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# CONTENTS



COVER STORY

38 **TAYLOR SWIFT**  
The 22-year-old shrugs aside mega success to focus on what matters most—her growth as an artist.

46 **DONALD FAGEN**  
The Steely Dan co-founder finds new creative freedom and reward on his latest solo effort.

24 **SOUNDGARDEN**  
The seminal rock band's first studio record in 16 years proves they haven't forgotten how to rock.

62 **PETER FRAMPTON**  
Thirty-five years later, the ace guitarist can finally embrace his monster career achievement.

36 **JOHN HIATT**  
One of music's most revered singer-songwriters gets even more passionate about his work.

66 **NAS**  
After decades of success this hip-hop storyteller inspires artists to do the unexpected.

Portrait by Brian Dobson

# HEARING RED

Taylor Swift turns up the emotional heat on her latest smash album

**By Russell Hall**



It's midafternoon, and word has been circulating throughout the day that Taylor Swift is set to star as Joni Mitchell in a forthcoming biopic—but nothing's confirmed. "If you see paparazzi shots of me shooting a movie," Taylor says, "then you'll know I've signed on to do it." In any case, it's quite likely the 22-year-old Swift will sooner or later add "movie star" to her array of accomplishments.

She's certainly prepared for any additional notoriety.

Her allusions to the paparazzi are casual—no hint of irony or irritation. Swift knows every move she makes is potential tabloid fodder, and life in the spotlight is something she adjusted to long ago. That she handles the scrutiny with grace is a small part of her magic. "I've been living this kind of life, with a magnifying glass on me, for about six years," she says. "I always take a moment to consider the consequences of my actions. It just seems to be the best way to go about things. I'm going to make mistakes, for sure. I just hope there aren't many."

So far, so good.

Swift's rise in the music world is a classic American dream-come-true story. Raised on a Christmas-tree farm in rural Pennsylvania, she picked up a guitar and wrote her first song at age 12. But even as a toddler, the drive, confidence and ambition that would underscore her artistry a decade later seemed built into her genetic code. "I've been singing randomly, obsessively, obnoxiously for as long as I can remember," she says. "My parents have videos of me on the beach at 3, going up to people and singing *Lion King* songs for them. I'd literally go from towel to towel: 'Hi, I'm Taylor. I'm going to sing 'I Just Can't Wait to Be King' for you now.'"

By 14, Swift had convinced her parents to move to Nashville, where she sharpened her songwriting skills working after school as an in-house writer for Sony Publishing. Two years later, her self-titled 2006 debut album took Nashville by storm—spawning five Top 10 hits and earning Swift a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist. Her third single, "Our Song," earned her first milestone, as she became the youngest person ever to write and record a No. 1 country hit. Meanwhile Swift's wholesome sex appeal established her as "America's sweetheart" and a role model for legions of young fans.

Swift's auspicious beginning set the stage for a full-scale phenomenon. For 2008's *Fearless*, she earned six Grammys, including Album of the Year honors—the youngest artist to receive that distinction. Guinness World Records lists 2010's *Speak Now* as the fastest-selling digital album by a female artist. Her record sales total more than 26 million, and she's placed more Top 10 debut singles on Billboard's Hot 100 chart than any recording artist.



On *Good Morning America*, New York City, 2012

Swift's latest, *Red*, finds her expanding her stylistic palette while keeping intact the bedrock themes that have defined her songwriting from the start. Written and recorded over a two-year period, the album chronicles, in the artist's words, "tumultuous, crazy adventures in love and loss—love that's fast-paced and out of control." Unlike *Speak Now*, a record Swift wrote entirely by herself, *Red* features six co-writes in addition to 10 Swift-penned tunes. She also worked with a team of producers, including modern-pop mavens Max Martin, Shellback and Jeff Bhasker, as well as her longtime co-producer Nathan Chapman.

"Writing by myself had become a comfort zone," she admits. "This time I really wanted to push myself. I called the people I've always wanted to work with—my production, songwriting and artist heroes—and said, 'Hey, do you want to get in the studio and work together, and make something different?' Track to track, there's nothing similar about anything on this record, and that's what makes it so exciting. It was an adventure to make, and it's an adventure to listen to."

Evidence of *Red*'s eclectic spirit ranges from the U2-like arena rock anthem "State of Grace" to "I Knew You Were Trouble," a quirky electro-tinged romp that features a dubstep chorus. Between the extremes, Swift continues to craft country-pop nuggets drawn from the raw material of her personal life. "For me, music is about a diary and a confession," she says. "I love getting to say things to people that I wouldn't say to them if I was standing face to face. Music is a way of verbalizing those things." From Nashville, Swift discussed the making of her new album, her songwriting process and how she handles life in the spotlight.

#### What was your goal for the new album?

To expand what I do creatively and learn from as many people as I possibly can. I never want to stop learning new things about making music. On *Speak Now*, I wrote everything alone and used just one co-producer. For this album, I called up Max Martin, Dan Wilson, Ed Sheeran—all these people I wanted to collaborate with. I still wrote a lot of the songs myself, but it was exciting to work with a variety of people on the co-writes and the production.

#### Did songs turn out as you envisioned?

Absolutely. Whenever I would write a new song, I would immediately start to think about the person who could best nail the production. I wanted the album to offer a refreshing take on what I do with both music and lyrics. It became an eclectic blend of music—a patchwork quilt. Somehow it all became cohesive when we began mixing.

#### What's behind the title?

It's all about correlating emotions with a color. All the intense emotions—all the crazy ones—are red. On the one hand you have



excitement, adventure and passion, and on the other you have jealousy, frustration and anger. The album is about the aftermath of experiencing those emotions.

#### What was the biggest departure?

"I Knew You Were Trouble," which I wrote with Max Martin and Shellback. Not only is it the biggest departure, it's also one of my favorites. It's about having your heart broken, but also being angrier with yourself than with the other person. It's about seeing the red flags, knowing the guy you're getting involved with is bad news, but walking right past the signals. The chaos that's evoked musically when you listen to that song is exactly how it felt to be there.

#### Any surprises happen in the studio?

"We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" happened very spontaneously. There was a certain guy, a friend of my ex, who walked in and said hello. After he left, that triggered a conversation about that relationship. I ended up venting and ranting and saying, "We are never ever getting back together, ever!" Max [Martin] kept saying, "You need to write that." I ran over and grabbed the guitar and starting singing, "We are never ever, ever..." I turned to Max and said, "Is that stupid?" He said, "No! That's awesome! Keep going!" [Laughs] It was one of those magical songwriting moments when everyone is in the room, everyone contributes and everyone is there to witness that initial, spontaneous spark of inspiration.

#### Describe your songwriting process.

My favorite thing is its unpredictable nature. You never know when the next idea will come. It might come at 4 in the morning while you're sleeping, or it might happen while you're walking through an airport, or in an elevator. When you do get something, you had

better be near something that allows you to record it, so you don't forget it. The initial idea is like getting the first piece of a puzzle, and you build the song outward from there. You don't know whether that first piece is going to fit into the chorus or the bridge, or whether it could be the first verse. That's for you to figure out. I love that. That's when the work starts.

#### Do you have a go-to guitar?

Nearly every song on the new album was written with my Baby Taylor. It has all sorts of scribbles on it. Bruce Springsteen signed it when he came to a show last year. It's kind of my lucky guitar now.

## 'One mistake I did not want to make was trying to be the next "somebody."'

#### What drew you to country music?

What kept me obsessed were great female role models like Faith Hill, Shania Twain and the Dixie Chicks. I grew up in Pennsylvania, in a place where country music wasn't the most popular genre. But whenever anyone told me country wasn't cool, all I had to do was pop in my Shania Twain CD, and I would

strongly beg to differ. Those artists showed me that you can stand for something and be different from your peers. From the time I was 12, music was all I ever thought about. Once I started learning guitar and writing songs, that was all I ever wanted to do. It's what I daydreamed about during school and what I spent all my time doing after school. None of it felt like practice—it always felt like the most fun you could possibly have.

#### Anything you've avoided in your career?

One mistake I did not want to make was trying to be the next "somebody." During my career so far, no one's ever really said, "She's the next 'somebody.'" I've always been quietly proud of that. Why try to become someone who already exists? Better to try and be the first you.

**Do you make a distinction between pop and country?**

Genres are a way for people to easily categorize music. Some who think in those terms are very "by the book." You are either this or you're that. What matters to me is whether or not the music is good. I let everyone else make the running commentary on whether I'm country enough. Last year, when I released "Mean," there was a lot of talk about whether that song was too country or too bluegrass. At that point I sort of threw my hands in the air and said, "Well, at least they're not saying I'm not *enough* something."

**Do you ever feel pressure to meet creative expectations that others place on you?**

I'm lucky to have a very flexible record label president [Big Machine Records founder Scott Borchetta] who wants me to stretch creatively. Plus, I know that's what my fans want. My fans don't want me to put out the same record every two years. What are they waiting for, if I'm just going to put out *Speak Now 2.0*? I want them to see I'm serious about giving them something new.

**Do you enjoy being involved in your live shows?**

I love being there to help put together the costumes, the staging, the transitions, the backdrops, the scenery changes and the elements of surprise. It's like gathering supplies and materials for a big art

## SOUND DECISIONS

Albums that influenced Taylor Swift's artistry



BLUE, 1971

**JONI MITCHELL**

"Some of the saddest, truest and most real depictions of pain and vulnerability."



COME ON OVER, 1997

**SHANIA TWAIN**

"A big step forward for country music. For me, it introduced the idea of blending different genres and influences."



BREATHE, 1999

**FAITH HILL**

"An amazing album. It really showed her coming of age in terms of style."



TAPESTRY, 1971

**CAROLE KING**

"Some of the most melodic hooks I've ever heard."



WIDE OPEN SPACES, 1998

**DIXIE CHICKS**

"Full of great songs that make me want to roll down the windows when I'm riding in a car."

Portrait by Sarah Barlow



'What matters to me is whether or not the music is good.'

Portrait by Sarah Barlow

project. I like that challenge of coming up with a vision for what the show should be. I like it when people can see what I'm singing about, as well as hear it.

**Are you always as confident as you appear?**

It wavers. When I'm around people who I feel have my back—like a stadium full of people who've bought tickets to see me play—I'm totally confident because I know they're there because they want to hang out with me for that night. On the other hand, it takes a lot of courage when I'm about to walk onstage for a TV performance or an awards show. It's like walking into a party, and you're not sure the people there really want to hang out with you. That's when the nerves kick in.

**Are you comfortable with the pressure of being a role model?**

I'm just living a life—that's mostly how I look at this. But what I do and what I say is going to be documented, so I had better do it and say it in a way I'll be proud of, all my life. That is a lot of pressure! But I've been putting pressure on myself since I was a little kid. My fans and I trust one another. We have this very close bond, and having this relationship for almost seven years now is something I cherish. Even though things have gone to different levels, I'm happy that's still in place. **M**

## CASTING CALLS

When the right role comes, Swift is ready

In 2009 Taylor Swift made her acting debut playing a rebellious teenager in an episode of TV's *CSI*. She also had a role in the 2010 feature film comedy *Valentine's Day*, and voiced a character for the 2012 animated film *The Lorax*. So just how serious are Swift's acting aspirations? "I've been reading scripts for about five years," she says, "and I've had an acting coach for the past couple of years. If I get a script where the story is something I feel is necessary to be told, that I couldn't live without being a part of telling that story, I would definitely jump onboard. I want the stories I tell to be true, whether that's in acting or in music. It's hard to say what I would and wouldn't do as far as subject matter goes. I've been really picky. The film wouldn't have to involve music, but of course if it does, that's going to speak to me more. I would love to be part of an important movie."