In some categories, every nominee was a woman. For Record of the Year, seven of the eight nominees were women with Miley Cyrus taking home her first trophy. In the category of Album of the Year, again, seven of the eight nominees were women. Finally, for Best Pop Solo Performance, all nominees were women. These nominations were not by chance, as women made a large impact on the music industry in the year of 2023.

In this chapter, I argue women not only made a large impact in the music industry, but also made a large impact on women and young girls through their music in 2023. Themes of

---

<sup>87</sup> Emma Firth, How 2023 became the year of the #girl, December 23, 2023, <https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/a46125868/girl-tiktok-trends/>.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

girlhood and nostalgia were produced by the musicians themselves and their fans. It is the artists who initiate the nostalgia and themes of girlhood, but it is the fans who make it come to life. To begin, I first examine the year of 2023 and why it is considered to be “The Year of the Girl.” I then analyze Miley Cyrus’ “Used to Be Young” as it relates to nostalgia and girlhood. Finally, I examine and discuss Billie Eilish’s breathing techniques in “What Was I Made For? [From The “Barbie” Movie].” The year of the girl allowed for so many women to confidently embrace the identity of “girl” and reclaim their own girlhood. Swift was not the only one incorporating nostalgia and themes of girlhood in her music in 2023.

### **“Barbie”**

Many women and young girls remember playing with Barbie dolls as children. Barbie was founded in 1959 by Ruth Handler. Handler was a mother and entrepreneur who was inspired by her daughter to create Barbie when she would project her dreams onto her paper dolls. Barbie was created to inspire young girls to dream big, and to become anything they set their minds to.<sup>91</sup> This idea of girls becoming anything they dream of—whether it be a doctor, lawyer, or president—is portrayed in the 2023 *Barbie* movie directed by Greta Gerwig. *Barbie*, the movie, takes place in a fictional world known as “Barbie Land.” This world is very different from the United States in that a patriarchal society does not exist. In fact, “Barbie Land” society is quite the opposite, a matriarchal society.

According to Nabila Myisha et. al., “patriarchy is a system of social life in which the center of power and authority rests with men, usually within the family structure or society more broadly. In a patriarchal context, men are seen to dominate leadership roles, make decisions, and

---

<sup>91</sup> “About Barbie,” *Barbie*, <http://www.barbiemedia.com/aboutbarbie/history.html#:~:text=Barbie%20was%20founded%20in%201959,and%20aspirations%20onto%20paper%20dolls>.

control resources and social structures.”<sup>92</sup> Because patriarchy is a gender hierarchy promoting male domination and power, it remains relevant in theorizing violence against women.<sup>93</sup> In a patriarchal society, men are more privileged than women. In the *Barbie* movie, patriarchy is challenged and often reversed.<sup>94</sup>

In the movie, Barbie and her boyfriend, Ken, go on a trip to the “real world” or modern-day Los Angeles. When they arrive, they immediately realize how different the “real world” is. Barbie notices that men are staring at her, as well as cat calling and harassing her. Ken notices that everything is male-dominant and becomes very excited with the idea. Ken becomes so obsessed with the idea of patriarchy that he brings it back home to “Barbie Land.” Ken then convinces the other Ken dolls to turn “Barbie Land” into a hyper-patriarchal society he calls “Kendom” in which men rule over everything.

“Barbie” examines the expectations society places on women in a patriarchal society and the overall female experience. The film addresses that Barbie was not meant to be a representation of how women should look or how young girls should aspire to look, but was instead to be a representation of everything a woman can be. The release of “Barbie” was essential in the year of 2023 being “The Year of the Girl.” “Barbie” broke many records and was the highest-grossing film in 2023. When the movie was first released, many viewers went to the theaters dressed up in their brightest Barbie pink and blonde wigs. Theaters even rolled out a pink carpet on opening night. Barbie is very nostalgic for many women and was a huge part of their girlhoods. *Barbie* played a crucial role in the year of the girl, as it not only broke records,

---

<sup>92</sup> Nabila Myisha, Angelia Brigita Maharani, Akira Hilal Ramadhan, Dinda Sabila, Mirza Fathima Jauhar Kamalia, “Decoding the Perpetuation of Patriarchal Culture in the Barbie Movie,” *Cultural Narratives* 1, no. 2 (2023): 72.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

but also allowed so many women to confidently embrace the identity of “girl” and to call attention to the long list of problems found within a patriarchal society.

### **The Eras and Renaissance Economic Boom**

Swift’s “Eras” Tour and Beyoncé’s “Renaissance” Tour have become a cultural phenomenon across social media, smashing world records in 2023. According to *The New York Times*, Swift’s “Eras” Tour is scheduled to top 1 billion dollars in sales, making it the first concert tour in history to do so. Swift is expected to exceed Elton John’s \$939 million for his multiyear farewell tour, the current record-holder.<sup>95</sup> Some economists believe both tours are an example of what is referred to as “revenge spending” which was a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. These spenders turned away from purchasing physical items to spending tons of money on experiences.<sup>96</sup> In order to attend an Eras concert, fans must spend a pretty penny on tickets, and the average Beyoncé fan spent an average of \$1,800 on tickets.<sup>97</sup> If the fan was not lucky enough to receive a pre-sale code via Ticketmaster, the fan must purchase a second-hand ticket which according to *The New York Times*, “cost more than a flight to Europe.”<sup>98</sup> Fans then must purchase transportation to whatever city, state, or country she is performing in, hotel rooms, transportation to the venue, and can choose to purchase an outfit based on a specific “era” of Taylor Swift. According to the survey company QuestionPro, Swift’s concert tour could generate around 4.6 billion dollars and Beyoncé’s 4.5 billion in economic activity in North America alone. QuestionPro compares Swift’s Eras Tour to the revenues of the 2008 Beijing Olympics,

---

<sup>95</sup> Jenna Smialek, Jordyn Holman, Desean McClinton-Holland, and Maggie Shannon, “Make the Whole Place Shimmer: America Spends Big for Beyoncé and Taylor Swift,” *The New York Times* (2023), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2849425710/42895CA12C1345C5PQ/1?accountid=14604&sourcetype=Newsapers>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

after adjusting for inflation.<sup>99</sup> The local economies surrounding each venue benefited greatly from Swift's tour. For example, Shade Hotel located in Manhattan Beach, California,

held a Taylor Swift pre-party where guests sported costumes, wore Swift themed temporary tattoos and sipped on a signature "Lavender Haze" cocktail, a reference to one of the most popular songs on her latest album. Both the hotel and its neighbors reported surging demand that pushed up room rates and sold out many properties.<sup>100</sup>

Both Swift's and Beyoncé's tours have become a boost for local tourism, driving more spending as fans were booking hair, makeup, and nail appointments, as well as purchasing outfits to wear to the concert. For Swift fans, QuestionPro found that fifty percent of fans used their regular earned income to buy concert tickets, four percent borrowed money to afford the tickets, while nine percent dipped into their savings account.<sup>101</sup> The economic boost caused by Swift's and Beyoncé's tours was a direct result of large sums of money spent by fans in a post-Covid world. After attending Swift's concert, artist Billy Joel stated, "The only thing I can compare it to is the phenomenon of Beatlemania."<sup>102</sup>

### **The Eras Tour and Girlhood**

For most Swift fans, dressing up as your favorite era for the concert is a must. Swift fans have a total of ten eras to choose from when carefully picking their outfits. Each era corresponds with an album. Therefore, ten albums mean ten different eras of Taylor Swift. Fans spend months preparing their outfits. Some fans make their outfits from scratch, while others spend

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

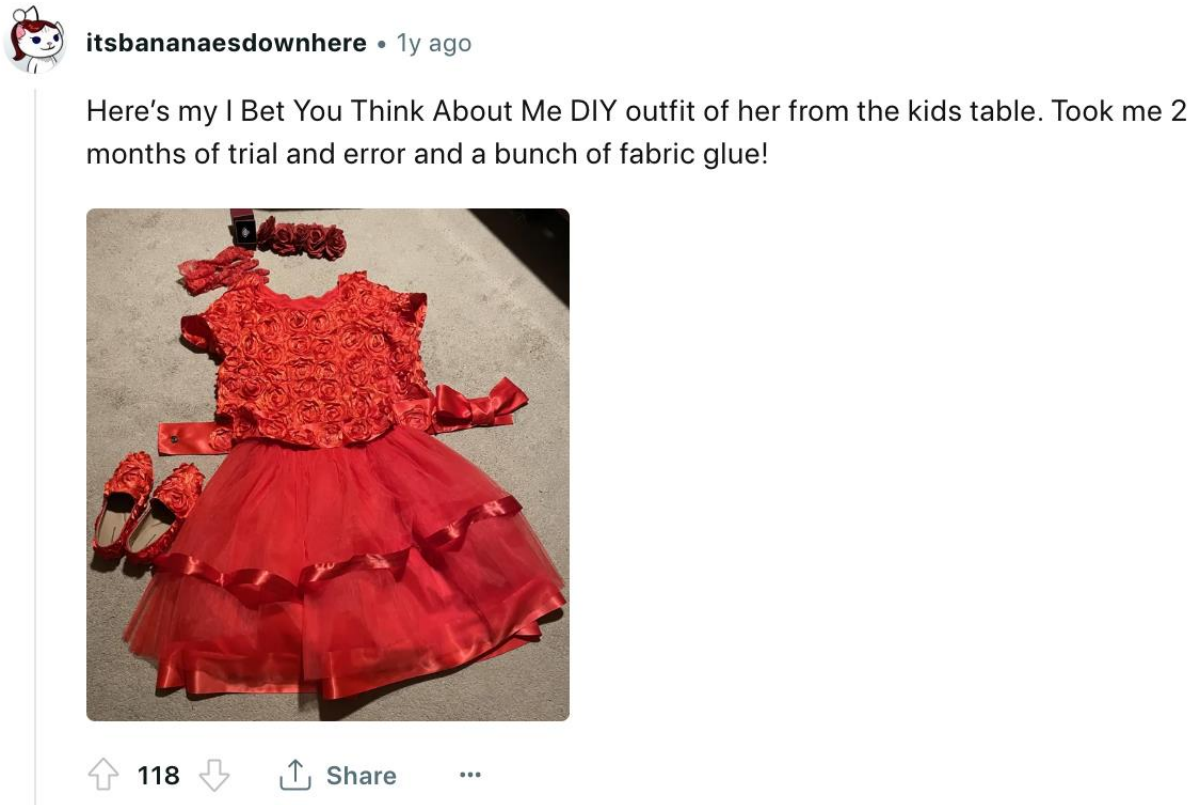
<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Nicholas Rice, "Billy Joel 'got Very Cool Dad Points' for Taking Daughters to See and Meet Taylor Swift (Exclusive)," People, November 25, 2023, <https://people.com/billy-joel-got-cool-dad-points-for-taking-kids-to-see-taylor-swift-exclusive-8405937#:~:text=After%20seeing%20Swift's%20Eras%20Tour,%2C%22%20he%20told%20the%20publication.>



their entire paychecks on ordering the perfect outfit. There are entire Reddit threads and Pinterest boards that have been created by fans to share inspiration and ideas with other Swift fans.

#### Figure 4.0. A Reddit Post of an “Eras” Tour Outfit



*A Reddit post made by @itsbananaesdownhere under the Reddit thread titled, “The Eras Tour Fan Outfits/Costumes Megathread.”<sup>103</sup>*

Here is an example of a Reddit post made by a fan who was preparing to attend one of Swift’s concerts. The era they are referring to is Swift’s “Red” era, named after her album *Red (Taylor’s Version)*. Even more specifically, the fan created this outfit drawing inspiration from a specific scene from Swift’s music video, “I Bet You Think About Me.” Fans are very clever and specific

<sup>103</sup> @itsbananasdownhere, “The Eras Tour Fan Outfits/Costumes Megathread,” (2023) [https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/11wzkzl/the\\_eras\\_tour\\_fan\\_outfitscostumes\\_megathread/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/11wzkzl/the_eras_tour_fan_outfitscostumes_megathread/).

in how they choose their outfits for the concert, often mimicking specific outfits Swift wore in music videos, on tours, or even at award ceremonies.

#### Figure 4.1. A Reddit Post of an “Eras” Tour Outfit



SabrinaSandra220 • 9mo ago



made a You Belong With Me shirt for the concert on the 26th!! i'm so excited!

*A Reddit post made by @SabrinaSandra220 under the Reddit thread titled, “The Eras Tour Fan Outfits/Costumes Megathread.”<sup>104</sup>*

A fan by the username @SabrinaSandra220 created their own “Eras” Tour outfit out of a plain white T-shirt and colored markers. This fan chose Swift’s “Fearless” era from her album *Fearless*. The outfit is referring to a specific scene within the music video “You Belong with Me.”

---

<sup>104</sup> @SabrinaSandra220, “The Eras Tour Fan Outfits/Costumes Megathread” (2023) [https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/11wzkzl/the\\_eras\\_tour\\_fan\\_outfitscostumes\\_megathread/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/11wzkzl/the_eras_tour_fan_outfitscostumes_megathread/).

#### Illustration 4.0. Scene from Taylor Swift's "You Belong with Me" Music Video



*Picture from Taylor Swift's "You Belong with Me" music video wearing the T-shirt that inspired Figure 4.1.<sup>105</sup>*

The fans bring to life the nostalgia by dressing as their favorite era of Swift. For @SabrinaSandra220, she dressed as 2008 Swift when Swift was a young teenager. Tour outfits are not the only case in which nostalgia and girlhood can be found in Swift's Eras Tour. Other nostalgic traditions carried out by fans include the making and trading of friendship bracelets and the painting of Swift's lucky number 13 on the backs of their hands.

As mentioned in Chapter III, Swift's "You're On Your Own, Kid" portrays themes of girlhood and adolescence. Swift fans are very well aware of this theme so much so that they took Swift's lyric "so make the friendship bracelets, take the moment and taste it," quite literally.

---

<sup>105</sup> YouTube, "Taylor Swift - You Belong with Me (Taylor's Version) (Music Video 4K)," Photograph, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=6qro7TWqTV4>.

#### Illustration 4.1. “Eras” Tour Friendship Bracelets



*An image of two Swift fans in attendance at the “Eras” Tour.<sup>106</sup>*

The majority of fans understand that when one is to attend an “Eras” Tour concert, they can participate in making several friendship bracelets. The purpose of the friendship bracelets is to make them with friends who are also attending the concert, and then exchange them with strangers at the concert. In most cases, these friendship bracelets are made using the cheap bracelet kits most girls had when they were just kids. These kits included clear plastic string and beads of various colors. The number 13 written on their hands is also significant to Swift’s fans.

---

<sup>106</sup> Gary Coronado, *Friendship Bracelet*, Photograph, Billboard, <https://www.billboard.com/lists/taylor-swifts-eras-tour-friendship-bracelets/>.

In Swift's early days of becoming famous she would paint the number 13 on her hand in large, turquoise font. As Swift grew as an artist, fans began to paint the number on their hands as well.

#### **Illustration 4.2. Swift's Lucky Number 13**



*Taylor Swift with her lucky number 13 painted on her hand.<sup>107</sup>*

Even though Swift no longer does this on tour as an adult, her fans still partake in painting her lucky number on their hands when attending her concerts. This act is very nostalgic for Swift fans as it takes them back to when they were younger, remembering the days when Swift sang with her lucky number painted on her hand. With fans engaging in these Eras Tour traditions, it allows for the nostalgia and themes of girlhood to come to life. Creating these friendship

---

<sup>107</sup> Unknown, *Lucky 13*, Photograph, *Blurred Lines*, <https://blurredlineslaw.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/taylor-swift-settles-lucky-13-lawsuit-out-of-court/>.

bracelets with friends, dressing up as one's favorite era of Swift, and painting her lucky number on the back of one's hand are activities one may have participated in as a young Swift fan.

The significance of the friendship bracelet is that it allows for young girls and grown women to experience girlhood as an adolescent or as an adult. 30-year-old women typically would not purchase a friendship bracelet kit from the toy aisle at Target and sit down to make friendship bracelets with their friends. As women age, these activities would likely to be considered as childish or immature. However, attending Swift's concert almost gives women permission to indulge in what feels like a past-time activity. It allows women to remember and feel the pure joy they once experienced as a young girl making bracelets after school with her friends. It allows women to experience girlhood again. Swift initiates these themes beyond her songs and the performance of them. Swift incorporates nostalgia and girlhood in her own "Eras" Tour outfits.

Swift's concert outfits have a similar nostalgic effect to the friendship bracelets. Swift wears outfits that are bright in color, often bedazzled, and incorporate a lot of glitter and sparkle. Bright colors, glitter, sparkle, and fringe are typically not found in an adult woman's closet. These are the types of clothes one may remember playing dress-up with as a young girl. Swift embraces these items in her concert wardrobe. She wears bright colored coats covered in fringe, bedazzled leotards with matching boots, and even her guitar is bedazzled. She wears an elaborate ballgown for one set, like a ballgown one may remember seeing in a Disney princess movie (see Illustration 4.3).

**Illustration 4.3. Swift Singing at her “Eras” Tour**



*Taylor Swift on stage singing during her Eras Tour.<sup>108</sup>*

Swift even recreates outfits from previous tours (from when she was younger) and incorporates the same little gestures that are easily recognizable by fans.

---

<sup>108</sup> John Shearer, “*Speak Now*” Dress, Photograph, *People*, <https://people.com/taylor-swift-rewears-reem-acra-original-speak-now-dress-new-album-7508907>.

#### Illustration 4.4. Swift's Heart Gesture



*Taylor Swift performing her Fearless set as a young teenager and as an adult on her “Eras” Tour.*<sup>109</sup>

One may notice Swift is wearing a very similar dress in her *Eras* Tour as she does in her *Fearless* Tour in 2009–2010. Swift also incorporates the same color of lipstick, while making the same famous heart gesture with her hands. It is evident that Swift thoughtfully and carefully chooses her tour outfits to create nostalgia and themes of girlhood for her fans. Swift thinks of every detail to create nostalgia, down to the color of her lipstick. It is unclear where the idea of fans recreating their favorite era through their concert outfit began. However, I believe it may

---

<sup>109</sup> Unknown, *Taylor Swift Fearless*, Photograph, We Have Notes, <https://wehavenotes.substack.com/p/attend-a-taylor-swift-show-like-a-swiftie>.



have began with Swift recreating her outfits to correspond with her own different eras. I believe very early in the tour fans may have picked up on this idea and have now decided to participate by dressing as their own favorite era. Once again, Swift initiates the nostalgia and girlhood as fans bring it to life in their own way. However, Swift is not the only artist singing about nostalgia and themes of girlhood in 2023.

### **“Used to Be Young” by Miley Cyrus.**

“Used to be Young was released five months after her 2023 album, *Endless Summer Vacation*. The song belongs to the album. However, it is unclear as to why Cyrus waited five months for it to be available for listeners. Posting to Twitter following its release, Cyrus writes, “This song is about honoring who we’ve been, loving who we are and celebrating who we will become.”<sup>110</sup> The song is packed with recollections of Cyrus’ girlhood as Miley and possibly Hannah Montana. Hannah Montana is a Disney character Cyrus played on the hit show “Hannah Montana” where Cyrus gained her fame at a young age. The song begins,

The truth is bulletproof, there's no fooling you  
I don't dress the same  
Me and who you say I was yesterday  
Have gone our separate ways  
Left my living fast somewhere in the past  
'Cause that's for chasing cars  
Turns out open bars lead to broken hearts  
And going way too far<sup>111</sup>

In the first verse Cyrus writes of her previous “fast” life, saying she has changed from it. Cyrus does not explicitly state what she means by “living fast.” However, many fans remember when Cyrus went through her reckless phase. When Cyrus released her single “We Can’t Stop” in

---

<sup>110</sup> Brian Truitt, “Miley Cyrus Tearfully Reflects on Disney Days Past with New Video, Song ‘Used to Be Young,’” USA Today, August 25, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/music/2023/08/25/used-to-be-young-miley-cyrus-song/70677129007/>.

<sup>111</sup>Miley Cyrus, Gregory Aldae Hein, and Michael Pollack, “Used to Be Young,” (MCEO Publishing and Universal Poly-Gram Int. Publishing, Inc.) Copyright (2023).

2013, she also released a corresponding music video that was quite controversial and shocking. Cyrus appeared to be partying in the music video. This video was the first time that Cyrus, as described by many, went off the rails. The public was used to seeing Cyrus as a role model for young girls because of how she was portrayed in her role as Hannah Montana. The release of “We Can’t Stop” changed that image immediately.

**Illustration 4.5. Cyrus Twerking in “We Can’t Stop” Music Video**



*Miley Cyrus twerking in her music video “We Can’t Stop.”<sup>112</sup>*

Kyra Gaunt describes Cyrus as, “a defiant 20-year-old Miley Cyrus, no longer aligned with her Disney persona,” who is “outfitted with short, white-blonde hair, white leggings, and a white sports bra clinging to her petite noncurvaceous frame as she ‘twerks’ in some home gym.”<sup>113</sup>

Twerking can be defined as, “a kind of ‘kenetic orality’ that began as a black social dance in

---

<sup>112</sup> Unknown, “We Can’t Stop,” Photograph, *Hollywood Life*, <https://hollywoodlife.com/2013/06/19/miley-cyrus-sexy-we-cant-stop-music-video-moments/>.

<sup>113</sup> Kyra D. Gaunt, “YouTube, Twerking, and You,” 218.

New Orleans...that involves bouncing your booty to the rhythmic changes and lyrical bars of a popular rap or twerk song.”<sup>114</sup> In “Used to Be Young,” many believe Cyrus is referring to this phase of her life when she is reflecting on her “fast” life. However, Cyrus states in an interview, “these lyrics were written almost two years ago at the beginning of my ESV [*Endless Summer Vacation*]...It was at a time I felt misunderstood. I have spent the last 18 months painting a sonic picture of my perspective to share with you. The time has arrived to release a song that I could perfect forever.”<sup>115</sup> In the chorus Cyrus writes,

I know I used to be crazy  
I know I used to be fun  
You say I used to be wild  
I say I used to be young

You tell me time has done changed me  
That's fine, I've had a good run  
I know I used to be crazy  
That's 'cause I used to be young<sup>116</sup>

In the beginning of the chorus Cyrus addresses some of the labels the media and public gave her. They called her “crazy,” “fun,” and “wild.” Cyrus then states her own opinion by writing “I say I used to be young.” In the second half of the chorus, again, Cyrus addresses what the public has said about her by beginning with, “You tell me...” and ending the chorus telling her own point of view, “That’s ‘cause I used to be young.” This switching back-and-forth between a public perspective of Cyrus and her own personal perspective shows up in more ways than one.

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Tina Benitez-Eves, “The Meaning behind the Lyrics of ‘Used to Be Young’ by Miley Cyrus,” *American Songwriter*, August 25, 2023, <https://americansongwriter.com/the-meaning-behind-the-lyrics-of-used-to-be-young-by-miley-cyrus/>.

<sup>116</sup> Miley Cyrus, Gregory Aldae Hein, and Michael Pollack, “Used to Be Young,” (MCEO Publishing and Universal Poly-Gram Int. Publishing, Inc.) Copyright (2023).

Figure 4.2. Transcription of “Used to Be Young”

## Used to Be Young

Miley Cyrus

$\text{♩} = 74$

Piano

Intro

I iii<sup>7</sup> vi<sup>7</sup> IV

8

Pno.

The truth is bull-et proof, There's no fool-ing you,  
Left my liv-ing fast, some - where in the past,

Verse I

Pno.

11

Pno.

I don't dress the same. Me and who you say  
that's for chas - ing cars Turns out op - en bars

14

Pno.

I was yes-ter-day have gone our sep-er-ate ways.  
lead to bro-ken hearts and going way to fa-ar

Pno.

17

Chorus

Pno.

I know I used to be cra-zy, I know I used to be fun.

Pno.

I V/vi

21

Pno.

You say I used to be wi-ld, I say I used to be young.

Pno.

vi ii°6

*A transcription of “Used to Be Young” by Miley Cyrus from her album, Endless Summer Vacation. This transcription includes mm. 1–28, or the first verse and first chorus only.<sup>117</sup>*

Cyrus’ choice in harmony over the chorus is significant in further portraying the lyrics. The song is written in E major. The chorus begins on I, changing harmonies every two measures, from the secondary dominant V/vi, to vi, to ii diminished in first inversion, back to I due to the repeat sign. One may notice the rise in tension as sol rises to si in the tenor (circled in red), si rises to la,

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

then relaxes down to le. This rising tension occurs as Cyrus is addressing the accusations and labels the public had placed on her when she was younger. The tension resolves when she admits her perspective stating it was all because she was “young.” The tension rises again as Cyrus sings of others’ perspectives and relaxes when Cyrus states her own perspective. The second verse is much like the first with slightly more detail,

Take one, pour it out  
It's not worth crying 'bout the things you can't erase  
Like tattoos and regrets  
Words I never meant and ones that got away

Left my living fast somewhere in the past  
And took another road  
Turns out crowded rooms empty out as soon  
There's somewhere else to go, oh<sup>118</sup>

Again, Cyrus reflects on her living “fast,” claiming she took another path. In the second verse one may think she regrets some of the moments in her 20s. However, Cyrus writes there is no point in crying over moments you regret, because you cannot erase the past. The music in the two verses of the song does not include the same tension and release as found in the chorus.

Cyrus’ voice sounds as if she is telling a story. Cyrus writes in the final chorus,

I know I used to be crazy  
Messed up, but, God, was it fun  
I know I used to be wild  
That's 'cause I used to be young  
Those wasted nights are not wasted  
I remember every one

I know I used to be crazy  
That's 'cause I used to be young  
You tell me time has done changed me  
That's fine, I've had a good run  
I know I used to be crazy  
That's 'cause I used to be young<sup>119</sup>

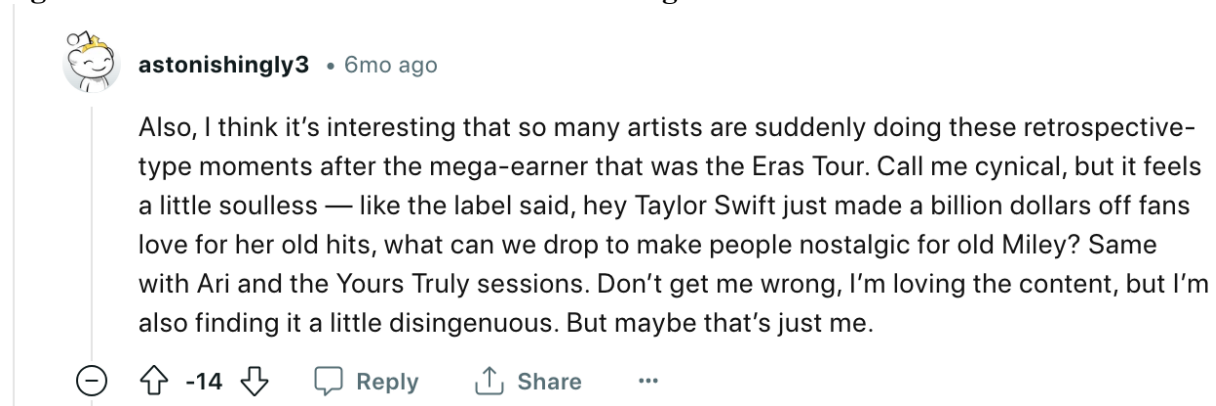
---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

In the final chorus the chord progressions and sudden switches in perspectives do not change. Cyrus only adds new names or labels the public may have given her such as “messed up” and “changed.” When speaking about the song Cyrus states, “Although my work is done, this song will continue to write itself every day. The fact that it remains unfinished is part of its beauty. That is my life at this moment, unfinished yet complete.”<sup>120</sup> In her statement, I believe Cyrus means that as she grows older there will always be moments in life she may regret. Her story continues to evolve, new memories are made, and Cyrus still continues to reflect and remember the past. The song was well-received by most fans. In recent Reddit posts and YouTube comments, fans wrote about how much they loved the song and how much Cyrus has changed positively and grown throughout time. However, there is almost never only positive feedback. One interesting Reddit post made by @astonishingly3 under the Reddit thread “Miley Cyrus – Used to Be Young,” is in Figure 4.3 below.

**Figure 4.3. Reddit Post About “Used to Be Young”**



*Reddit post made by user @astonishingly3 under Reddit thread “Miley Cyrus – Used to Be Young.”<sup>121</sup>*

<sup>120</sup> Tina Benitez-Eves, “The Meaning behind the Lyrics of ‘Used to Be Young’ by Miley Cyrus,” *American Songwriter*, August 25, 2023, <https://americansongwriter.com/the-meaning-behind-the-lyrics-of-used-to-be-young-by-miley-cyrus/>.

<sup>121</sup> @astonishingly3, “Miley Cyrus – Used to Be Young,” (2023) [https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/160obah/miley\\_cyrus\\_used\\_to\\_be\\_young/](https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/160obah/miley_cyrus_used_to_be_young/).

@astonishingly3 is blaming Cyrus for copying Swift's nostalgia, saying she is using it as a marketing tool in the same way Swift is using her re-recorded albums. As discussed in Chapter I, Swift uses nostalgia and themes of girlhood as a marketing tool and brand identity. With Swift's major successes in 2023, including winning two Grammy's and her record-breaking Eras Tour, are other artists copying her strategies in hopes of becoming as successful? While this is a topic for another project, it is worth considering as so many fans, including @astonishingly3, believe this to be true.

Along with the release of the song "Used to Be Young," Cyrus released its corresponding music video. The picture in Cyrus' music video is significant. One may notice her t-shirt with Disney's Mickey Mouse printed on it as shown in Illustration 4.6. As mentioned, Cyrus' fame came from Disney when she starred in Disney's "Hannah Montana." One may also notice the emotion in her facial expression. Her eyes appear watery and red. Cyrus looks as if she is sad, but more of a sadness one may feel when they reflect on memories of the past, a nostalgic sadness. This nostalgic sadness is shown during the brief moments in which Cyrus is seen tearing up while simultaneously smiling.



**Illustration 4.6. Photograph from “Used to Be Young” Music Video**



*Photograph taken from music video “Used to Be Young” by Miley Cyrus via YouTube.<sup>122</sup>*

Cyrus’ facial expression is perceived by fans via YouTube comments as “raw emotion.” Cyrus appears to be holding back tears from the very beginning. By the first chorus, tears slowly roll down her face. As Cyrus sings the song, staring directly into the camera, she keeps this same facial expression. Every few minutes, one may notice a tear streaming down her face. Cyrus’ nostalgia and themes of girlhood in “Used to Be Young” are comparable to Swift’s music. Cyrus

---

<sup>122</sup> Unknown, “Used to Be Young,” Photograph, *PopSugar*, <https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/miley-cyrus-used-to-be-young-song-49253369>.

sings of her early days as a performer, in similar fashion to the way Swift sings of her early days as a songwriter in “You’re On Your Own, Kid.” Although their stories are very different, Swift and Cyrus create nostalgia by incorporating themes of girlhood in their lyrics. For long-time Cyrus fans, when they hear “Used to Be Young” they remember Cyrus’ “wild” years. Fans also remember her years as Hannah Montana and have grown up with her throughout the many phases of her life. Hannah Montana was a huge part of many young girl’s girlhoods as it was a very popular Disney TV show. “Used to Be Young” is nostalgic as it is relatable to the lives of many women. When hearing the song, Cyrus fans may reflect on memories of watching “Hannah Montana” with their friends or dreaming of growing up and becoming a pop star just like her.

**“What Was I Made For? [From the “Barbie” Movie].”**

Cyrus is not the only artist who in 2023 recorded a nostalgic hit song for women. Artist Billie Eilish wrote “What Was I Made For? [From The “Barbie” Movie]” for the movie *Barbie* using similar breathing techniques to Taylor Swift in further portraying themes of girlhood. Grammy-nominated song “What Was I Made For? [From The “Barbie” Movie]” is a song about identity and belonging for women. Women often feel as if they have to work so hard to please others, just to feel like they are not enough. Written and sung by artist Billie Eilish, the song reveals the deeper themes in “Barbie,” beyond all of the plastic, glitter, and pink. According to Eilish, the lyric “what was I made for?” can resonate with anyone questioning their identity and purpose in the world.<sup>123</sup> Overall, the song is very melancholic, yet hopeful. Eilish writes the

---

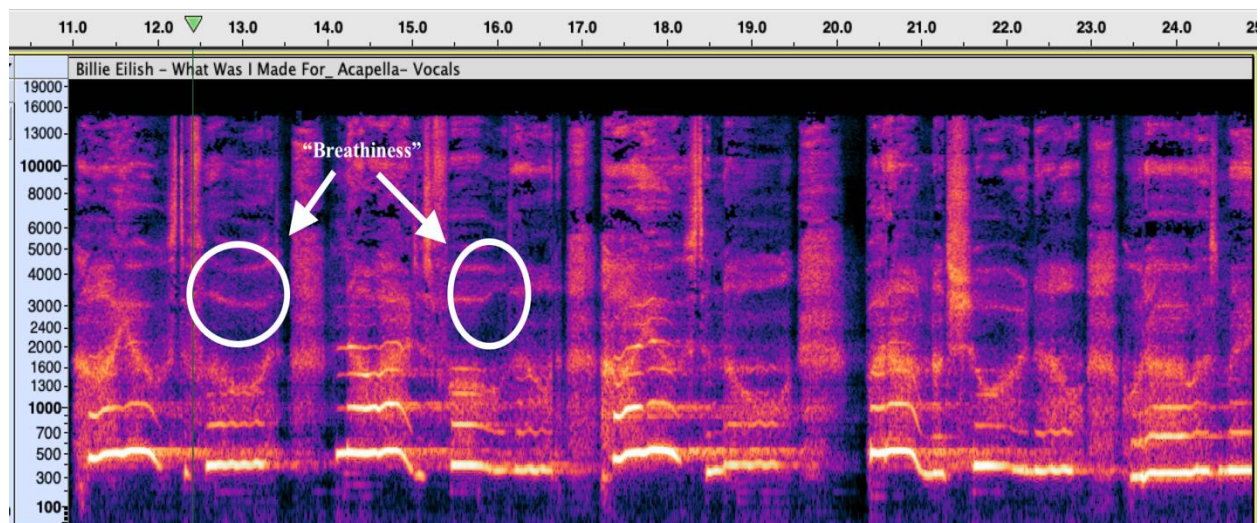
<sup>123</sup> Lindsay Lowe, “The Meaning behind Billie Eilish’s Grammy-Nominated ‘Barbie’ Song, ‘What Was I Made For?’” TODAY.com, February 1, 2023. <https://www.today.com/popculture/music/billie-eilish-what-was-i-made-for-song-meaning-lyrics-rcna136724>.

lyric, “think I forgot how to be happy, something I’m not, but something I could be.” The song includes nostalgic themes of girlhood, but in a negative light. Eilish writes in the first verse,

I used to float, now I just fall down  
I used to know but I'm not sure now  
What I was made for  
What was I made for?<sup>124</sup>

The song can be compared to Swift’s “Your own Your Own, Kid” and “Would’ve, Could’ve, Should’ve” in two ways, the first of which is nostalgic themes of girlhood. Both Swift and Eilish capitalize on these recollections of girlhood to relate to their fans. Secondly, Eilish uses some of the same exact breathing techniques Swift uses, as discussed in Chapter III. Eilish incorporates breathiness in an even more exaggerated way in “What Was I Made For? [From The “Barbie” Movie].”

**Figure 4.2. Spectrogram of “What Was I Made For? [From The “Barbie” Movie]”**



*A spectrogram of Billie Eilish’s “What Was I Made For? [From The “Barbie” Movie]” beginning at the first verse, 00:11.*

<sup>124</sup> Billie Eilish and Finneas O’Connell, “What Was I Made For? [From the “Barbie” Movie] (Kobalt Music Publishing) Copyright (2023).

Figure 4.2 depicts the breathiness of Eilish’s voice. One may notice the fuzziness or blurriness of the upper partials as well as the fundamental line, indicating that breathiness is occurring in Eilish’s vocals. The breathiness of Eilish’s voice is significant, because it reveals that other artists outside of Swift are manipulating their breathing techniques to further portray the meaning of their lyrics. The fact that this song was released shortly after Swift’s *Midnights* is also significant because the year 2023 allowed women and young girls to confidently claim and reclaim their own girlhoods.

2023 was a significant year for women in general, but more specifically, women in the music industry and their fans. Women not only made a huge impact in the music industry in 2023, but also on women of all ages through their music. Themes of girlhood and nostalgia were seen everywhere—through songs, in movie theaters, and in concert venues. These themes were not only produced by the musicians themselves, but their fans played a huge role in producing these themes as well. It is the artists who initiate these themes, but the fans are the ones who make them come to life. The year of the girl allowed for so many women to confidently embrace the identity of “girl” and reclaim their own girlhood.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

As I have shown in this thesis, Taylor Swift creates nostalgia through her music in more ways than one. Swift creates it through her lyrics, as well as through her manipulations of timbre, breathing, and various marketing strategies. I am certain there are other methods she intentionally incorporates into her music that also produce nostalgia. Therefore, I may continue to explore this idea beyond this project. Swift incorporates nostalgia to maintain and grow her fan base beyond one specific generation of women, in hopes to reach women and young girls of various age groups.

Swift's use of country twang in her re-recorded albums is obvious to most listeners, especially those who live or have lived in the United States. Those who are not familiar with country twang may not have the schemata to recognize it. Twang as a vocal schema allows humans to immediately associate twang with country music. For Swift, she uses her twang to unlock nostalgic memories for her fans. Twang can be considered a vocal schema because it allows the listener to easily associate twang with country music, since twang is a necessary characteristic in order to label a country song "authentic." Swift's re-recorded country songs are easily recognizable as belonging to the country music genre because fans are able to make predictions upon hearing Swift's use of twang. Therefore, country twang can be considered as a vocal schema because listeners are able to make these predictions upon listening. For Swift fans, her twang embodies feelings of nostalgia and remembrances of girlhood, as Swift began her career as a young country artist. For Swift fans, they remember listening to songs from her debut country album while singing them in their childhood bedroom, or screaming the bridge when "Teardrops On My Guitar" came on the radio when driving down the road. One cannot deny vocal schemas exist. Humans make assumptions based on one's voice allowing them to predict

age and/or sex. They can recognize the person's voice (if they are familiar with the person who is speaking) who is speaking as well as judge the acoustic cues to determine the emotion of the person speaking, just like how humans judge facial expressions. Unfortunately, the subject of vocal schemas is quite understudied and there is not much scholarship about the subject.

Beyond Swift's use of twang, she incorporates different breathing techniques to further portray the nostalgic ideas and themes of girlhood she writes about in her lyrics. Swift is known for writing about love and heartbreak in her music. However, she also includes themes of girlhood that can often feel very nostalgic for listeners. Swift writes about her own girlhood and experiences in great detail. These experiences can feel nostalgic to listeners because of shared girlhood experiences, such as one's first kiss or first heartbreak. As explored in Chapter III, Swift takes her performance of these themes one step further by manipulating her breath to further portray the meaning of her lyrics. This technique is not new for Swift and is not exclusive to her *Midnights* album as discussed in Chapter III. Swift has used this technique across multiple albums. Swift's craft extends beyond the more obvious lyrical content of her songs. She incorporates special effects to cue nostalgic memories or experiences. Swift's successes as an artist involve more than just her ability to write hit songs. Her ability to perform her songs in a way that captures nostalgia and themes of girlhood is just as essential to her success. I must say I am not the first to study and find significance in Swift's use of breath in her songs. Swift's breathing is certainly not conventional, as studied by Ohriner. However, Swift's breathing techniques are certainly not by coincidence either.

Girlhood played an important role in the year of 2023, especially in the music industry. From "Barbie" and The Grammys, to Swift and Beyoncé, as well as Billie Eilish, 2023 was a year in which girlhood was celebrated. Themes of girlhood and nostalgia were seen everywhere.

Themes of girlhood were prominent in the music industry as well as the entertainment industry. Not only were these themes often initiated by musicians and entertainers, but they were also produced by fans as well. Swift and Beyoncé made history in their record-breaking global tours. “Barbie” also broke several records and was directed by a woman. Billie Eilish and her “What Was I Made For? [From the “Barbie” Movie]” included themes of girlhood not only in its lyrics, but also in Eilish’s performance. Eilish, much like Swift, manipulated her breathing to create breathiness, as Pecknold described as an adolescent, female vocal quality. Eilish’s breathiness pairs very well with the themes of girlhood found within her lyrics. The song fit with the overall theme of the “Barbie” movie. I have found very little scholarship pertaining to the year of 2023 and women and girlhood. I find it interesting that it seems no one else is talking about women in 2023 even though it is found heavily in the media.

Swift is not the only female musician who capitalizes on nostalgia and themes of girlhood within her music. However, when I think of girlhood she immediately comes to mind. I believe this is due to my own personal experiences and recollections of girlhood as a huge Swift fan. In my own experience, Swift’s music was a huge part of my girlhood. I remember when my dad would drive me to Walmart to grab a physical CD every time she released a new album. Her music carried me through hard times as a young girl. Other artists have attempted to follow in her footsteps in efforts to become as successful as she has. Some have gained success in this way and others have not. Swift’s successes deserve to be studied, as she is one of the most influential women in popular culture today. In conclusion, Swift creates this nostalgia by incorporating themes of girlhood to grow and maintain her large fan base, which allows her music to be relatable to women and young girls of various age groups.

## REFERENCES

“About Barbie.” *Barbie*.

<http://www.barbiemedia.com/aboutbarbie/history.html#:~:text=Barbie%20was%20founde d%20in%201959,and%20aspirations%20onto%20paper%20dolls>.

Benitez-Eves, Tina. “The Meaning behind the Lyrics of ‘Used to Be Young’ by Miley Cyrus.”

*American Songwriter*, August 25, 2023. <https://americansongwriter.com/the-meaning-behind-the-lyrics-of-used-to-be-young-by-miley-cyrus/>.

“Breathy,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/breathy>.

Brown, Adriane. “She isn’t whoring herself out like a lot of other girls we see’: Identification

and “Authentic” American Girlhood on Taylor Swift Fan Forums.” *Journal of the*

*MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 5, no. 1 (2012): 161–180.

Burns, Chelsea. “Make it Old: (Taylor’s Version) and the Art and Experience of Re-Creation.”

Unpublished Manuscript.

Byelousova, Anastasiya. “Staying Fearless: A Text Analysis of Vulnerability & Connection

Through Taylor Swift's Artistry.” Honor’s Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2020.

Coronado, Gary. *Friendship Bracelet*. Photograph. Billboard.

<https://www.billboard.com/lists/taylor-swifts-eras-tour-friendship-bracelets/>.

Elliott, Richard. “A Blank Space Where You Write Your Name: Taylor Swift’s Early Late

Voice.” In *EMP Pop Conference: From a Whisper to a Scream: The Voice in Music*

(2016). [file:///Users/madelynhappell/Downloads/elliott\\_2016\\_blank-space.pdf.pdf](file:///Users/madelynhappell/Downloads/elliott_2016_blank-space.pdf.pdf).

Firth, Emma. How 2023 became the year of the #girl, December 23, 2023.

<https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/a46125868/girl-tiktok-trends/>.



- “Gasp.” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gasp>.
- Gaunt, Kyra D. “YouTube, Twerking, and You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Copresence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus.” In *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music*, edited by Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, 208–232. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Lowe, Lindsay. “The Meaning behind Billie Eilish’s Grammy-Nominated ‘Barbie’ Song, ‘What Was I Made For?’” TODAY.com, February 1, 2023. <https://www.today.com/popculture/music/billie-eilish-what-was-i-made-for-song-meaning-lyrics-rcna136724>.
- McGrath, John. “The Return to Craft: Taylor Swift, Nostalgia, and Covid-19.” *Popular Music and Society* 46, no. 1 (2023): 70–84.
- Mitchell, Claudia, and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*. Counterpoints, V. 245. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.
- Myisha, Nabila, Angelia Brigita Maharani, Akira Hilal Ramadhan, Dinda Sabila, Mirza Fathima Jauhar Kamalia. “Decoding the Perpetuation of Patriarchal Culture in the Barbie Movie.” *Cultural Narratives* 1, no. 2 (2023): 71–82.
- Narayan, Uma. “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism.” *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 86–106.
- Neal, Jocelyn. “The Twang Factor in Country Music.” *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, edited by Robert Wallace Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (2018): 43–64.
- Ohriner, Mitch. “Excess Inhalations in Taylor Swift’s *Midnights* (2022).” Unpublished Manuscript.

- Pecknold, Diane. "These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice." In *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music*, edited by Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, 77–98. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Regnerus, Mark. *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Rice, Nicholas. "Billy Joel 'got Very Cool Dad Points' for Taking Daughters to See and Meet Taylor Swift (Exclusive)." *People*. November 25, 2023. <https://people.com/billy-joel-got-cool-dad-points-for-taking-kids-to-see-taylor-swift-exclusive-8405937#:~:text=After%20seeing%20Swift's%20Eras%20Tour,%2C%22%20he%20told%20the%20publication.>
- Rossmann, Margaret. "Taylor Swift, Remediating the Self, and Nostalgic Girlhood in Tween Music Fandom." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 38 (2022) <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/2287/3017>.
- Rummelhart, David. "Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition." In *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence, and Education*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (1980): 33–58.
- Schindler, Robert M, and Morris B Holbrook. "Nostalgia for Early Experience As a Determinant of Consumer Preferences." *Psychology & Marketing* 20, no. 4 (2003): 275–302.
- Shearer, John. "Speak Now" Dress. Photograph. *People*. <https://people.com/taylor-swift-rewears-reem-acra-original-speak-now-dress-new-album-7508907>.

- Sisario, Ben. "How Taylor Swift's Eras Tour Conquered the World." *New York Times*, (2023).  
<https://login.libproxy.uncg.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/how-taylor-swift-s-eras-tour-conquered-world/docview/2846347772/se-2>.
- Sloan, Nate. "Taylor Swift and the Work of Songwriting." *Contemporary Music Review* 40, no. 1 (2021): 11–26.
- Smialek, Jeanna, Jordyn Holman, Desean McClinton-Holland, and Maggie Shannon. "Make the Whole Place Shimmer: America Spends Big for Beyoncé and Taylor Swift." *The New York Times* (2023).  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2849425710/42895CA12C1345C5PQ/1?accountid=14604&sourcetype=Newspapers>.
- Srivastava, Ekta, Bharadhwaj Sivakumaran, Satish S. Maheswarappa, and Justin Paul. "Nostalgia: A Review, Propositions, and Future Research Agenda." *Journal of Advertising* 52, no. 4 (2023): 613–632.
- Sundberg, Johan and Margareta Thalén, "What is "Twang"?" *Journal of Voice* 24, no. 6 (2010): 654–660.
- Truitt, Brian. "Miley Cyrus Tearfully Reflects on Disney Days Past with New Video, Song 'Used to Be Young.'" *USA Today*, August 25, 2023.  
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/music/2023/08/25/used-to-be-young-miley-cyrus-song/70677129007/>.
- Unknown. *Lucky 13*. Photograph. *Blurred Lines*.  
<https://blurredlineslaw.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/taylor-swift-settles-lucky-13-lawsuit-out-of-court/>.

Unknown. *Taylor Swift Fearless*. Photograph. We Have Notes.

<https://wehavenotes.substack.com/p/attend-a-taylor-swift-show-like-a-swiftie>.

Unknown. “Used to Be Young.” Photograph. *PopSugar*.

<https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/miley-cyrus-used-to-be-young-song-49253369>.

Unknown. “We Can’t Stop.” Photograph. *Hollywood Life*.

<https://hollywoodlife.com/2013/06/19/miley-cyrus-sexy-we-cant-stop-music-videomoments/>.

Vanner, Catherine. “Toward a Definition of Transnational Girlhood.” *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 2 (2019): 115–32.

YouTube, “Taylor Swift - You Belong with Me (Taylor's Version) (Music Video 4K),”

Photograph, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=6qro7TWqTV4>.

@astonishingly3, “Miley Cyrus – Used to Be Young” (2023)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/160obah/miley\\_cyrus\\_used\\_to\\_be\\_young](https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/160obah/miley_cyrus_used_to_be_young).

@itsbananasdownhere, “The Eras Tour Fan Outfits/Costumes Megathread” (2023)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/11wzkzl/the\\_eras\\_tour\\_fan\\_outfitscostumes\\_megathread/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/11wzkzl/the_eras_tour_fan_outfitscostumes_megathread/).

@kuspu, “Taylor Crying in Last Kiss” (2019)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/cbjf1i/taylor\\_crying\\_in\\_last\\_kiss/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/cbjf1i/taylor_crying_in_last_kiss/).

@loversickgirls13, “Songs where you can hear Taylor “breathing in” as she sings” (2022)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/r5cioi/songs\\_where\\_you\\_can\\_hear\\_taylor\\_breathing\\_in\\_as/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/r5cioi/songs_where_you_can_hear_taylor_breathing_in_as/).

@SabrinaSandra220, “The Eras Tour Fan Outfits/Costumes Megathread” (2023)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/11wzkzl/the\\_eras\\_tour\\_fan\\_outfitscostumes\\_megathread/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/11wzkzl/the_eras_tour_fan_outfitscostumes_megathread/).

@Tsukiakari\_12, “Last Kiss Taylor’s Version” (2023)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/153wtwk/last\\_kiss\\_taylors\\_version](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/153wtwk/last_kiss_taylors_version).