

Taylor Swift

By Geoffrey Koester

There are plenty of starving artists with dreams of selling millions of records and touring the world. To make it in the music business, you usually need to know someone and have a connection to the industry before you even start your performing career. So what made Taylor Swift such a huge success? She was the daughter of a stockbroker and a saleswoman, she didn't have anyone in the music industry guiding her and holding her hand. She used her own genius to make something of herself and cause the world to fall in love with her.

Swift is from small town Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, so did not even live close to Nashville, Tennessee – where she arguably needed to be in order to make a breakthrough in country music. Swift knew Nashville is the world capital of country music and made her way to the guitar-filled city when she was 11 with her parents to try to get a record deal. While she did not have success with a record deal, the trip was not completely worthless. After she returned home, feeling defeated, Swift was offered the opportunity to perform the national anthem at the US Tennis Open by someone who had her demo tapes in Nashville. It would only be two years after that when the new star would be offered her first record deal with Big Machine Records.

Young Taylor was performing as the opening act for major headliners in the country. Her music, largely written by herself, was music that relates to real life. At the same time, popular country band Rascal Flatts dropped also-rising star Eric Church from their tour as the opening act and tapped Swift to replace him alongside Gary Allan. Swift's music filled a gap in the country genre at the time – it lacked music that appealed to the teen palate. Swift, starting to show her true genius for music and business alike, saw this as her opportunity to make herself known.

In 2006, at the age of 16, Swift released her debut self-titled album "Taylor Swift" and scored points with many of the singles from the album. She was especially acclaimed for "Tim McGraw," the lead single on the debut album, which was one of 11 that she wrote or co-wrote. Appealing to Swift's youthfulness, the album reached over two million downloads on MySpace – the popular social media site at the time. Swift herself said she used MySpace a lot, using it to post pictures, blogs, and video teasers for her fans. Swift had a talent for connecting with her fans both in musical form and in real life, which supported her inevitable success to come.

As she started to become more of a star, with her debut album reaching number one on the American country charts and number five on the Billboard 200 chart, Swift insisted on keeping her private life relatively private and letting her lyrics do the talking. In interviews, she would typically stick to discussing her music and redirect questions asked about her personal life including those she may be dating. Because her songs were almost all about relationships and boys, the media and fans loved to probe about whom the lyrics were inspired. Her first major inferred relationship was teen star Joe Jonas, though Swift denied there was a relationship.

Swift maintained a down-to-earth appearance if not an actual homely lifestyle. At age 18, even though her second album was about to be released, she said her most exciting moment that year was that she voted in the election. "I felt so completely 18 and American," she said in

an interview with Star Tribune in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She kept her “girl next door” image for years as she released her first set of albums in the country arena. Continuing to write her own songs, her second album – Fearless – released in 2008. Eight of the 13 songs on the second release were written by Swift alone.

Coming off the success of her debut, she made the transition and turning point from “giddy teen” to “polished pro” according to reviews. Nearing the end of teen years, Swift also made Fearless a turning point in her career because it focused a bit less on teens and had a few more mature songs on the album. The best example of this shift is “The Way I Loved You” that describes a more complex relationship than past songs.

Swift started to expand her self-based business into clothing: in addition to Fearless, she also launched a line of sundresses at Wal-Mart in the same year. She chose Wal-Mart, as opposed to a more prestigious fashion retail, because she “never wanted to put [her] name on something that an 18-year-old girl struggling through her freshman year of college can’t afford.” She used the knowledge she gained from her father’s stockbroking to play an active role in all of her business decisions and showed that she played by her own rules.

Even though she was in a league of her own at 18, other celebrities were still taking notice and some were not as fond as others. Her debut album had sold 13 million copies at this point and Fearless had made Swift the youngest winner of the Grammy’s Album of the Year. In 2010, at MTV’s Video Music Awards (VMAs), Swift accepted the award for Best Female Video. Pop star Kanye West, who was fond of pop star Beyonce, interrupted Swift’s acceptance speech and announced that Beyonce was more deserving of the war in a manner that would be replicated across the Internet for years. Swift was humiliated, the crowd booted, and Beyonce was mortified after West made his announcement. Swift, however, used the event to come out on top in later months.

The Best Female Video award-winner made West the subject of one of her next songs, like so many other men in Swift’s life before him. She released the song Innocent on her next album, Speak Now, in 2010 and it included some pointed lyrics that most agree were aimed at her VMA foe. While Swift denied it for the sake of not sinking to West’s own level of decorum, the song and the album as a whole resonated with her fans.

Beyond West and Beyonce, Swift was also starting to be compared to other, possibly similar artists of the time. The Independent wrote in an editorial that Swift had little of Miley Cyrus’ “robo-preciousness,” none of Paris Hilton’s “vacuous celeb shine,” and none of Lindsay Lohan’s “wheels-falling-off fame-demons” either. Swift was coming off to the public as more functional, real, and, to some, even talented than her fellow female celebrities. Swift had her own brand of music and now her own brand of self to propel her career.

Among the list of stars she was compared to, Swift was the only country artist on the list most of the time, which made people wonder why she chose country music over another genre. Swift said she preferred country music because it fit her style. Country music is when “someone sings about their life and what they know, from an authentic place,” according to the rising star herself. She was definitely telling stories in each of her three albums so far – Taylor Swift,

Fearless, and now Speak Now – and that did fit better in country than any other genre. You could also argue that Swift found her start in country music because it was relatively easier to get a start there than in other genres. Few genres have a single hub of all things that are theirs like country music has in Nashville and Swift took full advantage of that even as a pre-teen. As her third album climbed up the charts, fans were starting to wonder if Swift would stay in country music forever and began to speculate about her true intentions for fame.

Change could be seen in Taylor's music on Speak Now and her anger was also starting to become more evident. One of the popular songs on the album, "Dear John," was believed to be heavily inspired by her relationship with fellow-celeb John Mayer with whom Ms. Swift had dated for a brief period of time. The song did not mention Mayer other than by his common first name and Swift would never give a hint to her inspirations, in "Dear John" or any other song, but coy, evasive lyrics fueled fan's theories.

Possibly even more noteworthy about "Dear John" than the inspiration behind it is the change in musical style heard in the song. It featured an electric blues style, with a peeling guitar licks, likely included to remind listeners of Mayer's own music. Even without the Mayer-inspiration, Swift began another turning point in her career with "Dear John" and the Speak Now album by starting to change her music to be less country and more in other genres. "I feel like in my music I can be a rebel," Swift said.

The change in musical style and increase in angry lyrics came out of necessity if not personal desire. For her first two albums, as a new artist and teenager, Swift only needed to tell her stories from her adolescent imagination. Now, after placing herself in the public spotlight, her life was already being told and so listeners were less likely to believe what she was telling. She had to get more creative and in doing so, she created songs that had no precedent in country music. She had begun her transition out of the genre, though it would take two more albums to finally cap off the dramatic switch.

While many things changed, some things did stay the same on Swift's third album. The artist continued to write most of the songs herself and this process was highlighted in her interviews promoting the album's release. "It's a very one-on-one experience," the singer said. "I don't factor in the millions of people who could possibly, hopefully hear that song one day." Her authenticity was her appeal, and even though she was showing more of a blues and rock-and-roll side in her music such as "Dear John" and "Mean" respectively, she only continued to increase her fan base.

Though her fans, ever increasing in number, loved the music, there were critics that were calling for Swift to make even more dramatic changes than she already had. Some were not impressed by her veiled attack of Mayer in "Dear John" or her inclusion of other past relationships in other songs. They hoped for her to have something more insightful in the next album, which Swift would store away and pull out for Red's song catalog.

While she faced criticism on her musical shift, she also faced criticism and fielded questions about her future in terms of kids and what she wore on tours. Serving as the hero of feminists and women in her fan base, Swift handled these questions gracefully. On kids, Swift

said she wanted them “some day” but not at the time. “Let’s say I’m 30 and still touring,” Swift said. “I wouldn’t want to have a family because I couldn’t balance it.” And as for what she wore (or didn’t wear) on stage, Swift refused to take her clothes off because she wanted to people to focus on her songs as she always had desired. Taking the criticisms into consideration, Swift released her next album – Red – in 2012.

The year before Red’s release, Swift had made nearly 53 million dollars and won six Grammy awards for her musical talent. When Red release in 2012, she had traveled even farther outside of the country bubble than she did in Speak Now. Speak Now may have acknowledged that the bubble existed and that Swift was right on the edge, but Red popped it. The album featured duets with Ed Sheeran and Gary Lightbody, both non-country artists, and songs that sounded more like something the band U2 would record.

Swift, with Red, was no longer the shy, relatable diary girl that she started as. She was now a “beacon of feminine oomph and genuine talent,” as written by the Tampa Bay Times. She took chances with songs like “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” that dominated the radio for three months after its release and they clearly paid off. The song “22” resembled a Ke\$ha song with a 1980s twist and “I Knew You Were Trouble” was synthy in a Britney Spears style.

The album stuck to Swift’s roots in some ways, being careful not to alienate her original fans too fast, by including some sadder, slower songs that resembled the music on her first three albums. An example of this is “Begin Again,” which told the story of a breakup and a fresh start. While some of the other songs on the album were flops, Red showed Swift’s greatest strength was her business genius and helped her to jump genres with hardly any ridicule.

Even simple aspects such as Swift’s pronunciation and diction were changing in her fourth album. Her voice was more serious and deeper, something that had not been heard in past music. One of her flaws has always been that her voice was too high pitched and chipper, but she toned that down – literally – in Red.

Swift, as a country star looking for something more, was not unprecedented. Plenty of past country stars had dreamed of escaping the admittedly monotonous genre, but none had yet succeeded. Swift, however, was in fact unprecedented in becoming a pop singer with an air of innocence. Now in a genre with females such as Cyrus and Spears, Swift was one of the most innocent artists you could find.

While fans realized Swift was now much more pop than country, she kept them content by bouncing between the two genres on the album. Every other song was pop-rooted but the songs in between resembled Swift’s country roots. Swift was in new territory and was creating a genre of her own, one that no artist had traversed in before her. Country radio no longer dictated what she could and could not sing and pop radio accepted her novelty. She left country because it was too constraining but joined pop on her own terms and redefined her new genre.

Red’s level of pop and lack of country was not enough for Swift and she topped it with her next and latest album: 1989. Named after her birth year, Swift took all of the lessons country

music had taught her and applied it to her first entirely pop album. Every hit on the track list sounds like it is a hit single, even though only a handful have currently been released as one. The first single off the album, “Shake It Off,” is the perfect example of twisting neat lines to sound original. One of the non-single songs on the album, “How You Get The Girl,” is like a checklist for writing the kind of love song Swift was known for in her early days. “Wildest Dreams” takes a break from the man-hating early days and paints the man as the victim, doomed to spending the rest of life his life haunted by what he’s lost. The most notable part of 1989 is that it is uniquely Swift: she continued to write many of the songs on her album and even released some of the lyric notes she wrote down with the album. You can hardly imagine any of Swift’s competitors coming up with anything that compares to this album.

Having shed her country skin and making a huge career pivot into pop music, Swift’s fame following 1989’s release exploded. Despite low expectations that the album could sell one million copies in a week like her previous albums, 1989 passed 1.1 million sales due to Swift’s star power and genius as a music maker and businesswoman. She preempted the release of her latest album with appearances on multiple television shows, such as Good Morning America, Late Show with David Letterman, and The Voice. Swift was also dominating social media sites Twitter and Instagram, similarly to how she dominated Myspace when she first reached for fame. Most notably, Swift refrained from adding her latest music to streaming services like Spotify to require people to purchase the album if they wanted to hear it.

Taylor Swift went from a young girl writing songs about her love life to being the “patron saint of girl power” in 10 years of music making. She set trends with her music and her lifestyle and she used her talent for songwriting along with her business genius to successfully make the shift from country to pop music without losing the fan base she built along the way. She has grown an empire out of a genre she created for herself; one that is now filled with new, starving artists seeking fame in a very similar way to how Taylor once dreamed of fame. These new artists are making covers of Swift’s music and creating their own music in her style. Swift, ever supportive of those inspired by her, continues to make music of her own and tour the world.

Word Count: 2,857

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