

Look What You Made Me Listen To: The Musical Journey of Taylor Swift

The work of the musician consists therefore only in knowing, as accurately as possible, the symbolic relations of all things so as to reproduce in us, through the magic of sounds, the feelings, the passions, the visions of an almost real world.

- Alan Daniélou, *Introduction to the Study of Musical Scales*.

I grabbed a pen and an old napkin and I wrote down our song.

- Taylor Swift, *Our Song*.

Amidst a financial crisis and changes in world leadership, 2008 was also the year in which Romeo and Juliet got married. Taylor Swift was featured in the Billboard Hot 100 Top 5 that year following the release of her single *Love Story*, a track from her sophomore album *Fearless*. The 18-year-old girl also wrote famous songs about teenage love, coming of age, high school drama, and her lovely family. Almost ten years later, Swift's *Look What You Made Me Do* leads Billboard Hot 100, even though her lyrics are not so optimistic anymore. True love was a belief of the old Taylor, who is now dead—or at least the new Taylor sings she is.

Look What You Made Me Do is the first single from Taylor Swift's sixth studio album, *Reputation*. The album was released in November 2017, and its main theme is exactly what the title suggests: Swift's controversial reputation. Since her debut in the music industry in 2006, the singer-songwriter has been in the tabloids not only due to her popularity, but also due to numerous scandals. She still fights with her ex-boyfriend Calvin Harris over the copyright of some lyrics. Kanye West became her enemy when he took the microphone from her hands during the 2009 VMA ceremony and was consecrated as her nemesis when he cursed her in the lines of his 2016 song, "Famous." Her relationship with Katy Perry went from mutual retweeting to

Perry stealing Swift's dancers and boyfriend. In short, Taylor Swift has a long list of ex lovers and an even longer list of enemies to whom *Reputation* is specially dedicated.

Of course inspiring her songs in real life episodes is not a new technique to Taylor Swift. Many of her songs are autobiographical, from *Outsider* and her other initial tracks about high-school bullying to the famous relationship-gone-bad hits like *Dear John*. As a teenager who released her first album at the age of 16, Swift expressed her whole maturation in these songs, exposing her personal life to the world. James Perone, author of *The Words and the Music of Taylor Swift*, says, "Swift's continuing string of failed relationships may have provided fodder for much of her best-selling and best-known songs, but it has also become something of the butt of jokes and even the object of money making schemes" (3). The incidents that made the singer famous among her audience also threatened her girly facet. Having people placing bets on how long her relationship would last (Perone 3) certainly does not build a good image, so Swift learned to use these events in her favor by making her fans sympathetic to the deceived nice girl. It is not surprising, then, that she played the victim in most of her autobiographical songs.

What is surprising, however, is how she changes this approach in *Reputation*, right when the scandals involving her got more serious. On the day of the album's release, New York Times music critic Jon Caramanica gave it 4 out of 5 stars. He writes that Swift, at the cost of sacrificing her old style and borrowing new genres such as rap and hip-hop, "turns the magnifying glass around." *Reputation's* songs may refer to other people, but "some of the most caustic and aware songwriting on this album is about herself." Instead of playing the nice girl, Taylor Swift suggests concealed details of her life and embraces her (bad) reputation. As Caramanica says,

The bombastic, unexpected, sneakily potent 'Reputation' is many things: It's the first

album on which Ms. Swift has cursed (“damn” doesn’t count); it’s the first time she has sung about consuming alcohol (and repeatedly at that); and it’s the vehicle for her most overt songs about sexual agency. Ms. Swift is 27 now, and the things she used to deny herself—in song, at least—are no more.

There is no recipe for success, especially in the music industry. Sticking with the same persona for long has its costs, but so does changing it. Both moves are risky: pop music is ephemeral, and fans are fickle. *Reputation* could have been a total failure, but Swift got it right and this is not random. In *Look What You Made Me Do*, she explicitly sings that “the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now (...) because she’s dead.” The teen popstar fans learned to love because of her innocence is said to be absent, but the new Taylor Swift is not losing her status: fans are buying the album, and critics are enthusiastic. There is an old Taylor and there is a completely different new one: why do people like and listen to both?

This question leads to necessary broader ones. We need to first look at what aspects can create a change in music and how this applies to Taylor Swift’s songs. What fans initially noticed and Caramanica wrote about was a thematic shift—naivité to exposure—, but this is not the main point of Swift’s transformation. We can describe a musical piece in terms of several other palpable quantities, as the lyrics, the timbre, the rhythm, the form. Even what seems to be “something more” and intangible comes down to technicalities. In *Introduction to the Study of Musical Scales*—which makes a comparative analysis of Western and non-Western music evolution—the musicologist and historian Alain Daniélou asserts that musical intervals—the difference in the pitch of subsequent notes—can be defined “by their psychological correspondences, such as the feelings and images they necessarily evoke in our minds” (129). Moreover, as he talks about the importance of these feelings in Indian music for example, he

states, “It is logical to conceive a theory of sounds based on the ideas represented by the sounds rather than on their numerical values” (129). So, the feelings are as important and as measurable to defining a piece of music as the pitch and the tempo. When we look for the similarities and differences among Taylor Swift’s songs, therefore, we need to look for them mainly in the lyrics, in the form, and in the quantifiable conveyed emotion.

The lyrics are the most evident aspect among these, since it is often the aspect we use to refer to a song. It is also the place we can ground one of the major contrasts between the old Taylor and the new one: the repetitiveness in the text. An online software program, SongSim, helps us to visualize how repetition evolved in Taylor Swift’s songs: it gives to a piece of text a graphical representation by plotting it into a square matrix and painting the cell at position (x,y) if the xth and the yth words of the text are the same. In short, the more repetitive the text is, the more colored its graph will be.

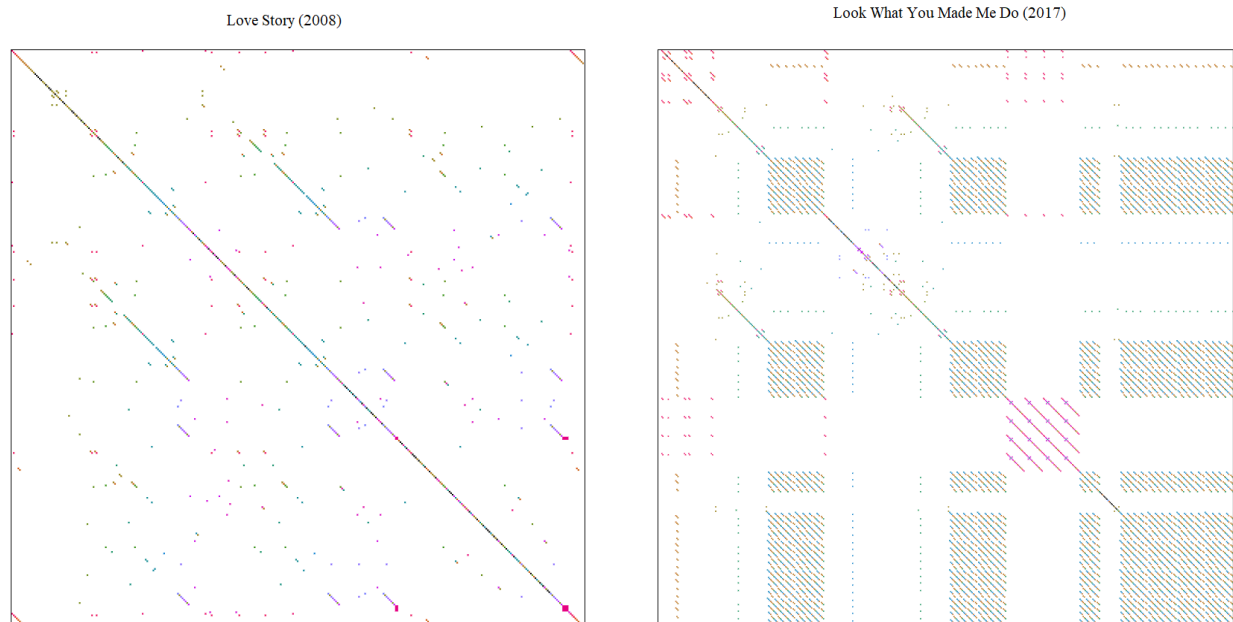


Fig. 1. Matrices of repetition created on SongSim

Comparing the matrices obtained by plotting the 2008 Taylor Swift song *Love Story* and

her 2017 hit *Look What You Make Me Do* (Fig. 1), it is remarkable how the repetitive structure of the latter differs from the former's lyrical progression. While in *Love Story* even the chorus changed, in Swift's new songs the repeated words are the very heart of the composition.

Elizabeth Margulis, a researcher in music perception and cognition, writes about what this difference means in *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind*. She claims that repetition is what makes regular language musical, "Since the basic semantic content should already have been transmitted the first time around, the repetition draws attention to other dimensions of the utterance" (5). Once Taylor Swift started venturing into rap and hip-hop, mainly "spoken" and less instrumental musical genres, she uses the repetition to make her message sound musical: the first time she sings a line, she states it; the second, she intones it and makes it catchy. The repetition also incites, as Margulis argues, a "participatory urge": it brings the listener into the music as "it activates more than usual a tendency toward subvocalization" (5). Thus, Taylor Swift's dive into the repetition is a change that goes along with the change in her music genre as a means to include more the audience in her songs. It is a process of maturation, in the sense that she invites the fan to follow her change with her.

In the melody of Taylor Swift's songs, however, we see no change, but consistency: *Love Story* (2008) and *Look What You Made Me Do* (2017) are both worked around repeated melodic fragments.



Fig. 2. Love Story music score



Fig. 3. Look What You Made Me Do music score

The music score shows that *Love Story*'s chorus (Fig. 2) is an alternance of D (keynote) and E sixteenth notes with “leaps” to F-sharp (third) or G (fourth) on the stressed syllables. In *Look What You Made Me Do* (Fig. 3), the pre-chorus is made purely of repeated A (keynote) in octave followed by two higher E (fifth) also in octave. These structures contribute towards the simplicity of the musical pieces: tonics, fourths and fifths correspond to intervals we can easily assimilate because they follow Bach's circle of fifths (a sequence of notes important for the establishment of tension and release), thus are the very core of all Western music. The structures Taylor Swift uses are powerful because they are familiar even to the uninformed listener. Jocelyn Neal, a researcher on commercial country music, provides an application for this simplicity in *When Recollection Is All We've Got: Analytical Exploration of 'Catchy' Songs*. Neal uses the example of a group of friends doing karaoke and “filtering” the most notable tunes of a song. She affirms that, “to a greater or lesser extent, the version of the song that emerges has passed through the filters of the casual performer's recollection” (21). Taylor Swift's songs are easily sung by her audience because they have a pitch we recall by heart and hooks (the “leaps” to the fifths and thirds for instance) that are natural but at the same time remarkable; as Jocelyn Neal says, “the bits and pieces we remember from those performances may be, in fact, the most essential key” (22). The maintenance of this simple repetitive structure is not obvious to the lay

listener, but its effects are: anyone can sing a Taylor Swift song because they are written specially to be reproduced.

This matters because, when we sing a song, we internalize all the emotion it conveys. This emotion depends totally on the musical structure, as it matches the “numerical values” that Daniélou suggests. He grounds this exclusive dependence by denying the role of personal interpretation in music: “the personality of the hearer counts for nothing in the phenomenon of musical evocation” (10). The researchers Kawakami, Furukawa, Katahira, Kamiyama and Okanoya go a step further in their study *Relations Between Musical Structures and Perceived and Felt Emotions*. They consider the existence of “two kinds of musical emotions: perceived emotion (expressed by musical pieces) and felt emotion (induced in listeners)” (407)—the former being the one which, according to Daniélou, matched the mathematical properties of the song. The study aimed to prove “that the emotion perceived by people listening to dissonant music and music in a minor key would not necessarily correspond to the one they felt.” Their findings support this hypothesis. High-density and ascending melodic fragments in major modes (as it is the case of *Love Story* and many of the old Swift’s songs) express happiness, and the felt emotion corresponds to the expressed in most of these cases. Songs in a minor mode (*Look What You Made Me Do* is in the key of A minor) tend to express sadness; the felt emotion, however, doesn’t necessarily match it: listeners have responded to the researchers with a wider range of emotions when presented to minor-key songs, so aspects of music other than the key should explain the felt emotion in these cases. On their turn, the octave intervals in *Look What You Made Me Do*, as studied by Kawakami and his team, express power, potency, and vigor (409). This is precisely the emotion which should arise from a song about Swift's revenge. Taylor Swift

is not at disadvantage when she sings about gossip, sadness, and intrigue. She has found appropriate musical structures to keep the feelings of her fans under control throughout her career.

Analysing these facets of Swift's music, we see how her transformation was carefully designed. It was startling that *Reputation* performed so well, but it was not a matter of chance: all the magic that exists in music does not win over the technical and universal principles ruling it. Taylor Swift has managed to reach a whole new public which was interested in pop, rap-ish contemporary music, but she also guaranteed that the early Swifties, who accompanied her from Nashville to the billboards, would not die along with the old Taylor. These people still listen to Taylor Swift because, even though the singer changed her style and her form, she remained exactly the same singer in the core (what can be seen in the comparison between her songs thematically and in the structural strategies she employs). She succeeded in using a variety of musical forms for the same purpose, and by combining these old and new ideas she expanded her reputation and left no fans behind. Rather than embracing a swift change from one album to the next, Taylor Swift progressively developed her songs—always reminding her old fans that, someday, they might ever get back together with the country teenager.

This duality between constancy and maturation is the very heart of Swift's ten years of success because it works towards the creation of an emotional resonance on her old fans: she grew up with them, and she needs to remind them of that. Just after the release of her fifth studio album, *1989*, Swift was interviewed by journalist Melissa Block. Block asks the artist why she addressed her hit song *Shake It Off* to her haters and not to her motivators. Swift answers:

I really wanted to kind of take back the narrative, and have more of a sense of humor about people who kind of get under my skin — and *not let* them get under my skin.

There's a song that I wrote a couple years ago called *Mean*, where I addressed the same issue but I addressed it very differently. (...) from kind of a victimized perspective. (227)

Mean and *Shake It Off* were written four years apart, and they address the same issue from opposite perspectives. If the former is sung by a victimized girl getting something off her chest, the latter is the ironic laughter of a self-aware and confident young woman. Two years before *Mean*, in 2008, she wrote *The Best Day*—a song in the format of a letter to her mom in which she complains about bullying in elementary school. Almost a decade later, *Look What You Made Me Do* (and maybe the entirety of *Reputation*), whose lyrics empowers Swift, is the next step on the “haters songs” territory. “I got smarter, I got harder in the nick of time,” she sings, attesting she has grown mature. When she does it, she wraps up the matter of fighting your enemies until this point: the victim stopped crying to her parents, acquired self-awareness and is empowered now. A fan who accompanied Swift through all these stages will not listen to *Reputation* as any pop record. For these people, this album is a reminder of the path they have traveled, of who they were and who they have become. The emotional resonance Swift creates with her recurring themes is intended to help the fans to know themselves better.

Margulis, the author of *On Repeat*, argues we achieve the point of self-knowledge through music because of repetition. “Since human beings are fundamentally musical, when we understand more about the musical capacity, we understand more about ourselves. In this way, something as simple as putting a track on repeat can serve as a window into who we are” (24). If repetition is an introspective feature in music, we can say that *Reputation* is twice more introspective than any other Swift’s album, because it is twice as repetitive. There is the lyrical repetition, which makes the songs catchy enough so that people who have never listened to Taylor Swift can still enjoy them, and the thematic repetition, which ties this album back to her

old singles. Although Swift claims she killed her old persona, she has kept her memory very much alive. The references the new Taylor makes to the old one are the overall reason *Reputation* still compels the Swifties.

Swift's new album achieved success because it is independent and engaging. People can listen to it without any previous knowledge of Taylor Swift if they like the new genre. For those who have been accompanying Swift since the beginning, however, *Reputation* offers a moment to look back and think about all we have experienced in ten years. And, in the eyes of the new Taylor, we have been through a lot. The teenager girls finished high school, went to college, and moved away from home. The outside kid is now at a better place than most of her bullies, and she knows it. Romeo and Juliet probably got divorced and now Juliet is fighting for the custody of their only child. Everything has changed, but the same characters are still alive on her songs if fans look for them, going through the same struggles we go through now. As reflected on every aspect of her music, Swift's transformation might include some magic, but it is not just some song written in an old napkin. *Reputation* is one more mile in a long journey of growth and maturation.

It is impossible to predict how long this journey will last. Maybe Swift's next album will be her downfall, maybe she will stick to her *Reputation* persona for a long time. However, if she keeps reproducing in us her feelings, her passions, and her visions of an almost real world, she still has a long way to go. It was bold for a 27-year-old woman to sacrifice the girl inside her, but, because of her expertise on reminding and teasing fans, Taylor Swift is definitely not leaving Billboard Hot 100 for now.

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