Rewriting History

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Not even a year after her album Lover, Taylor Swift took to Instagram to announce the release of her eighth studio album, folklore, in less than 24 hours. Although at the first listen the project may seem jarringly different from all her other works, the album is in fact a culmination of the best features of all her past releases, with Swift highlighting what she has always done best: her songwriting.

Sonically having nothing in common with the pulsating bass-lines of reputation and 1989, folklore comfortably places itself amidst mostly acoustic instrumentals of piano riffs and the twangs of guitar strings, harkening back to Swift's debut in the country scene, and accompanied by the likes of soaring string quartets, a brass section, and even a complete pipe organ. The black and white aesthetic of the album art depicting her in the forest (she doesn't seem to have made it out of the woods after all) along with the soft lowercase of the titles of all the tracks contribute to the style of the music itself: the chart-topping songstress is no longer concerned about the commercial success of her music, but instead views it as cathartic art for the sake of art, with folklore displaying a muted maturity and sobriety that was hinted at only in her documentary Miss Americana, but has been conspicuously missing in most of her past albums. However, make no mistake of it: although the entire album was written in the space of merely 3 months, it remains Swift's richest work thematically, focusing on her writing abilities rather than over-the-top production and radio hits.

Personally, what I find most interesting about folklore is the intersection of its themes with that of reputation, with both albums essentially being two sides of the same coin. Veterans of the fanbase need no introduction to the dark and moody tones of the latter: with the media embarking on a witch-hunt against Swift in light of her feud with Kanye West and her apparent serial-dater status, she vanished for two years in response to the manipulation, gossip and vilification she was subjected to in 2016. With her 2017 release, reputation, Swift combats the image of her created by the paparazzi and her rivals, and presents her identity for what it truly is, reclaiming her reputation for herself.

folklore follows the same principle of playing with the power of stories and legends, although subverting it to apply to both biographical elements of her life as well as tales of fiction. This time, it is she who is in control of her narrative from the get-go, mocking the media by making it nearly impossible to ascertain which songs are about her own life, and which are figments of her imagination. In the foreword to her album, she writes:

“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. Fairy tales and parables. Gossip and legend."

Time and again, Swift has stressed on the storytelling aspect of the album, and a closer look at some of the songs are sure to display her confessional and self-referential style. Overarching motifs are present throughout the project, linking songs together- the best example of this would be what Swift herself refers to as the "Teenage Love Triangle" consisting of the three songs cardigan, august, and betty. The trilogy narrates the drama of a high school relationship between two teenagers, James and Betty, and the strife that occurs between them when James cheats on the latter with another girl, Inez. Lyrics in all three songs displaying recurring phrases and themes bind them into a fascinating display of writing skill and creativity. Interestingly enough, the two characters James and Inez are named after the two daughters of her close friends Ryan Reynolds and Blake Lively, hinting at the fact that it might be a sapphic love story, especially since James' gender is never explicitly mentioned.

In epiphany, a haunting track with ethereal harmonies, Taylor connects the past world to the modern civilization by pointing out the constant turmoil that is ever-present. Making references to both her grandfather fighting in the Second World War as well as the ongoing coronavirus pandemic she pleads for "just one simple glimpse of relief". Further historical references are made in the last great american dynasty, one of my personal favourites. The song talks of Rebekah Harkness, a dancer and philanthropist married to an oil trader, making her one of the richest women in America at the time. The Rhode Island home Swift currently resides in was formerly owned by Harkness, and in narrating the dancer's story, she makes subtle connections to her own situations. Harkness was considered to be the "maddest woman" the neighbourhood had ever seen, with Taylor describing her as a "misfit widow getting gleeful revenge on the town that had cast her out". She flies in her "Bitch Pack friends from the city" to the chagrin of her neighbours, a cheeky reference to Taylor's own 2015 squad of models and pop stars, for which she came under fire for propagating elitism and exclusionist ideals. In the final stanza, she compares herself to Harkness, boldly declaring how she "had a marvellous time ruining everything" after purchasing the same home the philanthropist had wreaked havoc in. The connections between Rebekah and Taylor are strengthened later on in mad woman, a reference to the town's denunciation of Harkness. The song follows a similar style to The Lucky One from her album Red, which talks of an unnamed celebrity being driven mad by the fame and the spotlight, and how Swift considered herself to be on a similar path.

Taylor's creativity reaches its apotheosis in Track 5 of folklore, my tears ricochet. Track 5's of each of her albums are notorious among the fandom for usually being the most vulnerable and emotional songs in the album, and this one is no different. The ghostly overture is bitterly narrated by a dead woman, whose ex-lover decides to intrude at her funeral. However, fiction and reality begin to blur again as the writer makes further connections to her own life: the song is largely considered by critics and fans alike to be a metaphor for her ongoing battle with her old label, Big Machine Records, who bought the masters to her first six albums, leaving her with absolutely no ownership of her own music. With subtle nods to her songs being referred to as "stolen lullabies", and the record label "tossing out the blame" and "saving face", Swift presents an impassioned plea in the form of a haunting tune, characterised by spectral choirs and fading instrumentals. While many of the songs are sombre in nature, invisible string is a light-hearted, plucky attempt at wit and humour, being the most self-referential of all the songs in the album. Alluding to her long-time boyfriend Joe Alwyn's past part-time job in a yoghurt shop, her comfortable friendliness with her exes, and even laughing at a British waitress asking her if she was "some American singer", the song is a comfortable reminder that Taylor really is doing better than she ever was, in spite of the melancholy mood of the album. Other notable tracks include exile, a collaboration with Bon Iver, comparing a harsh heartbreak to being banished from one's country:

"You're not my homeland anymore So what am I defending now? You were my town, now I'm in exile, seein' you out."

Seven presents a child's innocent take on domestic abuse going on in her friend's household, with possible subtext suggesting the turmoil arose due to the child's hidden sexuality. With peace, Swift takes on a Joni Mitchell-esque persona to croon about themes similar to that in Dancing With Our Hands Tied of reputation, about finding love in spite of hardships and disturbance all around them.

While her closing tracks are usually hopeful and looking out for new beginnings, hoax presents a curveball to this expectation. Instrumentalised by nothing more than a bleak piano riff and Taylor's desolate vocals singing of someone's love being "the only hoax [she] believes in", the track is probably the most despondent of the 16 songs released. However, all is not lost: in the very final chorus, the song modulates from a minor to a major key, injecting some sense of bittersweet hope in the barren landscape initially presented. With the timeless and ethereal spirit of the album, folklore has cemented itself as the strongest creation put forward by Swift. The writer''s storytelling powers have never been stronger, and just like the legends, lore, and myths that she sings about, folklore is bound to find itself as one of the best concept albums in recent times, a perfect retort to all those who claimed she was incapable of writing anything other than "thoughtless, mind-numbing, mainstream pop". Regardless of her chart domination and radio success, one thing is certain: spanning eight albums, three genres, and boasting of global recognition, Taylor Swift can do it all, even if it's in the middle of an actual pandemic.