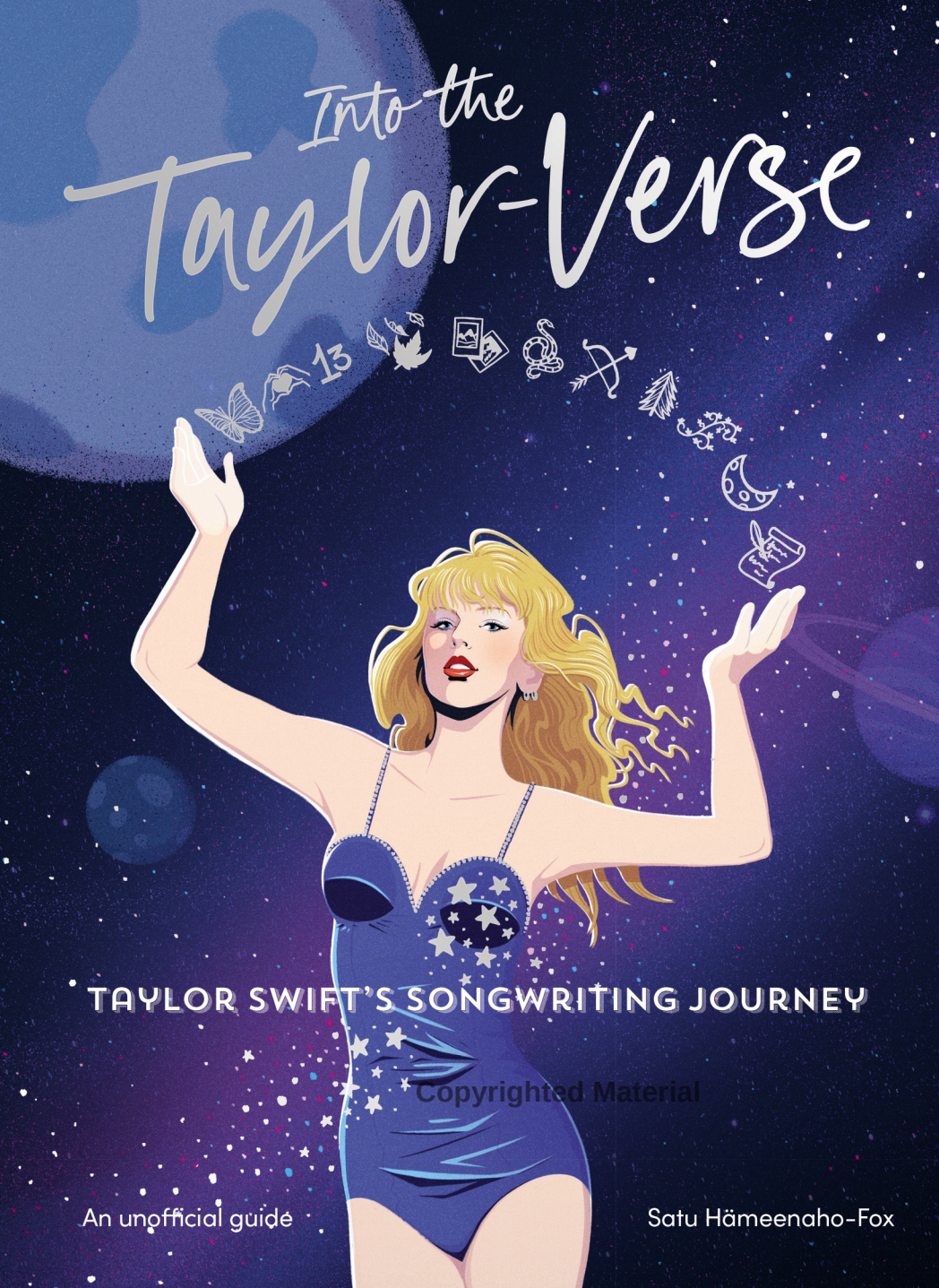
Into the Taylor-Verse



TAYLOR SWIFT'S SONGWRITING JOURNEY

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An unofficial guide

Satu Hämeenaho-Fox

Into the Taylor-Verse



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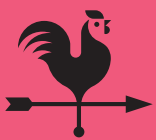


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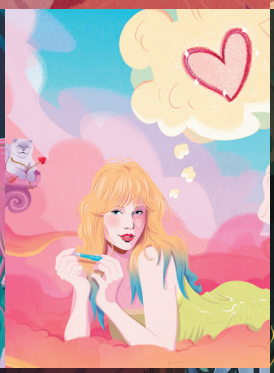
FOR THE SWIFTIES

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Introduction

Taylor Swift's achievements are legendary. Although all the popstars have their own crowns, she has aced every test, winning 14 Grammy Awards, 40 American Music Awards, 40 Billboard Music Awards and 23 MTV Video Music Awards, and was named TIME Person of the Year for 2023. She is the most famous woman in the world. But as smart and hard-working as Taylor has been to win all these accolades, break so many sales records and keep being so interesting we can't stop talking about her, there's something she does that is more important, and more unique to her. She writes songs that mirror people's feelings so closely we joke that she wrote them just for us. Despite being a towering figure of fame, her music still feels intimate, like she's speaking directly to you. Although her songwriting has matured and become even more compelling, this emotional vulnerability hasn't changed since her debut album came out in 2006.

Long before the world knew her name, a 13-year-old Taylor Alison Swift began her music journey on a New Jersey boardwalk in the summer of 2003. Wearing a

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butterfly T-shirt and an eager smile, Taylor performed a short set including the first song she ever wrote, 'Lucky You'. Fast-forward to over one hundred million album sales later and that boardwalk has become the world's biggest stadiums. The T-shirt has been replaced with bespoke costumes and the eagerness has been replaced with a powerful superstar aura. Little by little, Taylor curated an adult version of herself that still feels as friendly as the one in the butterfly top. She has created such an inviting universe within her songs, music videos, red-carpet looks and stage performances that die-hard fans (Swifties) spend hours at a time deciphering, studying and trying to predict what she'll do next. There's a lot to discover once you step into the Taylor-Verse. It spans many horizons, from the rainy small town of *Fearless* to the midnight graveyard of *evermore*.

Starting from the early days as a small-town girl that inspired her debut album, *Taylor Swift*, this book explores the ins and outs of how Taylor writes her songs, one album at a time. We'll learn about her inspirations: muses who she loved and lost, her own girlhood, real people from history and the work of William Shakespeare, to name a few. Taylor uses memory and time like no one else, especially to shape her songs about heartbreak. She is one of the world's greatest storytellers, using words, song structure, her personal life story and her deep understanding of her fans to spin tales about everything from losing the love of your life to, well, shaking it off.

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Taylor is not only a storyteller; she is also a mastermind. She has woven a whole web of connections between her songs and herself using the Easter eggs she plants from album to album, from important motifs in her lyrics to certain symbols and sounds, to meaningful colour schemes and even hairstyles. On her tours, she leans into her innate theatricality to make her live show appear fun and effortless, although actually she's an all-star athlete doing an energetic three-and-a-half-hour show in heels. The Eras Tour, which the fans have made their own with costumes and friendship bracelet exchanges, has become a huge cultural event. As smart and forward-thinking as Taylor is, some of the most fascinating aspects of her career came when fate rolled the dice: when the political landscape changed underneath her; when public opinion flipped overnight; the pandemic. Taylor has had to grow beyond her image as America's ultimate good girl, and become a more complex, resilient version of herself. Throughout the twists and turns of this journey, the Swifties have always remained dedicated, becoming integral contributors to the universe Taylor created. Taylor's relationship with her fans is the real stuff of legend: she listens, she notices, she thinks hard about what to offer next.

Whether you're a brand-new fan or have been here a long time, put on your best dress and prepare to see the stars. It's time to travel into the Taylor-Verse.

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1 Origin Story

TAYLOR SWIFT

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Taylor Swift grew up in a small town. Like many a born star, she couldn't wait to get out and see the world beyond the mall and the Methodist church, the high school and the football field bleachers. Those early years have stayed with her, not just as memories of her childhood, but in the first album she ever made, *Taylor Swift*. It's the only one of her albums not to have its own dedicated section of the Eras Tour, although most of the songs have appeared in the section where Taylor surprises the audience with tunes not on the permanent setlist. The themes and references Taylor uses in her debut album are expressed more simply than they will be in her mature songwriting, but this is still Taylor Swift. The scenes are set and the stories told in a way that lures people in like siren songs. Taylor wears little black dresses (and jeans – they never go out of style) with cowboy boots rather than high heels, and the stories are about the evergreen topic of yearning for love. Taylor will retell the formative experiences from her debut album in different ways: the hometown boyfriend with the Chevy truck in ''tis the damn



The scenes are set and the stories told in a way that lures people in like siren songs.

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season' (*evermore*) is straight out of 'Tim McGraw', while 'Midnight Rain' (*Midnights*) tussles with the choice between a traditional life and the lure of fame. *Taylor Swift* takes us back to the summer when she made her decision.

Taylor Swift is interesting for Swiftian historians who want to learn her origin story, but it's also an astounding songwriting achievement in its own right. Taylor was just sixteen years old when her self-titled debut album came out. Like most teenagers, she paid close attention to the people around her, and her earliest stories were set in a world that looked very much like her hometown of Wyomissing, Pennsylvania (population 11,122), or Hendersonville, where she went to high school (population 62,257). By the time *Taylor Swift* was released, Taylor was a rising star in the world-famous music scene in Nashville (population 689,447), a place known for respecting songwriting talent. Taylor had secured a record deal for songwriting at the ripe age of fourteen,[1] and would never forget that it was her ability to tell stories and conjure up an imaginative world that helped her become a star. Her second most useful skill was her immense drive, which helped when she went on a radio tour, travelling the country introducing herself to programmers, the people who decide which songs get radio play. Giving a great performance in front of a handful of grown-ups in a conference room isn't easy for any artist, but Taylor had a natural confidence that helped these important industry players warm to her, especially when she just kept coming back and treating them to new

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songs and another hour in her polite, smiling company.[2] They might have been standing in a conference room in downtown Nashville, but Taylor's music took them to an altogether different place.

On her debut album, Taylor takes us to an idyllic small town near a lake, where people drive pickup trucks and first love could potentially last forever – if the other person would just treat you right. The opening lines of the official first Taylor Swift song, 'Tim McGraw', spirit us away to a starry night in Georgia. Your crush is gazing into your eyes and telling you how beautiful they are. Who wouldn't want to go to that place and never come back? Taylor creates a paradise of back roads and porches, safe and cosy, just like our earliest romantic daydreams. If this sounds like a hug of a song, Taylor thought so too. During her first tour, she would go into the crowd halfway through 'Tim McGraw' to hug her fans and thank them for coming, before jumping back onstage to seamlessly finish singing about the poignancy of first love. The song is also a mission statement for the Taylor Swift songwriting process: she can write flowery comparisons just like any (tortured) poet, but she'll put a twist on them. The boy she likes compares her blue eyes to twinkling stars, just like Romeo does to Juliet in their famous balcony scene. But instead of indulging him, Taylor cuts him off, playfully calling him out for feeding her a line. Even though her debut album idealizes first romances and what could be, Taylor isn't going to fill her tracklist with songs bursting with grand, overblown

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Taylor creates a paradise of back roads and porches, safe and cosy, just like our earliest romantic daydreams.



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metaphors about love. Instead, she will build a universe from the concrete, meaningful details that she remembers from her own experiences, from the little black dress she wears to dance with the boy in 'Tim McGraw' to that scarf she'll later leave behind at someone's sister's house.

As first songs go, 'Tim McGraw' is a perfect scene-setter for the themes of the album, and the entire career to come. It's about a real adolescent experience, but it's also about Taylor's bigger dream: to be recognized for her music. The song is full of metaphors that show Taylor yearns to be seen and heard for her lyrical talent. She doesn't just say that the moon and stars shine, she says they shine like a 'spotlight'. She doesn't just say 'listen to me', she says one day you'll hear her on the radio. In fact, the word 'radio' crops up on four of the songs on *Taylor Swift*, showing where Taylor's thoughts were leading. This choice of words reveals where she was at in her life. We'll discover throughout this book that Taylor's words have deep personal meaning to her, and also reveal her journey through life – Taylor was a teenager when she wrote *Taylor Swift*, so it's natural that the word 'girl' features in five songs on the album; that was Taylor's world. Over time, the way she uses the word 'girl' will change dramatically, particularly in her career-long struggle over the good girl versus the bad girl. Here, though, being a girl isn't complicated. If you're a girl, you're exactly where you're supposed to be by the logic of *Taylor Swift* – by the lake, with your crush, under the moonlight. The subtle genius of her word choice in 'Tim McGraw' is that you don't have to

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want an actual spotlight to share in Taylor's yearning for it: we just want to feel special. The bright lights of fame are still to come for Taylor. Instead, this album is lit by the stars sprinkled throughout the lyrics. For now, she's a teenage girl, writing songs on her bedroom floor and hoping someone will like them.

Although the sound of *Taylor Swift* is organic, played on guitars and live drums, the story of how we came to know this record is a curiously digital one. A new technology came along at exactly the right time for someone who wanted to connect to others who felt like she did: social media. It's hard to imagine a time before it, but Taylor and social media were young together. Like any teenager at the time, she posted updates about her life, though her posts quickly evolved from her days at school to life on the tour bus, complete with period-accurate straightened hair and heavy-handed eyeliner (the YouTube make-up tutorial was yet to be invented). The stars aligned for Taylor to start her songwriting career at a time when culture was becoming less formal and glamorous, and starting to seek out more relatable stars. As well as shaking the hand of every programmer in Nashville, Taylor hand-built her empire, girl by girl, via social media and in person. A fan named Holly Armstrong spoke to a podcast focusing on Taylor's earlier music, *The Swift Legacy*, in 2021.[3] She described how she watched Taylor play on a sandy boardwalk in Florida when she was twelve years old, and Taylor was 13. Taylor's set included a pre-*Taylor Swift* song

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called 'Lucky You' and a cover of a song by country legend Patsy Cline. Afterwards, Holly lined up with three other people to speak to this cool new singer. She and Taylor spoke about ordinary things, like their favourite colour (purple) and their tops (Holly's said 'American Girl' and Taylor's had a pink butterfly). By the end of their short chat, Holly felt like she'd made a friend and had been turned into a committed fan: 'I don't think Taylor even really thought she was going to be as big as she is. You just don't think like that. You make the "friend" connection with somebody and they play guitar, they do music, cool, I want to listen to their music.' Holly was just one of the girls who Taylor turned her spotlight on, and who told their friends about this album of songs all about girls like them. They called up the radio station, on a landline phone, and requested her songs. And, using the new technology that had just recently become available, they went online (cue dial-up tone, because it's 2003) and commented on Taylor's MySpace, hoping she'd respond.

In the run-up to the release of *Taylor Swift*, methods of being a popstar were vastly different to today. When you saw your favourite singer, it was usually on TV or the front of a magazine, where they'd had the benefit of full glam; the interview was tempered by publicists and cut back

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by editors. In fact, a lot of gatekeepers stood between celebrities and fans, including the ones who ran the record industry and chose which lucky people would get a record deal. Navigating this forest of adult pressures is a lot to ask of a sixteen-year-old girl. Going from there being no such thing as social media to the existence of a site like MySpace was a giant leap in technology that Taylor was exactly the right age and disposition to take advantage of. Sarah Carson, writing in the *New Statesman* in 2021, looked back on the fervent days of her pre-*Fearless* Taylor Swift fandom, describing the appeal of a singer who wrote the swooniest music, set in a semi-mythical America, but also posted on the internet like a normal girl. One of Taylor's posts read: 'I sit in class and write notes to my equally psychotic redheaded best friend.'[4] MySpace Taylor even occasionally swore, something Albums Taylor wouldn't do until she snapped on *reputation*, showing that Taylor used social media just like every other girl at the time, testing the boundaries in how she expressed herself and letting her fans in on who she was when the grown-ups weren't around. Sarah wrote: 'The music itself was only half the appeal [. . .] The other half was – and, for many fans, still is – the quest to understand her. We looked for hidden meanings in her lyrics, decoded the secret messages she hid in liner notes and crafted in-jokes and fan theories.'[5] These secret messages, whether they are actually in code or just left somewhere that only some people will notice them, have become an important way that Taylor speaks

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to her fans. She's created a perfect tension: between her inviting lyrics and warm personality, you feel like you know her as a person, but she sprinkles puzzles and mysteries throughout her work to engage your natural human urge to decode and decipher.

Taylor found her place in the world inside country music, but most of her early fans weren't exactly followers of a genre that was mostly aimed at their parents. It was Taylor who converted her fans to country music through the sheer power of her songs and personality. It's also likely that, growing up in Pennsylvania rather than one of the more typical country music states, she saw which elements work in the genre and cherry-picked them to suit her own purposes. A gifted storyteller like Taylor knows how to help listeners suspend our disbelief. To become a country singer, Taylor had to adopt a few Nashville-isms, like a twangy Southern accent, to really sell these songs about pickup trucks. Right from the start of her career, she understood that a persona is an important part of marketing her music, which is just another kind of storytelling. Her persona is woven all the way through her music and lyrics and was boiled down to the most compelling message on *Taylor Swift*: a wholesome girl whose world is still her tiny hometown, the next-door neighbours and the street she lives on. Taylor would later say, 'I think there's an interesting lag-time on emotional growth for me. Because I write my records a couple of years before I put them out, I've always seemed two or three years younger than I actually was.'[6]

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Although Taylor was so young, she was still slightly older than many of her fans when *Taylor Swift* came out, and one or more years is a very long time when you're sixteen. One reason Taylor became a role model and 'big sister' to many girls is the way she sang about her own immediate past with such tenderness and immediacy, while we also got to watch her life unfold on MySpace and Tumblr or, increasingly, in the headlines. The songs that would later become a multi-platform Swiftian universe baffled the other teenagers at Taylor's school, who heard her sing at talent shows and assemblies. The decision to write songs in a genre that wasn't exactly considered cool in the emo era of the early 2000s led to schoolmates telling her to 'go sing that country beep' (Taylor's redaction).

Taylor's early experiences of being socially excluded at school (the first song she wrote for *Taylor Swift* was 'The Outside', about loneliness) meant she looked for connection elsewhere. She says, 'I had a double life. During the day I walked around, talked to people, went to class, studied for tests, and had crushes on boys, and then after school I would go downtown to Music Row in Nashville and I would write songs about those experiences.'[7] Being cast out became fuel for her songwriting, something she would never quite get over, as evidenced by the loneliness present in every stage of the whistle-stop life story in 'You're On Your Own, Kid' (*Midnights*). It also fuelled her determination; she has talked about how she had the courage to approach record labels as a pre-teen: 'It's because I knew I could never feel

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the kind of rejection that I felt in middle school. Because in the music industry, if they're gonna say no to you, at least they're gonna be polite about it.'[8] Other girls sensed that Taylor was keen to connect. By the time her first album came out, she was holding long meet-and-greet sessions, where she met and spoke to fans one-on-one for up to four hours at a time. When a fan asked for her signature, they'd often get a page of personalized notes hoping they enjoyed school this year and saying she would see them soon. Later, when her fans number in the millions, she won't be able to hug everyone or answer every email, but Taylor's interest in making personal connections never ends. These days she might drop a comment on an especially creative TikTok or send a care package to someone who set up a Taylor Swift Society at their college. It's even embedded in the way she sings – she's known for her direct vocal style that has almost no runs and frills, but instead feels like she's next to you, holding a conversation complete with sighs and laughs, something she will perfect and devastate us with in future albums. Then there are the Easter eggs that feel like coded messages only fans can read. What started in liner note codes ends with counting the number of birds in the background of her Instagram selfies for clues to the next re-record.

We know Taylor has always welcomed her fans with open arms and continues to do so with each new album – whether it's brand-new material or a long-awaited re-release. But why does her music itself create such a safe

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and cosy space? It should be obvious that an album by a teenage girl would come from a teenage perspective, but comparing Taylor's first album to those that inspired her, such as LeAnn Rimes's *Blue*, shows it's not necessarily the case. Young girls are often made to sing from a more mature perspective to expand their audience – *Blue* is full of references to loving your man and being a woman, which is strange to hear from a 13-year-old. Taylor took a different path, writing new, classic songs that sound perfect for people of any age to sing, whether you are still young or just remember that innocent time. *Taylor Swift* felt so welcoming to girls in particular because it's set in a world where girls make the rules. Even today, there are relatively few role models for girls; magazines for tweens often put Taylor, who is now in her thirties, on the cover as no one has come along to take her place. *Taylor Swift* is set in an innocent world devoid of the usual power imbalance. The lyrics of 'Stay Beautiful' describe a neighbourhood where girls lurk on corners, talking among themselves about whether a certain boy knows he's beautiful or not. It's a world where girls do the looking. The country music industry turned Taylor away at first because 'girls don't listen to country music'. It took her powerful artistic vision, and a seven-times-platinum debut record, to change their minds.

As well as having a distinctive point of view, Taylor has another thing great artists often have: muses. On *Taylor Swift*, these muses are almost exclusively boys, with one sweet song about friendship ('I'm Only Me When I'm With

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You', inspired by Taylor's best friend, Abigail) sneaking on to the deluxe edition. On the next album, *Fearless*, Taylor will still have Abigail for inspiration, and as time goes on her muses will encompass romantic partners but also despised enemies and even the media in general. Muses have been part of the creative process of painters and poets throughout history – their beauty inspires the artist to capture a specific moment forever, such as when the boy in 'Teardrops On My Guitar' glances at Taylor and she quickly smiles to cover up her feelings of unrequited love (good practice for keeping a straight face when journalists ask about her love life for the hundredth time). Over time, the media will become fixated on Taylor's muses and what the 'real story' behind the songs is, when the most exciting part is how she turns all her muses into works of art. Taylor develops a playful approach to what listeners may have heard about her and her muse: in the *1989 (Taylor's Version)* track 'Is It Over Now? (Taylor's Version) (From The Vault)', she references a tragic and widely disseminated 2013 photo of her looking extremely sad on a boat after a relationship-ending argument. It's not always easy being a muse, as some of them have learned all too well, but the compensation is that your uniqueness will be immortalized for all time. Taylor is not the only great artist to have written some of their most enduring works about having a crush on a cute boy; think of William Shakespeare's sonnets to his 'Fair Youth'. 'Shall I Compare Thee To a Summer's Day' is almost as romantic and catchy as 'Our Song'. Shakespeare and Taylor both wrote from

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a place of yearning. While the crush holds the power in real life, the artist has the final say, something Taylor will emphasize over and over again, through claiming her rights both artistically as a songwriter and as the legal owner of her music. If she wants to talk about real events from her life, she will. She'll turn to her personal memories time and time again and start to analyse herself as well as the people around her, becoming her own muse on self-reflective songs like 'Anti-Hero'.

Taylor Swift captures the last moment before Taylor became famous. It crystallizes the worldview she grew up with, and which she'll spend her entire life and career building on. It's a simple world where love and family are all you need. On each album we'll learn more about Taylor and what her ideal love looks like, often through her relationship to home. The Taylor of 'Mine' from *Speak Now*, written between the ages of eighteen and twenty, will treasure the drawer of personal items she keeps at her boyfriend's place. This domestic image of love will reoccur many times. Talking about writing 'Lover' in 2019, Taylor said, 'When young adults go from living in their family to then combining their life with someone else, that's actually like the most profound thing.'[9] Building a home is at the heart of Taylor's concept of ideal love: the twenty-seven-year-old Taylor of *reputation* will share a home and chores with her partner; the thirty-year-old Taylor of *Lover* will build the whole damn house.

'Mary's Song (Oh My My My)' captures Taylor's ideal

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