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Album Review: Taylor Swift's *reputation*

2016 was full of surprises in music: *Hamilton* became a hit on and off Broadway, Beyoncé dropped *Lemonade* out of the blue, and there wasn't a new Taylor Swift album. Of course these days, the songwriter seems to be dropping a new album every few months, but prior to 2016, any swiftie could tell you that she usually followed a strict every-other-year schedule. She released her self-titled debut album in 2006, followed by *Fearless* in 2008, then *Speak Now* in 2010, *Red* in 2012, and *1989* in 2014. But in the next year that fans expected to be listening to a new track list full of Taylor Swift originals, they never got it.

The delay came with good reason: Kanye West's single "Famous" sparked controversy with the lyric "*I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / Why? I made that b*tch famous*," in reference to West interrupting Swift's acceptance speech for Best Female Video at the 2009 VMAs. When Swift spoke out against the phrasing of this line, a video was released of the phone call between Swift and West prior to the song's publication in an effort to prove that the line had been approved. Though Swift never agrees to being called a "b*tch," the general public accused her of playing the victim anyway, calling her a snake and threatening her online. Ultimately, the backlash resulted in Swift disappearing from the spotlight instead of releasing her 5th studio album.

A year passed without any indication of new music in sight, and then suddenly, in August 2017, Swift's social media accounts were wiped clean of everything she had ever posted. Over

the course of three days, she posted video fragments making up a hissing snake, followed by a post that read, “first single out tomorrow night.” And thus, the *reputation* era was born.

Consisting of 15 tracks, *reputation* is a dramatic departure from anything Swift has put out before. The album bears a distinctly electronic sound, utilizing synth pads, electronic drum kits, and vocoder on almost every track. Some songs even err on the side of hip-hop, featuring rapid high hat and blaring bass. Lyrically, Swift explores more mature themes than she had previously addressed so explicitly in her music, including sex, drinking, and drug use. Each song reflects on the ways in which her reputation has impacted her life, whether it be in her friendships, relationships, or self-image. Ultimately, it’s a tale of destruction and rebirth, playing with hard and soft to create a sonically engaging piece of work.

The album opens with “...Ready For It?,” wherein Swift begins by clearing her throat, indicating that she has some things to say since we last heard from her. It’s a dramatic track full of heavy bass, beat drops, and synthetic vocal harmonies, lyrically warning her lover of what’s to come by being with her. Next up is “End Game,” featuring past collaborator Ed Sheeran and rapper Future, and it’s one of the more hip-hop-influenced tracks off the album. The thematic weariness of the spotlight continues with lyrics like: “*Reputation precedes me, they told you I’m crazy / I swear I don’t love the drama, it loves me.*”

Later on, tracks like “I Did Something Bad” and “Look What You Made Me Do” address her public defamation, portraying her as a phoenix rising from the fire. Further, “Don’t Blame Me,” “So It Goes...,” and “Dress” effectively kill her role as America’s Sweetheart through explicit allusions to sex and substance usage. “Getaway Car” tells an epic tale of a love destined to fail, backed by vocoders, synths, and some very 80s drum sounds. Conversely, “Delicate,”

“Dancing With Our Hands Tied,” and “Call It What You Want” all discuss the anxieties of finding a love that lasts in a time when nothing else does.

“Gorgeous” and “King of My Heart” both tell of an intense romance in spite of her expectations, employing poppy drum beats and synths coupled with accents of acoustic guitar. Then, backed by sirens, snare, and strings, “This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things” tells of big parties ruined by spoiled friendships, alluding to the situation with West in lyrics like: “*And therein lies the issue: friends don’t try to trick you / get you on the phone and mind-twist you.*” And finally, “New Year’s Day” is an ode to those who stick around when the party’s over, backed only by a muffled piano and vocal harmonies.

Overall, *reputation* uses electronic sounds to shield its vulnerable lyrical themes of betrayal, uncertainty, and love. Swift effectively utilizes techniques such as drum programming, synthetic harmonization, and side chain compression to create a tough image of herself in a time when she felt the most — to put it in her words — delicate.

Works Cited

Taylor Swift. *reputation*, Big Machine Records, 2017.