

Life of a Showgirl: Taylor Swift's latest self-portrait

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American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift released her latest album, *The Life of a Showgirl* (2025), in early October to a world wracked with upheaval. Donald Trump had ordered the US military to fight the “enemy within,” Israel was illegally intercepting flotillas bringing humanitarian aid to Gaza and masses of people were protesting austerity and authoritarianism in Europe, Africa and Asia. Amid this global violence and unrest, Swift, who has the ears of millions of fans and casual listeners, decided to release another album about herself.

Uninterested in the burning issues of genocide, war and resurgent fascism—or the daily concerns of her many admirers—Swift recorded an album “that really exhibits who I am in this moment,” as she told Apple Music. *The Life of a Showgirl*, which Swift recorded during her Eras Tour last year, focuses mainly on her own celebrity and her relationship with football star Travis Kelce. Though slightly more lively than *Tortured Poets Department* (2024), the album is mediocre at best.

Swift has decided to collaborate again with Swedish producer-songwriters Max Martin and Shellback. The pair previously worked with Swift on her albums *Red* (2012), *1989* (2014) and *Reputation* (2017). Martin has worked with acts like Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC: all creatures of the entertainment industry.

Martin's methods significantly shape the results of his collaborations. In a process resembling an assembly line, Martin works with a team of songwriters, each of whom is assigned a different part of the song. The parts are interchangeable: any of them can be removed and plugged into another song. The team works predominantly on computers and collaborates not in person but over the internet. The result is a professional

product, usually on the theme of romance or sex, with little human feeling or reference to the outside world. This method has had its inevitable effects on Swift's albums.

The Life of a Showgirl is largely soft rock, with nods to funk, disco and 1980s pop music. The accompaniment does not have genuine personality; there is no sense of a band with its own identity. In fact, the low fidelity of the drums and bass on some songs raises suspicions that they were generated using AI. The beginnings of several songs are nearly identical, and the same is true of the endings, during which Swift sings a syllable or two a cappella.

Swift's singing is passable and admittedly more varied and interesting than on her last effort. She sings about her romance, fantasies and petty grievances against her perceived rivals. The lyrics are cliché-laden (e.g., “This is just a storm inside a teacup,” and “I'm never gonna let you down”). Swift also supplies overwrought phrases (e.g., “Love was a cold bed full of scorpions,” and “Sleepless in the onyx night”) and clumsy wordplay (e.g., “Every single hot take is cold as ice”).

She also displays her self-love (e.g., “I have been afflicted by a terminal uniqueness,” and “I'm immortal now, baby dolls”). The song “Actually Romantic” is about someone who outwardly hates Swift but secretly loves her. The persistence with which she has indulged in these kinds of lyrics over time suggests that her egotism is not a joke.

On “Elizabeth Taylor,” Swift laments the travails of wealthy and glamorous women who have no romantic partners. She consoles herself with jaunts to Portofino, Cartier jewelry and her ability to get the best booth at an exclusive Hollywood restaurant.

The fifth song on each of Swift's albums is the most

moving or personal, according to fans. On *Showgirl*, that slot is filled by “Eldest Daughter,” a mishmash of clichés, weak social commentary and unhelpful words of wisdom.

Everybody’s so punk on the internet
Everyone’s unbothered til they’re not
Every joke’s just trolling and memes
Sad as it seems, apathy is hot
Everybody’s cutthroat in the comments
Every single hot take is cold as ice
When you found me I said I was busy
That was a lie
I have been afflicted by a terminal uniqueness
I’ve been dying just from trying to seem cool

More revealing, and less flattering, is “Father Figure,” partly inspired by George Michael’s 1987 song of the same title. Here, Swift assumes the persona of a crime boss, using language that recalls the Trump administration’s thuggish threats to its opponents. She describes mentoring a protégé who later betrays her, prompting her to take revenge. Swift stoops to employing a male’s vulgar boast about his anatomy (and, implicitly, his power). “This love is pure profit,” she croons. There is no hint that Swift is criticizing the perspective she is voicing.

“Wood,” dedicated to Kelce, fails to be as sexy as Swift intends. Accompanied by tepid funk, Swift does not convince or provoke with her too-obvious *double entendres*.

In the closing song, which is the title track, Swift presents herself as a showgirl, as she does on the album cover. This choice is appropriate, because she excels at showmanship more than anything else. Swift’s record-breaking success results in part from her blandness, which broadens her appeal (or at least does not actively alienate listeners) and allows her fans to project their own ideas and dreams onto her. At the same time, Swift’s stellar career is a symptom of the general decline in popular music—and in popular culture in general.

But *The Life of a Showgirl* has already encountered a backlash. Some critics, and even fans, argue the star is out of ideas and is cannibalizing her old songs. Others

correctly suggest she’s completely out of touch with a world engulfed in crisis.

This is weak and flimsy material. It does not speak to the new, radicalized sentiments and thoughts emerging in response to the dangers of war and dictatorship, including in popular music itself. The Swift phenomenon will dissipate.



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