

# The Single Life

By Jonathan Van Meter

## American Girl

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# Taylor Swift: The Single Life



**As Taylor Swift embraces a glamorous new look, the country-pop sensation talks to Jonathan Van Meter about fame, ambition, and the joys of being on her own.**

Taylor Swift is sitting in the front row of the Rodarte spring 2012 ready-to-wear show during New York Fashion Week, looking prim, if not chaste, in an ivory-colored confection with long, lacy sleeves, a high neck, and a full-length skirt—a look from Rodarte's fall collection that was inspired in part by the spirit of the Kansas homestead. It is the sort of getup that treads a fine line between sincerity and irony, between too-literal costume and clever fashion reference. In other words, it takes a girl with a special sort of moxie to wear it without looking like Melissa Sue Anderson from *Little House on the Prairie*. The fact that Swift is supermodel thin, towers over everyone (at five feet ten she clocks in at well over six feet in platform Miu Mius), and has skin as pale as a gold-rush bride's—well, let's just say she falls somewhere on the continuum from fetching to dazzling.

That irony is not Swift's strong suit makes her triumph all the more satisfying: She is wearing the dress; the dress is not wearing her. Perched here among the professionally blasé, she is all smiley gee-whiz confidence, full of hugs and exclamation points. Strangely enough, her opposite is sitting just two seats down: Rooney Mara, still in Lisbeth Salander mode, wearing all black and looking pale-to-green spooky. An editor sitting nearby jokes that the two could be the good witch and the wicked witch from *The Wizard of Oz*.

As the models begin their procession, it quickly becomes clear that Rodarte, whose bad witch aesthetic has made the Mulleavy sisters fashion darlings, has moved into Glynda territory. It looks as though they asked their casting director for an army of Taylor Swifts lithe, pretty blondes with long, wavy hair, but wearing zombie makeup. Indeed, the entire collection a parade of girlie pretty dresses, skirts, and hand-knit sweaters in a swirl of cornflower blue and sunflower yellow, with a few van Gogh Starry Night prints thrown in for good measure looks as if it were designed for Swift. "I have never been to a show where I wanted to wear everything," she says breathlessly. Afterward, as we plunge into the crush on the street to find Swift's car and driver, I overhear someone describe the collection as "prom on acid." It strikes me that



Swift herself might be described as all prom and no acid—for a certain audience, her music and her look are stuck in teenage gear. Which is why it comes as a nice surprise to discover just how sharp she is. She is clever and funny and occasionally downright bawdy as we ride around town with a small entourage on this hot fall day, visiting designer showrooms.

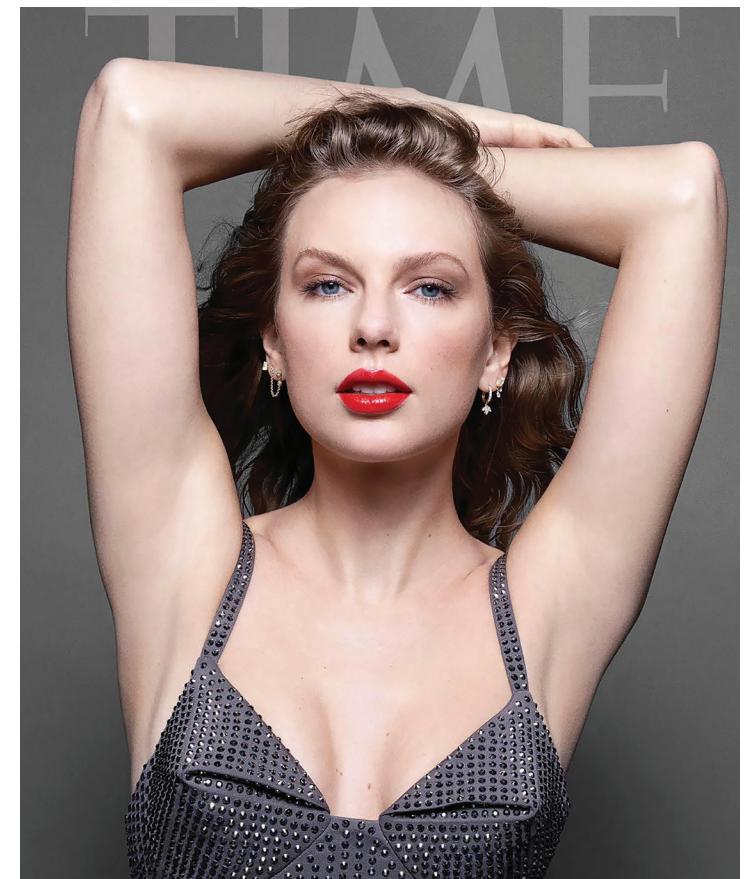
Indeed, one of the first things she mentions is the infamous honey-badger clip on YouTube that features a deadpan obscenity-laced narration. Swift knows every line—though she asks if her cursing can be off the record. She may be edgier than her image suggests, but she is not Courtney Love. She has a deeply ingrained sense of appropriateness. She also knows her audience—and knows that they aren't ready for her to grow up quite yet.

As we crawl through lower Manhattan gridlock toward Alexander Wang's showroom, we wind up in a conversation about how one never really gets over high school. If Swift has been criticized for being somewhat arrested in her creative development—stuck in prom, as it were—that tendency has lent her an uncanny ability to capture in her songs the vulnerable mind-set of teen girls everywhere. "Why you gotta be so mean?" She sings in the

straight-up country song that defined her amazing year in many ways and has been nominated for two Grammy's. Clearly, her school days remain all too vivid.

Swift, who grew up on a Christmas-tree farm in rural Pennsylvania, tells me that when she was in fourth grade her family moved to Wyoming, an affluent suburb of Reading. "So . . . middle school? Awkward," she says, launching into the first of many comic riffs. "Having a hobby that's different from everyone else's? Awkward. Singing the national anthem on weekends instead of going to sleepovers? More awkward. Braces? Awkward. Gain a lot of weight before you hit the growth spurt? Awkward. Frizzy hair, don't embrace the curls yet? Awkward. Try to straighten it? Awkward!" She starts to laugh. "So many phases!"

When I confess I played the cymbals in marching band during my freshman year, she high-fives me. "All of my favorite people I really trust none of them were cool in their younger years," she says. "Because if you know how to be cool in middle school, maybe you have skills you shouldn't."



# This is what I've wanted to do my whole life

Maybe you know how to be conniving, like, naturally." She laughs. "There's always that seventh-grade girl who looks like she's 25. And you're like, How do you do it? How do you do it, Sarah Jaxheimer?" She lets out a ear-piercing shriek: "Why is your hair always so shiny?!" (Later, I Google Sarah Jaxheimer, and sure enough, she has perfect, lustrous Jennifer Aniston hair.)

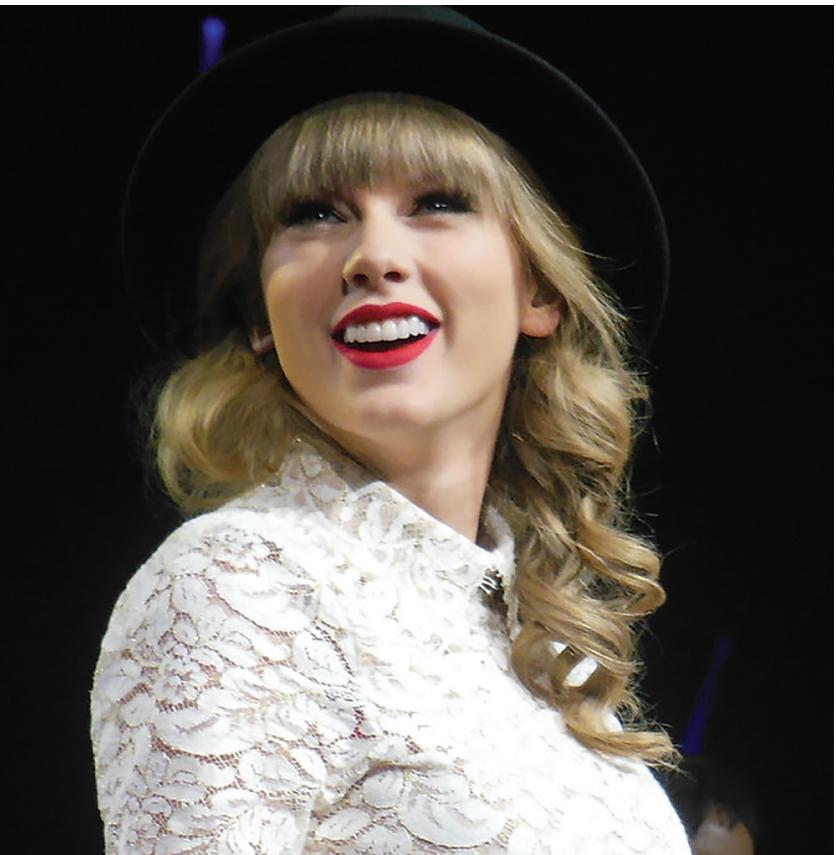
Swift finally stopped caring about being cool. "I think that happened as soon as I left school, when I was sixteen, because then all that mattered was music and this dream that I'd had my whole life. It never mattered to me that people in school didn't think that country music was cool, and they made fun of me for it—though it did matter to me that I was not wearing the clothes that everybody was wearing at that moment. But at some point, I was just like, I like wearing sundresses and cowboy boots."

Apparently, so do a lot of other people. A couple of weeks earlier I watched Swift perform for a stadium of 50,000 people in Philadelphia, for all intents and purposes her hometown crowd. I had never seen so many teens and tween and little girls with their mothers in sundresses and cowboy boots. "I look out at the stadiums full of people and see them all knowing the words to songs I wrote," says Swift. "And curling their hair! I remember straightening my hair because I wanted to be like everybody else, and now the fact that anybody would emulate what I do? It's just funny. And wonderful." The fact that Swift, at 22, already appreciates the delicious irony in that speaks volumes about her grown-up sense of perspective. That she's also the only kid at the table when it comes to filling huge stadiums also suggests she has a heft beyond her years. How many artists can even fill a stadium these days?

"But I bet it also makes it difficult for you," says Wang, "because they're

probably like, 'Oh, she's sample-size, and that means she can wear anything from the runway collection.' And you're like, 'I am not wearing that.' " They laugh. The two head over to the clothes hanging nearby, Wang's futuristic BMX sporty collection that he showed a few days earlier. He pulls something from the rack that he calls a "knit racing sweater," and Swift says, "How Tron of you."

I am almost afraid to ask her what she thinks of a recent blog post from the fashion editor at The New York Times, which suggests that she is "a plump little country girl," but I want to know. "I don't read reviews," she says. "I mean, I read reviews of my music and my shows. But I don't read the ones about my appearance. It's just a different kind of criticism. I'd rather not read it."



Swift has never been a fashionista. While she has had her fair share of missteps, in general her look has been extremely girl-next-door. Her choices in designers tend to run conservative, safe. And it seems to work for her. (She didn't miss a beat in answering my question about whether or not she is getting help from a stylist: "No stylist," she says. "I pick out all my own clothes. My friends think I'm like a 90-year-old lady. They're like, 'You wear the most sensible shoes!'")

She's more likely to have a standout look when she's not attending a high-fashion event. Swift has been photographed wearing lots of pretty prints, capes, and cute skirts. The bare legs and knee-length dresses she favors have become a signature, and her wardrobe, though often conservative, reflects the innocence of her music.

"I like putting together outfits," Swift says. "I like being a part of that process. And I don't really feel like there's one style that is mine. I think I just wear what feels right to me at the time. It's about feeling comfortable and confident in what you're wearing. I've always been more comfortable in casual clothes, jeans and a T-shirt, or in cute dresses."

