

For Taylor Swift and Drake, Friends Serve the Brand

Music

By JON CARAMANICA — NOV. 5, 2015

This year, Taylor Swift took her blockbuster album “1989” on tour, and as much as it was a celebration of her blossoming into a full-fledged, gleaming pop idol, it also served as a treatise on the virtues — and perks — of friendship.

During set changes, the stadium screens beamed videos of Ms. Swift’s intimates — Karlie Kloss, Selena Gomez, the Haim sisters — telling sweet, propagandistic stories about their friendship with Ms. Swift.

And each night, Ms. Swift brought out one or more special guests onstage — like Miranda Lambert, Lorde or, in one case, Julia Roberts and Joan Baez together. As spectacular as these moments could be, they still had an air of the predictable about them, ripe for parody.

That arrived in August, with “Please Welcome to the Stage,” a YouTube **video** by Lara Marie Schoenhals in which she plays Ms. Swift introducing increasingly preposterous, macabre guests: “the hologram of Maya Angelou!”; “the women survivors of ISIS!”; “acquitted murderess Amanda Knox!”

The clip, viewed almost a million times, suggested a scenario both hilariously absurd and not altogether implausible. After all, Ms. Swift’s umbrella is as wide as anyone’s, and her tractor beam of friendship is powerful.

Around the same time, Drake was having the meaning and potency of his alliances challenged, in a much more punishing way. In July, his sometime collaborator Meek Mill took to Twitter to accuse him of using a ghostwriter. Hip-hop, more than any genre, relies on an unspoken good-faith

network of collaboration. With a handful of tweets, Meek Mill tore that playbook up.

The accusations put Drake on the defensive, but within weeks, he decisively grabbed the upper hand, dispatching Meek Mill with a pair of songs and one devastating live performance — Meek Mill lit the match, but Drake made sure the bridge was burned.

The two most important pop figures of the last five years, Drake and Ms. Swift have both gone further by bringing others along for the ride, with varying degrees of intensity and sometimes different aims. Friendships versus partnerships: Whatever the nomenclature, they have been effective for both artists. In both cases, the alliances are loud, ingenious, public.

And yet for both artists, that model has begun to collapse, whether it was Ms. Swift’s becoming (yet again) an object of judgment and satire, or Drake’s seeing a weakening of the bonds that he’d had with his fellow rappers, especially up-and-comers.

Whether born of sincerity or expediency or some combination of the two, the alliances have been central to the pop takeover by Drake and Ms. Swift, stars who sprang from outsider genres who now enjoy both mainstream and critical acclaim. Seeing Drake and Ms. Swift pal around widely is no surprise: Accessibility and intimacy are central to both of them. They are simpatico songwriters, vividly autobiographical and strikingly vulnerable. And both have managed to display a kind of everyone-welcome catholicism, allowing others in without ever giving up the steering wheel.

How these bonds manifest in their lives and ca-

reers, though, is very different. Drake is one of the savviest collaborators in hip-hop and has made a habit of identifying young talents early and bringing them into his orbit. The benefits flow both ways — the rising artist gets a valuable co-signer and, often, a breakout hit; Drake gets a splash of youthful energy and credit for bringing an obscure idea into the mainstream. For Ms. Swift, her recent alliances have seemed more personal than professional, inasmuch as a hair's-width space between those two can be distinguished. They're different approaches, but both serve the brand.

They're starting to falter, too, though — for many reasons. Drake and Ms. Swift are pop's reigning titans, scrutinized heavily; their habits, repeated over time, can begin to appear premeditated. And friendship, as strategies go, might have peaked. The approach has been perfectly suited to the social media age, where online worth is measured in likes and favorites, where narratives are curated via envy-inducing Instagram posts and where collaboration is just a direct message away.

But too much positivity can begin to chafe. Public friendship requires a tremendous amount of good will, or perceived mutual self-interest. It demands that everyone stick to the script — which is why Meek Mill's allegations were so bracing.

Drake began this year, though, with chest puffed, prepared for a fight. In February, he surprise-released the mixtape "If You're Reading This It's Too Late," which found him at his most defensive and wary. "Got a lot of people trying to drain me of my energy," he lamented, a harbinger of attacks to come. It's as if he could sense the friendship model's impending rupture: It had gotten him to the top, but it would strand him there, too.

Meek Mill isn't someone whose career Drake has significantly boosted, though they have collaborated a couple of times. But his outing of the ghostwriter, Quentin Miller, raised eyebrows: If you were inclined to regard Drake as a vampire of young talent, then this seemed like evidence that he was getting to them ever earlier before they

even had hits of their own to pilfer.

Stop comparing drake to me too.... He don't write his own raps! That's why he ain't tweet my album because we found out!

— Meek Mill (@MeekMill) July 22, 2015

Over the past few years, Drake has been instrumental in the rise of a generation of rappers, whether by collaboration (Migos, Future, ILoveMakonnen, Fetty Wap) or by inviting them out on tour. Depending how you look at it, these are either the actions of someone more enthusiastic about who's next than about established talent or someone who's relentlessly feasting on new blood. Whichever the case, his batting average is astonishingly high.

And yet it has become, if not safe, at least acceptable to criticize Drake in public, something that would have been more or less unthinkable at this time last year. In September, the Houston rapper Sauce Walka, part of the Sauce Twinz, released "Wack 2 Wack (Drake Disstruction)," a track that followed a couple months of potshots in **interviews** and on social media, contending that Drake had promised to deliver a remix of their regional hit "2 Legited to Quited," but didn't come through, and that Drake has been pilfering Houston style without proper respect.

Drake is from Toronto, but Houston has been central to his personal mythology from the beginning: He's immersed in the city's signature sound and slang; he lived there for a time before his music took off; he regularly mentions it in song. For the last two years he's held a Houston Appreciation Weekend over the summer.

"**Wack 2 Wack**" is a far more effective challenge than anything Meek Mill put up, a combination of embarrassing personal details (if true) and righteous indignation about Drake's relationship to Houston: "It's cool to show love, but it's different when you're stealing."

Stealing was again the topic of conversation sur-

rounding “Hotline Bling,” which Drake debuted in July in the thick of the Meek Mill squabble. The song owes at least a conceptual debt to “Cha Cha,” the slow-sashaying Internet hit by D.R.A.M. Last month, D.R.A.M. took to Twitter for some light venting: “I feel I got jacked for my record ... But I’m GOOD.”

Finally, Drake recently posted a video on his Instagram of him dancing to a song by the young Florida rapper Kodak Black, causing Earl Sweatshirt to note, on Twitter, that Drake “can be a bit of a vulture” when it comes to young rappers.

And yet all this flack comes in the midst of what might be Drake’s most important year to date, one in which two sort-of-albums — “Too Late,” and the full-length Future collaboration “What a Time to Be Alive” — debuted atop the Billboard album chart. “Alive” was also itself a strategic checkmate of a project, in which Drake recruited the most productive and influential rapper of 2015, Future, for a full-length victory lap, capping off his take-down of Meek Mill. On “Digital Dash,” the first song from that album, Drake rapped, “I might take Quentin to Follies” — the Atlanta strip club — not worried about a thing.

That practiced chill in the face of fire is something Drake and Ms. Swift share, though they represent it differently. Drake acknowledges his detractors, while Ms. Swift rarely does, instead opting to continue to tell the story she wants heard, knowing full well that volume is on her side.

For the past year or so, that story has been about friendship. In interviews, Ms. Swift has frequently painted her newfound fascination with female friendship as a rejoinder to her peak tabloid era, two to three years ago, and to her lack of girlfriends as a child.

Certainly, these new friendships may be genuine, but these women are more often seen in Ms. Swift’s milieu — baking, shopping, taking lovely-looking vacations — than she is in theirs. They can appear decorative, carefully arranged details

in a trompe l’oeil of normal life.

Not choosing to turn her friendships into professional partnerships is deliberate, Ms. Swift told Vogue: “I have attention on me enough, so I want my friends to just like me because we have things in common rather than me sitting in a corner being like, ‘Listen to this song that I wrote about my life!’ ”

And yet, the two worlds can’t help but intermingle. As if to reinforce the essential truth of her friendship with Ms. Kloss, the two appeared together on the cover of Vogue’s March issue. At MTV’s Video Music Awards in August, Ms. Swift arrived on the red carpet cloistered among a group of famous friends — including the models Gigi Hadid and Cara Delevingne and the actresses Hailee Steinfeld and Mariska Hargitay — as if for protection. (Those women had all appeared in the video for “Bad Blood,” a song, perversely enough, about the dissolution of a friendship, supposedly with Katy Perry.)

By October, the idea of Ms. Swift’s squad — #squad if you’re hashtagging — as a site of coercion, and also emptiness, was grasped widely enough to be the subject of a sketch on the season premiere of “Saturday Night Live.” In it, two women struggle their way through a postapocalyptic ruin: everyone has left to join Taylor’s gang.

“What do they do all day?” one asks the other.

“I think she invites them onstage and they, like, walk around for a minute or something,” comes the shrugged reply.

“And then what?”

“That’s it.”

Both Ms. Swift and Drake talk openly about the care with which they approach their work and public image. “I monitor what people say about me, and if I see a theme, I know what that means,” Ms. Swift told GQ, pointing to earlier cases: first, when she was young and acclaimed, and people doubted her artistic merit; and later, when her ro-

mantic relationships drowned out her art.

Speaking with *The Fader*, Drake framed his handling of the Meek Mill dust-up in terms of strategy. To finish Meek Mill off, he had to make a song that would “literally become the song that people want to hear every single night” — a bona fide hit, which is what “Back to Back” became.

In the song “30 for 30 Freestyle,” from “*Alive*,” he elegantly relates, in just a handful of bars, the shift from being the outsider to being top dog:

Rookie season, I would’ve never thought this was coming
They knees give out and they passing to you all of a sudden
Now you the one getting buckets
They put they arm around you, now you becoming the crutches

Here, like on much of “*Too Late*,” Drake is fatigued. His relationships, so carefully cultivated, are beginning to become burdens. That’s a position Ms. Swift will probably never take. If this is her friendship era, it’s unlikely she’ll fully detonate it in favor of a new mode. Drake is a skeptic, and Ms. Swift is a relentless optimist.

That reflects their diverging goals: Ms. Swift is aiming ever more global, disconnecting her music from any of its past baggage. Drake, by contrast, is turning local, using his success as a platform to become even more specific. When it comes to others, where Ms. Swift sees a happy gaggle to embrace, Drake is starting to see a nasty swarm to duck.

Both tactics have their shortcomings. And this year’s blowback has been a reminder that no matter how big or compelling the crowd around you might be, at the top you’ll always be alone.