

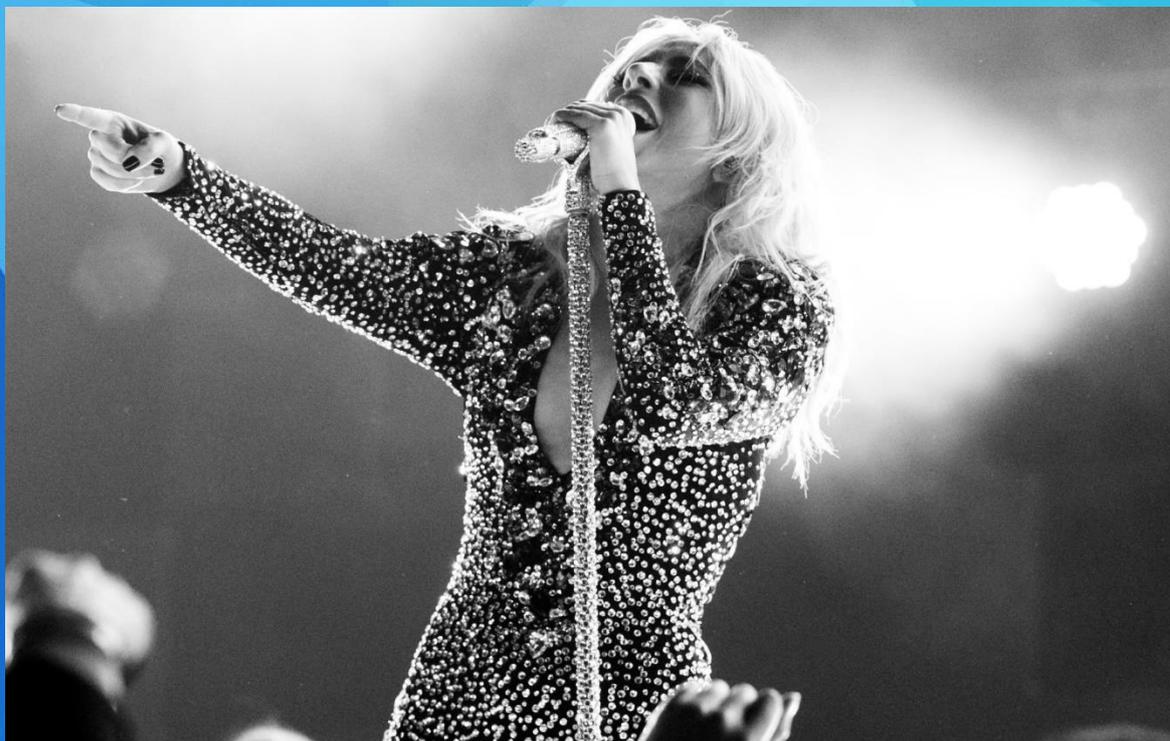
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# **Songs of Empowerment: Women in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Popular Music**

**Sara Martín (ed.)**





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## Preface: Songs, Women, and the Challenge of Analysis

The book now in the hands of the reader is the result of the work carried out by the students enrolled in the elective course 'Cultural Studies (in English)' of the BA in English Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, during the Fall-Winter semester of the academic year 2021-22. This is the tenth project of this nature that I produce with BA and MA students, following a teaching methodology I first used in 2013-14 for a course on *Harry Potter*. As I have often narrated,<sup>1</sup> I realized then that the articles and papers written by students could and should be published, and I found in the digital repository of my university (<http://ddd.uab.cat>) the perfect solution to the problem of who would want to publish this type of text. In the elective courses that followed the one on *Harry Potter*, I organized my teaching around the target of publishing an e-book, which has resulted, as I have noted, in nine previous volumes generating thousands of downloads. Students have reacted with puzzlement and surprise to my announcement on the first day of class that we would be writing a book together, but all have responded wonderfully to my proposal. This has been the case particularly in this volume, considering that only one month into the course my university suffered a very serious cyberattack which deprived us of our virtual campus and made class presentations of songs and videos quite challenging. The students, however, met the challenge and here is the result.

This is the first time I have ever taught a course on music, and this requires some kind of justification being, as I am, a Literature teacher. It is obvious to me that most of us, born in the 1960s and later, who choose to study for a degree in English did (or do) so out of an interest in Anglophone music. I have always been a keen reader but my initiation into English was through the songs which I would try to translate painstakingly as soon as I bought any new album. Music, however, meaning basically pop and rock, has never been an integral part of English Studies degrees in Spain, and although I constantly told myself that I should teach a course on this topic, I procrastinated until I lost the ability to work while listening to music. With the time devoted to music reduced practically down to zero, I decided that the chance was gone to present myself before students pretending I knew about current trends. This changed last year when I supervised a marvelous BA dissertation by Andrea Delgado López on Childish Gambino's music video "This is America" (see <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/249143>). Andrea also did a research internship with me that we used for her to produce a booklet called *American Music Videos 2000-2020: Lessons about the Nation* (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/243814>). Andrea wrote for each of the twenty-five videos analyzed a short essay presenting the singer(s), the song, and the video, and this gave me the idea for the e-book here presented.

I told my students in the 'Cultural Studies' elective about the projected e-book, candidly confessing I had no idea about what was going on in the world of popular music

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<sup>1</sup> See "Producing E-books on Fantasy and Science Fiction with University Students: Classroom Projects". *Mapping the Imaginative II*, Christian Ludwig and Elizabeth Shipley (eds.). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020. 163-184.

in 2021. They would have to teach me. Since I believed that we could not cover everything of relevance in one single volume, we focused on the women artists for the current e-book, and I will focus next year on the male artists with my MA students in a similar project. I brought to class a very long list of about one hundred women singers, all of them active, and asked students to choose two each, which they did, adding some new suggestions. I gave them, then, as much freedom of choice as possible, though I made sure that the main names got due attention (some, like St Vincent or Kacey Musgraves, will be probably missed, though). I extended this freedom of choice to the songs, which students selected on the basis of their preferences and also thinking of whether the song and video combination would be productive enough for their essays. In a feedback session which I held at the end of the course, some told me that had been a major difficulty, since many favorite songs had no music video, or because they found the videos less interesting than the songs. I happen to like music videos very much as a strange bastard child of cinema and advertising, so there was never a question of focusing only on a song. Given, besides, our lack of training in music, I feared that students would be unable to write even a few hundred words on lyrics which are often very basic at a poetic or literary level.

In the end, as it can be seen, we have managed to analyze more than sixty songs. The essays appear here organized by the date of the song's release, which I found preferable to arranging them by the date of birth of the singer as I had initially considered. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is already more than twenty years old, which means that we have been dealing with songs released when the students were mere babies, which has been a lesson for me. What I recalled as part of my life as an adult woman in my mid-thirties was for them a piece of pop's history. At the same time, we have agreed that for a very strange reason pop and rock seem to have stopped ageing, so that songs published decades ago still sound fresh. As usual, I have made a point of being a contributor and not only the editor of the e-book, to offer my students proof that I take their work as seriously as my own academic research. I must thank them from the bottom of my heart for their enthusiasm, the many lessons they have taught me, and their good work.

Finally, even though the way in which so many women singers sexualize themselves in the music videos might raise doubts about whether their songs, as we claim, are songs of empowerment, I believe that this is indeed the case. It is always difficult to determine, as the students have written, what constitutes a free choice and what is shaped by the sexist demands of the record labels. However, it is obvious if one pays close attention that the songs we have analyzed are intended to empower women, mostly to extricate them from any toxic relationships and from blind obedience to hetero-patriarchal tenets. If these singing women wish to show their beautiful bodies because it pleases them for their own feminist reasons, then theirs must be read as an empowering stance. And if their lyrics deal mostly with the impact of hurtful breakups, this is because women are making a colossal effort to abandon damaging romantic myths to celebrate their own resilience, as the songs show again and again. Enjoy!

Barcelona, February 2022

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## Kylie Minogue, 'Spinning Around': The Joy of Woman's Reinvention

Sara Martín

Released: 19 June 2000

Album: *Light Years*

Label: Parlophone

Genre: Dance-pop, disco-house

Length: 3:27

Songwriters: Ira Shickman, Osborne Bingham, Kara DioGuardi and Paula Abdul

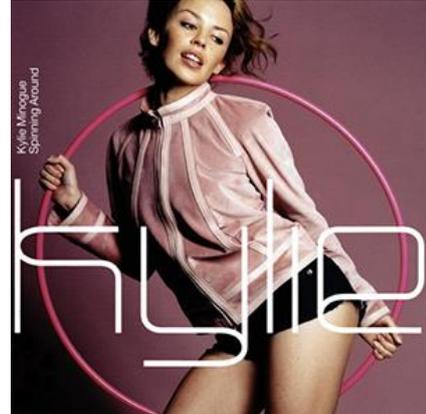
Producer: Mike Spencer

Lyrics: <http://www.songlyrics.com/kylie-minogue/spinning-around-lyrics/>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1DWBKk5xHQ>

Director: Dawn Shadforth



### The Singer

Kylie Minogue was born in Melbourne, Australia, on 28 May 1968. She has been active as a recording artist since 1988, when the catchy song “I Should Be so Lucky” from her first album *Kylie* became an instant international success. Minogue was until then popular because of her role in the soap opera *Neighbours* (1986-87). In her more than three decades as a performer, Minogue has published thirty-six albums (figures for January 2022), fifteen of which are studio albums. Her sales worldwide amount to more than eighty million albums (July 2020). Among her career highlights the hit “Can’t Get You out of my Head” (2001) needs to be mentioned, together with the fact that in November 2020 Minogue became the first woman to top UK album charts across five decades (1980s-2020s). As regards personal issues, Minogue is a breast cancer survivor (2005-6) whose case did much to publicize the need for women’s monitoring of possible risks (see Chapman *et al.*).

Minogue is particularly appreciated in her native Australia and in the UK, where she lives, but far less popular in the USA. Her long career has been marked by a steady evolution from girl-next-door to elegant disco diva, and a constant re-invention, always in collaboration with her close friend and creative director William Baker. Minogue, it must be noted, is very popular with LGBTBI+ audiences, with gay men forming an important segment of her fandom (see Guilbert). Although Minogue does not have an exceptional voice, she is a beautiful petite woman with a graceful stage presence, who is, besides, ageing without making a central issue of her sexy looks (in comparison to other artists such as Jennifer Lopez, one year younger than her, or Madonna, ten years older). Minogue did use the sexualization of her body to sell music but always within limits, veering towards classier images as her career progressed and, certainly, after her bout with cancer. Although she appears to have used Botox to keep her youthful looks, Minogue has always denied having used cosmetic surgery, a point the tabloids have

frequently disputed. The yellow press has also made Kylie Minogue the target of constant surveillance because of her unmarried, childless status and long string of boyfriends. Minogue has defended herself insisting that “I think I’m actually very unconventional. I’ve never been that person who was all about getting married. I love being in relationships but I love my freedom” (in Gannon). Not known to have taken an open pro-feminist stance, Minogue has nonetheless made the point of being her own woman beyond sexist social conventions and pop fashions.

Minogue has already been the object of some academic analysis. Marc Brennan noted that

Pop princesses, unlike Madonna, do not always attempt to be subversive, they often don’t write their own lyrics, they may not challenge the male gaze, and they rarely upset established institutions (although Britney [Spears] is giving her best shot). In short, pop princesses give cultural critics very little to write about. Easy to denigrate, difficult to celebrate. But there are exceptions. (178)

Brennan argues that Minogue is, precisely, a major exception on the basis of her perseverance, her classy stage performances, her cheerful public persona, and her particularly upbeat pop style. Lee Baron has even praised Minogue as “a key contemporary postmodern performer, whose progressive image changes have moved from market-driven imperatives, to a reflexive, self-aware conception of image evolution and transformation” (38). On their side, Sara Martín Alegre and Gerardo Rodríguez Salas have written that Kylie’s hyper-femininity is no sign of weakness but perfectly compatible with her tight control over her career, and that her “radical separation of the private woman and the public star has allowed her to question her own roles even more radically than Madonna has done” (164) to continue working as a generally respected artist.

## The Song

Journalist Alexis Petridis chose “Spinning Around” as Minogue’s main hit among the thirty he highlighted in his article for *The Guardian* (September 2020). As he argued,

Over the course of her career, Kylie has tried her hand at being Indie Kylie, Moody Kylie, Mature Kylie (...) But the fact remains that Kylie was essentially put on this earth to make glitzy, euphoric, balls-out pop bangers, and “Spinning Around” is the glitziest and most euphoric of the lot. A bold restatement of core values following her 90s dalliances with the left field; a perfect pop-disco nugget, a single only the terminally joyless could fail to enjoy.

Song reviewer Pam Avoledo had noted back in 2005 that “The delectable ‘Spinning Around’ finds Kylie Minogue re-energizing her career and returning to her what made her popular: light dance fluff. Except there’s a twist. She gives it an air of elegance and sensuality which was lacking in her early material”. The song was actually a key turning point in Minogue’s career, marking her comeback after the failure of the experimental album *Impossible Princess* (1997).

“Spinning Around” was not written for Minogue. As noted in Paula Abdul’s official website, she co-wrote it with collaborator Kara DioGuardi for a new album that never materialized. According to this website, Abdul claimed to have written the song after her

divorce from her second husband, clothing designer and later Live Nation executive Brad Beckerman. Minogue's team, however, believed that the song suited her and tasked producer Mike Spencer with creating a version adapted to her style. According to Spencer, the original song by Abdul and DioGuardi "was a lot slower—much slower in fact. It was a different song—the tune, production and concept were all different" (in Copsey). The vibrant tone Spencer gave the song, making it perfect for club dancing in 2000 (when it was released), combines with the lyrics to make it an even more firm declaration of a woman's liberation from the past through enjoyment.

"Spinning Around" is a song in which the singer announces that she is leaving her past behind to be her own woman and look forward to the future, having learned to control the desire that bounded her to her former lover and having found the truth about herself. 'Spinning around', which means "whirling", suggests that the process of change is not under complete control, but fast and overwhelming as it is, this process is presented as positive evolution. The less appealing aspect of this anthem to liberation is that the lover told to "move out of my way" never really leaves the song ("I know you're feeling me 'cause you like it like this", the chorus repeats insistently), unless we assume the song is intended for a new lover who does appreciate the transformation. Thus, even though the lyrics are mostly about a woman's evolution (she's got herself "a better wardrobe", is "through with the past" and has found "a new direction / and it leads back to me"), there is still a perhaps even toxic dependence on love.

It is important to note that even though, as noted, "Spinning Around" is rooted in autobiographical aspects of Paula Abdul's life, reviewers and fans ignored its origins and connected it easily with Minogue's own career. When she gleefully sings "The mistakes that I've made have given me the strength / To really believe / And no matter how I take it, there's no way I'm gonna fake it / 'Cause it's gotta be real (...)", this was read in relation to Minogue's overcoming of her failure to please audiences with *Impossible Princess*. In this way, the verse "I'm not the same" received a new meaning, fusing the woman and the career singer.

## The Video

"Spinning Around" was successful enough as a song but the video was a total revolution in Minogue's career and a hit worldwide. The short film, directed by Dawn Shadforth, shows Minogue dancing to her song in a nightclub, dressed in two sexy outfits: a red top accompanied by white hot pants, and a light gold top accompanied by the now iconic golden rucked up hot pants that caused such media frenzy. The hot pants, bought by photographer Katerina Jebb at a flea market for 50p, were worn by the star "in a photo shoot for her website and then to a fancy dress party, before they were re-discovered in a last minute search through her wardrobe the night before the "Spinning Around" video was to be filmed" (Arts Centre Melbourne). Attributed to reputed designer Stella McCarthy, the hot pants are now part of Minogue's costume collection at her native Melbourne's Arts Centre, started by a donation of the artists' parents (see Bailey). The museum scored a huge hit by staging an exhibition of Minogue's iconic outfits in Australia and in London's Victoria and Albert Museum, "the first time the V&A has devoted an

exhibition to the wardrobe of a performer, rather than the work of an established designer” (Bailey). The golden hot pants were the star item.

Minogue, thirty-two at the time the video was made, recalls “feeling quite self-conscious and kept wrapping a robe around me on set and would discard [it] right before the take” (in Neil). The donation to the museum of the revealing hot pants freed the pop star from the frequent demand that she wear them on stage, or for new photoshoots. She, nonetheless, took a definitive turn towards more elegant though not less sexy fashions one year later with the famous hooded white jumpsuit worn in the video for “Can’t Get You Out of my Head”, the beginning of a whole new period in Minogue’s public presentation.

### The Song and the Video

It is hard to say whether “Spinning Around” would have been as popular without the music video, with a different video, or with the same video but different clothing for Minogue. As they are, video and song can hardly be separated, particularly because the iconic hot pants seem to stand for the song itself. The video keeps from the lyrics the feeling of liberation—we see Minogue choosing a good-looking, younger dancing male partner—and enjoying the dancing. Yet, the images showing her in sensual poses on the club’s bar are clearly intended for the male gaze and to elicit the desire (or admiration) that leads to higher record sales.

Presumably, Minogue made her own choices for the video, as she was always done together with collaborator William Baker, but even if that is the case, her self-sexualization is not really part of the theme of the song (or not necessarily so). The song’s co-author Kara DioGuardi even called the video “sick” in an interview celebrating “Spinning Around” as her big break. Disappointed because Minogue, whom she did not know, had been given the song, DioGuardi was soon comforted: “And then I saw her ass in the video—she had these hot pants on and the video was sick—and I was like, ‘OK, I like Kylie Minogue. I’m going to make some money here’” (in Donahue). There is some ugly irony in the idea of a woman songwriter making money out of a woman singer’s perfect derriere, but this is hardly the only case.

In short, there is no way to solve the tension between the song’s celebration of a woman’s joyful reinvention and the video’s sexual exploitation of the star, because this is how Minogue chose to present her own feminine (womanly?) reinvention as an artist. To her credit, she has evolved towards a classier self-presentation and literally consigned the hot pants to a museum. That they are valued as an iconic object within the history of women in contemporary pop says plenty about the importance of women’s bodies in it. That the hot pants enabled Minogue to consolidate her star appeal is, then, both regrettable and proof that, as Madonna understood, sexiness can play in the star’s favor as long as she remains in control.

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## Avril Lavigne, 'Sk8er Boi': Teenage Girls' Fantasy Grounded in the Real World

Maria Giol Muñoz

Released: 24 August 2002

Album: *Let Go*

Label: Arista Records

Genre: Pop-rock, pop-punk

Length: 3:23

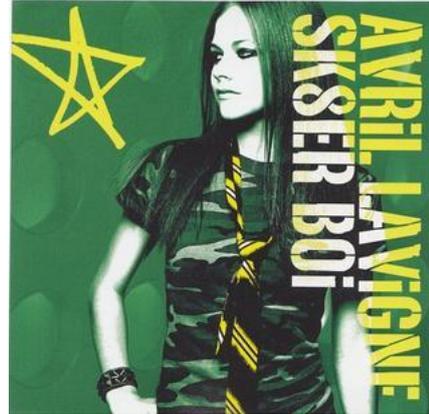
Songwriters: Avril Lavigne, Lauren Christy, Scott Spock and Graham Edwards

Producer: The Matrix

Lyrics: <http://www.songlyrics.com/avril-lavigne/sk8er-boi-lyrics/>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/Tly3n2b7V9k>

Director: Francis Lawrence



### The Singer

Avril Ramona Lavigne was born in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, on 27 September 1984. She has been active as a recording artist from the early age of fifteen, when, after winning a radio competition, she had the opportunity to appear on stage with the country superstar, Shania Twain, singing a duet version of the song “What Made You Say That” (1993). A year later, she signed a two-album recording contract with Arista Records worth more than two million dollars. In June 2002 Lavigne burst into the music scene when her debut album *Let Go* was released and became the best-selling album of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by a Canadian artist. The songs “Complicated” and “Sk8er Boi” included in the album were an instant hit, selling more than fifteen million copies worldwide. Lavigne challenged the glamour of mainstream pop with her punk-influenced pop anthem and skate-punk fashion, which helped her earn international recognition and the title of “Pop Punk Queen”.

For over two decades, Lavigne has published six studio albums, eight extended plays, twenty-eight singles, thirty music videos, as well as appearing in several movie soundtracks and charity albums. Her sales worldwide amount to more than thirty million singles and forty million albums (July 2020). Some of her important achievements along her career are the 2002 Guinness World Record as the youngest female solo artist to top the UK album chart, or in 2007 when her hit single “Girlfriend” was the first to reach one hundred million views on YouTube. Concerning her personal life, in 2014 Lavigne had to battle for her health when she was diagnosed with Lyme disease; when she recovered, she came back to the music scene releasing her latest album *Head Above Water* (2019). There also emerged in 2005 a weird conspiracy theory stating that the artist had died in 2003 and had been replaced by a lookalike named Melissa for which she responded to a fan during a live stream on Facebook “No, I’m not dead, I’m here”.

In the 2000s, when the Canadian artist launched her career and gained popularity worldwide, she peaked top-selling charts in several countries that are key markets in the music industry such as the US, Japan, UK or her home country, Canada. However, since her fourth studio album *Goodbye Lullaby* (2011) onwards, the continent of Asia has been by far her strongest market. Compared to other international female artists and following Taylor Swift's header, Lavigne has a huge number of followers in Asia, over four million, and she has sold nearly seven million album copies of which five were sold in Japan alone. Her twist in popularity can be attributed to the new slant she took with the release of *Goodbye Lullaby* (2011), which coincided with her first divorce from Deryck Whibley. In this album she strayed a bit from her grungy punk-pop roots towards a more acoustic pop-rock and focused on her life experiences rather than on relationships, which seems to have attracted new audiences.

Over the years, Lavigne has expanded in new directions, emerging with the skater girl style then moving to a rather punk rock glam new style and more recently acquiring a more gothic grunge style, both in her music and image. If you look at her beginnings, it is important to remark that, even though she briefly switched to her characteristic punk-rock/pop-punk style because of its more lucrative possibilities, as a child raised in a Catholic household she used to sing in church and originally started pursuing a career in country-folk music. Then, at the genesis of her music career, in the early 2000s, she adopted a new rebellious pop-punk princess image that clashed with Britney Spears' chic pop-princess look, and became immediately idolized. Elements like the use of thick black eyeliner, the color combination of pink and black, wearing Converse shoes, multicolored hair, etc. became distinctive Lavigne gimmicks.

Later, in the 2010s as she had grown older and more mature, she started publishing more serious and sophisticated works that were less loud grungy-driven. Finally, in her latest studio album *Head Above Water* (2018) Lavigne announced in her Twitter account (January 2018) that the album was "personal, dear, intimate, dramatic, raw, powerful, strong and unexpected. This record is a true emotional journey" (@AvrilLavigne). In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* (February 2019) she declared "I get a little jazzy on the album, I needed to evolve musically and not do the same pop-rock thing over and over again" (in Kaplan). So far, a good way to encapsulate Lavigne's artistic career could be Jonathan Bradley's comments in his article for the *Billboard* media (October 2018): "Avril Lavigne has become ageless and yet, at the same time, she retains the potential to restore that smart-mouthed fake punk waiting to roll up to us, rock our world, and then maybe get way too real".

In addition, the popularity of 21<sup>st</sup> century social media has provided Lavigne with a space to keep pushing her followers towards the pursuit of authenticity, for example, publishing Instagram posts with heavy-handed texts like "Bitch you better listen" - sincerely, your intuition" or "Don't be the same, be better". Dozens of artists well known today such as Billie Eilish, Olivia Rodrigo, Soccer Mommy and Paramore or artists less popular have followed the path Lavigne trod from the moment she released her defiant yet fun-as-hell debut album, *Let Go*. One of the most ascendant indie-rockers of the moment, the 20-year-old Sophia Regina Allison (alias Soccer Mommy), cited in an interview for *Billboard* magazine in 2018 Avril Lavigne as a direct influence for writing her first album *Clean* (2018):

She's a perfect blend of Elliott Smith meets Evanescence, with some '90s dark grunge; that's the kind of stuff I like that I can do. (...) It hasn't been a conscious thing, like, 'I don't want to listen to a bunch of dudes,' but I genuinely like music by women better, (...) There are tons of male musicians I like; that's not the point. But sometimes I'll be sitting in a room with dudes talking about Guns N' Roses or whatever rock gods they're thinking of, and I find that shit boring. The ruled-by-men genres are lame as fuck. (in Havens)

Lavigne was, indeed, among the first to encourage women to express this kind of opinion.

## The Song

At the time of Avril Lavigne's first appearance on stage at the age of fourteen, she told Shania Twain that she desired to become a "famous singer" and shortly afterwards she was smashing to the top of the charts with the release of her first studio album *Let Go*, the best-selling album of 2002 and, as noted, the best-selling album of the 21st century by a Canadian artist. The album, released with Arista Records, became an instant phenomenal success headed by the first two singles "Complicated" and "Sk8er Boi".

While making the album, Lavigne started co-writing songs with songwriter Cliff Magness, following to the aesthetics she felt drawn to. However, the songs they came up with, "Unwanted" and "Losing Grip", which are Lavigne's favorites, were not of Arista's taste for being a too heavy type of rock and not appealing to a teen public. As a result, she was paired up in the studio with the pop music writing and record producer team composed by Lauren Christy, Graham Edwards, and Scott Spock, known as The Matrix. Soon, they came with the singles "Complicated" and "Sk8er Boi" thanks to which Lavigne became a teen icon. The question of the songwriting authorship has been a topic of debate. In her 2003 interview with *Rolling Stone's* magazine, Lavigne asserted that she was the primary author. Nonetheless, The Matrix team gave a different version insisting that her contributions to the writing process were far less substantial than she claimed. Authenticity in her work and persona has always been a theme that Lavigne has always fiercely defended and chased, sometimes to the extent of critiquing other fellow artists for lacking authenticity. In her words "Actually, I know for a fact, there are some young female artists who don't even sing on their own records and who don't sing live. And that is pathetic" (in *Billboard*)

In the behind-the-scenes footage of the video for the song "Sk8er Boi" (2002), Lavigne declares that:

"It is a song that I wrote about my high school experience, I was a skater in high school, and I know what it feels like to have people look down on you and kind of treat you different because of the way you dress and put you into, like, into a certain category"

The message is clearly brought to life in the lyrics in a storytelling style which traces the paths of two high school students: a schoolgirl who "does ballet" and, the song's namesake, a punk boy who wears "baggy clothes". The first three verses are filled up with gender-stereotyped contrasts. On the one hand, the girl who does ballet has a pretty face, and secretly wants the skater boy but lets him go away because of social pressure

for not being “good enough for her”. On the other hand, the boy does go after the girl but is rejected. By the middle of the song, though, there is a twist. The two have grown older and while the woman is alone fulfilling society expectations nursing her baby, the boy that has become a man who is now a superstar “rockin’ up MTV” and “Slammin’ on his guitar”. The line “sorry, girl, but you missed out / Well, tough, luck that boy’s mine now” reveals that the narrator is the boy’s girlfriend who, if circumstances had been different, the girl protagonist of the lyrics could have been instead. Now, the most important part comes when she regrets “the man that she turned down” and a final realization opens up for her: “There is more than meets the eye / I see the soul that is inside”.

Ultimately functioning as a kind of cautionary tale or even as a romantic tragedy, the song teaches that we shouldn’t judge the opposite sex because they have “an alternative style”; we do not live in a girl fantasy but in the real world, where the most desirable man is no Prince Charming but a Sk8er Boi.

### The Video

The music video was directed by Francis Lawrence, a successful American video director that has worked with stars such as P!nk, Britney Spears or Rihanna. The narrative of the video is similar to the song but slightly altered. The music video revolves around an improvised concert held by Lavinne and her band, in the intersection of 7<sup>th</sup> with Spring Street in Los Angeles. It begins by showing several of Lavinne’s friends and band members in the streets promoting the concert in advance via graffities, flyers, emails, and posters. Perfectly fitting the punk genre, the promotion of the concert is carried out in rebellious ways, stamping Lavinne’s symbol of the red star everywhere. Incidentally, the red star symbol does not have a further symbology than just being her logo for the first album; still, star symbols have always been credited with providing guidance and protection. In the last scenes of the video, Lavinne and her bandmates reach the location and start a live performance on the roof of their cars as a crowd quickly gathers. Towards the end of the song, police cars and a helicopter arrive to disperse the by then quite big crowd; meanwhile, Lavinne uses her guitar to break the car windshield and then throws the guitar onto the road and is left looking up at the helicopter defiantly. In addition, this rebellious mood is reinforced by the fast cuts, and quick movements that the camera offers changing from one setting to another.

Because they were the opposite of the aesthetics that most young artists were displaying at that time, the clothes that the artist and her companions wear were said to “take androgyny to the eyes of the masses” (Zulch) in an article on the trends in the 2000s that Lavinne made popular. Wearing an urban-punk fashion outfit with baggy jeans, spiked complements, tie-dye t-shirts, Converse shoes and sleeveless shirts combined with neckties seems to be attributed, in part, to Lavinne’s slightly masculine and punk aesthetics. Apparently the green and gold t-shirt that Lavinne wears flooded the artist with hundreds of requests from teens who wanted to buy the same look; she had bought it in a thrift shop in New York City. Furthermore, Francis Lawrence, stated during the making of the video that Lavinne “is the exact MTV audience by now”, meaning that she was perfect for the audience of the channel which, together with

mainstream radio, played a huge role in the success of the young artist (her songs were frequently played) even before going on her first tour. As it can be perfectly felt and seen in the video, Lavigne offered authenticity, rebellion, and a sense of breaking free from societal impositions or gender stereotypes that was less likely to appear in other contemporary, early 21<sup>st</sup> century pop videos.

### The Song and the Video

An enduring question surrounding “Sk8er Boi” is who the real wrongdoer in the narration is: the girl who does ballet, her friends, or the skater boy? It seems that each character takes a share of the guilt. On the one hand, the ballerina for rejecting the boy under social pressure and, at the same time, the friends for sticking their noses in the girl’s romantic life and then, hypocritically, getting tickets for his show. On the other hand, the boy seems to have in mind and recall the ballerina too often because his new girlfriend knows all about her. In addition to this, neither the lyrics nor the music video make a hundred per cent evident what is the actual position of Lavigne among the persons mentioned in the lyrics. However, since she takes the role of a famous musician in the music video, it can be deduced that Lavigne is the narrator of the song who is the girlfriend of the famous guitarist. Still and all, the video swaps the genders of the guitarist and the girlfriend exhibiting Lavigne as the one “slammin’ on [her] guitar” while the boyfriend is standing in the crowd.

To conclude, reviewer Nick Reynolds of *BBC Music* called the single “brilliant”, “a classic high energy pop song with crunchy guitars and a great hook”; he wrote about the storyline that it is “as slick and clever as an episode of *Buffy*. It bowls you over with its energy and sticks in your mind”. The song alone would have probably achieved a huge success anyway. Yet, it must be admitted that the music video adds further content and power to the lyrics, given that it helps to visualize the skater boy aesthetics mentioned in them and, most importantly, it shows that skater cool can be extended to girls “rockin’ up MTV”. Over the years, many critics have questioned the authenticity of the artist’s aesthetics and music on the grounds that Lavigne is just another music label’s marketable product. Others have justified the change of her looks and music genre (from conservative country to skater-punk looks) as a product of growing up and gaining experience. Whether her change was real, or it was a mere commercial creation it does not really matter. What is true is that Lavigne’s singles have turned her into one of the main, not to say *the* main, female pioneers to inspire new generations of woman artists to pursue the rockier side of pop mainstream music. She has proven that it is possible to turn an audience on without having to model your image to make it more appealing to male-dominated punk-pop space (which is often misogynistic); essentially, it is perfectly valid to be true to yourself acting and feeling however you like without feeling sorry or apologizing for being a girl.

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## Jennifer Lopez, 'Jenny from the Block': Exploiting Privacy in the First Bennifer Era

Merna Assad

Released: 26 September 2002

Album: *This is Me... Then*

Label: Epic Records

Genre: R&B, old school Hip Hop

Length: 4:04

Songwriters: Jennifer Lopez, Troy Oliver, Mr. Deyo, Samuel Barnes, Jean-Claude Olivier and Cory Rooney

Producers: Cory Rooney, Troy Oliver and Poke & Tome of Trackmasters

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Jennifer-lopez-jenny-from-the-block-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dly6p4Fu5TE&ab\\_channel=JenniferLopezVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dly6p4Fu5TE&ab_channel=JenniferLopezVEVO)

Director: Francis Lawrence



### The Singer

Jennifer Lynn Lopez, also known as J.Lo, was born in the Bronx, New York, on 24 July 1969. The singer is of Puerto Rican descent. J.Lo has not shied away from dabbling in a variety of artistic occupations, being known for dancing, singing and acting. In 1990, she began her career as a backup dancer for the popular TV series *In Living Color*; she was also a backup dancer for New Kids on the Block and Janet Jackson throughout the 1990s. Lopez starred in a couple of minor movies before landing her big break in 1997 with the role of the late Mexican singer Selena Quintanilla in the biopic *Selena*. This movie not only brought on more roles, but also started her music career. Her role in *Selena* also made her, at the time, the highest-paid Hispanic female actor in history.

In 1999, J.Lo released her first single "If You Had My Love", which topped the Billboard Hot 100 for five weeks and went platinum. Her success as an actor and a singer led her to become the first woman to have a no.1 album (*J.L.O* her second studio release) and no.1 movie (*The Wedding Planner*) in the same week; this movie also gave her the title of highest-paid female actor in Hollywood. She has since kept growing in the film and television industry by producing successful shows such as *The Fosters* and its spin-off show *Good Trouble*, as well as the police drama *Shades of Blue* and the dance competition show *World of Dance*. In 2010, Lopez became a judge on the popular singing talent show *American Idol*, remaining in it for four more seasons. Her most recent project, the movie *Hustlers*, which she also starred in, was very successful and earned her a Golden Globe Award nomination in 2020 for best-supporting actor. Lopez told *GQ Magazine* "I do things because I love them. I didn't get paid a whole bunch of money for *Hustlers*, I did it for free and produced it. I bank on myself. That's the Jenny From the

Block. I do what I want, I do what I love” (in Greco online). J.Lo has also cemented her place within the music industry, which explains why, in 2014, she became the first woman to receive the Icon Award at the Billboard Music Awards (see Riedlinger). Lopez is also known for being one of the first icons representing her community in pop culture and as an inspiration to the Latinx community. Kristal Sotomayor, a documentary filmmaker, said this about her impact of her representation: “She changed my perception of Latinidad because she was able to be a triple threat, not just an actor portraying a stereotype” (in Gonzalez).

Although Jennifer Lopez has been overall a successful actor, she has opened up about her current and past struggles with her rise to fame. J.Lo opened up in 2013 in a *W* interview about a time when she was homeless as she had decided to leave home to pursue her dance career against her mother’s wishes, who had advised her to further her education: “I was homeless, but I told her, ‘This is what I have to do’” (see Cover Media). In the same Interview, J.Lo declared that she believed that these years of struggling shaped her into the person she is today: “when you are struggling, you’re trying to make it, you learn resilience, you learn discipline, you learn to not give up, to have faith”. She also admitted that with the fame and success came “pressure, more scrutiny” and “more expectation” (in Vincent). Although she was a successful dancer, singer and actor, she dealt with plenty of criticism and hate coming from the public critics. They diminished her talent by insinuating she had gotten these opportunities due to her looks. In a *Hollywood Reporter* article, Merle Ginsberg noted that “Jennifer Lopez is widely cited as kicking off the bigger-butts trend. At the 2012 Oscars, she with co-presenter Cameron Diaz boosted booty buzz by showing their rear views to the audience”. J.Lo has also opened up about the hardship she has faced due to her failed marriages and romantic relationships: “For me, the relationship journey has been very up and down, but it didn’t have to do with anybody else but me — it was about me figuring out me” (in Hines).

## The Song

J.Lo’s song “Jenny from the Block” was released within her third studio album *This is Me ... Then* on 26 September 2002. The genre of the song is R&B and old school hip-hop. The album was created at the time when Lopez Jennifer was engaged to fellow actor Ben Affleck and she claimed that many of the songs were dedicated to him.

In the intro lyrics, J.Lo samples the song “Heaven and Hell is on Earth” by the 20th Century Steel Band, borrowing the lines “Children grow and women producing / Men go working, some go stealing / Everyone’s got to make a living / BX, uh (Southside Bronx)”. These lyrics describe where she grew up, a tough neighborhood as the lyrics mention, where individuals sometimes had to steal to provide for themselves and their families. In the chorus Lopez sings “Don’t be fooled by the rocks that I got / I’m still, I’m still Jenny from the block / Used to have a little, now I have a lot / No matter where I go I know where I came from”. In these lines, J.Lo acknowledges that although she might now be wealthy, she still recalls where she came from and the struggles she faced growing up with little. In the lyrics “From *In Living Color* to movie scripts / To On the 6 to J.Lo to this / Headline clips”, Lopez describes the evolution of her career from a backup dancer

on a TV show to now being the topic of the media as a celebrity. With the lyrics “I’ve grown up so much / I’m in control and loving it / Rumors got me laughing kid”, Lopez suggests she does not care about what the paparazzi or the tabloid media may say about her because she’s in control of her life and narrative; she knows where she came from and where she’s going. She ends the song by singing about how she had to grow up fast due to the fame, but she remains humble and real.

### The Video

Throughout the music video by Francis Lawrence, we see the contrast between Lopez’s old and new life. In some scenes, New York is used as a background representing her past life and hometown, which she refers to as “the Block” in the song, a word rappers use meaning their own neighborhood. In other scenes, Lopez is pictured at photoshoots and relaxing on a yacht which represents her new opulent life. The video shows us both sides of her: Jenny from the Bronx as well as the rich and famous J.Lo.

A recurring concept in the video is the loss of privacy that comes with fame and success. We see this idea at the beginning of the video when we see J.Lo in her apartment in images filmed by hidden cameras. We see this surveillance again when the paparazzi take pictures of her inside her own home while she is getting undressed in front of the window. A video, apparently made by someone peering into her building, shows her rehearsing. Lastly, we see the paparazzi taking pictures of her while she is buying a watch, which we see later see Ben Affleck wearing in the video. All these scenes imply that Lopez is being watched at all times, wherever she goes. Lopez also brings to our attention the deceptions the media commits. The music video demonstrates how a picture taken by the paparazzi for the tabloids can be made into a story with no roots in reality. For example, in one scene, J.Lo and Affleck appear to be arguing. A few seconds later, we realize that she just had something in her eye which was the cause of her exaggerated facial expression. In another scene, it looks as if Affleck, on his knees, is proposing to Jennifer. A few seconds later, we see him picking up an earring she had dropped and handing it back to her.

The music video also includes other subtle messages. In the middle of the video, the song switches from “Jenny From the Block” to another song from the same album, “Loving You”. J.Lo is seen in a studio singing the lyrics: “never give up on the good days”. After that scene, she sings “Boricuas in the House” (the word Boricua refers to a person of Puerto Rican descent). This break from the song is interesting as it’s her way of adding more messages within the video such as the lyrics from “Loving You” which may be referring to her relationship with Affleck and to her Puerto Rican roots.

Lastly, a big part of the music video involves private moments of Jennifer, as Lopez and Affleck were nicknamed. One of these moments is the infamous yacht scene where Affleck touches Lopez’s behind. This scene in particular is interesting because although the obvious message of the video is the loss of privacy that comes with fame, we still see Affleck untying the string of J.Lo’s bikini top, and touching and kissing her bottom. We see them, in short, making a public display of affection despite them knowing they are being watched, and in a video supposedly complaining against their loss of privacy.

## The Song and the Video

“Jenny from the Block”, song and video, cannot be understood, then, without Lopez’s relationship with her boyfriend Ben Affleck in the early 2000s. Recently, Affleck and Lopez have rekindled their romance, which has made many fans feel nostalgic and celebrate again the “Jenny from the Block” video that features him. In an article published in *Slate*, Heather Schewedel observes that “The most important cultural document of the “Bennifer” epoch remains the music video for “Jenny From the Block” (...),” with Affleck’s intimate “gestures that are forever burned into the brains of an entire swath of millennials”. As she adds,

“the other rub of the video was that, for a song that was about how J. Lo had stayed true to her roots during her rise to superstardom, it seemed to backfire, as some viewers interpreted the video as pouting from a couple whose fairly unsympathetic complaint was that they couldn’t lead their lavish lives without being hounded by the press”.

In my opinion, the video undermines the original message Lopez is trying to convey in her lyrics. Most scenes show Lopez living a lavish life with her handsome fiancé, then a major sex symbol in Hollywood. This shows how Jennifer cannot truly claim she is still “Jenny from the block” because the opportunities and success she’s had have changed her. In the same *Slate* article, Schewedel refers to a piece published in *Me!* magazine about the music video:

Tim Grierson theorized that the video also may have felt emasculating for Affleck, who essentially served as its “video hoe”, in a role reversal of the usual regrettable music video gender dynamic. There was wide speculation it harmed Affleck’s career, and he later said he regretted it. The video was intended to be a commentary on the couple’s overexposure, but it seemed to only result in even more of it. Affleck later attributed some of the fascination and derision surrounding the two to ugly strains of racism and classism: People didn’t expect a white guy like him to be with a Latina woman from the Bronx.

In a *Rolling Stone* article, Ej Dickson mentions that the couple were actually unpopular with the press during their first relationship, and did get harsh criticism due to their over the top public displays of affection. For example, Affleck took out half page of ads in *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter* to praise Lopez. Dickson also notes “their cringey PDA in the music video”, observing “They seemed an altogether unlikely pair—he the ruggedly handsome yet laid-back Bostonian, she the glitzy Latina pop superstar”. As noted, Affleck has recently protested that the tabloids were racist, sexist and mean when talking about Lopez. Yet, the couple perhaps deserved some of all the negative coverage because of stunts such as announcing their engagement on an ABC primetime special with Diane Sawyer. Famously, Bennifer broke off their engagement a few days before their wedding with the following statement: “Due to the *excessive media attention* surrounding our wedding, we have decided to postpone the date. When we found ourselves seriously contemplating hiring three separate ‘decoy brides’ at three different locations, we realized that something was awry” (in Kerns, italics added).

In short, the music video did not help Jennifer Lopez to show that she was the same girl from the block, but instead shows the difficulties she faced once she entered

the Hollywood scene. Nonetheless, people still refer to this music video and song to this day, and the nickname “Jenny from the Block” is cemented in the culture as a way to name a girl trying to stay true to her roots. The concept and meaning of this music video and song have been much criticized but they are now, ironically, a nostalgic memory of the early 2000s and of Lopez’s much publicized relationship with Ben Affleck. This time around, the couple seem to be getting better media feedback, despite being once again much talked about in the tabloids. Perhaps, being both more mature, they will now handle the pressure better.

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## Shania Twain, 'I'm Gonna Getcha Good!': A Definite Female Confidence

Laia Droch Canals

Released: 7 October 2002

Album: *Up!*

Label: Mercury Records

Genre: pop-rock, country

Length: 4:02

Songwriters: Robert John 'Mutt' Lange and Shania Twain

Producer: Robert John 'Mutt' Lange

Lyrics: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-whMGArOWOM>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3Pb3EJY5Qg>

Director: Paul Boyd



### The Singer

Shania Twain was born in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, on 28 August 1965. Twain's original name is Eileen Regina Edwards, though she took the surname of her stepfather, Jerry Twain, at a young age. Her amazing singing voice was first discovered after the family relocated to Timmins, also in Ontario; by the age of eight, she was performing in bars to supplement her parents' irregular income. Unfortunately, the couple were killed in a traffic accident, when Twain was twenty-two years old, and she had to raise her sister and two brothers. Nonetheless, Twain continued to sing in clubs, and in 1991 she attracted the attention of producer Norro Wilson, who took her to Nashville, Tennessee, to record her first album.

With her mix of country melodies and pop vocals, Twain became one of the most popular crossover artists of the mid-1990s. Her debut album, *Shania Twain*, sold barely 100,000 copies, but her skill drew the attention of another producer, Robert John ('Mutt') Lange, who had a successful career producing records for Bryan Adams and Michael Bolton. Twain and Lange, who soon began creating songs together, fell in love and married in 1993. Twain's second album, *The Woman in Me*, was released two years later. It was a critical and commercial success, selling over eighteen million copies and winning a Grammy for country album of the year. Twain achieved chart-topping success on both the country and mainstream charts with her third album, *Come on Over* (1997). By 1999, Twain had sold more than ten million copies of this album, making her the best-selling female country performer and the first female recording artist in any genre to have two albums sell more than ten million copies in the same year. In 2002 she released the highly anticipated *Up!*, a double album containing both country and pop versions of the songs. In 2004, she released her *Greatest Hits* album, which included a duet with country singer Billy Currington. By that time she had already contracted Lyme disease, a bacterial

infection that caused her to lose her voice. Surgery put her back on track and she made a successful comeback in 2012.

Despite her success—she is the only female singer to have three diamond records in the United States, certified by the RIAA, being also the second Canadian singer with more records sold—Twain has been a divisive figure within country music among purists, who initially did not take kindly to her genre-blending. According to biographer Stephen Thomas Erlewine, most critics accused her of “diluting country with bland, anthemic hard rock techniques and shamelessly selling her records with sexy videos”. During the 1990s, Twain often received backlash for her unconventionally liberated appearance as a country music singer. Some critics objected that except for her sex appeal and her videos, focused on her physical appearance rather than her music, Twain had little to offer. Fans were unconcerned about such complaints, owing to the fact that her following included many who had gotten accustomed to such marketing methods as a result of their regular exposure to MTV. Twain was, indeed, the first country musician to properly utilize MTV’s approach in many ways.

Despite being widely criticized (and in spite of her Canadian nationality), Twain’s success in the music industry has earned her the honorific nickname of the “Queen of Country Pop”. Taylor Swift, whose career started in this genre, has cited Twain as one of her most prominent musical influences. “That’s very sweet, and I’m very honored”, Twain responded on air to Swift, “Those kinds of compliments give so much more meaning and reward to what I do as an artist. It means a lot. It means a lot to me” (in Crone). No doubt, the careers of Taylor Swift and of the current new queen of country pop Kacey Musgraves would not have progressed without Twain’s breaking down genre barriers and giving country music a distinctly sensual twist.

### The Song

“I’m Gonna Getcha Good!” was the first single from Twain’s fourth studio album, *Up!* (2002); it was co-written by Twain and her then-husband, Robert John ‘Mutt’ Lange. The song was originally released to country radio in the United States on 7 October 2002. Twain chose “I’m Gonna Getcha Good!” as the first single for *Up!* since she thought it was relatable to her previous singles, and she did not want to release music too unfamiliar. At the same time with this song Twain mixed the two styles of pop-rock and country music, inviting listeners to hear a fresh and new sound. The song became one of her biggest hits worldwide and an inspiration. Among others, the Jonas Brothers covered the song in their film *Jonas Brothers: The 3D Concert Experience*.

Twain characterizes the song as expressing the usual ‘Shania attitude’, a definite female confidence. She stated that, in her experience, confident men outnumber confident women, and she felt it would be interesting to write about the same confidence from a female perspective. The lyrics are, thus, all about a woman who knows what she wants. Shania Twain’s name, then, has become associated with confidence. However, Twain stated in an interview that this was not always the case. Her record label told her in the early stages of her career, Twain reports, that “I would be hated by the men because I was too opinionated and too forceful and demanding, and I would be hated by the women because I was being sensually expressive” (in Maloney). “I didn’t let fear get

in the way. And I didn't let anyone create doubt" (in Maloney), she added. Shania Twain has since then become a symbol of women's empowerment in the country music business and beyond. Twain demonstrates to us all that there is more than one notion of what it is to be a woman with outspoken songs like "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!", "Any Man of Mine", and "That Don't Impress Me Much".

The repetitive lyrics of "I'm Gonna Getcha Good!" are quite simple. However, I would like to comment on a few lines: "Don't wantcha for the weekend, don't wantcha for a night / I'm only interested if I can have you for life". Here we see that the singer is a confident woman, who knows what she is worth, and does not settle for just being with her lover for a weekend or a night. She deserves someone who wants to be with her forever. In the two following stanzas she sings: "You're gonna be mine / You're gonna fall in love with me". Here again, we see how the singer knows she will end up getting what she wants. I think it's important for Twain to sing a song like this: showing herself as a confident woman and being able to get everything she wants, freely expressing her desire for a man, for one night or for life.

### The Video

Paul Boyd directed the music video for "I'm Gonna Getcha Good!", designed by visual artist Ash Beck, in London. The video is available in six different versions. The original version for both the 'Red' and 'Green' radio mixes was the first to be published. These were eventually replaced with a 'SFX Edit' version for both the Red and Green versions, which included extra sound effects for the motorbike and the robot. The 'Blue' mix was only released in India, and an alternate 'Red' version was published, which simply featured Twain and her band playing behind a glass wall to the lengthier album version, rather than the original video, which was reduced to fit the radio edit.

The music video is certainly very different from the previous ones, as Twain chose to enter the territory of science fiction; in contrast, other music videos of hers featured animals or nature, for example, "Any Man of Mine", "Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under" or "Forever and for Always". This was a bold proposal, which pleased her fans. The video is set in a dystopian futuristic setting, with Twain singing with her band and next riding a motorcycle out of a secret location, racing around the city, trying to escape from a gigantic flying android. At the end of the video, Shania finds a clone of herself behind a broken glass wall; with that what she wanted to represent that she was the same artist as in previous albums but with a bolder proposal. As she declared, "I want people to relate it to the Shania they already know and, at the same time, hear a fresh and new sound" (in Candiani, my translation). Because Shania Twain plays two different roles in this video, fashion designer Marc Bouwer, produced two completely different looks, both rock'n'roll. One is a sexy lace catsuit that she accessorizes with dark makeup and big, flowing rock-chick hair. The other is a motorcycle costume made of imitation leather. The clothes she wore in the music video were very successful, even Bouwer enthused that "she looked amazing, better than ever" (in Lee). Twain eventually donated the catsuit to the Shania Twain Center in her hometown of Timmins, Ontario.

I think it is worth noting the role of Twain when dressed in leather clothes. Twain is riding a motorcycle, and it seems she knows exactly where she wants to go or what

she wants to achieve. As noted in the previous section, Shania Twain's name has become associated with confidence, and in this scene, the protagonist of the video is shown as a self-confident person. The Canadian singer aims to get the guy she likes, but despite having such a clear goal, she has a hard time getting him as there is a giant male robot that prevents her from achieving what she wants. The giant robot chasing her is a metaphor, as it represents the obstacles that a self-confident woman faces when wanting to get a man. This video was released eleven years ago, so in it we can see what the mentality of men was like a decade ago: it was men's job to find a girl and not the other way around as Twain is doing in the video. In the same way that the singer had difficulty succeeding in the world of country music, but finally succeeded, in the video we can observe a similar situation. It is not easy for Shania to get what she wants, but she does not give up.

### The Song and the Video

We could say that the video is not necessary in order to better understand the lyrics of the song, but it is important to watch it to see Twain's evolution. It is also important to say that if it weren't for the new idea behind the visuals for the music video, the song probably would not have been so successful. Because of Twain's futuristic music video, which follows the early-2000s futuristic traditions of Jessica Simpson ("Irresistible") and Janet Jackson ("What's It Gonna Be?!"), many people were more inclined to applaud the changes Shania Twain had undertaken for the film. As noted, the video is an original and creative proposal, as Twain wanted was to surprise her audience with something new. However, what surprises the viewer most is that the video does not match the lyrics. It is even contradictory.

If we only listen to the lyrics, we imagine Twain expressing a woman's desire for a man, perhaps in a night-club situation or similar. However, if we watch the video, we see a threatening male robot trying to catch Shania Twain's leather-clad persona. That is, Twain shares much of her protagonism with the dangerous flying machine, coded male. The other Shania Twain we see in the video watches the chase of her clone while she sings, in a way describing what is happening to the Twain dressed in leather clothes, with "I'm Gonna Get You Good" seemingly applying to the robot's clearly negative intentions rather than to a woman expressing her desire. In short, the video is no doubt attractive but it totally alters the song's message in favor of women's empowerment.

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## Britney Spears, 'Toxic': An Epoch-Defining Concept

Sara Martín

Released: 12 January 2004

Album: *In the Zone*

Label: Jive

Genre: Dance-pop, techno pop

Length: 3:19

Songwriters: Cathy Dennis, Christian Karlsson, Pontus Winnberg, and Henrik Jonback

Producers: Bloodshy & Avant

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Britney-spears-toxic-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOZuxwVk7TU>

Director: Joseph Kahn



### The Singer

If Madonna is the Queen of Pop, there is no doubt that Britney Spears is the Crown Princess. Born Britney Jean Spears (on 2 December 1981) in McComb, Mississippi, to James 'Jamie' Parnell Spears and Lynne Irene Bridges, Britney was raised as a Southern Baptist (she's now Catholic). Trained from early childhood in singing and dancing, always spurred on by her ambitious mother, Spears' professional career took a turning point in 1992 when she was cast in *The Mickey Mouse Club* together with Christina Aguilera and Justin Timberlake. Spears returned home for a few years to complete her education and continue training for a musical career, until she was signed up in 1997 by record label Jive (part of A&R). In 1999 Spears launched her amazingly successful debut album ... *Baby One More Time*, which turned her overnight into a teen sensation. Her second studio album *Oops!... I Did It Again* (2000) followed, with an even greater success in sales and popularity. In this period Spears started dating former fellow child star Justin Timberlake by then embarked in his own career with boy band NSYNC.

Britney's stardom was fully consolidated with the following album (*Britney*, 2001) and the tours, but her public image went through a first complicated juncture when, after breaking up with Timberlake, she appeared in the 2003 MTV Music Awards with Madonna and Christina Aguilera; their notorious performance ended with Madonna kissing both young women on the lips. Spears' image had been based at the onset of her career on her public presentation as a virgin, America's pure girlfriend. Her relationship with Timberlake put an end to that virginal period, though

Implicitly, she argued that her virginity loss was acceptable, even though she had broken her promise to wait until marriage, because she believed that she was in love with Timberlake, that he was the "right person" she had gestured to a few years earlier, that he was "the one". In essence, she sought to assert her right to the title of consummate virgin, despite the fact her relationship with Timberlake had

failed, in order to maintain her claim that she had embodied virginity in the “right” way. (McAlister 3)

Although by 2003 the relationship was over, MTV showed Timberlake’s shocked expression watching Madonna kiss Spears, an image that seemed to reflect all of America’s shocked stance (and that obscured Madonna’s also kissing Christina Aguilera). Whatever Madonna intended by those kisses—apparently she wanted to kiss Jennifer Lopez, who rejected her proposal (see Kapusta)—if she intended to crown Spears and Aguilera as her Princesses, the gesture backfired.

Spears fourth studio album, *In the Zone* (2003), appeared at the start of a period of personal turbulences, extending to *Blackout* (2007) and beyond. Britney married a childhood friend in Las Vegas, only to have the union annulled less than three days later. In 2004 she married Kevin Federline after a whirlwind romance, and even though his ex-girlfriend was pregnant by him. Spears had two children with Federline; in 2006, her photos driving with the elder boy on her lap caused a first major scandal, raised by the paparazzi always following her. The couple divorced in 2007, after which Spears entered a downward spiral, including the breakdown which led her to abandon rehab prematurely and to shave her hair off at a salon in view of the preying paparazzi. She lost subsequently the custody of her children and soon had to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital. In an insightful article for *Rolling Stone* of 2008, Vanessa Grigoriadis wrote that

If there is one thing that has become clear in the past year of Britney’s collapse—the most public downfall of any star in history—it’s that she doesn’t want anything to do with the person the world thought she was. She is not a good girl. She is not America’s sweetheart. (...) She’s the perfect celebrity for America in decline: Like President Bush, she just doesn’t give a fuck, but at least we won’t have to clean up after her mess for the rest of our lives.

Actually, in a way her fans and many other admirers did ‘clean up after her mess’, when Britney Spears was eventually involved in the long, painful process of freeing herself from the conservatorship that her father Jamie had obtained in 2008, alleging she was not mentally stable enough to run her own life. Spears was then clearly in need of psychiatric treatment, but her father kept his greedy patriarchal hold on her fortune, career, and even reproductive choices until 2021, when her demand to be freed was backed by immense popular support in the social media through the #FreeBritney campaign. Spears revealed that hardly any of her career choices in those thirteen years of legal enslavement had been hers, though she continued to make albums (*Circus*, 2008; *Femme Fatale*, 2011; *Britney Jean*, 2013; *Glory*, 2016) and touring, taking even a residence in Las Vegas (2017). As Jo Ellison wrote,

As a modern allegory for the perils of female celebrity, Britney is this generation’s poster child. Like Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor, Spears’ very public journey from sweet naïf to bedevilled pop star spans a whole era in modern show business in which her experiences have been repackaged as a cautionary tale. Emerging in the strange twilight before the smartphone or social media, but when stories were already going viral online, Spears was one of the casualties of the paparazzi frenzy for star content at a time when the media could run unchecked.

It does not seem, however, that either paparazzi or the social media gawkers and haters are checked for good. Spears has in fact hinted that her career might be now over, which is possibly the only way she can be really free and, finally, her own woman.

### The Song

“Toxic” is a single from Spears’ album *In the Zone* (2003) written and produced by producers Bloodshy & Avant in collaboration with Cathy Dennis and Henrik Jonback. Spears accepted the song, originally written for Janet Jackson, after it was rejected by Kylie Minogue. The dance-pop and techno-song pop hit contains elements of bhangra music, being famous for the catchy Bollywood strings of the hook, borrowed from Lata Mangeshkar and S.P. Balasubrahmanyam’s “Tere Mere Beech Mein” (1981). When ‘toxic’ was chosen word of the year 2018 by the *Oxford Dictionary*, the Twitter account @OxLanguages confirmed that “Interestingly, our research into ‘toxic’ found that pop icon @britneyspears played a part in spreading this metaphorical use of the word; the lyrics of her 2003 song “Toxic” draw an extended metaphor of a lover as a dangerous yet addictive drug” (15 November 2018).

Whereas “toxic masculinity” refers to the patriarchal set of behaviors that some men use to dominate women and preserve their privilege, what is “toxic” about masculinity in the song is the man’s sexual allure, which the singer describes as addictive. As she sings in the chorus, “You’re toxic, I’m slippin’ under / With a taste of a poison paradise / I’m addicted to you / Don’t you know that you’re toxic? / And I love what you do”. The man remains unaware of his charms (a line in verse one reads “A guy like you should wear a warning”), as the singer protests “there’s no escape” and “I need a hit, baby, give me it”. The addiction is too strong to manage, though not regretted or resisted for though the man is “dangerous” the singer declares “I’m lovin’ it”, meaning her subjection to her own desire for him. In the outro she begs “Intoxicate me now with your lovin’ now / I think I’m ready now”. Toxicity, then, is used in the traditional romantic sense of presenting desire as a drug (or poison) that causes unconquerable addiction. Perhaps the only novelty is that the song deals with a *homme fatale* rather than a *femme fatale*. Among so many breakup songs, “Toxic” stands out for its acknowledgement of female desire, though hinting at the same time at the later use of ‘toxic’ as negatively poisonous rather than positively addictive.

### The Video

The expensive futuristic music video directed by Joseph Kahn presents Spears as a sort of female action hero taking revenge against men that she easily seduces, and even lethally poisoning her faithless boyfriend. According to Kahn, Spears contributed many ideas, such as the brisk sex scene in the bathroom of the airplane where she is a flight attendant, or the motorcycle ride with model Tyson Beckford in the streets of Paris. “That’s part of her brilliance”, Kahn explained in 2004, “She has this weird awareness of her appeal. She totally understands that she’s naughty and nice, that she’s the girl next door gone bad who is constantly titillating you. She’s not like most artists who flaunt their pure sexuality. She toys with you and leaves you conflicted” (in Kaufman).

The film borrows its imagery from the action films by John Woo, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, and even Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (Spears' blue flight attendant outfit is a nod to Jean Paul Gaultier's designs for this film). The video is famous for the clips showing Spears naked, wearing nothing but diamonds, an image that Kahn claims was selected by the singer herself. Actor Marin Henderson plays the lover onto whose open mouth Spears pours the green poison that kills him (stolen from Toxic Industries in a dynamic action scene), thus reversing the lyrics in which the man, not the woman, is toxic. Unless, that is, it is assumed that she murders him precisely to get rid of his toxicity, additionally demonstrated by his infidelity. There was some concern, Kahn explains, that the video would be censored because of its featuring a murder, but the director asked Henderson to smile, suggesting his character knows he is dying but is pleased to be killed by a woman as formidable as Spears, and this seems to have worked (Kaufman).

### The Song and the Video

With singers like Spears, with a career extending to more than two decades it is quite difficult to choose with certainty a song and video that really represents them. For many, the iconic red latex catsuit by Michael Bush that Spears wears in the video for "Oops!... I Did it Again" is the quintessential image of the star; for others, the sophisticated woman in a futuristic black outfit of "Stronger" (also directed by Kahn) is closer to her essence. In any case, there is no doubt that "Toxic" remains one of Spears' greatest hits. Showing her awareness of this fact and her sense of humor, Spears posted in May 2021 a video on Instagram in which, wearing a white bathrobe, she plays for boyfriend Sam Ashgari the hook's four violin notes making squeaky sounds with her nose against the glass door of their bathroom.

As noted, Spears did not participate in the composition of "Toxic", which lacks any biographical reference to her personal life (the relationship with Federline had not started yet at the time the song was recorded). In contrast, as the director confirms, Spears did have a great measure of control over the video, which basically reflects her fantasies about how she wanted to self-represent. The mixture of the sexy ingénue and the action hero reflects, as Kahn notes, her full awareness of where her attractive lies, and seems to mirror her independence in the last period of her life in which she was single, not yet a mother, and not controlled by her father. That Spears wanted to film herself both naked and murdering a man is perhaps proof of how conflicted the images she had of herself were then, but she looks at all points in the video sexy, self-confident, and in control. Hopefully, now that her father's appalling patriarchal conservatorship is over, Spears might have a chance to be that ideal woman again and leave all the "toxic" men in her life behind.

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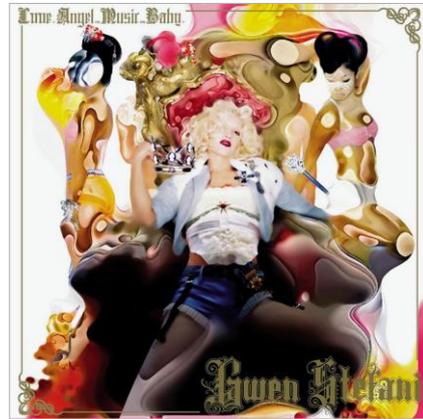
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## Gwen Stefani, 'What You Waiting For?': Bringing on a New Chapter

Monica Natalia

Released: 4 October 2004  
Album: *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.*  
Label: Interscope  
Genre: Electro-pop, dance-rock  
Length: 3:41  
Songwriters: Gwen Stefani and Linda Perry  
Producer: Nellee Hooper  
Lyrics: <http://www.songlyrics.com/gwen-stefani/what-you-waiting-for-lyrics/>  
Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWA4uJOXF-g>  
Director: Francis Lawrence



### The Singer

Gwen Renée Stefani was born on 3 October 1969 in Fullerton, California. Today, she is a singer, songwriter, record producer, fashion designer and actor. She has been active in the music industry since the early 1990s, and was well-known for fronting the ska-pop-rock band No Doubt (1986–2004). Her beginnings in the band proved to be successful with big hits such as “Just a Girl” and “Don’t Speak”. In the early 2000s Stefani veered towards creating music as a solo artist, collaborating with artists such as Dr. Dre and Eve, which also put her on the spotlight gaining national and international fame. She has won three Grammy awards and sold more than thirty millions albums worldwide. Stefani has also served as a coach in the singing competition *The Voice* where she met her current husband, country singer Blake Shelton. Most recently, she held a concert residency in Las Vegas (2018-2021) titled *Just a Girl*, in which she donated \$185K of her \$19.2M grossing to the non-profit charity Cure 4 The Kids Foundation.

The early days with No Doubt were particularly inspiring for Gwen, as she joined the band thanks to her elder brother, Eric. Raised in a Catholic household in Orange County, the Stefani parents exposed their children to folk music from an early age. Sooner than later, Eric and Stefani teamed up with peers and formed No Doubt. They signed with Interscope records in 1991. One of those peers was the bassist Tony Kanal, whom Gwen Stefani would date for about eight years. Following Kanal and Stefani’s breakup was a short hiatus, but the band reunited and Stefani took songwriting to a confessional and therefore, liberating level. It was during this period that Stefani began to write about her personal issues and when the smash hit “Don’t Speak” hit the music charts. In fact, Stefani is often praised for expressing her vulnerabilities bluntly, attaining the reputation of a “rock goddess with major issues” (in Eliscu) or “the queen of confessional pop” (in Dunn).

Notably, Stefani has appeared on prestigious magazine covers over the past thirty years, in either her girliest of girly girl outfits or displaying her defiant and tomboyish rock

chick attitude. Shirley Manson, the lead singer of Garbage and a loyal companion to Stefani asserts:

There will never be anyone else quite like her. She's got an extraordinary mixture of the elements that make a great pop star and the elements that make a great rock star. She's like the perfect Trojan horse: she seems very benign and wholesome, but underneath lurks an incredible toughness and powerful directness. Nobody can copy her, because she's this uniquely extraordinary contradiction. (in Eliscu)

Clearly, Stefani's blending aesthetics and charisma make the headlines. Van Meter notes that "as rough-and-tumble as she gets onstage, Stefani leaves that attitude behind when the concert's over. (...) She's a rare rock star who has it both ways". Actually, Stefani's interest in fashion sparked at an early age, when her mother gifted her a sewing machine. Since then, Stefani has thrifted clothes and altered them to her liking, to the point of wearing her own clothes on stage and eventually launching her own fashion lines; Harajuku Lovers, L.A.M.B. and GX by Gwen Stefani.

### The Song

"What You Waiting For?" is the lead single in Stefani's first solo album *L.A.M.B. (Love. Angel. Music. Baby.)* released in 2004 and inspired by pop dance music from the 1980s. Rosen has praised the album for being a "delightful mess":

*Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* bombards listeners with party chants, vocoder-smudged vocals, superstar cameos, cheesy hip-hop samples—an exhaustive, exhausting grab bag of pop tricks, topped off by the manic presence of Stefani herself, who has always been a kind of one-woman musical shock-and-awe campaign.

Written by Stefani and Linda Perry (known as the lead singer of 4 Non Blondes), the song was well received by critics and commercially successful, remaining on the Billboard Hot 100 chart for a total of twenty weeks. Notable positive, international reception endured in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Besides, the song has been remixed and covered by a number of artists such as Marina and the Diamonds.

Connecting it to her more recent song "Spark the Fire" (2014), Stefani has declared that "What You Waiting For?" is "a personal song that is a really positive message about *don't mess with my vibe*. I'm going to be up here, don't bring me down. Get off my cloud, because no one's going to take me away from this positivity" (in Feeney, original italics). In the same way, the song presents an internal monologue between a confident and a hesitant Gwen. Ultimately, the confident Gwen takes the reins and manages to transcend writer's block fruitfully. McGibbon notes that "Every aspect of her life—from her looks, to her friends, to her marriage—is under the full glare of the media spotlight. But she handles everything with a cool, business-like attitude and has turned herself into a one-woman, multimillion-dollar corporation". Indeed, Stefani has managed to surpass the pressures in the music industry and accomplish all that she's set her sights onto. And "What You Waiting For?" is proof of that freedom.

The song expresses three main points. Firstly, Stefani laments the parting from the band that has been like family to her. After ten years of working with No Doubt, Gwen decided to call a break and begin a musical journey independently with the collaboration

of other great artists. She describes this step as “a scary conversation” and “worrisome”, though her attachment to No Doubt remained solid and she eventually reunited with the band in 2012. Shugart and Waggoner argue that “as lead singer and the only female member of the band No Doubt, Stefani occupied center stage in ways that endowed her with a presumption of agency” (134). Whether she had it then or not, certainly agency is a factor that lies within Stefani from early on.

Secondly, considering she was thirty-five years old by the time she released the album *L.A.M.B.*, Stefani not only expresses in the song the pressures in the music industry to be a “super hot female”, but also how her maternal clock is ticking away: “your moment will run out ‘cause of your sex chromosome”. Here, Stefani makes a clear reference to the need of taking advantage of her youth as a means to release the “awaited hot track” and obtain international attention and sufficient record sales. Moreover, Stefani had often and openly expressed her desire to have children: “I’ve always wanted to do the family thing” (in Eliscu). Today, we see that while she continues to release new music, she is also prioritizing the mommy track in raising three kids. After releasing the album, Stefani confirmed: “I feel like the clock isn’t as loud in my ears anymore. I feel like I got it out of my system” (in Vineyard).

Thirdly, an overarching theme for the whole album is the overt fascination for the Harajuku scene, a district in Tokyo known for its eccentric fashion. While many have criticized Stefani for hiring four silent Japanese backup dancers who parade in her music videos and, in some cases, appear as “living props” (in Ahn); Rosen suggests that “you can’t help but admire the songwriter who has dared to set such a private obsession to an electro beat and imagine that it belongs on a blockbuster pop album”. This is perhaps the most controversial topic in Stefani’s career, as her trend setting has often been her way of absorbing fashion from other cultures and using them as accessories—note too her wearing a Bindi in connection to dating Kanal (of Indian heritage) earlier on in her life.

## The Video

The music video, directed by Francis Lawrence with direct intervention of Stefani herself, transpires between two parallel scenes. On the one hand, we see Stefani in the recording studio experiencing writer’s block and on the other, we see her transported into the world of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Lewis Carroll’s Alice books depict a young little girl thrust into a fantasy dream world, where she interacts with daunting creatures and confronts a series of events that are very much scenes out of a nightmare. For instance, she grows in size, bulging out of the house as observed in the music video: a frightening yet emboldening scene. Although the costume design in the video is a rather sexier and more flamboyant depiction of young Alice by John Tenniel, Stefani manages to represent the tough girly girl that Alice represents in the Carroll books. Her femininity is empowering. As Camille Paglia notes, “despite her girlish appearance, Alice is very brave, even when she is being violently acted-upon” (462). Throughout her adventures “she remains serene and self-assured” (462), capable of taking anything that is thrust upon her. And that’s the point. Stefani aims to encourage young girls and women to speak up for themselves and release their creative inertia so

as to transgress their own 'writer's block' in whatever form it takes. In other words, the video is an invitation to step into adventure.

### The Song and the Video

Stefani's "What You Waiting For?" has had a great influence on popular culture. Artists such as Fergie and Nelly Furtado have been called out for "releasing albums that were obvious descendants" of Stefani's hit *Love. Angel. Music. Baby*" (McGibbon). The album surely kicks off with a motivational song: eccentric in style and candid in lyrics, it has frequently been recognized as its highlight.

Needless to say, the presence of the Japanese girls in Stefani's music videos, including "What You Waiting For?" is now quite uncomfortable. While comedian Margaret Cho has even compared their presence to a "minstrel show", Stefani has rebutted that claim by asserting that the incorporation of these girls was an act made "out of love", defending the interchange between cultures as a "beautiful thing" (in Feeney). Cills notes that "Asian fetishism and appropriation was rampant in 80s rock, from Siouxsie and the Banshees' slanted eyes referencing "Hong Kong Garden" to hits like The Vapors' "Turning Japanese" and Styx's' "Mr. Roboto"". However, Stefani's exhausted use of cultural practices as accessories treads dangerously towards cultural appropriation. Even more so when the girls were given pet names connected to the *L.A.M.B.* album: Love, Angel, Music, and Baby respectively.

In any case, after the release of this album and in particular, the leading song, Gwen Stefani has emerged as a multiplatinum pop star worth paying attention to. The song suggests, as Rosen perceives, that "Stefani is out for a good time and willing to get there just about any old way". Celebrant of contrasting personalities, Stefani has declared that "the solo records allowed me to indulge my girly side" (in Freeman), something that she couldn't fully do when fronting No Doubt. Embracing her feminine side and doing it 'her own way', Stefani is, no doubt, an iconic singer who has set in motion the shaping of popular music today. The way she has reconciled family life and a firm continuum in her music career is proof of a powerful female force to be reckoned in the music industry.

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## Madonna, 'Hung Up': Hanging onto a Long Career

Sara Martín

Released: 17 October 2005

Album: *Confessions on a Dance Floor*

Label: Warner Bros.

Genre: Dance-pop, disco, un-disco

Length: 5:37

Songwriters: Madonna, Stuart Price, Benny Andersson, Björn Ulvaeus

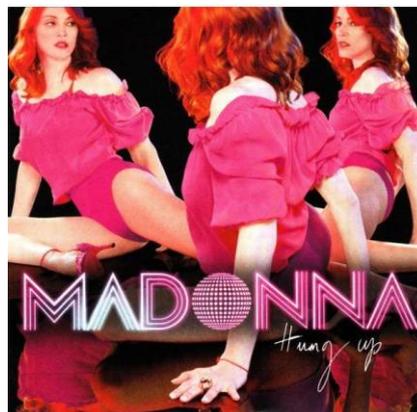
Producers: Madonna, Stuart Price

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Madonna-hung-up-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDwb9jOVRtU>

Director: Johan Renck



### The Singer

The undisputed Queen of Pop, Madonna Louise Ciccone was born on 16 August 1958, in Bay City, Michigan, to Madonna Louise (née Fortin) and Silvio Anthony 'Tony' Ciccone; she is of mixed Italian and French-Canadian descent and a Catholic. Her relationship with her father deteriorated when he remarried following her mother's early death of cancer. Although a good scholar, Madonna was always unconventional and rebellious by nature. Having chosen to pursue a career as a dancer she attended the University of Michigan on a scholarship but dropped out without taking a degree, moving next to New York City. There, she trained as a contemporary dancer, which led to employment as a backup dancer with star pop singers such as Patrick Hernandez.

Madonna's musical career started in 1979 and her breakthrough single "Everybody" was published in 1982. She was catapulted to international fame (and controversy) with her album *Like a Virgin* (1984) and its eponymous single. Since then, Madonna has released (January 2022) fourteen studio albums, three soundtrack albums, six live albums, six compilation albums, and thirty-six other limited releases, becoming the world's best-selling female recording artist of all time. Madonna's career expands now more than four decades and she gives no sign at all of wanting to retire, quite the opposite.

Madonna created a public persona that was heavily sexualized and at the same time in total control of her self-presentation and career choices, which served as an example to all the women singers that came after her. Her scandalous performance at the MTV Awards show of 1984, in which she simulated masturbation, and the publication of her volume *Sex* (1992), with softcore pornographic photography by the Steven Meisel Studio and Fabien Baron, firmly established her as an erotic icon. This was also projected in some of her film roles, such as Susan in *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), or

Breathless Mahoney in *Dick Tracy* (1990), though she made a point of displaying her acting credentials in the musical film *Evita* (1996).

In any case, Madonna's insistence on associating herself to eroticism and sexuality disregarding her own ageing has turned her into a rather complicated figure to read. For her admirers, Madonna is proving that women's sexual empowerment can continue into old age (she is now past sixty), whereas for her detractors she is opening herself to ridicule with her constant bodily remaking, her many plastic surgeries, and her need to appear sexy at all times. Madonna has always divided opinion, with many seeing her as a major feminist icon and others as a power-hungry, controlling, manipulative diva, though perhaps these two images are complementary or even the same one. Her biographer Lucy O'Brien grants that she was constantly puzzled by the contrast between the public and the private woman and, so, came to the conclusion that "The only place where she seems truly herself is when she is doing her work. Apart from that she can be self-conscious, status-conscious, everything-conscious" (18). At any rate, as her social media show, Madonna only follows her own opinions, feeling empowered enough to disregard everybody else's views.

As regards strictly her musical career, Madonna has always pursued a very effective strategy by engaging the services of a series of valuable and fashionable producers, usually young. This has kept her work constantly updated, to the point that it might be argued that constant change constitutes the essence of Madonna as a musical artist. Each new album has meant the emergence of a new Madonna, with fans trying to catch up onto her new act every time. There is, thus, an enormous difference between the carefree sexy young girl of *Like A Virgin Like A Virgin* (1984) and the wise experienced woman of her latest album, *Madame X* (2019), with many variations in between, perhaps most notably the mystic *Ray Of Light* (1998) and the uninhibitedly celebratory *Confessions On A Dance Floor* (2005). As journalist Neil Strauss famously wrote when this album was released, "her true genius is a facility for learning. She is a quick study. One of the only things consistent about her career is her ability to absorb and incorporate knowledge at an alarming rate, allowing her to stay one step ahead of critics, competitors, fans and trends". On the downside, Madonna has often been accused of a certain musical cannibalism or parasitism, being always ready to incorporate into her career whatever appeals. This is possibly unfair, as she appears to have been sincere in her choices for each new album and enjoy her progression; besides, she has always promoted the careers of her collaborators and also of many other artists, mostly women, through her own record label, Maverick Records.

On the personal front, Madonna, who has been married twice (to actor Sean Penn and director Guy Ritchie), is the proud mother of a mixed-race family of six children: her two white biological children and four Black children adopted from an orphanage in Malawi. There was plenty of controversy when she was unfairly accused of practically kidnapping or even buying the eldest, David, as his biological father accused her. Madonna not only ended this controversy but also challenged the Malawi's Supreme Court and Government to change the sexist laws which did not allow her to adopt children as a divorced single mother (see Rice). Needless to say, she won the case.

## The Song

“Hung Up” is a single from Madonna’s tenth studio album *Confessions on a Dance Floor* (2005), written and produced by Madonna herself and Stuart Price. The song famously features a catchy sample from ABBA’s hit “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)” by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus. Madonna “admitted that she wrote a grovelling letter to Swedish superstars Abba asking if she could sample their music on her latest single” (BBC News) and they appear to have granted permission exceptionally out of admiration for the star and the song. This is one more example of how Madonna cannibalizes the talents of other persons, no matter how positive the rapport between Andersson and Ulvaeus and herself was. Clearly, they did not need Madonna, but at this point in her career, after the loss of popularity caused by the lower sales of *American Life* (2003), she did need ABBA. Thanks partly to the sample, the single became an instant worldwide success and gave Madonna’s by then flagging trajectory a much welcome push upwards.

“Hung Up”, Madonna’s “most wonderfully commercial single since the mid Eighties” (Robinson) is a nod to that phase of her career both in its groovy dance-pop style and her vocal performance. The lyrics describe a situation in which a woman waits for her supposedly male lover to hurry up and be available for her, as she gets increasingly impatient for, as the repetitive intro goes, “Time goes by so slowly” for those who are waiting. The chorus acknowledges the singer’s dependence on the lover (“Every little thing that you say or do / I’m hung up, I’m hung up on you”) but also her growing tiredness (“Waiting for your call, baby, night and day / I’m fed up, I’m tired of waiting on you”). She moves from the indecision of the first verse (“I’m caught up, I don’t know what to do”) to the determination to stop waiting in the second verse (“And I’m done, I’m hanging up on you”). For some unknown reason, the lover appears to be reluctant, or so the bridge suggests (“You’ll wake up one day, but it’ll be too late”). The song returns to the chorus to announce that the wait is over and the relationship will not continue (or perhaps not even start).

In a way, the song might as well be called “Hurry Up”, for there is an evident urgency in Madonna’s attempt to entice her reluctant lover. This can be attributed simply to his weak will, though it is also possible to think that he feels overwhelmed by the woman’s demands to requite her feelings. Inevitably, and since Madonna was forty-seven at the time she released the single, “Hung Up” has often been read as a *carpe diem* style call to enjoy youth before it is gone. Whereas in Gwen Stefani’s hit “What You Waiting For?” the tick-tock of the clock connected with the need to face motherhood, in Madonna’s “Hung Up” the singer’s impatience with time seems caused by other factors. They can be the strength of the singer’s sexual/romantic desire or, as noted, a new awareness brought on by age that there is no time to waste, nor any lover worth waiting for.

## The Video

The music video, directed by John Renck, intercuts in its first half images of Madonna, wearing a pink leotard and high heels, dancing on her own in a studio with images of a

group of young Black and Asian people engaged in parkour, break-dance, and other dancing routines in the streets of Los Angeles and of London, and other locations like a restaurant or the tube. By mid-video Madonna abandons the studio to join her young crew in a London club; there she flirts with several young men until she bursts out singing, dancing the moves she was seen rehearsing. The video ends with the image of a tired but satisfied Madonna on the studio floor.

The video is distinctive for two reasons. One is Madonna's own ageism, for although the persons appearing in the film are racially diverse and also bodily diverse (meaning that not all are normatively thin), there is apparently none older than thirty. Although Madonna does look marvelous and moves as if she were also in her twenties, the issue of age is highlighted by the absence of other persons of her group age or older. There is no explanation for why only she, among the dance club clients, is not young. On the other hand, the video is strangely focused on Madonna's muscular thighs, which are photographed from a low angle seemingly to emphasize their strength. The leotard she wears is not particularly revealing and her body looks trim and fit but not particularly sexy (in comparison to other videos she has made). It is, then, peculiar, that all the sexiness in the video is connected with her gymnast thighs and that they occupy such a prominent place.

### The Song and the Video

The music video is not at all connected with the lyrics, being, rather, an illustration of the fun a person can have listening to the song and, above all, dancing to it. "Hung Up" has never been connected to any biographical episode in Madonna's life but, in contrast, when asked what she wanted to achieve with the album *Confessions on a Dance Floor* she replied: "I just want people to hear it and go 'Oh my God'. I want it to lift people up and get them dancing round their house, driving round in their car until the record's finished. It's really simple. I just want to make people happy" (in Garfield). Neither "Hung Up" nor any other song in the album is then, in any way, intended to provoke her audience, as Madonna has frequently done. The same applies to the video. At the same time, and as happens with other pop songs such as Kylie Minogue's "Spinning Around", we need not think of pop as other than a music genre mainly aimed at bringing happiness to the listener.

Having made this point, it is perhaps necessary to explain that although Madonna's career is so extensive that many others songs by her could have been an object of analysis, "Hung Up" is iconic in both its song and video incarnations. Not so much for the content, perhaps, as for being a perfect example of Madonna's ability to change. As a chameleonic artist she is undergoing a constant metamorphosis, and "Hung Up" happens to be one of the most attractive turning points in this process, at least judging by her fans' extremely positive reaction. In a way, Madonna shows doubly her empowerment with this song, both in the lyrics focused on this woman who won't wait anymore, and in her style choices for the video. The pink leotard and the 1970s layered haircut are part of Madonna's iconography and no doubt of 21<sup>st</sup> century pop music by women.

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## P!nk, 'Sober': Temporary Escape from One's Own Mind

Roisin Anglim

Released: 31 October 2008

Album: *Funhouse*

Label: LaFace

Genre: Power-pop

Length: 4:11

Songwriters: P!nk, Kara DioGuardi, Nate 'Danja' Hills, and Marcella Araica

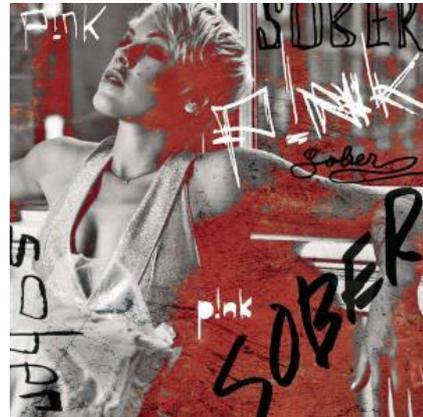
Producers: Danja, Tony Kanal and Jimmy Harry

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/P-nk-sober-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJ3ZM8FDBIq>

Director: Jonas Åkerlund



### The Singer

P!nk was born Alecia Beth Moore in Pennsylvania, USA on 8 September 1979. She experienced a middle-class childhood, and her parents' tense marriage led to their subsequent divorce before she was ten years old. She attended Central Bucks High School West as an adolescent. In high school, Alecia joined her first band, Middleground, but it subsequently disbanded after losing a Battle of the Bands competition. She began developing her now-distinctive voice at a young age, and around the age of fourteen, she began performing in Philadelphia clubs. It was around this time that she began stylizing herself as P!nk (or Pink), after Mr. Pink, a character in the movie *Reservoir Dogs* by Quentin Tarantino. Her mother has stated in interviews that her teenage writings were very introspective. Her writing style clearly still maintains this quality to an extent, particular in certain songs such as "Sober", where the lyrics offer an insight to the listener into a dark and bleak aspect of the singer's personal life.

Pink partook in two R&B bands around this time in the late 1990s, called Basic Instinct and Choice, neither of which gained much traction or attention, and both of which disbanded fairly rapidly following their initial formation. However, LaFace, the label of the now-disbanded Choice, took an interest in P!nk and her unique voice and talent, and in the year 2000 she released her first solo album, *Can't Take Me Home*. The album was a surprise hit and created two singles that reached the top 10, "Most Girls" and "There You Go". Following the success of this first album, P!nk won the trophy for Female New Artist of the Year at the 2000 Billboard Music Awards. She went on to release smash hit albums such as *Missundaztood* and *I'm Not Dead* and she skyrocketed to fame.

P!nk is mostly known for her unique and rasping singing voice, her introspective and often controversial or evocative lyrical content, and her badass, tomboyish image in the media. She is notable as a female pop artist who is not ultra-feminine, or indeed over sexualized to the same extent as countless other female artists in her field, either by their management or by the general public. Her hair throughout her career has been cropped

short, and her body is more athletically shaped than the very slight or very curvaceous bodies of many of her fellow female pop artists (she had trained for years as a gymnast in her childhood and excels at acrobatics, which she uses in her shows). Her unique style of writing and singing gained her the reputation as one of the most trailblazing artists of her musical generation.

### The Song

“Sober” was released in 2008 on P!nk’s fifth studio album *Funhouse*. One of the singles from the album, “Sober” achieved commercial success following the huge popularity of her single “So What” from the same record. A few critics dismissed the song as more of the same of P!nk’s usual content, but most felt it to be a heartfelt and profound song describing the comfort that comes with escaping from one’s problems into the bliss of alcohol or drugs, and the singer’s wish to feel the same as she does on these addictions, while sober. The song achieved commercial success, reaching the top ten in thirteen countries, and the top twenty in the USA. It was also nominated for a Grammy Award in 2010.

The lyrical content of the song addresses the way in which alcohol, drugs or other addictions give the user confidence, a false sense of euphoria, and offer a relief or ‘safety’ from one’s own sober thoughts. The song is lyrically powerful as P!nk describes how she no longer wishes to be the “girl who laughs the loudest / or the girl who never wants to be alone”. This is a reference to the concept of the ‘ultimate party girl’, always laughing the loudest, singing the most, dancing the craziest, who on the outside appears to be the life of the party; the girl who, internally, parties like this to avoid the ultimate eventuality of being left “alone” with the sober thoughts that she wishes to escape from. In the chorus Pink sings that she is “safe, up high, nothing can touch me”. These lyrics cleverly use a play on words and have a double meaning. The concept of physically being safe up high and out of reach, like a bird from its predators on the ground, is likened to the idea of being “high” or in a state of intoxication from drugs or alcohol, and the feeling of safety this state brings as one can detach somewhat from the world (“Nothing can touch me”) and one’s own dark thoughts, especially with certain drugs which bring on a state of euphoria. Pink has previously discussed her own personal experiences with alcohol and drug use in interviews, “I have had some vices in my life. When I was younger it was drugs and things...” (in *Schmeer*), and it is evident that this is a personal and real-life experience for her, while also being one that can resonate with countless people all over the world who have struggled with or are currently struggling with some form of addiction.

### The Video

The music video was directed by Jonas Åkerlund and was filmed in Sweden. It features P!nk herself attending a party, and another version of P!nk, a doppelganger of sorts, who also attends the party. The video begins with a TV screen flickering and showing an image of P!nk, and then moves out to the room in which the TV resides, P!nk’s bedroom. She is lying on the bed and wakes up. The video cuts at various points to an image of P!nk simply sitting and singing, such as when she sings the first line of the song. The

video then shows P!nk at a party, observing her doppelganger as she laughs drunkenly and raucously parties with the other guests. This is an interesting use of filming technique as it is a possible representation of the feeling of watching oneself behaving differently or crazily under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and knowing that this is not the true you, but the one you use to escape from your true feelings or problems. She then walks through the house to find her doppelganger throwing up into a toilet, at which point P!nk goes in to help her. She then looks herself (her other self) in the eyes and walks out of the bathroom. This is perhaps representing the idea of truly looking at what you have become, because of your addictions, and then abandoning this version of yourself to find the person you are without them. The video then begins to factor in clips of P!nk in a totally white room, dressed in white and with a white wig covering her hair. This could be taken as an allusion to the need for safety, peace, and the ability to endure and even enjoy silence, which is referenced in the song's lyrics. Alternatively, the overwhelming whiteness could be indicative of the typical idea of rehab or a psychiatric ward, to which addiction can often lead, although this is perhaps a more obscure take on these images.

As the song reaches its bridge and the most climactic point, the video shows P!nk and her doppelganger in the bed from the start of the video, kissing each other passionately. This part of the video was often removed when the video was shown on more conservative television and music channels; however, it is included in the YouTube original version. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for the climactic point in which P!nk's sober self and intoxicated self collide, as she begins to come crashing down from her high and once again is united with the thoughts, issues and struggles she faces when she is alone with her thoughts. This is metaphorized by the sudden image of the intoxicated version or doppelganger of P!nk disappearing, leaving the original version alone on the bed, as she was when the video began.

### The Song and The Video

On a final note, the video contains a certain amount of sexualization of the artist herself, although this is not usually a characterizing aspect of P!nk's music or video content; however it does appear to some extent in some of videos. In this video she is quite scantily clad, in varying degrees of some type of lingerie, although it is important to note that the video does not feature a huge emphasis on the fact that some of her body is exposed, and in many scenes the effect may have been similar without the revealing costumes, provoking thought on why these items were selected in the first place. On the other hand, there is also something to be said for the fact that as the song touches on such a raw and personal topic, the use of semi-nudity can be said to emphasize the bareness of the lyrical content. It can also be observed that as mentioned, the video itself attempts to create a somewhat surreal replication of a party (the surrealness perhaps indicative of the altered mental state of someone using drugs or alcohol to escape reality), and in a party atmosphere it is accurate to state and portray that women do tend to be scantily dressed more often than not, which may explain the use of these sexualized outfits on a woman who has not relied on her own sex appeal in order to fuel her success.

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## Lily Allen, 'Not Fair': British Humor, American Folklore, and a Stance for Women's Sexual Agency

Bàrbara Hernández González

Released: 20 March 2009  
Album: *It's Not Me, It's You*  
Label: Regal Recordings  
Genre: Country pop, bluegrass  
Length: 3:52  
Songwriters: Lily Allen and Greg Kurstin  
Producer: Greg Kurstin  
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lily-allen-not-fair-lyrics>  
Music video: <https://youtu.be/fUYaosyR4bE>  
Director: Melina Matsoukas



### The Singer

Lily Rose Beatrice Allen was born in Hammersmith, London (UK) in 1985. Active since 1998, she is a singer, songwriter, actor and author. However, she rose to fame in 2005, when she uploaded some of her music onto Myspace, which led her to airplay time on BBC Radio 1 and a contract with Regal Recordings. Since then, Allen has been awarded (and nominated to) many prizes such as Grammys, Brit Awards, and MTV Video Music Awards. Allen's music was heavily influenced by ska and reggae until 2009, when she turned to electropop, pop and R&B. Her music style is characterized by her soft, melodic voice and how it contrasts with her often raw, humorous, and even sarcastic lyrics. About her being mainstream within the music industry, Allen sings in the song "The Fear", released in 2009 "I am a weapon of massive consumption / It's not my fault, it's how I'm programmed to function".

Allen's childhood and youth were not easy. She had a dysfunctional family as her parents, who were both in the music and film industry, were mostly absent. Her father, actor Keith Allen abandoned the family home when she was four years old and her mother, film producer Alison Owen was an addict who would often stay away for long periods. No wonder then that Allen dropped out of school at fifteen for not wanting to, as she said in an interview with Miranda Sawyer for *The Guardian*, "spend a third of her life preparing to work for the next third of her life, to set herself up with a pension for the next third of her life (...) Fuck that, I'd like to make fuck-loads of money and then retire by the time I'm 30, please!"

Allen's persona is to a great extent defined by her politics as she is a fervent supporter of the Labour Party. She has a firm anti-Tory, anti-far-right stance, which shows up in her song "Fuck You", dedicated to George Bush and the British National Party. The singer has often been described by the (patriarchal) media as a "mouthy", "feisty", "rough", "foul mouthed" girl. She has also been called a "London Anti-Diva" (Ellis 169) because of her punk attitude, obscene gestures, and chav-like persona: "Led by M.I.A., Lady Sovereign, Lily Allen, and Amy Winehouse (with Kate Nash and others fomenting

the next wave), the London anti-divas have been instrumental in affecting the conventions and expectations of modern gender identity, and they have used humour as their principal weapon of assault” (Ellis 169). Although Allen’s style has changed throughout the years, she used to be known for her kitschy style, which contrasted with her American counterparts such as Christina Aguilera or Jennifer Lopez. Bangs, gold hoops and outfits which combined dresses and sneakers were central to her aesthetics.

Her working-class, chav image has been, nonetheless, largely questioned due to her relatively wealthy family background, which provided her with good connections and granted Allen far more opportunities than the regular working-class girl. The characteristic Cockney accent in which she speaks, and sings has also been questioned, with some calling it “Mockney”, being far from natural and an impersonation of working-class London native Cockney speakers (see Woodlock *et al.*). On this issue, Allen has tried to deny that being the daughter of famous, affluent people makes her a privileged person. Quite unaware of how privilege works and how it has helped her, in her book *My Thoughts Exactly*, she claimed that “Sure, I had media connections through my parents and an entrée into the Groucho fucking Club, but I managed to get a career in spite of that and my education—not because of them” (quoted in Sturges).

Allen became a mother in 2011 with Sam Cooper. It is fair to say that motherhood has substantially changed her notorious persona. She now has a more mature, less chav-fixated image, though she can still be very playful, for instance featuring giant inflatable milk bottles on stage in a concert. On motherhood and being a mother in the music industry, Allen has claimed:

I remember the days of Neneh Cherry prancing around with her big pregnant belly out. I always thought was really cool, and I thought I can celebrate this. But it doesn’t work (...) I think women have become more sexualised over the last 20 years. People associate women—especially women in the public eye—with sex. They don’t want to know that you’ve had children passing through your birth canal. I don’t think people like being reminded of that. (in Levine)

The challenging nature of balancing motherhood and a career (especially in the music industry) is currently a topic in the spotlight. That is, Lily Allen is not alone in calling attention to it, as it has been discussed recently by numerous woman artists such as P!nk, who released the documentary *All I Know So Far* on the topic.

## The Song

“Not Fair” is what could be called an anomaly in Allen’s discography. This is mainly because of its genre: a mix of country pop and bluegrass, which incorporates sounds rarely found in the singer’s songs. Nevertheless, conceptually and lyrically “Not Fair” is clearly connected to her persona for its grotesqueness, humor and rawness. The song deals with sex education and women’s sexual agency, which are relatively unexplored topics in songs, much less at the time of its release. Along these lines, it is clear that Allen’s humor is concerned with women and their issues: “Allen’s ‘reporter’ humor is female-specific in its perspective, and her surface innocence and accessibility belie a sly humor with a post-feminist edge, which is often delivered verbally using the word choice of a hardened sailor” (Ellis 174).

The lyrics describe a male partner who is apparently perfect, displaying attributes that should be taken for granted in all men: “he treats me with respect” and “he says he loves me all the time”. However, incongruously and unnoticed by the singer, he is also quite controlling as he calls his love interest “fifteen times a day”. Despite this ‘devotion’, the icing on the cake is that he does not care for his partner’s pleasure during sex, which is described as a “thing that’s getting on the way”. Thus, Allen describes this man’s selfish sexual actions through phrases such as “all you do is take” and “I think you’re really mean”, a situation which she finds “not fair”. Because of his selfishness when it comes to partnered sex, the woman feels “pretty damn hard done by”, which uncovers her dissatisfaction regarding the relationship, as he is both unable and unwilling to listen to her and give her pleasure. “Not Fair” also discusses how women deal with self-doubt when it comes to sexuality, getting their needs met, or having their boundaries respected: despite the man’s obvious shortcomings, Allen still sings “maybe I’m just overreacting”.

Allen states that the man has never made her scream, clearly referring to her never reaching a sexual climax, while he “makes this noise and it’s apparent it’s all over”. Hence, when her partner reaches orgasm, the sexual act is over, which makes him the protagonist leaving the woman in the background as a pleasure-giver. This lack of reciprocity is evident as she complains “I spent ages giving head”, obviously getting no oral sex herself. In addition, Allen expresses general disappointment and an inherent decadence in all relationships with men as a common situation for women; if the singer dates the awful man described in the song this is not because he is perfect but because “he’s not like all them other boys / they’re all so dumb and immature”. If, despite his great shortcomings as a partner, he is better than others, this says plenty about the very poor state of current masculinity. Overall, “Not Fair” represents an act of defiance towards cis-het-men-centered sex education while reclaiming women’s pleasure and sexual agency. It also denounces the inherent decadence in cisheterosexual men’s generally poor understanding of sex, which implies a need for a more inclusive and broad vision of it, one which takes women into account.

### The Video

The video is very much unlike Allen’s other music videos as the American influence in this one is overwhelming. Lily Allen is shown as a guest in the 1970s *Porter Wagoner Show*. She performs “Not Fair” together with a band of musicians whose clothes are representative of country American culture. This, along with its country pop, bluegrass-infused style, makes it rather different from the rest of her videography, in which British culture is heavily present. Instances of this are the “Smile” music video, which features typically British settings, or the video for “LDN”, which was filmed in London and makes reference to Rough Trade, a record shop and label in the city. Thus, this music video contrasts and defies the Britishness in the singer’s career and persona, taking an unexpected turn towards Americanness which leans towards the absurd and is thus comedic.

The essence of the music video is far from the 21<sup>st</sup> century ways of filming and doing as it has a clear vintage essence, which was accomplished by recording the video on videotape and with a real vacuum tube TV camera which can be seen during it (see

the *Wikipedia* entry for “Not Fair”). In addition, Allen sings into an old microphone. All in all, the video for “Not Fair” is clearly inspired in the 1970s.

The faces of the male members of Allen’s band in the video are certainly worth mentioning. As the lyrics progress, they oscillate between boredom, surprise, and disgust. This indicates that they may be recognizing themselves in the lyrics as addressees of the song, the claims of which they may find ridiculing and emasculating given that these describe a man whose sexual performance is insufficient and poor.

### The Song and the Video

The combination of the song and the video is certainly comedic as well as apparently random and chaotic. To begin with, Allen is introduced by the presenter as a “purty little lady” who sings a “real purty song”. “Purty” is a variant of “pretty”, an element of American regional speech which is a clear example of metathesis, a linguistic process by which the order of two sounds is reversed. The presenter’s remark is redundant and clearly ironic given that the song is, as noted, actually about a man’s poor sexual performance.

Part of the parodic nature of “Not Fair” resides in the several contrasts that happen within it. In the music video, Allen sings accompanied by other musicians in a Faux Country TV Bonanza setting full of traditional American folklore elements such as cowboy shirts, mullets, Dolly Parton-like hairstyles, dances, farm animals... This is a considerable cultural shock considering Lily Allen is an iconic British figure, described by Ellis as “symbolic of this national pride and reflecting the renaissance of bright new pop from the homeland” (174). Moreover, there is a noticeable contrast between Allen’s Mockney accent and the presenter’s, which is characteristic of Southern US. The raunchy lyrics (with references to “the wet patch” on the bed), the traditional setting and the apparent normality also make for an absurd combination: one of tradition, subversion and sexual explicitness. Allen’s apparently ideal relationship and her decadent sex life with her partner are yet another contrast, together with the sweetness of the melody, her soft voice and the lyrics. Finally, her innocent behavior and white outfit (a symbol of purity), also differ from the lyrics. The sharp, brutal honesty and rawness of the lyrics also contribute to the scandalous, humorous tone of the song.

All in all, Allen uses several humorous devices such as extravagance, contrasts, irony and the grotesque to present an issue that affects many women: the unbalanced sex roles in heterosexual relationships, where male pleasure is central and female desire is discarded. This leads to an encouraging stance for other women to talk about their experiences and pleasure without shame or guilt, to go from secrecy to communication.

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## Mariah Carey, 'Obsessed': Herstory

Merna Assad

Released: 16 June 2009

Album: *Memoirs of an Imperfect Angel*

Label: Island Def Jam

Genre: Pop

Length: 4:05

Songwriters: Mariah Carey, Terius Nash, and Christopher Alan Stewart

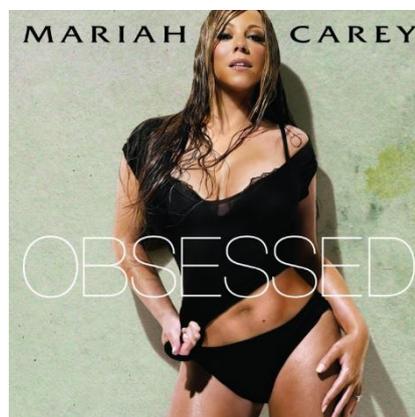
Producers: Mariah Carey, Terius Nash, and Christopher Alan Stewart

Lyrics: <http://www.songlyrics.com/mariah-carey/obsessed-lyrics/>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1Yt0xJKDY8&ab\\_channel=MariahCareyVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1Yt0xJKDY8&ab_channel=MariahCareyVEVO)

Director: Brett Ratner



### The Singer

Mariah Carey was born in Huntington, New York, on 27 March 1970. She was discovered at the age of eighteen at a party by Columbia Record's President and soon-to-be husband, Tommy Mottola (Salazar). Carey is an impressive singer and is known for her remarkable vocal range of five octaves (Roberts). She has published so far fifteen studio albums, eight compilation albums, two soundtrack albums, one remix album and has sold over two hundred million records globally. In 1991 Carey won two Grammy Awards for Best New Artist and Best Pop Vocal Performance for "Vision of Love". In 1993, Mariah Carey's album *Music Box* was no.1 on the music charts around the world and had become her *magnum opus*. In 2005, she was nominated for ten Grammy Awards and won three of them. In 2015, she received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for her success of 25 years in the music industry (see Salazar). Her popularity is even growing today.

At the beginning of her career, from 1991 to around 1997, Carey had a girl-next-door, young and innocent look. Managed by Mottola at that time, her image was tightly controlled by him. She has declared that he tried to "wash the urban" off her when referring to her interest in dabbling in hip hop and collaborating with African-American artists (in Freeman). After her divorce from Mottola, Carey completely changed her image. She began wearing more revealing clothing and singing more explicitly about sex. She also began collaborating with hip hop and R&B artists. Many critics, however, derided her, one even calling her "town slut". Many believed her comeback album *Butterfly*, which features hip hop and R&B music, would ruin her career (Martinez). Fortunately for Carey, that was not the case.

Nonetheless, now that she has been in the industry for nearly thirty years, Carey has the reputation of being a high maintenance diva. When asked how she feels about this, Carey replied:

“You know what? I don’t give a shit. I fucking am high-maintenance because I deserve to be at this point. That may sound arrogant, but I hope you frame it within the context of coming from nothing (...). I was always high-maintenance, it’s just I didn’t have anyone to do the maintenance when I was growing up!” (in Freeman)

“Coming from nothing” refers to Carey’s difficult childhood, during which she grew up poor in an unsafe and abusive household, as she has narrated in her memoirs *The Meaning of Mariah Carey*, co-written with Michaela Angela Davis. Carey also dealt with racism at an early age, growing up as a biracial child of Afro-Venezuelan Irish Descent. Her very public divorces from Tommy Mottola (1993-1998) and Nick Canon (2008-2016), the rumors about her having had plastic surgery, and some *faux passes* in her public appearances have fueled controversy around her.

### The Song

Mariah Carey’s song “Obsessed” peaked at number ten on the Billboard Charts for sixteen weeks in July of 2009 (“Charts”). However, thanks to the social media platform TikTok, “Obsessed” had a resurgence in popularity ten years later, in 2019, due to a dance challenge (Anifitos). When this song was first released, many speculated whether it dealt in fact with the established rapper Eminem, with whom Carey has had a long feud. The music video confirmed that she was indeed referring to Eminem and his obsession with her as Carey portrayed the character of the stalker using the rapper’s characteristic look. Eminem has a history of rapping about the star and claiming that they had an intimate relationship since 2002, though Carey has always denied any type of involvement with the rapper (*In Touch Weekly Staff*).

The stalking is manifest in the lyrics: “Why you so obsessed with me? / Boy, I wanna know, lyin’ that you’re sexin’ me”. In these lyrics, we see the artist denying a relationship with an individual, complaining that this person is obsessed with her and is spreading fake rumors about having a sexual relationship with her: “All up in the blogs / Saying we met at the bar / When I don’t even know who you are”. These lyrics refer to fans and gossip magazines speculating on their possible relationship due to Eminem’s vulgar and explicit lyrics about Carey, whom he mentions by name in his songs, and what supposedly occurred during their time together.

As she sings, “You a mom and pop / I’m a corporation / I’m the press conference / You a conversation”. In these lyrics, Carey sets out to put Eminem in his place by comparing him to a small-time business while declaring that she is a corporation, much more established and important in comparison. She goes on to further diminish his importance by suggesting that he is vapid and that he has no importance to her as a topic for conversation. The line “got you all fired up with your Napoleon complex” describes Eminem as a person who has an aggressive attitude as a way to overcompensate for being small, as the French figure is said to have been. The “Napoleon complex”, indeed, is also known as “small man syndrome” (Knapton). Carey then sings “all my ladies say” asking women to sing with her making it a “universal anthem for women” as many could

relate to her stalking by a man, which makes “Obsessed” a precursor of the #metoo 2017 movement (Ingold). With this song, Carey speaks to the universal experience that women encounter, clashing with men who feel entitled over them and with the culture of “locker room talk”, by which men feel they have the right to speak of women in explicit manners without their consent.

### The Video

The music video, directed by Brett Ratner, starts off with a mysterious-looking man opening the limousine door for Mariah Carey as she is greeted by screaming fans. This ‘man’ (actually Mariah herself dressed in drag) stares longingly at the diva as she walks away and enters a hotel to do a photoshoot. The rest of the music video alternates between scenes of Carey posing seductively for this photoshoot as she sings along to the song and clips of her stalker obsessing over her. As the music video progresses, the stalker becomes bolder and bolder in his attempts to get closer to her, this boldness eventually leading to his death.

The mysterious man continues to appear throughout the video following the singer as well as performing jobs on the photoshoot while she is oblivious to his presence. He can be seen using a blow dryer to give her a blown-out look in her shoot. He also stares at her in awe as she poses paying no mind to him. Other scenes also show the man wearing a hoodie and dancing to the song in his ‘stalker cave’ where the walls and ceiling are plastered with posters of Carey. Even the bed is covered in bedsheets printed with Carey’s images, further demonstrating how obsessed this individual is with the singer. In one of the scenes, Carey begins running towards the hotel with her shopping bags as she notices the man following her. As she enters the hotel, the stalker is seen following her in as he pushes the people at the front door to the side. The stalker is portrayed as a man with a goatee wearing a baseball cap, large baggy clothing, a hoodie and a do-rag, a look famously associated with the famous rapper Eminem. The end of the music video shows the stalker waiting for Carey to exit the hotel. As she walks out, he begins crossing the street, taking out his phone and taking pictures of her. Seeing him snapping pictures and mistaking him for a fan, she begins smiling and posing. Suddenly, a bus strikes the distracted stalker, supposedly killing him. Carey gasps for a moment, in shock, but does not seem to be eager to help. The scene ends quickly and cuts back to her at the photoshoot.

### The Song and the Video

Carey’s song “Obsessed” is a response to Eminem’s song “Bagpipes from Baghdad” and the numerous times throughout the years where he had insinuated that they had had a sexual relationship (*In Touch Weekly* Staff). The pairing of the lyrics and the visuals in the music video was intended to make the rapper appear to be an overzealous fan of hers, discrediting any rumors of any kind of relationship between the two stars. The music video’s intention was to show how Carey sees herself in comparison to Eminem, mocking his looks and demeanor as well as placing him in subordinate staff positions. The lyrics

also make it clear that she does not wish to be associated with him or mentioned by him, once again clearing any speculations of a relationship.

This song had audiences divided on whether Carey was lying about her past relationship with Eminem. The release of this song was a way for her to control the narrative and retaliate against the rapper after he repeatedly mentioned her in his songs. Yet, the importance attached to whether she is lying about the existence of this past relationship has diverted attention from the more important message behind the song: many women have had stalkers or abusive men in their lives harassing them daily. In an article published on *I-D UK*, Jeffrey Ingold writes that “We missed a significant opportunity to shine a necessary light on the misogynistic abuse Mariah was singing about in ‘Obsessed’”. He further explains that that this song was unfairly dismissed by listeners as just a tasteless diss track without considering its implications at a larger scale.

Men are often given the upper hand in these types of conversation as too often women’s complaints are turned into a ‘he said/she said’ debacle. An individual’s sexual and/or private life, real or invented, should not be debated publicly without both parties’ consent. Although the music video is meant to be lighthearted and shows Mariah in the light of stardom and glamour, careless of ‘nobodies’ obsessing over her, there is a moment in which she appears to fear her stalker. In the music video, the stalker’s boldness increases throughout the video, which can draw light to how men do not simply ‘admire’ from a distance but can also become more physically intrusive with time. Tellingly, although this song and music video were intended to be an end to the feud with Eminem, he went on to release “The Warning”, further sharing details of the alleged sexually explicit encounters with the singer, once more disrespecting her boundaries. Whether it was intended or not, Carey’s “Obsessed” brought to light how misogynistic society can be and how it attempts to defame and deny the experience of women who speak up against men who disrespect them.

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## Lady Gaga, 'Bad Romance': The Birth of a Star Monster

Inma Expósito Martínez

Released: 26 October 2009  
Album: *The Fame Monster*  
Label: Interscope  
Genre: Dance pop, electropop  
Length: 4:54  
Songwriters: Lady Gaga and RedOne  
Producers: RedOne and Lady gaga  
Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lady-gaga-bad-romance-lyrics>  
Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrO4YZeyl0I>  
Director: Francis Lawrence



### The Singer

Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, better known as Lady Gaga, was born in New York City, on 28 March 1986. She is a singer, songwriter, record producer, musician, actor, activist and businesswoman, and she is well-known and popular for her image makeovers and reinventions as well as for her musical and vocal versatility. Lady Gaga has been active since 2001. She began performing when she was a teenager by singing at open mic nights and starring in school plays. Germanotta attended New York University's Tisch School of the Arts; however, she dropped out to pursue a career in music. Following the cancellation of her contract with Def Jam Recordings, Gaga worked as a songwriter for Sony/ATV Music Publishing; later, she negotiated a deal and signed a joint agreement in 2007 with Interscope Records and Akon's label, KonLive Distribution. The next year, Gaga ascended to notoriety with her controversial debut studio album *The Fame*, and thanks to the success of her chart-topping singles "Just Dance" and "Poker Face". The album was eventually re-released in a deluxe edition titled *The Fame Monster* in 2009, which included the hit songs "Bad Romance", "Telephone" (with Beyoncé) and "Alejandro". Lady Gaga has also dabbled in acting, starring in the miniseries *American Horror Story: Hotel* in 2015 and 2016, for which she won a Golden Globe for Best Actor, and in the highly acclaimed musical drama film *A Star Is Born* in 2018. Her work and contributions to the soundtrack, which resulted in the chart-topping single "Shallow", turned her into the first woman to win an Oscar, a BAFTA, a Golden Globe and a Grammy Award in one year.

Since the very beginning of her career, the singer has been controversial and notorious for different reasons, such as her extravagant looks and outfits, her 'blasphemous' music videos and lyrics that angered the religious community (some examples are the music videos for "Judas", "Alejandro" and "Bad Romance"), for fighting against the gender roles and heteronormativity rules, as well as for the claim that she oversexualizes the image of her own body and persona, amongst other issues. The

public's reaction to her music, fashion sense, and behavior has always been divided. Due to her impact on modern society and ascent to worldwide celebrity, sociologist Mathieu Deflem of the University of South Carolina has been teaching a course named *Lady Gaga and the Sociology of the Fame* since early 2011 with the aim of elucidating "some of the sociologically significant features of Lady Gaga's stardom" (see AFP). On the other hand, in an article released in *The Sunday Times* in 2010, Camille Paglia called Gaga "more an identity thief than an erotic taboo breaker, a mainstream manufactured product who claims to be singing for the freaks, the rebellious and the dispossessed when she is none of those". Gaga's extravagant fashion style has also played a significant role in her public persona. *Time* placed Gaga on their All-Time 100 Fashion Icons list, claiming that: "Lady Gaga is just as notorious for her outrageous style as she is for her pop hits (...) she has sported outfits made from plastic bubbles, Kermit the Frog dolls, and raw meat" (Friedman).

Many consider that Gaga's early music and videos were ahead of their time and that is why people did not accept them back when they were released, since they were not ready for the innovations and the discourse she was presenting to the world. In truth, Lady Gaga was a pioneer in many aspects. Indeed, the dark concepts that she presented at the very beginning of her career, along with the creative aesthetics that she produced for her artistic universe, are elements that are seen more and more often nowadays in women's musical careers. However she was the one to introduce them in the pop culture:

Arguably, the championing of Lady Gaga's creative freedom laid the groundwork for similar artists to confidently realise their own visions throughout the subsequent decade. We have witnessed some stumble as they looked to Gaga for too much inspiration, while others flourished as they pushed their own boundaries without compromise. Even Gaga herself got lost in the pressures of *ARTPOP*, her own vision stunted by the impossible expectations she set with *The Fame Monster*. (McNeilage)

As an artist, she dared to try and do things no one ever did before, which was very scandalous at the time, and even now for some. The star touched many taboo and sensitive topics, even included them in her performances, such as eating disorders, which led in a lot of criticism for 'romanticizing' anorexia and bulimia, breaking gender roles, as well as openly supporting and trying to create a safe environment for the LGBTQ+ community.

Lady Gaga continues surprising even now with her fashion sense, music style, acting talent, and versatility as well as her wonderful vocals and outstanding shows. She built a strong and extravagant character for herself in order to be accepted in the music industry and this outstanding persona, along with her creativity and innovations, allowed her to become an icon and inspiration for many people (her fans call themselves 'little monsters'), though she remains infuriating and outrageous for others.

## The Song

According to journalist Ross McNeilage "Bad Romance" "changed the face of pop". The song received plenty of positive feedback from music critics. *Rolling Stone*'s Jody Rosen proclaimed that it was the best song in Gaga's discography by ranking it as the "number one song". Joden claimed that it perfectly embodied the "essence of Gagaism", and

praised the “relentlessly catchy chorus” and “pummeling club beat”, making the song “grand”, “joyful” and “melancholy”.

Gaga herself explained that “Bad Romance” was one of the songs that she wrote during her tour in 2009. The songs that she composed at that time, she noted, are songs that acts as metaphors for the “paranoias” as well as the abstract “monsters” and inner demons that she had to face and fight during that tour. Furthermore, the artist explained, whenever she was in a relationship, she felt very lonely since she always felt attracted to men that were not good for her, hence their “bad romance” never worked. This is another inspiration behind the song, where the star explores her feelings and attraction, or obsession, for toxic men and how even knowing they can’t love her she keeps feeling attracted to them. In this case, the man she was in love with and that inspired her to write the song was her best friend. In an interview with Bryant, the artist explained how the song was written on her tour bus while she was in Norway:

I was in Russia, then Germany, and spent a lot of time in Eastern Europe. There is this amazing German house-techno music, so I wanted to make a pop experimental record. I kind of wanted to leave the ‘80s a little bit, so the chorus is a ‘90s melody, which is what the inspiration was. There was certainly some whisky involved in the writing of the record. It’s about being in love with your best friend.

The singer said she was enumerating Alfred Hitchcock’s films in the verse “I want your psycho, your vertigo shtick, want you in my *Rear Window*, Baby, you’re sick”. She stated that “What I’m really trying to say is I want the deepest, darkest, sickest parts of you that you are afraid to share with anyone because I love you that much” (in Bryant).

As previously mentioned, the song explores the situation of someone who is being controlled by the person they love and how they are so blinded by their obsession with that toxic and unhealthy relationship that they do not want to get out. In fact, they want all the nasty and ugly parts of that person as much as the good ones. All in all, “Bad Romance” is a horror fairy-tale that portrays something very toxic as well as complex. It is a take on the dark side of love and how the woman wants to experience it anyway since the thrill that comes with that bad romance makes her feel alive; it is an unhealthy relationship that ends up turning into what could be called an obsessive infatuation. Besides, it is important to note that the way some lines are recited rather than sung gives a more realistic aspect to the song and the story that it is being told, since it feels more like a narrative than a song at some parts.

## The Video

The video, directed by Francis Lawrence, definitely played a big role in the success of the song and the artist, so much that it has even named the best music video of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As mentioned before, Gaga was a pioneer in many aspects and her music videos were as innovative as controversial; things that artists never attempted before in a video were done by the singer, which was very shocking at the time as well as very much questioned and criticized. Her visual style, aesthetic and artistic universe, which the singer created for herself with the help of directors and fashion designers, were absolutely groundbreaking; “Bad Romance” definitely was a bold move from the artist that resulted in an outstanding success.

The “Bad Romance” video shows the dark side of the music industry and the way that labels sell off their artists as if they were mere objects, in this case a young and vulnerable girl that is Lady Gaga herself. At the beginning, Gaga is kidnapped by the Russian mafia to be sold off to the highest bidder, that is to say, into sexual slavery, which signifies the way the music industry sells off their artists in order to make money. The scene where Gaga is in the middle of a room in her underwear, surrounded by diamonds while men are looking at her, conveys the message of her being an object that the music industry is ready to sell to the highest bidder. The frequent use of close up shots of Lady Gaga’s face along with the natural make up that she uses and the digitally enhanced big eyes are used to emphasize her purity as well as to portray her innocence and vulnerability against the music industry.

The extravagant and strange outfits that Gaga wears throughout the video makes the whole concept and aesthetic bizarre; at that time it was considered even scandalous. The setting’s aim is to make the place look like a futuristic space, which some labelled as a “futuristic Russian bathhouse” (Ukraine), hence the predominance of the white color throughout the music video. However, it is also important to note that whereas Gaga wears white clothes at the beginning of the video, signifying her purity and innocence, at the end she changes into a red outfit portraying her change after entering the music industry. She had to be brave and strong and, in order to be so, she has to abandon her vulnerable and pure self. Besides, her make up when wearing the red outfit is far stronger and less natural than when she is in white; that way the video emphasizes the complete change that the young singer had to face in order to survive inside the music industry. At the end of the video, after burning in bed her enslaver, the man that bought her, Gaga is free and powerful, meaning that she is now in control of own career, as well as of herself.

### The Song and the Video

It is hard to say whether “Bad Romance” would have been as successful and groundbreaking without the music video, however it cannot be denied that the video gave the song an extravagant, dark, innovative and what some would call “weird” aesthetic, an image that otherwise would maybe not be associated with the song. Undoubtedly, the music video managed to impress a clear image in everyone’s mind that plays every time one hears the song. One cannot help being reminded of the music video, with Gaga’s odd style, the faceless monsters that surround her, as well as the choreography which was also very much commented at the moment (and even now) for being very particular, closer to contemporary dance than it is usual in music videos.

The lyrics and video share a relationship since they are both about toxic relationships and obsessive love and dependance. However, they take very different approaches to the matter. On the one hand, the song describes the toxic relationship, dependance and obsession for someone that is clearly not good for you and how even knowing so you are not able to give up on that bad romance. On the other hand, the music video portrays the same toxic relationship but between an artist that wants to be famous and successful and the dark music industry that only cares about their own benefit and will explode the artist in all ways possible. It is indeed a toxic relationship

since both parties depend on each other in a toxic way even if they do not want to. The artists know that the music industry is not something good for them, yet they cannot help but succumb to their terms and conditions and become powerless against the labels in order to have an opportunity to succeed. In a different but similar way, at the same time the music industry cannot help but depend on the artists since they are their source of income. The lyrics are about being so in love and blinded by someone that you love every single thing about them, even their dirty and ugly aspects (“I want your ugly, I want your disease”); this part of the lyrics could be translated in the music video as the hunger for fame; no matter how ugly and dark the music industry is, you still want to be part of it.

For sure, both the song and the video marked a before and after in Lady Gaga’s career. The sound, the outfits (or lack of them in some scenes), the futuristic and strange aesthetic that had not been seen before at that time, featuring the theme of monstrosity and madness that the artist created as her concept and image, her creativity and boldness were as impressing as shocking. Now, as then, you can love it or hate it but it cannot be denied that Gaga has become an icon and pioneer in many ways changing, and even helping to create, pop music as we know it nowadays. Indeed, it could be said that she paved the way for the rest of women innovators.

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## MARINA, 'Hollywood': American Culture through Foreign Eyes

Aixa Domínguez Pérez

Released: 29 January 2010

Album: *The Family Jewels*

Label: 679 Recordings

Genre: Eurodisco, bubblegum pop, glam rock

Length: 3:50'

Songwriter: Marina Diamandis

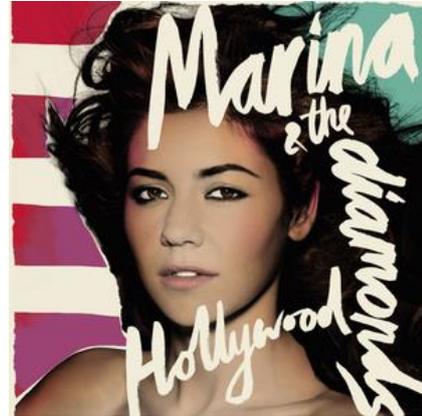
Producers: Richard "Biff" Stannard, Ash Howes and Starsmith

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Marina-hollywood-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1VTcJfL7RE>

Director: Kinga Burza



### The Singer

Marina Lambrini Diamandis was born in Brynmawr, Wales, on 10 October 1985. Although she was born in the United Kingdom, Diamandis is of Greek descent and she has stated several times how she feels more Greek than Welsh. Her original stage name was Marina and the Diamonds, but in 2018 she decided to change it to MARINA (in capital letters). She stated in various interviews that her name 'and the Diamonds' was never because of an actual band existed, but because of her fans. It is a little part of them that she carried with her name everywhere.

MARINA has been active since 2005 when she started auditioning for musicals, in which she was unsuccessful. Later on, she rejected contracts from fourteen record labels, except from the only one which she thought would not dictate her image. In 2008 she signed with Neon Gold Records and was hired as the supporting artist for Gotye's tour. In October of the same year, though, she signed with 679 Artists. The reason for the change is unknown. MARINA has published one EP, with six demos that she recorded in her house and five studio albums. The main highlights in her career are "Primadonna" (2012) and "Teen Idle" (2012).

MARINA is particularly known in United States and in United Kingdom, where she still resides. MARINA herself stated that 60% of her audience are gay people and, by extension, the LGBTQI+ community. She has changed her style and lyrics during her career, mainly because of the different topics in each of her albums. In her second album (*Primadonna*) she depicted the archetypical American housewife via her alter ego Electra Heart. With the end of this era, she depicted the death of the character in a music video also called "Electra Heart". This remarkable character was quite popular in 2013, when Tumblr was at its peak. Tumblr is a social network and micro-blogging website where MARINA enjoyed the support of many teenage girls and persons in the LGBTI+ community. Her image was recreated and even romanticized there, along with her lyrics and music videos. They were thousands of blogs and pictures dedicated to her and

following the lifestyle of Electra Heart, the character that brought MARINA fame and appreciation. The archetype of American Housewife and female fatale were represented in her depiction of the Heart character. In an interview for *The Irish Times* in April 2013, she explained who Electra Heart was:

“I was starting to think about our Tumblr generation, and how photos appear on Tumblr and people become almost like mini-stars of the internet, and you don’t know who the hell they are—they’re just anonymous faces. So I started to take photos, and make an effort to look completely different in each one, in different hotels and apartments all across America when I was travelling. And it just started to build from that. It was more the prima donna archetype at the beginning, really; I was reading a lot of books like *Hollywood Babylon*, focusing more on the gossipy, suicidal side of the ‘30s and ‘40s in Hollywood. That’s how it started, and then it grew into a real project”. (in Murphy)

For her other albums, the main topic changed from a critique of the typical American housewife to the most personal and rawest material. Her third album, titled *Froot*, talks about her most vulnerable side but also “it’s almost celebrating being happy (...) and half of the album is about a relationship that I had to end” (in Britton). With the arrival of her fourth album, *Love + Fear*, she stated in a tweet now deleted that “It took me well over a year to figure out that a lot of my identity was tied up in who I was as an artist and there wasn’t much left of who I was” (in Greenwood). The sound could be described as a continuation of *Froot* with a more spiritual and self-reflective sound. Finally, her last studio album, *Ancient Dreams in a Modern Land*, is about the wanting of an ideal or better world, without capitalism, climate change and patriarchy, aspects that are mentioned in “Purge the Poison”.

MARINA’s public persona has been generally welcome. She has always been supportive of other women and minorities, advocating for feminism and against beauty standards, both in her songs and in her social media. Her videos and songs are not sexualized since she believes that “I don’t think it suits me to wear very little clothing, it just wouldn’t feel right. I’d rather people listen to what I have to say instead of staring at my bum” (in Jupp). With this statement she means that everyone can do whatever they please, however she prefers to make her message clear by the lyrics being the focus of attention. In her fifth album (*Ancient Dreams in a Modern Land*), apart from only working with women because she believes that the narrative could only be told by women, she collaborated with Pablu Vittar, a Brazilian Drag Queen, and with Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, ex-member of the feminist punk rock band Pussy Riot.

## The Song

MARINA decided that “Hollywood” should be one of the singles of the album because “This is who I was. Hollywood infected my brain and I really valued the wrong things in life, but I changed dramatically. This obsession with celebrity culture is really unhealthy. I don’t want to live my life like that, and I don’t want to be a typical pop star” (in Cragg). The song is about the positive and negative aspects that America offers, the duality that a nation can provide for their people and for foreigners. Even though she was born in Wales, MARINA has always felt a close connection with the United States through the

movies, the songs, everything American. Nevertheless, that is what America wants you to believe: that it is a paradise, a free nation with nothing but positive aspects. Yet, almost nothing that is shown is real. The romantic movies are too romanticized, the characters, the scenario and the scenes are all fake. There is nothing wrong with this type of representation because at the end of the day, it is an artistic production, but the incorrect part is selling all this by pretending it is real and it is what will happen if you live in the United States. That is the main point of “Hollywood”, the duality and the brainwashing that America has been delivering since at least World War II if not before.

MARINA, a singer and songwriter, is the only author of “Hollywood”. She did not take any music classes and had no music theory background, therefore she used to make music randomly, until it sounded perfect for her. “Hollywood” is a mixture of bubble-gum pop, eurodisco, and glam rock. The lyrics are inspired by the way the United States of America instils their propaganda into every admirer’s brain. MARINA has claimed in interviews that she loves the American people and culture, nevertheless she is not and was never in favor of US propaganda. The singer is now past the era when she was obsessed with America, understanding that her obsession was not healthy at all, and that she had been lied to with the American misinformation, promising kisses in the rain and a wealthy live, as she states in her song.

“Hollywood” is fun and catchy, in stark contrast with the straightforward negative lyrics complaining about America’s most iconic creation. MARINA’s lyrics play with this duality and polarity. The title is a direct reference to America’s main tool for indoctrination. Hollywood, meaning generally American popular films, remains problematic because of the impact it has on cinematic representation around the world. Giving an image that is not real and manipulating and tricking the audience to fall into the trap of thinking this is the ultimate reality of the United States, Hollywood must be rejected.

In the song MARINA asks beautiful Polish migrant girl Anya “‘Why would you wanna be a Hollywood wife?’ / ‘Because I don’t want to end up living in a dive on Vine’” as a poor woman, she replies. With these lines, the singer lets us see how Anya believes “American queen is the American dream” and this is what she wants to conquer. “Hollywood infected your brain / You wanted kissing in the rain, oh, oh” MARINA tells Anya and her own audience. Yet, she also seems to be talking to her past self, having a conversation about how brainwashed she herself was by believing every myth about America. “I’m obsessed with the mess that’s America”, a wiser MARINA sings, addressing her obsession in a healthier, better informed way. Paradoxically, though aware of the not so beautiful parts of America she is still obsessed, enjoying the parts that actually are beneficial and beautiful.

### The Video

“Hollywood” was the most successful single of her first album and with it, MARINA received the recognition she deserved. On YouTube, it accumulates more than twenty-nine million reproductions. The video depicts the typical house party that we often see in Hollywood films, filled with people having fun, not caring about the mess they are leaving behind, dancing and singing. In addition, there are look-alikes, such as Elvis Presley and

Marilyn Monroe, one of the most iconic personas of the 20th century in pop culture in the United States. The video is filled with American flags everywhere, around the house, on people, in decorations and in clothes. MARINA wears a typical cheerleader outfit and through the video we see her changing outfits. After that we can appreciate a dress made with American flags as an inspiration. She also changes into more fancy and elegant clothes, imitating the kind of sophisticated parties also often depicted in Hollywood films.

### The Song and the Video

The video director is Kinga Burza, a Paris-based, Polish-Australian commercial and music video director who has worked in videos for Katy Perry, Ellie Goulding, Lana Del Rey and Aurora among other artists. Burza has also directed a video for MARINA's "Oh No!" What must be said about her direction and the video's production design is that they confirm rather than criticize the American values MARINA is contesting. This possibly has to do with the bubbly tone of the song: if the lyrics are ignored, both music and video suggest that MARINA is celebrating American culture, particularly as regards the "American queens" that want to live the American dream. It is surprising that there is nothing in the video being critical with the USA as the lyrics are.

A good chance, besides, is missed to poke fun on MARINA as she herself does in the lyrics when she sings "A fat security making plays for me / As soon as I touch down in, old L.A., he said... / 'Oh my god, you look just like Shakira / No no, you're Catherine Zeta' / Actually, my name's Marina". The strongly visual moment of the song is missed by the director, who actually had enough narrative material in MARINA's lyrics to build a completely different film. In any case, the reference to non-American stars Shakira (who is Colombian) and to Zeta Jones (who is Welsh like MARINA), highlight the difficulties to be recognized as a star of her own that the far less known MARINA faces. She is her own woman, and known among her fans, but not at all in this America she loves and hates.

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## Adele, 'Someone like You': The Queen of Heartbreak

Alejandra Pumarola Arroyo

Released: 24 January 2011

Album: *21*

Label: XL

Genre: Pop, soul

Length: 4:47

Songwriters: Adele and Dan Wilson

Producers: Adele, Dan Wilson, and Mike Spencer

Lyrics: <http://www.songlyrics.com/someone-like-you/someone-like-you-lyrics/>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLQI3WQQoQ0>

Director: Jake Nava



### The Singer

Adele Laurie Blue Adkins was born in London, England, on 5 May 1988. She is a singer, songwriter, musician, and multi-instrumentalist. She graduated from The BRIT School (as they claim, “the leading Performing and Creative Arts school in the UK”) in 2006, and rose to fame when one of her best friends at the time published a song of hers on Myspace. Four months later Adele signed a contract with the label XL. In 2007, she received the Brit Award for Rising Star, being dubbed ‘the new Amy Winehouse’, and next she won the BBC Sound of 2008 poll. Her debut album, *19*, was released in 2008. It is certified 8× platinum in the UK and triple platinum in the USA. The album contains her first song, “Hometown Glory”, written when she was just sixteen, which is based on her home suburb of West Norwood in London. An appearance on *Saturday Night Live* in late 2008 boosted Adele’s career in the USA. At the 2009 Grammy Awards, Adele won the awards for Best New Artist and Best Female Pop Vocal Performance. In July 2009 she paid £8,000 for a commissioned painting by Stella Vine in a charity auction in aid of Keep a Child Alive, a charity which helps African children and their families living with HIV/AIDS.

In 2011, Adele released her second studio album, *21*. The album was well-received and surpassed the success of her debut, earning numerous awards in 2012, among them a record-tying six Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year; the Brit Award for British Album of the Year; and the American Music Award for Favorite Pop/Rock Album. The album has been certified 17× platinum in the UK, and is overall the second-best-selling album in the nation. In the USA, it has held the top position longer than any album since 1985, and is certified Diamond. The world’s best-selling album of 2011 and 2012, *21* has sold over thirty-one million copies worldwide, making it the best-selling album of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The success of *21* earned Adele numerous mentions in the Guinness Book of World Records. She was the first female artist in the history of the Billboard Hot 100 to have three simultaneous top-ten singles as a lead artist, with “Rolling

in the Deep”, “Someone like You”, and “Set Fire to the Rain”, all of which also topped the chart.

In 2012, she released “Skyfall”, which she co-wrote and recorded for the James Bond film of the same title. The song won an Academy Award, a Golden Globe, a Grammy and the Brit Award for British Single of the Year. After taking a three-year break, Adele released her third studio album, *25*, in 2015. It became the year’s best-selling album and broke first-week sales records in the UK and USA. *25* was her second album to be certified Diamond in the US and earned her five Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year, and four Brit Awards, including British Album of the Year. The lead single, “Hello”, became the first song in the USA to sell over one million digital copies within a week of its release. Her fourth studio album, *30*, contains the chart-topping single “Easy on Me” which was released in October 2021.

Adele’s music is closely connected to her love life. She is popularly known for falling in love and getting heart-broken within no time. However, one must appreciate the fact that all her relationships have taken her to a next step, making her the woman she is nowadays: a very successful female artist with one of the best singing careers. The first boyfriend inspired *19*, and then during her first tour in support of this album, she dated a man who inspired the majority of the songs from *21*. Next, she began dating the CEO of the charity Drop4Drop, Simon Konecki, in 2012. After winning Album of the Year for the second time at the 2017 Grammy Awards, after a great deal of speculation, she confirmed that she and Simon had married in private. In April 2019, she announced that they had separated after more than seven years together—hence *30*.

### The Song

The ballad “Someone like You” was written by Adele and Dan Wilson for her second studio album, *21*. XL Recordings released the song as the second single from the album on 24 January 2011 in the United Kingdom and on 9 August 2011 in the United States. Accompanied only by a piano in the song, Adele sings about the end of the relationship with her ex-boyfriend. The song received positive reviews from music critics who chose the song as a highlight in the album and praised its simple sound. The lyrics and Adele’s vocal performance in the song were also praised. “Someone Like You” was a huge success, topping the charts in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the United States, as well as reaching the top ten in many other countries. By late 2015, it had sold over 1.5 million copies in the UK alone, making it the second best-selling single of the 2010s and the third-best-seller of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far.

Wilson states that “We just wrote it on the piano and then we recorded it when it was written. It wasn’t sort of like recording it and listening to it thinking ‘where can we go next?’ It was really old school” (in Eames). “Someone like You” sums up the now defunct relationship that the album *21* is all about. Lyrically, the song talks about the end of Adele’s first “real relationship” with her long-time friend and lover, and shows her confronting his new marriage. “Someone like You” is a love song from the point of view of a woman who shows up unexpectedly at her married ex’s front door, only to be confronted by the fact that he’s moved on and has a life and a wife, whereas she’s never been able to let go of the man she fell in love with.

## The Video

On 27 September 2011 it was announced that the music video for the song was already filmed in Paris, France, directed by English filmmaker Jake Nava. Several black-and-white pictures which showing Adele “gazing out over a river against a cloudy backdrop” (Fowler) were also posted. Later, the same day, MTV posted a 30-second preview of the video which showed Adele slowly walking on a road. Talking about the video, Nava said, “The location evokes style and romance. And shooting early in the morning allows you to focus on Adele in this lonely and emotional space” (in Fowler). The video premiered on 29 September on MTV and VEVO becoming one of the most popular videos of the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus far and, of course, one of Adele’s favorite.

The narrative story of this music video is linked to the song’s lyrics quite closely. Adele is struggling to move on from a breakup. The music video, filmed in a grainy black and white, connects with the emotion of the singer, helping to convey the theme of the song, which is pain and depression. The video begins with a shot of a street in Paris and Adele is seen walking on it alone in the winter cold, thus transforming the romantic setting into a scene for sadness. She continues to walk and starts singing the song with a sad look as the camera makes circles and shots more locations in Paris including the iconic Eiffel Tower. During the second chorus, Adele stops singing and looks at the Seine. She continues walking alone through the streets during the song’s bridge and at the end, she goes inside a building where she sees her ex-lover. After seeing her, he starts to walk away and several shots of Adele looking at him follow. Director Jake Nava did not use many scenes or cuts; the music video is very simple, however it suits the song’s directness. As he explained,

“Adele came to the session with lyrics and melody for the first half of the verse at least—there was a real vibe and idea already. She told me she wanted to write a song about her heartbreak... that was how she put it. She told me a little bit about the guy who broke up with her, and I think maybe part of my contribution was to help keep the video really simple and direct—very personal”. (in Waterman, original ellipsis)

## The Song and the Video

It is impossible to think about the song and not relate it to the video. Both shape one of the most reproduced videos of the 2010s century with near two million views on the YouTube platform (January 2022). So, as we can imagine the song and the video can hardly be separated. The wintry imagery and the melancholic, bucolic feelings that the video express are what relates the video to the song. Adele’s intentions with the video where to replicate the emotion of the lyrics. Paris is popularly recognized as the city of love and its romantic atmosphere but Adele uses the video to express what she is going through and romanticizes Paris in quite another way. The video focuses on her facial expressions and on the way she feels towards the man that has abandoned her. Some critics have reviewed the music video and the song as one the best songs of the century. James Montgomery called the video “a perfect match for the song’s jaw-dropping emotional range—raw and unfiltered and incredibly sad, but also, in a lot of ways, beautiful”. Andrew Matson of *The Seattle times* observed that

The song of the year now has a simple, perfect video: Adele in Paris, singing and strolling, apparently processing the breakup detailed in the song's lyrics. The look on her face during 'I wish nothing but the best for you' line is the best, just gutting, a real achievement how she plays it cold but not sarcastic. I think in times of emotional devastation, everyone wants to stand on a bridge over the Seine on a cold day, squinting into the wind, sorting it out.

In short, Adele's perfect combination between the music video and the song is what established her lasting fame. The intentions are clear, the queen of heartbreak is desperately trying to convince herself to forget about the man that has left her after a toxic romance. The man will never reappear in her life and she has to assume the truth. Jake Nava helps her evoke what she is going through and that is remarkable, much more so because Adele appears to be strong rather than vanquished by love.

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## Nicole Scherzinger, 'Don't Hold Your Breath': The End of a Toxic Relationship

Laia Droch Canals

Released: 10 March 2011

Album: *Killer Love*

Label: Interscope Records

Genre: Pop, R&B

Length: 3:17

Songwriters: Josh Alexander, Billy Steinberg, and Toby Gad

Producers: Carl Falk, Steve Angello, and Rami

Lyrics:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KELSQEnoD8>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4nKOzk8qbw>

Director: Rich Lee



### The Singer

Nicole Scherzinger was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on 29 June 1978, as Nicole Prascovia Elikolani Valiente Scherzinger. She began acting at the age of fourteen and studied musical theatre at Wright State University. Scherzinger is mostly known for being the lead vocalist of the Pussycat Dolls (2003-2010, and again since 2019), one of the most successful girl groups of all time. This American singer has sold more than sixteen million records as a solo artist and has been nominated for Grammy and Laurence Olivier Awards, even though despite the group's popular success, it was not easy for Scherzinger to be successful in her solo career. Her debut album, *Her Name Is Nicole*, was shelved, though later she went on to make two somewhat successful studio albums (*Killer Love* in 2011 and *Big Fat Lie* in 2014).

The number-one hit single "Don't Hold Your Breath" is included in *Killer Love*, her best-known album. *Killer Love*, has been said to have a bittersweet theme, hence the album's title. Scherzinger has explained in a short 'behind-the-scenes' documentary that:

"I wrote *Killer Love* about a tortured love. Where you can't get enough of the love but it's not good for you. And I guess when the fans listen to the album, I want them to know that a lot of the music that I chose had to do with my past experiences and relationships, where I've lost myself many times. It's about being lost and broken and in a very fearful, dark place and the process of coming out of that". (YouTube)

Summarizing Scherzinger's words, she is saying that *Killer Love* is a highly empowering album, but it comes from a place of heartbreak—one of her problems. The title of the second album, *Big Fat Lie*, was inspired by her struggle with an eating disorder. The American singer, then aged twenty-seven, was battling bulimia. It was not an easy time

for her as she did not recognize the disorder until she started losing her voice and could not sing at concerts. Her manager even found her unconscious on the floor. It was not until years later that Scherzinger admitted she suffered from this eating disorder. As Wallis wrote, “ahead of their highly-anticipated comeback, lead [Pussycat Dolls] singer Nicole, 41, has opened up about her secret struggles with an eating disorder and suggested the pressures of the girl band heightened her issues”.

Aside from her musical career, either with Pussycat Dolls or solo, Scherzinger has participated in television shows such as *Dancing with the Stars* in 2010, in which she was the winner. Scherzinger has also served as a judge in other television talent shows, such as *The Sing-Off* (2009-2010), *The X Factor US* (2011), four seasons of *The X Factor UK* (2012-2013, 2016-2017), Australia’s *Got Talent* (2019), and *The Masked Singer* (since 2019). Moreover, she made her West End debut in the 2014 production of the musical *Cats*. She also voiced a role in the Disney animated film *Moana* (2016).

As noted, Scherzinger is best known for being the lead vocalist of The Pussycat Dolls, with whom she has had planned a reunion tour (she cancelled it, however, in January 2022). Despite being the only member of the group to gain widespread fame, Scherzinger has failed to establish a successful solo career, particularly in her own country, the USA (she appears to be better known in the UK). Music critic Stephen Thomas characterized Scherzinger as “the least distinctive diva of the new millennium”. Furthermore, Adam White has described Scherzinger’s career as “a perfect case study in all the right ingredients not automatically producing a great result; (...) she’s never taken off as a pop star in her own right, instead achieving greater visibility and success as a reality TV judge and spokesperson for products”.

A singer who is not a celebrity is not considered successful in the traditional sense. However, Nicole Scherzinger’s celebrity status appears to be more secure than her status as a singer, which is unusual. The problem in her case is that success is measured by the high standard of the Dolls’ international success, while less popular singers than her are considered to have an excellent musical career. Magda Szymanska observes that, while the Pussycat Dolls were all about having a good time, Scherzinger has been portrayed in a much duller light. The other issue negatively affecting her is that Scherzinger’s style of sexiness is monotonous. The videos for songs such as “Whatever U Like” treated her “as a Bond girl rather than a main character” (Szymanska), and she remains as a would-be-diva in an odd limbo.

## The Song

“Don’t Hold Your Breath” appeared in Scherzinger’s debut studio album, *Killer Love* (2011). The song was written by three men (Josh Alexander, Toby Gad, and Billy Steinberg) and produced by another male trio (Carl Falk, Steve Angello, and Rami Yacoub). It is a song that combines several musical genres such as europop, pop and R&B. It also incorporates musical elements common in nightclubs. The song was first broadcast on 30 January 2011 on BBC Radio, during the *Tom Deacon Show*. It eventually reached the iTunes digital store as the second single from the album. Later, three EPs with several remixes of the original song went on sale. The song was quite successful and received favorable reviews. Ben Norman described “Don’t Hold Your Breath” as “an

absolute standout and one of the best tracks she has offered in any association she's had". Also, Robert Copsey of *Digital Spy* stated that the lyrics and performance were reminiscent of Gloria Gaynor.

As for the title, some people agreed on that it was "quite an apt title for anyone expecting amazing things from it" (de Votée). If we consider the etymology of this idiom, it is really the best title for Scherzinger's song. "Don't Hold Your Breath" is a phrase suggesting that if one were to hold one's breath while waiting for the expected event, one would die before it happened. The song is about a toxic relationship. The female protagonist of the song realizes that her relationship with her ex-partner, most likely F-1 champion driver Lewis Hamilton, has finished and that things will not go back to the way they were. The reasons for their breakup are not known, though it was speculated that it happened because Hamilton did not ask Scherzinger for marriage, or because he underestimated her; others claimed that "the racing driver was 'selfish' during their relationship" (Gamp). Scherzinger herself argued that Lewis "did not give it his all" (in Gamp) when they were together.

In the song the woman has finally left her partner due to his poor treatment of her. Scherzinger is describing a relationship in which the woman was too much in love and lacked the courage to walk away which she later acquired. She has finally broken free and left him for good, and she informs her former lover that he should not wait for another chance since she will not return. If we pay attention to the song, we can see that the singer sounds still very resentful ("What you did to me, boy I can't forget") because she suffered deeply. She always hoped their relationship would change and get better ("I loved you so much / then I thought someday that you could change"). The lyrics reveal the events that happened at the end of a love relationship, in a tone of spite, as shown in the lines "You can't touch me now there's no feeling left / If you think I'm coming back, don't hold your breath / What you did to me boy I can't forget / If you think I'm coming back, don't hold your breath".

While filming her video, Scherzinger told the story of her song: "The song is about letting go and moving forward in your life. It's a very empowering song even though it comes from a very broken dark place originally... just makes the victory of it much more powerful" (in *Story of Song*). This is a positive message, and both the melody and the lyrics are good enough. Yet, despite these positive features, some believe that the song doesn't really impress the listener, being quite conventional: "It just remains a ghost of a song that fails to leave any lasting impression on the listener" (de Votée), beyond its origins in the singer's personal life. However, the song has received positive reviews for Scherzinger's vocals and for the change in musical style, and its attractive simplicity. Many of his fans believe that it is a totally remarkable song and also one of Scherzinger's best.

## The Video

Rich Lee directed the accompanying music video for "Don't Hold Your Breath", which follows Scherzinger as she goes through the emotions of the song. According to Robbie Daw, the song video depicts Nicole in a more "vulnerable" light, as she "cries and regrets the loss of a love affair, but never looks back". The film was shot at the Woodbury-Story

House, an uninhabited house in Altadena, California, listed on the United States National Register of Historic Places as part of the national heritage. The video's aim was to depict drama and anger. The whole video has a cold light, which represents the sadness and the complicated moment that the American singer was going through. However, there are parts of the video where the light is warmer, with sunshine representing the singer's overcoming the painful breakup and rebuilding her life.

Scherzinger has always opted for simple videos in which she tells her story and shows it from her perspective. This is a rather uncomplicated film, but if we analyze it in detail we see that it has plenty to tell us. If we only watch the video once and without paying attention to it, what we will only see is Scherzinger traveling in the back seat of a car, walking through an abandoned house and looking in a mirror while experiencing different emotions. However, an in-depth analysis of the video will make the viewer appreciate the video more. The film starts at night and the protagonist wears a man's shirt. This is a very controversial moment in the video as Scherzinger appears to be stripping in order to show the unnamed man she sings about what he's missing. Once in the car, Scherzinger looks back from the window, a look at what she is leaving behind: her toxic relationship. When she gets out of the car, she enters an empty mansion that represents Scherzinger herself: she is alone and abandoned. It is important to note that there are two main scenes during the chorus. In the first, Scherzinger is seen wrapped in a blanket, while in the second, she is seen walking through a room in the old house that needs to be renovated. The second scene depicts the new life she will begin without her toxic boyfriend. In the bathroom scene Scherzinger looks at the mirror and we can see how she experiences various emotions: anger, sadness, pain, but also a sense of female empowerment. We see a woman who is strong, brave, and certainly capable of ending a toxic love affair.

### The Song and the Video

The song's lyrics are direct and clear enough. The music video helps to better understand the unhappy lyrics as we see a sad Scherzinger, trying to overcome the breakup, presumably with Hamilton. Nonetheless, video and song diverge in some aspects. The song is full of anguish, yet in the video we can see that Scherzinger looks sexy despite her disheveled appearance. She is shot pandering to the male gaze, and all attention falls on her, the only person seen on screen. The opening scene when she changes clothes in the back of the car, stripping off her lover's oversized shirt to don a black tank top, attracted much controversy; indeed, Scherzinger's character in the video was described as a "sexy siren" (Rap-Up). Scherzinger's music videos are usually quite sensual but the car scene seems gratuitous and, on the whole, the up-beat song and video seem to contradict the pain of the breakup. However, fans seem to find the song effective. One, calling herself Fawn Whisperer, writes in the YouTube comments section that "This song helped me so much after leaving a man who was abusive and made me feel worthless every day... I still loved him when I left him. I held my breath and ran and never looked back. This song was a great affirmation. Thank you so much". This is the highest possible praise and confirms this is too a song of empowerment.

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## Rihanna, 'Man Down': The Truth Untold

Amelia Shaw

Released: 3 May 2011

Album: *Loud*

Label: Def Jam, SRP

Genre: Reggae

Length: 4:28

Songwriters: Shama Joseph, Timothy Thomas, Theron Thomas, Shontelle Layne and Robyn Fenty

Producers: Sham, Kuk Harrell and Bobby Campbell

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Rihanna-man-down-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEhy-RXkNo0&ab\\_channel=RihannaVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEhy-RXkNo0&ab_channel=RihannaVEVO)

Director: Anthony Mandler



### The Singer

Robyn Rihanna Fenty was born on February 20th, 1988, in Saint Michael, Barbados, and was raised in its main city, Bridgetown. The Barbadian jack-of-all-trades has dabbled in various other professions since her debut as a singer in 2003, showcasing her talents as an actor, fashion designer and entrepreneur. To this day (2022), she has achieved fourteen number-ones, thirty-one top-ten singles in the United States and thirty top-ten singles in the United Kingdom. So far, Rihanna has won nine Grammy Awards, thirteen American Music Awards, twelve Billboard Music Awards, and has set six Guinness World Records. Such accomplishments have enabled her to become one of the industry's most renowned artists, with critics such as Jayson Greene describing her voice as “an industry-wide idea, a creative property (...). We crave the thrill that you can only get when a dozen or so good ideas manifest themselves in a single voice”. Her sound has become so popular that it is now recognized and celebrated as highly desirable and recognizable, despite Rihanna's diverse repertoire; her music has explored elements of pop, R&B, reggae, hip hop, and EDM, and deals with a number of topics ranging from love, female sexuality, money, among others.

Rihanna may sit atop a stairwell of fame today, but life has not always been so kind to her. She recalls growing up with an alcoholic, drug-addict father who would frequently beat her mother; Rihanna herself “would try to get between them to break up a fight” (in Ross and Macht) and has commented on how this atmosphere had a lasting impact on her own romantic endeavors. Aside from her troubled upbringing, the singer has also struggled to maintain her image, a factor which many agree is of utmost importance in the music industry. In the earlier years of her career, Rihanna was marketed as a fresh sex symbol and pop-princess, and rose to fame with hits such as “Pon De Replay”, “SOS”, “Unfaithful” and “Umbrella”, which presented her as a unique artist and played very heavily on her attractiveness. Her good-girl image was shattered, however, after news of alleged abuse at the hands of former partner Chris Brown

surfaced on the internet in 2009, launching Rihanna into the public eye and labelling her as “a poster child for battered women” (*BBC News*). Although the two have supposedly made amends, her image remains affected by the affair to this day. Rihanna expressed how she feels as though she is being made to constantly relive the event in her interview with *Vanity Fair* in 2015: “But, for me, and anyone who’s been a victim of domestic abuse, nobody wants to even remember it. Nobody even wants to admit it. So to talk about it and say it once, much less 200 times, is like... I have to be punished for it? It didn’t sit well with me” (in Robinson). The pictures of her injuries were released without her knowledge, and sparked the creation of “Rihanna’s Law” (by the organization STOPaparazzi), which stated that no type of information regarding cases such as these should be released without the artist’s official consent. Though the images have proven beneficial to some extent—in that they have left no room for doubt surrounding the legitimacy of the case—Rihanna felt it was an invasion of her privacy (see Ross & Macht) and has since struggled to shake off the ‘victim’ label. After the incident, her music began to shift to address more mature topics, and she adopted a “hardcore masculinity and dominatrix-type” persona (Hobson 82) as that seen in songs such as “S&M”, “Rude Boy”, “Bitch Better Have My Money” (in which the lyrics “don’t act like you forgot / I call the shots” act as a clear reminder to fans and haters alike that she is in control), and others.

Since then, Rihanna’s singing career has gradually slowed to a halt, and her focus seems to have shifted rather towards her fashion and makeup lines, Fenty Fashion and Fenty Beauty, with almost no sign of new music since the release of *ANTI* in 2016. Though many would love to hear new material from such a trademark voice, her more loyal fans (her so-called Navy) are happy to see her thriving in her new professional endeavors. In the meantime, the singer is enjoying teasing her Navy with snippets of songs on Instagram, accompanied by captions like “me listening to R9 by myself and refusing to release it” (Rihanna via Instagram).

### The Song

“Man Down” was written during a writing camp held by record company Def Jam in 2010, intended to compose new possible material for the then-unnamed album *Loud* (2010). Present at the camp were Daniel Jones (manager of duo Rock City) and Sham (Shama Joseph), who was inspired by a vision of Rihanna returning to her Caribbean roots (see Ketchum). After showing the demo to Rock City brothers Theron and Timothy Thomas, the two were immediately inspired by its West-Indian sound and insisted that Rihanna should be given a “one-drop”, a “response to Bob Marley’s ‘I Shot the Sheriff’” from a female perspective (in Chase). The song’s “choppy Caribbean rhythms” as well as Rihanna’s “thick Barbadian patois” (Skinner) have called the attention of several critics; while the other songs from the album have received mixed reviews, in “Man Down” “Rihanna sounds surprisingly agile in this genre and it’s one of her finest, most confident vocal performances to date” (Cinquemani). As the song develops, her accent becomes increasingly more present, progressing to “why did I pull dee trigguh”, “when mi went downtown” and “run outta town / none a dem can see mi now”.

The song has been interpreted as a murder ballad in which Rihanna is a fugitive. After shooting a man who appears to be her boyfriend, the singer flees as she cries to

her mother, racked with guilt: “oh mama, mama, mama/ I just shot a man down”. As one would expect, the song has been analyzed in terms of her relationship with Chris Brown, with many seeing the song as taking on a “confessional tone” (see Stern), or otherwise as “a warning shot across the radio dial to Chris Brown’s ‘Deuces’” (Brown) in which Rihanna’s former aggressor sings “When I tell her ‘Keep it drama free’”, “No more tryna make it work”, and “Thought it was true love, but you know women lie” (see full lyrics at <https://genius.com/Chris-brown-deuces-lyrics>). *The Guardian*’s Kitty Empire claims that Rihanna’s “Man Down” “pings with context” as she sings the murder metaphor with “bittersweet menace”, though producer Sham has responded to these claims, stating:

“I didn’t think it made any sense. I think it was because of who it was saying ‘I just shot a man down’. I think it was very hypocritical for some of the parents against violence in media, those same parents have probably allowed their kids to watch all types of movies and programs that have depictions, or things that insinuate violence. So for them to be mad about, number one, an issue that actually exists? People focus so much on the incident of rape that they fail to think about, once this experience has happened to this person, that they have to live with it. A woman feeling like she wants to shoot somebody who’s still alive because of something that they took from her, that’s real and that’s honest”. (in Ketchum)

Sham’s comment rings true not only for Rihanna, but for many others who have or are experiencing domestic abuse. But whether we understand the song simply as an ode to her Barbadian roots or as a haunting reminder of her past, its success in demonstrating Rihanna’s impressive vocal versatility continues to surprise and thrill its listeners.

## The Video

The video for “Man Down”, directed by Anthony Mandler, takes place in the fittingly vibrant Portland Parish on the north-eastern Jamaican coast. Rihanna revisits her Caribbean origins and, for the first time since her “A Girl Like Me” era in 2006, we get various snapshots of what life might have been like for the singer in her youth. Images of a smiling Rihanna in a variety of colorful, frilly outfits flash across the screen and she is seen participating in perfectly mundane activities: hugging children, sipping fresh coconut juice, and greeting her fellow elders with a gentle kiss on the cheek. It is clear that her relationship with her community is a very close one, making for a striking contrast between the video’s initial imagery in which Rihanna, seemingly unprovoked, shoots a man down in the center of town. When asked about the video, director Mandler said he felt the song needed a “strong narrative and visual” tone to support its controversial theme, and described the clip as “dramatic and shocking and intense and emotional and uplifting and enlightening” (in Vena). As anticipated, the video tells the story of young protagonist Rihanna, whom we accompany as the details unfold to reveal the true nature of the murder. We eventually learn that her actions were indeed provoked (justified?) by an implied rape. The imagery seen in Rihanna’s “Man Down” has been analyzed in Janell Hobson’s book *Body as Evidence: Mediating Race, Globalizing Gender* (2012):

Rihanna rejects the victim stance; in the video, she plays a rape survivor who guns down her attacker. When Barbados-born Rihanna locates this video in Jamaica, the birthplace of reggae, she not only returns to her Caribbean roots but also appropriates symbols of violent masculinity (...) to express female rage. The video’s

prologue recreates a Hollywood version of a dark-hooded femme fatale, but the unfolding storyline seeks to explain her motives, and we are invited to sympathize with a young island woman who, because she may have dressed and danced provocatively with a man at a dancehall, is seen as somehow 'deserving' of rape. By pointing both a literal and lyrical gun at the issue, Rihanna asks viewers to consider what justice means in the context of sexual violence (82-83).

The video addresses an issue which would typically be kept hushed not just by the media, but by society in general. The fact that Rihanna is a celebrity should have little to do with how her situation is perceived, but unfortunately this appears not to be the case.

As discussed, both song and video are aimed as a projection of the singer's heritage; seeing her so in her element as she cycles through sunny, exotic Jamaica has us pondering whether this might have been how a young Robyn may have enjoyed her youth. Perhaps what we should be paying attention to here is not the shocking crime but the bigger picture, one that most would otherwise dance around the edge of: namely, that Rihanna is a black woman. The various criticisms that both song and video have received call attention to the violent nature of the performance, with organizations such as the Parents Television Council (PTC) blasting Rihanna for her "cold, calculated execution of murder" (in *TMZ*). Watchdog group Industry Ears instead opted for a comparison with abuser Brown, claiming "[if] Chris Brown shot a woman in his new video (...) the world would stop. Rihanna should not get a pass" (in *TMZ*). It seems alarming that Rihanna's artistic exposition of an event which was no doubt very traumatic for her should be so heavily scrutinized. An article from *Pop Matters* (2011) discusses the negative reception of the "Man Down" video, calling it "curious"; violence is commonplace in the world of music and has been for many years, with depictions of abuse—particularly towards women—seen in videos from Kanye West, Eric Clapton, Johnny Cash, and even Justin Timberlake. But the fact that Rihanna is a woman here is obviously not the only problem, as the article further explores:

Given how ubiquitous violence is in music and television, the request to ban Rihanna's video on the grounds that it depicts a murder seems disingenuous. What might be troubling to critics of "Man Down" is not just the violence it contains, but who commits the violence and why (...). In her analysis of the "Man Down" controversy, the blogger Sol Chica rightly points out that the response to the video hinges on the fact that the violence in question is committed by a woman of color. Sol Chica compares (...) the Rihanna song with Carrie Underwood's hit "Before He Cheats" (...) [and] suggests that because Underwood is a white woman, she is more easily seen as a victim. Her violent response is, therefore, perceived as legitimate. By contrast, as a woman of color, Rihanna is seen as unjustified and more threatening in her use of violence (in *Pop Matters* online).

If one thing is obvious from these comments, it is that the world is still not willing to accept the gravity of the situation affecting abuse and rape victims. It is baffling to even entertain the idea of Rihanna being constantly under fire, as opposed to her aggressor, but the singer remains on the hotseat for her uncensored portrayal of the facts. "Man Down" has become an ironic metaphor for the question it seeks to expose: sexual assault will always be treated as a taboo, and its nature will continue to be kept under wraps unless its victims take extreme action.

## The Song and the Video

The song itself was relatively successful at the time of its release, but did not receive as much attention as some of Rihanna's better-known tracks. It was not until its music video was released that it began to gain steam, drawing in both positive and negative criticism, as we have seen. Without the video, interpretations of the song may be completely different to those implied when paired with the video; as it has been discussed, the lyrics make no mention of any type of sexual aggression. In fact, without the video, the song could simply be a powerful metaphor for a breakup: the lyrics "I just shot a man down" and "I didn't mean to lay him down" paired with the recurring theme of guilt may just as easily play on the feelings of heartbreak and the difficulty of calling it quits with someone you care about.

Even in this sense, however, one cannot help but tie it to Brown regardless. Rihanna herself has commented on her complicated relationship with him; after all was said and done, she found herself flying out to Miami to reunite with him once again until things turned sour for good. Rihanna "was that girl who felt that, as much pain as this relationship is, maybe some people are built stronger than others. Maybe I'm one of those people built to handle [things] like this (...). [But] if you put up with it, maybe you are agreeing that you [deserve] this" (in *BBC News*). The remark is reminiscent of Rihanna's past, and brings light to the side of domestic abuse few want to talk about. Just as the singer was unable to comprehend why her mother would put up with her father's abuse, so too was she blinded by what she believed to be love, instead believing that people "didn't understand [Brown]" and that she "thought [she] could change him" (in *BBC News*).

The music video brings life to what would otherwise be waved off as an artistic representation of a bad breakup. It aims to shed light on a topic usually hidden from the public eye, and it is clear that those who have perhaps not been in Rihanna's situation are simply unable to comprehend why her video is such a magnificent portrayal of the feelings and urges one goes through after experiencing any type of assault. Actor Gabriella Union, a rape victim herself, praised the song and its video in a tweet: "Saw Man Down by Rihanna. Every victim/survivor of rape is unique, including how they THINK they'd like justice to be handed out. During my rape, I tried to shoot my rapist, but I missed" (in Melton). Though Union believes that "the desire to kill someone who abused/raped you is understandable" (in Melton), she reflects on her own urges to kill her rapist and concludes that her feelings eventually changed. Whether the video and song are to be seen as a theatrical representation of sexual abuse or simply an extended metaphor of a relationship gone wrong, Rihanna and her team have without a doubt done an excellent job in forcing viewers and listeners of the track to open their eyes to a discussion they would otherwise rather be kept behind closed doors.

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## Grimes, 'Genesis': Ethereal Cyborg

Aixa Domínguez Pérez

Released: 9 January 2012

Album: *Visions*

Label: 4AD

Genre: Synthpop, ethereal wave, electropop

Length: 4:15

Songwriter: Grimes

Producer: Grimes

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Grimes-genesis-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FH-q0l1fJY>

Director: Grimes



### The Singer

Claire Boucher known as Grimes was born on 17 March 1988 in Vancouver, Canada to upper middle-class professional parents. She has been active since 2007, when she started posting music on Myspace. However, she started to be truly famous in 2012 thanks to her third studio album *Visions*. Shortly before that, in 2011, she abandoned her studies on neuroscience and Russian at McGill University, dropping out before finishing her degree. She signed then with the British label 4AD, where she has remained until the present day.

How she chose her artistic name was up to luck. In Myspace before creating an account you had to choose three music genres that described your style. She listed “grime”, a type of British electronic music, without knowing what it was. Nevertheless, Boucher told a journalist another different story, explaining how the name took inspiration from *The Simpsons*’ journalist Frank Grimes and from artist Ken Grimes (see Coplan). Later, in December 2014, she wrote in her Twitter account, @Grimezsz, “i was originally too embarrassed (sic) of this story so i told journalists i was named after frank grimes, who is also very cool” and “or wait, no i said i was named after someone else named grimes argh,—see this is why you shouldnt lie to journalists”.

Grimes has published so far five studio albums: *Geidi Primes* (2010), *Halfaxa* (2010), *Visions* (2012), *Art Angels* (2015) and *Miss Anthropocene* (2020). In addition, she has also released two EPs: *Darkbloom* (2011) and *This Story Is Dedicated to All Those Cyberpunks Who Fight against Injustice and Corruption Every Day of Their Lives!* (2020). Her career took off particularly after *Visions*, though she remains something of a cult indie figure. Grimes is appreciated mostly in the United States, Canada and Mexico. She has often performed in the latter since the beginning of her career, having jumped from only English speaking countries to Spanish speaking countries as well through Mexico.

Since 2012 Grimes has been in the public eye more often than before; she is an extravagant woman often connected with scandal, particularly since the writing of her third album. The last part of *Visions* was written in isolation in a Montreal apartment with

blacked out windows (since Grimes can't compose music in daylight), without eating nor sleeping and under the effect of amphetamines. Grimes has always been open about her drug consumption along her career; however, she wrote in her Tumblr account in August 2014 that

losing people to drugs and alcohol is the worst because they destroy any good memories you have of them before forcing you to deal with the empty space they leave behind. (...) I don't want that to be part of my narrative, and if it has to be I want people to know that i hate hard drugs. All they've ever done is kill my friends and cause me to be unproductive. (qtd. by Confusion)

Grimes has attracted most attention, apart from her music, because of her relationship with Elon Musk, the business tycoon with whom she had a son. This relationship was controversial for different reasons, beginning with the name of the baby boy (X Æ A-Xii). Grimes, an anti-imperialist and left-wing woman, negatively surprised many of her fans by dating one of the wealthiest men in the world, an entrepreneur associated besides with problematic advances in AI technology and space exploration. Grimes has always been a fan of science fiction, being specially interested in cyborgs, robots and AI, but from a critical perspective. Almost all of her music videos and songs are related to these themes, a good example could be the song "We Appreciate Power" (2018). Some fans thought that Grimes had sold her morals for Musk. However, the couple broke up in 2021 without the relationship really affecting Grimes' music career. In July 2021, Grimes "announced that her next album will be a space opera about a lesbian AI romance and joined the judging panel of the avatar-based singing competition, *Alter Ego*. Now, naturally, she's launching an AI girl group called NPC, who are set to make their debut on November 12" (Dawson). The first single, composed with Chris Lake, "A Drug From God", was released on that date.

## The Song

Grimes' song "Genesis", from the album *Visions*, narrates a story about a cold-hearted girl with trust issues who does not believe in finding love. That is the first narrative that comes to mind when you listen to the lyrics. However, Grimes has a way of using the melody and the production that leaves the lyrics in a second position. She herself has even declared that she hates singing and writing lyrics and prefers producing. She stated on a video interview with Pitchfork in 2020 that the lyrics of her song "Vanessa" are "clearly bullshit. I mean, I used to be so crazy that I didn't realize songs had lyrics. Like I thought everyone was just saying nonsense, like I actually thought that".

It is no surprise, then, that the lyrics for "Genesis" are not that poetical and are maybe a little bit generic, but that was Grimes' minimalist writing style back then, in 2012, when she did not put much effort in her lyrics. The song stands out because of the melody and the production by Grimes herself. The lyrics are repeated through the song and their meaning is very simple. In any case, if we had to tease a narrative out of these lyrics we actually could, and we might even find references to video games ("Playing the deck above"). "My heart, I never be, I never see, I never know / Oh, heart, and then it falls, and then I fall, and then I know", Grimes sings. The senses are carried by the brain and the eyes, meaning that the singer does not attribute her feelings to the heart, which she only

notices when she loves and loses that love. The title of the song “Genesis” could be interpreted, then, as a constant new start. “Playing the deck above / It’s always different / I’m the one in love”. Love seems a feeling that ought to be strategized rather than be natural, something out of a repetitive game.

### The Video

“Genesis” was one of Grimes’ first successful music videos thanks to the popularity of her album *Visions* (2012) which, as noted, this song is part of. The simple, low-budget video depicts friends having fun, driving around with cars and playing with a snake (a reference to Britney Spears performance at the Video Music Awards in 2001). Grimes herself directed the video; as she explained in an interview with *Pitchfork* in August 2012 “I can’t help taking everything that’s attractive to me and putting it into stuff, I’m very bad at keeping things minimal” (in Battan). The video is thus a combination of little things that Grimes love: having fun, playing with swords and other weapons as in videogames, posing around and overall, being with friends doing as they please. Oddly, Grimes has also claimed that the video is “loosely based on this painting by my favorite painter, Hieronymus Bosch, called ‘The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things’” (in Battan), though watching the video it is hard to see the connection with the painting, no matter how loose. Grimes has also noted that the video “was very Tarantino influenced, and he’s influenced by anime, and obviously anime and video games go hand in hand” (in Battan). As it is habitual in Grimes’ videos, she showcases in “Genesis” friends she admires (besides, she had no money to hire models or actors). The girl with pink braids and a very interesting cyberpunk presence is Grimes’ friend Brooke Candy, a rapper, singer, songwriter and stripper. They met in L.A when Grimes moved there, after Grimes noticed Candy in one of her own shows and fell in love with her look. Overall, the video is a mix of cool aesthetics and people, focused on the magnetic presence of Grimes (and of Brooke Candy as a sort of doppelganger), rather than on the lyrics.

### The Song and the Video

“Genesis” was quite popular, with more than five million streamings, and the video made it and Grimes better known to the public. Every good song needs a music video to expand its popularity, and we can observe this for every song that has been created. The video will always have more reproductions than the song alone. In this case the video was a great push in Grimes’ career. In the same YouTube interview by *Pitchfork* quoted before she stated that “To be completely honest, I think I prefer making videos to making music”. As we have been discovering, Grimes does not seem to enjoy songwriting as much as other music-related activities. In the videos we can see her persona really showing up and connecting with the music she makes. We cannot say in the case of “Genesis” that the song and the video match closely, because, as noted, as director Grimes just has added to the video elements she found attractive. In any case, the video works well. Everything Grimes gives to us is really appreciated because she is true to herself.

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## Björk's 'Mutual Core': Human in Nature in Human

Pernille Gøtze Johansson

Released: 7 February 2012

Album: *Biophilia*

Label: One Little Indian

Genre: Eclectic, avant-garde, electronic, rock, pop, classical, epic, experimental

Songwriter: Björk

Producer: Björk

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Bjork-mutual-core-lyrics>

Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnzRqCK6Fs>

Director: Andrew Thomas Huang



### The Singer

Icelandic-born Björk Guðmundsdóttir (b. 1965) began singing from an early age and released her first album, *Björk*, a collaborative album of children's songs, at the age of twelve. Björk has a long, successful and very diverse career with many different phases: talented child star, composer and singer in a post-punk band in her teens, vocalist in the popular Icelandic 1980s band Sugarcubes, jazz standard interpreter and performer, and author of her own album *Debut*, in 1993. Björk is known for her eclectic, explosive and experimental musical style, and not least for her likewise experimental, powerful, yet fragile, use of her voice. She often collaborates with other artists, and never seems to be restrained by any genre or form of expression, having even acted in films. In 2000 she starred as the leading role, Selma, in Danish Lars von Trier's musical drama, *Dancer in the Dark*, featuring her music, a role for which she won several best actor awards. She has released (and co-released) approximately twenty-five albums and projects (twelve albums in her own name).

As for her geographical roots, Björk has been depicted in the media as a rather mythical figure, rooted in her Icelandic background. In her article "Subjectivity and the Construction of Emotion in the Music of Björk" (2006) Nicola Dibben writes that:

Much of the writing about her music—journalistic commentary, record reviews and scholarly criticism—interprets it in terms of her biography, as illustrated in the headlines and associated visual images which accompany various magazine articles and other publicity material. These representations focus on her sexual relationships; her motherhood, frequently referring to the incident in which she struck a journalist as evidence of the fierce desire to protect her son's welfare and privacy; her Icelandic nationality, which is cited as a reason for what are seen as her eccentricities, and as a metaphor for the extreme contrasts within her music (the fire and ice of her home country); and her artistic heritage as a musician with a long and varied career. (172)

As an artist Björk reaches a broad and very diverse audience. She is a very important figure, not only on the pop culture scene, but in various platforms and genres within the

Western World's musical sphere in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and from the 2000s and forward. She has throughout the years engaged with a wide range of musical genres (i.e. electronic, classical and film scores), projects (such as her *Biophilia* multimedia album), and collaborations across genres, borders and artistic fields, with a large number of musicians, film makers, and large choirs from both Iceland and Greenland.

## The Song

The song "Mutual Core" belongs to Björk's seventh album, *Biophilia* (2011), a multimedia concept album released alongside tutorial applications, which links nature's elements with musical learning tools and online workshops within musicology. The title "Mutual Core" hints that the main themes of the song have to do with the relations and connections between human beings and between them and nature. As scholar Ann-Sofie N. Gremaud argues in her chapter "From within the Porous Body Modes of Engagement in Björk's *Biophilia* Album", in *Artistic Visions of the Anthropocene North: Climate Change and Nature in Art* (2018), Björk is examining the relationships and processes of emotions and interaction between the human species and the processes and movements in nature:

In the videos as well as the lyrics, geological processes and emotional processes are symbolically intertwined as the singer continuously touches, rearranges, and allows her body to merge with tectonic plates, crystals, or volcanos. The main theme that runs through the songs, I argue, is the question of the make-up and consequences of human emotional engagement with other human and non-human bodies. (128)

Thereby, the title of the album, *Biophilia*, and the title of the song, "Mutual Core", are a helpful point of departure in unfolding some of the issues and critical views that are being artistically examined in Björk's geological, technological sci-fi universe.

The title *Biophilia* mimes the hypothesis of the term 'biophilia' made popular in a broad sense by the American biologist Edward O. Wilson in 1984. In his book *Biophilia* (1984) he suggests that humans "possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life" (see *Oxford Reference*). Wilson argues that the affinity of life is the essence of human life, which binds us to all other living species. With this in mind, I argue that the lyrical 'I' in the lyrics can be read as a biophilic 'I' engaging with other living organisms: "I shuffle around / The tectonic plates in my chest / You know I gave it all / Trying to match our continents". As I later will elaborate, it is visually clear how Björk in the music video is merging with nature, a nature that she is in the middle of. Being swallowed by the sand from the waist down she is seemingly being embraced by the ground, the tectonic plates, the soil on which we humans walk. Since the color of her skin is the same as the nuanced hues of the sand, it appears as if she is in a connective phase or in a process of connection, which the lyrics underline: "I know you gave it all / Offered me harmony / If things were done your way / My Eurasian plate subsumed / Forming a mutual core". As Gremaud underlines, "this echoes Wilson's statement about human biological needs, our way of connecting to the rest of the world as well as our biological make-up" (138). The emotional dynamics described in the lyrics are both those between human and human, and between human and nature. As the video makes very clear the song is, I argue, on the one hand, an ecocritical comment on the human species' effect on nature and its ensuing damage. On the other hand, both the visual side and the

soundscape along with the lyrics emphasize how the human species is in the hands of the great and almost beyond comprehension forces of nature. Thus, the merging, interconnectedness and constant exchanges between living organisms, the sharing of the same sphere, the breathing of the same air and the coexistence of everything on this planet and in this universe is at the core of “Mutual Core”.

### The Video

As I have demonstrated, Björk’s ‘I’ is part of the sand, the spirits of the earth and rock formations and thus the geological realm of the world, and vice versa: the forces of nature, unbelievable as they may be, are created out of the same material as human beings. This point is being underlined, when the rock formations evolve into flying creature-like faces with hands or tongues, touching each other and forming the words as Björk sings them. Throughout the video, it becomes clear that the world depicted is both as small and private as the sensuality and intimacy between human beings, and at the same time as vast, grandiose and tremendous as the powers within tectonic plates.

The video can thus be read as a comment on the constant link between micro- and macrocosms which human beings in the (post)modern, anthropocentric age have to take into account, for instance regarding climate changes and the increasing number of natural disasters. The video depicts, beside Björk, the great nature forces that surround her (the maybe-human): rock formations, tectonic plates on the move, the eruption of sand, volcanic explosions and activity, all set in a sci-fi-inspired and rough, yet beautiful and colorful scenery, miming the landscape of Icelandic raw, rural landscapes. These *forces majeures* (in the literal sense) don’t appear as the enemy of the human, on the contrary: they are part of human nature, as humans are part of them. Together with Björk, video director Andrew Thomas Huang has created an animated supernatural universe. The metamorphic strategy supplies the face of nature with one of the human, which is made obvious when human-like faces emerge from the flying rock formations—singing the lyrics of the song and interacting both with each other and Björk. Huang thereby underlines how humans are deeply intertwined and connected with nature.

### The Song and the Video

“Can you hear the effort / Of the magnetic strife?” the ‘I’ asks in the song. And actually the audience can. The video and lyrics interact in a way, so when the geological volcano fragments collide this is reflected in the intensified electronical soundscape: “In this way, the lyrics move back and forth, creating analogies between the bodily and emotional experience of interconnectedness, on one hand, and the geological processes of connection and disconnection in tectonic plates, on the other” (Gremaud 138).

The song “Mutual Core” experiments with the total collapse amongst the hierarchies between human and nature. It depicts emotional feelings of fragile and explosive character. From this perspective the song can be read in an eco-feministic context, by which relations are being valued highly. In an interview Björk unfolded this paratactic and humanistic view on the world:

I like all the emotions, you see: I like to be scared, I like to be happy, to be stupid, I like to be innocent, I like to be clever, I like to be witty, I like to be a two year-old, I like to be a 90 year-old, to be macho, to be feminine—all the different things. It's all a question about attitude and spirit and emotions. You can for example be for the first time on top of a mountain, or be for the first time in love with five persons at the same time—or for the first time eat spaghetti for breakfast—or for the first time not talk for two weeks. All these things you can do for the first time, and you can do things for the first time for the next hundred or two hundred years; you don't have to lose your innocence. This strict reality that everybody agrees with is rubbish. There is no such thing. (in Polar Music Prize)

I argue that this underlines one of the key themes of the song—and Björk's performance of it: the real isn't a constant—there is no such thing, as she says. I find that is why Björk in her artistic practice challenges, disrupts, explodes, hides, experiments and shakes off whatever expectations there might be to a female pop/rock star in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; she *is* the volcanos, landscapes and icebergs rumbling in the dark threatening to travel through metal, concrete, rocks, light and darkness.

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## Fiona Apple, 'Every Single Night': Representations of Anxiety Navigating Mental Illness

Paula Herruzo Muñoz

Released: 24 April 2012

Album: *The Idler Wheel...*

Label: Epic Records

Genre: Alternative

Length: 3:33

Songwriter: Fiona Apple

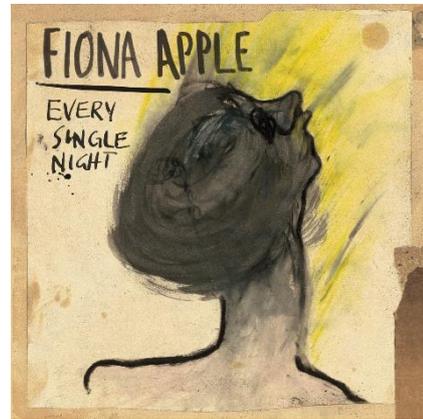
Producers: Fiona Apple and Charley Drayton

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Fiona-apple-every-single-night-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bllLq4BqGdg>

Director: Joseph Cahill



### The Singer

Fiona Apple McAfee-Maggart—born September 13, 1977—is an American musician, songwriter, and producer from New York City. Her breakthrough within the music industry came in 1996 with the release of her first single, “Criminal”, under the label Columbia Records, with whom Apple had signed a record deal at age seventeen and published her first studio album, *Tidal*. After almost three decades into her career, the performer has made a name for herself internationally and paved her way into becoming a successful artist. Apple has released five studio albums which have sold over ten million copies combined, seventeen singles, and fifteen music videos. The singer’s discography has earned her multiple award nominations including eleven Grammy nominations, three Grammy wins, one MTV Music Award, and one Billboard Music Award.

As a musician, Fiona Apple is particularly praised by the critics for her versatile sound, vocals, and lyrical abilities. Music reviewer Emily Nussbaum points out that “whereas other artists might move fast, grasping for fresh influences and achieving superficial novelty, Apple prides herself on a stickier originality, one that springs from an internal tick-tock”. Although her discography is characterized for being highly experimental, Apple’s music is usually classified as alternative, rock, pop, and avant-pop. Born to a remarkably artistic family of actors, dancers, and other musicians, the performer was musically trained from a very young age and displayed impressive piano skills. Apple began composing her first songs as a seven-year-old, and has overseen the production, writing and arrangements of her own published music ever since the beginning of her career. Her role as a songwriter intrinsically leads to a rather autobiographical reading of her witty yet also often crude lyrics, which often deal with themes of mental struggles, heartbreak, and sadness.

The singer herself has been open about her experience with sexual assault as a young child and the outcome it had on her mental health, developing an obsessive-

compulsive disorder, anorexia, anxiety, depression, and an addiction to cocaine. Regarding her status as a survivor of rape, Apple stated in a 2000 interview for Q that her traumatizing experience is not a source of inspiration for her often dejected lyrics: “It doesn’t get into the writing. It’s a boring pain, it’s such a fuckin’ old pain that, you know, there’s nothing poetic about it” (in Sutcliffe). However, her latest album, *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* (2020), includes the track “For Her”, inspired by the life experiences of a close friend, where she sings: “Well, good morning, good morning / you raped me in the same bed your daughter was born in”, a good example of why Apple’s lyricism, autobiographical or not, can be deemed as bitter and even unsettling at times, as much as it is also full of uncomfortable and brave honesty.

Having grown up in the public eye, the musician’s status in the industry has evolved during the years. Notwithstanding, Apple has always kept a low-profile celebrity lifestyle, ever since the early times when she was perceived as a rebellious teenager because of her outspoken personality. Several public appearances reinforced the performer’s status as an edgy young woman during the 2000s—her 2007 VMAs acceptance speech, during which she openly questioned celebrity culture and shouted the iconic words “the world is bullshit”, or the infamous meltdown at the New York Roseland Ballroom in 2000, where the songwriter stormed off stage due to technical issues.

However, Apple’s public ‘bad girl’ persona faded away as she matured, and the musician is now widely respected by her industry peers as an avant-garde artist. Nonetheless, Fiona Apple remains unapologetically critical of the music scene, and slammed the Academy of the Grammy Music Awards in a 2021 interview for *Rolling Stone*, arguing against unfair judging and the misogynistic treatment towards Kesha after her abuse by producer Dr. Luke came to light (see Blinstein). Additionally, Apple recently expressed her wish of not wanting to be under the scrutiny of the public eye anymore to take care of her mental health: “It’s really because I don’t want to be on national television—I’m just not made for that kind of stuff anymore. I want to stay sober, and I can’t do that sober—it doesn’t feel safe to me to be under exposure, scrutiny, comparison to people. I can’t” (in Carras). Because of this, it is currently rare to see the performer attending public events.

### The Song

“Every Single Night” was Fiona Apple’s comeback after six years of distance from the music industry. It is the lead single from her fourth studio album, *The Idler Wheel Is Wiser Than the Driver of the Screw and Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do* (2012), which although having made it to the charts in a lower ranking than her previous work, is one of the singer’s most critically acclaimed records. *Pitchfork* editor Jenn Pelly reviewed Apple’s single—named “Track of the Month”—and stated that “Only Fiona Apple could deliver something like the psychologically complex self-analysis on ‘Every Single Night’ and sound elated”, praising as well its outstanding lyricism. The song is an exquisite exhibition of Apple’s talents as a musician; her vocals shine in a raw, yet delightful manner, accompanied by a peculiar music production.

In “Every Single Night”, a mentally-drained Fiona Apple sings about wanting to embrace her own sadness during a nocturnal mental breakdown. The lyrics to this ballad contain some of the singer’s most commended writing to date. The words “Every single night / I endure the flight” are the opening lines of the track, in which the pain the singer is under is deemed unescapable: “Like a second skeleton / Trying to fit beneath the skin”. The initial part of the song hints at fears and insecurities that regularly creep through her mind and come out alive at night—in the chorus, the songwriter confesses that anxiety will deprive her from getting any sleep, as it is regular for people suffering from certain mental illnesses: “Every single night’s alight with my brain”.

The lyrics are surrounded by constant imagery of the human body as a carrier of the emotions that configure individual identity: “If what I am is what I am, ‘cause I does what I does / Then brother, get back, ‘cause my breast’s gonna bust open. / The rib is the shell and the heart is the yolk / I just made a meal for us both to choke on”. Despite the initially sad and disturbed undertones of the track, the message being conveyed becomes more positive as it progresses, and Apple repeatedly proclaims: “I just wanna feel everything”. The desire to feel everything also implies being exposed to the darkest parts of her own self. As Pelly observes, “Apple has a genius for articulating the power that comes with solitude and self-reliance”. Episodes of anxiety often make the individual feel powerless and unable to control their emotions—perhaps the words are intended to express how dealing with complex feelings also entails being able to navigate through old pain.

Be that as it may, the song has a self-concluding last part in which previous metaphors are brought back to convey the control the singer has now found within herself: “If what I am is what I am ‘cause I does what I does / And maybe I’d relax, let my breast just bust open / My heart’s made of parts of all that surround me / And that’s why the devil just can’t get around me”. All in all, the performer seems to have endured enough suffering to grow thicker skin and deal with her emotions in a hopeful, yet honest way in which she is aware of her own weaknesses and accepts them.

### The Video

The music video for “Every Single Night”, directed by Joseph Cahill, induces a dreamy, chaotic atmosphere charged with symbolism; it was described as “one of the most surreal in her archive” by journalist Rachel Hahn, showing the singer emotionally struggling in different urban scenarios. The first scene depicts a close-up of Apple while someone places an octopus over her head, marking the start of a series of disconnected and apparently nonsensical bizarre scenes—she is shown drowning in the water tank of a zoo, wandering around the lonely streets of Paris while a giant octopus emerges from the river, and passing out moments later only to be carried by a group of strangers who are constantly holding light bulbs.

The metaphors and images present in the lyrics make their own appearance in the music video, for the singer embraces a skeleton and holds a brain in her own hands while being surrounded by snails. Altogether, the visuals create a feeling of anxiety which accurately conveys the meaning of the song. The lack of a clear storyline adds the final sprinkle of confusion to an already eccentric music video in which, the viewer, seems to

be taking a glimpse into the troubled mind of the singer, presenting herself as a woman in pain. In that sense, Apple portrays a quite realistic image of mental illness suffering by stepping away from its romanization.

### The Song and the Video

It is unknown to what extent Fiona Apple herself was involved in the directing of the music video, but it is safe to consider that the message in “Every Single Night” is presented in an oddly interesting way visually-wise: “It’s creepy and it’s cinematic and strangely enough, it’s everything we expected from a returning Apple” (Buda). Emotions often show themselves in illogical manners, which is why the choice of the oneiric and almost nightmare-like settings for the music video is highly suitable.

It is worth noting that Apple appears with a noticeable less glamorous look and overall appearance in comparison to the highly-perfected aesthetics that pop stars usually embody, probably as a matter of personal preference—she often chooses lighter make-up, if any—and to better suit the theme of the song. In a certain way, however, it could also be argued that the fact that the performer navigates the alternative side of the mainstream music scene, along with choosing not to engage with the scrutiny of the public, can bestow her with the ability to make artistic choices deemed as more authentic or approachable by the audience. Be that as it be, Apple delivers a heartfelt performance, and the viewer can understand her struggle both visually and musically to appreciate her unique artistry.

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## Norah Jones, 'Miriam': Hating the Other Woman

Sophie Whittlely

Released: 25 July 2012

Album: *Little Broken Hearts*

Label: Blue Note Records

Genre: Indie pop

Length: 4:22

Songwriters: Brian Burton and Norah Jones

Producer: Danger Mouse

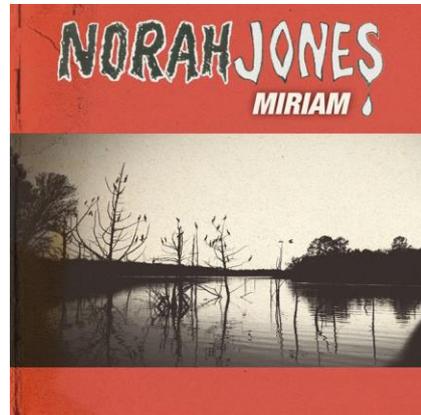
Lyrics:

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/norahjones/miriam.html>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZgkCIKE6hQ>

Director: Philip Andelman



### The Singer

Norah Jones, originally named Geethali Norah Jones Shankar, is an American singer and songwriter born on 30 March 1979 in Manhattan, New York, to world-renowned Indian sitarist and composer Ravi Shankar and concert promoter Sue Jones. Norah Jones has been active in the music industry from 2000 to the present day, with her latest album, a Christmas album entitled *I Dream of Christmas*, being released in 2021.

Norah Jones came to music at a very early age and this art played a hugely important role throughout her childhood and adolescence. Her father, Ravi Shankar, was an immensely successful musician and renowned sitarist who had associations with the biggest names in the western music sphere including The Beatles. Shankar's musical influence inspired Norah, who at the age of five began singing in her church choir. After establishing her love of music from such an early age, Jones learnt a number of instruments and particularly enjoyed the piano and singing which led to her transfer from Grapevine High School to The Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. At the age of sixteen, Jones made the decision to officially change her name from Geethali Norah Jones Shankar to the simplified Norah Jones, removing the Indian aspect of her name. Jones has never commented on why she made this move; it is therefore unknown whether the cause was her music career or perhaps her estrangement from her father from a very early age until they were reunited when Norah turned eighteen. There has been much speculation over her relationship with her father, a matter she has tried to remain private about. Defending her silence, in an interview with *Vogue* Jones recalled that "The success of my first record and the sudden public interest in our relationship complicated everything (...). I was trying to tell my story and be true to myself while still trying to convey a sense of privacy regarding my unique family dynamic" (in Mahindru).

Despite the difficult family dynamic, Jones found her path and rose to fame very quickly. During her time studying at the University of North Texas Norah met Jesse Harris,

an encounter that enabled her to begin to pursue her career. She moved to New York after graduating and started a band with Harris; the band garnered much attention which eventually resulted in Jones signing a record deal with Blue Note Records in 2001. Only a year later, in 2002, Jones, at the time aged twenty-two, released her debut full-length album, *Come Away with Me*, of which she sold over twenty-seven million copies and which earned her five Grammy awards. A main reason accounting for her huge success is the range of listeners Norah Jones attracts. Her music, blending classic and contemporary jazzy pop, appeals to all age groups, leading to what *The Guardian* has called 'The Norah Effect', "melting the barriers between generations and genres" (Spenser).

### The Song

The song "Miriam" was released in 2012 and is included in the album *Little Broken Hearts*. Having worked previously with Danger Mouse on his album *Rome*, Jones worked with the artist again on her own album accounting for the change in style to her previous releases. "Miriam" is an example of the new paths Jones explores in the album.

This song lends itself to analysis and is of particular interest because it provides such a contrast from her previous work, perhaps as a response to the backlash she received at earlier stages of her career. Much of Jones' early work has been subject to harsh criticism with *The New Yorker* dubbing her second album *Come Away with Me* as "One big booty call" (Frere-Jones). Not only was the nature of her sensual lyrics openly criticized but also the overall resonance of her work, with many reviews referring to her as "tepid", "blank", and "dull" (Frere-Jones), and landing her the unfortunate nickname of 'Snorah Jones'. The dark and surprising lyrics in "Miriam" can easily be viewed as a response to this criticism. Firstly, unlike her "sultry" (Bogart) first three albums, the lyrics are here about a breakup; they take a powerful and vengeful tone from the very start and, contrastingly, are directed at a woman rather than a man. In many ways this is a strong response to the idea that her music is solely focused on seduction.

The very opening of the song, "Miriam, / That's such a pretty name, / I'm gonna say it when, / I'll make you cry", directly addresses the woman we assume to be the singer's rival and establishes the dark and vengeful tone from the beginning. The lyrics throughout are unsettling and undoubtedly focused on the fall of a woman who has come between the singer and her partner. The listener is left with no doubt over the intentions of the singer when she sings, "Now I'm not the jealous type / Never been the killing kind /, But you know I know what you did / So don't put up a fight". The unsettling nature of the threat is emphasized somewhat by the indication of pleasure the singer derives from this revenge, "I'm gonna smile when you say goodbye". Clearly this spiteful song defies the critics that have stated that "Jones never ruffles feathers or breaks the skin" (Frere-Jones).

However, whilst the lyrics seem to address this woman called Miriam, the song is at its center, about a man, a theme that resonates in almost all of Norah Jones' music. Arguably, in many respects these lyrics make it easy to criticize the singer's point of view as lacking feminist principles. The line "I've punished him for being too weak / Now I've saved the best for you" simultaneously suggests that the singer believes the other woman

to be the one to blame for the interference caused in the relationship, and paints Miriam as a *femme fatale* that seduced the man against his will (for he is “too weak”). The notion of the man being simply ‘weak’ rather than evil like the other woman, further insinuates Miriam’s presentation as a seducer and the cause of all the damage. This is further indicated in the previous stanza, “I know he said it’s not your fault / But I don’t believe that’s true”. This is not a helpful portrayal of a woman and serves to perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

However, *Little Broken Hearts* traces all of the stages of a breakup and in this sense, the anger she conveys in “Miriam” is a truthful telling of the reality of such a situation—presenting lyrics that are intense and do not mask any emotion. By doing so, Jones tells a story throughout the album that does not shy away from the worst aspects of human nature, in this respect the song does not relay a message of ‘hating the other woman’ but instead simply presents the relatable and truthful stages of a breakup—including the inevitable anger and resentment. In addition, after her early success—Norah Jones “had enough cash to do pretty much what she wanted” (Kivel) and in creating the album *Little Broken Hearts* she shows her incredible range and ability to create music that resonates with all the feelings of a breakup, displaying how she is able to “push her own boundaries” (Kivel) with regard to her music.

### The Video

The video for “Miriam” was directed by Philip Andelman, a well-known, respected director who has worked on videos for many music industry stars including Rihanna and Selena Gomez. Here, Andelman perfectly matches the music to the video, filmed in Texas on Lake Bastrop. The film begins with a slow camera panning of the lake which elevates the eerie quality of the music. The video then features Norah Jones singing on a small boat, staring straight at the camera before dipping below the water surface to show the body of the woman assumed to be Miriam. Jones has commented on how she had just come out of a breakup when this video was filmed and was “Thinking dark things” (in *Complex*) and as a result has said there is “a lot of hurt” in the album as a whole which is particularly obvious here. The video clearly reflects this state of mind and is very chilling all the way through, showing the new and darker quality to her music in a dramatic change from her previous videos such as the one for “Come Away With Me”, which has a dream-like and very relaxed tone.

“Miriam” was not the lead single on the album *Little Broken Hearts*, but followed “Happy Pills”, which garnered slightly more attention. “Miriam” did not reach the tops of any charts as a single, despite the album reaching number four in the UK and the song did not receive a huge level of critical acclaim. As such, it is difficult to say whether the music video had any impact on the song and its overall success, however it is an effective video that defies the idea that Norah Jones is a singer that is afraid to offend.

### The Song and the Video

The understated nature of the music video enables the focus to remain on Norah Jones’ voice and the fact that the production is so minimal is representative of the power of her

voice in itself, especially when taken in comparison with the many contemporary music videos that rely and make use of such elaborate sets/means of production. Furthermore, it is the tone of her voice that is her main selling feature and the durability of herself as an artist and the video respects this. While “Miriam” was not even one of her top selling songs, it has still been likened to Dolly Parton’s *Jolene* and found its place among the genre of ‘revenge ballads’. The video removes any element of mystery surrounding the lyrics, considering the frame at the end which shows a woman tied up with rope under the water. As I have previously mentioned, the song reflects the lyrics perfectly in conveying the creepy and murderous tone. However, the composure and image of Jones sitting as a lonely figure in the middle of the lake, as she sings directly into the camera, portrays a sense of strength and power and embodies the nature of her success which is solely focused on her vocal talent.

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## Anohni, 'Cut the World': Unable to Stop

Pernille Gøtze Johansson

Released: August 2012  
Album: *Cut the World* (by Antony and the Johnsons)  
Label: Rough Trade Records  
Genre: Pop, symphonic, classical, chamber-pop  
Length: 4:40  
Songwriter: Anohni  
Producer: Pitchfork  
Lyrics: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/antonyandthejohnsons/cuttheworld.html>  
Music video: <https://youtu.be/U9a1C1qXHfM>  
Director: Nabil Elderkin



### The Singer

New York City-based Anohni (born Antony Hegarty in 1971 in Britain) formed part of Antony and the Johnsons between the years 1998 to 2000. The group released their first album, *Antony and the Johnsons*, in 2000, but became wider known with the album *I Am A Bird Now* (2005). After more than four years of silence, with no new studio album releases, Anohni released her solo album *Hopelessness* (2016) under her new name. Stylistically it is hard to label her music. Even though Anohni is placed within the pop music field, she is clearly influenced by a broad variety of different music styles; for instance she makes use of instruments and creates soundscapes (also in the way she uses her voice) which are typical of classical symphonic orchestra music. Furthermore, the epic sound and the experimental music style are influenced by both theatrical codes and the jazz genre. Additionally, Anohni has collaborated with various musicians such as Lou Reed, Rufus Wainwright and Björk—but also inter-artistically with performance artist Marina Abramović and the Danish National Symphony Orchestra; both play a key role in the further analysis of the song and associated video, “Cut the World” (2012).

With a background in the alternative cabaret, drag and the performance underground milieu of New York, Anohni is known for her queer and at times androgynous appearance, and as a trans person who is challenging the stereotypical gender roles, constructing her own subjectivity. As master of musicology Åste Jensen Sjøvaag puts in her 2012 master thesis, *Uncovering the Cover: Reading Authenticity and Subjectivity in Cover Songs* (written when Anohni was still known as Antony): “[T]hrough the staging of his performance; he is constantly changing his visual and auditive image” (Sjøvaag 65). As an ever-changing and ever-challenging persona Anohni is highly political in her lyrics and outspoken views, denouncing the climate crisis and criticizing political, social and economic issues such as injustice against minorities and inequality—especially in the United States: “We’re behaving in a virulent manner; we’re cannibalising our own home. And we’re unable to stop ourselves” (in Beaumont-

Thomas), Anohni states in an interview with *The Guardian* (2016). In the same interview she is reflecting on the transgendered position in the world:

I was never going to become a beautiful, passable woman, and I was never going to be a man. (...) It's a quandary. But the trans condition is a beautiful mystery; it's one of nature's best ideas. What an incredible impulse, that compels a five-year-old child to tell its parents it isn't what they think it is. Given just a tiny bit of oxygen, those children can flourish and be such a gift. They give other people licence to explore themselves more deeply, allowing the colours in their own psyche to flourish. (in Beaumont-Thomas).

In this manner her music melts together with her beliefs and personal convictions, which she is known for expressing straightforwardly. Anohni was the second openly transgendered person to be nominated for an Oscar (in 2016 for the soundtrack to the documentary *Racing Extinction*), but when learning that she wasn't invited to perform at the show, she decided to boycott it completely, and stated in an essay in her blog:

I want to be clear—I know that I wasn't excluded from the performance directly because I am transgendered. I was not invited to perform because I am relatively unknown in the U.S., singing a song about ecocide, and that might not sell advertising space. It is not me that is picking the performers for the night, and I know that I don't have an automatic right to be asked. But if you trace the trail of breadcrumbs, the deeper truth of it is impossible to ignore. Like global warming, it is not one isolated event, but a series of events that occur over years to create a system that has sought to undermine me, at first as a feminine child, and later as an androgynous transwoman. It is a system of social oppression and diminished opportunities for transpeople that has been employed by capitalism in the U.S. to crush our dreams and our collective spirit.

In this way, Anohni's musical expression and career connect the private with the public, dealing artistically and personally with the transitions of the world, from the personal matters of individuals on a micro level to the macro strokes of the brush.

## The Song

The 2012 album *Cut the World* featuring the song of the same title is a live album recorded in Denmark in 2012 in collaboration with the Danish National Symphony Orchestra. The song "Cut the World" was originally written for the theatrical musical performance play by the Serbian-born performance artist Marina Abramović titled *Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (2011). The play was directed by Bob Wilson, starring Willem Dafoe and Anohni herself among other performers. The play was well-received, and Brennan states in his review that every moment is heavily loaded with a variety of symbols, and the scenes "suggest multiple meanings" (Brennan). This is a useful quote in the analysis of the song since the lyrics and the music show both beauty and horror—the listener is left with an ambiguous message. The song's atmosphere is overall dramatic, dreamy, melancholic and symphonic, which (as usual) Anohni is backing up with her soft, warm, big tenor voice (see Sjøvaag for further vocal register analysis). Despite its epic character and the dramatic lyrics, the song also captures the fragility and poetic in inter-human relationships: "My eyes are coral / Absorbing your dreams / My skin is a surface / To push to extremes".

Beginning by stating “For so long I’ve obeyed / That feminine decree”, and ending with numerous repetitions of the question: “When will I turn and cut the world?”, this song captures the anger and unjust archetypical expectations for women to keep deep inside their suffering and pain forced by a patriarchal reality. From a feminist perspective the song dismisses the woman’s role of supporting the structures of a repressive system, within which she has been placed through generations. In this system, she is expected to ‘contain your desire to hurt me’, and not react and ‘cut the world’—even though “My heart is a record / Of dangerous scenes”, as Anohni sings. The woman is a witness of all these scenes of injustice. Not only a witness of her own suffering or repression, but a witness of the ill-treatment of all women, all minorities, who suffer from being treated as ‘the other’ in the sense of not fitting the standardized male measurements on which the world is built. The lyrics can be read as a plea or an invitation to all feminist persons in the world to stop suffering—or witness suffering—in silence. And a proclamation to society for acknowledging anger as a valid feeling—within all human beings (and not only half of us). As the video supports, the narrative in the song can be interpreted in a quite dramatic and violent way, but it is also plausible to read the invitation to “cut the world” in a less direct way, and more as a reflection on the (patriarchal and unequal) system which society is built upon.

### The Video

The video, directed by Nabil Elderkin and starring actors Carice van Houten and Willem Dafoe, also features performance artist Marina Abramović, among others. It is a highly cinematic production that takes place in a rather sophisticated, corporate office environment. Dafoe plays the CEO and van Houten his secretary. In the short introduction the two characters interact and engage in what seems to be a normal, pleasant, not too deep or personal, but polite and short conversation. But there is a tension, something is smoldering, something is completely wrong beneath that smooth, exclusive, and generic surface. As the lens follows the secretary, a small change within her is revealed: a certain look in her eyes, the sad smile on her face, the sky outside the windows that are darkening a bit. This change evolves, not in an explosive way, but in a subtle and gradual way, that leads her to pick up a sharp letter opener with which she eventually cuts the throat of Dafoe’s character. When asked about the narrative conceptualizing of the video, Anohni answered in an interview with *Pitchfork*:

“The basic premise was that a cataclysm in nature provokes a chain of events, which occur in the film. I ended up finding the word ‘cataclysm’ because I kept thinking of a tsunami, or something that happened to everyone—no one was making conscious decisions. And Willem sensed that something was changing, in the way that a dog would sense an earthquake. And by the time [Carice] was aware of what happened, somehow her consciousness had shifted”. (in Pelly)

The cataclysmic *force majeure* in the narrative of the video is the movement in a world in which there are no options left, but to let the tsunami hit. This is not about the killing committed by each individual woman (the last scenes show many in bloodied clothes, knives in hands), rather it is about the structures that drove them to ‘cut the world’. It is not about Dafoe’s character or the other (presumably) men, husbands or superiors that

have been killed. The killing is not necessarily a personal act of vengeance committed by a sexually insulted or oppressed woman. It is a depiction of a confrontation with the institutions, that can only remain in force if the current power dynamics, which secure some people's privileges at the sacrifice of others, are being preserved.

### The Song and the Video

As the video has a very subtle appearance—in all its cinematic finesse it is a rather slow-moving film, and the colors are to some extent subdued—it complements the tune by Anohni: the effect of the dramatic event is even more striking, when it is depicted in the calm environment of the films' office setting. As the musical tension builds up, so does the visual narrative. Yet, throughout the tune, even during the rather macabre throat slicing, the tempo and effects are kept in check. The act of killing is to some extent performed in a rather emotional and fragile way; Elderkin, for instance, has van Houten hold Dafoe and cry into his eye. Anohni explains the transfer which the tear symbolizes as “[a]n intuitive, emotional awakesness. It represents that it wasn't a killing done out of rage” (in Pelly). Even in the act of killing, the secretary stays emotionally open and acknowledges the other person—as a person. The video depicts, in detail, the horror of a killing, but it perhaps also exhibits something in human nature: “This video is obviously problematic, but I feel very strongly about it as a gesture. It's not a suggestion we're asking reality to pursue. It's a shaking of some ideas in peoples' heads—a dialogue between archetypes within each of us” (Anohni in Pelly). The building up of tension which in the movie comes to its outermost consequences, is a movement in our society, it is the building up of... something. A need for change, or transfer, so necessary and inevitable, something which we are unable to stop.

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## Tinashe, 'Who Am I Working For?': Against Capitalism

Ania Sáez García

Release: 6 September 2012

Album: *Reverie*

Label: Tinashe (self-released)

Genre: R&B, soul

Length: 3:47

Songwriters: Tinashe Kachingwe, Wesonga Jr. and Loving

Producers: Nez & Rio

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Tinashe-who-am-i-working-for-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68MrrahuzGA>

Director: Tinashe Kachingwe



### The Singer

Tinashe Jorgensen Kachingwe was born in Lexington, Kentucky, on 6 February 1993, but moved to Los Angeles when she was eight. She started ballet, tap, and jazz dancing when she was four, and started participating in competitions with her dance company when she was eighteen. Tinashe starred in some TV shows, movies, and children's videos in the early 2000. She was in the pop girl group *The Stunners* in 2007 under Columbia Records. When the group disbanded in 2011 she started her solo career.

When she parted ways with Columbia Records, Tinashe self-released her debut solo mixtape *In Case We Die*, but subsequently signed under RCA Records. However, "RCA deferred her sophomore album, *Joyride*, wanting to keep the singer in an ill-fitting pop box rather than the genre-expanding R&B she preferred with co-writers like Dev Hynes of Blood Orange" (Bendix). After the cancellation of the album *Nashe* and her tour, Tinashe decided to abandon RCA Records. When she was finally able to release the album RCA kept postponing, reviewers noticed that "Power and confidence are ongoing themes in Tinashe's new music, which is both a surprise and relief for listeners who know what it took for her to release it" (Gonzales). Later she self-released her studio album *Songs for You*, a Christmas EP titled *Comfort & Joy*, and her long-awaited fifth album *333*. Despite the seemingly slow progression of her career, Tinashe has been nominated and won various awards, such as the Ivor Novello Award for Best contemporary song and the Zimbabwe Achievers Award USA for Music artist of the year (she is of Zimbabwean descent on her father's side), which shows her large circle expanse not being encased in only one sector of society.

Tinashe is well known for her social media, being especially active in them. She has been involved in a few major quarrels with other celebrities. One of the best known cases was her heated exchange with renowned artist Lana Del Rey, after Del Rey posted on her Instagram account a video of the protests flooding the USA after George Floyd's

killing by the Police. In this video “She allegedly zoomed in on the protesters, leaving their identities exposed” (Langford), particularly those who might be accused of looting. Tinashe, along with other artists like Kehlani, called Lana Del Rey out through Twitter. After the post was deleted, Tinashe thanked Lana Del Rey for removing it. However, the post was later re-posted, as some fans informed Kehlani, until a compromise was reached and “Over the weekend, Tinashe, Kehlani and Del Rey attended peaceful protests to support the Black Lives Matter movement and to protest the tragic murder of George Floyd” (*PopCrush*).

The best known of all Tinashe’s clashes with other celebrities is her feud with Chris Brown after he made some unpleasant remarks regarding Kehlani’s attempted suicide. After Tinashe protested and unfollowed Chris Brown on Instagram, “In response, the Grammy winner took to his Instagram and said: ‘Notice that I’m not the one asking to get on anyone’s record, this is them thinking they are standing up for something’” (Cassidy). The friendship they may have had while they released *Player* definitely disappeared when Tinashe brushed off the matter in an interview, and Chris Brown took to his Instagram (again) to berate her (see Simmons).

Tinashe also had some problems regarding the sexual stereotypes forced on her, because of this, she was not comfortable with coming out as bisexual. However, this has changed with the progression of her career and “she now feels comfortable revealing her sexuality, in this stage of her career” (McKay). In an interview with *Gay Times* Tinashe stated that “I never wanted people to think that I used it for attention. There are so many f\*\*\*ing stereotypes about being bisexual that made me want to shy away from talking about it. I’m much more open to having those discussions now” (in Damshenas).

### The Song

The song “Who Am I Working for?” from her album *Reverie* is a claim against capitalism. The system is not working and only serves as a prison for almost everyone so that just a few can live happily while chaining up everyone else. The lyrics are a hymn to liberty and equal rights. Tinashe portrays the difficult situation capitalism forces on workers in the lines “I gotta get another job now / ’Cause I can’t seem to make enough money / Damn, I’ve been working so hard now / But I still can’t provide for my family” and then again when she sings “And I’m working like a dog just to get ahead / Wondering every single day, ‘Is it my turn yet?’ / But somehow I can’t get out of debt”. Tinashe pictures the Government as the embodiment of capitalism, and shows how workers are harassed: “There is a knockin’ at the door / Tax-man here, government want more”; soon the lyrics change to: “There is the devil at the door / Tax-man here, government want more”. However, she seems to be quite optimistic about the future, as after the first chorus she sings “We can only go up from here, I believe”. The song ends with the lines “No one’s more enslaved now than the ones who falsely feel they are free”, which gives the whole song a new meaning, transforming it from a mere claim against capitalism to a chant for general awareness about Americans’ lack of freedom.

## The Video

The video for “Who Am I Working for?” is full of messages against the enslaving system of capitalism, and shows the fakeness of it all. The message “past due” that appears on the overdue bills changes to “too late / not enough/ give up”, which questions the real meaning behind capitalist standards, stressing the individual’s inability to escape its traps.

There are two main moments in which the camera focuses on Tinashe throughout the video. In the first one, she appears singing while sitting on some stairs. In the second one, she is dancing before a white wall where messages keep appearing while she and the dancers wear masks. The masks are translucent, but still distort the real image of their faces. This mask is a symbol of the façade the system poses, as although it presents itself as something transparent, it still hides its true reality behind what it sells as true. On the wall, we can see slogans resisting the system, such as “Free us” and “I will not be a slave”, and statements against the claims of capitalism. “We all bleed red” and “Riches→Paper” show the real values that have been distorted by the system and how all humans are the same for this machine. Through the video we can see the word “work” being flashed intermittently, showing how we are taught what we have to do via messages we sometimes don’t notice. At the end of the video, we see one last message written on a dollar—“Who am I working for?”—which serves as a closing stance in this consciousness raising video.

## The Song and the Video

Tinashe has been herself an ill-treated worker. Payne wrote in 2013 that “the 20-year old singer’s career is on the rise. Last July, she signed a solo recording contract with RCA/Sony Music, and is currently at work on her debut album”. Almost ten years later, in 2022, “What Am I Working for?” comes off as ironic, taking into account this was her first release under RCA, which later became the employer she had to fight with to have her music published. Tinashe faced professional setbacks to her career, as the label seemed to prioritize other artists and downplay her work. When she was finally able to release the album RCA kept postponing, reviewers noticed that “Power and confidence are ongoing themes in Tinashe’s new music, which is both a surprise and relief for listeners who know what it took for her to release it” (Gonzales), yet the ups and downs Tinashe went through during the process and from which she emerged with renewed force were not discussed from the political point of view she uses in the song.

The delivery of the message against capitalism that the video tries to give is, in any case, almost nullified by the appearance of the expensive Audi convertible Tinashe drives. This blatant product placement constitutes a denial of the song’s message and shows besides that in order to release a political anti-capitalist song and video some pro-capitalist propaganda is still needed for funding. The slogan “I will not be a slave” is thus emptied of meaning, for the song and Tinashe’s career appear to be tools for economic self-empowerment leading towards the purchase of items like the Audi, and not at all calls for reconsidering work from a serious critical position. Or so it seems.

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## Lana Del Rey, 'Ride': The Controversies of Being a Sad White Girl

Sam Ávila Rubiales

Released: 25 September 2012

Album: *Paradise*

Label: Interscope Records

Genre: Soul-pop

Length: 4:49

Songwriters: Lana Del Rey and Justin Parker

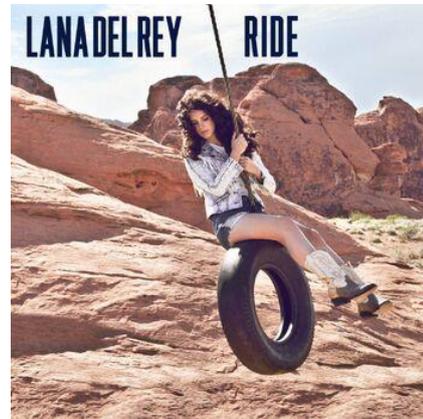
Producer: Rick Rubin

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lana-del-rey-ride-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py\\_-3di1yx0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py_-3di1yx0)

Director: Anthony Mandler



### The Singer

Lana Del Rey was born Elisabeth Woolridge Grant on 25 June 1985 in New York. She has been active since 2005, yet she became known worldwide with her album *Born To Die* in 2012. Nevertheless, Del Rey had already become an internet phenomenon due to the publication of two self-directed music videos for her songs “Video Games” and “Blue Jeans”, which were later added to the album *Born To Die*. Prior to the release of the record that made her famous, she had released an album in 2010 called *Lana Del Rey a.k.a. Lizzy Grant* featuring songs she had been writing during the five previous years. Since her successful second studio album, she has been publishing albums almost every year. Del Rey’s discography consists of eight studio albums (including the two mentioned) and an EP called *Paradise* which was an extension for the album *Born To Die*. In addition to having toured the world to promote her music, she has also published a book of poetry titled *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass* accompanied by an audio book.

Del Rey was raised in a Catholic family in Manhattan. It must be mentioned that she developed a drinking problem closely linked to her mental health during her early teenage years. This period of her life is easy recognizable in many of her lyrics. In an interview with *The Telegraph* she described this period of her life by saying “I couldn’t believe that we were mortal. For some reason that knowledge sort of overshadowed my experience. I was unhappy for some time. I got into a lot of trouble. I used to drink a lot. That was a hard time in my life” (in McCormick). Once she recovered from her addictions going to rehab, she spent a time living with her uncle in Long Island where she learnt to play the guitar. Although during this time she started writing songs, she did not pursue a singing career as she was working as a waitress. It was years later, when she moved back to New York City to start a major in Philosophy, when she recorded and registered some of the songs and begun performing in Brooklyn bars under different names such as Lizzy Grant.

Lana Del Rey is not Lizzy Grant herself but her creation: the relatable-idealistic character of a sad girl. When asked about the limits between the character and her true persona, however, she has not been clear on whether there is a difference between the two. Her artistic persona is, at any rate, easily recognizable as a sad girl who longs for the American dream. Del Rey's lyricism and music has been multiple times described as poetic and cinematic; she has stated that her inspirations are actually poets such as Sylvia Plath, Walt Whitman, or Allen Ginsberg. Furthermore, there are recurring themes in her discography which could be summarized as romantic love, Old Hollywood, and the traditional image of Americana. As Nick Levine stated in an article for the BBC, mainstream culture tends to demand the unflinching reinvention of artists. For instance, Bowie and Madonna have clearly changed their style every time they have released an album. Lana Del Rey stands out because she has been doing the contrary. The image she projected on *Born To Die* almost a decade ago is still easily identifiable on her latest album *Blue Banisters* (Levine).

## The Song

"Ride" has been a beloved and fan favorite single since its release as the lead single of the *Paradise* EP in 2012. Raunaq Nambiar explained on the website *Medium* a possible reason why this song is so significant for her fans but also for pop culture:

In modern-day music, storytelling is a rare commodity. We find ourselves surrounded by materialistic narratives, unoriginal production, and music that's built around numbers rather than words. From the small pool of songs that have a message, there are two types. There are those that narrate a book, a lyrics sheet, a piece of text. The thing that makes Lana Del Rey's "Ride" so special is that it chronicles a journey through life in under five minutes.

The soul-pop song was written by the singer herself and Justin Parker, who also co-wrote many songs from that period in her career. Del Rey brought the idea to producer Rick Rubin and the pair worked on a demo called "Drive" that evolved into the song "Ride"; the lyrics stayed practically the same but the instrumentation was changed. The lyrics recall a personal diary, with their raw and straightforward stream of thoughts. The recurring themes of Del Rey appear in this single too: sadness, America, and youth. As usual in her songs, the singer romanticizes Hollywood and the West Coast. However, it must be said that she does not glorify only the luxurious usual images of the Californian lifestyle but also the dark and deep part aspects of it (Levine).

In the song, Del Rey describes her need for company as she feels desperately lonely and is tired of being left alone with her thoughts. She conflicts her need to heal with her need to evade her world. Ultimately, she finds it easier to escape her mind and "just ride". In addition, she directly mentions the company of old men, for instance in the first verse "you can be my full time daddy". This is no ground-breaking concept in Del Rey's language, as she is known for mimicking a 'Lolita' image. Lolitas are usually underage girls for whom old men show romantic or sexual intentions. This image of a 'sugar baby/sugar daddy' relationship seems to be the last and only resource Del Rey has to pursue her happiness. She has failed to get a stable state of mind and so she expects the company of rough older men (the "Bowery Bums" as she refers to them in

the song “Bartender”) and the use of drugs, to aid her. Substances help Del Rey simulate a ‘happy’ emotional state closely to what she expected to find but never did. Nevertheless, the song does not base its content on that idea; eventually, the lyrics suggest that her emotions are up to what God has in store for her (Nambiar).

The bridge of the song is probably the most significant part, both musically and lyrically. Del Rey belts out “I’m tired of feeling like I am fucking crazy. / I’m tired of driving ‘til I see stars in my eyes. / All I’ve got to keep myself sane, baby. / So I just ride”. Del Rey goes with the flow, not really caring much where she comes from, and certainly not caring where she is going to. In other words, she somehow trusts the people she will find on the road will at least give her some sense of happiness. As Nambiar observes, “She’s done struggling with who she is. She can no longer take the pain. She just rides, agreeing to disagree. Consequentially, this moral ambiguity means that she can fit it with everyone but doesn’t belong to anyone. There isn’t a group of like-minded people she can call her own kind...”.

## The Video

The video directed by Anthony Mandler made the cinematic vibe of the song even more palatable. The ten-minute music video could be understood as a short film due to the fact that it narrates a concrete story with a concrete cast in the credits (for instance, Del Rey appears portraying a character called The Artist). In addition to that, it premiered on the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica with a very Hollywood-style red-carpet ceremony.

The video begins and ends with monologues which are strictly linked to the lyrics of the song. Del Rey appears swinging on a tire on a rope that seems to be hanging from the sky itself. During the introductory monologue, the character portrayed by Del Rey is described as a “chameleonic soul”, which agrees, as I have argued, with her ability to fit in without actually having a group of people of her own. In relation to that, the voice of the singer gives just little detail about who The Artist is: a young girl longing to be a poet but actually a not very popular singer.

A really significant aspect of the video are the other characters, old men with whom Del Rey seems to be having some type of affair (in the worst-case scenario they might be her clients). These old men could arguably be depicted as threatening for a lonely young girl such as The Artist. However, she argues that while she is currently in a difficult time of her life named “winter”, these men are “the only summer she has ever met”. The bikers enroll The Artist in what seems to be an endless road trip that keeps her stable and somehow happy, and reflects her state of mind. The men and The Artist ride on motorbikes waving a United States flag until they join around a bonfire.

Towards the end of the music video, Del Rey appears wearing a Native American crown, with a gun in her hand. She is surrounded by people in the middle of the desert and later sexually plays with one of the men on the sand. However, this provocative game ends up with her aiming at him. Stressing the idealistic archetypical depiction of American patriotism with the flag, the desert frontier-alike landscape, and the guns, she states in the closing monologue “I believe in the country America used to be”. This seems an allusion to the decades she romanticizes, the fifties and the sixties. As she has declared, “I wanted to be part of a high-class scene of musicians. It was half-inspired

because I didn't have many friends and I was hoping that I would meet people and fall in love and start a community around me, the way they used to do in the '60s" (in Cody). On the other hand, this is a controversial statement because it can easily fall into the glorification of a dark period in American history. The second half of the past 20<sup>th</sup> century was known for the great amount of civil rights movements trying to change what could be described as "what America used to be". Ignoring this, Del Rey somehow longs for that time perhaps because she would like to be perceived as an Old Hollywood star.

### The Song and the Video

The video of "Ride" undeniable complements the song and turns it into one of the most solid and recognizable projects of Lana Del Rey as a singer and as a character. Even though the lyrics are very straightforward, the video confirms the emotions that were meant to be understood with the song. Nevertheless, questions arise when it comes to certain aspects of both the song alone and its combination with the video.

First of all, Del Rey has been repeatedly accused of not being a feminist and of actually idealizing the sexist stereotypes about women which feminism has been fighting for years; for instance, the need to find a man or a woman to be free. Del Rey does not directly state that is a goal, but it must be observed how she ties her happiness to having met those old men on the road. The romantic approach to older men looking for significantly younger Lolitas is quite controversial, taking into account the culture of pedophilia that has always defined women's bodies and men's sexual desires. Over the years, her idealization of older men has decreased and does not seem to be a central topic in her songs or poems. However, people still wonder whether Del Rey is performing a character, as many pop icons do, or not. Del Rey has stated that she's "never had a persona. Never needed one. Never will" (in Jones) but the doubt persists.

Another issue that must be noted is her use of a Native American crown in the video. Lana Del Rey has been accused multiple times of appropriating Native American culture and Latin American culture for the sake of aesthetics. In this particular video, she wears the ornament while singing "I'm tired of feeling like I am fucking crazy". The combination of this image and the lyrics suggest a link between madness or wilderness and Native American people. Far from being an innocent scene, this is a stigma Natives have been fighting for years. More recently, Del Rey has made statements purposely highlighting the fact that she has always been surrounded by people of all races in order to challenge these accusations, yet, again, the image is there.

All in all, Lana Del Rey has established herself as a modern pop icon with a very specific image and vision which is perfectly reflected by the song and video "Ride". Although she has failed to properly address her controversial statements or actions, she has undeniably contributed to pop music in terms of sound and lyricism. Despite her problematic moves, she represents the American woman who does not necessarily get rid of traditional and normative features associated with womanhood. Contrary to the popular belief in mainstream feminism, it is not necessary for a woman to reject traditional aspects of femininity to be a feminist. Del Rey undeniably defends femininity and reclaims her place in modern feminism. Nevertheless, it is somehow her responsibility to address or not her later or current controversies. Finally, there is no doubt that she has contributed to a great extent to helping indie-pop females cross into the mainstream;

indie-pop solo careers for women, beyond bands, are rare and this makes Del Rey's pioneering contribution even more relevant.

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## Emeli Sandé, 'Clown': A Message to the Music Industry

Monica Natalia

Released: 3 February 2013

Album: *Our Version of Events*

Label: Virgin Records

Genre: R&B, soul

Length: 3:41

Songwriters: Emeli Sandé, Shahid Khan, and Grant Mitchell

Producer: Naughty Boy

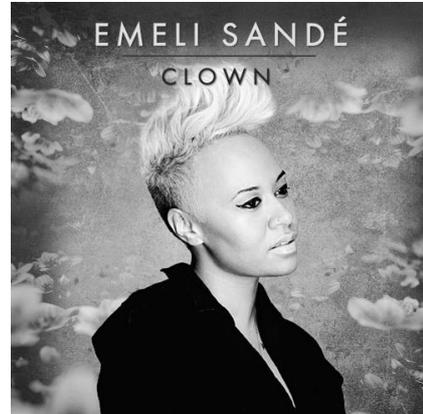
Lyrics:

<http://www.songlyrics.com/gmpresents/clown-i-ll-be-your-clown-lyrics/>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OHX\\_PA25Ok](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OHX_PA25Ok)

Director: W.I.Z. (Andrew John Whiston)



### The Singer

Adele Emily Sandé is a Scottish singer and songwriter. Born on 10 March 1987 in Sunderland, England, she moved to Aberdeenshire, Scotland at the age of four and lived there until she relocated to Glasgow to pursue a career in medical school. Raised by an English mother and a Zambian father, she was supported in her songwriting from an early age. Her father, a choirmaster, insistently encouraged young Emeli to grind her musical talents, such as playing the clarinet and the piano. During her time in medical school, she already signed with Virgin and EMI records, which propelled her to quit her studies once she obtained a degree in clinical medicine specializing in neuroscience, to pursue music.

Sandé's solo career officially started in 2010, when she decided to drop her first name 'Adele' given the rising fame of British singer-songwriter Adele Laurie Blue. Sandé decided then to use her middle name 'Emeli' professionally. She had by then already collaborated with several of the UK's most successful artists, writing songs for Tinie Tempah, Leona Lewis, Alicia Keys, and Labrinth. Her collaboration with music producer Shahid Khan, also known as 'Naughty Boy' ignited the beginning of her many great career hits with British rapper Chipmunk's (Jahmaal Noel Fyffe) debut single "Diamond Rings" (2009). In discussing her professional friendship with him, Sandé claims that "I was doing a show in London for [BBC Radio] 1Xtra and I met this guy called Naughty Boy. We got in the studio and we clicked work wise. We just started writing, not necessarily for me, we just thought 'let's write a pop tune' and experiment'" (in Crosbie). Khan also served as a catalyst for Emeli's eventually signing with record labels Virgin and EMI. As a matter of fact, EMI records was sold in 2012, split between Sony and Universal Music Group, for under \$2 billion, which caused great upheaval in the UK, where the label was regarded as a national treasure (Forde), even though "Brian Southall, who worked at the label in the 1970s and '80s, says its glory days were marked by excess as

much as success” (Rose). In 2021 Sandé decided to go her separate ways with what was left of EMI records after a decade of working with them, as she was struggling to reach the same sales figures as for her 2012 debut album *Our Version Of Events* and felt the label was not doing enough for her career (Boyle). Recently, Sandé has signed new publishing deals with Chrysalis and Reservoir records. As she has declared, Sandé is delighted to partner up with these record labels: “I have been inspired by many of the artists on their impressive catalogue. I’m very proud to now be a part of this legacy. The unreserved belief and respect they have shown to me and my music gives me great faith that this is the perfect home for my fourth album. I very much look forward to our future together and the exciting journey ahead!” (in Paine).

Sandé may not be very well known outside Britain—those who have heard of Sandé may know about her from the opening and closing acts of the 2012 Summer Olympics in London—but she is a major figure in the UK. Careerwise, she received a BRIT and a MOBO award even before releasing her debut album *Our Version of Events* (2012). This album thrust her into national fame, with her subsequent records, *Long Live the Angels* (2016) and *Real Life* (2019), reaching top positions in the UK charts. In 2017 Sandé was named Member of the British Empire in acknowledgement of her services to music. In 2019, she was appointed chancellor of the University of Sunderland because of her firm stance regarding the weight of education. “I want to use my time as Chancellor”, she explained, “to break down barriers to education, to ensure that people see their worth and that they aspire to reach their potential” (in Norways). Sandé has also been active within political and philanthropic entities, campaigning for the Labour Party in the 2019 UK general election, participating in Elton John’s AIDS Foundation Event, raising funds for Fashion Targets Breast Cancer and performing at the YPI in Scotland to support secondary school pupils and their hard work in the community.

## The Song

“Clown” is the fifth single of Sandé’s first studio album *Our Version of Events* (2012). It hit number one on the UK charts and the album sold over 5.4 million copies. The song was written by Emeli Sandé herself, Shahid Khan and Grant Mitchell and was covered by Dutch group O’G3NE in 2016.

“Clown” presents the idea of an entertainer who must perform regularly despite the scarce financial success received and little to no recognition. It brings about thus the topic of resilience in the music industry, where artists must face the difficulties of obtaining success. The song lyrics describe Sandé’s own experience in trying to get signed to a record label at the beginning of her career and her interaction with the elitist executives:

“It’s about trying to get into the industry, keeping faith in myself when I felt that many of the labels didn’t have faith in me. It’s about being called a clown or an idiot for wanting to chase after what you want, because people will always say you’re rubbish and all the rest of it, but if you don’t follow what you want to do then you won’t achieve anything fulfilling”. (in *Songfacts*)

The implications of entering an industry in which you need to fight for your creative calling is the primary theme in the song. It is to be noted that the music industry

has a disproportionately larger number of men-led record labels. The corporate hotseat is taken up primarily by men, not to mention their relevance when nominating artists for awards. “Anecdotally, I’ve heard that labels are not too keen on signing and developing female talent because it costs more”, asserts Rhian Jones, contributing editor to *Music Business Worldwide*. “There’s stylists, there’s make-up artists and the shows tend to be bigger productions. Whereas Lewis Capaldi can just get a guitar out, put a t-shirt on and everyone loves it” (in Savage). Clearly, this presents patriarchal power relations in the industry, eventually deploying female artists into exclusion.

Sandé sings, “I’ll be your clown, behind the glass” and in calling herself “your clown”, Sandé implies that she must be validated by the executives. The record labels are in control, staging each and every step to their liking. Sandé continues, “My life’s a circus, round in circles”, announcing the exhausting lack of independence, ultimately withdrawing her from taking the reins. Notably, Sandé recently moved from Kobalt to Phonographic Performance Limited (PPL) for management of international neighboring rights. She said: “PPL has a strong reputation for looking after the rights of performers and I know my collections are in safe hands whenever my music is played in the UK or globally” (in Paine). As I see it, “Clown” announces the fight for autonomy, something that emerging artists in today’s day and age may favor in the context of new technologies. Streaming platforms such as Bandcamp and Soundcloud have spawned rapid and worldwide digital reproduction and distribution, something worth thinking about.

### The Video

The music video for “Clown” was directed by W.I.Z., an English music video and film director known for his videos for popular artists such as Massive Attack, Marilyn Manson and Oasis. “Clown” is made in the style of a silent, pseudo fascist film from the 1920-30s, which elicits a challenging discussion on authoritarianism and state violence.

In the music video, Sandé is shown forced to sign a document in order to receive something in return, which could account for success in the music industry. The music industry is portrayed by a group of men, dressed in a military attire who demand nothing less than total submission. This group of men represents the powerful and coercive entity of the record labels who believe they have the right to take all decisions over their chosen artists. In the video, we see emotional close-ups that display the paternal and menacing attitude of these soldiers pushing Sandé to sign the contract.

Sandé appears between two settings, where light plays a significant role in conveying mood and atmosphere. On the one hand, we see Sandé in a lit up room as if in complete exposure and interrogation when scrutinized by the men. Low angle shots add a feel of authority to the officers. On the other hand, Sandé is featured in a dim lit room, all alone, glancing upwards as if reflecting on what she ought to do in the face of coercion. A beam of light falls on her head, suggesting that there is an alternative way to circumvent this situation.

Regarding the pseudo fascist film imagery, the clip is in fact convincing in suggesting that the message of “Clown” is worth listening to, the same way fascist propaganda aims to reach their audience through populism. Relevant to the rise of modern-day fascism is the recent fall of Kabul to the Taliban and their stance on the

banning of music, as they enforced so across Afghanistan in the 1990s. Hemani demands “the international community, particularly the music and music research communities, must stand with the Afghan musicians as well as Muslim religious minorities to protect their cultural rights”. A careful attention paid to “Clown” brings forth a not so distant reality, specifically with regards to the right for individual expression in either secular or sacred forms.

### The Song and the Video

“Clown” undoubtedly presents the struggle of exhibiting oneself in the music industry despite the setbacks that come with it. Getting signed with a record label is no easy task, as competitive as the sector is and has always been, it is also the interactions with the superior representatives that can also bring about disillusionment. This is a song that aims to move beyond this cornering of an artist.

Moreover, Sandé’s use of pseudo fascist imagery is a powerful technique in denouncing the music industry and specifically, the genre of popular music as the careful selection from a group of people, often men. From this line of thought, questions arise: What voices matter in the awarding of popular music today? Does being in a room full of men deciding the trajectory of my professional career make me feel safe? Does this record label understand the politics and nuances of my own personal experience? How can we contribute to the forging of a more egalitarian music industry?

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## Katy Perry, 'Roar': The Process of Liberation and Empowerment

Núria Negreira Jiménez

Released: 27 August 2013

Album: *Prism*

Label: Capitol Records

Genre: Power pop, arena rock

Length: 3:42

Songwriters: Katy Perry, Max Martin, Lukasz Gottwald, Bonnie McKee, and Henry Walter

Producers: Dr. Luke, Max Martin, and Cirkut

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Katy-perry-roar-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CevxZvSJLk8>

Director: Grady Hall, Mark Kudsi



### The Singer

Katherine Elizabeth Hudson was born in Santa Barbara, California, on 25 October 1984. She is not only a singer and a composer but also an actor and a businesswoman, as she has taken part in some films and has her own record company. The origins of her worldwide known artistic name Katy Perry come from the abbreviation of her name Katherine into Katy and the maiden's name of her mother, Perry. The artist has been active since 2001, when she released her first album, titled *Katy Hudson* (her actual name). Her first album consisted of evangelic music and turned out to be a failure. Still, it is worth saying that she kept training in music for many years until she became famous as Katy Perry in 2008 with the controversial song "I Kissed a Girl", which reached the #1 position on the Billboard hot 100 chart in the USA.

Before making the big leap to international fame with other songs like "Hot and Cold" (2008), the name of Katy Perry was already beginning to echo among the audience and in the world of music. It was the famous and iconic Madonna who, amid Perry's efforts to break into the music industry, helped her raise to fame. This happened in the wake of the release of Katy Perry's song "Ur so Gay" (2007). This song turned out to be a great scandal, with many in the public claiming that it has homophobic undertones. However, speaking on the radio program *Johnjay & Richen* Madonna declared "I have a favorite song right now, it's called 'Ur So Gay' and you don't even like boys... have you heard it? You have to listen to it! It's by an artist named Katy Perry... Oh it's so good, check it out on iTunes" (in Perry video). These words propelled Perry to fame considerably.

In her career as a singer, Katy Perry has published five studio albums, thirty-two singles and thirty-two musical videos so far. Among these five albums, *Teenage Dream* (2010) sold almost 200,000 copies in the United States. Of the six songs released as singles, five reached the top spot on the Billboard's Hot 100 in 2011. This made Perry become the first female artist to get five number one singles from the same album on a

musical list, and the second artist in general after Michael Jackson with his album *Bad* (1987). Among her career highlights, Perry also achieved in September 2011 the record of becoming the first artist who managed to stay more than sixty-nine weeks in a row in the top ten positions of the Billboard Hot 100 in the United States.

Throughout her career, Perry has been an active supporter of the LGBTBI+ community (despite the “Ur so Gay” controversy). However, most people saw the single “I Kissed a Girl” as a marketing ploy to bait the LGBTBI+ audience, implying that Katy Perry, who most likely has never have had any homosexual experience, used the song as a strategy to win over the public in the community. According to Hernandez, though, “Yet year after year since then, Perry has continued to be an outspoken advocate for equality, going through a notable evolution after having been raised by strict parents who were born-again-Christians-turned-pastors”. Due to the very oppressive religious environment in which Perry was raised, she unconsciously used to reject the LGBTBI+ community until she grew up enough to realize that she wanted to champion and support them. When she received the National Equality Award at the Human Rights Campaign Gala in 2017 she gave an emotional speech in which she claimed: “There’s no other community who has done more for me, to shape who I am today and there is no other community I believe in more than you—I stand with you” (in *Grazia*). Perry clearly stated that she supports the LGBTBI+ community, and even more, that she has had some homosexual experiences because she was curious and finally free to enjoy them.

### The Song

“Roar” by Katy Perry is the first single of Katy’s third album *Prism* (2013) and was released on 27 August 2013. This song was co-written by many authors including Perry herself with the help of Max Martin, Dr. Luke, and Bonnie McKee. It was produced by Dr. Luke, Martin, and Cirkut and it mixes the two genres of power pop and arena rock. It is worth saying that this song is inspired by the story of Perry’s marriage to British comedian Russell Brand, which only lasted one year. Perry has confessed that the marriage with Brand had been quite dreadful, a rollercoaster of problems that ultimately resulted in divorce due to irreconcilable differences. The story of the song tells the process of liberation and adaption to a new life after a difficult relationship. This experience ends up becoming a process of empowerment and self-love for the singer.

Perry has always been an artist who has played much with fun and joy in her songs and musical videos. However, though “Roar” is also a happy pop song it does have a more focused side. Writer and editor James Montgomery stated in his article for *MTV News* that “‘Roar’ is Perry’s most purposeful single to date”. Perry does not just try to make people dance with this song, but rather empathize with her. It is an empowerment anthem intended for those who are discontented and are in need of a change, of taking control of one’s own life. Katy Perry is giving her all to “Roar”, showing her ups and downs and her emotions. This song is a cry (a roar) to self-love, freedom, and empowerment. Montgomery further asserts that, despite appearances, Perry’s “Roar” is her most intimate song. As he argued,

And, sure, coming off the biggest album of her career, it would be easy to chalk all of this change up to ego, but there’s something undeniably genuine about “Roar”. It

is personal, it is powerful, and, with its combination of sonorous hooks and searing sentiment, it is certainly one of the more perfect pop songs to come down the pipeline in quite a while.

Clearly, Katy Perry made it clear that the message behind “Roar” is not only a source of inspiration and empowerment for the public, but also her opportunity to tell her own story, and in this way, be able to leave it behind. Once the song starts, she claims she was passive and sad in her relationship: “I used to bite my tongue and hold my breath / So I sit quietly, agreed politely / I guess that I forgot I had choice”. As the song progresses, so does she: “You held me down, but I got up / I see it all, I see it now”; this is seen as the starting point of her own empowerment. At the end of the song, she is not a girl trapped in her past anymore, but she is a strong woman, she is the eye of the tiger, she is thunder, and she is a champion. Undoubtedly, by the end of “Roar” Perry’s development as a new person who has put her past behind is complete.

### The Video

With the music video Katy Perry wraps her message in the atmosphere of a jungle story, using animals and nature as a metaphor of her process of liberation. Grady Hall and Mark Kudsi, the directors of the video, managed to stage and magnify the singer’s message through nature, creating a perfect perspective of how Perry evolves and adapts to the jungle after a plane crash. The introductory scene places Perry in the middle of the jungle, showing signs of concern while his selfish boyfriend, presumably an explorer, takes pictures of himself. This scene can be read as a reflection of the artist’s personal problems with her ex-husband. When the fictional boyfriend is suddenly devoured, Perry keeps trying to adapt to the jungle of which she was so afraid. She manages to survive there and even defeat a fierce tiger with her roar. Metaphorically, she finally adapts to the jungle as she adapts to her new persona. The video makes it clear that the Katy of the first scenes is not the same woman. By the end, she has already fulfilled her journey to self-love and has achieved the control of her own life.

On a different note, Hall and Kudsi’s transformation of a Los Angeles Garden into a jungle, connected Perry to many famous characters. She has been considered the female-version of Tarzan, as the music writer Laura Stavropoulos argues in her article for *Udiscovermusic*. In addition to that, Adam R. Holz states that

Katy Perry gets in touch with her inner Jane in the full video that’s been produced for “Roar”. (...) It’s not long, though, before Katy acclimates and adapts, doing a lot of roaring herself as she tames the creatures of the jungle and coaxes them, Dr. Dolittle-style, into doing her bidding (like, say, using an elephant to help her shower, a scene in which we glimpse her bare shoulders). Eventually, Katy’s jungle queen dispenses with the torn rags of her civilized clothes, exchanging them for a cleavage-bearing tiger-print bikini and grass skirt.

It is worth mentioning that the video only focuses on her as the main center. There are no more people, just her facing the jungle, implicitly meaning that the only important highlight is her and how hard she is trying to become an empowered woman.

## The Song and the Video

Both the lyrics and the music video combined complement and emphasize the message of the song. It is hard to know whether the song would have become as successful without the quite attractive video, but what is clear is that Hall and Kudsi's work raised the song to the top: this is one of the few recent music videos to reach three billion views when it was released on YouTube. All the strength and empowerment that the lyrics transmit is magnified thanks to the video, where a woman's courage, strength, and happiness make sense, her adventures illustrating each phrase of the lyrics. As mentioned before, the lyrics are full of animal metaphors that are exemplified in the video. As a way of illustration, the symbolic roar of power she claims along the whole video becomes real when she defeats the life-threatening tiger roaring in front of her by roaring louder. It could be said that both in the lyrics and in the video Perry suffers a kind of metamorphosis by which she endorses woman's fierceness and self-empowerment.

Besides, each line of the song is followed by every scene of the narrative video, in other words, the lyrics and the musical video advance at the same time. As she sings the first verse, when she declares her passiveness and concerns, she is exemplified as being afraid of the jungle, not knowing what to do. However, in the pre-chorus and chorus she starts to gain control as she accommodates to nature. By the end of the video and the lyrics, Katy claims everyone is going to hear her roar, exactly what she did in the jungle when facing the tiger. The lyrics along with every scene of the video are a perfect mixture to understand that there is no one behind her transformation but the discover of her own power.

However, the music video also raised some dilemmas regarding the use of real animals for it. One may feel uncomfortable or think it is not ethic to use animals to make a music video, as PETA asserted in a letter sent to the directors of the video "What you may not know—as most people do not—is that animals used for entertainment in film and television endure horrific cruelty and suffer from extreme confinement and violent training methods" (in Lewis). Nevertheless, Perry's answer to PETA's letter ensures that there were representatives of the American Humane Association during the filming days to confirm that the proper guidelines were followed for the use of animals on television and that no animals were harmed during the making of the video.

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## Sia, 'Chandelier': The Perils of Alcohol

Yaiza Sánchez Millán

Released: 17 March 2014

Album: *1000 Forms of Fear*

Label: Sony/ATV Music Publishing

Genre: Electropop

Length: 3:36

Songwriters: Sia Furler and Jesse Shatkin

Producers: Greg Kurstin and Jesse Shatkin

Lyrics: <https://www.letras.com/sia/chandelier/>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vjPBrBU-TM>

Director: Sia Furler and Daniel Askill



### The Singer

Sia Kate Isobelle Furler is an Australian singer, songwriter, voice actor, and director. She was born on 18 December 1975 in Adelaide, South Australia. Her mother was involved in the arts and her father was a musician, so she was exposed to a creative environment at an early age. Sia first began performing with a jazz band called Crisp in the 1990s. This made her acquire some early success and thanks to it, she started a solo career in 1997, when she released her debut studio album, *Onlysee*. However, this failed to break through and Sia decided to move to the UK with her boyfriend at the time, Daniel Pontifex. Tragically, a week before they were to leave Australia, he was hit by a car and died instantly. She has claimed that Pontifex was the love of her life, and his death was devastating for her.

Between 2001 and 2010, Sia released four more studio albums and toured for a while. After this, she decided to take some time off performing and collaborated with other artists producing some successful and popular songs, such as "Titanium" with David Guetta, "Diamonds" with Rihanna and "Wild Ones" with Flo Rida. In 2014, she debuted at No.1 in the USA Billboard 200 with her sixth studio album, *1000 Forms of Fear*. Then, she produced the immensely successful song "Chandelier" and since then, Sia has covered the top of her face with a wig to protect her privacy as much as possible. Between 2016 and 2018, Sia released two more studio albums and in 2018 she collaborated with Labrinth and Diplo in the band LSD, which released its debut album in 2019. In this year, she wrote and directed the controversial film *Music*, released alongside an eponymous album. Sia has also played parts in a few films, like *Peter Rabbit*, among others.

Sia has been diagnosed with a variety of complaints: Gaves' disease, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and complex post-traumatic stress disorder, originated from multiple childhood traumas, including being sexually abused at the age of nine. She has suffered from depression, addiction to painkillers, and alcoholism. In 2010, she even wrote a

suicide note, planning to overdose. She has considered retiring permanently from performing and touring due to panic attacks. In addition, Sia has confessed many times she does not like fame: “Most people would think ‘oh why would you not want to be famous?’ The reason is because fame is disgusting and it ruins you and it’s psychologically damaging and it’s bad for your self-esteem” (in Bracken). Since the release of “Chandelier” she has always performed with her characteristic eyes-covering wig or with looks that blend into the background; her costumes are often crafted “almost so you can’t really see me but you can still” (in Bracken). Sia has also been affected by negative experiences that have to do with social media:

“I’m too sensi. For every 30 people who were awesome there was one who was just, like, kinda ruining it for me. And I guess in the beginning I had much thicker skin, for some reason, and I would just retweet rude people because they were funny. But then it got to me a little bit. I think because there’s probably a part of me that believed what they were saying”. (in Bracken)

Thus, even though she clearly is not comfortable being a successful artist—since this implies not having privacy and being constantly exposed to negative comments—she persists in her career: “It was a combination [of money and anxiety]. It was that I didn’t want to be famous but I still, I wanted to work out a way to make, like, my gift work in my favour without having to sell a piece of my serenity real estate” (in Bracken).

## The Song

“Chandelier” was released on 17 March 2014 as the lead single from Sia’s sixth studio album, *1000 Forms of Fear*. It was written by Sia herself and Jesse Shatkin, and produced by Shatkin and Greg Kurstin. It is an electropop song, featuring electronica, R&B and reggae influences. The song talks about Sia’s devastating experience with alcoholism and the negative feelings that come with addiction, like pain, guilt or emptiness. In this song, Sia opens up and expresses her inner feelings regarding her issues with alcohol, as a reflection of her psychological state in that moment. The title “chandelier” alludes to excessive, reckless partying: “I’m gonna swing from the chandelier / From the chandelier / I’m gonna live like tomorrow doesn’t exist / Like it doesn’t exist”.

The lyrics talk about “party girls” like Sia herself, that is, girls drinking alcohol to excess, and the social meaning that this action entails. When Sia sings “Can’t feel anything, when will I learn?”, there is a suggestion that she knows drinking is wrong and the consumption of alcohol is destroying her, but she does not know how to stop it. In the chorus, the verse “One, two, three, one, two, three, drink” is associated to the action of drinking alcohol compulsively *per se*. The later verse “Throw ‘em back ‘til I lose count” means that she is not thinking about the future, just enjoying the moment. And this is what alcohol causes precisely: disinhibition, not being aware at the moment that it is harmful. As noted, the action of swinging from a chandelier is here associated with wild parties and alcohol. Also, there is a reference to the Latin aphorism *Carpe Diem*, which urges the enjoyment of the moment. This is another cause of alcoholism: forgetting about everything and not caring about the consequences beyond the present time. This also suggests that the alcohol is making the singer fall into an abyss. When Sia sings “but I’m holding on for dear life”, one could think she is struggling, trying to restrain herself from

committing suicide. She wants to escape from this toxic environment and get better, but she finds it very difficult.

The key moment of the song is the call “Help me, I’m holding on for dear life”. This is the ultimate sign that she is left with no other resources. She does not know what to do to get out from this dark place where the alcohol has led her. So, she asks for help because she cannot do it alone. Later, she sings “gotta get out now, gotta run from this”, aware again of the dangers of alcohol, verbalizing that she wants to get out of this situation. Right after, the verse “here comes the same, here comes the shame” reflects what has been mentioned before, which is the negative feelings that materialize the morning after having drunk alcohol compulsively. In this moment, she is conscious of the negative effects that alcohol causes and the contrast between the positive feelings that are experienced during consumption and the consequent negative feelings when the effect has passed. Yet, the line “keep my glass full until morning light” shows the problem is not over. In the last part of the song, in which Sia keeps repeating that she is “just holding on for tonight”, there is an insistence on the fact that she is fighting against this situation, but still trapped, falling apart.

### The Video

The music video was directed by Sia herself and Daniel Askill and it was released on 6 May 2014. It is the first time that the dancer Maddie Ziegler, then twelve, made her appearance in Sia’s music videos. Since then, Ziegler has starred in all of them, as Sia has refused to show herself in the videos.

The video was wonderfully choreographed by Ryan Heffington. Ziegler is wearing the same blonde wig which Sia used to promote the album. Clad in a flesh-colored ballet leotard, Ziegler performs a dance interpreting the content of the song in a dirty and empty apartment. Her exaggerated moves transmit perfectly the emotions that the ingestion of alcohol entails, which is this contrast between happiness, liberation, euphoria and its consequent sadness, apathy, exhaustion, suffering and even depression. Every body movement and facial gesture reflect and describe what the lyrics express and what Sia wants to transmit. Ziegler stated the following to the *New York* magazine:

“I like the whole dance. It was really different and weird for me, because I usually don’t, you know, be a crazy person every time. It was so fun to do and it was really out of the box and it expanded me a lot, because I’m used to competition dances where you’re like, ‘Point your legs!’ But this time it was like, you just need to let go and feel it.”

“Chandelier” was nominated in the MTV Video Music Awards for Video of the Year and Best Choreography, and it was awarded for the latter, and remains today a very popular video.

### The Song and the Video

As stated above, the video is a perfect complement for the song, and it helps the public understand better the meaning of the lyrics that Sia wanted to express. The part corresponding to “one, two, three, one, two, three, drink” shows Ziegler doing dance

moves that represent the act of drinking alcohol compulsively. There is also a moment where she represents madness as the mental issues derived from the excessive ingestion of alcohol. This may be criticized, because it may be argued that the video stigmatizes mentally ill people, but perhaps it was the most visual way to express the consequences of alcoholism. All throughout it, as stated above, Ziegler shows the feeling of desperation and not knowing what to do about this circumstance. She also represents the negative physical consequences due to the excess of alcohol by putting her hands on her stomach as simulating a stomach-ache. The key moment in the video corresponds to the key moment of the lyrics: the call for help. In this moment, Ziegler pretends she is drowning and needs help. Finally, at the end of the video, she fakes her psychological and physical state by smiling very superficially, as if she was not truly smiling, just pretending she is okay, when she is not.

The relationship between Sia and Maddie Ziegler has been hotly debated. Since Maddie's appearance in "Chandelier", they have established a close relationship. A journalist watching them interact wrote that Maddie "calls the singer her 'second mom' and later addresses her as her godmother" (Donaldson). Furthermore, the first time Sia met the dancer, she confessed feeling "the instant connection and experienced the love of a mother with her 'firstborn' child" (in Tinubu). They have even slept together in the same bed more than once. Maddie's mother, Melissa Gisoni, is aware and feels comfortable with this: "They're like sisters, I love how they snuggle together" (in Tinubu). Sia even speaks on her behalf sometimes: "I can tell from Maddie's face whether she wants to do it or she doesn't" (in Tinubu). She even cast Ziegler in her last film, *Music*, to play the role of an autistic child. When accused of not hiring an autistic person, she stated: "I actually tried working with a beautiful young girl non-verbal on the spectrum and she found it unpleasant and stressful. So that's why I cast Maddie" (in Singh). Nonetheless, Sia has expressed her discomfort around the fact that while she herself does not want to be famous (that is why she covers her face with a wig), she has exposed Maddie to the public sphere:

"As soon as I met Maddie, I felt this extreme desire to protect her and I think that it was part of my own healing. I felt just extreme compulsion to protect her and yet the irony is that I didn't want to be famous and I threw this child into the spotlight and she would say to me, 'Don't be silly, I was already famous and I wanted to be famous.'" (in Singh).

As Donaldson states in her article, "there are still questions to be asked over a grown woman's decision to use a child as her public face and to have such control over her career".

To conclude, "Chandelier" might be considered an autobiography of Sia. As stated previously, Sia has struggled with addictions to drugs and alcohol, and around the time she wrote this song, she had not detoxified yet. The song and the video perfectly depict the message that Sia wanted to convey: the perils of alcohol and how she was suffering from them around that time. As for the video's dancer, Maddie Ziegler, even though she and Sia have claimed that they consider each other family, there is still debate on the internet around Sia's attitude towards Ziegler and her artistic career.

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## Meghan Trainor, 'All About That Bass': The Lacking Body's Positivity Anthem

Manar Kamouni Akachouih

Released: 11 June 2014

Album: *Title*

Label: Epic, Big Yellow Dog Music

Genre: Bubblegum pop, do-wop, hip hop

Length: 3:09

Songwriters: Meghan Trainor and Kevin Kadish

Producer: Kevin Kadish

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Meghan-trainor-all-about-that-bass-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PCkvCPvDXk>

Director: Fatima Robinson



### The Singer

Meghan Elizabeth Trainor was born in Nantucket, Massachusetts, on 22 December 1993. Trainor grew up in a musical household, given the fact that her father, Gary Trainor, was a music teacher and organist. Therefore, she began singing at a very early age, when she was only six years old, at a local church. During her early years as a musician, she performed as a member of a local Nantucket band called Island Fusion for four years, where she sang and played instruments such as the piano and the bongo drums. Not only that, but Trainor also learned how to play the guitar and trumpet when she attended Nauset Regional High School. Later, during 2009 and 2010, Trainor attended the Berklee College of Music's Performance Program, a special five-week course, through which she achieved excellent marks.

By the time Trainor was eighteen, she had already self-released three albums: *Meghan Trainor* (2009), *Only 17* (2011) and *I'll Sing With You* (2011). Throughout her teenage years, Trainor attended songwriting conventions, where company productions searched for new songwriters. It was through a music conference in Nashville, which took place in 2012, that Trainor finally got noticed and signed to the record label Big Yellow Dog Music, where she worked as a songwriter for the next following years. This stems from the fact that Trainor did not think it possible for her to become a recording artist, due to her body image. As her father stated, Trainor "thought she was one of the chubby girls who would never become an artist" (in Sullivan); therefore, she was content with what she got at that moment.

A year later, in 2013, Trainor and Kevin Kadish, who is also a songwriter and producer, co-wrote "All About That Bass", a body-positive anthem, and presented it to various record labels. Unfortunately, all of these companies rejected the song because they thought it should be "more synth-y and pop-y" (*Billboard*), which Trainor and Kadish did not understand since they thought this song was a hit. Nonetheless, Trainor got the

chance to meet L.A. Reid, Epic Records' chairman, who got to see her performing "All About That Bass" and signed her to his label as a recording artist. Trainor's song was released on 30 June 2014, reaching "number one in 58 countries and selling 11 million units worldwide" (*Wikipedia*).

After releasing her debut song "All About That Bass", Meghan Trainor rose to fame and achieved the dream she never thought would be possible for her. As she states in her *TODAY* (November 2014) interview: "I wrote this song to help people be comfortable in their own skin. I wrote it for myself because I wasn't comfortable. When I wrote it, I was like: 'I wish I felt like that'. It has helped me and a bunch of people". Nevertheless, even though the message of the song was loved by plenty of people, many critics claimed that the song is not as body-positive as it seems since its lyrics bash other women and validate loving oneself only after getting validation from others.

Notwithstanding, Meghan Trainor has continued to release music that has had massive success, such as her debut album *Title* (2015), with which she won a Grammy for "Best New Artist". Furthermore, she has also taken part in other types of projects, some of which have nothing to do with music. For instance, she made her cinematic debut as a voice actor in the animated movies *Smurfs: The Lost Village* (2017) and *Playmobil: The Movie* (2019). Not only that, but she also appeared as a judge in two different TV competition programs, *The Four: Battle for Stardom* and *The Voice*, showing a different facet of herself to the world.

## The Song

"All About That Bass" is the lead single of Trainor's official debut album *Title* (2015). It is a pop, doo-wop, and hip hop song that was released on 11 June 2014 under Epic Records and Big Yellow Dog Music. It was written, as noted, by Meghan Trainor and Kevin Kadish, and produced by Kevin Kadish himself. As McKinney states in her article for *Vox*, "Trainor's hit single is catchy. It's also—seemingly—a song about women accepting their bodies in a world where those bodies are held up to impossible standards and constantly ridiculed".

The concept of the song was inspired by Trainor's personal experience, given the fact that she did not love her body when she was growing up. As a result, she wrote "All About That Bass" to empower herself and other women to love their bodies no matter what size they are. However, even though this may clash with the singer's intentions, Trainor's song is not as empowering as it seems to be, since "in some verses, it uplifts the ideas of body positivity and self-worth, and in others, it destroys those ideals by putting down other women" (McKinney). However, when she was confronted with this complaint in her *Pop Justice* interview, Trainor argued that she would never bash skinny women because she has friends that are skinny and feel fat too.

The song is composed of a chorus and two verses. The chorus, which is the most prominent part of the song "I'm all about that bass / 'Bout that bass, no treble", uses the musical concepts "bass" and "treble" to symbolize thickness and thinness. Then, in the first verse, the contradictory arguments that McKinney mentions in her article appear. On the one hand, Trainor states "If you got beauty just raise 'em up / 'Cause every inch of you is perfect / From the bottom to the top", which is really empowering considering

that she is encouraging women to love their bodies the way they are. However, on the other hand, there are also verses such as “I ain’t no size two / But I can shake it, shake it like I’m supposed to do / ’Cause I got that boom boom that all the boys chase” or “ my momma she told me don’t worry about your size / She says, boys like a little more booty to hold at night”. These lyrics promote the traditional beauty standards which are determined by how men view women. Therefore, she is stating that women should love themselves because men also love their non-normative bodies and are satisfied by them.

Furthermore, the second verse of the song reveals how Trainor’s body positivity is not inclusive of all body types. She sings “I’m bringing booty back / Go ahead and tell them skinny bitches that”. Here, she uses the negative connotation “bitches” to refer to skinny women, which downgrades them, and hence, defeats the whole purpose of the song. To a certain extent, she is rejecting the cult of thinness and embracing thickness and booty, which is what was trending back in 2014 (thanks to artists like J.Lo or Nicki Minaj), when the song was released. On that account, Trainor’s idea of body positivity only “includes women whose bodies are slightly larger than the insane, Photoshopped standard, but it’s not all-inclusive for ‘skinny bitches’ or women who are larger than a size eight” (McKinney).

Nevertheless, it is important to consider that back in 2014 when “All About That Bass” was released, the public was not used to seeing women singing about their body image publicly, let alone non-stereotypical bodies on the curvier side. Therefore, this song was very revolutionary since, in a way, it did encourage women to love themselves. However, the arguments given in the song are not truly empowering, nor self-positive, given the fact that body positivity is a social movement that motivates self-love for people of all sizes for themselves, and not to please anybody else.

## The Video

The music video for Trainor’s lead single “All About That Bass” was directed by Fatima Robinson and published on YouTube on 11 June 2014. It is a fun and colorful video in which Trainor appears dancing and singing in various settings with different dancers and characters. At the beginning of the music video, Trainor appears singing the chorus and looking directly at the camera with the iris wipe effect, which makes her the principal focus and embraces the idea of the artist being the main character.

Then, as the video progresses, it can be noted that intertextuality is present in it since it seems to be focused on a Barbie theme. This has to do with the fact that the main color of the music video palette is pink; specifically the shade of pink used in Barbie’s logo. This can be noted through the outfits and hairstyles of Trainor and her dancers, among other decorative elements in the background. Besides, there are also other direct references such as Barbie’s boyfriend Ken or the Barbie dollhouse, which appear later in the video.

Throughout the music video, many characters stand out. The first and most noticeable one is the former Viner star Sione Maraschino. He appears dancing in a very flexible way, even doing stunts, which contradicts the stereotypical idea of fat people being lazy and unable to move athletically. Furthermore, also present is actor Daniela Dib, who represents skinny women. She appears wrapped up in a plastic dress, perhaps

symbolizing the idea of skinny women being fake, which heavily contrasts with the concept of being natural and curvy which Trainor embodies. Finally, three girls with blond wigs that act as Trainor's backup singers, appear during the do-wop part of the song. In the beginning, all three of them act and look exactly the same, as if they were following a pattern, perhaps representing the control which stereotypes have over people. However, as the song starts coming to an end, they start dancing freely and having fun, maybe symbolizing their liberation from these conventional ideas.

### The Song and the Video

It can be said that the song and the music video for "All About That Bass" go hand in hand given the fact that the lyrics of the song are clearly represented in the music video. As it has been previously stated, Trainor's intentions for this song are to encourage women to love their bodies no matter what size they are. However, just as this positive message is successfully conveyed through the video, the polemical message of skinny bashing is also present in various scenes.

Furthermore, the song and the video complement each other, not only because of how well the lyrics are portrayed through the video, but also because of the peculiarity of the sound of the song. This is due to the fact that the song has a 50s beat, which is amazingly well portrayed in the whole setting of the music video. Nonetheless, it is hard to state whether "All About That Bass" has gained more success for its lyrics or for its music video since both the lyrics and the video convey a very strong message.

In short, it is possible to state that Trainor has failed to transmit a body-positive message through her song, considering that she was not inclusive of all body types and gave arguments that validate one's self-worth through others. Nonetheless, it is important to take into account that when this song was first released, it was a time when the public was not used to seeing female singers like Meghan Trainor disclose taboo topics such as non-normative bodies, much less embrace them. Therefore, it was quite a revolutionary moment in the music industry, and it had a great impact on women in general, encouraging them to love themselves more thanks to the message of Trainor's song, which was the main purpose of it all.

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## Selena Gomez, 'The Heart Wants What It Wants': A Dark Fairy Tale

Inma Expósito Martínez

Released: 6 November 2014

Album: *For You*

Label: Rock Mafia Studios

Genre: Pop, R&B

Length: 3:47

Songwriters: Selena Gomez, Antonina Armato, David Jost, and Tim James

Producer: Rock Mafia

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Selena-gomez-the-heart-wants-what-it-wants-lyrics>

Music Video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ij\\_0p\\_6qTss](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ij_0p_6qTss)

Director: Dawn Shadforth



### The Singer

Selena Marie Gomez, mostly known as Selena Gomez, was born on 22 July 1992 in Texas. She was named after the singer Selena Quintanilla-Pérez (1981-1995), due to her father's Mexican roots. Gomez's parents emigrated to Texas from Monterrey in 1970 and she has stated about her heritage that she is a proud third-generation American-Mexican. Selena Gomez is a singer, actor, songwriter and producer, whose career started at an early age when her mother's stage designing made her become interested in entertainment and she decided to pursue a career in the industry. Gomez debuted in the children's television series *Barney & Friends* in 2002. However her breakthrough came thanks to her role in the Disney Channel series *Hannah Montana*, with Miley Cyrus, as well as with her leading role as Alex Russo in *The Wizards of Waverly Place*, which marked a before and after in her career.

Gomez started recording some songs for Disney and its series (some examples are "Magic" and "Cruella the Vil") but after signing a record deal with Hollywood Records, she formed the pop rock band Selena Gomez & The Scene. The first album of the band received mixed opinions; some music critics praised its fun nature while others criticized the singer's vocal performance. Despite all, Gomez and the band achieved quite a big success with a few of their singles such as "Naturally", "Round and Round", "Who Says", "A Year Without Rain" and the still successful "Love You Like a Love Song" which meant a breakthrough in Gomez's music career. Later on, the band disbanded when the singer decided to focus on her solo acting and music career in 2012.

*Stars Dance* was Gomez's debut album as solo artist. Both the lead single ("Come & Get It") and the second single ("Slow Down") did well in the charts, although the album was not her best-selling record. In 2014, she released her single "The Heart Wants What It Wants" and a compilation album later on, *For You*, before ending her contract with Hollywood Records and signing with Interscope Records. In 2015, the singer released

her second solo studio album, *Revival*; her third solo album *Rare* was published in 2020. All this time she has continued acting in films such as *Another Cinderella Story*, *Princess Protection Program*, *Monte Carlo* and *Spring Breakers* among others.

Gomez has been associated to a few controversies, mostly fueled by rumors circulating on the internet that have never been proved true (such as the existence of some sex tapes with Justin Bieber) or by comments made by other persons. Thus, designer Stefano Gabbana called Gomez ugly in an unfortunate Instagram post. Furthermore, Gomez has been heavily criticized from the very beginning of her career due to her limited vocals, or lack of them as some allege, and her use of auto-tune. Notwithstanding, Gomez's own actions have also been the cause of some controversies; one example is her cultural appropriation of traditional Bindi forehead art for her "Come & Get It" performance in the 2013 MTV Music Awards. Another controversy had to do with the Black Lives Matter movement; in 2016 she was accused of not taking the campaign seriously because of an unsympathetic tweet in which she claimed there were "more important things to talk about" (she later opened her Instagram account to black artists for them to voice their opinions). Beyond this, her image was, and still is for some, a bit tarnished due to her relationship with Justin Bieber and the story full of betrayals and toxicity that they share together. Moreover, her notorious feud with Miley Cyrus back when Gomez started dating Nick Jonas after he broke up with Cyrus as well as the end of her long friendship with Demi Lovato, another former Disney star, have affected Gomez's public image. Regarding other personal issues, Gomez was diagnosed with lupus, which led her to cancel her Stars Dance Tour to undergo chemotherapy in 2015. The singer has also declared that she has been dealing with anxiety and depression for years.

### The Song

Lucas Villa of AXS stated that "The Heart Wants What It Wants" (2014) reminded him of Lana Del Rey's music due to the use of "trip hop beats, guitar and distorted Emile Haynie-styled yelps" as well as Gomez's "dark" lyrics. This was not a negative comparison but a positive one. Villa added that the song "stands as a heartbreaking revelation in her five-year-old songbook, one that's vulnerably beautiful and unapologetically honest". Mike Wass applauded and complimented the song by declaring that "The Rock Mafia-produced gem shows the former teen queen in an entirely new light. There's a vulnerability we haven't seen before as Selena sings about the dark side of her very own fairytale with palpable honesty and conviction"; the reviewer called it the main selling point of the album, *For You*, forecasting a future with many hits for Selena Gomez if she followed this direction.

The main source of inspiration for Gomez when writing this song, together with Antonina Armato, David Jost and Tim James, was her toxic on-off relationship with the singer Justin Bieber. She stated during interviews that "The Heart Wants What It Wants" was an autobiographical song that portrayed the difficulties and pain she experienced during that relationship. Moreover, the artist said that she did not want to perform the song during her *Revival* tour since: "It's like when you smell a scent and it takes you back to a place that maybe wasn't the best place. That stuff is a little bit more difficult" (in

Feeney). According to the singer, “The Heart Wants What It Wants” is something that she wanted and needed to say. Furthermore, she stated that the release of the song was the perfect way to end a chapter.

However, even if the song is about Bieber, that is not the point nor what truly matters. The song sends an important message: sometimes women just cannot abandon an abusive relationship, since this is not as easy as people may think. The lines when the singer sings “Save your advice ‘cause I won’t hear, / You might be right, but I don’t care / There’s a million reasons I should give you up, / But the heart wants what it wants” perfectly describe how women feel when they are in an abusive relationship. They know that staying in it is wrong and that they are being hurt; however, they do not know how to get out or convince themselves that they do not have to stay. It is not easy to get out of an abusive relationship, since when you are inside of it you are not able to see the truth even if others tell you, only if you are able to get fully and completely out of it you may be able to see how toxic and unhealthy it was. By saying “the heart wants what it wants” Gomez is referring to the feeling of being trapped when although you know it is not good for you, you cannot escape a relationship.

Gomez is trying to explain that a situation of abuse cannot really be understood until you experience it yourself; therefore, you should not judge someone if you have not been in their shoes. This message, or rather explanation, that the singer is expressing in the song could be interpreted as an answer to everyone who used to judge her for returning to Bieber over and over again despite all the pain he caused her. In spite of knowing that theirs was an unhealthy and toxic relationship, she wanted to believe and convince herself that he loved her back, although deep inside she probably knew that he did not love her, at least as he should, and that he never would. As she sings, “The bed’s getting cold and you’re not here, / the future that we hold is so unclear / But I’m not alive until you call / And I’ll bet the odds against it all”. Throughout the song Gomez is stating that despite knowing that the relationship was unhealthy and that the man she loved was not treating her well, she could not help but stay in it because her own feelings were addictive and she could not escape him: “You got me scattered in pieces / Shining like stars and screaming / Lighting me up like Venus / But then you disappear and make me wait / And every second’s like torture / Heroin drip, no more so / Finding a way to let go Baby, baby, no, I can’t escape”. This, as noted, goes beyond Gomez and Bieber and explains why so many women cannot break away from toxic relationships with men.

### The Video

Journalist Kabita Maharana defined the music video for “The Heart Wants What It Wants” as “emotionally charged” and so it is. The music video, shot in an elegant black and white, opens with the singer describing the way she was feeling during the time she was in the abusive relationship, presumably with Bieber; crying and with a broken voice she says:

I know him and I know his heart. And I know what he wouldn’t do to hurt me. But I didn’t realize that I’m feeling so confident and so great and then it just be completely shattered by one thing. By something so stupid. But then you make me feel crazy, like it’s my fault. I was in pain.

This monologue at the beginning of the video is a clear proof of how complex and toxic the relationship was and the pain the singer was in.

At the beginning of the music video the viewer can see Gomez getting dressed and crying while seeing herself in the mirror; she is clearly in pain and suffering, however the moment she meets other persons she fakes a smile and acts as if everything is fine so no one can notice the hell she is living. Then she attends a party, an environment that from the very first moment feels uncomfortable for her as well as for the viewer, since Gomez's uneasiness can be felt even through the screen. It is crystal clear that she does not want to be there but she goes and stays for her loved one. Throughout the video it is shown that the man, her boyfriend, is in control and knows that he has power over her; he is aware of the fact that she loves him so much that she will not complain about anything. The actor, Shiloh Fernandez, does an excellent job of portraying the toxic, attractive men that women often fall for; his aloof body language and facial expressions perfectly portray the way he is convinced that Gomez will not leave him, even if he flirts with other women in front of her, even if he treats her like an object that is there to look good beside him. He does all those things because he knows she is addicted to him and will not leave his side.

The fact that the entire music video is in black and white helps to convey the message even better. Gomez is not portrayed as a glamorous star and the main focus in the music video is not herself but her story. The scene when the happy moments of the couple are shown, with a scratchy and low-quality film effect that gives an appearance of a homemade video, show the viewers flashbacks of the good and happy times that the couple spent together. Nevertheless, the moment the flashbacks end and the music video goes back to the present it is clear that Gomez is not as happy anymore and that she is hurting. The way the music video is filmed and edited allows, then, the viewer to focus on the story and the message, emphasizing the singer's painful world rather than her beauty or success.

### The Song and the Video

Although the song does not need the video in order to send its powerful message, the video helps the viewers to sympathize even more with the singer and her story, as well as to acquire a clearer impression of what she went through during the relationship with Bieber. The video, which shows both the bad lonely moments as well as the good times when the couple were happy and in love, is intended to be realistic; that is to say, it makes audiences feel invested in the story and sympathize with what the singer is feeling as if it was your own experience. The viewer gets in Gomez's shoes, in short, to feel her pain. Opening up like that publicly, being a powerful woman as she is, cannot be easy at all; it takes much bravery to tell a dark time in your life so openly. Undoubtedly, the video is a perfect representation of what the lyrics talk about and the message that she is trying to convey. Both the song and the video are so closely connected and full of emotions that they feel like one unit instead of two separate texts. In addition, both Gomez and Fernandez's acting is impeccable. Gomez superbly portrays all the emotions and pain she was feeling inside, as difficult as it is to show that vulnerable part of yourself to the world. Fernandez, as noted, does a wonderful job of representing the toxic and abusive

man the lyrics are talking about, so much that the viewer feels anger when seeing him treating a woman, that he supposedly loves, like that.

Overall, both the song and the video leave nobody indifferent, the way such private and intimate matter is openly shown, as well as the vulnerable side of the singer along with the dark times she went through, is heartbreaking and even painful to watch. The message about how women often are unable to get out of an abusive relationship that the song sends can be even better understood when watching the video. This is something that many women can relate to and maybe watching it from another perspective, in this case Gomez's story and experience, can help them to open their eyes or get the strength and courage that they need in order to get out of their own living hell, their own dark fairy tale.

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## Tori Kelly, 'Unbreakable Smile': From 'Vanilla Girl' to Grammy Winner

Manar Kamouni Akachouih

Released: 28 April 2015

Album: *Unbreakable Smile*

Label: Capitol Records, Schoolboy Records

Genre: Pop

Length: 3:53

Songwriter: Tori Kelly

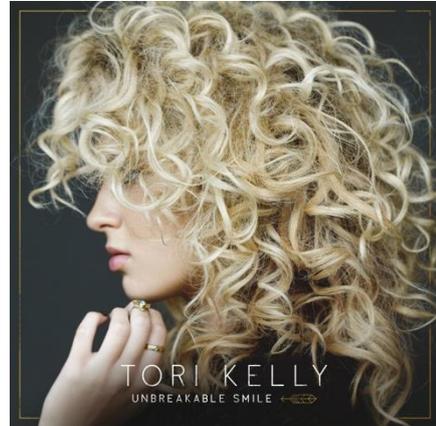
Producers: OzGo, Peter Carlsson, and Tori Kelly

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Tori-kelly-unbreakable-smile-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CV0vhKCYKAc>

Director: Andrew Rose



### The Singer

Victoria Loren Kelly was born in Wildomar, California, on 14 December 1992. Kelly realized she wanted to dedicate her life to being a professional musician from a very young age, since she grew up in a musical household and was immensely influenced by it. Therefore, in 2003, when she was only ten years old, Tori participated in *Star Search*, an American talent competition show. The following year, in 2004, she faced a potentially life-changing event. She appeared in *America's Most Talented Kids* and won, which led her to get signed by the major record label Geffen Records when she was only twelve years old. This opportunity could have been the one to pave her way to fame; however, their contract got cancelled before they could release any record because of conflictual ideas. This mishap greatly discouraged Kelly, leading her to almost give up, as she herself stated in an interview: "I felt like I had all these promises made to me, telling me 'you are going to be the next big thing' and it was fun while it lasted. But when all of that shattered, as a twelve year old kid, I was devastated thinking that it was over for me, and that I was never going to make it" (in TERELL).

A few years later, in 2007, Tori Kelly began posting her original music on her YouTube channel, which helped her become better known and gain a significant amount of followers. Afterwards, in 2010, she auditioned for season nine of *American Idol*, which would mark a before and after in her career as a singer. Kelly did not win this time; nonetheless, she decided to further rely on her YouTube channel using her new popularity and continued working on her music, until she released her first EP *Handmade Songs by Tori Kelly* in 2012, under her own label Toraay Labels. Soon after, Kelly accomplished getting in the top 10 pop album list on iTunes with her EP, which made her more noticeable in the eyes of the industry, leading her to sign with her current record label Capitol Records in 2013.

After several attempts, Kelly had finally made it into the music industry. However, she did not have it easy from the beginning, as she did not meet the expectations which

the media and the industry had of her. When Kelly first entered the picture, she had the reputation of being ‘vanilla’, since she was perceived as this plain, boring, nice girl, who just played the guitar and had nothing interesting to convey. The labels wanted her to be like other famous female singers that were trending at the time, who were more revealing with their choice of clothing and had a more outgoing and bubbly personality. Unfortunately, Kelly’s being true to herself made the media and the industry distrust her future success, even though she has a magnificent voice. Nevertheless, Kelly stayed strong and decided not to throw in the towel, given the fact that she wanted to be real and become successful in her way, which she eventually managed.

It is also important to mention that Tori Kelly is a Christian, considering that faith is an essential part of her life and that it also plays a part in her songwriting. Her religion does not only affect her personal life, but also her life as a singer in the music industry. As Megan Bailey claims, “Kelly has been faced with temptation over and over again while working in Hollywood. She reminds herself frequently that her career comes second to her faith”. Religion is what keeps Kelly grounded and humble in terms of fame, since she knows how fame can destroy people, as she argues in her *YouVersion* (November 2017) interview: “In my line of work it’s kind of built up to be about me... which is scary. It’s terrifying”, Kelly explains. “That’s the biggest challenge” (original ellipsis). Furthermore, even though Kelly does not consider herself part of the Christian music genre, she released a gospel album, *Hiding Place*, in 2018, which won two Grammys in 2019: one for Best Gospel Album and another for Best Gospel Performance/Song for the album track “Never Alone”.

Sadly, as Thomas Bleach claims, it is a fact that “Tori Kelly may just be one of the most underrated artists of right now”. Although she is a genuine and talented artist, she has never received the attention she really deserves. Her voice and heartfelt lyrics are truly amazing and should be recognized by more people. However, this unsuccessfulness stems from the fact that women in the industry are expected to expose their bodies to make it big. Therefore, women like Kelly, who choose not to give in, are not as noticeable through the media since, apparently, their talent alone is not enough for them to succeed and be given a platform. Nonetheless, even though Kelly did not make it to the top when she started, she stuck to her principles and managed to succeed and gain recognition solely by her talent and confidence.

## The Song

“Unbreakable Smile” is the title track of Tori Kelly’s debut eponymous album of 2015. It is a pop song that was released on 27 April 2015 by both Capitol Records and Schoolboy Records. It was solely written by Tori Kelly, and produced by OzGo (Oscar Görres), Peter Carlsson, and Kelly herself. As Alex Kritselis states in his article for *Bustle*, “it’s a sunny, sassy, and delightfully catchy anthem about never compromising who you are—no matter what”. This concept was not decided from the beginning, since neither Kelly nor her record label had a clear picture of what her first album was going to be about. Nevertheless, Kelly herself got inspiration from a situation she went through when she first entered the music industry, as she claims in the following statement:

“I was getting some feedback through the grapevine within the industry that people were doubting if I was going to be able to do anything else—if I was just that girl with her guitar, if I was too boring, too plain, too nice, even. (...) I’m hearing all these things and pretending it’s not fazing me at all, and sure enough, that night, I went home and just spilled my whole heart out into a song. I think it was some things that I needed to say for a long time that I was holding in”. (in Krtiselis).

“Unbreakable Smile” is, then, a song in which Kelly expresses the ideas and emotions she had been suppressing ever since she had first set foot in the music industry. As it has been previously stated, Kelly received negative comments which assured her that in order to be successful, she had to change her personality and leave her morals and allegedly conservative way of thinking aside. Despite everything, she decided not to back down, and wrote her song “Unbreakable Smile”, which directly addresses these issues related to her personal experience, and also questions the way the music industry works for women in general.

The song is composed of a chorus, two verses and an outro. The chorus, which is the most prominent part of the song (“you’re not breaking me / ain’t got time for ya / you won’t shatter me / got an unbreakable smile”) states that Kelly will not surrender to the industry’s requests no matter what they do or say. She feels confident in being herself, which is all she needs to stay strong. Then, in the first verse (“Somebody told me fame is a disease / You start singing the blues when you start seeing the green”) she talks about how fame could be considered a “disease” since changing for fame is something that easily spreads among artists. She also makes reference to the “green”, which refers to money and is normally the main drive of singers just aiming at fame. Afterwards, in the second verse, (“You see me hanging with my fam, it don’t mean I’m living in a bubble / You’ll find me at church, but that don’t mean I can’t cause trouble”) Kelly alludes to her family and faith, affirming that her being religious and reserved does not mean she is naive and does not know how the industry works. She is actually aware of the situation, which is why she is addressing it. Then, she describes the music industry as a “chessboard” and the artists as “pawns”, which she refuses to be (“But I’d rather make’em yawn than be a pawn on your chessboard”). Subsequently, Tori addresses the main issue of the industry regarding women, which has to do with body exposure as the only way they can be successful in the industry (“But baby who knows maybe I can sell out shows without taking off my clothes”). Finally, in the outro (“I might be smiling / But don’t mistake kindness for weakness”) she alludes to how strong women are expected to have a tough exterior, and how other women who are nice and have softer exteriors (like Tori herself) are walked over and treated as foolish girls by the industry.

It is important to address the fact that even though Tori discusses body exposure as a way of reaching success in the lyrics of the song, she is not trying to criticize nor bash female artists who do it by choice. The message she wants to convey is that female singers should not have to feel pressured to show more skin or be sexualized by the industry in order to be famous. Every female singer should be respected for what she does without having to leave her principles and thinking ideologies apart.

## The Video

The music video for Tori's title track "Unbreakable Smile" was directed by Andrew Rose and published on YouTube on 28 April 2015. It is a very simple, yet powerful video in which Tori Kelly appears singing against a black background. At the beginning of the music video, the viewers can only see the left side of Tori's face. However, as she starts singing, Kelly directly faces the camera, confronting the media and the industry with her thoughts and ideas. Finally, when the song begins to reach the end, Kelly assumes the same position as in the beginning of the music video, only showing the left side of her face again. The two positions she maintains along the music video could be reflective of how little the media knows about her (when only one side of her side is shown and she is quiet), and what she really is like (when she states her ideas facing the camera).

Moreover, the background and setting of the music video are also fundamental since they have a purpose. The black background makes Kelly, her voice and her smile be the main focus of the music video, which is what the song is all about. Throughout the video, the viewers can see Tori being herself and having fun displaying her talent without having to pretend to be someone she is not. With her music video for "Unbreakable Smile", Kelly proves to be a great songwriter and singer. She does so with a very simple but elegant music video, which is entertaining and fun to watch and highlights her charisma and talent.

## The Song and the Video

It can be said that the song and the music video for "Unbreakable Smile" go hand in hand and complement one another. This stems from the fact that the lyrics of the song alone are already powerful, which would make a more extravagant music video unfit. This is because it would distract the viewer from the message the song wants to convey, which is not Kelly's aim. Therefore, a simple music video was the correct choice for this song, since it focused on the right issue, proving Kelly's ideas and thoughts.

Furthermore, it is a fact that "Unbreakable Smile" has gained more success for its lyrics than for the music video, since through them Kelly bravely challenges the industry and the media for their idea of how a female artist should act like in order to succeed. Nonetheless, this does not imply that the music video is not important. On the contrary, as it has been stated before, it complements the lyrics, showing that Tori Kelly's talent is enough for her to gain recognition and reach fame without further ado.

In short, it is possible to say that Tori Kelly has proved the industry wrong by staying firm to her morals and making her own way into fame. She is one of the few female artists that decided to follow her way under her own terms, which should be something worth admiring. Nevertheless, this example should go beyond Kelly and be normalized, considering that female singers should feel free to choose the way they want to express and perform their songs, without having to prove anything to an industry that does not take women seriously for their talent.

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## Zara Larsson, ‘Lush Life’: The Power of Breaking Free

Pol Salinas Clavijo

Released: 5 June 2015

Album: *So Good*

Label: TEN, Epic, Sony

Genre: Electropop

Length: 3:21

Songwriters: Emanuel Abrahamsson, Marcus Sepehrmanesh, Linnea Södahl, Fridolin, Walcher, Christoph Bauss, and Iman Conta Hultén

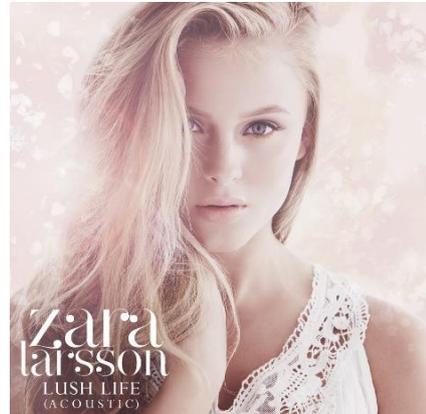
Producers: Freedo, Shuko

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Zara-larsson-lush-life-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tD4HCZe-tew>

Director: Måns Nyman



### The Singer

Swedish singer and songwriter Zara Maria Larsson was born in Stockholm on 16 December 1997. In 2008, at the age of ten, she won the talent show *Talang*, the Swedish version of the *Got Talent*. Some record labels became interested in her and early in 2012, she eventually signed with TEN. Her national fame came with “Uncover” a song that topped the charts in Scandinavia and went platinum six times in 2013. Larsson’s international fame came with “Lush Life” in 2015. Larsson has released three albums so far, *1* published in 2014, *So Good* published in 2017—all its songs reached number one in Sweden—and finally *Poster Girl*, released in 2021. She has also released more than thirty singles and EPs. Some of her career highlights are “Symphony” with Clean Bandit, published in 2017, and with more than one hundred million views on YouTube; “Never Forget You” with MNEK, published in 2015, and “This One’s for You” with David Guetta, which became the UEFA EURO 2016 official song. Larsson has noted that one of her main inspirations for being a singer was the musical group ABBA, the worldwide famous Swedish band. Sweden is one of the countries that better trains students in music both in and out of school, which possibly explains the country’s current importance in the field of pop, of which Larsson is an example.

Larsson has proclaimed herself a fan of Beyoncé, identifies as a feminist, and models herself as an activist after the Black American singer. She has always been very aware of issues around equality, something that can be seen in the lyrics of her songs. Larsson has always had a very open mind regarding opinion on social media and interviews, which has caused her some trouble. Michael Cragg recently noted that “One of pop’s biggest, and most outspoken, young stars, the Swedish musician now wants to leave her Twitter beefs behind—but she’ll never stop talking about the issues she cares about”. About her outspokenness, Larsson argued that “Both my parents are very educated when it comes to social issues and being woke about what’s going on in the

world, and they've been very supportive of me having a voice" (in Swift). In 2015, for instance, she gained plenty of positive attention after posting a photo on Instagram showing her leg inside a condom to refute the idea, invoked by men reluctant to using that kind of protection, that a penis can be too big for condoms to fit around.

### The Song

"Lush Life" was born in a writing camp, where a group of Swedish songwriters joined for a week and started brainstorming ideas for new songs. This was the song that attracted most attention towards Larsson, later becoming a huge success. It is indeed her most successful solo single and video to date, with more than seven hundred million views on YouTube. The song was top one in Sweden and top five in Europe. Lillian Min has argued that "Lush Life" is the antidote of summer love and noted that

Larsson's vocals eerily shadow the kind of sung sting made popular by artists like Rihanna, but the production is all Swedish pop magic you can hear the same sort of electronica-based production for fellow Swedes Tove Lo and Tove Stryke (and to a lesser extent, early Lykke Li). And like those artists, Larsson benefits from crafting her lyrics around one sentiment, linked to a hook that can't be forgotten.

"Lush Life" is an acknowledgement of the freedom associated with summer. Larsson celebrates the hedonism of partying every night to dance and enjoy the summer, then doing it again the next day. Romance is in this context ephemeral, with a constant cycle of finding love, losing it, moving on and finding another person to love. In one of her interviews Larsson argued that: "Losing love is a disappointing experience full of regrets, but sometimes you have to move on. Life is truly abundant because there will be another chance to love" (in *Explained Lyrics*) The word "Lush" means abundant, and that is the idea that Larsson wants to endorse with the song: that there are plenty of men out there and there will always be new opportunities in the future to fall in love again. She also wants to downplay the impact of breakups, presenting the courage of breaking free and letting go from a relationship when things are not going well as a common, ordinary experience, important but not too distressing.

### The Video

There are three different version of the "Lush Life" video. The first one was directed by Måns Nyman and published only in Sweden in 2015. In the video, we can see Larsson dancing in front of a white background. There is a shorter version for worldwide release, with a colorful palette and visual effects that was released in 2015 as well. A third version, directed by María Clerté, was aimed at a United States release in 2016. The video is even more colorful and there are dancers joining Larsson, though this video was not as popular as the international version. In her article on the US version Pam Avoledo comments that the 2016 version is "an idea of what an US version of a music video is supposed to be. There are silhouettes, pastel backgrounds and a lot of dancing (how many Ariana Grande videos did the director watch?). Nonetheless, these are trends that were happening last year in US videos, making Larsson already behind the times".

There are several moments and actions in the 2016 video that are important to mention. The first one can be seen at the beginning of the video, where Larsson rips off her necklace and throws it away as a symbol of breaking free from the relationship. She can also be seen walking confidently, reassuring her decision, and willing to live this “lush life”. She is mainly dancing throughout the video, which reflects Larsson’s call for going out, having fun with your friends, and dancing until the sun comes up. There is also a comparison of the relationship with a pair of handcuffs, and how she is better without them. A scene shows Larsson represented as a dark shadow with lightning bolts inside of her, this image suggests her power to do whatever she wants regardless of people telling her what she should do instead. She will make her own rules because by living her life as she wants, she will find true happiness.

### The Song and the Video

Both the lyrics and the video share the same ideas towards Larsson’s message and intention with the song. Summer romance is both a personal experience and a pop culture myth by which a person meets someone and stars a short-lived love story that ends at the end of summer with the return home, often to distant places. With this song, Larsson wants to talk about the reality of parting ways after a short fling, which is often dismissed by pop singers as songs usually focus on the high feeling of longer relationships. This quick turnover of partners is part, as the song indicates, of the club scene in summer, and, generally, of an atmosphere in which if a young woman cannot find the right guy, she quickly moves on to the next one. If there is no connection, then he is just not the one, particularly if he is going to try to change every imperfection he is not happy with. Larsson transmits the idea that a woman must never change for a man if he is not willing to change for her and that there should be no drama in love. This is an encouraging message for women to be always whoever they want to be; if a woman is not happy with a relationship, even if leaving it is hard, she needs not be there out of any commitment. She has the power to leave the relationship, as new opportunities will always come in the future in this kind of not too romantic ‘lush life’.

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## Melanie Martinez, 'Sippy Cup': A Sinister Fairy Tale

Mireia Morera Masa

Released: 31 July 2015

Album: *Cry Baby*

Label: Atlantic Records

Genre: Electronic, trip hop

Length: 3:15

Songwriters: Melanie Martinez, Kinetics, and One Love

Producer: One Love

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Melanie-martinez-sippy-cup-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdwaWp59qz8>

Director: [Melanie Martinez](#)



### The Singer

Melanie Adele Martinez is an American singer, songwriter, actor, director, photographer and screenwriter. She was born in Queens (New York) in 1995 to parents who are of Dominican and Puerto Rican descent. Melanie grew up in a happy environment with a father who liked music very much, which influenced the artist a great deal. She stated in an interview for *NYLON* in 2015 that she wanted to be a singer from a very young age; in fact, she started writing poetry when she was in kindergarten. However, Martinez also remembers being a very emotional child, which prompted other children to refer to her as a 'cry baby'. Reversing the slur, she created a character who became the protagonist of her first album, titled *Cry Baby*. Martinez's songs are generally based on her personal experiences. She has described her music as very dark since she likes to create an atmosphere filled with creepy childlike sounds. Seeing that, we might think that the artist could have had some trauma growing up, or some kind of problem with her family that prompted this gloomy and sinister sense in her songs, but the truth is that Martinez, as she confirms, "had a great childhood" (in Manders).

Martinez rose to prominence in 2012 after she appeared on the American talent show *The Voice*; although she did not win the edition, the show made her very famous. After that, Martinez released her debut single "Dollhouse", following her debut EP of the same title in 2014, through Atlantic Records. Since then, she has released two more albums, *Cry Baby* (2015), which includes the songs "Sippy Cup" and "Play Date"—which has become a trend in the video-sharing application TikTok—, and her second album, *K-12* (2019), which follows the storyline of the previous one. In 2020 she released an EP called *After School*.

On another note, Martinez is recognized for her looks. At the age of sixteen, she decided to dye half her hair blonde, following the style of Cruella de Vil, the villainess in *101 Dalmatians*. In addition, she wears baby doll-inspired outfits, just like the 'cry baby'

character. It often seems difficult to differentiate between Melanie, the twenty-six-year-old woman, and Melanie, the creepy-baby artist. Martinez herself finds it complicated to do so, as she explained:

“It’s been really hard trying to separate my personal life, like who I am as a person and who I am as an artist, because it’s so real for me. I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately, because you put a lot into your music when you’re an artist, so when you put your whole self in, it’s really hard to understand the difference (...) So, the Cry Baby character is basically the really insecure, dark, and vulnerable side of me that’s who I am deep down”. (in Manders)

This ‘dark’ character that the artist has created seemed to be very real in 2017 when Martinez was accused by her former friend Timothy Heller, a woman, of sexual assault. When this happened, Martinez’s fans criticized Heller; the singer undermined her credibility by applauding her fans and stating that the accusation was false. However, another woman friend of Martinez also accused her of sexual harassment. To add insult to injury, none of these accusations led anywhere as the victims did not press charges; the singer “never had to face many consequences for her actions” (Stevenson); now it seems that no one is concerned with the allegations anymore. Perhaps the sinister Cry Baby character shares more traits with the real Melanie Martinez than it seems.

### The Song

“Sippy Cup” is the third track of Martinez’s first album *Cry Baby*; it was released on 31 July 2015 with its corresponding music video. The album was written as if it were a movie since every song follows a storyline that needs to be heard and seen in a specific order. The video focuses on the Cry Baby who resembles Martinez herself but also on other creepy characters that help create this fictionalized world with all the misfortunes that happen in it. As a matter of fact, despite her claims that she had had a happy childhood, Martinez said in an interview for *Vice* in 2015 (see Redactie) that the album was filled with many things that happened in her own life in addition to other fantasy elements.

Following the style of the singer, each song in the album bears a title related to childhood, even though its message may carry a more adult-like theme, focusing on grown-ups’ problems. In the case of “Sippy Cup”, the singer targets the matter of the difficulties in acknowledging reality and confronting one’s problems, especially regarding relationships. As the third track, the lyrics of the song follow from the events that occur in the second song, “Dollhouse”, which allows the audience to take a deeper look into the Cry Baby’s family life. In this case, the singer refers to a “sippy cup” filled with a syrup which is actually alcohol, wanting to emphasize that alcohol is still what it is even when you put it in a cute little cup. Martinez uses the sippy cup, then, as a metaphor to assert that problems remain no matter how much one tries to cover them up. Besides, in the chorus, she highlights that you cannot solve these problems by merely dressing them up and making them look good on the outside, as she states in the verse “kids are still depressed when you dress them up”. As a consequence of the mother’s alcoholism and the failure of the rest of the characters to face their problems, it seems that the narrator’s innocence, i.e. the Cry Baby’s innocence, has been damaged. The main character

expresses her emotions and this loss of peace by referring to herself as a “corpse that you keep in a cradle”, metaphorically referring to her childhood as being now dead.

Essentially, the lyrics of “Sippy Cup” describe the dark episodes that affect the family, and in doing so, it sends the main message that a problem cannot be solved by simply concealing it. We could relate the actions that end the Cry Baby’s innocence as an allegory of the end of Martinez’s own loss of innocence.

### The Video

Aside from writing music, Martinez is also interested in visuals; as I have stated before, she is a director and a visual artist. Her music videos are influenced by many visual artists, some of them including Mark Ryden, Aleksandra Waliszewska, and Nicoletta Ceccoli. Furthermore, the artist highlighted that she is likewise inspired by Tim Burton, as we can see from the darkness and the grimy atmosphere in her videos. In the case of “Sippy Cup”, we see the end of the Cry Baby’s innocent childhood through a twisted video which “finds our vintage clothing-clad heroine floating on a cloud with angel wings” (Wass), though far from being angelic.

As I have previously mentioned, in this album the lyrics of the songs are as important as the visuals. For the artist, we cannot have one thing without the other; that is why *Cry Baby* is a concept album that functions as a movie with its beginning, a central conflict and an end. Similarly to any film, the album includes primary and secondary characters; the main characters are the Cry Baby, who appears in every video; the mother, who is seen in “Sippy Cup”, “Cry Baby”, and “Dollhouse”; and additionally, the alphabet boy and Johnny. Besides, although most of the videos are mainly set in the Cry Baby’s house, the films are also set in the Big Bad Wolf’s House or in the strange Hospital. As a result, the visuals allow the spectators to get a deeper look into this sinister world that the singer describes in her songs.

Concerning the “Sippy Cup” storyline, the video begins with the Cry Baby’s mother laying down drunk on the kitchen floor. Suddenly, her husband appears with another woman and the mother murders them both; when the Cry Baby goes downstairs into the kitchen and sees the corpses, under a sheet, her mother puts her to sleep with chloroform. When she wakes up, the mother gives her a liquid in a sippy cup which makes her forget everything she has seen. It is obvious that the syrup which the mother drinks is alcohol; she drinks probably due to her husband’ infidelity or simply the bad relationship that the married couple must have. As a consequence, this affects little Cry Baby, who is beginning to understand the reality of the world she lives in. As Martinez repeats in the lyrics, her mother is trying to cover up these problems, not just by hiding the corpses with a white sheet—perhaps the purity that is now stained with blood—but also with the liquid that she uses to make her daughter forget every perverse thing she has seen. Although at the end of the video we see the Cry Baby with angel wings in a white location which could remind us of heaven, as if her mother had killed her, the truth is that Melanie informed her fans that what dies is the innocence of the Cry Baby, but not the character herself.

## The Song and the Video

In the case of Melanie Martinez's "Sippy Cup", it is clear that the song would not have been the same without the video. For starters, the singer wrote the track and directed the video so she could tell her story in her own way. Being only twenty at the time, Martinez put a lot of effort into creating all the characters and making up a fantasy world for the Cry Baby to live in. It is as if the singer has created a music box to leave the emotional child Melanie behind and welcome the Melanie that has now evolved and sees the world in a much more mature way. As the singer stated in the interview for *NYLON* in 2015, she adores "the contrast between adult situations and the kid themes. It just shows it can all come back together" (in Manders). Therefore, the change that the Cry Baby goes through and that is explained in the lyrics, is highlighted even more in the video. Not just in the case of "Sippy Cup" as a song, but in *Cry Baby* as an entire album, although it is true that it is in "Sippy Cup" where reality hits the protagonist and she starts the change that every movie hero has to suffer in order to evolve. In the case of the Cry Baby she has to leave her innocence behind, as Manders claims:

It is the things from our childhood that haunt and shape us the most. The loss of innocence is a bittersweet one, and oftentimes, the lessons learned in adulthood are best learned when put in layperson's terms. Or in the case of Melanie Martinez, the candy color-haired mind behind "Carousel", seen through the eyes of the proverbial child. (Maders).

We could argue whether or not Martinez the artist—not to be confused with the character—applies this to her own life and is brave enough to confront her problems, or whether she keeps hiding behind a baby-like figure in order to carry on with a faked innocence that allows her to cover her own skeletons in the cupboard, or "corpses" in the "cradle".

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## Kelly Clarkson, 'Piece by Piece': Healing Past Wounds

Maria Giol Muñoz

Released: 9 November 2015

Album: *Piece by Piece*

Label: RCA Records

Genre: Pop-rock

Length: 3:44

Songwriters: Kelly Clarkson and Greg Kurstin

Producer: Greg Kurstin

Lyrics: <http://www.songlyrics.com/kelly-clarkson/piece-by-piece-lyrics/>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqCqYP7hDWI>

Director: Alon Isocianu



### The Singer

Kelly Brianna Clarkson was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on 24 April 1982. She reached the music spotlight in 2002 after winning the inaugural season of the TV talent-spotting show *American Idol*. Before the television debut, she had tried to get a break in professional singing by moving to Los Angeles, but she was out of luck. In an interview with *The Guardian* (March 2015), she declared:

“I didn’t have money for a photo shoot, so I sent my demo out—a soulful demo—without a picture. And a couple of times, [label staff] said to me, ‘Oh, you’re not black’—they wanted a black-backing-singer look. I did get some calls returned: Gerry Goffin was the first person to be excited by me. They invited me to his home and I saw his gold records and thought, ‘this is amazing’. So I had some interest from people who’d worked with major artists, but I still wasn’t really getting anywhere. I was living with a girl I barely knew on Croft Avenue [in Los Angeles], and the day we moved in we went out to dinner. We came back from dinner and the place was on fire”. (in Sullivan)

Luckily, *American Idol* provided the artist with the opportunity she had been searching for. The creator of the ‘Idols’ television format (UK *Pop Idol* and US *American Idol*), Simon Fuller, hit the target when he answered affirmatively to the question hovering all over media. “[Will Clarkson] last longer than the other reality starlets who have been testing the British public’s patience for the last 18 months?” (in Sullivan). No sooner said than done, Clarkson released her pop-rock debut single “A Moment Like This” (2002), later included in the debut album *Thankful* (2003), which soon topped Billboard’s 200 record charts and the Canadian Singles Chart.

Nearly two decades later, Clarkson has built a prolific music career publishing nine studio albums, one compilation album, one remix album, six extended plays and fifty singles (see her *Wikipedia* entry). Her sales are “over 25 million albums and 45 million singles worldwide” (Marcone and Philip 258), out of which twelve million alone come

from her second studio album and double Grammy awards' winner *Breakaway* (2004). Indeed, she has been honored with many other accolades that sum up a total of seventy-seven so far; among these, another Grammy award and twelve Billboard Music Awards. Further to this, Clarkson's studio albums *Wrapped in Red* (2013) and *When Christmas Comes Around* (2021) debuted number one on Billboard Top Holiday Albums, which had some music journalists dubbing Clarkson as "the holiday queen" (Curto), perhaps only second to Mariah Carey. What is more, some of Clarkson's singles have been ranked among the best female Christmas records ever, at the level of Dolly Parton's "Hard Candy Christmas" (2001).

As regards Kelly Clarkson's other activities, she is very popular chiefly among Anglo-American audiences beyond her singing and song writing. She has published two children's books (*River Rose and the Magical Lullaby* (2016) and *River Rose and the Magical Christmas* (2017)), has taken some acting roles in movies (including the *American Idol* spin-off movie *From Justin to Kelly* (2003)) and is a successful TV personality. Kelly Clarkson has a charismatic, humorous and extrovert personality that have made her an ideal coach and advisor in the reality television series *The Voice US* (2018-21). Being a member of the contest has provided Clarkson with tools to help emerging artists achieve success. For instance, in her first season Team Kelly brought Brynn Cartelli to victory; subsequently, Clarkson named her supporting artist for her Meaning of Life tour in 2019. Additionally, since 2019 Clarkson hosts her variety talk show *The Kelly Clarkson Show*, a winner of three Daytime Emmy Awards. Finally, this year NBC has announced that her show will take over the time slot of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* after it ends in 2022 (see Itzkoff).

As for Clarkson's personal life, on the one hand she is the mother of two children with her ex-husband Brandon Blackstock, the son of Clarkson's former manager, Narvel Blackstock. On the other hand, throughout her career, she has had to face endless criticism from the yellow press especially of her appearance and weight fluctuations, though she has learned to ignore them. As she told the *Daily Mail* "Too skinny, too fat, too blonde—so much blah. This is who I am and I'm happy. Happy looks different on everyone" (in Mulkerrings). Ultimately, Clarkson is an artist that promotes body positivity, feminism, environmentalism, and authenticity messages through her music. An excellent example is the song "Whole Lotta Woman" (2017) where the singer herself identifies with the title and invites men to "accept it or walk away".

### The Song

"What have they done to our Kelly, those canny men pulling the strings of her post-American Idol career?", journalist Aaron Berger despairingly wrote. Despite its success, this is how Clarkson's first studio album, *Thankful* (2003), was received by many music journalists. The following album, *Breakaway* (2004), sought to break ties from this easily marketable Clarkson with a pop-rock style and a new voice that was received favorably by critics. Finally, ignoring the label's objections, by the time she released *My December* (2007), Clarkson had practically taken over the song writing of the album and left behind the *American Idol*'s stamp. By 2015 the American singer had carved out a niche in the music business and released with RCA Records the single "Piece by Piece", part of her

seventh studio album with the same title. The release differs from previous albums because it presents a more mature Clarkson, who has married and experienced motherhood for the first time. Particularly, Clarkson wanted to create a concept record inspired by personal experiences with love, family, and empowerment.

“Piece by Piece” is a pop-rock song written by Clarkson herself with her producer Greg Kurstin. Although the song is based, as noted for the rest of the album, on a personal experience it can strike a chord with many persons. Specifically, the single is a follow up from the 2004 song “Because of You” about Clarkson’s childhood experience of abandonment by her father. Clarkson’s parents divorced when she was six and her father stepped away from his daughter’s life. “Because of You” reflects on the trauma and consequences that this caused in her adult relationships as her father’s absence created the fear that she would not be able to love a man again. Yet, years later, Clarkson could restore her faith in men, thanks to her husband Brandon Blackstock, and the circle was closed by the birth of their daughter, River Rose. In Clarkson’s words,

“A lot of the reasons why I wrote ‘Piece by Piece’ was I guess I didn’t realize the gravity of the situation until I had a child of my own, and until I experienced love like I do with Brandon (Blackstock) on the daily basis. I guess you don’t realize something is missing until you feel it. I can’t imagine walking away from my little girl. I can’t imagine not having that love anymore. I didn’t know it was missing because I never had it. It was a revelation and that’s why I wrote that song. I think a lot of people go through that”. (in Rosen)

The lyrics take a narrative style; they start setting up the conflict, then lead to a climax and a final resolution. Hence, the first verse, “all I remember is your back (...) / leaving us all in your past” is the recollection of the moment when the father left the family behind. Then, by the chorus, the singer has found a male figure that “piece by piece” has collected her from the ground and healed “the holes” (traumas) that the father created. Moreover, this good man contrasts with the father figure because “he never walks away / never asks for money” and loves and takes care of her. Finally, the resolution comes, the singing woman comes into terms with her father because after having a child she has verified “that a man can be kind and a father could stay / should be great”. Additionally, the verse “I made something of myself and now you wanna come back (...) / Back then I didn’t have anything you needed, so I was worthless” is interesting to consider. The lines insinuates that when Clarkson became famous and wealthy her father came back, out of pure interest, but she defends that love should not be motivated by gain. Clarkson’s final message is that now that she is about to experience motherhood, she will never neglect her family and, together with her husband, she promises to always love and take care of baby River.

### The Video

The music video for “Piece by Piece” was filmed by the Canadian music video director Alon Isocianu and in a few words “it will make you want to hug your mom” (Chouinard) because of its many images of caring women. Following Clarkson’s legacy of bringing out powerful music videos, this time the strategy chosen is to send a strong message through simple images. Filmed in black and white, the video alternates shots featuring

Clarkson singing with scenes showing mothers with children, pregnant women, and children. Incidentally, Clarkson wrote the song when she was pregnant with River but by the time the video was shot (2014) her daughter had been born and not until 2015 did she get pregnant again.

Specifically, the video sets off with some symbolic elements or images that convey a sense of sorrow, dejection and/or abandonment. Firstly, there are two people holding hands, suddenly, they let go and there is one hand that tries to reach for the other but misses. Then, the film shows a fading flower, a door that closes and the image of a lonely teddy bear. Afterwards, there appear several sequences showing Clarkson singing full of emotion intercalated with others where diverse women and children appear. These people's facial expressions reinforce this sense of melancholy or abandonment, though this starts to change with the emergence of bright lights. The denouement arrives with the black background switching to white and the display of all these various women celebrating themselves. Clarkson appears holding her own baby daughter River Rose. The whole video is a celebration of women's childhood and motherhood though the final shot with the mother and daughter also serves as a tribute to Clarkson's husband, Brandon Blackstock, a main inspiration, as noted, for the song.

Additionally, it is necessary to note an incongruency, for despite Clarkson addressing her absent father and eulogizing her husband in the lyrics, there does not appear a single male figure or reference in the music video. Actually, the video alone without music makes clear this celebration of the female figure but it does not give a clue about the lyrics relation to fatherhood (whether positive or not); this is most noticeable in the final scene where Clarkson appears embracing baby River alone. This absence of men from the music video can be interpreted as a means to condemn fathers for failing in the task and a tool to emphasize the importance of mothers. Additionally, this procedure is frequently employed in music videos of female artists that express heterosexual desire (see Megan Thee Stallion "WAP") or condemn men for failing whether as fathers or boyfriends.

### The Song and the Video

The music video is fairly faithful to the spirit of the lyrics. Still, it has to be acknowledged that the music video alone gives plenty to think about and can lead to broader interpretations maybe not so centered on the figure of the father, since no man appears in it, as noted. The video's universal aim is to help people in similar situations of abandonment to realize that they are not alone in their struggles, and that relying on someone to restore your faith in love is not weakness but strength. In an interview with *Glamour* Clarkson declared about the song:

"I had [my daughter] River, and even from holding her the first day, I was like, how could anyone walk away from that? Then I started thinking that my husband [Brandon Blackstock] is such a great father", she said. "He's not an audience guy—he is onstage doing the work with me. He changes diapers, he stays up, and if I've had a late night, he'll wake up with her in the morning. We're definite partners, and I felt so lucky. I was talking to my sister on the phone about how sometimes girls with daddy issues don't find men like that! You find men who are all you knew, and I just feel so lucky" (in Whitney)

Therefore, “Piece by Piece”, unlike “Because of You”, is meant to be a song with a happy ending/message. At last, Clarkson has stated that she no longer feels resentment towards her father, though this does not mean that she approves of behavior like his. Nonetheless, she grants that “everyone’s human” (in Whitney) and she herself will do her best to love and support her family.

While the music video is largely about the bad relationship between father-daughter, its images mainly show the power of a mother-daughter relationship. All of the women and girls are happy together without the necessity of any male figure. Actually, at a recent declaration in her talk show, Clarkson gave a new spin to the song’s intentions acknowledging that after her divorce from Brandon she has realized that the hero in the lyrics is she herself and not her husband for restoring her faith on men. She explained: “I wrote the song for my daughter and my husband at the time, and little did I know it was only a piece of this puzzle” (in Karasin). Clarkson had put a lot of expectations on her husband, yet irreconcilable differences and the bitter divorce with him opened the truth in front of her: all these expectations should have been placed on herself instead. The couple are still (January 2022) in an ongoing battle for the custody of both children and unresolved financial aspects (see Starstruck Management Group).

21<sup>st</sup> century female musical artists have often been identified with a type of feminist vindication that distrusts romantic relationships, alienates the male figure and celebrates women’s sexuality. Clarkson’s recent reinterpretation of the song by which she is the hero and not her husband can be acknowledged to pertain to this contemporary discourse. Nonetheless, it is also important to recall that at the release of the single, Clarkson reminds us that having healthy romantic relationships or admitting emotional reliance on a male figure, and recognizing his importance, are not weaknesses. What is important, above all, is to remain strong and improve. As Clarkson has declared, “Women have been pioneering for years for equal rights, and we have more to offer, so I guess it frustrates me when people only bring one part of their personality to the table. (...) I feel like as a generation, we sell ourselves short. I just expected more from us” (in Whitney).

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## Lizzo, 'Good as Hell': The Anti-bullying Queen

Alejandra Pumarola Arroyo

Released: 8 March 2016

Album: *Cuz I Love You* (super deluxe); originally released in the EP *Coconut Oil*

Genre: Pop, R&B

Length: 2:39

Label: Atlantic, Nice Life

Songwriters: Lizzo and Eric Frederic

Producers: Ricky Reed and Lizzo

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lizzo-good-as-hell-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmbmeOgWsqE>

Director: Ricky Reed



### The Singer

Born Melissa Jefferson in Detroit on 27 April 1988, this American singer, rapper, songwriter, and flutist is known professionally as Lizzo. While growing up, Lizzo listened to gospel at home, took flute lessons, and played in her school's marching band. She began rapping when she was fourteen, forming the group Cornrow Clique with her friends. When high school was over, Lizzo studied classical flute at the University of Houston, but the loss of her father when she was twenty devastated her and she even ended up living in a van for a little while. Looking for a fresh start, Lizzo moved to Minneapolis in 2011 and soon became a part of the city's thriving music scene. She performed with groups including Lizzo & the Larva Ink, and the Chalice, whose debut album, *We Are the Chalice*, appeared in 2012.

During this time, Lizzo also worked on her music and collaborated with Gayngs' Ryan Olson and Doomtree's Lazerbeak for her September 2013 debut album, *Lizzobangers*. The album's gritty sound earned Lizzo local and national acclaim, and she toured the USA and the UK with Har Mar Superstar after its release. The following year, Lizzo worked with Prince on his album *Plectrumelectrum* and made guest appearances on tracks by Clean Bandit ("New Eyes"), Bastille ("Torn Apart"), and Sean Anonamous and DJ Name ("Cold Shoulder"). To make her second album Lizzo recorded at the studio of Bon Iver's Justin Vernon, working once again with Lazerbeak as well as producers Sam Spiegel and Stefon 'Bionik' Taylor. The result was *Big Grrrl Small World*, published in December 2015, a more eclectic set of songs that borrowed from classic and contemporary hip-hop and R&B. Released by Lizzo's own BGSW label, the album's widespread praise led to a deal with Atlantic Records.

Lizzo was originally a rapper and it took some time before she found the confidence to sing in her records. For her first major-label release, Lizzo worked with producer Ricky Reed, who encouraged her to use more of her gospel vocal training on the songs they were writing together. The *Coconut Oil* EP, which featured the singles

“Worship” and “Good as Hell”, appeared in October 2016 on Reed’s Nice Life imprint and reached number twenty-two on Billboard’s Top R&B Albums chart. Following tours with Haim and Florence + the Machine, and a stint hosting the MTV program *Wonderland*, Lizzo issued the 2017 single “Truth Hurts”. After a brief break, she returned in April 2019 releasing several singles. In August 2019, *Coconut Oil* appeared on the Billboard 200, while “Truth Hurts” reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 and became the longest-running number-one by a solo female rap artist to date.

Although she specializes in frothy, effervescent pop, there is a sincerity to Lizzo’s music (and persona) that is tremendously moving. When she sings “I know I can do all things”, in her 2016 empowerment anthem *Coconut Oil*, she wills young girls listening to her music, who don’t fit the narrow parameters of slim white womanhood set out by the music industry, to believe that they, too, can own the limelight. Though known for her hit songs and self-confidence, Lizzo has nonetheless opened up about how comments from haters on social media are hurtful. She has addressed on several occasions the bullying and criticism she has dealt with all through her career. The musician has opened up about struggling to feel heard and accepted in an environment that is not always supportive and she has addressed why these hateful comments are surfacing. Lizzo has declared that even though Black women are great “innovators in the industry”, “We are the ones who do suffer from the marginalization the most and the erasure the most” (in Brockington). The Grammy-winning singer admitted that without the internet or social media she could have been “erased”. She added, “But I chose to be undeniable and I chose to be loud and I chose to be great. And I’m still here” (in Brockington). Lizzo deleted her social media accounts for a little while after she received fat-phobic and racist comments but she came back stronger than ever, with a string of positive, self-confident messages.

## The Song

Lizzo originally recorded “Good as Hell” for the soundtrack of the 2016 film *Barbershop: The Next Cut*. The song was released as the lead single from her debut EP *Coconut Oil* on 8 March 2016. The song didn’t chart at the time but began to gain traction in 2019 following the increased interest in the rapper’s music. It finally entered the Hot 100 dated 7 September 2019, after Lizzo delivered a vibrant performance incorporating “Good as Hell” and “Truth Hurts” at the 2019 MTV VMAs. Lizzo co-wrote the self-loving anthem with Ricky Reed (also a songwriter for Twenty One Pilots, Meghan Trainor, and Jason Derulo). She also co-penned her breakthrough single “Truth Hurts” with the producer.

The song starts with Lizzo rhyming: “I do my hair toss / Check my nails / Baby how you feelin’? / Feeling good as hell”. Lizzo explained that the song alludes to the pink sweater emoji girl with the hair toss, which she had in mind when she started composing the song with Reed. Then the next thing she thought of was checking her nails. “It was a natural statement that came out my mouth”, Lizzo said to *SMF*. Like most great anthems, the song is intended to be a communal exercise. The line “I do my hair toss” returns over and over, eventually shifting into a direct invitation to the listener: “And do your hair toss”. Marching through the wreckage wrought by shaky self-confidence, Lizzo shouts a question into the void—“Baby, how you feelin’?”—and waits as a choir of female voices

replies “Feelin’ good as hell”. The empowerment of women is at the heart of this particular anthem. “I’m tired of the bullshit”, Lizzo said during her VMA performance. “And I don’t need to know your story to know that you’re tired of the bullshit, too. It’s so hard trying to love yourself in a world that doesn’t love you back... you deserve to feel good as hell. We deserve to feel good as hell!” (in Kale). Behind Lizzo, her dancers—women of color, of all body shapes and sizes—whooped and hollered.

“Good as Hell” is also a song about female friendship: Lizzo tries to cheer her friend up and wants her to forget about her breakup to celebrate life: “Woo, child, tired of bulls--t / go on, dust your shoulders off, keep it moving / yes, Lord, tryna get some new s--t / in there, swimwear, going to the pool s--t”, the artist sings. This anthem is about taking something out of a breakup but also about the power of sorority; overall, Lizzo’s philosophical solution to the problem of romantic love is that women need to focus more on themselves than on their often damaging lovers: “Come now, come dry your eyes / you know you a star, you can touch the sky / I know that it’s hard but you have to try / if you need advice, let me simplify”. The vocalist is presenting herself as an example of an independent woman whose joyous mood is not dependent on that of a romantic partner. You can talk about love and breakup, and count on your female friends: they will always be there no matter what you go through.

### The Video

There are two videos for “Good as Hell”. The first one, released on 11 May 2016, features Lizzo and multiple women of color at a beauty salon, getting their hair and nails done while having fun with the occasion. The uplifting video follows a woman who enters the salon feeling insecure about herself, but, with a little help from the women around her, and mainly of Lizzo, she is reminded of how beautiful she is. A lot of hair tossin’ and dancing follows. This music video ties with the movie *Barbershop: The Next Cut*, for which, as noted, the song was originally written. On 9 December 2019, in the wake of the song’s growing popularity, a new official music video was premiered on YouTube (see Mendez, Belfiori). This music video, directed by Alan Ferguson, is set in Southern University, and features the Baton Rouge HBCU.

In this second video the university’s marching band students have trouble with some regular classes while preparing for an upcoming performance; one of the cheerleaders is heartbroken over a relationship she had with another student. Lizzo then shows up during one of the rehearsals and accompanies the group throughout the video, performing her song and having fun with the students. Lizzo is at hand to lift their spirits ahead of the nerve-wracking day. Her uplifting lyrics narrate each character’s storyline, starting with the cheerleader that is depressed over her relationship. Moving on to a female saxophone player that can’t quite get the marching band’s choreography down, the frustrated student’s fellow bandmate takes it upon herself to give her some encouraging pointers. This sets the scene for the song’s feel-good chorus: “I do my hair toss / check my nails / baby, how you feelin’? / feelin’ good as hell”. And, in true Lizzo fashion, a bus that has the singer’s name written across the front brings the students to the game and serves as the perfect stage for a dance-off. Channeling the power of Lizzo, each character is able to put their doubts and insecurities aside to deliver a memorable

homecoming performance. Lizzo's lyrics never fail to remind all of us to love ourselves, and, for that reason, her songs will never get old.

### The Song and the Video

This is a feel-good song intended to raise the spirit of heartbroken people. The artist uses the song to encourage broken-hearted girls or those whose feelings have been hurt to find every possible means to get on with their lives and be cheerful again, rather than brood over what left them broken. Lizzo uses the song to encourage introverted girls to take part in activities that would bring their joy back and make them forget about the men who hurt them in the past. The song is very tuneful. Lizzo was expressive as she sang the lyrics and they flow well with the rhythm.

Although it may read like an oxymoron, good as hell is actually a colloquial phrase that refers in a positive way to being in an exceptional state. And in this particular song, what is being labeled as such is ideally the addressee's attitude. More specifically, the addressee is presented as someone who is going through self-esteem issues due to being mistreated by a romantic partner. So overall, the purpose of this song is to uplift this person. Thus, Lizzo approaches this task using a couple of different strategies. For example, she presents herself as someone who is not afraid to enjoy life and entreats the addressee to join her. Lizzo is challenging her friend to dress nicely and make an attempt to appreciate life on her own accord. The insinuation is that this would include interacting with other romantic interests. Lizzo is convinced that the addressee's current partner is no longer interested in her. We all know that women getting their self-confidence ravaged via toxic relationships is a common occurrence. And it is this reality which Lizzo has taken it upon herself to confront.

The music video is packed with young women of color, doing the work of preparing themselves for the world, and then feeling themselves ready in the most glorious sense. However, there is also a doorway here for anyone to step through and find a room of their own if one can zoom out and imagine that all kinds of broken relationships are addressed between the song's opening and crescendo—a bad romance but also a bad job, or a bad meal or, even if just for a moment, a bad world. Without erasing the unique specifics of the song's message, there is another message rattling below: anyone who desires wings can go out and get them. Bring me your people who work two jobs during the week just to have spending money on Saturday. Bring me your broken-hearted—the ones who know their relationship is careening towards doom but still wake up searching for a reason to stay, and the ones who know they won't find that reason and have given up looking. Bring me the people who were shy in college but grew into their endless potential while everyone else grew old and boring. Bring me the parents who have stashed their children with someone else for a few hours, and bring me the children who have snuck past their sleeping parents. There is a night yawning wide, begging for you to run into it.

"Good as Hell" is the anthem of both the night itself and of life in preparation for it: the saint that comes to you in the mirror when the lighting is bad, or the hair that won't move the way you want it to, or when you've tried on all of the outfits and none of them seem right. "Walk your fine ass out the door" isn't just about ending a romance gone

awry. It is permission to exit from whatever version of yourself doesn't believe in the other you: the best, most impossible you.

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## Princess Nokia, 'Tomboy': Embodying Proud Dissidence

Bàrbara Hernández González

Released: 1 April 2016

Album: *1992*

Label: Rough Trade

Genre: Hip hop

Length: 3:37

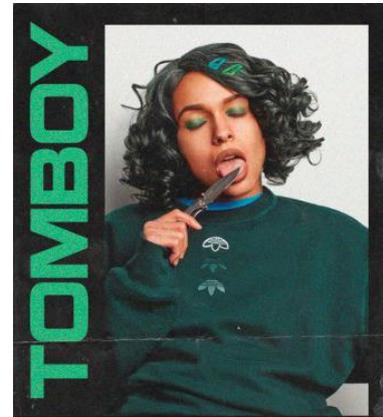
Songwriters: Destiny Nicole Frasqueri (Princess Nokia) and Gilberto Ramírez

Producer: Saint

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Princess-nokia-tomboy-lyrics>

Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH-LyInSNYw>

Director: Milah Libin Cinematography by Travis Liblin



### The Singer

Destiny Nicole Frasqueri was born in New York City in 1992. She has been active in music since 2010 but her rise to fame happened in 2017, when she released her album *1992 Deluxe*. The first song that she ever published was titled “Destiny”, though it was uploaded on Frasqueri’s SoundCloud page under the artist’s alternative name Wavy Spice in 2010. However, she later changed her name to Princess Nokia, a moniker which in fact refers to how a cheap Nokia cellphone was the only one she could afford. Frasqueri has published three albums: *1992* (2016) (*1992 Deluxe* is the expanded re-release of the former), *Everything Sucks* (2020), and *Everything is Beautiful* (2020). Apart from being a singer, she debuted as an actor in the film *Angelfish* (2019), a drama set in the 1990s in which she played Eva, a character who is radically different from Princess Nokia in many aspects.

Frasqueri’s identity as a queer and bisexual person of Afro-indigenous descent, as well as her intersectional feminist views, are very relevant in her music and public persona. She also practices *Santería*, an African diasporic religion that was developed among the Afro-Cuban communities during the time of the slave trade between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This way, spirituality is very much present in the way she expresses herself. As she declared in interview, “The indigenous woman is reflective of the modern, urbanized ghetto woman. I don’t like to lose sight of that. Because my people were oppressed, murdered, and their spirituality was taken away from them, I feel it’s my duty to exhibit it in my art” (in Fader). Therefore, it is clear that her community and roots are central to the singer. Moreover, her lyrics and music videos usually depict situations, places, and people that relate to the New York City scene she is part of because of her local upbringing: “It’s where all my most fundamental thoughts and ideas come from. I’m the classic New York kid, y’know? I’m matzo ball soup, I’m Katz’s Deli, I’m passed out outside a rave in a pool of my own vomit—that’s me, that’s how I grew up” (in Madden).

Regarding Frasier's music genre, it is only fair to describe it as a combination of rap, soul, rock, and house. Interestingly, her performances and personality are heavily influenced by hardcore, punk, and rave cultures as she spits, punches the air, and dances frenetically and aggressively on stage. Along these lines, she has often been described as a punk performer. Certainly, Frasier's career in music is innovative and defiant towards society and the music industry. She takes features typically associated with men and genres dominated by men and appropriates them in a way that empowers her, and other people like her. The fact that she openly speaks about her sexuality, being queer, her dissident body, and her afro-indigenous, Puerto Rican roots is in itself revolutionary.

### The Song

If "Tomboy" was to be placed somewhere in Frasier's career, it would be safe to say that the song represents the singer's early success as it is one of her most popular songs in the album that boosted her fame, *1992*. Moreover, the song has a careless, DIY essence, which is characteristic of her early work. "Tomboy" could be described as an audacious blend concerned with body confidence and agency, sexuality, gender, NYC subcultures and the urban, ethnicity, spirituality and sisterhood.

Repetition is central to the song when it comes to its presence and significance; the expression "tomboy", which is a misogynistic slur, and the mention of "little titties and phat belly" keep being repeated in a way that makes listeners feel they are being shouted at. This insistence refers to how gender non-conforming people are continuously harassed for their gender expression as it seems to mirror the way the cisheteropatriarchal system rejects and represses gender and sexual dissidence.

Nonetheless, this is not just a knee-jerking gesture but a political stance: Frasier is proud of these alternative features and honors them as she expresses herself with boasting confidence and bravado, which is typical of hip-hop and rap male figures: "I'm so damn pretty", "I could take your man if you finna let me". Small breasts and fat abdomens do not conform to the current beauty standards for femmes, it is the hour-glass shape that rules, which makes Frasier's lyrics fierce. She also refers to a particular way of dressing: "gold hoops and that name chain", "big pants and some scuffed shoes". While these are typically related to hip-hop and rap urban subcultures, this is not a typical image but instead, they signify a gender subversion of this urban aesthetic, usually embodied and dominated by men, in Frasier's reappropriation.

The presence of sisterhood in the lyrics is also worth mentioning. Princess Nokia talks about her friends ("I'm having fun with my friends, and I don't want it to end"), about them as an "army" and celebrating "a room full of girls acting real rowdy". This is really interesting because Frasier places friends and family as the ultimate expression of love, instead of singing about romantic heterosexual love as the center of life, which is often expected of women. Far from being docile, the singer refers to loud, aggressively confident femmes who have careless fun and are ready to defend themselves ("then I'ma punch you again"), which is often condemned for women as they are expected to perform decency and boundless kindness. Thus, through this sense of self-defense, dignity, and sisterhood she reclaims loudness and queerness, which people like her have been and are banned from.

*Santería* is present in the last part of “Tomboy”, in which spells, being a *bruja* and magic are mentioned. Hence, as second-wave feminists from the 1960s used to say, the personal is political. The fact that she claims African spirituality in an urban way—“he fuck with my *bruja*, my pussy a spell”—is an act of anti-colonial resistance. Along these lines, referring to the song “Brujas”, Raine and Strong asserted that “Princess Nokia decolonizes African spirituality by referring to the motifs of magic in positive aspects, via the use of urban vernacular, for example pairing ‘witchcraft’ and ‘bitchcraft’”.

### The Video

It can be claimed that *Riot Grrrl* culture has had an impact on Princess Nokia’s persona as well as on “Tomboy”. Many parallels can be drawn between the singer and this culture, about which Peterson and Bennet claimed that “The bands most commonly associated with the Riot Grrrl music scene—Heavens to Betsy, Bratmobile, and Bikini Kill—appropriated punk musical style and shock performance tactics to express feminist viewpoints and to push women’s experiences to the forefront” (119). Similarly, Frasier screams, spits, and reappropriates bravado and the streets in order to amplify the voices of those oppressed by a white cis-hetero patriarchal system, “It is the rawness of *1992 Deluxe* that arguably brought the pedagogy of the oppressed people back to hip-hop culture” (Raine and Strong).

Furthermore, the DIY aspect of Riot Grrrl culture is really relevant to its music video, which claims the mundane and self-management. In that regard, Princess Nokia insists in the images of her roots, the neighborhood, and its streets: in the video she is shown smoking a joint, walking, skateboarding, or talking with her friends. One scene is especially significant regarding the presentation of everyday life: the one in which she is seen wearing a Puerto Rico shirt while eating food out of a bowl, on the sofa of a typical living room full of old childhood photos, next to an old woman that seems to be her grandmother. Moreover, the video features people sitting in parks, playing basketball in a city court, or skateboarding, all of which are everyday activities that relate to Frasier’s New York City neighborhood lifestyle.

### The Song and the Video

Bodies and beauty standards are central to the song and the music video. Interestingly, the latter features bodies of different sizes moving in a natural (and neutral) way, bellies and legs moving, and rolls being visible. Therefore, Princess Nokia goes beyond body positivity and settles for body neutrality, which asserts that a body is an extension of an individual which has functions other than fitting beauty standards: “my body little, my soul is heavy”. Bodies are not wrong or right, beautiful or ugly; they do not have to be beautiful. What is it that defines a body as beautiful anyways? Princess Nokia claims self-confidence and self-love instead of adherence to a canon that is racist, ageist, ableist, fatphobic, sexist, and transphobic.

The video matches the lyrics’ sense of angry, system-attacking sisterhood and in fact, anticipates an aggressive tone at the beginning with a sharp knife sound. This powerful reactivity greatly contrasts with the sense of love and care directed towards the

community of friends and family. The idea of community between the oppressed depicted in “Tomboy” is not exclusive to this song in Nokia’s repertoire, it is also present in the “Brujas” video, which also depicts the power of non-white women and femmes associating. In “Tomboy”, Frasqueri and her friends flash their breasts shamelessly, in a rather punk and cheeky way that resembles an activists’ political revindication. They also show their underwear carelessly in a non-traditionally feminine way. This extremely confident, daring, and defiant attitude is usually associated with men; however, there is a clear difference: “While the trope is typically used to brag about money, cars and women, Nokia twists the trope to brag about breaking gender norms, allowing her to express her identity and expand ideas around gender in the genre” (Russo 12).

This represents a clear rejection of the racist, cissexist, patriarchal beauty standards that rule over everyone, but especially non-white femmes. All in all, Princess Nokia is reinterpreting, queering, and reclaiming hip-hop and the urban scene for those who flourish on the margins.

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## Alicia Keys, 'In Common': We Are All the Same

Willem Meuter

Released: 4 May 2016

Album: *Here*

Label: RCA Records

Genre: Tropical, dancehall and Latin

Length: 3:29

Songwriters: Alicia Keys, Lllangelo, Taylor Parks, and Billy Walsh

Producer: Lllangelo

Lyrics: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/aliciakeys/incommon.html>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HazJhPnrB8>

Directors: Pierre Debusschere and Keeley Gould



### The Singer

Alicia Keys, or as her official name goes Alicia Augello Cook, was born on 25 January, 1981, in New York City. Keys is undoubtedly one of the most famous American female artists. She has often stated that it is a blessing for her to be of a multiracial heritage, as this makes it easier to relate to different cultures. Alicia's mother, Teresa Augello, a woman of Italian, Irish and Scottish descent, worked part-time as paralegal and part-time as an actor and was thus quite creative herself. Keys was brought up solely by her mother and does not have any siblings. Her African American father was never there for her when she was young. She found his absence hard to accept when she was younger. However, Keys states that it has made her a strong independent woman. Her mother, who had to work multiple jobs in order to sustain herself and Alicia was her role model in life.

From a very young age Teresa Augello noticed the musicality in her daughter, which is why she placed Alicia on piano lessons already at the age of seven. Alicia eventually went to a music school where she graduated long before everyone else did at the age of sixteen. Alicia started composing songs at the age of twelve and signed her first contract with Columbia Records at the age of fifteen. Keys attracted the further attention of record company executives while in high school, and after what amounted to a bidding war for her talents, she signed with Arista Records in 1998. Even though she was accepted to Columbia University on a full scholarship, after a four-week stint at the school, Keys departed to devote herself fully to her music.

Growing up in NYC has been a key factor for Keys to become the person she is today. When she was younger, she had to do everything by herself in a huge and culturally diverse city as NYC is. This has shaped her as the person she is today. She even states that her music is influenced by this factor:

“I grew up in the middle of everything. I walked the streets alone, I rode the trains alone, I came home at three in the morning alone, that was what I did (...). The city had a huge influence on me because it’s such a diverse place. As hard as [growing up in it was], I always felt very blessed about being able to recognize different cultures and styles, people and places. I feel like the concrete alone just gave me a certain drive. I really saw everything: every negative I could possibly see from the time I could walk until now; and also, every positive, every bright future, every dream that I could possibly see. So, growing up around this big dichotomy definitely influenced my music”. (in Franky)

It is important to mention, that next to her music, Keys is very much socially active. According to D’Amour, Alicia has partnered with prison reform group to establish the ‘We Are Here’ social justice movement. “We as a country, we sell ourselves as the land of the free, except that we have more people in jail than the whole western world combined”, she has declared (in D’Amour and Zon). Keys talks about the price tag of prisoners, but also adds up the social value they detract by highlighting that there are 1.1 million fathers in jail. Keys is currently trying to use her fan group and social media to get people to sign a petition which she will send to Congress to curb down the high incarceration rate of mainly black men. She is also trying to put more emphasis on programs to help prisoners once they leave prison.

Alicia Keys won the Amnesty International’s Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2017. This is a result of her work as an activist for Indigenous people fights for their rights in Canada. Amnesty International declared the following about Alicia’s contribution:

Both Alicia Keys and the Indigenous rights movement of Canada have in their own ways made inspirational and meaningful contributions to advancing human rights and towards ensuring brighter possibilities for future generations. Crucially, they remind us never to underestimate how far passion and creativity can take us in fighting injustice.

Keys is likewise very much involved with human rights, equality, issues on immigration and climate change. In 2017 she participated among other celebrities in a woman’s rights march which led to many other marches around the world. According to *MusicNews.com* she delivered a blistering speech on human rights and protested against President Donald Trump’s stance on women’s rights. She performed next her song “Girl on Fire”, which entails a stance on women’s rights.

It is fair to say that Alicia Keys is much more than just an international female musician. Keys has brought out seven studio albums, two live albums, forty-five singles and has sold over sixty-five million records worldwide, but, above all, she uses all this popularity to do good in the world. She has been putting a lot of effort in changing the world’s perspective and tries to raise awareness for marginalized social groups. It has been pointed out that this is a result of her youth, when she and her mother had to fight to survive. Keys knows what it is like to be on the poorer or less fortunate side of life, and this shows in her music and her activism.

## The Song

The BBC stated that “In Common” is one of the songs that made Alicia Keys one of the biggest musicians in the world. When she released this song, within her sixth album in

2016, she had taken a break for four years (for reasons unknown) and it was thus crucial for her to come up with something new and creative. Keys dared to take a step away from her previous classic R&B sounds and tried something fresh in the dancehall, tropical and Latino spheres, disappointing none.

The song, besides, was not just a way for Alicia Keys to get back onto the charts again but the expression of deep personal unease. Keys had always been seen as a very confident woman, which is why it was surprising for the public when she started singing about being “Messed up too, messed up too / Just like you, just like you” in the song “In common”. She stated that “I definitely did get caught up in this realm of wanting to appear so perfected and so un-messy and so contained, and so that it was a little bit detrimental to the ability to just be whoever you are, whoever I am, fully” (in *NPR*, quoted in *Songfacts*). With “In Common” Keys and the other songwriters wanted to show the world that nobody is perfect. Everyone has got their own problems and issues they don’t like about themselves, but we should all be able to accept those flaws and live with them. That we should all be able to accept ourselves and others, is the message Keys tries to give the public, as she told *NME*:

“That song sums up the theme of how we are all on our journeys and trying to figure out who we are, which presents a lot whole of problems and challenges”, she said. “We’re all messed up in our own separate ways with things we’re trying to get through. There’s something really liberating about being able to say, ‘I got my mess, you got your mess—and that’s all right’”. (quoted in *Songfacts*)

The lyrics of the song narrate the end of a long relationship, started “When we were young and we ain't had no vows” as communication fails. Paradoxically, the singer attributes this to the members of the couple having “way too much in common / If I'm being honest with you”. There is also a great deal of insecurity in the singer’s voice, as she sings in the chorus “Who wants to love somebody like me? / You wanna love somebody like me? / If you could love somebody like me / You must be messed up too”. Having much “in common” then, is not the foundation of love but the opposite.

## The Video

The artwork for the single “In Common” is also related to a social movement supported by Alicia Keys. Keys appeared in the set coming back from the gym, without make up on and still in her sports attire. However according to *Songfacts*, photographer Paola Kudacki convinced Keys that this was just the right look for her. She decided to try it and eventually declared that she felt, seeing her photos, “the strongest, most empowered, most free and most honestly beautiful”. This artwork made Keys decide to join the #nomakeup movement. She made public appearances, for instance on national television, without make up on to inspire all the women in the world to just be themselves with no need to act in a fake way.

The video, in which Keys wears no makeup, is about being able to express yourself the way you are, as she herself commented on:

“This video is about celebrating our individuality, and how in the brilliance of our uniqueness, the magic of it all is at the core, we are all the same. We want the same

things. We all want to experience love, the freedom to be our truest selves, to love whomever we want and to be accepted and celebrated for all of our nuances and so-called imperfections that make us, us". (in *Songfacts*)

The video is quite straightforward and has no hidden messages in it. The song can easily be understood without seeing the video; however, the video adds a secondary message to Alicia Keys' song of breakup. In the video you can see a diverse group of men and women, of different ages and racial or ethnic backgrounds expressing themselves by dancing and interacting with each other. It starts with only a few people, but in the end the whole scene erupts into a party with many people all expressing themselves; no-one is ashamed to be part of a diverse group or shame for their bodies, as all have much "in common" as human beings. It has to be said, however, that there are no older people participating in the video, which somehow undermines the message. This could have been a choice made to attract a younger audience, but this is unknown.

### The Song and the Video

As noted, whereas the lyrics deal with a couple who have much "in common" but cannot be together precisely because of that, the video deals with what individuals have "in common" beneath their skin, two concepts that overlap but are in fact different. The whole video is shot in black and white, and Keys is wearing no make up to strengthen the message that we should all be happy with ourselves paying no attention to skin color. Keys thus wants to express in this video that everyone should accept themselves and others for the way they are, though this is only partly confirmed (or even contradicted) by the lyrics. What is remarkable in any case is that Keys aims at a more interracial approach in comparison to Beyoncé (see the article here for "Brown Skin Girl"). She, unlike Keys, presents herself as an embodiment of Black femininity and makes a point of celebrating diversity within the Black international community than what all humans of any race have "in common".

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## Hayley Kiyoko, 'Gravel to Tempo': The Power of Self-Validation

Victòria Recio Bonet

Released: 5 August 2016

Album: *Citrine* (EP)

Label: Atlantic, Empire

Genre: Electropop

Length: 3:39

Songwriters: Hayley Kiyoko, Cecil Bernardy, and Jonathan Dorr

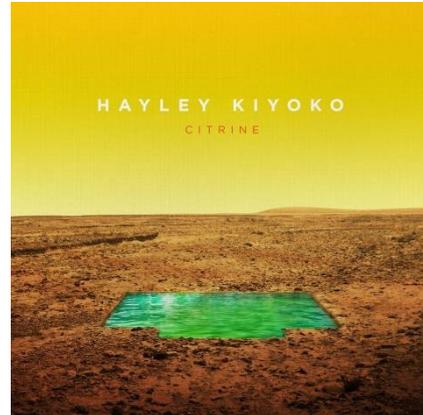
Producers: 4e, Dan Book, and Bram Inscore

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Hayley-kiyoko-gravel-to-tempo-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOm2rGwmhWg>

Director: Hayley Kiyoko



### The Singer

Hayley Kiyoko was born on 3 April 1991. She is an American singer-songwriter and actor. Her mother Sarah Kawahara is a Canadian figure skater/choreographer with Japanese ancestry and her father is American actor/comedian Jamie Alcroft, a man with English, Welsh and Scottish ancestry. Kiyoko began acting in national commercials at an early age for companies such as Cinnamon Toast Crunch. When she was six years old, she decided to learn how to play the drums, and by age eleven she was writing her own drum sheets and sold them in local music stores. She briefly joined the girl-group *The Stunners*, however after four years they went on separate paths and she started pursuing her solo career.

Kiyoko's musical career comprises a total of four EPs, including *A Belle to Remember* (2013), *This Side of Paradise* (2015), *Citrine* (2016) and *I'm Too Sensitive for this shit* (2020). In 2017, she released two singles, "Feelings" and "Sleepover". Her only studio album, *Expectations*, was released in 2018 and the same year, she went on her own tour; additional dates were included around Europe in 2019 to what was renamed as the Encore European Tour. Kiyoko's most recent work includes the songs "Found My Friends" and "Chance", possibly part of a yet unpublished project. Kiyoko's career as an actor is also quite prominent, she is mostly known for her roles on Disney Channel productions: she played the role of Stevie in a few episodes on the TV show *The Wizards of Waverly Place*, premiered in 2010, and of Stella Yamada in the 2011 Disney Channel movie *Lemonade Mouth*.

As for her reputation, Kiyoko, who identifies as lesbian, is a prominent figure within the LGBTIQ+ community as a community rights advocate. According to Kiyoko herself, she became aware of her sexuality when she was only five when she developed a crush on her female swimming teacher. For her work with music and impact on the LGBTIQ+ community, she was won several awards: Kiyoko was named the fourth most influential

woman musician of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by *NPR* and won the Rising Star award in the Billboard Women Music Awards, both in 2018. Her fans have given her many nicknames through the years in honor to her legacy, amongst them “Gayley”, “Hay” and the most popular being “Lesbian Jesus”. Her sexuality has an important influence on her music as she tackles on LGBTIQ-related issues, especially in her music videos and has become a pioneer for her representation of lesbian relationships in the music industry.

### The Song

Kiyoko’s song “Gravel to Tempo” belongs to her third EP *Citrine* and it was released as a single on 5 August 2016 through Atlantic and Empire before the EP release in September. Among the various genres Kiyoko works with, this song is associated with electropop. Kiyoko herself composed the song along with Cecil Bernardy and Jonathan Dorr. It was mostly her own creation, due to her personal connection with the issues raised in it. A peculiarity is that this is one of her few songs in which the title is not mentioned in the lyrics. Kiyoko disclosed via Twitter that the inspiration behind the title was how the song was built off while she was walking on gravel and kept on hearing the tempo of her own steps, which can actually be heard at the beginning and the ending of the song. This EP was also inspired by the overcoming of the concussion which she suffered during that time and how she was treated for PCS (post-concussion syndrome), throughout her healing with a citrine crystal, which led her to reflect on the importance of well-being and self-care: “this crystal I’ve been carrying around has been helping me stay happy, (...) I thought, ‘If this is helping me this much, I should call my EP *Citrine* because that’s what I want my EP to do for my fans—I want to promote happiness and get rid of self-doubt, I want to do that for them.’ That’s why I called it *Citrine*” (*Hayley Kiyoko Wiki*).

Regarding the lyrics, the main motif of Kiyoko’s song revolves around sexuality and self-empowerment, hence the importance of not seeking validation from others but from ourselves. The lines “I don’t feel adequate / Thinking I’m a monster in disguise” suggest how she feels about not being able to fit in with the rest of the girls, because she is different and feels diminished for it; therefore, because she feels like a “monster” she must use a disguise to hide her true identity. The following lines, “Caught up with the fact that life will be dark / But can we handle being kids?”, reflect Kiyoko’s own thoughts and the main theme of the song about learning to accept and love yourself for who you are, to lessen the burden of this feeling of unworthiness and pessimism. In an interview for *Refinery29* (August 2016) where Kiyoko also talked about the music video she stated that “My goal is to inspire my fans to find happiness in themselves earlier on, so they don’t have such a tough time growing up” adding that “The world is a hard, difficult place right now. But it can feel a little bit easier if you believe in yourself”. The most resonant lyrics in this song are in the insistent chorus: “I’ll do this my way / Don’t matter if I break / I gotta be on my own”; these convey how she is willing to expose her true self and be proud, despite being aware that the others’ criticisms may damage her. The lyrics, in short, reiterate how self-expression is more important than shying away from one’s true identity by wrongly covering it up.

## The Video

In her brief article for *Out* Barr comments that in the video for “Gravel to Tempo” Kiyoko shows us a creative way to stand up to the bullies, “the high school mean girls”: “Written and directed by the artist herself, Hayley Kiyoko busts moves in front of the popular crowd at school in the halls and in the cafeteria without any shame or embarrassment. The song and video promote self-empowerment and independence—and we dig it” (Barr). As Kiyoko clarified regarding the video, she “chose high school as the setting because it’s a pivotal moment in your life where you naturally develop insecurities” (in Wong). In the video, the main character, played by Hayley Kiyoko herself, is intended to represent her own self back in her high school days, hankering after a clique of popular girls that allude to the crushes she had during that time of her life. At the beginning, the audience can perceive a distance, an invisible barrier between these girls and Kiyoko. She acknowledges that she is different from them but still craves their appreciation and validation. However, after a moment of self-doubt and ensuing realization, she confronts the girls and spontaneously starts dancing, signifying a form of relief and the liberation of her true self; this is a crucial moment that reflects she finally recognizes that what is important is to be one self, embrace your true identity and not be influenced by others’ opinions.

The main message the video carries, then, is a lesson about learning how to free yourself from the weight of the personal and social homophobic criticism that endangers identity and self-expression. As a concluding note, Kiyoko explained to *Refinery29* in 2016 that she knew exactly how she envisioned the video during the writing process of the song: “I remember so well what it was like to idolize other people and look for validation from them. But then I grew up, and I realized: The only validation I need is from myself” (in Davis). This shows how efficiently she conveyed her message, being able to balance the lyrics and her vision for the video.

## The Song and the Video

Kiyoko’s song lyrics and video really go hand in hand as both convey the same message the singer meant to bring into them. Clearly, although she speaks specifically and in autobiographical tones of the liberation of a young lesbian girl, Kiyoko’s song is offered as a universal self-empowerment anthem. Moreover, thanks to Kiyoko’s own perspective and input on the making of the video as director, we can perceive this story and message even more clearly than if it had been directed by someone else who had not shared the singer’s own experience. The video accompanies the song perfectly as both carry her own story in a way nobody else could have brought to life and also accomplishes its goal of inspiring people around the world to love themselves and pick up the courage to face these adversities earlier in life.

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## Hailee Steinfeld, 'Most Girls': A Female Empowerment Anthem

Victòria Recio Bonet

Released: 28 April 2017

Independent single release

Label: Republic Records

Genre: Electropop

Length: 3:24

Songwriters: Hailee Steinfeld, Ryan Tedder, Zach Skelton, Tim Sommers, Jeremy Dussolliet, and Asia Whiteacre

Producers: One Love, Zach Skelton, and Ryan Tedder

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Hailee-steinfeld-most-girls-lyrics>

Music video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBB\\_QOZNEdc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBB_QOZNEdc)

Director: Hannah Lux Davis



### The Singer

Hailee Steinfeld was born on 11 December 1996 in Los Angeles, California. She is an American actor, singer and songwriter. Steinfeld is of mixed European, Filipino and African-American descent and her father is Jewish. Her mother, Cheri, is an interior designer and her father, Peter, is a fitness trainer; her brother Griffin, a NASCAR driver. Hailee Steinfeld attended three different schools and finished her studies at home finally graduating from high school in 2015. Her cousin, model and actor True O'Brien, was her inspiration to start acting after Steinfeld saw her on a television commercial when she was eight years old. Noticing her young daughter's interest in acting, her mother suggested her to take acting lessons before going on auditions.

When she was only thirteen, Steinfeld was picked out among 15,000 girls for a main role in the movie *True Grit* (2010) by the Coen brothers; her performance earned her an Oscar nomination, making her one of the youngest actors to be nominated. In 2011, Steinfeld was cast as the female lead in *Romeo and Juliet*, however as she was fourteen at the time, director Carlo Carlei changed the script eliminating some scenes in order to make it age-appropriate. Some of her most popular roles include Nadine on *The Edge of Seventeen* and Emily Junk in *Pitch Perfect*, both released in 2015 along with the sequel of the latter; the television series *Dickinson* (2019) where she portrayed the poet Emily Dickinson, *Spider-Man: Into the Spideverse* (2018) and her latest debut as Kate Bishop in the Marvel Studios television show, *Hawkeye* (2021).

Steinfeld's parallel musical career started when Republic Records approached her after listening to her sing for the movie *Pitch Perfect 2*; the label signed her in May 2015. Her biggest influences in music have been mainly Madonna and Rihanna. She has been praised by Dylan Kelly as an "artist of ambidexterity, showcasing supremacy across an impressive repertoire of on-screen roles in film and television" and a singer whose

“musical prowess is one of melodic self-growth and good-natured, lyrical wisdom”. Amongst some of her original achievements, Steinfeld won a Billboard Music Award as *Top Covered Artist* for her single “Most Girls”; her song “Love Myself” debuted on the Billboard Pop Songs chart giving her the highest debut by a female solo artist since Natalie Imbruglia debut with “Torn” in 1998. This song got certified platinum twice by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and later in 2020, “Most Girls” and “Starving” were certified platinum two and four times respectively.

Steinfeld’s beginnings as a musical artist, however, got mixed reviews from the critics. Her EP, *HAIZ*, released in 2016, actually bombed. Thus, the magazine *Vulture* gave it harsh review indicating Steinfeld’s songs were unoriginal and too repetitive: “In its own way, the *Haiz* EP is fascinating, but for all the wrong reasons. Steinfeld is a perfectly competent blank slate, which makes this EP a pure time capsule of Pop Music Trends in 2015” (Zoladz). However, a critic from *Nylon* magazine jumped to the artist’s defense by stating that “*HAIZ* may not be overly innovative and it may not be pop music’s savior, but it’s fun, catchy, and has a lot of good messages for young women everywhere” (Gharnit).

Beyond any criticisms, Steinfeld seems to be well established in music circles. She has shared a friendship with Taylor Swift for years and even starred in the music video for Swift’s single “Bad Blood”. Her closest friends include artists such as Camila Cabello, Selena Gomez or the actor Sophie Turner. Steinfeld is also a philanthropist and has endorsed many charities, most of them focusing on the improvement of children’s lives. She has collaborated with the organizations No Kid Hungry, the Make-A-Wish foundation or the WE movement among others.

## The Song

The song “Most Girls” by Steinfeld is an independent single that was released in April 2017 by the label Republic Records. Steinfeld’s song is considered an electropop track. The lyrics of the song were written by Hailee Steinfeld herself, along with Ryan Tedder and Zach Skelton, also producers of the track together with Tim Sommers, Jeremy Dussoliet and Asia Whiteacre. We can observe that the main themes present in the song are self-love and female empowerment, as this statement by Steinfeld in an interview reads:

“As much as it’s (...) some girls are this, some girls are that, it’s most girls, most girls you know, most girls that are in this world—and it is really [that] all women have something to offer and have a story and have a goal in life or someone they find inspirational or something”. (in the Zach Sang Show)

As Steinfeld has also indicated, she drew her inspiration for this song from often hearing the poisoned misogynistic “compliment” ‘You’re not like most girls’, which she despised and denounced for being derogatory. Steinfeld also shared on her Instagram account a text by Canadian poet, Rupi Kaur showing her agreement with her words and pointing to the similarity between their themes (see Cao). As she told Nicholson: “I felt that we’ve been accepting the compliment ‘You’re not like most girls’ for a very long time. I have. I feel like there’s been this golden standard or rule that in order to be special you have to be different to other women”.

The lyrics defend that women are free to choose the way they want to live and that their lifestyle choices are valid without being subject to judgment and prejudice, hence the parallelism between the lines “They’re staying out late ‘cause they just celebrating life” and “Sleeping in late ‘cause they just celebrating life”. The pre-chorus reads “But it’s okay if you wanna change the body that you came in / ‘Cause you look greatest when you feel like a damn queen”; this could hint to transsexual women that may choose to modify their bodies to feel more comfortable with themselves, emphasizing the notion that what is important is feeling comfortable in your own skin, even if that means having to undergo certain changes. Some of the most powerful lines are in the chorus: “Most girls work hard, go far, we are unstoppable / Most girls: Our fight to make every day”; here we can see how Steinfeld completely appropriates this expression by giving it a twist and changing it to “I wanna be like most girls”. These lyrics give a strong sense of female empowerment, encouraging women to keep being strong and powerful.

Steinfeld, in short, sends a message about celebrating womanhood in all its forms and how women should not feel diminished for taking different choices about their lives or their bodies, but instead embracing the way they are and striving to prioritize feeling comfortable with themselves.

### The Video

The video starts off with a guy telling Steinfeld she is not like “most girls”, a comment which urges her to get away from him immediately. Afterwards, Steinfeld appears representing different kinds of personas that girls around the world can identify (such as the athlete, the party girl or the bookworm) celebrating the worth that all these unique identities carry. The video is a response to the guy’s opinion showing him how “most girls” have in fact many positive attributes as valid and amazing as any others. In her blog, Saccone highlights important points the video tries to make: “This isn’t about competing with other women or talking down to girls who make different choices about their bodies or their lives. Instead, it’s a celebration of womanhood in all its many forms”.

Despite the positive message, there are some problematic issues in the video, such as its approach to body positivity. While the song makes a reference to “most girls” being beautiful, the girls that are shown towards the end appearing along with the singer conform to a similar pattern. As Lutkin observed: “All of these girls are extremely thin and femme, so in reality, most girls do not appear in this video”. To add to this controversy, the rumors about Steinfeld having undergone plastic surgery to modify her nose, emerging after the photos taken during the Met Gala in 2021 highlighted her changed appearance, makes her being the deliverer of this message encouraging to feel good for who you are all the more ironic.

### The Song and the Video

As a whole package, when analyzing the connection between the lyrics and music video, we can observe that the video fails to present to the audience some of the essential points that the song wants to deliver. As noted, Steinfeld’s different personas are not sufficiently

diverse for the audience to feel represented in a realistic and accurate way. Another problem, as we have seen, is the lack of diversity among the young, pretty women appearing in the video, who do not fit either realistic standards for women's bodies. We could say the video should have been produced in a different way, so its audience could better grasp the real message of the song as there is a clear distance between the meaning of the lyrics and the visuals chosen for the video. The main problem here, to be straightforward, is that Steinfeld is too exceptionally attractive to send a message denying her own exceptionality in relation to 'most women'. It is obvious to anyone watching the video that Steinfeld is not at all like 'most women' and although she does try to present herself in a variety of roles that undermine her star exceptionality, with her youthful beauty she can never be a delegate for all the women that she poisoned compliment she is criticizing despises.

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## Lorde 'Perfect Places': How To Be A Successful Indie-Pop Girl

Sam Ávila Rubiales

Released: 1 June 2017

Album: *Melodrama*

Label: Universal New Zealand

Genre: Electro-pop

Length: 3:41

Songwriters: Ella Yelich-O'Connor and Jack Antonoff

Producers: Lorde, Jack Antonoff, and Andrew Wyatt

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lorde-perfect-places-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0DjcsK\\_-HY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0DjcsK_-HY)

Director: Grant Singer



### The Singer

Lorde was born Ella Marija Lani Yelich-O'Connor in New Zealand, in 1996. In her early years, her parents encouraged her to read multiple genres of literature and signed her to a drama group, where she learnt to both write and to speak publicly. Furthermore, during her school years, a teacher suggested that she could be a gifted child and her parents took her to a test of cognitive abilities. Her teacher ended up being right. Ella/Lorde, raised in the suburbs of Auckland, spent part of her teenage years competing on speech and literature contests.

Ella became interested in music together with her friend, Louis McDonald, with whom she started covering songs. Both alone and with McDonald, Lorde also participated in singing competitions, ending up in high places. However, a more solid intention to pursue a music career came with the creation of the duet Ella & Louis in 2010. The two friends began performing regularly. The recordings of their covers were sent to music corporations such as Universal Music Group. Eventually, she started writing and performing her original songs until producer and songwriter Joel Little joined her to work on the EP that would be released as *The Love Club* EP, which introduced her to the mainstream audiences. While working on music she also kept studying until she decided to drop out in her last year of compulsory education (Radio New Zealand). Lorde started using her stage name after the release of the EP; its origins are rooted in her fascination with royal families and aristocracy stories. In order to make 'Lord' sound more feminine, however, she added the 'e' at the end of the word which evoked elegance and sophistication. Tellingly, she never considered using 'Lady' as her stage name.

In 2012, *The Love Club* was released for free on SoundCloud though it was commercially re-released months later by UMG. Lorde's success was largely because of her hit song "Royals". Both audiences and critics praised her style and lyrics:

Lorde's style is a successful marriage of upbeat radio-friendly pop with an indie touch, reminiscent of popular female artists overseas including Britain's Florence + The Machine, American Lana Del Rey and Canadian Grimes. It's a sound that's

equally popular with mainstream radio listeners, as it is with hipsters. Lorde also has a versatile and strong singing voice which seems to effortlessly fit different styles. (Cardy)

In 2013, just a few months after the release of *The Love Club*, the songs previously recorded were included into her first studio album *Pure Heroine*. From that moment on, Lorde headlined in major festivals such as Coachella. David Bowie asked to perform “Life On Mars” at the BRIT Awards in 2016, which she did shortly after his death. Bowie’s pianist Keith Garson claimed that “David really liked Lorde, and he felt like she was the future of music, and they had a few wonderful moments together” (in *Guardian Music* online). A year later, her second studio album, *Melodrama* (2017), came out. Although it did not have the same commercial success as *Pure Heroine*, it was highly acclaimed. After a hiatus of three years, Lorde announced the publication of *Going South* a book which chronicles her visit to Antarctica (Bruce). It was not until early Summer in 2021 when she released the lead single of the upcoming album *Solar Power*, finally published in August. It has been said that her three albums perfectly depict the stages of young life such as adolescence, its end and young adulthood. *Solar Power*, in any case, has not received the same praise as her two predecessors. Arguably, this is because when Lorde was asked if she would ever write a hit like “Royals”, she replied that releasing smash hits is a waste of time (in Alghrim).

### The Song

“Perfect Places” was released on 1 June 2017 as the second single of *Melodrama*. It was written and produced by Lorde herself, Jack Antonoff, and Andrew Wyatt. The song was described as a perfect teenage summer anthem by Gill Kaufman on *Billboard* and a “darker take on the teenage party circuit” by Sarah Grant on *Rolling Stone*. Lorde explained that the song had undergone many transformations until the official version came out. One of the reasons why she and Antonoff struggled was the deep meaning of the lyrics. Only when they decided to get rid of the pre-chorus did the song become what it ended up being (in Weiner).

Lorde published some verified annotations about the lyrics on the website Genius. According to her, the song deals with loneliness and with meeting strangers at parties as a way to cope with it. Lorde describes herself as a mess, mostly due to her regular partying habits. The lyrics of the song describe throwing up both as a consequence of alcohol and as a way to open up to people at parties. As she writes on Genius, the song came together in the second half of 2016 while she was in New York. In “Perfect Places” she sums up her time there singing “I hate the headlines and the weather / I’m nineteen and I’m on fire”. On the one hand, Lorde is becoming unhappy about how her time on New York gets media attention, on the other hand she knows that she is young and wants to celebrate youth. However, as time passes by and with “all of our heroes fading” (referencing the deaths of Bowie and Prince on 2016), she comes to the conclusion that the main reason for partying is to escape from the loneliness at home. On Genius, Lorde wrote: “I think I’m partying so much because I’m just dreading sitting at home by myself hearing my thoughts hit the walls (...). Kind of what the album is about”. By going out to party, Lorde is endlessly looking for perfect places to feel safe, right, and free. However,

at the same time she searches, the singer realizes that those perfect places are just another social and cultural myth and she closes the song with the verse “What the fuck are perfect places, anyway?”

### The Video

The music video for the single was directed by Grant Singer who also directed the one for Lorde’s preceding single “Green Light”. The video was shot in Jamaica and shows scenes in which Lorde is completely alone wearing outstanding outfits in gorgeous places, from a jungle to the beach to a beautiful hotel to a rice field and then a bonfire. As Rizzo writes, “There may be no perfect places, but I’ll settle for wherever Lorde is at”. The chosen locations for the music video contrast with the thesis of the lyrics. While it is undeniable that these places are visually perfect, the lyrics point out that the goal to find the perfect place is unachievable.

In addition to the landscapes, Lorde’s clothes are also quite fancy and fashionable. As Minton wrote “Lorde is stepping up her sartorial prowess, which has evolved from goth queen in black, full-length dresses, paired with a cascade of curls and dark lips to a more refined, sexy, glam look that’s a bit more tame but just as witchy (and bewitching)”. Additionally, Lorde tweeted that there were some ‘Easter eggs’ in the video (see Bartleet). First of all, it has been noted that the scene where she is singing holding a light bulb is a direct reference to Paramore’s video “Ignorance”, where the band’s singer sings next to another light bulb. The scene showing Lorde at an empty table with plates, glasses and champagne might be understood as a reference to another song from her album, “Sober II”, where she sings “oh how fast the evening passes / cleaning up the champagne glasses, / we told you this was melodrama”.

Despite the fact that Lorde sings about a period of time she spent in New York, she also said “[the album] all took place in New Zealand, is about me and my friends” (in Morris). Although the lyrics are mostly about partying, the video seems to focus on the deeper meaning of the song which might be the solitude of the search for the perfect place, even for a woman as privileged as Lorde appears to be.

### The Song and the Video

The combination of the video and the song helped the single to gain a solid placement on Lorde’s discography. Perhaps not at first sight, the video does indeed reference the meaning and intention of the song. The New Zealand singer lets the public know with the video that she has now the budget to visit those beautiful places, which become literal instead of the metaphor the chorus of the song is about. This might be understood as a comment on her relation to fame. Being known worldwide has allowed Lorde to wear chic clothes and travel around the world, yet, she still feels lonely. In her latest release, *Solar Power* (2021), her track “California” expresses that same idea too in its lyrics: “Once upon time in Hollywood, / when Carol called my name, / I stood up, the room exploded, / and I knew that’s it, / I’ll never be the same”. These lines are clearly linked to one of the ideas behind “Perfect Places”. In “California”, Lorde references the time she won a Grammy for “Royals” and how that was the beginning of her way up to the top—

supposedly the best 'perfect place'. Nevertheless, being there also meant a drastic change in her life.

Lorde is known for not being an eccentric pop star. Nonetheless, she has secured her place as one of the most influential pop stars of the 2010s. She was not the first alternative, indie, sad girl to make it in the industry but she was a clear example of succeeding in the pop field on her own terms, where artists are expected to be extravagant and to a certain extent, divas. Lorde embraces another kind of young woman that it is more easily relatable. With the song analyzed here, she confirms that impression, as she explains transparently how she copes with her sadness and loneliness like any other young adult of the modern world, though, if she so chooses, with more glamour. Nonetheless, Lorde's music must be understood as a form of poetry which can be observed once one listens to a whole album. The singles that are released to promote her upcoming albums are usually more commercial and shallow when it comes to their lyricism. Lorde's ability to beautifully write can be observed in songs such as "Liability", "Stoned at the Nail Salon" or "400 Lux" but, unfortunately, those songs only become visible to those who are regular listeners of the artist and are ready to explore all the 'perfect places' in her discography.

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## Kesha, 'Praying': An Artist Reborn

Amelia Shaw

Released: 6 June 2017

Album: *Rainbow*

Label: Kemosabe, RCA

Genre: Pop

Length: 3:50

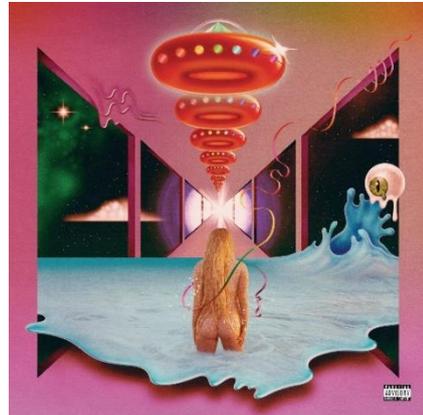
Songwriters: Kesha Sebert, Andrew Joslyn, Ben Abraham, and Ryan Lewis

Producers: Jon Castelli and Ryan Lewis

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Kesha-praying-lyrics>

Music video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dur3uXXCQ&ab\\_channel=keshaVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dur3uXXCQ&ab_channel=keshaVEVO)

Director: Jonas Åkerlund



### The Singer

Kesha Rose Sebert is an American singer-songwriter mainly recognized for the rowdy, party-girl persona she portrayed in the earlier years of her career. The artist has sold over 100 million records worldwide, and has been nominated for a number of awards, some of which she has won. Her climb to fame was indubitably marked by the explosive song “TiK ToK”, in which the singer boasts of a life of partying. On the surface, Kesha’s recklessness seemed to be an unfiltered representation of pop-star life for young female artists, a concept which was both criticized and admired. Behind the scenes, however, the artist was allegedly battling abuse from former producer Lukasz Gottwald (Dr. Luke), sparking legal action that would see her career thrown into limbo for years.

Kesha, born 1 March 1987, in Los Angeles, California, began her career at the young age of eighteen, though her musical journey took off before she could even talk. With singer-songwriter Rosemary Patricia ‘Pebe’ Sebert as her mother, Kesha spent all of her infant life on stage and in studios as her mother struggled to juggle work and parenthood, relying on welfare to provide for daughter Kesha and her brother Lagan. As for her father, there is supposedly no knowledge of him or his whereabouts, save for a man named Bob Chamberlain who came forward in 2011, claiming to be her biological father (see Still). In her youth, Kesha was seen as something of a misfit for her fashion choices and exceptionally high SAT scores, which in turn got her accepted into Barnard College. She then later dropped out to pursue her musical career.

In her teenage years, Kesha relied on her waitressing job to get by, and frequented a local bar for tequila shots and free tacos. The singer has recalled this particular memory on many occasions when discussing the dollar sign in her previously stylized name “Ke\$ha”, claiming that “[the] dollar sign, to be honest, was me taking the piss out of being broke” (in Day). Kesha has since expressed her indifference to money, stating that “I was so happy being broke. And I’m happy not being broke” (in Day). Why Kesha chose to drop the dollar sign from her name has little to do with money, however,

and much more to do with starting a new chapter in her life after checking into a rehabilitation center for bulimia nervosa in 2014. In a live discussion with *Refinery29*, the former party princess described how the process occurred:

It [losing the \$] happened after I went to rehab for my eating disorder. I let go of my facade about being a girl who didn't care. My facade was to be strong, and I realized it was total bullshit. I took out the \$ because I realized that was part of the facade. It was a journey and I'm happy—that was me in that part of my life. But then I turned a corner—but I still have a fucking tattoo of it on my hand. I'll have to figure that out! (in Harris)

Kesha's career was flung into scrutiny after her lawsuit with Dr. Luke in 2014, in which the singer accused her former producer of emotional and sexual abuse. With the #MeToo movement quickly taking hold of the world after 2017, Kesha's case became a central focus of the struggle, with fellow artists such as Taylor Swift and Kelly Clarkson showing their support as #FreeKesha began to storm social media platforms. Her career ground to a halt in the midst of back-and-forth allegations made by both parties, with Dr. Luke countersuing for defamation and breach of contract. *New York Times* journalist Taffy Brodesser-Akner described her then Kesha as

someone in suspended animation, unable to release new music pending contract litigation, touring small clubs to make some money to help fund her lawsuit and to make sure her fans don't forget her; now she is someone who wants to work and make music, just without the man she says raped her; now Kesha is a cause. (online)

Since then, Kesha has been able to release two more studio albums, titled *Rainbow* (2017) and *High Road* (2020), though she urges fans not to celebrate her freedom, telling an Animal (her official fandom name): “No, no. I'm not free. Don't think that, because there's still a lawsuit” (in Brodesser-Akner). Her releasing new music is, however, a defiant refusal to be still, to be silenced any longer. In late 2021, the judge handling Kesha and Dr. Luke's case finally ruled against the former, claiming the events described lacked detail, nor did they fall within the statute of limitations. Regardless, she continues her fight to change the perception of abuse survivors in the music industry as weak female artists—being a hyperfeminist herself—and basks in the freedom of her now broken façade.

## The Song

Unlike her usual dance-y EDM sound, “Praying” is a full-bodied ballad which progressively swells, paired with explosive singing and heart-wrenching lyrics. The song is certainly nothing like her notorious party anthems; there is nothing about drugs, sex or alcohol here. Instead, Kesha questions faith, exposes her weaknesses and pleads with her (alleged) aggressor, asking that they repent for their sins in lyrics such as “I hope you're somewhere prayin' (...) I hope you're somewhere changin'”. Though the song was not initially written by Kesha herself, original songwriter Ryan Lewis is said to have contacted her with an undeveloped version of the song, after his wife Jackie suggested the rough draft would be perfect for Kesha, given her (then) current situation. The soul- and gospel-influenced pop piano ballad became a statement of hope, empowerment, and

strength for those in the grip of mental illnesses. The singer revealed that, for her, the song dealt with overcoming her own suicidal thoughts, stating in an essay for Lena Dunham's *Lenny Letter* that she aimed to "[channel her] feelings of severe hopelessness and depression" and how this progressed into "[finding] strength in myself even when it felt out of reach" (in Snapes). The lyrics are certainly in tune with these concepts, with inspiring lines such as "I'm proud of who I am, no more monsters, I can breathe again".

While such concepts are recurrent throughout the song, so are others which have sparked controversy in relation to the Dr. Luke scandal. Kesha's uplifting vocals call for forgiveness for all, even those who perhaps do not deserve it. In the initial lines of the song, the artist instead shows gratitude to whoever may have wronged her, singing "I can thank you for how strong I have become" in a low, sincere tone. The line is reminiscent of renowned artist Christina Aguilera's own power-infused song "Fighter", in which she too gives "thanks for making [her] a fighter" (full lyrics at <https://genius.com/Christina-aguilera-fighter-lyrics>). Kesha's "Praying" might not be as spunky as Aguilera's "Fighter", but there are hints of resentment laced throughout as the song rises to its final, emotional outburst when Kesha practically screams "some say, in life, you're gonna get what you give / but some things only God can forgive". We are thus presented with Kesha's true, unfiltered feelings (allegedly regarding her dispute with former producer Dr. Luke); despite having come to terms with her trauma and feeling grateful for having emerged all-the-wiser, she will never forget the pain. In this way, "Praying" is the perfect partner-in-crime for "Fighter", and should be seen as equally as potent.

### The Video

As if her humbling lyrics weren't enough, the "Praying" music video shows us a rubbed-raw version of Kesha, an image which is incredibly striking when compared with carefree, alcohol-fueled rock'n'roll Ke\$ha. The grubbiness we are so accustomed to does make its return, but this time we take a plummeting drop into the real world, where Kesha's bloody, beaten-up face is not the result of endless nights out partying, but rather of her ongoing mental struggles and abuse. As the video begins, we find Kesha lying in an open coffin with two pig-headed men looming over her. A melancholic voice-over poses questions such as "am I dead?", as she ponders over the existence of God, whether anybody truly loves her, and if so, how could they let such things happen to her? The questions are apparently genuine, we find, as she told *Paper Magazine* "I'm a nihilist, in that I think nothing matters. Sometimes. Then I think what really matters is just being kind" (in Goldfine).

Next, we are transported to an image of a motionless Kesha lying on a plank of wood in the middle of the ocean where everything is black and white; here is the representation of how Kesha felt after her trauma, lifeless and void of color. The camera pans into Kesha's eye, and we find ourselves going on "a psychedelic trip into [her] mind" (Valentine) as she smears neon makeup and glitter on her face, possibly in an attempt to find some relief in what was once her trademark image. This does little to comfort her, however; she is not that person anymore. Later in the video, we see her running away from the pig-headed men from earlier, as well as smashing television screens graffitied

with slurs and insults commonly heard in the female pop-star industry. Both are blatant nods towards the toxicity of the media; she satirizes the paparazzi by comparing them to pigs, while quite literally breaking down the beauty standards expected of female artists. Little by little, Kesha's reality begins to gain more and more color, until a small, colorful bird finally inspires hope in her and her world is once again filled with vibrancy.

The video, directed by Jonas Åkerlund, was shot over the course of one day, an experience the artist likened to “the best therapy session, the longest therapy session ever” (in Valentine). While Åkerlund had envisioned Kesha as a fallen angel who had lost all hope, her stylist Samantha Burkhart insisted the singer wear white angel wings as opposed to the black ones that had been suggested, so as to present her as pure and innocent, untainted by her traumas. The most striking outfit, however, is arguably the dazzling, metallic, bird-like armor that she sports throughout various scenes in the music video. It is, ultimately, the colorful bird that finally allows Kesha to revive again—here, she becomes her own savior and is reborn. She resurfaces to walk across the water, a scene which is irrefutably biblical in nature, showcasing the famous rainbow dress the singer has since been recognized for, due to its similarity to Beyoncé's famous dress in *Lemonade*. Stylist Burkhart went on to confirm that there was quite a lot of deliberation regarding the dress for that very reason. Ultimately, though, the dress has been acknowledged as a symbol of Kesha's struggles: “it's kind of like the dress has gone through this entire experience with her”, Burkhart adds. “It's a beautiful rainbow, but not a perfect rainbow. And I think that's a big message in the song, too: When you've gone through a struggle, you don't have to emerge from it looking perfect” (in Fishman).

### The Song and the Video

To separate the song from the music video in this case would be like separating the art from the artist, in that one can never be complete without the other. The video for “Praying” has become a visual representation of the cripplingly tangible feelings so desperately expressed by the singer, both lyrically and vocally, in such a way that we are able to feel them and live them with her. Many have discussed the true meaning of the song and its video, and though Kesha herself makes no direct reference to her alleged aggressor, the link between the song and the Dr. Luke lawsuit has inevitably been made on a number of occasions. As Traesger comments,

Kesha doesn't mention Dr. Luke by name, but she does address the situation directly in the song (...): “When I'm finished / They won't even know your name / You brought the flames and you put me through hell / I had to learn how to fight for myself / There ain't no other truth I can tell / I'll just say this is to wish you farewell / I hope you're somewhere praying”, she sings in a stunningly strong voice.

It is not only through her lyrics that Kesha makes these (perhaps not so) subtle nods towards the event; the imagery presented to us in the video also plays its part in tying her words together. On multiple occasions throughout the video, she is seen trapped in a fishing net, from which she slowly begins to detangle herself. Most would have expected the euphoria of being fully freed from it, but Kesha's real-life net maintains its firm grip on her. As Goldfie notes, “although Sony cut ties with Dr. Luke in 2017 and he's no longer producing her albums, Kesha is still in the same six-album recording and

publishing contract she signed with the producer at 18, meaning that [the album] likely required his sign-off and will potentially benefit him financially”.

It would be foolish not to make the connection between the Kesha’s fiery hymn of forgiveness and the hardships that she has gone through as a result of her relationship with Dr. Luke. But as a female artist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, her only remaining hope is to keep on keeping on. She has instead chosen to take the “high road” (see her most recent eponymous album), knowing that she has done all she can to bring about justice not only for her, but for others in her situation.

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## Dua Lipa, 'New Rules': The Power of Sisterhood

Yaiza Sánchez Millán

Released: 7 July 2017

Album: *Dua Lipa*

Label: Warner Bros Records

Genre: Tropical House, EDM, electropop, dance pop

Length: 3:32

Songwriters: Caroline Ailin, Emily Warren, and Ian Kirkpatrick

Producer: Ian Kirkpatrick

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Dua-lipa-new-rules-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2qgadSvNyU&ab\\_channel=DuaLipa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2qgadSvNyU&ab_channel=DuaLipa)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2qgadSvNyU&ab\\_channel=DuaLipa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2qgadSvNyU&ab_channel=DuaLipa)

Director: Henry Scholfield



### The Singer

Dua Lipa is an English singer, songwriter and model. She was born in London in 1990, but her parents are from Kosovo. She started her musical career by covering other artists' songs on YouTube when she was fourteen years old. In 2015, she signed with Warner Bros. Records; her self-titled debut album was released in 2017. The album contained seven singles, including two UK top-ten singles "Be the One" and "Idgaf" and the UK number-one single "New Rules" (*IMDB*). In 2018, she released the single "One Kiss" with Calvin Harris, "Don't Start Now", and other songs, which charted in the top ten. In 2020, she released her second studio album, called *Future Nostalgia*, which became her first UK number-one album (*Wikipedia*).

Dua Lipa has become the first female artist with four songs over one billion Spotify streams, and she has won and been nominated to many awards. In 2018, she won two Brit Awards for British Female Solo Artist and British Breakthrough Act. "One Kiss" peaked number one in the UK and became the year's longest-running number-one single by a female artist, winning the 2019 Brit Award for Song of the Year. "Don't Start Now" was the most commercially successful song by a female artist in the US in 2020. Her second studio album, *Future Nostalgia* helped Lipa win British Female Solo Artist and British Album of the Year at the 2021 Brit Awards (*Wikipedia*).

Lipa wrote her first song when she was four years old, since she had family connections to music because her father had been in a rock band in his native Kosovo. She moved out of her family home to London when she was fifteen to pursue her career in music: "I was like, I want to do music, but I want to do it on a global scale. I have to go back to where everything is happening" (in *Biography*). As a result of her growing fame, Lipa attracted some negative criticism, such as being accused of using dull choreography in her shows and videos (*Biography*). However, instead of giving up on her goal of becoming a top-rank artist, she started taking some dance training sessions (*Biography*).

Dua Lipa has shared her support for Palestinians, women's rights, the Black Lives Matter campaign and LGBTIQ+ rights. In addition, Lipa created the Sunny Hill Foundation along with her father, an organization that assists young people in Kosovo. Her past family issues and her own experience as a migrant make her worried about the future status of immigrants and refugees in a post-Brexit United Kingdom scenario.

## The Song

"New Rules" was released through Warner Bros Records on 7 July 2017, as part of her album *Dua Lipa*. The song was written by Caroline Ailin, Emily Warren, and Ian Kirkpatrick and produced by the latter. It is an electropop and tropical house track with an electronic dance music production that contains dance-pop strokes and dance-hall beats (*Wikipedia*). Even though Lipa had stated previously that she preferred to compose her own songs, "New Rules" was not written by her nor even for her. The song was offered to several artists, but all of them rejected it complaining over the fact that it did not have a "notable hook" (*Wikipedia*). When asked about the fact that she had not written the song, Lipa explained that:

"I still take a lot of pride in being able to write my own songs. My story's coming from me. But 'New Rules' is a song that I felt like I had been in the room and written. I'm so close with Emily [Warren] and Caroline [Ailin] and Ian [Kirkpatrick], who had worked on it, that I feel like it was a song they had written with me in mind. I'm proud of it as if I had been in that room. I just feel so closely to it. I guess I don't have that perspective anymore. But like I said, I still love writing everything. And I'm still going to do it. But it's a song that I feel like I can relate to on a personal level, that I also feel that when I do perform it, it becomes mine and I embody it in a different way". (in Carley)

The lyrics of the song show Lipa giving herself a set of 'new rules' in order to get over a former boyfriend, as she is being helped by her women friends. "It's the breakup song that I wish I had when I was breaking up with someone. (...) This is me taking charge", Lipa has declared (in Newman). The song narrates that the reason why the singer feels obliged to set these rules is because, even though she feels good when in her lover's company, he does not love her back. Therefore, she needs to get away from him: "He makes me feel like nobody else, nobody else / But, my love / He doesn't love me, so I tell myself, I tell myself". This is then a song about overcoming unrequited love.

The rules Lipa sets up are three. The first one is not picking up the phone because "You know he's only callin' 'cause he's drunk and alone". The second rule is not letting him enter her life again: "Two: Don't let him in / You have to kick him out again". The third rule is avoid being his friend, since the breakup is still recent and temptation strong: "Three: Don't be his friend / You know you're gonna wake up in his bed in the mornin'". Finally, there is a little word game: "And if you're under him, you ain't getting' over him", which can be understood literally (under him in bed, having sex) and metaphorically: under him as opposed of getting over him, that is, moving on.

The pressures of romantic love are also addressed in the song. There is a line in which Lipa sings "I keep pushin' forwards, but he keeps pullin' me backwards". This describes how the man keeps insisting on getting back together, despite not truly loving her, while she tries to get away from him time after time. Socially, this attitude on the part

of men is seen as romantic, since masculinity is constructed upon the idea that males perform the active role and females perform the passive one; therefore, the fact that a male keeps insisting on getting back together is understood as something positive, because this means he is playing an active role and fighting for the girl's love back.

The lines “Now I’m standin’ back from it, I finally see the pattern / I never learn, I never learn” imply that this is not the first time that the singer gets involved with this kind of selfish man and that there is a pattern that she keeps following. From a feminist perspective, this criticizes how women are socially and culturally educated to love and take care of their oppressive male partners, as well as held responsible for improving them; thus, they tolerate and put up with their negative behavior, even blaming themselves in case they do not succeed in the quest to find ‘true’ love. Apart from that, women are also educated to believe that they are not valid enough as persons if they do not find a man to share their life with. This is implicitly the reason why the singer has so many difficulties to abandon her lover and implement the set of new rules.

### The Video

The “New Rules” music video was released on 7 July 2017. It was directed by Henry Scholfield and Teresa Barcelo was in charge of the attractive choreography. As for the location of the video, it takes place at the Confidante Hotel in Miami. The video presents a strong 1970s influenced aesthetic, with soft pastel colors in the hotel décor and also the clothes worn by Lipa and her female friends (Shannon).

The video features Lipa’s friends trying to prevent her from getting back with her former boyfriend by reminding her constantly of the rules she has to follow in order to accomplish this aim. The music video was critically acclaimed, and most of the reviews highly praised its themes of female empowerment. It made Lipa the youngest female artist with a video exceeding one billion views on YouTube. The video was nominated for British Music Video of the Year at the 2018 Brit Awards and Best Choreography at the 2018 MTV Video Music Awards. As Lipa declared,

“It was really quick, because none of my videos had ever done anything like that. So many cool female artists were reaching out. Lorde said it was one of her favourite videos she’d seen, and Zara Larsson was reaching out. The message of the video is ‘Girls supporting each other’, so it meant so much to me when other female artists truly had my back. I think it all just happened so fast. I didn’t expect it. But I still didn’t expect it to go to number one in the U.K. I didn’t!” (in Carley).

### The Song and the Video

Considering only the lyrics, we may assume that Dua Lipa is alone in reminding herself of the anti-boyfriend rules and trying to apply them. However, there is an element added to the video, which is the idea of sisterhood understood from a feminist perspective: a political decision made by women that share the same ideals which consists of working together to reach the same objective, namely their liberation from the patriarchal system. This idea is reflected by how Lipa appears surrounded by her caring women friends, who are actively helping her to obey these rules in order to prevent her from getting back

together with her ex-boyfriend. There isn't one single scene in which there is a woman alone. They are constantly together and trying to prevent Lipa from contacting her ex, always there for one another. Along the video, the friends show their support, trust and guidance. The choreography shows Lipa's weak physical state; her friends have to guide her because she is unable to act upon her own autonomy and agency (Shannon). There are also some flamingos appearing on scene, which were Lipa's own choice. She decided to include them because they travel in flocks "and there's a sense of unity" in their flight (in Newman), which reflects the sorority theme of the video.

In the second part of the video, when the chorus is repeated, thanks to these new rules and the support of her friends, Lipa's physical and mental state has improved and she even smiles. They now show the joyful side of female friendship and the setting also changes, since the young women move to the external part of the hotel. In the last part of the video, another girl in the dance crew of friends shows signs of slipping up and breaking these new rules. So, now it is Dua Lipa's turn to do the same that her friends did for her, preventing her friend from getting back with her toxic boyfriend. This shows the cyclical nature of female friendship in the music video. There is always giving and receiving.

To sum up, the video transforms the song into a representation of sisterhood and the idea of community between women, and denies the sexist idea that a woman's worst enemy is another woman. To a certain extent, it is vindication of what the patriarchal system took away from women, which is the sense of camaraderie and loyalty instead of the internal constant competition amongst them for men's attention. As blogger Shannon states, "Dua Lipa's video serves as a mainstream reminder that femme friendships are radical responses to society's abandonment of women and of overall emotional and physical wellness". This enriches the song and certainly reinforces the 'new rules'.

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## Janelle Monáe, 'Crazy, Classic, Life': Standing up for Your Rights

Pol Salinas Clavijo

Released: 27 April 2018

Album: *Dirty Computer*

Label: Jane Le publishing, Ink is an instrument Publishing and Tang Nivri Publishing

Genre: R&B, soul

Length: 6:22

Songwriters: Chuck Lightning, Nate 'Rocket' Wonder and Janelle Monáe

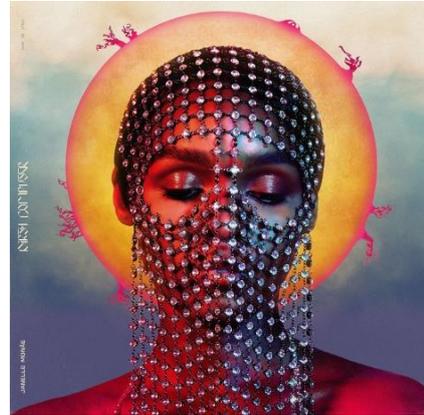
Producers: Chuck Lightning and Janelle Monáe

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Janelle-monae-crazy-classic-life-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cx30\\_oXJDaY&ab\\_channel=JanelleMon%C3%A1e](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cx30_oXJDaY&ab_channel=JanelleMon%C3%A1e)

Director: Alan Ferguson



### The Singer

Janelle Monáe Robinson, an American singer, songwriter, rapper and actor, was born in Kansas City, on 1 December 1985. She started singing at the age of twelve, when she was enrolled in the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York. In Atlanta, she met the band Outkast, and featured in some of their songs. A member of the band introduced her to the Bad Boys record company, with whom she signed her first professional contract, the one that boosted her career. Monáe has published three studio albums so far (*The ArchAndroid*, 2010; *The Electric Lady*, 2013; and *Dirty Computer*, 2018), that were a huge success and have earned her a Grammy award in 2010 and several nominations as well. Monáe has parallel careers as a model and actor. She has received numerous awards for films such as *Hidden Figures* (2016) and *Moonlight* (2016).

Monáe has never dressed or acted in any stereotypically feminine way and currently identifies herself as a non-binary person. In one of her interviews for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Monáe proudly expresses her preference arguing that: "Being a queer black woman in America, someone who has been in relationships with both men and women, I consider myself to be free" (in Spanos). She has also been very vocal and outspoken about racial issues and race-related violence in the United States, having written many songs that refer to these issues. Monáe is very much focused on being a voice for the people who are not often heard, to help others to be seen, heard and helped. In one of her interviews, she declared that:

"I feel like I have a responsibility to my community and other young girls to help redefine what it looks like to be a woman. I don't believe in men's wear or women's wear; I just like what I like. And I think we should just be respected for being an individual (...) I've been in *Vogue*, now, and different publications, which is cool,

because I think that it just shows a different perspective of how women can dress”.  
(in Andrews)

Thanks to her role in trying to help these groups of people that have problems fitting on the society and that sometimes are even discriminated, Monáe has gained much popularity; many people see her as a role model, especially for the LGBTQ+ community.

Another important aspect of Monáe’s career is her interest in science fiction with the creation of a dystopian universe, named Metropolis, for her albums and the implementation of an alter-ego, an android named Cindy Mayweather that appears in many of her songs. In one an MTV interview with P. Diddy, Monáe argued that “Cindy is an android and I love speaking about the android because they are the new ‘other’. People are afraid of the other and I believe we’re going to live in a world with androids because of technology and the way it advances” (in MTV UK). In 2010, Monáe even told *Rolling Stone*, “I only date androids” (in Hoard) thus tying herself to the cyborg beyond the albums. She also stated that the implementation of this alter-ego is due to the idea that the android, as the new ‘other’, can be compared to being a lesbian, gay, black or a woman. The android has given Monáe a cover to touch on a variety of social issues, especially the ones that she found more difficult or more uncomfortable to deal with. Monáe wants the people who feel oppressed or feel they are ‘other’ to connect with the music and to feel that she represents who they truly are.

## The Song

There are several important elements that the song “Crazy, Classic, Life” deals with. The title already announces the singer’s intention to live in a world where there are no hard judgments, where people can be whoever they want, and where being yourself is all that matters. She just wants to be happy being herself, and that no one can change that. Monáe has commented that one of the main inspirations for writing the song is how the notion of true freedom also comes from the right to be wrong; it is not more difficult for women to succeed, but they get treated much more harshly if they make mistakes. According to Monáe, the song also describes how despite the racial prejudices and discrimination against African Americans, black people know how to persevere and be grateful for their freedom as individuals.

There are certain elements to comment regarding the lyrics: The song begins with a passage from the US Declaration of Independence: “You told us we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Discrimination is a major theme in the album *Dirty Computer*, and the use of the Declaration in the song serves to point out some ironies: the first one is that women are not included at all in it, and the second is that all the men who wrote the declaration owned slaves at that time. Monáe sings: “I don’t want to live on my knees”, alluding the idea of being weak and subservient as slaves were, which Monáe clearly does not want to be; she aims instead at changing this idea in people’s mind. In another moment of the song, she also contrasts the traditional American phrase the “American Dream” with the infamous speech by Malcolm X about the “American nightmare”, written to oppose the ideals of the supposed ‘dream’. Monáe stresses that

she is ready to fulfil her own American dream, and break free from the negative judgements that US society passes against Black people.

Another important moment in the song is when Monáe challenges the assumption that God is a man, singing that: “I wanna find a god / and I hope she loves me too”. She refers to God as feminine, on the basis of feminism and asking for gender equality. The rap at the end of the song is very important: “The same mistake, I’m in jail, you on top of sh\*t / You living life while I’m walking moppin’ sh\*t”. In this moment, she wants to emphasize that while white people have been celebrated for pushing the borders, black people are being punished for the same actions.

## The Video

The video for the song is a narrative film with some science fiction elements, set in a dystopian future but not really different from what is happening in the society nowadays. Monáe is driving her car with her friends in the opening shot of the music video, when she hears the police sirens and has to pull over, a clear allusion to the constant harassment of African Americans by law enforcement agents.

There are, in any case, several different, positive identity markers on display throughout the music video. Monáe and her Africa-American friends have traditional tribal African paint on their faces, demonstrating their intention of embracing their race and culture. Monáe wears rainbow eyeshadow through the video, which alludes to the Pansexual pride flag and seems a way of referencing her pansexuality, confirmed in many interviews. Being an Africa-American female, Monáe fights for peace, unity and understanding. In *Atwood* magazine Danny Vagnoni argued that:

“Crazy, Classic, Life” is a clear confrontation of American identity and the ways it still has yet to metabolise its own ugliness and recognize the humanity of black, or otherwise minority (non-white heterosexuals) Americans. “Crazy, Classic, Life” is at once a celebration of humanity, and a vigil for people lost to inhumanity.

Beyond these issues, the video also focuses on human moments of joy, with the marginalized individuals enjoying themselves in an environment where against all odds, they can be free. The video displays a great variety in its cast with the young characters showing sexual fluidity. Whaley comments in an analysis of the song in *Mic* magazine that “As the camera pans over an array of diverse man and women’s faces as a sample of the declaration of sentiments and resolutions from the Women’s rights convention in 1848 plays: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all man and woman are created equal’”. Monáe can be seen intimating with both men and women, embracing her own pansexuality.

Towards the end of the video, there are several important scenes to mention. The first one presents Monáe and her friends rising their fists, alluding to the Black Panthers’ salute. Another important scene shows Monáe sitting at the center of a long table, next to a group of eclectic people, while she stares at the camera singing the rap part of the song. The scene can be compared to the Da Vinci’s Last Supper painting, but replacing the image of the white Jesus for a black, queer woman. Oddly, the video ends with the police arresting Monáe and her friends, perhaps hinting that they don’t fit in the videos’ dystopian future or that racism continues in it

## The Song and the Video

The “Crazy, Classic, Life” music video does not clearly align with the lyrics, but both manifest an intention of celebrating being young, black, wild, and free. The song deals with the idea of being in a fantasy world, where you are free to be whoever you want and to stay with whoever you want, breaking free from society’s (mis)judgements. Escapism is a beautiful thing, especially when your life is always under threat. Monáe really wants people to empathize with her, making them see that they are not alone and that they must live life as they want. At the same time, the other intention of the song is to warn people that danger lurks everywhere, ready to destroy the happiness she finds in the fantasy world; as a critic of the problems that certain collectives of the society have to suffer, especially the African American and the LGTBI+ communities, Monáe appears to be the target of repression. In conclusion, with “Crazy, Classic, Life” Janelle Monáe offers a very powerful song, with the intention of changing public opinion regarding some of the excluded collectives and inviting them to stand up for their own rights. She also wants to celebrate black identity and enjoy life in freedom. She urges thus the listeners of the song to be whoever they want and to be with whoever they want.

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## Florence Welch, 'Hunger': Sensitivity Tasting Happiness

Aixa Aranda Salas

Released: 3 May 2018

Album: *High As Hope*

Label: Virgin EMI

Genre: Dance-pop, disco-house

Length: 3:24

Songwriters: Florence Welch, Emile Haynie, Thomas Bartlett, and Tobias Jesso Jr.

Producers: Emile Haynie and Florence Welch

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Florence-the-machine-hunger-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GHXEGz3PJg>

Director: AJ Rojas



### The Singer

As unconventional figures in the music industry go, Florence Welch outshines the rest and positions herself in the very center. Born on 28 August 1986 in London, her early years were already marked by this sense of uniqueness. In a stage of her life in which she describes herself as “mentally absent” (in Ryan), she began having issues at school. The child Florence would get into trouble for impromptu singing in the middle of class and, her interests rather focusing on the life outside of it, finding solace in art and literature. Eventually, she got diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia, a developmental disorder that causes issues with organization, but that did not stop Florence from excelling academically; as a matter of fact, she was considered profoundly talented in the arts.

Throughout her growing years, thus, Welch would lose herself in the artistic world, both as a way of shielding herself from reality and expressing herself in it. “She would often be found (...) in the library, reading books on Jack the Ripper and Victorian Britain (...) She became a Nirvana fan and began to go to punk gigs wearing all the gear” (Ryan). It was no surprise, then, when she ended up enrolling at the Camberwell College of Arts; there she would begin pouring her inner world into the outer one with works such as a six-foot-wide artificial flower arrangement that spelled out ‘You’re a twat’ (Welch notes it “was directed entirely at myself”) and a cake with the words “It’s going to get worse” iced on it (both in Needham).

Perhaps due to this love for the visual arts, Welch has developed a peculiar sense of style that has led her to become a fashion icon. Referred to as the “Queen of Bohemian Style” (Allaire), she states that her classic vintage-like style was born out of carrying a trunk of clothing while on tour: as soon as the band reach a new destination, “We jump out of the van and we’re like go—whatever you can find in charity shops, Primark, vintage stores for £10” (in Ryan). Nevertheless, what may have started as an affordable way to

achieve her characteristic style ended up charming the eyes of many designers and leading her to work with brands such as Gucci, Chanel, etc. Visuals, thus, are her brand signature just as much as her music: Welch's adoption of a fragile pre-Raphaelite image adds up to her delicate personality, conveying this dreamy figure of someone barely tethered to our world, in constant danger of flying away. Nevertheless, with the sound of her powerful voice, this 'ethereal' figure transforms into a mighty presence.

Welch always knew that music was her true passion. She recalls singing for her grandmother at a very young age and then performing in family weddings and funerals; eventually, she persuaded her parents to sign her up for music lessons. There, she would learn French and Italian arias, but she would also sing every day "Spooky" by Dusty Springfield. According to her own words: "It was a weird mix and I think that's where the difference in my range comes from" (in Ryan). Writing music, just as much as expressing it visually, contributed both in helping her cope with her deeply felt emotions and in pouring them into the outer world. Having acquired a taste for the morbid and the macabre as a child, her songs constitute a raw mix between pure sensitivity and uncensored pain. In what was supposed to be a break from college, she was spotted in a nightclub by promoter Mairead Nash while pretending to be the frontwoman of a band that did not exist (Lloyd), and her career began shortly afterward.

During the following years, Welch was to win twenty-four awards out of more than one hundred nominations and top several times both the UK and US album charts. Throughout that process of success, she went on to live the 'rockstar life': attending every party, not getting enough sleep, and abusing alcohol as a way to cope with her newfound fame and her lifelong anxieties—"The partying was about me not wanting to deal with the fact my life had changed, not wanting to come down" (in Wiseman). As a highly sensitive person she thus shielded herself from overwhelming fame, but she eventually realized that her behavior was more damaging than helpful, which led her to sober up: "When I realized I could perform without the booze it was a revelation. There's discomfort and rage, and the moment when they meet is when you break open. You're free" (in Wiseman).

Furthermore, Welch states that even that self-destructive tendency, once dealt with, helped her somehow in the process of fueling her creativity:

"I found that things always became heavier and darker—but in a good way. Like some of that fury that would always end up directed at myself if used the wrong way, that sort of chaotic and self-destructive side, if I could just take it to the stage or take it into the studio it's kinda like taking the demon and instead of trynna fight out in your own house you sort of—you become one with it" (in Mac, part 2/3).

In that process of healing and living a life of peace and kindness towards herself, her forth studio album, *High As Hope*, was born.

## The Song

"Hunger", the second track of the album, was never meant to be published. In what she calls "self-dares of truth" (in Wiseman) Welch writes her thoughts in the form of private confessions to understand herself better. "Hunger", one of them, was originally written as a poem navigating how she tended to look for love in things that were not love.

With the opening lines “At seventeen I started to starve myself / I thought that love was a kind of emptiness / and at least I understood then, the hunger I felt / And I didn’t have to call it emptiness”, Welch opens up for the first time in her life about an eating disorder she suffered as an adolescent. She then adopts the hunger as a metaphor for something else, for an emptiness she is trying to fill and continues to do so throughout the song. “I thought that love was in the drugs / But the more I took, the more it took away / and I could never get enough”. As she goes on, she explores the many ways how she tries to satiate this need but fails. But then she realizes that everyone has their own ache or unfilled emptiness, their own “hunger” (“We all have a hunger”), and the mere acknowledgment of this common but silent feeling might make us feel less alone. Perhaps there might be no solution at all (“We never found the answer”) but, since everybody is feeling hungry, it does not matter. Then, rather than go on focusing on herself and her sorrow, she gazes onto the outer world and realizes that she is surrounded by beauty and beautiful people, which makes her forget it and focus on the outer happiness that life can procure: “Oh, and you in all your vibrant youth / How could anything bad ever happen to you / You make a fool of death with your beauty, and for a moment / I forget to worry”.

Welch describes her process of creating songs as if they were boxes that preserved the feelings and sensations that she puts into them. In “Hunger”, the imaginary box is the recognition that she cannot “be fixed” by others nor that her sadness will disappear by merely distracting herself from it. With it, though, she intends to inquire about this common feeling (the “hunger”) that nobody talks about despite being a profoundly common experience. In doing so, she hoped to make people feel seen and identified:

“The core of this record is perhaps looking to connect, and perhaps encourage connection in others and in some way (...) I thought that by making myself vulnerable saying things I never thought I’d say out loud, perhaps it’d encourage people to feel like —(...) this song is about pain, but it is also a celebration” (in Mac, part 3/3).

In hopes of un-stigmatizing those feelings of sadness and not being good enough, Welch inspires people to let go of that sorrow, appreciate the little gifts of life, and hold on to each other.

## The Video

As stated, the song “Hunger” dives into the need of feeling something that only love can satiate; following its themes and ideas, the video visually expresses that need to feel loved.

Directed by AG Rojas, the video begins by presenting an androgynous statue in a black and white cold environment. The statue is completely naked (and thus, exposed) to the many eyes that observe it. It is broken, empty, and has several injuries in the form of holes in it. Regardless, the spectators do not judge the statue but admire it instead. They approach it and touch it, caressing its wounds. In the following sequences, we observe, now in colored images, how many people throughout time come to see, own, and appreciate the statue. They admire it, touch it, decorate it, adore it, even, in some cases. They all live their lives in their own ways, with the statue at the center of it, each

one finding their own sense of beauty in it. Time passes, and the environment and people surrounding the statue change, but the love they lived together remains with it. At minute 3:20 it can be observed how, in what once was an empty hole, beauty, in the form of a plant, is growing from inside the statue. As a direct allusion to her previous video “Sky Full of Song” (which could work as a visual prequel for “Hunger”), the representation of beauty growing in the form of bare life embodies creation born out of the enormous amount of love the statue has received.

Eventually, as the video depicts, time passes, the statue decays, grows old, and gets even more broken. Furthermore, it reaches a point where it’s completely alone: covered in what appears to be desert sand, it hints that everyone who has ever loved it is now gone. But, despite that, the statue remains covered in life and beauty: the love that it once lived remains with it. Then we are faced with a question in the form of a statement: “How many have to die so that you can feel loved”. With the passing of time, we might fail to remember how we have been loved, or, because of the “hunger”, we might not even notice it while it happens; but neither takes that love away. The statue is now completely alone, but it does not matter. It is still covered in flowers.

### The Song and the Video

Both the song and video for “Hunger” work in a complementary way to present perhaps one of Welch’s deepest and most personal songs. Who once was an “unconventional child” that later became a troubled and tortured artist has now grown to be someone who manages to live life in a state of “quiet happiness”, appreciating the life and beauty that surround her.

Maintaining the use of visuals, she illuminates the feeling conveyed in the lyrics of “Hunger” with imagery of peaceful kindness. Still, Welch does not restrict herself to achieving this state; despite being a song and video about learning to appreciate domesticity and quietness, we can still see her dancing freely throughout the video. After all, freedom, peace, love, and happiness go hand in hand: what is the point of fighting with a “hunger” for such a long time if she is not to taste every spark of life that she encounters?

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## Mitski, 'Nobody': Isolation and Identity

Paula Herruzo Muñoz

Released: 26 June 2018

Album: *Be the Cowboy*

Label: Dead Oceans

Genre: Alternative/indie, rock

Length: 3:13

Songwriter: Mitski Miyawaki

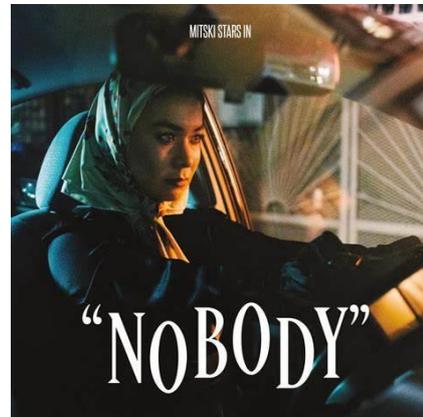
Producer: Patrick Hyland

Lyrics: <http://genius.com/Mitski-nobody-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qooWnw5rEcI>

Director: Christopher Good



### The Singer

Mitski (born Mitsuki Hayland Miyawaki) was born in Japan on 27 September 1990. She released her first two albums *Lush* (2012) and *Retired From Sad, New Career in Business* (2013) as school projects during her training at Purchase College Conservatory of Music in New York City. However, it was not until the release of her third studio album *Bury Me At Makeout Creek* (2014) under the independent label Double Double Whammy that she gained international recognition. The performer has been widely appreciated in the alternative scene for almost a decade, however, the latest years of Mitski's career have been particularly fruitful as she started to be under the radar of mainstream audiences. By the time of the publication of her critically acclaimed fourth studio album *Puberty 2* (2016) with Dead Oceans, Mitski had already toured with prominent industry names such as Lorde and was well-known in the realm of alternative music. Nevertheless, her breakthrough within mainstream audiences and Billboard 200 debut came with the release of her latest work *Be the Cowboy* (2018) and its second single, "Nobody". Ever since the publication of her first self-released record, Mitski has published 5 studio albums, 13 singles, 1 EP, 1 OST, and 18 music videos. Her upcoming sixth studio album *Laurel Hell* is announced to be released in February 2022.

Regarding her personal life, Mitski is a rather private artist, although she has been outspoken about the identity issues stemming from living in over 13 different countries during childhood until she settled down in New York City for college: "I didn't even make friends because I knew it would be goodbye in a year. Everyone else just thought I was different and weird" (in Schnipper). Alienation is a central theme embedded in the lyrics of her most popular tracks, where the singer reflects on her own experiences with loneliness. In relation to being a biracial woman born to a Japanese mother and an American father, Mitski stated that after having navigated through the whole world, she felt "half Japanese, half American but not fully either" (in Schnipper). In a sense, the lack of a homeland that profoundly concerned the performer during most of her life is now a source of inspiration for her virtuous lyricism.

When first met with the public gaze, Mitski's artistic persona and melancholic rock songs were often perceived under the 'sad indie girl' trope. However, her role as a songwriter, bassist, and vocalist in charge of her entire discography has earned her the appraisal of the industry. In relation to her image as a proficient musician, Justin Barney notes how "Her music is often called 'raw and honest', and that's true, but it is far from being that simple. Mitski's songs are as controlled, professional and thoughtful as she is" (Barney). Her journey from a self-released singer before graduating from Purchase College to being signed by one of the most respected indie labels, Dead Oceans, is profoundly marked by Mitski's ambition to become an artist who is in complete control of her own music.

Almost a decade later into her career, the performer herself admits to having little concerns regarding her reputation (see Snapes) but is steadily focused on her artistry: "even if it actually sometimes hurts, it doesn't matter as long as I get to be a musician" (in Schnipper). The songwriter has also explored her role as a composer in recent years, when she has written several songs for industry peers such as Allie X. Altogether, Mitski has earned over the past ten years the status of being a main female figure for the alternative music scene among mainstream audiences.

### The Song

"Nobody" is the second single from Mitski's fifth studio album *Be the Cowboy* (2018). It was written by Miyawaki herself, and it is one of the most upbeat songs of her career. The singer composed the track while spending Christmas alone away from home while touring, and the lyrics reflect on her desire to feel loved while also not wanting to give up on her individuality. "Nobody" has been depicted as a "disco-infected ode to loneliness" (Snapes), and perhaps that is the reason why despite its already very successful release, it gained traction again during COVID-19 lockdown as it went viral on various social media platforms. Because of this, Mitski started to reach younger and pop-oriented demographics too more widely.

The opening lines "My God, I'm so lonely / So I open the window to hear sounds of people" already depict the main issue of the song by referencing physical isolation from society. In an interview on YouTube for *Genius*, Mitski light-heartedly confessed to having written "Nobody" "in a semi-fugue state on my hands and knees just crying and repeating the word 'nobody'. I was like, let me use this pain and exploit it for my money". Likewise, the word "nobody" is frantically enounced through the song both as a desperate longing for company and an affirmation of the singer only finding comfort within her own self—after all, she always has. The single represented Mitski's first debut on non-indie charts as she reached Billboard 200 for the first time. Besides the portrayal on loneliness and isolation interacting with self-identity that Mitski offers with "Nobody", the song also gives insight on the wishes of the singer to feel desired, even though she is aware that such thing will not grant her eternal company: "and I know no one will save me, I just need someone to kiss".

After having interviewed Mitski on "Nobody", Justin Barney concludes that "[in the song] Mitski points out that there's a big difference between being alone and feeling alone, and her music explores both sides of this divide while navigating the trench in

between”. The nuanced area between finding comfort in isolation and also presenting the human desire to feel loved, in opposition to social expectations of independence and complacency often inflicted upon women, meets the “aggressive femininity” (Snapes) that Mitski set the songs on *Be the Cowboy* to display; specifically, the notion of “wanting to have power but feeling powerless” (Snapes) underlying the opposites of being alone voluntarily, for instance, by choosing to spend Christmas alone in a foreign country, versus being lonely and losing oneself in the middle ground.

### The Video

The music video for “Nobody” is the most successful of Mitski’s career. The singer is depicted navigating through different scenes of ordinary life, alone in her room and wishing for company, thus offering an accurate portrayal of the sentiment present in the lyrics. However, the ending unveils how Mitski is actually filming herself, and rather than the main character, she is introduced to the viewers as the director and cinematographer.

It seems as if Mitski’s old self was attempting to find a way of dealing with her loneliness, but rather than providing herself with the company she longs for, the music video depicts her journey of finding comfort in her own self. The singer finds the words “nobody” endlessly repeated in a piece of paper in one of the first scenes, only to end up coming across the words “you” written in her own diary. Instances of radical metaphors where the lyrics are present such as the previously mentioned are frequent throughout the music video, although more subtle takes on the themes touched upon in the song are also present—when the singer is seen holding hands with a faceless person, or her own image is erased from the screen of a robot. The image of a blurry faceless woman hangs on the wall of her room, perhaps hinting at Mitski’s own identity struggles—however, the singer seems to have come to terms with herself by the end of the music video. Altogether, Mitski is successful at giving an insight into the ideas she determined the track to convey, and at shaping her own stance on self-acceptance with an elaborate narrative music video.

### The Song and the Video

“Nobody” might bring about debatable issues on how women navigate through loneliness and isolation, especially when lacking a partner. The lyrics, besides hinting at isolation, also convey the performer’s own sense of culpability regarding being lonely “I’ve been big and small / And big and small / And big and small again / And still nobody wants me”, as if not even the most superficial societal standards could fulfill the existential void prevalent in the track. Nevertheless, Mitski does not offer a romantic interest as a counterpart to loneliness, neither in the song nor the music video, but rather embraces this loneliness and finally seems to find a homeland within her own self.

In her analysis of Mitski’s song and music video for *The Harvard Crimson*, Grace L. Ziu describes the ending of the “Nobody” music video as “the aftermath of dancing alone in your room, when all the fun and games are done”, and in a way, Mitski’s choice of positioning herself as the director of her own performance grants the songwriter the privilege of dancing to her existential crisis while stressing the need for self-acceptance.

Likewise, the songwriter's words for *Genius* regarding her wish of exploiting her suffering to create art fit the narrative of Mitski being in control of the pain that is being portrayed in "Nobody". She is the ultimate creator and editor of her own tragedies, and with "Nobody", the singer seems to have been able to write an unforgettable "ode to loneliness" accompanied by a music video that rightfully encapsulates her personal journey.

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## Ariana Grande, 'God Is a Woman': A Women-Empowering Anthem

Alba Guijarro Sanchez

Released: 13 July 2018

Album: *Sweetener*

Label: Republic Records

Genre: Pop, hip-hop, R&B

Length: 3:18

Songwriters: Ariana Grande, Ilya Salamanzadeh, Max Martin, Savan Kotecha, and Rickard Göransson

Producers: Ariana Grande, Ilya Salamanzadeh

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Ariana-grande-god-is-a-woman-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHLHSIExFis&ab\\_channel=ArianaGrandeVevo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHLHSIExFis&ab_channel=ArianaGrandeVevo)

Director: Dave Meyers



### The Singer

Ariana Grande-Butera, better known as Ariana Grande, was born in Boca Raton, Florida, on 26 June 1993. She started her acting and singing career at a young age and played roles in local theatre before she was a teenager. At the age of fifteen, she appeared in the Broadway musical *13*, in the role of Charlotte, which earned her a National Youth Theatre Association Award. Two years later, her real leap to fame came when she was cast as Cat Valentine in the TV series *Victorious*. The show went on for four seasons (2010-2013). During those three years, Grande also pursued a singing career, making her first appearance on a record in the soundtrack from the series. She finally released her first single "Put Your Hearts Up" in 2011, a song that was mostly targeted towards her *Victorious* audience. Grande's acting career continued with the TV spin-off *Sam & Cat*, in which she interpreted the same character Cat, but the show ended abruptly after only thirty-five episodes.

In September 2013, Grande released her debut album *Yours Truly* which showed a more mature image of the singer. The Mariah Carey inspired album featured hits like "The Way" with rapper Mac Miller, "Baby I" and "Right There" with rapper Big Sean. Her following album *My Everything* (2014) debuted at number one, after the single "Problem" featuring rapper Iggy Azalea reached number three on Billboard's Hot 100. "Love me Harder" featuring The Weeknd, "Break Free" featuring Zedd, "Bang Bang" with Jessie J and Nicki Minaj, and "One Last Time" are other top hit singles from this album. Grande's musical career kept growing with the years and she released more albums such as *Christmas & Chill* (2015) or *Dangerous Woman* (2016), which made history when the lead single debuted at number ten, making her the first artist to have her lead singles from her first three albums debut in the Top 10; the album itself debuted at number two on the Billboard 200.

While in Manchester, during her *Dangerous Woman* tour, on 22 May 2017, Ariana and her fans suffered a terrorist attack, which left more than a thousand people injured and caused twenty-three victims, including the suicide bomber. Grande was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, but only a month after the bombing, she returned to the UK to hold One Love Manchester, a benefit concert with the purpose of collecting money to help the families of the victims. Artists like Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry, The Black Eyed Peas took part in the event. A year after the attack, Grande made a comeback with the single “No Tears Left to Cry” as a response to the event. The song was part of Grande’s new album *Sweetener*, which led her to winning her first Grammy for Best Pop Vocal Album.

Grande’s fifth album came out in 2019, including hits like “Thank U”, “Next” (which lent its title to the whole album), “7 Rings” or “NASA”. According to *Biography*, Ariana “demonstrated her drawing power by becoming the youngest performer ever to headline Coachella, as well as just the fourth woman to earn the honour”. During the same year 2019, she released some collaborations with well-known artists, publishing in 2020 her latest album, *Positions*. In 2021, Grande married real estate agent Dalton Gomez after being together for about a year. After the release of her latest album, the singer has taken some time off music to “focus on ‘New Versions of Storytelling’” (Roberts) and she has dedicated her time to new projects, such as participating in the 21<sup>st</sup> season of the singing contest *The Voice* as a coach and appearing in the film *Don’t Look Up* alongside actors like Leonardo DiCaprio or Jennifer Lawrence.

Apart from music and television, Ariana Grande has also tip-toed into the beauty industry. In September 2015 she released her first fragrance ARI by Ariana Grande; this was followed by Sweet Like Candy, Moonlight, Cloud, Thank U, Next, and R.E.M. Her newest perfume is called God Is a Woman, like the song analyzed here. After two years of working with her collaborators, in 2021 Grande finally released her own makeup brand, R.E.M Beauty, which has had a great welcoming by her fans.

## The Song

The song “God Is a Woman” is the fifth track on Ariana Grande’s album *Sweetener*. The track was written by Ariana Grande herself, Max Martin, Ilya Salmanzadeh, Savan Kotecha, and Rickard Göransson. The song has over 700 million streams on Spotify (January 2022), Grande was nominated for it as Best Pop Solo Performance on the Grammy awards and the video received the MTV Video Music Award for Best Visual Effects.

“God Is a Woman” was released on 13 July 2018, and Grande shared on her official Twitter account that the song was about “sexual female empowerment and how women are literally everything and the universe is inside of us”. The song is full of sexual references and of allusions to the experiences that sexual relationships bring. For example in the lyrics “It lingers when we’re done / You’ll believe God is a woman”, Grande seemingly refers to the almost religious feeling that some people experience when having sex, stressing the woman is here close to divinity. The song, precisely, elicited had some controversy since the singer presented God as female:

When asked whether she wasn't concerned about the potential controversy she was going to create by saying God is a female while answering questions from her fans on Twitter, Grande said she was aware of the controversy that ascribing the female gender to God was going to create and was actually expecting a negative backlash. However, she said it is important that people remember that what she's doing is nothing short of art. According to her, regardless of whether people understand or don't understand everything she does, she's grateful for the opportunity she's been blessed with to be herself and "inspire others to do that as well". She ended by saying, she'd rather be herself "than play it safe". (*Song Meanings and Facts*)

Leaving the religious opinions aside, what cannot be denied is that Grande created an empowering anthem for women, giving them the recognition they deserve as well as celebrating the power that the female body holds, also in sex.

## The Video

The music video for "God Is a Woman" was posted on YouTube the same day of the song's release and was very well received. The video shows images of Grande as Mother nature, references to female genitalia and the universe as well as nods to mythological myths such as Romulus and Remus and the Cerberus myth.

The first image is one of Grande as the center of the universe, followed by the singer, apparently naked, laying on a watercolor painting that resembles female genitalia. The following image has been interpreted by her fans as Ariana and some men being in the womb, the men are in the same bed as Ariana, but she is in a slightly higher position representing the egg and they are swimming representing the sperm. Grande also represents the sculpture of The Thinker while some men call her bitch or fake; she seems, however, unconcerned since she is significantly bigger than them, and the words bounce off when they touch her. She is also seen in front of a three-headed animal, a reference to the Cerberus myth; in this same scene, she is wearing a replica of Madonna's Gautier bustier, this could also be linked to the fact that Madonna's voice appears later on the video.

Ariana appears next fingering the Earth. She shared a funny image with her fans on Twitter accompanied by the text "I'm so random. I can't believe I just did that" with the caption "remember when I fingered the earth", so the gesture was definitely not a coincidence. There is an odd image, when the music stops for a second, showing some beavers, one of them screaming; Grande said during an interview for the *Zach Sang Show* on YouTube that this represented "the frustration of being misunderstood women (...) being seen as just a [\*...ing pussy] and screaming like frustrated like 'Hi, I'm not just a vagina'". Next, Grande represents Mother Nature and appears with a pregnant belly. Following previous images referring to myths, she now appears feeding three men, making a reference to the Romulus and Remus myth. There is an intermission with a dialogue narrated by Madonna, one of Ariana's biggest icons. Emily Wang commented that:

In this interlude she's dressed like what appears to be a female version of Thor, complete with a gavel for a hammer. While Grande lip-synchs, Madonna recites what *Billboard* identified as the bible quote Samuel L. Jackson's famously says in *Pulp Fiction*. "I will strike down upon thee, with great vengeance and furious anger, those

who attempt to poison and destroy my sisters, and you will know my name is the Lord, when I lay my vengeance upon you”, she says.

Since this song can be considered a feminist anthem, the original quotation has been changed from ‘brothers’ to ‘sisters’. Madonna has always been a feminist icon and has expressed female sexuality in her songs, music videos and lifestyle, so Grande could have not chosen anyone better for the role.

One of the final scenes shows Grande holding different balloons, which represent the planets, while balancing and walking on a rope, this could be interpreted as Ariana balancing the universe. The outro shows Ariana dancing and singing in the center of a chorus, but the voices are not of different women, it is her own voice layered several times to give the impression of it being a chorus. The final scene alludes to Michelangelo’s painting “Creation of Adam” with Ariana as a female God surrounded by female angels giving life to a black Eve.

### The Song and the Video

The song and the music video of “God Is a Woman” are outstanding, and although they can be understood separately, when put together, they reinforce the general impression of female empowerment. The video does not follow a specific order as if it was telling a story, it is rather a collection of significantly known figures that play tribute to the woman figure. When Ariana Grande refers to God being a woman, she is not only referring to one woman in particular or women who have created life, but also talking about all women and how powerful their bodies are. This includes women’s capacity to create new life. When Grande sings “And boy, if you confess, you might get blessed / See if you deserve what comes next” she is seen pregnant in the video, suggesting that if her partner acknowledges his feelings and puts their relationship first in his list of priorities, he could take part in the blessing that creating life is. Ariana Grande has taken the feminist message to the next level with the creation of this song and music video, and has given voice to all the women who have been shut down and not listened for years, or basically throughout the history of life.

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## Nicki Minaj, 'Ganja Burn': The Aftermath of Neglection

Zainab Lafghani El Maddi

Released: 10 August 2018

Album: *Queen*

Label: Young Money, Cash Money

Genre: Reggae fusion

Length: 4:54

Songwriters: Onika Tanya Maraj, Jaiirus Mozee, and Jeremy Reid

Producer: Jeremy Reid

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Nicki-minaj-ganja-burn-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/eMymSXUN9nQ>

Director: Mert Alas, Marcus Piggott



### The Singer

Onika Tanya Maraj, professionally known as Nicki Minaj, was born in Saint James, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, on 8 December 1982. The daughter of Trinidadian gospel singers of African heritage, Nicki had a troubled childhood with her father being a violent drug addict who abused her mother; these events resulted in Nicki and her family moving to Queens, New York when she was only five. Nicki grew eventually interested in rapping yet decided to give a try to acting when she was admitted to the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. With her acting career quickly ending and multiple part-time jobs later, Nicki finally began exploring the underground hip-hop world by performing as a backup singer for many rappers and by posting her work on Myspace (see Wiest). This eventually led her to getting signed by Fendi, CEO of Dirty Money Entertainment. However, Nicki only reached the early stages of her success after three mixtapes (*Play Is Over*, *Sucka Free*, *Beam Me Up Scotty*) and a top 20 song (“I Get Crazy”), when multiple selling rapper Lil Wayne signed her to the label Young Money Entertainment.

One of Minaj’s key gimmicks is her use of multiple alter-egos that accompany her versatile rapping flows and lyrics; originating in her childhood with her first alter ego Cookie, which allowed her to escape from the harshness of her childhood, and her transition from Nicki Maraj to Nicki Minaj when she signed her first record deal (Elle), Nicki developed more personas from her underground days to her biggest collaborations (such as “Monster” alongside Kanye West, Jay-Z and Rick Ross), her hit songs and finally in every one of her releases. One of the most famous and controversial alter egos was Roman Zolanski, described as a British homosexual male. This male alter ego presented a bold and fearless side of Nicki Minaj, who was also adorned with her many colorful wigs and a unique rap flow. Zolanski was Nicki’s alter ego of choice in her 2012 Grammy performance, the turning point when she decided to put her creativity above the demands of any powerful executives in the music industry. Contrary to Gaga’s Jo

Calderone and her exploration of the drag king's world, Roman was Nicki's way of saying what she does not want to say; she defined such character with an addicting rapping flow that gained a great interest from the public.

Since her underground rapping days, Minaj has been praised for her lyrical talent, and she has carried on developing it throughout her career. This comes as a surprise since no other female rapper has been known for writing her own lyrics; the biggest hits by previous rappers such as Lil Kim or Foxy Brown were written by fellow male rappers (see Findlay, Ziegbe). The matter of ghost-writing in the rap scene—meaning a rapper claiming lyrics that he/she did not write, which goes against the genre's truth—has been present for decades, yet from the 2010 decade onwards it has adopted a new sense because of the lack of rappers writing their bars. Nicki Minaj is among the few rappers who has stayed loyal to hip-hop's essence (among rappers such as Kendrick Lamar or J. Cole), yet she is not usually included in debates where the greatest rappers are concerned, which raises the matter of her artistry being undervalued for being a woman. She has stated many times the frustration and hardships that come with being a woman in the male-dominated genre of hip-hop and the music industry overall. She shared these thoughts in her documentary *My Time Now*:

“When you're a girl, you have to be everything. You have to be dope at what you do but you have to be super sweet and you have to be sexy and you have to be this, you have to be that, and you have to be nice (...). It's like, 'I can't be all those things at once. I'm a human being.'”

Her awareness of the disadvantage that she and other women rappers face compared to their male colleagues in hip-hop might have been the main reason why she has always put her skills and creativity above everything else, including powerful executives and two-edged music contracts. To put it in perspective, Drake and Nicki were both signed to Lil Wayne's label; both chose to follow a rap career while adding pop and R&B to their style; while Nicki Minaj has always been transparent with her writing process and how she is the main creator of her songs, Drake has been caught up in scandals over having people writing his lyrics. This is considered a controversial matter since, in contrast to other genres, the integrity of a rapper come from their lyrical skills. Taking into account that Drake is more successful than Minaj, this shows how biased the rapping circles are towards men.

### The Song

“Ganja Burn” serves as the opening track to Nicki's fourth studio album *Queen*. It is important to set a context for the song and album's release since Minaj's decision to place it as the first track seems to have an important purpose. After an almost four years long hiatus from her last album *The Pinkprint*, *Queen* was released and, as Reeves explains, it brought “a new Nicki Minaj character: the regal, haughty monarch, a woman who insists in sword-sharpened rhymes as a prerogative for excellence”. She came back in an attempt to reaffirm her position as the biggest female rapper in the last decade, after much ongoing backlash and belittlement of her influence. While “Ganja Burn” was not part of the promotional singles which Minaj chose to announce her upcoming album,

she seems to have placed it at the very beginning to quite set the theme or purpose of her new album.

This vindication of her status is referred throughout the entirety of the song (with the exception of the chorus) and she does so with her notorious wordplay, this time dominated by negative references to celebrities (“You made one dope beat, now you Kanye?”). She explains how it takes more than rapping to achieve the position she rightfully earned (“Put my blood, sweat and tears in perfecting my craft / Still every team’s number one pick in the draft”). As Krishnamurthy comments, “Amid her many incarnations, that insatiable appetite to be the best hasn’t changed. The tenacity and hunger from the stairwell continues at the top of hip-hop. She wanted the throne. Now that she has it, she isn’t going to relinquish it to anyone—male or female—gunning for that title”. Nobody expected that a bubbly, pop-wise rapper would take over the rap industry dominated by men who offer next to nothing in terms of versatility, and that she would amass 100 million album sales even surpassing Aretha Franklin in chart entries. As she sings in the lines “If it’s really your passion, would you give the world for that?”, Minaj has always been prepared to defend her creative choices and she was well-aware from the beginning that the music industry’s business was not created to bend for any artist, let alone a black female rapper. As Kornhaber argues:

These aren’t uncommon opinions, but it’s significant for Minaj to position herself as a high-minded genre savior given the prejudices she has faced. As an immigrant whose brand is built on funny voices, crass rhymes, and curves—a “Barbie” persona, as she calls it—she’s often a target for snobs, racists, and/or sexists who say she’s responsible for the de-intellectualizing of rap.

Besides her voiced thoughts on her frustration towards people questioning her status, she also expresses harsh fashion and sexual statements throughout the first verse. She name drops Audrey Hepburn as a possible meaning of feeling like her rap equal and continues by letting know that she can either fight or let go of anyone who doubts of her (“Fashion Icon, Audrey Hepburn”; “I could wage war or I come in peace like Gandhi”). Minaj has included, since early in her career, sexual lyrics that referred to herself as well as the female gender in general. She has used all sorts of metaphors to refer the female genitalia (see first verse from “Boss Ass Bitch” (Remix) 2013, for example), yet in this song she sort of reclaims her power when it comes to being sexual: “Gotta be king status to give a man my body”.

## The Video

Under the direction of fashion photographers Mert and Marcus, Nicki Minaj presents “Ganja Burn” as a tale heavily influenced by Egyptian mythology. The video is opened by three quotes that explain the tale of a generous queen who rejected her army’s protection and allowed her enemies to defeat her. After their takeover, she rose stronger than before to take revenge. The music video presents this tale with Nicki Minaj dressed as the defeated queen, to later appear in clothes that seem to refer to the Egyptian Sun God Ra and his animal representation, the falcon. The main interpretation to Nicki’s decision of portraying the Sun god might be linked to the religious legend of Ra and Apophis. It said that Apophis, Ra’s enemy, tried to prevent the Sun from rising every

night, however it was prevented by Ra's worshipers. Once again, Minaj continues to narrate how the industry tried to set her up through her career and how she was able to prevent it by dint of her loyal fans and her integrity.

The video is set in a desert with its orange dust covering the scenery. Minaj appears wandering through this desert as a representation of the sleep she was put on by her enemies, as she referred in the quotes that opened the video ('What they perceived as death, was a deep sleep'); this could be a symbolic allusion to the rejection that she received from the industry and her isolation. When raising from her sleep, various half-naked black men emerge while dancing to depict the queen's army. Elements such as fire surround the monarch turned goddess. Minaj showcases sensuality and fierceness through her Egyptian inspired clothes and accessories. Egypt has been vindicated as a land ruled and peopled by black persons, against the whitewashed image projected by Western archeology and historiography, and Minaj is contributing with her video to dismantling the traditional reading of this ancient civilization.

### The Song and the Video

The music video serves as Minaj's way to illustrate not only her song but also her career. The video's storyline about the defeated queen that raises with her army to take over her enemies is a clear representation of the artist's unstable dominance in the industry, in the hands of executives who tried to get other artist to disparage or diss her (Harris) or others who prevented her from getting certain awards (such as Grammy's executive producer Ken Erlich) acknowledging her impact on rap. The quotes that open the video concluded with the line "so that generations for years and years to come, would know; that even in the grave, he is Lord" illustrates not only what "Ganja Burn" is about but also her confidence on the legacy that she is leaving. As mentioned previously, "Ganja Burn" is the opening of her fourth album and Minaj is determined to clear any doubts over her artistry; this fierce message can be either an assertive statement or a gilding of the lily. Minaj has been vocal about her talent and influence throughout most of her career, hence while she grants, as seen in the music video, that she may have been efficiently attacked, she puts her "blood, sweat and tears" to reclaim her status and upgrade her abilities, as she expresses in the lyrics.

In an industry where artists are given their flowers after they die, it is no wonder that, after a decade of continuous successful releases, Minaj would have felt the need to tell her story and state how frustrated she felt over the public and industry's mistreatment. Whether Nicki Minaj can be referred to as the Queen of Hip-Hop or not, it can be surely said that she has been more criticized than celebrated, which is not the case of many artists who have brought their fair share to the development of music. Minaj's versatile lyricism, bold attitude, and creative spirit has opened the door to other female rappers who are now able express themselves in line with their male counterparts, in what seems to have become a more female-inclusive hip-hop industry than it was twenty years ago.

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## Jess Glynne, 'Thursday': Embracing One's True Beauty

Roisin Anglim

Released: 11 October 2018

Album: *Always in Between*

Label: Atlantic Records

Genre: Pop

Length: 3:36

Songwriters: Jess Glynne, Ed Sheeran, Steve Mac

Producer: Steve Mac

Lyrics: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jessglynne/thursday.html>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0v30jKH958>

Director: Joe Connor



### The Singer

Jessica Hannah Glynne, known as Jess Glynne, was born into a Jewish family in Hampstead, London, on 20 October 1989. The family name was originally Goldstein, a very stereotypical Jewish surname, but her grandfather changed it to Glynne. She was raised in Muswell Hill in North London. Her mother worked in A&R in the music industry, perhaps an early link to the career she eventually found herself in. Jess Glynne applied for the widely known music talent show *The X Factor* when she was fifteen years old, but did not ultimately compete as she dropped out of the audition stage following a disagreement with producers. Had this not occurred her career may have gone in a totally different direction, as seen with bands such as Little Mix and One Direction.

Glynne spent a period of her life travelling the world after completing her formal education, and then began working for a music management company, which ultimately led to her developing and expanding her music skills and unique voice into the career she has today. Her first recognition truly came from collaborating and singing vocals on the Clean Bandit hit song "Rather Be", for which she was approached by the band, not the opposite as some may expect considering how unknown she was at the time. The song became well known and Glynne's distinctive voice became a recognized one on the radio and in the charts at the time. Glynne won the Grammy Award for Best Dance Recording and was nominated for Song of the Year at the inaugural BBC Music Awards for her collaboration on "Rather Be". She released her first studio album *I Laugh When I Cry* in August of 2015 following the number one single "Don't Be So Hard On Yourself", a catchy tune about self-acceptance and forgiveness. *I Cry When I Laugh* entered the UK Albums Chart at number one and the album eventually received a triple Platinum certification. In October 2018 her second studio album *Always in Between* was released and became her second number one album. The single "Thursday", featured on this album, peaked at number three in the charts after its release. Glynne's characteristic, warm, and strong voice has given her a unique and easily recognizable place in the charts

today and her heartfelt singing and open, honest and uplifting lyrical content (not to mention her catchy tunes and melodies, often played at parties and discos!) has made her an artist with whom many can resonate, leaving no doubt as to her successes so far in the music industry.

### The Song

“Thursday” is a song from Jess Glynne’s second album *Always in Between*, and was released in October 2018. The song originates in a session with Glynne herself and her collaborator Mac, which Ed Sheeran joined by chance. “We spoke about the highs and lows of being famous and doing the job that we do,” Glynne notes. “It was really cool because for me as an artist, I don’t really work with that many artists, and obviously you never know how it is for someone else and you feel like you don’t know whether that’s just you” (in Schiller). “Thursday” has been cited by Glynne as one of her personal favorites in her own music, being “close to her heart” (in Fishwick). This is understandable for any listener of the song as it speaks of deep personal insecurity and of learning to accept oneself as one is. Although the topic of the lyrical content is serious and deep, the song itself is joyous, and ultimately presents itself as more of a celebration of self-love and self-acceptance than anything else more somber.

The lyrics begin with “I won’t wear makeup on Thursday / I’m sick of covering up / I’m tired of feeling so broken”. The singer expresses her insecurities (see Mower) in the first verse, and describes her struggle to overcome and accept herself, ending with the line “Cus who I am is enough” as she transitions into the more uplifted bridge, and then into the uplifting chorus where she expresses the desire to “dance” and feel free. The second verse follows a similar pattern, slightly more optimistic than the first, followed by the now almost-euphoric bridge and chorus sung in Glynne’s beautiful soulful voice. This layout is cleverly done by the songwriters, as the somber beginning of the song, followed by the gradual build to a euphoric ending with the uplifting harmonies, is an apt and effective representation of the singer’s gradual journey from harsh and all-consuming insecurities and struggles to the euphoric sense of feeling that she is enough and that she is worthy.

Although the song speaks of Glynne’s personal insecurities more so than those perpetuated by the media and music industry, the song clearly is referencing these struggles as well as her exclusively internal ones. The music industry itself is a fiercely competitive environment, and there is constant pressure to perform and to subscribe to a certain beauty and behavioral standard in order to succeed. In addition to this, the media is intertwined closely with the music industry, as most artists require media approval and attention in order to truly succeed and become famous. They are under constant close scrutiny, any wrong step or mistake can result in the ending of someone’s career, and women are even more under scrutiny as their physical appearance is turned into public property, there to be criticized, dissected and commented upon at every single opportunity. Glynne’s personal struggles with self-belief and self-love can only have been exacerbated by, if not even created by, the media attention and scrutiny she has received as a female pop artist. Her overcoming of these insecurities, therefore, is even more triumphant, as not only has she had to overcome the imaginary negative voice

in her own head, the way most of us do, but she has also had to overcome real negativity and criticism from countless external sources, giving her even more of a triumphant and ecstatic relief having overcome them.

### The Video

The video by Joe Connor, shot in an elegant black and white, shows Glynne sitting in a chair, dressed in regular, non-flashy or provocative clothes as she sings the lyrics. Her hair is in a simple braid and she wears minimal makeup. The scenes show Glynne gazing in a mirror while wearing simple black underwear, sitting while wearing an oversized suit and singing in a recording studio. These methods of simple filming and design both emphasize the lyrical content of the song by allowing the viewer not to be distracted. They simultaneously support the content of the song as they show Glynne more as she truly is, not dressed up or fancified in order to fit into the music industry's standards, or indeed the general standards of society itself nowadays, for women to have much makeup on and to have their anatomies flaunted, their bodies overly exposed and sexualized in order to gain media attention and success. Connor's style is effective as it not only allows the viewer to focus more on the song's lyrics than on the artist's look, but it also reflects the mood and theme of the song itself, with its simplicity and bareness, which rivals the music industry's constant demand for more glitz, glamour and more showiness, especially for female artists, in order to stay relevant.

### The Song and The Video

There is something to be argued, however, in the fact that Glynne contradicts her own lyrics in the song, as in some stages of the video she clearly has makeup on; although it is not excessive, it still contradicts the song's concept, and in fact literally contradicts the lyrics, "I won't wear makeup on Thursday". A clear counter-argument is that Glynne's song, despite these lyrics, is about self-acceptance, and as such, she should be able to wear both minimal or no makeup, and also to wear more if she feels like she wishes to, in order to express her bodily autonomy, providing she is wearing it for herself, to express her own desires and thoughts, and not to impress, satisfy or seduce anyone else. This can be said to be represented by the music videos portrayal of both Glynne looking very natural, and her appearing more 'dolloed up' and still singing about self-love and acceptance. If this was the intention, it is apt and effective, as the song generally comes across as somewhat of a power ballad of self-expression and acceptance, and also as an exultant, jubilant triumph over all of those who have criticized her, and the one who perhaps has been her harshest critic, herself, has now become her own biggest supporter and cheerleader.

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## Billie Eilish, 'Xanny': The Reality of Teenagers' Addictions

Ania Sáez García

Release: 29 March 2019

Album: *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*

Label: Darkroom, Interscope

Genre: Mid-tempo, jazz-influenced pop ballad

Length: 4:25

Songwriters: Billie Eilish and Finneas O'Connell

Producer: Finneas O'Connell

Lyrics: <https://www.musixmatch.com/es/letras/Billie-Eilish-2/xanny>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZyybvVx-js>

Director: Billie Eilish



### The Singer

Billie Eilish Pirate Baird O'Connell was born in Los Angeles, California, on 18 December 2001, being therefore a 21<sup>st</sup> century artist. She performed at talent shows from a young age onward, and joined Los Angeles Children's Chorus when she was eight. According to family lore, Billie started playing the ukulele when she was six, and wrote her first 'real' song at eleven for her mother's songwriting class (the song was about a zombie apocalypse, inspired by *The Walking Dead*).

Billie Eilish's formal musical career started in 2015, when, aged only fourteen, she uploaded to SoundCloud two songs on which she and her elder brother Finneas had worked on for fun. She then released the single "Ocean Eyes" (another collaboration by the O'Connell siblings) on the same platform, which brought her professional attention. Since then Billie Eilish has released many EPs, along with singles and two albums, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* and *Happier Than Ever*. Two of her songs have been included in the soundtrack of the series *13 Reasons Why* and she and Finneas composed the James Bond main theme for *No Time to Die*. Billie Eilish has also collaborated to raise funds for the people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to raise awareness of the illness. Despite her young age (she's currently nineteen), Billie Eilish has won a long list of awards, including seven Grammys; she was the second person ever to win the four main Grammy categories (Best New Artist, Record of the Year and Song of the Year with "Bad Guy", and Album of the Year with *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*) in the same year, 2019, being the youngest person and the first female artist to do so (see Warner).

Much of the media attention Billie Eilish has received has been triggered by her fashion style, consisting mainly of baggy, oversized clothing. In May 2019 she appeared in a Calvin Klein advertisement in which she mentioned that she mainly dresses like that to prevent people from judging her body. Similarly, in March 2020, during her *Where Do We Go?* tour, she premiered *Not My Responsibility*, a short film which addresses her

experiences of body shaming. Beyond issues connected with her physical appearance, Billie Eilish has been involved in other campaigns, some less positive than others. Among the positive ones, in March 2020 she encouraged fans online to register to vote for the 2020 US presidential election, and then in August she performed at the 2020 Democratic National Convention and announced her endorsement of Joe Biden's presidential campaign. For the Met Gala of September 2021 she accepted wearing an Oscar de la Renta spectacular gown because the fashion house agreed to permanently end its use of real fur. Eilish was raised as a vegetarian and is a regular advocate on social media for animal rights and veganism. In fact, she won a PETA Best Voice for Animals distinction in 2019 for her online activism. Fellow singer Megan Thee Stallion said in *Pitchfork* that Billie Eilish "is a rare spirit who speaks from her heart with no pretenses (...) a woman who stands up for herself and advocates for women everywhere" (in Nast).

Among the less savory issues, it must be noted that in June 2021 Billie Eilish became a subject of significant negative media coverage and criticism due to several videos recorded a few years before. One of them showed her mouthing the anti-Asian slur 'chink'. On June 22 she posted an apology on Instagram, claiming she was "appalled and embarrassed" by the video, made when she was thirteen or fourteen and did not know the slur was a derogatory term. Reflecting on the events, she stated that

"I said so many things then that I totally don't agree with now, or think the opposite thing. The weirdest thing is how nothing ever goes away once it's on the internet (...) When you're a fucking teenager, you don't really know yourself (...) I didn't actually know how I really felt. So I just came up with this façade that I stuck to" (in Lancaster).

Other critics have complained about her use of blaccent and AAVE (African American Vernacular English). She was also accused of queerbaiting for using the caption "I love girls" to promote her music video for the single "Lost Cause", which was also noted to contain "Sapphic undertones and scenes" (Robledo).

Another main issue in Billie Eilish's career is the impact Finneas has in it, since "nearly every song the 17-year-old star has ever released was co-written with and produced by her 22-year-old brother Finneas O'Connell" (Aswad). We cannot say for sure whose voice is more prominent in Billie Eilish's lyrics, whether hers or her brother's, and it's undisputable that they share a special bond. They work together and fuse their ideas into their work, creating masterpieces that may not have been born if they worked alone. Many question Billie Eilish's real implication in her music, as many perceive her mature stance despite her age an act, perhaps shaped by Finneas. However, Eilish's life experiences along with her character have allowed her to grow up into this mature stance. Her joint work with her brother helps her grow along with her creative process and creations. She speaks through her music of what she feels the world is like or what her feelings are and these are topics she shares with her brother.

## The Song

The inspiration for the song "Xanny" came to Billie Eilish after seeing her friends heavily inebriated at a party, and becoming "completely not who they were" (in Wetmore). The event had a frustrating and affecting impact on her. Drugs are a close subject to her, since some of her friends have died due to drug overdose, in fact, one of them had died

two days prior to the recording of the song. Regarding the composition of “Xanny”, Eilish and her brother Finneas wanted the song’s refrain to sound like “a girl blowing cigarette smoke into [someone’s] face” and to replicate “what it feels like to be in secondhand smoke”, as they explained in their YouTube video *A Snippet into Billie’s Mind - Xanny*. Furthermore, their overall desire was to make people listening to the track “feel miserable”, as they stated in their *Paper* interview (in Wetmore).

The title of the song is a reference to Xanax, or alprazolam, a prescription drug used to treat anxiety and panic disorders. Xanax affects the brain and the central nervous system, as a tranquilizer; it is highly addictive and its abuse can lead to overdose and death: “Taking this medication with alcohol or other drugs that can cause drowsiness or breathing problems may cause very serious side effects, including death” (WebMD). Xanax, however, is also “a drug newly glamourised by a generation of young, disaffected SoundCloud rappers” (Ewens). Eilish elaborated further in the message in the song, claiming it is “less ‘don’t do drugs’; it’s more ‘be safe’ (...) “I don’t want my friends to die any more” (in Ewens). She endorses thus what Charlie Harding described as a “teen sobriety trend” in the lines “I’m in their second hand smoke / Still just drinking canned coke / I don’t need a xanny to feel better”, and some self-aware, autobiographical parts in the lines “Please don’t try to kiss me on the sidewalk / On your cigarette break / I can’t afford to love someone / Who isn’t dying by mistake in Silver Lake”.

### The Video

The video is a minimalist but shocking production, directed by Billie Eilish herself. It depicts the singer in an all-white outfit, sitting on a white bench against a white background whilst her face is burned by disembodied hands pressing cigarette butts on it. The color white represents the numbness one experiences while inhaling this “second-hand smoke”, which is further proved by the minimal reactions Eilish shows after being burned repeatedly in the face. At the same time, these burns are physic representation of the psychological damage as an after effect that being in this drug-abuse environment provokes. The robotic dance moves she performs with glazed eyes, other than being sitting still, are the depiction of the entrapment the drugs provoke, as Eilish does not move from the bench but still moves her head and neck, changing a little her perspective but otherwise having the same view. On a personal note, I believe that the ending of the video, in which she stands up and the scene is covered by smoke, is a representation of the two endings a person can face, one in which you overcome your addiction (you get up from the bench), and the one in which it consumes you (the smoke swallows everything until there’s only black).

### The Song and the Video

It’s important to note that Eilish was not allowed to direct her music videos before because of her lack of experience, and that this is her debut in directing. Talking about her directing of “Xanny” she says in an interview with *The Guardian*:

Since the beginning of my career I wanted to direct videos. I told everybody that immediately and they were like: “Well, you don’t have any experience and you don’t

have the time”. There’s this weird world of “You don’t have any experience so you can’t have the job”—it’s like, well, how am I supposed to get the job if I can’t get any experience? I think that’s a big problem in the world with women. I don’t think people like us being the boss, especially because I was 13, 14, 15 years old: they really didn’t want a 14-year-old girl to direct a music video. But I knew I wanted to and I convinced them, I got their trust, and from here on out I want to do my own videos (in Petridis).

When asked about her directorial debut in an interview with *Alternative Press* Eilish says “Visuals are so important to me, and I’m very proud to be in a place where I can present my creative vision exactly as I want it. Thank you to everyone who has put their trust in me” (in Greenwood). The music video was nominated for Best Direction at the 2020 MTV Video Music Awards (see Shafer).

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## FKA twigs' 'Cellophane': Finding Strength in Vulnerability

Arnau Badia Muñoz

Released: 24 April 2019

Album: *Magdalene*

Label: Young (XL Records)

Genre: Avant-pop

Length: 3:24

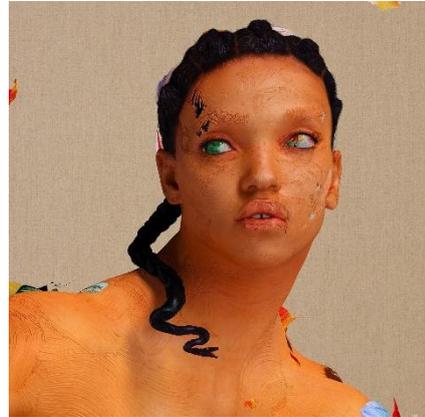
Songwriters: FKA Twigs, Jeff Kleinman, and Michael Uzowuru

Producers: FKA Twigs, Jeff Kleinman, and Michael Uzowuru

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Fka-twigs-cellophane-lyrics>

Music Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkLjqFpBh84&ab\\_channel=FKAatwigs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkLjqFpBh84&ab_channel=FKAatwigs)

Director: Andrew Thomas Huang



### The Singer

FKA twigs, born Tahliah Debrett Barnett in 1988 in Gloucestershire, UK, has forged herself as one of the main figures of contemporary alternative music. Barnett was born to a Jamaican father and a British-Spanish mother in a working-class household. She attended a Catholic school in Cheltenham, where she undertook opera and ballet lessons from a young age. At seventeen, Barnett moved to South London to pursue dancing as a full-time job while attending performing and creative arts BRIT school there. During this time Barnett was featured as a backup dancer in music videos by international artists such as Kylie Minogue, Plan B, Ed Sheeran, Taio Cruz, or Jessie J. At the age of eighteen, while working as a hostess in a London strip club and getting into contact with the UK underground music scene, Barnett shifted her focus from dancing to producing music.

The first body of musical work that Barnett released under the FKA Twigs pseudonym (later styled FKA twigs) was *EP1*. The four-song EP saw the light in 2012 through the independent music platform Bandcamp, and it was later accompanied by a music video for each of the four tracks. FKA twigs would not gain major critical attention until the release of her second EP, *EP2*, which came out later in the same year. Issued through Young Turks, *EP2* featured production from Venezuelan producer Arca, and it was described as “the UK’s best example to date of ethereal, twisted R&B” (Lester). *EP2* earned Barnett a nomination for BBC’s Sound of 2014 prize, and a feature in Billboard’s ‘Artists to Watch in 2014’ list.

Twigs’ debut studio album, and her first major body of musical work, *LP1*, was released on 6 August 2014. The production for the album was handled by FKA twigs herself, alongside Arca and Clams Casino, amongst others. *LP1* received widespread critical acclaim, and it secured FKA twigs a public position as one of the rising stars of alternative music. *Pitchfork* magazine compared Twigs with Icelandic alternative pop star Björk, and about the album, they stated that “quiet as it may be, (*LP1*) is a huge album,

a monumental debut” (Sherburne). In the following years the artist released a third EP, *M3LL155X* (pronounced ‘Melissa’), and directed a dance film titled *Soundtrack 7*, which recorded a performance filmed on-site across seven days at the Manchester International Festival in 2015.

In 2014 Barnett began dating British actor Robert Pattinson, and the couple actually got engaged before their split in 2017. Barnett, a mixed-race woman as noted, suffered a massive wave of racist and sexist online abuse from Pattinson’s fans throughout the period in which the couple was together and even after the breakup. Detailing the abuse that she suffered on social media, FKA twigs declared: “He was their white prince charming, and I think they considered that he should definitely be with somebody white and blonde and not me” (in Allura). In the same year, soon after the upsetting clash with Pattinson’s fans, Barnett underwent surgery to remove a number of fibroid tumors from her uterus. In the following year FKA twigs initiated a relationship with American actor Shia LaBeouf, which would result in her accusing LaBeouf of sexual battery, assault, and infliction of emotional distress after the couple parted ways in 2019.

On 24 April 2019 FKA twigs released “Cellophane” as a single and teased with it an upcoming album. On 8 November 2019 the artist released her second studio album, *Magdalene*, which included “Cellophane” as well as eight other tracks. FKA twigs herself has stated how the creation of *Magdalene* was inspired by her breakup with Robert Pattinson. Musically, *Magdalene* pushed FKA twigs’ sonic boundaries even further by featuring elements from an extended array of genres such as pop, electronic music, trap, opera and industrial music. It is because of this very same mix that the album has been defined by critics as a piece of work that defies any genre classification. The album, which was accompanied by the *Magdalene* 2019 tour, was met with universal critical acclaim, and many people still regard it one of the staples of modern alternative music, as well as the album that consolidated FKA twigs’ career.

## The Song

“Cellophane” is a 3:24 minute-long introspection into the frail depths of a decaying relationship. It is almost impossible not to relate, to some extent, the themes and images described in the lyrics of the song with the events that were taking place in FKA twigs’ life at the time the song was written. The breakup with Pattinson (which took place two years prior to the release of the track), the episodes of online harassment, and her surgical intervention are some of the issues that come to mind when we hear FKA twigs pouring her soul and broken heart into her vocals in this track. To this we need to add the situation of abuse from LaBeouf she was enduring.

It is important to make a note about the problematic labelling of “Cellophane”—or much of FKA twigs’ music for that matter—as a specific musical genre. While we can identify certain elements of R&B music all throughout her work, she has made it very clear several times how she does not want to be labeled as an R&B artist only because of her race:

“When I first released music and no one knew what I looked like, I would read comments like: ‘I’ve never heard anything like this before, it’s not in a genre.’ And then my picture came out six months later, now she’s an R&B singer. I share certain

sonic threads with classical music; my song 'Preface' is like a hymn. So let's talk about that. If I was white and blonde and said I went to church all the time, you'd be talking about the 'choral aspect'. But you're not talking about that because I'm a mixed-race girl from south London". (in Lester)

The musical elements of "Cellophane" are an important aspect of the song's narrative, as well. At the beginning of the track we hear FKA twigs singing in an almost whispery manner over the repetition of a piano melody reminiscent of Erik Satie (see Kim). As the song progresses, we are introduced to some slowly paced percussion—mostly beatboxed—which is backed with an increase of intensity on FKA twigs' vocal delivery. By 1:12 her delicate vocals have switched to an intense falsetto, and the song no longer feels like the muted confession that it felt at the beginning, but like a fully stretched expression of proud vulnerability. Moreover, and continuing on the vocal aspect of the song, Mariam Odeh writes that "Twigs' delicate and soothing voice offers a stark contrast to the song's heart-wrenching lyrics; uncomplicated words dripping with complicated feelings, pushing and pulling at all of our heart".

The lyrics of the song are quite simple yet extremely successful in conveying the feelings of self-doubt and insecurity that FKA twigs' presents throughout the song. At the beginning of the song she addresses a series of emotional questions towards her former lover: "Didn't I do it for you? / Why don't I do it for you? / Why won't you do it for me / When all I do is for you?" The lyrics continue with a series of unrequited wishes that Twigs' directs again towards her lover: "And I, just want to feel you're there, And I don't want to have to share our love". The inclusion of the cellophane metaphor, which serves to express the state of her feelings and a final observation on an element that deteriorates the relationship from the outside, namely, Pattinson's fans' external judgment is also present: "They're watching us / They're hating / They're waiting / And hoping / I'm not enough". About the lyrics of the song Odeh notes that the singer's "seemingly effortless word choice and repetition gives the illusion of simplicity, while her groaning, cracking voice bears the weight of the world and all its problems".

I want to come back to the cellophane metaphor, because it is not only used as the main metaphorical device of the song, but also as an image to describe the relationship recounted in the song. Cellophane is a transparent plastic material which is usually employed to wrap or decorate presents. With this idea in mind, FKA twigs uses the image of the cellophane to describe the feeling of constant exposure that she felt during her relationship with Pattinson, due to his popularity. "Cellophane" is thus a revelation of how despite Twigs' efforts to keep her feelings sacred and private, her love was ultimately wrapped in a translucent cover from which everyone else in the outside could see through.

I believe that an aspect that makes this song very special in our current context is that in an age where women artists are almost forced to be revolutionary or keep a 'badass' image, FKA twigs is delivering the message that the expression of vulnerability does not necessarily make one less strong or valid as a woman. On this same notion, we must not forget that "Cellophane" is not a ghost-written song nor a product of the over-artificial traffic of songwriting and production that takes place in the major spheres of the pop industry. "Cellophane" is a song written and produced by FKA twigs herself, and therefore a transparent and controlled work of self-expression.

## The Song and the Video

The “Cellophane” music video won four UK Music Video Awards (Best Cinematography, Best Editing, Best Ending and Best Alternative Video) and it was nominated in the Best Music Video category of the 2020 Grammy’s. The video makes an important contribution to the overall narrative structure of *Magdalene* as an album. We first need to recognize the nature of this narrative in order to understand how an element like this music video signifies a key element of the artistic and narrative concept of the album.

The first element that is striking from the music video is its color palette. Bronze-brownish and golden tones are predominant throughout the video, a choice of color which is harmonized with the art concept for the cover of the album and the outfits that FKA twigs wore during the *Magdalene* promotion and tours shows. In the video, FKA twigs is initially shown pole dancing in front of an unseen audience. As she dances the pole morphs into a vine, and twigs ascends to the sky, where she encounters a metallic bird-like creature which she battles. Amid the brawl Barnett falls into the void only to land in a muddy stretch, where she is sensually mud-bathed by several older women in dark garb.

The video for “Cellophane” introduces a whole different perspective to the interpretation that we can extract from the song. While, and, as we have been mentioning, *Magdalene* is undoubtedly a breakup album, it also delivers a message of catharsis and self-assurance throughout many of its parts. Songs like “Holy Terrain” and “Mary Magdalene” transcend the themes and motifs of heartbreak to present FKA twigs as a reborn, powerful woman, a modern Mary Magdalene. In this sense, it is interesting to consider how a song so delicate and tragic as “Cellophane” became the vehicle for such a visually stunning and intense music video.

Upon the release of the music video, FKA Twigs published a statement on her Twitter account (dated 24 August 2019) in which she declared that “When I wrote ‘Cellophane’ over a year ago a visual narrative came to me immediately, I knew I had to learn how to pole-dance to bring it to life, and so that’s what I did”. Pole dancing is used by FKA Twigs as a method not only to express her heart pangs, but also as a symbol of reassurance and strength. Pole dancing is a dancing technique that is often associated with strippers and the satisfaction of the male fantasy, but, nevertheless, FKA Twigs uses it in such an elegant and delicate way that it renders the spectator almost into a voyeur of such an intimate ritual.

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## Miley Cyrus, 'Mother's Daughter' : A Feminist, Inclusive Anthem

Axelle Haese

Released: 7 June 2019

EP: *She Is Coming*

Label: Parlophone

Genre: Pop

Length: 3:40

Songwriters: Miley Cyrus, Andrew Wyatt, and Alma Miettinen

Producer: Andrew Wyatt

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Miley-cyrus-mothers-daughter-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T2RonyJ\\_Ts](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T2RonyJ_Ts)

Director: Alexandre Moors



### The Singer

Miley Cyrus was born in Texas, USA, on 23 November 1992. Her real name is Destiny Hope Cyrus. She is an American singer-songwriter, musician, producer and actor. She has been distinguished as a star since her teenage years. From an early age, she was already immersed in the artistic environment of her father, Billy Ray Cyrus, a renowned American country music singer, songwriter and actor. He was the one who launched Destiny's acting career at the age of nine, when he gave her a role in his 2001 series *Doc*. She appears in three episodes. However, Miley's career truly took off thanks to her protagonist role in the Disney series *Hannah Montana*, broadcasted from 2006 to 2011. She plays a high school student by day, who is secretly Hannah Montana, pop star, by night. This lead role offered her the chance to combine her two passions: namely comedy and singing. Indeed, she performs all the songs in the television show. She released her first single "The Best of Both Worlds", which is the theme song of the well-known TV series, under the name Hannah Montana. This role of pop star at night became a reality, as the teenager made her mark in the world of song. In 2009, Destiny released her first EP *The Time of Our Lives* with her own stage name Miley Cyrus. Currently, Cyrus is one of the best-selling recording artists of all time. So far, she has published seven studio albums, two live albums, four extended plays and thirty-seven singles. It is estimated that she has sold seventy-five million singles and twenty-five million albums worldwide, totaling 100 million records. Her most famous songs are "Party in the USA" (2012), "Wrecking Ball" (2013) and "The Climb" (2009).

In terms of her reputation, Cyrus has been constantly involved in scandals. It is important to bear in mind that at first, she had the reputation of America's sweetheart for her wholesome image on *Hannah Montana*. When her singing career started, people were shocked to observe how Cyrus had grown. She was projecting a different image and was no longer the teenager that people used to watch on screen. At the age of

eighteen, she released the music video “Can’t Be Tamed” in which she appears in a highly sexualized image, claiming that she cannot be tamed or changed. Three years later, with her album *Bangerz*, the young singer asserted her new look and her unapologetic attitude, full of constant provocations. This reached a new height with her provocative performance with Robin Thicke of his song “Blurred Lines” at the VMAs in 2013. After singing her hit “We Can’t Stop”, Cyrus shed her teddy bear leotard to reveal her second outfit, flesh-colored underwear. She then performed the duet with Thicke, against whom she swayed, before kissing his neck, showing him her backside and rubbing her genitals (or ‘twerking’) as she shook a huge foam finger. In the same year, Cyrus made another splash when she released the video of her song “Wrecking Ball”. She shows herself in profile swinging naked on a wrecking ball, licking a hammer in a very sensual video that turned scandalous.

Even though these scandals are at the root of Cyrus’ bad reputation, they are also part of her success (see Bacardi). Scandals are publicity and the singer seems to take great pleasure in shocking people, always overdoing it and crossing limits. However, one might well ask the question of whether Cyrus is not merely struggling to emancipate herself from the image of the innocent teenage girl she used to play in *Hannah Montana*. Even though her reputation is not spotless, Cyrus remains a global star with a faithful community of ‘Smilers’, the name of her fandom.

### The Song

“Mother’s Daughter” is a feminist song which not only endorses women’s empowerment but also provides an homage to the singer’s mother, Tish Cyrus. Regarding the feminist dimension, Cyrus is clearly trying to break away from the image of the harmless woman present in our society. In the lyrics, she describes herself many times as “a freak”, “a Nile crocodile”, “a piranha”, “nasty”, “evil”. Additionally, she maintains that women are powerful, fearless, and that they should be aggressive to defend their rights. She repeats, “Don’t f\*ck with my freedom, I came here to get some”. Cyrus is not singing in a calm or peaceful way: instead, she appears to be impatient, as if the message were difficult to convey.

This song gives the impression that Cyrus is sick and tired of repeating the same thing perpetually. Indeed, she has always claimed to be a feminist; thus, at the age of twenty, in 2013, she declared “I feel like I’m one of the biggest feminists in the world because I tell women to not be scared of anything” (in Izundu). “Mother’s Daughter” is a very aggressive and committed song supporting the idea that women and minorities deserve to be well treated and strongly encouraging women’s freedom. This song appears as a reflection of Cyrus’ commitment as she wrote in her *Happy Hippie* op-ed, “No one should have to hide who they really are, no matter what his or her name, gender, status or orientation”. Undoubtedly, in a time when women’s rights are violated, Cyrus makes it clear that women are going to be criticized no matter what they do. Therefore, she encourages every woman to act freely and be themselves.

On top of a strong involvement, as the title of the song suggests, the homage given to Cyrus’ mother, Tish Cyrus, is central. She represents a very significant part of her daughter’s life because in addition to being an actor and producer, she is also Cyrus’

manager. According to Cyrus herself, her mother taught her strong values, and had always predicted that her daughter would be successful in life. The lyrics bear witness to this “My mama always told me that I’d make it, / That I’d make it, so I made it, I put my back into it, my heart in it, / So I did it, yeah, I did it”. Furthermore, Cyrus is proud of how powerful she is today, which is due to her mother: “Must be something in the water, Or that I’m my mother’s daughter”. Some other lyrics are addressed to her mother, for instance “Oh my gosh, she got the power, Oh, look at her, she got the power” or simply to all women.

Nevertheless, we could be critical towards this homage and wonder if her mother really deserves all this appreciation. Obviously, we do not have the right to judge anyone, but we can be skeptical. Indeed, it was Cyrus’ parents who threw her into the public spotlight at an early age, which caused her notable trauma (in Mier). Namely, due to her fame, her body has been exposed while she was very young. The scrutiny of her body affected her deeply, as she has explained: “I think I knew who I was meant to be, but I’m sure there’s something in there. Some trauma of feeling so criticized, I think, for what I felt was pretty average teenage, early [twenties] exploration” (in Spanos). In fact, Cyrus was expected to be a pop star, to wear glittery tight clothes and makeup, although she was very young. However, she did not choose that life and was too young to be able to agree or disagree with the life her parents offered her. At nine years old, when her father had her play in the *Doc* series with him, Cyrus was merely a child and certainly unable to imagine the consequences a life of a celebrity could have on her. Even if this lifestyle brought her a lot of positivity, it is true that it caused her damage. This is why we should question the thanks to her mother, who is her manager.

### The Video

The video portrays Cyrus dancing in a very sexy way, wearing a red latex catsuit, which appears to allude to the one Britney Spears wore in the “Oops!... I Did It Again” video. Besides Cyrus, the video includes a great diversity of women. The film celebrates the diversity of women’s bodies by featuring white cisgender women, transgender African American women, others in wheelchairs and overweight women. All the women are proud, such as a little black girl dressed as a superhero or a mother breastfeeding her baby. Cyrus makes no secret of her feminism and her commitment to the rights of the LGBT+ community.

The homage to her mother is also reinforced by the video since we can enjoy five scenes of the two women together, drinking tea on a sofa. Cyrus rests her head on her mother’s shoulder, appearing calmer than in the other scenes, not wearing her red latex catsuit anymore. This gives the feeling that the singer feels safe and calm with her mother. On the other hand, to reinforce the empowering dimension of the song, several flashing messages appear throughout the video such as: “Not an Object”, “Sin Is In Your Eyes”, “Every woman is a riot”, “Virginity is a social construct”. As well, at times powerful ideas are represented through several scenes, for example, a sanitary napkin appears to normalize periods or false women nipples to criticize their censorship on social media. Ultimately, the video evokes a many subjects and gender issues not covered much in 2019, and even nowadays in 2021. Thus, the video might be as significant as the song,

maybe even more due to the message it provides. The director of this meaningful music video, Alexandre Moors, has stated that:

“The video is about the woman’s body—the right to own your own body and make it free from the male gaze, in any way shape and form, (...) It’s a broad message, and we’re not trying to be dogmatic. But we’re living in difficult times in America, and what I get from this video is that it injects a lot of energy and determination and the right fuel for the struggle”. (in Lee)

There was some debate about whether a female director might be more appropriate for such a feminist song, to which Moors replied: “We also don’t want to fall into the trap of the political correctness of having to be obligated to have a female director for this” (in Lee).

In order to transmit this message, the video is quite provocative, particularly when Cyrus’s red latex catsuit is seen to be decorated with a spiked vagina. This accessory is an allusion to the *vagina dentata* myth, which possibly was an anti-rape mechanism of defense originally but became a misogynistic tall tale. On top of that, Stiegman notes, the vagina can remind us of a famous phrase: “This pussy grabs back”, invented by the writer and performer Amanda Duarte and Feminist Fight Club author Jessica Bennett, after Donald Trump’s scandal in 2016. As a video posted by *The Washington Post* revealed, in 2005 Trump had bragged to a journalist that “You know, I’m automatically attracted to beautiful [women]—I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything”. Cyrus’s outfit is a message to Trump and all the men holding similar views, meaning that, indeed, “Pussy grabs back”.

### The Song and the Video

The video and song are strongly linked, it is difficult to separate one from the other since the video supports the lyrics. Even more information is transmitted through the video than through the song itself. Namely, when Cyrus claims “Don’t f\*ck with my freedom”, thanks to the video we understand that she is not only talking for herself, but also talking for all minorities. Additionally, Cyrus surrounded herself with strong personalities: Melanie Sierra, an activist who fights for the recognition of single mothers; Aaron Philip, a trans model with a disability, and finally the transgender singer Casil McArthur. The song and the video deliver an important message which can be delivered to a huge amount of people, given the number of Cyrus’s fans. This song can inform people and open minds as well. The song and video together create a true feminist anthem, deconstructing the taboos of our society and giving voice to all women and minorities. This music is definitely a reflection on repression and liberation by a committed and rebellious Miley Cyrus. And an homage to all mothers beyond hers.

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## Kim Petras, 'ICY': Embracing the Coldness

Marina Esteban Rubio

Released: 19 June 2019

Album: *Clarity*

Label: BunHead Records

Genre: Dance-pop, electro-pop

Length: 3:10

Songwriters: Kim Petras, Vaughn Oliver, Theron Thomas, Dr. Luke, and Aaron Joseph

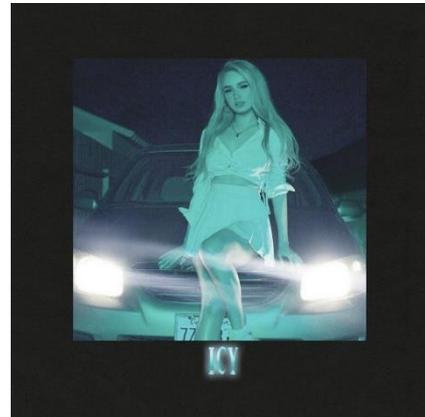
Producer: Dr. Luke

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Kim-petras-icy-lyrics>

Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8UNJDjygk0>

Director: Alexandre Moors



### The Singer

Kim Petras was born on 27 August 1992 in Cologne, Germany. Aged only nineteen, she moved to Los Angeles to pursue her dreams of becoming a pop star and has been living there ever since. Petras knew from a very young age that she wanted to sing. This urge came from her difficult childhood and puberty. She suffered bullying throughout all her school years, and she only found escapism in pop music; this is why she feels so passionate about her influences, she feels that they saved her. Petras started to write songs at thirteen, and increasingly she realized that she could do the same some people did for her: offer help. She declared in an interview with *People* that “I used to run home from school and watch Gwen Stefani music videos, and I felt like I could escape my problems with that” (in Nelson). She also mentions as inspirational stars Madonna, the girl band Destiny’s Child, Kylie Minogue, and Britney Spears.

Petras had to do plenty of self-learning because she was adamant about her objective, but also knew she had to be very good at it. At thirteen, she started teaching herself songwriting and producing, also taking classes, and watching documentaries on how pop artists work. She also studied how other people reached success. Petras located producers online and asked to work with them, sending demos and lyrics. She wrote and produced her songs until she became, in her view, good at it (in Ahlgrim). Eventually, Petras moved alone to Los Angeles and, while working as a waitress, she went to open mic nights, did shows in gay clubs, and reached out to producers and record labels. Nobody ever knocked on her door; she went out of her way to get contacts with lots of people from the industry. This was, however, by no means easy. Petras believed at a low point that she could not make it; she felt that her voice and her ideas were bad and that she was not hot enough (in Ahlgrim). While fame arrived, she published via Awal, a distribution company with many sub-labels that helps indie and independent projects to grow; this way, Kim Petras created her own label, BunHead

Label, under this umbrella company and released her music up until the album *Future Starts Now* (2021). She is now signed to Republic Records.

One crucial aspect of Petras' identity is that she is transexual. It is important to mention this because her being transgender is part of her identity and hence of her art. Moreover, her visibility as a transgender woman helps fuel representation: younger people need to see all the realities of gendered identity because if transgender persons don't have a space in the media they appear not to exist. Kim Petras is also the youngest person in the world to ever have sex reassignment surgery. Before this, at the age of fourteen, she toured various German and British TV shows to give visibility to her story: she wanted to undertake the operation but according to German law she had to wait until she was eighteen. After two years of campaigning, the German Government agreed on letting her undertake the operation at sixteen, after which the law was changed, requiring no minimum age any more.

On how Petras' gender ties with her career, she has stated that at first she did not discuss much this issue because she wanted her music to stand for itself. However, she was still accused of using her identity as a publicity tool, whereas people in the LGTBQ+ community criticized her for not being vocal enough. This seemed to be a no-win situation. Petras now is "down to be transgender however I want and talk about it as I want. Because I've always been open about it, but now I don't care anymore because I know I'm here because of my music" (in Ahlgrim online). Precisely, one of the reasons for her publishing independently was because major record companies seemed to only see the fact that she is a trans woman. They were either trying to find how to market her in this way, or they directly told Petras that she was against God, and so they could not sign her up. She was even asked if she had transitioned because it was "trendy" (in Ahlgrim). She recalls this experience as traumatic and sad, but Petras is thankful that she got full control of her project. She has herself faced a complicated story about how to approach transgenderism: "I've lived my whole life with integrity with being transgender and trying to empower other people, and I don't want to make anybody feel like I'm using it—or not supporting the transgender community the way I should", she said. "That was the balance that was the hardest for me to strike" (in Ahlgrim).

## The Song

As with any new taxonomy, the definition of hyperpop is blurry and contested; one meme cheekily suggests more precise terms such as *glitchcore*, *ketapop* (for the disorienting raver drug ketamine), and *trans ragewave* (because many of the creators are pissed and aren't cis). But the term doesn't quite convey the genre's zest for punk's brattiness, hip-hop's boastfulness, and metal's noise. (Kornhaber)

This is how Spencer Kornhaber defines hyperpop in an article in *The Atlantic*. It is difficult to point out what exactly is hyperpop and what it is not, but he got the main points right: it is a style directly tied with the LGTBQ+ community and with some underground movements. Although the term was made famous by Spotify (the streaming service created a playlist called Hyperpop and that is how it attracted attention), the subgenre was coined by producer and DJ A.G. Cook and popularized by Sophie and Charli XCX.

Kim Petras dives into this genre in full force. The song analyzed here, “ICY”, does not fully fall into the category, but many of her works do. However, pop and its subgenres are very easily mixed together and they all fall under the same umbrella. What is for sure is that Petras does not stray far from pop and she dwells in between pop, bubblegum-pop, emo-pop, dance-pop, hyper-pop, or even electro-pop. Personally, I find value in the fact that she is so unapologetically in love with a genre that has been—and still is—undervalued by a large part of audiences. All genres of pop music should be equally respected, even songs made entirely on a computer.

“ICY” is the lead single of Petras’ only album so far *Clarity*, which was released in 2019. The album, which was a two-year songwriting journey, tells a story of her feeling hurt, small and powerless after a rough breakup. Her boyfriend cheated on her while she was away being an opening act for Troye Sivan’s *The Bloom Tour*, and she healed through songwriting as she could not do more than that. By taking out her feelings on paper, Petras could focus on being present in her own life. The lyrics start stating what she felt for her ex-partner: “Never loved nobody harder / Never felt stronger / thought that we would last forever / gave me something to believe in / thought that you were all I needed”. Here Petras reveals how she was deeply in love and deeply committed to the relationship and how she thought it would last forever.

She was understandably deeply hurt by her boyfriend’s infidelity and wanted to prove that she could also be bad and cold, as he had been. In the chorus, she directly addresses her ex-boyfriend and accuses him of her coldness now: “Now I got an ice cold heart / VVS’ is the only kinda ice I want / Kinda funny how the money can replace the love / So numb I don’t feel it inside me / So dumb I believed you really liked me / ‘cause of you now my heart is so icy”. Apart from shifting the guilt onto him, she also refers to money and diamonds (VVS) for she has replaced her thoughts on love by thinking of money. She was stupid before because she believed in him, but she has put her heart inside armor. Later, Petras also sings about how she many offers and many lovers but how she does not want to settle down any more, probably because she is afraid of commitment now that she has been hurt. She sings: “Now I’m on a higher level / I ain’t ever gonna settle / Plenty offers on the table”. These lyrics once again are to prove her superiority to her lover, and how now she is recovering from the breakup.

Her favorite lines are “I don’t even hate you, you did me a favor / turned my heart into a glacier” and they really sum up the whole concept of the song. In the end, she is thankful for the person she has become, she feels a better person, more powerful, and with a cold heart, which she is proud of (in Schiller). Petras has declared that while writing this song she realized how much power she had, despite the breakup, and she wanted people to feel powerful likewise when listening to the song. This is a very common feeling after an end to a relationship: even if you are deeply hurt and sad you want to prove that you are fine, even living the best time of your life. This is what Petras does in her song and her method of coping is stating that she has now has a cold heart. Personally, I believe that bragging about being cold is not a good point (why would one be cool about feeling nothing and showing zero affection?), but in the end it is up to her how she feels after a bad breakup. Many people, many women, will surely relate.

## The Video

Directed by Alexandre Moors, the music video perfectly translates the meaning of the song onto the screen. It is inspired by the video of Britney Spears's "Stronger" (2000), one of Petras' favorite songs (in Sanchez). In the same interview, she also mentions Aaliyah and Madonna as inspirations. "Stronger" and "ICY" are similar in that they are both catchy breakup songs, but the videos are different. What they may have in common are the similarities in the outfits both singers wear, in their black or white tones. All the outfits in the video were chosen by Petras herself, who wanted to evoke a classy, elegant, independent woman. It is the first time she felt confident enough in front of the camera to show emotions.

The video starts with Petras in a glass tank, which represents her being trapped in a relationship and her being heartbroken. She is surrounded by sadness, but as the song progresses the video does too, and she transforms into an icy-looking, cool figure. She described the transformation as a "bionic glittery version of myself that evolves through the pain of heartbreak" (in Love). The video intercalates shots of Petras covered in glitter in an ice tub with clips of her in different outfits, dancing. She wanted to stress in a literal way the freshness that comes after a breakup, and how she became stronger.

The video shows Petras in revealing, sexy shots and she is clearly sexualizing herself. She has said in the various interviews noted here that she is in full control of what she does—she is in control of her looks and has stated that she self-presents as she wants—so we ought to think that the heavy sexualization of her body is also her choice. This is a tricky matter; we woman cannot determine anymore when a choice is really a free choice or if what we think is free corresponds just to patriarchal standards. Often it is the latter; so, while Kim Petras owns her choice of how she portrays herself we need to be aware of the fact that we cannot escape the molds of patriarchy and the male gaze.

## The Song and the Video

Petras is a normative woman, and she expresses her gender in a way that follows traditional femininity. I believe she can express her notion of gender however she wants; everybody can perform their identity as they please. It is true that in the video there is a plenty of emphasis on her breasts and generally her body, and this obviously follows stereotypical notions of womanhood. But we, as cis and trans woman, should be able to perform our femininity as we please. Even if that means following patriarchal society standards, we cannot be constantly fighting that. Moreover, some women like to express their femininity in a feminine way, and that is as valid as the strategies of women who fight to break out of the mold.

The notion of the Ice Queen is by no means new. The origin is in Hans Christian Andersen's 1845 tale "The Snow Queen". Ever since then, the Snow Queen—also called White Queen or Ice Queen—is a recurring character in tales and stories. She is often a villainous woman, who lives in a palace in a very cold climate, and she is also beautiful. Although originally a villain, having such a strong female has made the Snow Queen a very famous character which has been used all throughout different forms of media. She has also lost her villain status—Elsa from *Frozen* is a form of Ice Queen. As she is a

woman who is alone and who oversees her palace, society sees some empowerment there. Even if she is bad or a villain (which should make us think why single woman in charge are always villains), Elsa's figure is important as for female representation. Kim Petras takes the most traditional form this figure and trope, presenting herself as a lonely Ice Queen with a cold heart. In the fairy tale, this is because she is an antagonist, but in contemporary times the cold heart is a result of a fallout with a man and emerges from the need to protect oneself from getting hurt again. If one shows no feelings towards others they cannot be hurt. To Kim Petras, this is empowering, and this is what makes her feel better.

All in all, Kim Petras uses her song and video as a healing mechanism. In this case the breakup is biographical and what she talks about is reality. While being cold and icy may not be the healthiest nor most mature option, it is up to her how she wants to cope with her broken heart. The lyrics of the song are really telling how she feels. As for the video, she portrays her own expression of femininity in a way that she chose, even if that means following traditional standards not everyone might like.

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# Beyoncé, SAINT JHN & Wizkid, featuring Blue Ivy Carter: 'Brown Skin Girl' and the Rewriting of Beauty Standards

Zainab Lafghani El Maddi

Released: 24 July 2019

Album: *The Lion King: The Gift*

Label: BMG Rights Management, Warner Chappell Music, Inc., Sony/ATV Music

Genre: Pop/hip-pop, afro-pop

Length: 4:08

Songwriters: Adio Joshua Marchant, Anathi Bhongo Mnyango, Beyoncé Gisselle Knowles, Carlos St. John, Michael Uzowuru, Richard Isong Olowaranti Mbuk Isong, Shawn C. Carter, and Stacy Barthe

Producers: P2J and Beyoncé

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Blue-ivy-saint-jhn-beyonce-and-wizkid-brown-skin-girl-lyrics>

Music video: <https://youtu.be/vRFS0MYTC1I>

Director: Jenn Nkiru



## The Singer

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter was born in Houston, Texas, on 4 September 1981. She had been performing in singing and dancing contests since she was a very young child, but rose to fame by taking the role of lead vocalist in one of the best-selling girl-groups, Destiny's Child (1990-2006). While being part of the group, Beyoncé, alongside her colleague in the band and longtime friend Kelly Rowland, began to be part of controversies around the rumor that Destiny's Child' manager Mathew Knowles, Beyoncé's father and Kelly Rowland's legal guardian, favored her over the rest of the members. This rumor kept growing as Destiny's Child's line-up continued changing overtime until the line-up featured Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland, and Michelle Williams. After four albums, of which *The Writing on the Wall* (1999) was the most popular, and in the midst of a hiatus (when each member was exploring their solo artistry), twenty-one-year-old Beyoncé released her debut album *Dangerously in Love* (2003), which includes the hit songs "Crazy in Love", "Baby Boy", "Me, Myself and I", etc., and sold five million copies in the USA and eleven million worldwide.

Besides her work as a Destiny's Child member (with whom she released five studio albums), Beyoncé has released a total of nine albums: five of them are studio albums (*Dangerously in Love*, *B'Day*, *I am Sasha Fierce*, *4*, *Beyoncé*, *Lemonade*); one album (*Everything Is Love*) is part of her career as part of the duo The Carters along her husband, the rapper Jay-Z; one is a live album (*Homecoming*); and one a soundtrack (*The Lion King: The Gift*). Through her by now three decades long career, Beyoncé's music has discussed topics from every spectrum of love (falling in and out of love, cheating, marriage) as in "Love on Top", "Irreplaceable", "Sorry" or "Single Ladies",

youth and growing up as in “Party (featuring André 3000)” to feminism, women empowerment and femininity as in “Pretty Hurts”, “Flawless”, “Diva” or “Grown Woman”, among many others (see Petridis). She has shown a vulnerable side with the same openness she has showcased her fierceness and confidence.

As she sings in the lines “My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana / You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bama” of her song “Formation”, Beyoncé has been always vocal about racial issues since, since early in her career. Both of her parents are African-American, yet she is a light-skinned black woman like her mother. Being multitalented in the music industry is a gift that can allow an artist to shine in different areas and Beyoncé may be an example of it. She sings, raps, dances, acts, song-writes, produces... yet she is also light-skinned. In an era when colorism is still prevailing and brown and dark skinned persons often lack representation, it is inevitable to wonder if Beyoncé would be the icon that she is today if it was not for her complexion. As Nicole Vassell notes, “The Beyoncé’s (sic), the Rihanna’s (sic), obviously they have incredible talent but their lighter skin has been an advantage in getting them as far as they’ve gone. There could be darker-skinned women that are just as talented but we might never know because the attention is not paid in their direction” (in Wilson). What Vassell argues can be seen in every ambit as racism and colorism transcends the music business. While talent remains important, it is more than proved that the same doors are not open for artists that do not pass the ‘Paper Bag Test’; this practice dates back to 1900, when many African-American individuals were subject of this test by having their skin tone compared to a brown paper bag. If the skin tone was lighter, the person was allowed to enter the facility where the test was being done; but if the skin tone was darker the person was rejected. The Paper Bag Test was one of the many concepts that fed this privilege of light-skinned over dark-skinned people, even when both groups are victims of white supremacy.

Besides her alleged favoritism issues in Destiny’s Child and her benefitting from the industry’s racism, Beyoncé has also been involved in appropriation controversies over her song-writing credits. The hit song “Irreplaceable” from her second studio album *B’Day* serves as an example. The main writer of this song was American singer-songwriter Ne-Yo who, after hearing that Beyoncé claimed the credits in one of her concerts, had to clarify that he wrote the entire song but worked along the singer on the arrangements of the song, which earned her the co-writing credits.

### The Song

“Brown Skin Girl” was released in the middle of the publicity campaign for the 2019 remake of *The Lion King*, after Beyoncé released “Spirit”, which is included in the official soundtrack of the album. While promoting the movie, in which she voices lioness Nala, Beyoncé announced the release of the album *The Lion King: The Gift*, a soundtrack inspired by the film which serves as a companion to the official one, curated by Beyoncé herself. The song is co-led by Guyanese-American singer and producer SAINT JHN and the Nigerian rapper Wizkid and features Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s daughter Blue Ivy Carter (which earned her a Grammy, shared with the other singers, at the age of nine). The main

author of the song was SAINT JHN though it was later co-written by various artists including Beyoncé.

*The Lion King: The Gift* is a soundtrack album that explores the celebration and reclamation of African heritage; it is no surprise then that there would be a song that empowers the people who created and built this culture. “Brown Skin Girl” is a work that empowers and showers with love women of the darker complexions while promoting gender unity, having black men lending their vocals to expand the message. In the midst of a music industry which has shown that colorism remains as dominant as it has always been, this song feels like the perfect tool to encourage the biggest victims of society to embrace and love themselves, even when they cannot find any reason to do so.

Blue Ivy's presence in the song goes beyond her just being Beyoncé's daughter. Not only has she faced harsh criticism by the media for her brown skin, black facial features and natural black hair, she is also at an age when racialized children become more aware of racism and when internal personal issues begin to appear. As Brea Cubit recalls for *Pop Sugar*, when listening to “Brown Skin Girl”:

I was suddenly taken back to my childhood, when my mom made me wear my natural hair to school, but I was too embarrassed to be proud of it. I was taken back to wishing my curly locks and gravity-defying fro didn't make me stick out like a sore thumb in a classroom full of long, straight hair. I was taken back to thinking that maybe if my skin was lighter, I'd be prettier.

Many listeners could argue that this song could have had a greater meaning if it was sung by a singer darker than Beyoncé, and this is certainly true. However, as it has been mentioned before, the music industry (among many others) is still drowning in colorist and racist issues, and Beyoncé is certainly lending an important hand by using her platform and privilege to send a message that could be easily ignored in darker people's mouth.

## The Video

With the music video, Beyoncé and the Nigerian-British director Jenn Nkiru attempt to celebrate the women the song is about in all their greatness and to magnify the message carried in the lyrics, and they do so by including dark-skinned people of all heritages, including South-Asian (see McKenzie, Fujii). The video makes it clear that unity is the answer to racism (see Pizello); at the end of the day, the skin is the first thing seen in a person, not directly their ethnicity. Moreover, there are also shots of a black woman with albinism, as an invitation to all of those who are rejected by their skin color, regardless of the context, to stand up proudly. While the video focuses mainly on the dark-skinned women that appear on it, Beyoncé can also be seen in different clothing and hair styles as a reminder that this is her song after all. She does an amazing job of setting the spotlight on the rest of the women, yet she also makes sure people pay attention to every angle of her persona, which was not necessarily essential in this particular song.

The video images are varied but a main theme is a debutantes ball focused on a dark-skinned girl, who engages in a journey to self-love. What could be interpreted from the video's theme is that these brown and dark-skinned women in flattering white gowns are being presented to a society, built to reject them, by the hand of black men, also

present at the ball, who are there to support them. Different shots of brown and dark-skinned women dolled up, laughing, dancing and enjoying themselves are displayed throughout the entire video, apart from the ball. The images also show various traditional clothing styles such as Nigerian and Indian ones, as well as different African hairstyles such as braids, bantu knots, cornrows, faux locs, a braided crown, etc. There are also different cameos by celebrities intended to celebrate those who succeeded regardless of their dark complexion, among them British supermodel Naomi Campbell, American singer Kelly Rowland, Kenyan-Mexican actor Lupita Nyong'o, and South Sudanese-Australian models Adut Akech and Aweng Chuol. The video concludes with Blue Ivy singing in the background while the protagonist of the video emerges among a group of brown and dark-skinned people. This ending could be interpreted as the self-awareness that has been adopted by these women in the past years that will lead to a future with more appreciation and inner-growth from their attributes.

### The Song and the Video

Both the song and the video are complete on its own, yet when combining them we get the already strong message of the lyrics amplified. The joy and empowerment that are described in the lyrics are also beautifully displayed in the video, with all these women (whom the song speaks to) picturing every line that is sang. The video also allows to widen the spectrum of skin complexity outside North America, which where people, and the media, assume the greatest diversity exists. As beautiful and empowering the lyrics are, the video reaches out to those persons discriminated around the world such as South-Asian brown and dark-skinned people and people with albinism, who tend to be excluded from colorist debates. The video along the lyrics combine perfectly to send one and only message: brown, dark and every skin is beautiful, and it is time to celebrate all of them.

Beyoncé has previously discussed the upside-downs of beauty standards with songs such as "Pretty Hurts" (2013), which depicts the constant pressure put on women to look good and also her own experience of being a child beauty pageants. However, what makes "Brown Skin Girl" worth discussing is its defying rejection of the Eurocentric, white beauty standards. In a society where racial issues have yet been solved, it is difficult to see why and how would women of dark complexion, big noses, or kinky hair find a reason to love themselves. While Beyoncé's purpose of the song could have been a mere strategy to promote her project with Disney, she has lent her massive platform to women who would have not been included in other ambits and has given to future brown and dark-skin girls a song and a video that will help them fight the discrimination that so long prevails.

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## Celine Dion, 'Imperfections': Not That Imperfect

Willem Meuter

Released: 18 September 2019

Album: *Courage*

Label: Columbia

Genre: Pop, dance

Length: 3:59

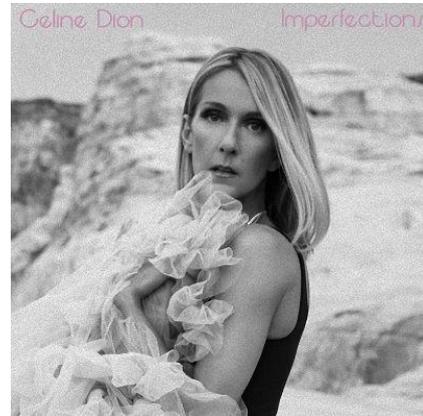
Songwriters: Ari Leff, Michael Pollack, Nicholas Perloff-Giles, and Dalles Koehlke

Producer: Dallask

Lyrics: [Celine Dion - Imperfections Lyrics | AZLyrics.com](#)

Music video: [Céline Dion - Imperfections \(Official Video\) - YouTube](#)

Director: Gabriel Coutu-Dumont



### The Singer

Celine Dion, or as her official name goes Céline Marie Claudette Dion, was born on 30 March 1968, in Charlemagne, Quebec, Canada. Dion is one of the big international stars of her native country, being both Canada's best-selling recording artist and the French language best-selling singer of all time (*Wikipedia*). Dion is the youngest of fourteen siblings and she was raised in a poor, but very musical family. She was after the song "Céline" which was recorded by French singer Hugues Aufray two years before she was born.

From a very young age Dion was interested in music, and at the age of five she made her first public appearance singing in her oldest brother's wedding. Since this early appearance on stage, Dion has never stopped performing. Aged only twelve, Dion composed her first song. She collaborated with her mother and her oldest brother to jointly compose "Ce n'était qu'un rêve", which translates in English as "It Was Only a Dream". Her brother decided then to send this recording to music manager René Angélil. This move by Dion's brother eventually changed and shaped her life. Angélil was moved by Dion's voice and decided that he should help her to become a star. Angélil even decided to mortgage his house in order to fund Dion's first album *La voix du bon Dieu* (1981). This turned out to be a great decision, as this record hit the local number one spot and made Celine a local star in Quebec.

The world got to know Dion for the first time in 1988, when she won the Eurovision Song Contest in Dublin. She represented Switzerland with a song in French. However, Angélil did realize that for Dion to become a worldwide star, she needed to perform in English instead of only in her native French. So that is why Angélil, with her consent, decided to enroll Dion at a school to learn English. Two years later, Dion made her debut in the English market with the album *Unison* (1990). In 1991, Dion made her real international breakthrough by singing the title track of *Beauty and the Beast* from Disney.

In 1997 Dion released the song for which she is known, without a doubt, all over the planet: James Horner's "My Heart Will Go On", composed for the soundtrack of one of the most popular movies ever: James Cameron's *Titanic*.

Dion eventually got involved in a controversial romantic relationship with René Angélil. When they first met Dion was only twelve, whereas Angélil was thirty-eight. Dion's mother did not want her to fall in love with Angélil, a much older, twice-divorced man. However, by the age of nineteen, Dion was already insisting that theirs was a serious bond and told her mother that "I'm not a minor. This is a free country. No one has the right to prevent me from loving whoever I want to" (Dion 159). And so, their professional relationship turned romantic when Dion was twenty; five years later, they got engaged. The couple made their relationship public through her album *The Colour of My Love* in 1993 and in 1994 they married. Both had a dream of having children together, however, this was not easy. It was only after two operations Dion had to undergo that they finally succeeded in 2001, with the birth of a son. Dion suffered a miscarriage in 2009 before the couple had twins in 2010, after a fertilization treatment complicated by Angélil's poor health. Their relationship ended tragically, twenty-one years after they married, when Angélil passed away due to throat cancer in 2016. She has not been in other relationships so far.

It is important to note that Dion is more than an artist. Dion is socially much involved and has promoted many charities and good causes worldwide. She has promoted the Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation after losing a niece to this disease. Dion has collaborated with other celebrities to support World Children's Day. She has donated \$1 million to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, and she is very much involved in supporting the LGTBQ+ community, helping to provide HIV prevention materials in Quebec. Dion even has her own gender-neutral clothing brand, and hopes to "encourage a dialogue of equality and possibility" (Wong).

### The Song

The song "Imperfection" received good reviews overall. It was published in the album *Courage* (2019), which was Dion's first English-language album in six years, following Angélil's illness. Mike Wass states that "Celine Dion is back, and she's making up for lost time!", and describes the song as "most contemporary-sounding song in years, with a catchy chorus about self-reflection" (Wass). In this chorus Dion sings "I've got my own imperfections, I got my own set of scars to hide" as the song focuses on the topic of self-hatred. Dion wants to show that everyone has imperfections, stars included, and everyone should be able to love themselves the way they are.

The song is specifically about a relationship to which Dion cannot commit because she has got imperfections. Dion cannot love and trust someone else when she cannot trust and love herself: "Yeah, I got my own imperfections / I got my own set of scars to hide / I got my own imperfections / I can't hold your heart when I'm fixing mine". However, towards the end of the song there is a twist in meaning. The singer realizes that she does not want to lose this person, and that everyone has imperfections, presumably also this other person. Dion realizes that she will always have her imperfections and is asking the other person to accept these imperfections: "They're part

of me and you are too / And I don't really want to choose / Can you love them the way that I love you? / They make me who I am today / And they will never go away / Can you love them the way that I love you?" Dion stresses that her imperfections will not be solved in a day, in a month or even in a year. It will take plenty of time and they might never go away, but she asks her partner to accept that. She is aware of these imperfections, and she thus acknowledges that she needs to work on them just like her partner probably needs to work in his/her imperfections. The basic need of humans to be loved should not be hindered for none is really perfect.

### The Video

The music video for "Imperfections" was directed by Gabriel Coutu-Dumont and produced by Sailor Productions/Silent Partners Studio. The content is somewhat paradoxical given the meaning of the song. The song is about imperfections and a non-functional relationship due to the fact that Dion does not love herself. However, in the music video Dion seems close to perfect and flawless, with her many gorgeous, daring outfits. The whole video is shot in black and white, which makes it arguably even more elegant. The video is mainly based on Dion herself, and only a few additional people are briefly seen in the video; the sole purpose of their presence is helping to make Dion's outfits and take any flaws off her make up. This strengthens her own majestic, chic presence. However, towards the end, Dion shows herself more vulnerable when she takes off her make-up, showing her naked face. This is a gesture showing that she will not be perfect in this relationship; nevertheless, she asks her partner to accept her natural appearance, as it is part of her. The video ends with an image of her bare face, free of make-up and a smile suggesting her satisfaction.

### The Song and the Video

It is difficult to say how much impact the video has made on the success of the song "Imperfections". The paradoxical contrast between the glamorous video and the lyrics suggest that they are at odds and that the song could have been successful anyway without the music video. This is because the strong message that Dion tries to send is mostly carried by the lyrics and by Dion's unbeatable vocal skills. However, the scene showing her taking off her make-up is a strong image that will be remembered by everyone that sees the music video. The problem is that, seeing the music video while considering the lyrics, people might conclude that it is easy to talk about imperfections being as 'perfect' as Dion depicts herself in this video. Thus Emily Zemler from *Rolling Stone* calls the video "Evocative" but notes that its "glamorous, behind-the-scenes Hollywood aesthetic (...) is juxtaposed with the lyrics as Dion reflects on self-criticism, noting, 'I got my own imperfections'". For Zemler, the Hollywood aesthetic, appears to have too much weight. Also, Rebecca Alter from *Vulture* protests that

queen Celine does a frankly abysmal job convincing us that she's anything but perfect, singing in a perfect voice about her inadequacies while stunting in couture perfectly. The drama of her body language in billowing sleeves? Heaven. Her stripes and oversize polka dots and large hat wide-stanced Cirque du Soleil fashion

narrative? Art. Her running, Bird Box blindfolded, toward the camera in black-and-white like a high-glamour human embodiment of that old-timey movie of the train driving toward the audience? The Lumière brothers wish! We know she's perfect.

Especially considering Dion's philanthropist and social involvement, (think about her having her own gender-neutral clothing brand) the message in the videoclip would have arguably been stronger if she had worn something less flamboyant and possible even less blatantly feminine, and elegant. The music video would have been sent a stronger signal and would have aligned better with the lyrics of the song. It has to be concluded that the music video and song don't align, but maybe that is exactly the factor that make people think about the message. And for fans of the now ageing Celine Dion both her glamorous and her make-up free look are images to celebrate.

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## Celeste, 'Stop This Flame': An Uplifting Response to Adversity

Sophie Whitley

Released: 9 January 2020

Album: *Not your Muse*

Label: Polydor Records

Genre: R&B, jazz

Length: 3:29

Songwriters: Celeste, Jamie Hartman, and Nina Simone

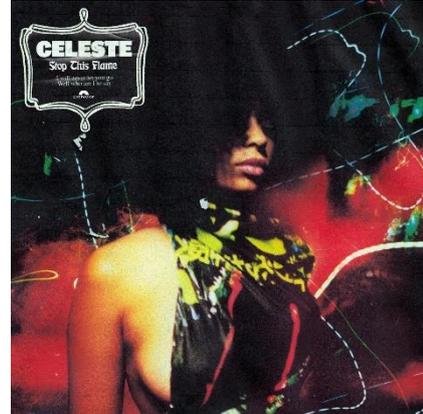
Producers: Jamie Hartman and John Hill

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Celeste-stop-this-flame-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UE3sTF3oj6w>

Director: Leon Ward



### The Singer

Celeste Epiphany Waite is an American-British singer and songwriter born on 5 May 1994 in Los Angeles. At the age of three, following her parents split, Celeste moved from the USA to Dagenham and then later, aged five, to Salt Dean, a small town near Brighton. There she spent much of her childhood and enjoyed a sense of freedom that she believes influenced her music. The aspiring singer wrote and uploaded the song “Sirens” when she was only seventeen; this song was a tribute to her father who had passed away the year before. It was this song that first got the attention of her manager, Tom March who helped her to properly begin her career.

Following the uploading of “Sirens” onto SoundCloud, Celeste was given recording time in Sarm West Studios in London’s Notting Hill while still working shifts at her local pub. In 2014 her career actively took off when she began providing vocals for electronic producers such as Avicii, Tiefs, and Real Lies while also self-publishing content onto the platform SoundCloud. It was whilst recording at the studio that she composed her debut single “Daydreaming”, released under Lily Allen’s record label, Bank Holiday Records, in October 2016. Celeste’s rise to fame has been fast, particularly in the last two years. Her debut album, *Not Your Muse*, which she composed over the pandemic, reached number one on the UK Albums Chart. In addition, the album earned her nominations for Album of the Year, Best Female Solo Artist and Best New Artist at the 2021 Brit Awards as well as the 2021 Mercury Prize. Furthermore, Celeste has since appeared on a number of prime-time British television broadcasts including *The Graham Norton Show*, *The One Show* and at the Brit Awards where she performed “Strange”. Her music has also been used as a soundtrack to multiple Netflix series, most notably *The Trial of the Chicago Seven* and *Bridgerton*, all of which have further propelled her into the lime-light.

Much of Celeste's music is influenced by the personal struggles she has faced, most significantly, the death of her father—whose identity she has kept private—when she was sixteen years old. Celeste has said that her father's death gave her more "drive to do something [she] cared about" (in Smyth); in "Father's Son", she paid homage to him. In addition, Celeste has spoken about her experience in the music industry and growing up in Britain in general as a woman with Jamaican heritage. She has commented on how "Unconscious bias was something I definitely had to deal with—more than outright racism" (in Power) as well as on her time at a performing arts school, Vardean College, which she found to be constricting, leaving after only one year.

Celeste's music is described as having aspects of soul, jazz, and R&B and she is often likened to Aretha Franklin, Amy Winehouse, and Nina Simone. Her voice always remains the principle element in her music; Celeste keeps the accompaniments very minimalist as not to distract from her vocal talent and the meaning behind the lyrics. While Celeste's rise to success was stalled by the pandemic in 2020, the nature of her music stands her apart from many contemporary artists and yet her lyrics seem to resonate also with many, which has secured her a growing fan-base in both the UK and America. Celeste's music is on Radio One's B-list, meaning it is regularly played alongside artists at the top of the charts (she is currently signed with Polydor Records). The huge success of her latest album this year and her trajectory have been predicted to emulate those of the most successful soul artists in the UK.

### The Song

"Stop This Flame" was Celeste's first release that gained a place in the charts in her home country, the UK. The lyrics are in many ways hopeful. The song was even used as the theme for the football coverage of the 2020/21 Premier League with broadcaster Gary Hughes commenting on how "The start of the football season is all about hopes and dreams for millions of supporters up and down the country, and this track brilliantly portrays those feelings" (in Newsdesk). This sense of determination has been summarized by Celeste, who states that the song is about "seeing it through to the end" (in Murray) whether this is in relation to love, aspirations and dreams or the overcoming of adversity. This message is evident when looking at the chorus: "You tell me to stop but I keep on going / Tell me to stop but I keep on going" and in the second verse through the line, "You'll never stop this flame". Clearly the message here is one of perseverance and strength in spite of opposition. This may refer to her short stint at the performing arts school where she felt she was forced to follow a path she did not want to follow; as noted, she dropped out to pursue her own personal style.

In many of the lines Celeste seems to be addressing somebody, asking; "You think you're somebody don't you?", perhaps suggesting the song is about a love affair. If it is assumed that the song is about a relationship, aspects of the lyrics such as the opening verse; "I'll give you anything you want / Anything you want / Anything, anything / Just don't tell me no", could prove problematic. In this instance, the lyrics are suggestive of dependency and desperation which contradict the image of strength and resilience which Celeste presents. Having said this, as the song progresses it regains some sense of independence with the lines in the penultimate verse stating: "Keep away from me / if

you can't withstand my love". In the final line however, she states "I will never let you go"; again, if this refers to a lover then the lyrics may be taken to be reflective of a toxic relationship in which the singer is unable to move forwards.

As Celeste herself has suggested however, this song can be viewed from a number of perspectives which has an influence on the meaning of the lyrics. For example, Celeste has spoken about how this song in particular resonates with the Black Lives Matter movement. Christine Ochefu notes how "Even without a pandemic, it is often a difficult feat for Black soul artists to get ahead in the industry compared to their white counterparts" and Celeste is "aware of the issues" potentially accounting for the tone of the lyrics in the song. In an interview Celeste described the relevance of the song in relation to the movement when singing at an event: "The night was also in honor of Black excellence and I was in a room full of people that had come across adversity and surpassed people's expectations in their area as people of colour. In that moment I felt a sense of empowerment and comfort in singing that song and it just took on a new form" (in Smyth). One of the key lines that she repeats throughout the song, "I will never let you go", again, is a powerful statement that evokes a sentiment of strength that is reflected in the music video.

### The Video

The music video for "Stop This Flame" has been a huge success for Celeste and director Leonn Ward, gaining close to one million views on YouTube, where it was first uploaded in February 2020. The video has since been nominated for the Best British R&B/Soul video awards. In the video Celeste appears in a variety of vignettes surrounded by a large cast of people of all different ages and ethnicities. The cast is comprised of a majority of black and dark-skinned people as it is shot in New Orleans and is designed to reflect the energy of the citizens and pay homage to the home of jazz music; no doubt, "The Birthplace of Jazz is the embodiment of the song's irrepressible spirit" (Cakes, online). Furthermore, the video incorporates both old people and children which embodies the notion of inclusivity and the portrayal of a community.

The portrayal of diversity and the upbeat dancing in the street does not seem to point towards a relationship, instead, it is about unity and most importantly; artistic expression. As a critic suggests, "Each vignette offers an overarching theme and meaning—the band represent unity and strength, for example, and the youth represent a cautious optimism for the future" (Ulitski). Furthermore, director Leonn Ward has commented on how "The final set up is the drone shot, the circle of unity, which is dedicated to Black Lives Matter and respect to this incredible movement" (in *HoneyPop*) reflecting Celeste's own thoughts about the song itself and the importance it took on in relation to BLM. In terms of Celeste's personal presentation, this video is consistent with her usual styling. As an artist Celeste chooses to wear clothes that reflect the meaning and the atmosphere that the song creates. In the January before this video was released the singer told *Vogue* that, for her, fashion is "about creating a look to suit the character and the mood of a certain song" (in Newbold), and I think the choice of military uniform and all white suit radiates a sense of empowerment and reflect this concept. A military uniform symbolizes the central theme of the music—fighting for

a cause and putting up resistance towards repression. Furthermore, military uniform has historically male associations and so the use of an all-female ensemble signifies female strength and inclusion.

### The Song and the Video

The video is filmed on set in New Orleans, a significant location for Celeste as it is the home of Louis Armstrong, Ed Blackwell and Ornette Coleman, a number of key jazz artists that provided an early influence for the singer. As such, Celeste stated how “It was important for me to go to what feels like the source of so much that inspires me” (in *HoneyPop*), that place being New Orleans. The music video is on the whole, very optimistic, cheerful and uplifting with an assortment of jazz musicians, drums and dancers filling the streets. As previously mentioned, Celeste usually keeps her music and videos minimalistic (see her music video for “Strange”) and so this is a considerable shift in style. The singer has spoken about how she had fallen in love for the first time prior to creating this video in the summer of 2020 and comments on how this has influenced the tone of her music which has become more triumphant and upbeat, accounting for this change (in *Dex*). Her own personal styling in the video is also an important factor. Celeste has spoken about the responsibility she feels towards the idea of representation—particularly with regard to her natural afro hair. She has said that as a child growing up with musical aspirations she “never really had a role model with hair like mine who celebrated it” (in *Smither*). Therefore, in her videos—as exhibited in “Stop This Flame”, she feels it is of great importance to her to wear her hair as an afro as an example to younger people and is an expression of her identity. Overall, the music video was well-received on release and I believe, adds to the uplifting nature of the song as well as feeding into the message it presents by maintaining the authenticity of the genre via the location, including a diverse cast and staying in line with Celeste’s own expression of her unique identity.

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## Taylor Swift, 'The Man': When You Have Had Enough

Ana Ferrer Soler

Released: 24 January 2020

Album: *Lover*

Label: Republic

Genre: Synth-pop, electropop

Length: 3:10

Songwriters: Taylor Swift and Joel Little

Producers: Joel Little and Taylor Swift

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Taylor-swift-the-man-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqAJLh9wuZ0>

Director: Taylor Swift



### The Singer

Taylor Alison Swift was born on 13 December 1989 and lived most of her childhood in Nashville, Tennessee. At the age of 14 and with the support of her parents, she decided to pursue a career in country music after watching a documentary about Faith Hill, a very famous country singer. Always accompanied by her dear mother, she began visiting Nashville record labels and submitting demo tapes of covers she had done of Dolly Parton and The Chicks. Yet, Swift kept getting rejected as she mentioned in an interview for *American Songwriter*: “And I realized that everyone in that town wanted to do what I wanted to do. So, I kept thinking to myself, I need to figure out a way to be different. I need to have something to really bring to that town” (in Malec).

After that, Swift took singing classes and learnt how to play the guitar. Her time finally came when she signed a songwriting deal with Sony/ATV Music Publishing in 2004, which allowed her to work with experienced songwriters and learn even more. Unfortunately, she later ended up leaving the record level due to still not having been able to publish any music. Swift recalled that she “genuinely felt that I was running out of time. I wanted to capture these years of my life on an album while they still represented what I was going through” (in Preston). Nevertheless, she finally secured a recording deal with Big Machine Records in 2005 and later in 2006, she finally released her eponymous debut studio album *Taylor Swift* which would be the beginning of a very successful music career. Her international success, though, started after she released her second studio album, *Fearless*, which had countless of sales and broke many award records.

Taylor Swift has a very special discography as her fans like to point out. The artist writes and produces each album to depict what she is experiencing and feeling in each period of her life. Each album represents, thus, a different Taylor. For example, her first two studio albums were *Taylor Swift* (2006) and *Fearless* (2008). If you listen and analyze the lyrics of the songs in both albums, you can see what a young and innocent teenager felt or wanted at that time: a crush on a friend that only brought her heartbreak, as

depicted in “Teardrops on My Guitar” (2006); a romance out of a fairytale, as we can see in the popular single “Love Story” (2008), or her hope and determination to succeed in the music industry despite being an underdog singer at that moment, which we can hear about in “Change” (2008). Now, in contrast to her past studio albums, the Taylor Swift we find in her seventh studio album *Lover* is a more mature version of herself. She is no longer an innocent teenager hoping to become a singer and go around the world singing for the masses. This Taylor has gone through a lot, she has suffered, she has matured, and she is tired of being used as a punchbag by the many men in the music industry and the press.

Between her fifth studio album *1989* (2014), and her sixth, *Reputation* (2017), Taylor Swift spent four years out of the public eye. She deleted all her social media accounts, stopped giving interviews and basically lived a secluded life surrounded by her family and close friends. Swift went through a major depressive episode during this time, experiencing panic attacks and PTSD. Her life at that moment was hectic to say the least. On one hand, she had a very public feud with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, which brought the media and the public against her due to the Kardashian’s public campaign against her. It all started when Kanye West released his single “Famous” (2016) with the offensive lyrics: “I feel like me and Taylor Swift might still have sex / Why? I made that b\*\*\*h famous”. Swift’s spokesperson quickly released a statement after fans and media bombarded the singer with messages and questions about what her thoughts were on those crude words. The representative stated that Kanye did not call the artist for approval on the lyrics, but to ask her to release his single on her Twitter account so it would gain more attention. However, Taylor declined and was never made aware of what he would rap about throughout the phone call. Unfortunately, this public statement angered West and his wife at the time, Kim Kardashian, who leaked an illegally recorded video of Taylor Swift’s phone call with Kanye and branded Swift publicly as a “snake”. The influencer’s fans and her power with the media made the whole feud even worse because many believed that Swift was victimizing herself just for attention and that she was a liar. The last we heard of Taylor Swift in 2016 until she made her comeback in late 2017 with *Reputation* was when she responded to Kim Kardashian’s video in an official statement. The artist posted an official statement on her Twitter account on July 18, 2016 (which is now deleted due to Swift deleting all her social accounts and later creating new ones) where she commented:

“Where is the video of Kanye telling me he was going to call me ‘that b\*\*\*h’ in his song? It doesn’t exist because it never happened... He promised to play the song for me, but he never did. [...] While I wanted to be supportive of Kanye on the phone call, you cannot ‘approve’ a song you haven’t heard. Being falsely painted as a liar when I was never given the full story or played any part of the song is character assassination. I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative, one that I have never asked to be a part of, since 2009.” (qtd. in Donnelly)

In 2020, the full conversation between both artists was leaked and it proved that not only had Kim Kardashian had edited the video she had posted to make Swift look bad, but also that Kanye had not played the full song to Swift and she had never lied.

On the other hand, and unknowingly to the public at that time, the artist was busy dealing with legal procedures at court. On 2 June 2013, Swift had been sexually

assaulted by a former morning show personality for Denver's *KYGO-FM*, David Mueller. It was later filtered by the media that when this horrible event happened, Swift informed Mueller's bosses that he had groped her at a public event. This led to Mueller getting fired; angered by this, he accused Swift of lying and sued her for damages due to his loss of employment in September 2015. She, however, counter-sued him for sexually assaulting her, asking for nominal damages of only a dollar the following month. The legal battle lasted three long years, but it all came to an end when the trial finally began on 7 August 7. Both Taylor Swift and David Mueller appeared in court that first day and the trial lasted a full week, after which Swift won the lawsuit on 14 August 2017.

After going through such a long process of legal procedures and focusing on her mental health, Taylor Swift finally felt ready to come back to the public eye. Since then, she has become an example of strength to her fans due to her resilience while fighting to be heard and believed when she spoke against her abuser and for remaining strong despite the heavy (cyber)bullying she went through.

## The Song

Swift released her seventh studio album, *Lover*, on August 23, 2019. It was the first one of her records which she fully owned, as in June of 2019 (a couple months before she published her new album) Kanye West's former agent, Scooter Braun, had bought all the artist's masters and now officially owned Taylor's past music. This occurrence made Taylor start another legal battle against the famous agent.

*Lover* was her sixth consecutive album to sell more than 500,000 copies in one week in the US, making Swift the first female artist to manage this feat. Moreover, all the eighteen songs from the album charted on the Billboard Hot 100 in the same week, which made her set another record for most simultaneous chart entries by a female artist. The lead single of the album was "Me!", which debuted at number 100 on the Billboard Hot 100 and by the second week had risen to number two. *Lover* was the world's best-selling studio album of 2019, selling 3.2 million copies worldwide. Indeed, the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) honored Swift as the global best-selling artist of 2019; she had previously won this title in 2014 which made her the first woman to win this honor twice.

"The Man" was the fourth and final single from the album, and through the song, Taylor imagines what the media's treatment of her would be like if she were a man instead of a woman. Moreover, she highlights how much harder women must work in order to succeed in any industry, and how this inspired her to write the song:

"We [women] have to curate and cater everything, but we have to make it look like an accident. Because if we make a mistake, that's our fault, but if we strategize so that we won't make a mistake, we're calculating. There is a bit of a damned-if-we-do, damned-if-we don't thing happening in music". (in Lipshutz)

The song peaked at number twenty-three on the US Billboard Hot 100 and it entered the top 40 in many other countries around the world. It got a very positive reception from the critics, who praised its feminist message. Many female artists in the industry expressed their agreement with the message Swift was relaying with the song.

Through the lyrics, one can clearly see the toxicity present in the music industry and how the media contributes to perpetuate this as well. *The Guardian* journalist Laura Snapes shared and commented on this matter too on a now deleted tweet, published in February 2020, by stating that “The music industry is so profoundly toxic and resistant to change, it almost feels unethical to participate in it at all sometimes”. Thus, throughout the song Swift writes from the perspective of what her life would be like if she were a man in the music industry and how incredibly different her career would be. You can see this in lines such as “I would be complex / I would be cool or when she sings, I’d be a fearless leader / I’d be an alpha type”.

Swift even goes further by also bringing an awareness of the double standards in society. The artist’s romantic life has been commented on and even harshly criticized throughout her career. The media has portrayed her as a promiscuous, unstable woman who jumps from man to man, using them to write songs and then dropping them for a new one in search of more experiences to write about. In the lyrics Swift writes about how if she were a man she would not be viewed and portrayed as this man-eater, but in a totally different and more positive way: “They’d say I played the field before / I found someone to commit to / And that would be okay / For me to do / Every conquest I had made / Would make me more of a boss to you / I’d be a fearless leader / I’d be an alpha type”. Moreover, and as we will later comment about the video, Swift brings even more attention to these double standards by using Leonardo Di Caprio as an example. In the song, Swift says that “I’d be just like Leo / In Saint-Tropez”. The actor’s hectic romantic life has also been discussed by the media, but he is seen as a Casanova or bad boy who is searching for ‘the one’. What is more, Di Caprio’s preference for women between the ages of twenty to twenty-five (there are even charts that explain this) is considered a funny fact about him in social media.

Lastly, Taylor raises awareness about how many women are not believed when they come forward and speak up about being sexually assaulted: “When everyone believes ya / What’s that like? (...) They wouldn’t shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve / What I was wearing / If I was rude”. When the media leaked that Swift was suing her assaulter, many outlets and journalists questioned the veracity of her words. Swift, who intended to deal with the lawsuit in private, sued Muller for only a dollar because she was not interested in nominal damages but in healing herself and bringing him to justice so he would not do the same to other women. Yet, the media made it seem as if she wanted to portray herself as a victim to the public eye. This connected, besides, with Kesha’s being sexually abused by her producer Dr. Luke. She was denied the right to release music without him, only got the support from a few female artists and was kept being constantly questioned by the media. Taylor Swift was later revealed to have helped Kesha throughout the long lawsuit, donating \$250,000 to help her pay her legal fees (Mirani). Swift is well-known in the music industry to be a warm and kind individual, always supporting other female artists as much as she can. Thus, Taylor thought it was imperative to bring awareness to such a social issue through the lyrics of the tune because if top influential singers such as Kesha, or herself, get this horrible treatment from society and the media when they come forward... how will other smaller female artists and common women be treated when they come forward?

In conclusion, the powerful lyrics of the song teach us as women that we need to remain strong, be unapologetic and upfront about the injustices that we face because of our gender. That if we keep bringing awareness to all that is referenced through the lyrics (sexism, the double standards in society, the sexualization and objectification of women, the performative allyship from many men, etc.), we might start the spark that might ignite the fire of a change in our society's views and behavior.

## The Video

The official music video for "The Man" was released on 27 February 2020 and it was directed by Swift herself. It was her directional debut and won Best Direction at the 2020 MTV Video Music Awards, making her the first solo female director in the VMAs history to win in such a category. The music video is a satire and depicts Taylor as her male alter-ego, Tyler Swift, with cameos from supporting stars such as Dwayne Johnson. In drag, Swift fully becomes *the man*, an embodiment of male privilege clearly inspired by Leonardo Di Caprio's *The Wolf of Wall Street* depiction of Jordan Belfort.

Throughout the video, Swift depicts different prevalent examples of double standards in our society such as the objectification and sexualization of women, toxic masculinity and how the root of this comes from our patriarchal society. In one of the scenes, Tyler Swift runs down a hallway giving high-fives to nineteen disembodied hands after waking up from a one-night stand. This scene not only alludes to the double standards behind the *walk of shame* (when a woman walks back home on the day after a sexual encounter, most typically dressed in the same clothes she used the previous evening), but the hands are a reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment of the United States Constitution (as pointed out by many critics in many different news outlets around the world), which granted women the right to finally vote in the country and started the long process for equality. If we are supposedly equal to men, why do women experience the so-called walk of shame and men do not?

In another scene, Tyler is with his daughter in the park and while she is playing and clearly bored, he either only pays attention to his phone or checks out young women that walk in front of him. Yet, he is later celebrated as the best dad for bringing his daughter to the park and basically doing the bare minimum. In the final scene, Swift finally appears as the video's director and instructs her male alter-ego to be more sexy and more likeable in the following takes. Again, she gives a subtle dig to the entertainment industry's objectification of women and their sexist treatment. Moreover, after instructing Tyler to portray himself sexier and more attractive to the camera, she turns to praise Loren Gray who is performing a small cameo in the music video. She is an influencer who portrays a tennis ball girl and despite her role only consisting of one scene where she rolls her eyes, she is still praised by Swift.

Lastly, in the end credits Taylor Swift is listed as the director, writer, owner and star of the music video and Dwayne Johnson is given credit for his voice role as "The Man". Furthermore, there are pictures shown of Swift's transformation process into her male alter-ego. Before the video ends, there is a disclaimer that states that "No men were harmed in the making of this video".

## The Song and the Video

As the credits on the music video stress, the short film was directed, produced, and owned by Taylor Swift herself. This is her way of publicly claiming ownership of the thoughts and beliefs that are behind the lyrics of her song and the way she has decided to portray them through the official music video. In the video, Swift showcases through different scenarios all that she had been conveying through the lyrics: the double standards in our society and the media outlets, the sexualization and objectification of women, the performative allyship from many men, and even the sexism that surrounds us in our daily lives. Moreover, her alter-ego Tyler Swift is strikingly similar to Leonardo DiCaprio's character in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. In the song, she references the actor's playboy lifestyle and compares how the public and the media view him as *the man* for his hectic love life while other women are slut-shamed for the same.

In conclusion, through both the lyrics and the music video, Taylor Swift is upfront and unapologetic while pointing out the many faults in our patriarchal society. She brings awareness to the disparity between how women and men are viewed by society, the sexism around her career and many other societal issues that need to be discussed and addressed out loud more often.

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## Ellie Goulding, 'Brightest Blue': A New Beginning

Núria Negreira Jiménez

Released: 17 July 2020

Album: *Brightest Blue*

Label: Polydor Records

Genre: Pop

Length: 4:26

Songwriters: Ellie Goulding and Kearns & Eliot

Producer: Kearns & Eliot

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Ellie-goulding-brightest-blue-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zh7TiheSaR4>

Director: Giorgio Testi



### The Singer

Elena Jane Goulding was born in Hereford, England on 30 December 1986; she is a singer, composer, and multi-instrumentalist. Goulding has loved music since she was a child. She began playing the clarinet and later the guitar, and she graduated with a BA degree in Theatre from the University of Kent. As she wanted to pursue a career in music, Goulding tried to gain recognition in her country and started composing by the age of fifteen. In 2009 she had her first album released; an EP titled *An Introduction to Ellie Goulding* which included her first single “Under the Sheets”. However, she did not succeed as expected and continued to train as a musician.

Ellie Goulding finally became famous the following year when she won the *Sound of 2010* poll, an annual BBC poll which has as a goal finding new promising artists. That same year, Goulding released her first studio album *Lights*, which debuted as number one in the UK Single Chart and the UK Album Chart. During 2012 Goulding worked hard to release her second studio album, *Halcyon*; in 2013 she released the song “I Need Your Love” with the famous singer, DJ, and producer Calvin Harris. This made Goulding popular around Europe with her fame even spreading to Australia and New Zealand. Little by little Ellie Goulding established herself more and more firmly in the music industry, even managing to participate in the soundtracks of two very successful films such as *Divergent*, in 2014 and *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2015 with the song “Love Me Like You Do”, which catapulted Goulding to the number one position in the UK charts. In her career as a singer and composer, Goulding has released four studio albums, thirteen singles, and seven EPs. Her music has been so successful that she won the Brit Awards in 2010 and in 2014 as Best British artist. Moreover, she also won the award for the revelation artist of the year in the Glamour Magazine Awards in 2011 and the best electronic dance music in the Teen Choice Awards in 2019 with the song “Close to Me”.

Even though Goulding has been successful in her career as a musician, she took a five-year break from the music industry, from 2015 until 2020 when she came back

again. One can assume that many singers take a rest from their musical career, maybe in intervals of two or three years, to renew ideas and inspiration. However, Goulding disappeared for five long years, thus risking being forgotten and having a difficult or even unsuccessful comeback after so long outside the spotlight. The reason for this partial retirement may lay in the fact that when Goulding released her album *Delirium* (2015) she was not in a good personal moment. After finishing her *Delirium* tour, Goulding decided it was time to stop, to reconnect with herself and fall in love with music again. Goulding claimed that most of the music she performed for *Delirium* was imposed, possibly by her record label. Hence, Goulding was not playing music she loved but commercial songs that did not fulfil her.

What is more, Goulding even stated that she had lost the love she felt for music and, as she claimed, “I’d just become a robot that was able to walk on stage and perform energetically and wildly” (in *Savage*), but nothing more. In addition to this, her fame did not permit her to have any free time and she felt wrapped in a stressful and exhaustive agenda that did not allow her to enjoy her reputation and success: “actually I was just exhausted, and I don’t remember any of it. I wasn’t really able to enjoy anything properly” (in *Savage*). This is the reason why she took five years to come back again, with a new attitude. According to Morris, “Goulding usually prefers to appear unthreatening and relatable rather than demand adoration, and that doesn’t change here, but her quality control has improved”. She is now making choices in her way, being true to herself and playing the music she likes better, rather than being merely commercial.

## The Song

“Brightest Blue” by Ellie Goulding is one of the singles of the eponymous album. This pop song was released on 17 July 2020; it was written by Ellie Goulding herself with the help of Kearns and Eliot, the producers. It is worth saying that this song serves as presentation of Goulding’s new era after spending five years away from music. “Brightest Blue” is said to be an ode to self-love and self-liberation after a bad time, as Kemp asserts: “The album, (...), is born from the deeply formative time she had with herself in the city. She is renewed and confident as ever, with each track on the record offering a glimpse of a radiant independence”. The song is about Goulding’s personal triumph, confidence, and independence in her professional career over the music industry, which tries to impose music likely to be money-making rather than consider the singer’s own project.

Some may be wondering why she chose bright blue for the titles of her song and album, as many of us will connect blue with sadness rather than with happiness. Arguably, she selected “Brightest Blue” as a title to refer to the good side of the blue color. As Songfacts reports, for Goulding blue is a synonym of warmth and happiness, what she felt after walking into an exhibition by abstract painter Doug Wheeler at a New York gallery. When Ellie Goulding found herself in a room bathed in a relaxing, bright blue light and his colorful paintings, the experience served as an enlightenment and as inspiration for this song's optimistic lyrics.

Further from this, delving into the analysis of the song, “Brightest Blue” expresses the idea of how difficult the state of the world we are living today is and how hard Goulding has tried, and is trying, to find mental peace despite living in a world of chaos. Hence,

she mixes in the lyrics feelings of sadness and melancholy with her happiness and prosperity. Goulding starts the song claiming that now she feels better than ever “Everything is heightened now / It’s looking so much brighter now”. Then, she refers to an episode of the past when she could not find herself; now, thanks to her personal development she knows who she truly is. “I was lost and now I’m found”, she sings. Next, she continues by singing that in the past she used to be obsessed with things she could not control and criticizes how people behave in the current world. However, although people fake love and the colors are fading, nothing can let her down and she stills feels illuminated and not drained by the bad things that are happening around her. Before the chorus, she asserts “You give me” and then the chorus repeats “the brightest blue” many times. This song appears to be addressed to Goulding herself, so when she says “you” in the lyrics she is aiming at her own empowerment. After the chorus, she declares that although “times are hard, people scarred” she is the spark in the dark, and even states that she sees the future in her own eyes, asserting her self-confidence.

### The Video

Ellie Goulding’s “Brightest Blue” does not have an official music video, which raises the doubt of why an artist of her importance would not make a music video to accompany her comeback single and give more power to the message of her song. Nevertheless, Ellie Goulding offered in the platform YouTube through Vevo a filmed live performance directed by Giorgio Testi and recorded in London using XR<sup>2</sup>. Goulding recorded videos of two of her new songs (the other one is “New Heights”) exclusively for VEVO; in the words of Giorgio Testi, “we took a different approach to each of the tracks, creating worlds for Ellie to perform within that suited the emotions and soundscapes of each track” (in Smith).

The live performance film, which is as attractive as any music video, starts in darkness, almost with no light, implicitly depicting Goulding’s past and how unsatisfied she was. Then, as the chorus approaches, the darkness that surrounds the stage progressively vanishes and a bright blue light starts illuminates Goulding, metaphorically representing her new era full of light and hope, which makes the performance an exceptional exemplification of her personal process of growth. Goulding appears alone on the stage, in a glamorous white dress and with no dancers, which stresses that she is the center of her life, as the song claims. As she does in the song, Ellie Goulding recalls again in the video the game of playing with darkness and light, and perfectly connects both through the idea she is trying to transmit.

### The Song and the Video

The song accompanied by the video form the perfect combination to lay a greater emphasis on the message conveyed. The song lyrics reveal Goulding’s perspective on life whereas the live performance perfectly represents her personal development and a

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<sup>2</sup> Extended reality (XR) is a universal term inclusive to immersive learning technologies virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR). (see Day).

proper way of highlighting and comprehending what she had been through. Everything that the lyrics claims is portrayed through the play of light and dark, the body language, and the elegant performance that Goulding offers on stage. Her strength and empowerment are magnified, her actual singing voice enjoyed.

When Goulding starts singing, there is very little light and her tone is quite low. However, as the song progresses and the choir constantly repeats “the brightest blue”, the scenery begins to abandon the interplay of light and darkness to fully illuminate the singer, placed against a background of bright blue. As her voice grows louder and more powerful, the spotlights become brighter and illuminate her better. The lyrics are thus mirrored by the stage illumination, creating a truly beautiful effect. Goulding offers her audience in this way not only powerful lyrics but also a brand-new audio-visual experience, using technology and modern tools to create a quality performance and proving, in addition, that she need not sexualize her body to transmit her music.

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## Cardi B, featuring Megan Thee Stallion, 'WAP': Women's Right to Pleasure

Axelle Haese

Released: 7 August 2020

Label: Atlantic Records

Genre: Hip-hop, dirty rap, trap

Length: 3:07

Songwriters: Belcalis Almanzar, Megan Pete, James Foye III, Austin Owens, and Franck Rodriguez

Producer: Ayo the Producer Keyz

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Cardi-b-wap-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsm4poTWjMs>

Director: Collin Tilley



### The Singer

Cardi B, the American rapper and songwriter, was born in Manhattan, New York, on 11 October 1992. Her real name is Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar. Before starting her career, Almánzar had to overcome several hardships in her life, and therefore, we can certainly define her as a resilient woman. She grew up in the Bronx district, which is a conflictive quarter of New York. At the age of sixteen, she joined the Bloods, a particularly dangerous gang. Belcalis studied at the Renaissance High School while working as a full-time cashier in a supermarket. She was unable to manage both activities and abandoned her studies at the age of eighteen, without graduating. Due to this decision, her mother chased her out of the house and made her homeless. Her only choice was moving into the family home of her abusive boyfriend, which means she had to endure domestic violence for years because she could not afford her own house. When she lost her supermarket job for giving discounts to customers, her manager advised her to become a stripper; she told her mother, however, that the money came from babysitting.

Stripping enabled her not only to escape poverty and domestic violence but also to start again to attend classes at the university, although she did not graduate (see Clique). At the same time, her videos on social networks such as Vine and Instagram were becoming viral. She became famous, finally quitting her job as stripper to take part in reality TV shows such as, *Love & Hip-Hop: New York*, though by the end of 2016, after two seasons, she left the show to focus on a career in music. Afterwards, she released her two first mixtapes *Gangsta Bitch Music Vol 1* and *Gangsta Bitch Music Vol 2*. Over time, she developed the stage name Cardi B, which is a derivation of Bacardi, a brand of rum that was once her nickname. Finally, in 2018 she published her first studio album *Invasion of Privacy*. Since then, Cardi B has become more and more popular within the rap genre. So far, she has published thirty-five singles, including eleven as main artist and twenty-four as collaborating artist. Besides that, Cardi B is the first woman in Grammy history to win the best rap album category.

One major issue concerning Cardi B's reputation is that she is a provocative woman, with a very impulsive character. She cultivates a great closeness to her audience, and many women identify with her outspokenness, her humor and her shamelessness. In 2018, in New York she allegedly injured an employee during a private concert in a violent fit of jealousy that confirms her mercurial reputation. She also found herself at the heart of a scandal when a video surfaced of her admitting that she used to drug men to rob them. However, she apologized on Twitter, through a long message explaining the causes of her actions. She claimed: "I made the choices that I did at the time because I had very limited options" or even "I did what I had to do to survive".

Regarding her private life, Cardi B has been in a relationship with the American rapper Offset since 2017. They are currently married and are parents of two children. In the more public sphere, she has a tumultuous relationship with the well-known singer Nicky Minaj. Although there were allegedly insulting remarks from Nicky Minaj stating that Cardi B was not fit to be a mother, they seem to maintain a good relationship today.

## The Song

The song "WAP" was released on 7 August 2020, featuring Megan Thee Stallion, another well-known American rapper, from Houston. It was produced by Ayo The Producer Keyz and was written by the two singers as well as by Austin Owens, James Foye III, Franck Rodriguez, and Jorden Thorpe. Concerning genre, it is a mixture of hip-hop, dirty rap, and trap. The acronym "WAP" means "Wet Ass Pussy", which reflects beyond a shadow of a doubt the themes the song tackles.

From the first words, we are immersed in the universe of the two artists' explicit and provocative lyrics. For instance, we can hear them singing "Bring a bucket and a mop for this wet ass pussy", "Give me everything you got for this wet ass pussy". Indeed, the idea of female pleasure is the main theme, and basically Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion sing about how they would like to be sexually satisfied by men in what Ramírez de Arellano calls "a joyful role reversal". More precisely, the idea of cunnilingus is emphasized by the two women, singing for example "Put this pussy right in your face". Women's expression of sexual excitement is still very much limited in Western cultures, but here they both claim it as something positive. Sexuality, in their eyes, is not dirty. Therefore, the singers discuss how being horny feels, without any hesitation. They are asking for what they need from a man, with no intention to disguise their needs: "I need a hard hitter, I need a deep stroke", "I need a Henny drink, I need a weed smoker" or "I need a king cobra". There is no mention of male pleasure in the lyrics, but a focus on female pleasure. "WAP" puts women into the spotlight, allowing them to dominate during the whole song's sexual discourse. The provocation is omnipresent, and this is how the two artists want to assert their personal and sexual freedom.

As soon as it was released, "WAP" created a scandal. The song was seen as very vulgar and coarse by a big part of the audience, including some politicians expressing their views on Twitter. James Bradley, a Republican stated that "Cardi B & Megan Thee Stallion are what happens when children are raised without God and without a strong father figure. Their new 'song' (which I heard accidentally) made me want to pour holy water in my ears and I feel sorry for future girls if this is their role model" (in Brown).

Former Republican Congressional candidate DeAnna Lorraine, also complained through two tweets that “Cardi B & Megan Thee Stallion just set the entire female gender back by 100 years with their disgusting & vile ‘WAP’ song” and “If Cardi B & Megan Thee Stallion think that their vile song did anything to empower women they are completely wrong. No radio station should play that trash, censored or uncensored” (in Brown). Of course, many disagreed, and the song did find a large audience. As Holt writes:

These ludicrous critiques show, once again, that sex is only a taboo expression in music when women—specifically women of color—explore it. Love-making, sex, fucking, or whatever you might call it, isn’t a new theme in music. In fact, many of America’s “greatest hits” were tracks from Lynyrd Skynyrd, George Michael, Pearl Jam, and other male artists who explored sex and drugs in their lyrics. So why do we only hear criticism like this when artists like Cardi and Megan do it?

### The Video

The director of the music video is Collin Tilley. He presents many very sexy scenes with a variety of women dancing in a voluptuous way, principally Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion in the role of indomitable and sensual women. Their strength is symbolized by wild dangerous animals surrounding them. In this context, they appear to be confident, fearless and powerful. We can contemplate them wandering in a sumptuous mansion whose decoration symbolizes sensuality; live panthers, white tigers, and snakes meet there golden, naked statues. The video features cameos by female celebrities that the two singers want to endorse or celebrate. Kylie Jenner, the television star, the singers Normani, Rosalía, Latto, Sukihana, and actor Rubi Rose are there to present examples of women free from the patriarchy.

Additionally, the video portrays other women demonstrating their sexual prowess, through sensual dance and gesture. All along the video, no man appears, and this can be surprising because in their lyrics the two rappers are directly talking to men (“Spit in my mouth, look at my eyes”, for example). Notwithstanding, we can question whether this song is really addressed to men. Perhaps it is only addressed to women, in order to show them that they should not be afraid to claim their libido. Also, we can view it as a criticism against the habitual presence of hypersexualized women in male artists’ music videos. Here, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion choose freely to sexualize themselves and offer proof that it is possible to produce a sexual video without any men, even when heterosexual desire is the object of the song.

### The Song and the Video

The song and the video, contrary to their many critics’ negative opinions, may be seen as examples of women’s empowerment. Indeed, women are represented as free and powerful in both. Instead of believing that they are disparaging for women, we could think that a modern and progressive femininity is represented in song and video, led by the two singers. As Koku reminds readers,

Meg and Cardi’s loud, empowering exclamations made an impact, but they’re not the first. Women—and female rappers in particular have always talked about sex.

Together, they are following in the footsteps of artists including Lil Kim, Trina, Missy Elliott and Khia (who was responsible for the iconic 00s anthem “My Neck, My Back”). And yet, such frank discussion still brings out a combination of wonder and disgust in many people.

Women are sexualizing their bodies by choice, which overturns patriarchal codes and deconstructs the objectification of women. Furthermore, they fight against the stereotype of the submissive woman, assuming both their sensuality and their sexuality. They reclaim this sexuality that is usually imposed onto them, and the pleasure that goes with it. The critics show that there is still much inequality between the two sexes. There is no objection if a male artist talks about his libido and sexual performance in great detail; for men, explicit lyrics and misogyny seem to be the acceptable norm. But when a woman does the same, she receives plenty of criticism. This proves that society still looks down upon sexually powerful women, especially when they are Black like the two singers. Likewise, a woman is allowed to be a sexual object when a man decides so, but when a woman wants to use her body in a sexual way, willingly, this is problematic. On top of that, a strong sorority between the two artists and the other women can be observed in the video, which suppresses the stereotype of a constant competition between women. All in all, the song represents everything that a patriarchal society does not expect from a woman, which seems to be disturbing for some people, given the numerous negative reviews. Despite being controversial, Cardi B’s song provides us with a new narrative to digest, which becomes a major turning point in pop music culture. This is done by the talent and provocation of two young women, who have succeeded in creating a very modern hymn to feminism.

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# SZA, 'Good Days': A Mantra to Remind Ourselves That There Is Always Better Days Ahead Of Us

Ana Ferrer Soler

Released: 25 December 2020

Album: *Good Days*

Label: Top Dawg, RCA

Genre: Alternative R&B, neo-soul, psychedelic soul

Length: 4:39

Songwriters: Solána Rowe, Carlos Muñoz, Carter Lang, Christopher Ruelas, and Jacob Collier

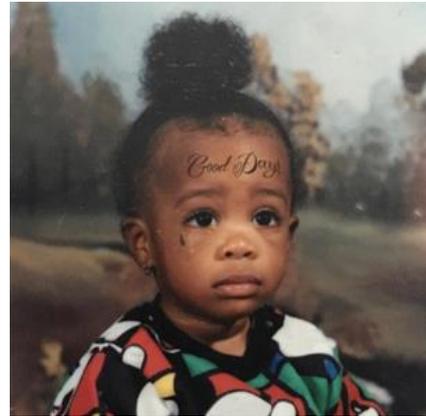
Producers: Solána Rowe, Carter Lang, Loshendrix, and Nascent

Lyrics: <https://www.billboard.com/music/lyrics/sza-good-days-lyrics-9507972/>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p3zZoraK9g>

Director: SZA



## The Singer

Solána Imani Rowe, known professionally as SZA, was born on 8 November 1989 in St. Louis, Missouri to a well-off family; she was later raised in Maplewood, New Jersey. Her parents had quite important jobs: her father was an executive producer at news channel CNN while her mother was an executive at AT&T, a multinational conglomerate company. Religion has been an important factor in SZA's life since early childhood. She had been born to a Christian mother and a Muslim father but was raised as an orthodox Muslim. However, heartbreakingly and due to the September 11 attacks of 2001, Rowe was subjected to severe bullying in seventh grade and she had to stop wearing her hijab outside her home. Her faith and Islamic connections still are very important, key props in the foundations of her life, as she mentions in an interview for the radio show HOT 97 FM:

"It's like the belief in one God, all the pillars of Islam et cetera, and I think those are ideas that will never leave me, those make sense in my spirit. It's the way that I connect with God; it has always made sense to me. I think I would love to wear my hijab but I feel like I don't wanna wear my hijab and talk crazy on stage and be in videos with Travis Scott. Like I don't wanna be disrespectful because I have too much love and respect for the religion, for my father, and for myself".

When Rowe decided that she wanted to devote her life to making music, she formed her professional name using the Supreme Alphabet of the Five-Percenter—a Black nationalist movement influenced by Islam, founded in 1964 in the Harlem district of Manhattan, New York City by Allah the Father (formerly Clarence 13X)—and also under the influence from rapper RZA of the famous Wu-Tang Clan. Thus, the S stands

for either 'savior' or 'sovereign', while the last two letters in her stage name stand for Zig-Zag and Allah (the name is pronounced 'seeza').

SZA started her singing career by self-releasing two EPs: *See.SZA.Run* on 29 October 2012 and *S* on 10 April 2013. The two EPs generated quite a buzz online, and since the reviews from the music critics were very positive, the president of the record label TDE became interested. In 2013, SZA became TDE's first female artist, soon publishing a variety of singles and featuring in many other artists' songs. Finally, she made her official debut with the studio EP *Z*, which charted at number thirty-two on the UK R&B Charts and at number thirty-nine on the USA *Billboard* 200. After releasing a couple more singles and another EP, SZA focused entirely on her debut album with RCA Records; she wrote songs as well for other female artists such as Beyoncé and Rihanna. The process of writing and producing the album, titled *Ctrl*, took longer than expected; it was supposed to be released in 2015 but it was delayed to 2017, though the quality of the album made the wait worth it. *Ctrl* exceeded expectations and gathered universal acclaim from music critics, ranking incredibly well for a debut album in most music charts and even going platinum. *Ctrl* was named best album of 2017 by the American news magazine *Time* and earned her five Grammy nominations, including Best New Artist. SZA gained even more fame by featuring in songs by well-known artists such as Justin Timberlake or DJ Khaled. Most of these singles broke records, specially her collaborations with the pop band Maroon 5 and the rapper Kendrick Lamar.

The artist's unique vocal style has gained SZA much popularity due to its "vapory husk and sky-high falsettos" (Muller); her vocals have been called "chillwave" and "ethereal" (Sargent). SZA had always been very passionate about her own songwriting (she enjoys writing and reading poetry as well), mentioning in an interview for *Billboard* how "I just kind of freestyle them off the top of my head. Whatever comes to my mind I just let it out the way it comes, which sometimes doesn't make any sense even to me" (in Ugwu). SZA's music style has been described as alternative R&B, synthetic pop and soul, and neo-soul but it clearly has taken influences from a wide variety of genres beyond these which include hip hop, indie rock, witch house, chillwave elements, minimalist R&B, cloud rap, etc. This is why music critic Michael Madden, has described SZA's style as not "R&B, pop, soul, or one thing at all", but a versatile mix of all of them.

## The Song

Before releasing "Good Days", SZA first teased the song via one of her Instagram stories on 15 July 2020. The song was originally featured as the outro of the music video for the single "Hit Different", released in September 2020, and the artist tweeted then about how "this song is in clearance as we speak" (in Bloom). This led to speculation by music critics and fans that it would later be released as a B-side to "Hit Different". Nevertheless, a week before the release of this single, SZA finally confirmed that "Good Days" would be coming out before 2021 —only to release it as a surprise drop on 25 December 2020 with Jacob Collier's additional vocals featured in it. Later, SZA revealed through her Twitter account that she had started writing the song during a music session on Carter Lang's birthday party and she had "finished it randomly recently".

The single was dubbed by musical critics as a nostalgic track where SZA sings about a past love that went wrong, and is now soul-searching for her true self and rejoicing freely on her life. The pop music critic Caitlin White highlighted in her review that the song is “a sad but optimistic (track) that yearns after just what the title names, and manages to hit much more of a melodic, narrative-driven tone that puts it more in line with her *CTRL* output”. “Good Days” may talk about a former love that broke SZA’s heart and destroyed her self-esteem, yet the song is mainly about finding hope in the darkness. Through the lyrics, we see how the artist tries to move away from the negativity of her past and present, trying to look forward to a much more positive future.

It is no secret that SZA dealt with severe depression in 2020 when she lost her beloved grandmother, whom she was extremely close with as she has mentioned in multiple interviews, and she had to work hard to get out of that dark hole. The singer mentioned in a YouTube fan video that the song is a mantra to remind herself that there is hope, that she must move on and choose to feel better. What is more, in her heartfelt comment on the video she adds that:

“Good days is about not being sure... not sure hope is still a thing, not sure better is coming, not sure any of even it matters. It’s an acknowledgement we’re all in the same ugly chaotic beautiful existence. We’re all shattered and stretched beyond our means in all Ways. Good days is a reminder we’re all struggling to find and feel a connection. To believe everyday has the tiniest possibility to be better than the last is what it’s all about. Possibility!! A SLIVER of hope... not even a whole lot. A reminder to OURSELVES... that a sliver is sometimes all u need”. (in Rowe)

As we can see in her comment above, the single is more than your standard “getting over a harsh break up” song. It is about existence: how chaotic but beautiful life can be. It is a reminder that life is not easy but that is the beauty of it, to hope that the next day might be better than our today and to keep a positive disposition; that we are all going through different things while trying to find deep connections that could bring us happiness, love, and other positive outcomes. Furthermore, this is why she keeps mentioning that there are good days ahead in her mind, because bygones need to stay as bygones, and we all need to live in the present instead of wasting our time lamenting all that went wrong in our life.

SZA did a great job transmitting all of what she mentioned in her comment in the famous single, for not only the music critics but the fans as well understood the meaning behind those lyrics, and it made the track become a smashing hit in just a couple of weeks. Moreover, it has been nominated as Best R&B Song in the 64th Grammy Awards, but the result of whether it wins or not is still pending.

## The Video

The single has two official music videos directed by SZA herself. The first one, released on 30 December 2020 is the official lyric video where we see SZA singing the song while the lyrics written in a smoky white font appear on the screen. SZA is wearing a tan bikini and her hair is braided with beads, which contrasts heavily with the background where we see a collage of smashed and destroyed furniture in wooden tones. The second one, which is the official music video, was released on 5 March 2021. Throughout the video

we see SZA experience a drug-induced psychedelic experience, stuck waist down in a mound of earth on an Alice-in-Wonderland inspired garden/forest and pole dancing in a library as well. In the film, the artist envisions herself as a magic mushroom that is growing in this bewitching, natural garden/forest, where she sings and dances among other fungi. This footage is juxtaposed, as mentioned above, with scenes of SZA pole-dancing elegantly in a library that is stacked high with books. Finally, the artist, who is still experiencing this mushroom-induced experience, eventually finds herself at a gas station, out of that magic forest and the big library; there she pole-dances to a minute-long snippet of one of her new songs, "Shirt".

There are intriguing parallels between the music video and Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*. In both works we find a woman who remains always stuck up to her waist in a mound of earth but through her routines (dancing ones in the music video, mundane daily ones in the play) and prattling (singing in the music video, talking in the play), she remembers past happiness and reminds herself that there are good days ahead. However, SZA has only mentioned *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll as her inspiration for the video. Thus, the many parallels drawn above between the famous play and the music video might be just a wonderful and curious coincidence.

### The Song and the Video

As noted, SZA directed both official videos, credited as Solana, so it is safe to assume that she made her own choices. The mushroom-induced trip can be thus read as a representation of what she is conveying with the lyrics, about how she feels stuck in the negativity of the past and that of a failed relationship, and must work hard to wiggle herself out of that dark place to be free from those shackles. After fighting to free herself from that oppressing mound of earth, SZA dances happily as if rejoicing in her freedom and the beauty of life. In addition, we see shots of her wearing a dress made of big sparkly jewels, which make her look as if she is shining from happiness. This is another representation of what SZA is singing in her lyrics, that there are many good days to come, and they are full of hope and happy moments.

Lastly, all this footage is intercut with scenes of SZA in a library, where there are towers of books all over its bookshelves, and she is seen reading old books while spinning around and pole-dancing in a beautiful, dazzling bikini, completely unbothered by any comments or anyone. She is free to think and do whatever she pleases, and if she wants to dance and prance around dressed as she likes in her private library or read, she can do so. This is not about sexualizing her body for the male gaze but enjoying her freedom for herself.

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## Taylor Momsen, 'And so It Went': A Tale of War for Liberation

Aixa Aranda Salas

Released: 8 January 2021

Album: *Death By Rock n'Roll* (by The Pretty Reckless)

Label: Fearless

Genre: Grunge

Length: 4:28

Songwriters: Taylor Momsen and Ben Philips

Producers: Taylor Momsen, Ben Philips and Jonathan Wyman

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/The-pretty-reckless-and-so-it-went-lyrics>

Music video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9W-nlfhh8Uo&ab\\_channel=PrettyRecklessVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9W-nlfhh8Uo&ab_channel=PrettyRecklessVEVO)

Directors: Taylor Momsen and Jon J.



### The Singer

Taylor Momsen (St. Louis, Missouri, 1993), was almost born into show business. Her first acting job at the age of two followed shortly after her signing up with prestige modeling agency Ford Models; four years later, at the age of six, she starred alongside Jim Carrey in *The Grinch*, a film for which she received three nominations for different awards. It was when recording *The Grinch's* song "Where Are You Christmas" that Momsen discovered what would become her true passion and destiny, music, though after the movie, Momsen continued acting and modeling for a whole decade. Her taste for rock music had already been acquired and nurtured by her father's influence. Momsen began songwriting at the age of five; by the age of eight, she had already sold a song (see Andaloro). But it was when she first stepped into the recording studio for *The Grinch* that everything came together for her:

"It was such an impactful moment in my life because it made me go 'I wanna do music for the rest of my life; I love being in a recording studio, I love being behind a microphone and I love everything about it', and that was really... It was a huge turning point and put me in a position of the mindset to be where I am now". (in Audouin)

By the time Momsen was fourteen, she signed up with IMG Models, and more importantly, she got a role on The CW's hit show *Gossip Girl* (2007-12), which allowed her to relocate to New York City. There she met producer Kato Khandwala and future bandmate Ben Philips. Khandwala stated that the first time he heard her sing: "I was blown away. I was like 'This girl is great'. She's got a distinctive sound—a kind of raw, throaty moan, much deeper than one would expect from someone so young. After listening to some records together, it was clear that we [spoke] the same language" (in

Blonska). Together, the three of them created her first album, *Light Me Up*, and thus, The Pretty Reckless was born.

Momsen's schedule, of course, which was already hectic to begin with, became even more conflicting. It got to a point which she would only sleep about two hours a day; let us not forget that as she herself notes, at this point she was only sixteen (in *Taylor Momsendaily*). Adolescence is by excellence the age for rebellion, a rebellion that will indeed be heightened if one is under the public eye and feasted on by the tabloids. Momsen's image changed then radically; she went from being

“the good, Christian girl next door” to wearing leather, gigantic heels, her distinctive raccoon eye-shadow make-up, and started to sing about going to hell and marrying the devil. The artist got into many feuds, and her adoption of a profoundly sexualized look made it easy for Hollywood to turn against her: the tabloids were allegedly shocked with *The Grinch's* Cindy Lou Who, and some co-stars labelled Momsen a “brat” and “pathetic”. (Garvey)

It was then, at the age of seventeen, when she decided to quit acting and pursue a career in music, which was always, according to her own words, what she had always wanted to do (Walsh online).

When Momsen was twenty-one, The Pretty Reckless released their second studio album, *Going To Hell* (2014). It was very successful: with it, Momsen became the first woman to land three consecutive number one hits on Billboard's Mainstream Rock Chart. The album's release consolidated the band's reputation: if it hadn't been made clear before, they were there, they made rock music, and they played by their own rules. Their controversial lyrics and Momsen's self-sexualized image were at the highest point of their trajectory. Momsen has always affirmed that the nudity, bold outfits, and overall sexualized image were by her own choice. As she grew older, though, she left behind the extravagant and polemic outfits to adopt more casual and toned-down ones. This appeasement of her looks might be a reflection of her personal life, for she has remained outside the public eye for the past several years with no scandals known whatsoever.

## The Song

After the release of their third album, *Who You Selling For* (2016), the band went on tour opening for Soundgarden the night that their lead vocalist, Chris Cornell, a close friend and personal hero to Momsen, died by suicide. She was devastated and canceled every show, only to suffer too the loss of her close friend and long-time producer Kato Khandwala a couple of months afterwards in a road accident. Momsen fell into what she described as a “dark hole of depression and substance abuse” (in Walsh), which led her to consider quitting music and dissolving the band. It was that very same music, though, which helped her overcome that grief and paved the way for recovery. Their fourth album, *Death by Rock n' Roll* (2021), represents this journey from a terrible situation to acceptance, beginning with dark sounds and pain-filled lyrics and evolving into lighter melodies. Therefore, “And So It Went”, the fourth track in the album, is bound to be a darker one.

The song was co-written by Momsen and Philips and co-produced by them and Jonathan Wyman. When talking to *ABC Audio*, Momsen said that it was inspired by “the

state of civil unrest” that the world has been under for the past couple of years (in Johnson). The song is structured in a way that might recall a tale, starting each verse with “and so it went”, narrating a story about unfortunate but expectable events unfolding after a critical situation. With each verse, the song deepens into a very vivid story, reporting the tale and triumph of what appears to be a revolution. The lyrics contain plenty of rough and aggressive vocabulary: bullets, fists, fires, bodies, cry, scream, etc. With it, the song characterizes the revolution depicted as a bloody one, attacking with violence the established power that has dehumanized society and claims their identity back. Momsen sings “you are not the king / I am not the fool”, “the world does not belong to you / it belong to me”, or “they’re the fuckin’ human race”.

The production and music contribute to the storytelling as well, from the guitar riffs in-between verses sounding like explosions and giving this battle-like feeling, to an eerie-echoey effect in the third verse when the story narrates how the enemy has “nowhere to run, nowhere to hide”. The chorus sounds like a marching song. The first verse is sung only by Momsen, the second one by a double-layered voice, and the third one by a choir of children, giving the impression of people progressively joining the revolution and alluding to other protest songs such as “Another Brick in the Wall” (1979) by Pink Floyd.

Despite singing this war-tale, though, the singer/narrator does not feel (or is not) amongst the rebels. “And so it went” is sung from the perspective of an external narrator: “*the children* lost their minds”, “*they* said...”. This could be a mere narrating device, but some lines in the first-person singular situate the narrator reporting from inside the story: “it’s too much *for me* to take”, “*I* can hear them scream”. Additionally, if the band’s career is considered, it can be noticed how evocative of their song “Heaven Knows” this one is, both in terms of structure and themes. In the previous one, Momsen includes herself amongst the participants both in the lyrics and the video, which is not the case for either with “And So it Went”. Furthermore, it is as she is talking to someone else, who is on the enemy side: “don’t *you* think they know”, “*you* had so much of everything / but still, *you* wanted more”. In the song’s bridge, there appears to be a moment of vulnerability. This is sung in a lullaby-like style accompanied only by a harpsichord, and there Momsen declares some closeness to this enemy: “all these eyes upon us but no one seems to see / that you and me are just the same as God made it to be / but you’re much too close to me”. Be that as it may, the presence of “but” and “too” indicate that this proximity generates discomfort in the singer-narrator. Nonetheless, the rebels win the war and the defeat of the enemy announces itself in the final lines: “you had so much of everything / but still you wanted more”, with the past tense indicating that the enemy is no longer in possession of anything.

The song features Raise Against the Machine’s Tom Morello, who also was the lead guitarist for Audioslave, whose lead singer was no other than the late Chris Cornell. Those two lines are very similar to the final ones of the band’s “What You Are” (“I gave you everything / but then you wanted more”), a song that depicts the story of a man overcoming a toxic relationship. It is not clear if the relationship was with a person or a drug addiction, but it was a toxic and co-dependent relationship nevertheless; perhaps the closeness to the enemy in “And So It Went” is related to this idea. Therefore, while paying homage to Cornell alongside his former bandmate, “And So It Went” replicates a

story about an abusive relationship though putting it into the perspective of a socially oppressed group rallying against their oppressor.

### The Video

The video for “And So It Went”, co-directed by Momsen and Jon J, who had already worked with the band on previous occasions, depicts the story narrated in the lyrics. Momsen stated that she wanted to create a music video that doesn’t distract from the music but embellishes it, though she does indeed focus on the visuals (in Momsen). The video opens with the empty streets of New York filmed using a black and white filter, to be filled seconds later by three children in pig masks and a fourth one in a wolf mask, reinforcing the song’s tale-like structure. They roam around the streets, chase each other, and, most importantly, they riot. They destroy urban furniture, they trespass into a crime scene and they re-enact almost everything that the lyrics narrate: they are “the children that lost their minds”.

Momsen herself appears in three different settings, which could be interpreted as her portraying three characters. We see the first one wearing a crown and a pink Versace suit, holding a scepter and sitting on a throne. At first, this character might appear to be the narrator, but it could be interpreted differently; with it, Momsen portrays “the enemy”. Let us remember the constant reference to the lyrics; “you are not the king, I am not the fool”. It can also be noticed how, as it happens before a revolution, the enemy is ever-present; at the beginning of the video, this character’s presence is predominant over the other two. When portraying it, Momsen moves and dances in what appears a conceited and even cocky manner. Additionally, this is the only segment of the video that depicts any colors; the rest is in black and white. This character, therefore, portrays the established power and oppressing force that the rebels are to overthrow.

On the opposing side and introduced to us a few seconds later, we meet the second character of Momsen’s portrayals. This one is in a white space in contrast to the previous one, which is in a dark room: this contrast might indicate the dichotomy of good and evil that they represent, even though it could merely be a way of contrasting them. She is filmed here using a black and white filter, just like the “children that lost their minds”, situating her on their side. Thus, this character represents the other fighting force: the rebels. In this segment, her movements are violent, raw, and fight-like. It also must be noted how, unlike the other two characters, she is not alone: she shares her space with the band.

The third image, and the last one we meet, seems to be in-between these opposing forces. This character appears to be trapped, her upper body and face covered by a ripped mesh stocking, or similar, with only an eye free of it; thus, she is free enough to see but not to move. Her movements are very varied: beginning in constricted gestures, they evolve into a more free movement of her arms. As a remarkable difference from the other two, the shots in which she appears are almost static, and despite her moving and spinning, she does not leave her original position. As regards color, she is again in between the other two characters: neither filmed in black and white nor displaying any colors, either. This character, then, might represent what is between the two fighting sides, perhaps society or even Momsen herself.

These three characters appear to be interconnected as whenever one moves, the other two are affected. The fragments of these characters moving in their own spaces and interacting with each other proceed throughout the video in a very rapidly paced manner, contrasted with the images of the children rioting. This gives, with each passing second, the feeling of escalating violence, which goes along with the warlike lyrics, but suddenly stops when the bridge is reached. As noted, this resembles a moment of vulnerability amidst the violence. The fast-paced succession of images stops, and we are presented with what appears to be a softer side of the “enemy”, finding herself at peace with the “trapped” character. However, this peace does not last long, and with the re-appearance of the third character, the fight is resumed. In this way, the battle goes amidst the explosion that Tom Morello’s guitar solo constitutes.

During this guitar riff, the alternation between images becomes chaotic; this could point to the revolution reaching its highest and most violent moment. It is then when, amid the rapidly changing scenes, the “trapped” character begins to break the web, setting herself free. After it, we see for the last time the “enemy” reclining back on the throne and ceasing the fight. Then, the “rebel” character appears once again in a confident, defiant pose: she is the last one standing and, thus, has won the fight. It can even be assumed that the two remaining characters become one, this being indicated by a final head tilt commenced by one and finished by the other. The video briefly hints, though, that this “trapped” character has always belonged to the rebel side, for she appears for less than a second in the “rebel” space (minute 2:55). From this perspective, the video can represent a reclamation of self-identity and society. Both have always belonged to the people, but they have been stolen. The theft leads to a fight against the imposed and oppressing force that is defeated through a revolution.

### The Song and the Video

While being almost identical in meaning, themes, and sense, the interpretation of song and video might be slightly different, but in all likelihood, they are complementary of each other. Following the band’s constant themes and ideals, it prompts to break away from the established and imposed. But how does this function when examined through the lens and question of female empowerment? Can it be considered a rebellious message?

The song, lacking any presence of elements that can be related to the subject, gives way to the sole analysis of the video. In it, as stated, Momsen portrays three different characters, none of them being sexualized, though this it is not an element that has been absent from her career. Both the video and the song are deeply reminiscent of the band’s “Heaven Knows”, in which both artist and video are sexualized, as most of the band’s production at the time. As noted in the first section, the abandonment of the sexualized look is probably a reflection of Momsen’s growth into an adult, likely having little to do with any social ideology.

Furthermore, her being a beautiful, wealthy white woman has been weaponized against her for not breaking away from the canonically established presences of the media. But why should she? The constant idea maintained throughout her career is to encourage people to freely express themselves, fighting against whoever prevents them from doing so. She never proclaimed herself a hero for any cause: she merely did what she wanted to, which might be the most self-empowering thing to do. Through her self-

produced, self-written and self-directed song and video, she conveys a message in favor of breaking away from a toxic, imposed situation and rebelling against it. And as both the video and song convey, it is only after everyone fights together that, with this aid, the singer-narrator can break free. Whether she is being set free from inner conflicts or an external oppressing force, Momsen, as she has always done, faces it head on with the power of her music.

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## Demi Lovato, 'Dancing with the Devil': Almost in Heaven

Andrea Hernández Flores

Released: 26 March 2021

Album: *Dancing with the Devil...The Art of Starting Over*

Label: Island Records

Genre: Pop

Length: 4:04

Songwriters: Demi Lovato, Mitch Allan, Bianca 'Blush' Atterberry, and John Ho

Producer: Mitch Allan

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Demi-lovato-dancing-with-the-devil-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAg69LaLIS0>

Director: Demi Lovato and Michael D. Ratner



### The Singer

Demi Lovato, whose full name is Demetria Devonne Lovato, was born on 20 August in 1992 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. However, after the divorce of their parents, when Demi was two years old, they moved to Dallas, Texas, and grew up there. Demi's mother is Dianna De La Garza; she used to be a cheerleader and struggled with bulimia, which would later influence Demi. Their father was Patrick Lovato, a man who used to struggle with alcoholism and mental health issues and eventually died from cancer. Lovato has one sister called Dallas, who is also part of the entertainment industry, one stepsister on their mother's side called Maddie and another on their father's side called Amber, with whom they spoke at first at twenty years old. They are of Spanish Mexican descent as their father was.

Lovato is a singer, songwriter and actor and their music genre is pop, pop-rock and R&B. They have published seven studio albums, two video albums, five extended plays, forty-four singles and music videos, and eleven promotional singles. They also wrote one book called *Staying Strong: 365 Days a Year*, and filmed three documentaries: *Stay Strong*, *Simply Complicated* and *Dancing with the Devil*. Lovato has sold 2.7 million albums, and they have 23.8 million song downloads and 5.6 billion streams, only in the USA. In addition, they were nominated for the Grammy awards twice, three times for the Brit awards and four times for the Billboard music awards, among others.

Lovato grew up in the public eye, and that took a toll on them. They started participating in beauty pageants aged only seven years old, as they have often said, those contests made their body issues worse. At the age of four, for instance, they were already wondering when their stomach was going to be flat. Their acting career eventually started in 2002 when Lovato was around nine years old and starred as Angela in the children's TV show *Barney and Friends* along with their best friend at that time, Selena Gomez. It

was not until 2008 when they starred in the Disney Channel original movie *Camp Rock* that their music career started; in the same year their first album called *Don't Forget* was released. The next year, in 2009, Lovato got their first role as a main character in a Disney Channel original TV show called *Sonny with a Chance*. They also starred in another Disney channel original movie called *Princess Protection Program*, again with Selena Gomez. During that period of their life, they made some appearances in famous TV shows, such as *Just Jordan* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Later that year, their second album *Here We Go Again* came out, this was Lovato's pop-rock era. In 2010, the movie *Camp Rock 2: The Final Jam* came out. In 2011, their third album *Unbroken* was released. The following year, Demi became a judge for *The X Factor USA*, which won them a Guinness World Record for being the youngest judge in that contest. In 2013, their fourth album *Demi* came out and they also appeared in the widely known show *Glee*. Their albums *Confident*, *Tell Me You Love Me* and *Dancing with the Devil...The Art of Starting Over* were released in 2015, 2017 and 2021 respectively.

Lovato has had different mental health issues as long as they can remember; consequently, they did not believe they would live for long, as they said in an interview for *American Magazine* in 2016: "I lived fast, and I was going to die young. I didn't think I would make it to 21" (quoted in Webber). They suffered from the eating disorder anorexia nervosa from a very young age, influenced as noted by their mother, and struggled with bulimia for a long time. Lovato also self-harmed due to the bullying they suffered at school because they were, supposedly, fat; the horrifying bullying included all of their classmates' signing a suicide petition. After begging their mother, they were finally homeschooled. Lovato subsequently had rough teenage years; they started using drugs when they were underage with some of their Disney Channel colleagues, such as Miley Cyrus. The drugs helped numbing the pain they felt after going through many hard situations. Lovato was raped when they were fifteen on set, filming *Camp Rock*, as they explained in their docuseries *Dancing With the Devil* and later told *The Guardian*:

"We were hooking up, but I said, 'Hey, this is not going any farther, I'm a virgin and I don't want to lose it this way.' And that didn't matter to him, he did it anyway. And I internalized it and I told myself it was my fault because I still went in the room with him, I still hooked up with him". (in Horton)

Lovato did not confirm who this person was, but claimed this was a person they had to see every day after the assault. This man was never punished for raping them. In fact, he came back to film the second movie of the franchise. They did report the assault but this was hushed. Lovato did not want the rape to be publicized, either, since Disney Channel girls were supposed to be "innocent virgins".

Lovato came out as non-binary earlier this year and goes by the pronouns they/them. They are, obviously, a mental-health and anti-bullying advocate, and a LGBTIQ+ rights activist and have always shown support towards the black community. As they wrote for *Vogue* "After taking some time to educate myself, what I've learned is that to be a good ally, you need to be willing to protect people at all costs". They are very politically active, openly declaring how much they hate gun violence and racial injustices. They wrote a song during the election period in the USA called "Commander in Chief", criticizing the then President of the USA, Donald Trump.

Lovato have been to rehabilitation facilities a few times after relapsing on anorexia or addiction. In 2012, they went to rehab for the first time after punching one of their backup dancers in the eye. Lovato realized they could not overcome addiction without help and signed themselves in a facility. After being discharged they made public that they had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, although the diagnosis was eventually changed to ADHD. On 24 July 2018, Demi suffered an overdose and a near-death experience, which is narrated, precisely, in the song “Dancing with the Devil”, to which I turn next.

### The Song

“Dancing with the Devil” is the lead single of Demi Lovato’s seventh studio album, *Dancing with the devil...The art of starting over*. It was their most important comeback single after being inconspicuous for three years. As Rebeca Bernat observed in her review of “Dancing with the Devil”:

The song does an immaculate job of expressing their difficulties with remaining sober and unlocks a part of them that we had not seen yet. “Dancing with the Devil” is not only an explanation of the events that took place in July of 2018, but also a self-reflection. They are speaking their true thoughts on the experience, on what went wrong, and tries to make the listener understand what it felt like to be in their position mentally.

The song narrates how Lovato lived the worst day of their life, the day they almost died of an overdose. Lovato wrote the song with the collaboration of songwriters Mitch Allan, Bianca ‘Blush’ Atterberry, and John Ho. The song’s genre is pop; nonetheless, it has also been described as a fusion of soul-rock and R&B. Its title “Dancing with the Devil” is a common metaphor used when someone does something reckless that could potentially end their life. Demi Lovato danced with the devil for a long time but survived to tell their story and learn from it.

The song describes their lack of control over addiction. At the beginning Lovato sings “It’s just a little red wine, I’ll be fine”, thinking that a glass of wine cannot undermine their sobriety, though addicts never stop drinking or using after lapsing if only a little. They later mention “I’ve been good, don’t I deserve it?” as they had been sober for six years, hence, they deserved a drink in a moment of weakness. After the chorus they say “It’s just a little white line, I’ll be fine”; this is not about wine anymore, which only shows how they have already lost control. Lovato is a Christian so there are a few religious references in the song. For example, they say “Almost made it to heaven / It was closer than you know”, since they did not just have a heart attack but two strokes after the overdose. They also beg the Lord’s pardon.

The lyrics are full of courageous honesty as Demi frankly addresses their issues with drug abuse and the endless spiral of addiction. They bring up some themes that might sound familiar to the addicts, such as bargaining. A form of bargaining is when people think that they can use drugs during a certain situation without losing control. Addicts decide to go back to drug-taking so they can regain power over their lives, in Demi Lovato’s case they wish to end this “twisted reality”. Other themes present in the song are denial and lack of awareness, which can be grim combined with mental health

issues. In the last part of the song, they express their regret and how sorry they are as they apologize for dancing with the devil.

On the whole, “Dancing with the devil” is and remains a powerful song as it explains Lovato’s spiral of addiction in a raw way, without holding back. With the lyrics of the song, Demi shows that they are not only a breathtaking singer, but also an astonishing storyteller.

### The Video

The official video of “Dancing with the Devil” was directed by Lovato themselves and by Michael D. Ratner, who also directed their documentary of the same title (2021). In the video the singer relates the fateful events that took place on the night Lovato suffered the overdose, 24 July 2018. The visuals recreate specific details of that night, for instance, Demi is seen wearing the same clothes and hairstyle they were wearing when the overdose took place. They are seen drinking at a bar and later opening a bag at their house, in which the spectator is led to believe there are drugs. They are later shown unconscious and fighting for their life at a hospital bed hooked up to machines. Some visual effects used for the video, such as a blurry effect with the lights diffused on mirrors, show the audience what Demi was feeling as they were progressively overindulging on drugs and alcohol. In the video we can also see some of Lovato’s actual relatives, however, their faces cannot be seen. They probably decided to film it this way because Demi Lovato woke up temporarily legally blind and could not see them. The video describes exactly what Demi is saying with the lyrics, it makes it easier to understand them. It shows realistic scenes of an addict, so even though it can be triggering for some it can also help raise awareness of addiction. Demi Lovato wanted to explain what really happened so that people that admired them could finally know the truth coming from their own mouth.

### The Song and the Video

The song and video “Dancing with the Devil” might bring about debatable topics on how Demi Lovato decided to share such a personal and traumatic experience. After the release of the single, part of the audience felt grateful to them for sharing the events in such a truthful way; however, other people attacked them for oversharing and making profit of their near-death experience. A vast majority of people even argued that Demi Lovato only wrote songs about traumatic experiences that had taken place in their life. Despite granting that a couple of songs about their struggles would be inspiring and brave, nevertheless they did not enjoy the fact that Demi only exploits traumatic experiences and uses them to create new songs, music videos, and even documentaries.

It is also important to mention how beautiful they look throughout the whole video, even when they were at the hospital fighting for their life. In short, they could be exploiting their issues and struggles to create music, or they could just be willing to share their awful moments to set an example to people and show that getting better is possible, but also is relapsing. Regardless, it is undeniable that Demi Lovato accomplished their goal

of showing their truth of their near-death experience with lyrics and a music video that do not fail to show the downward spiral of addiction in all its brutality.

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# Olivia Rodrigo 'good 4 u': A Melancholic Upbeat Song About Breaking Up

Alba Guijarro Sánchez

Released: 14 May 2021

Album: *Sour*

Label: Geffen and Interscope Records

Genre: Pop, rock, punk, grunge, emo, alternative styles

Length: 2:58

Songwriters: Olivia Rodrigo, Dan Nigro, Hayley Williams, and Josh Farro

Producer: Dan Nigro

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Olivia-rodrigo-good-4-u-lyrics>

Music video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNi\\_6U5Pm\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNi_6U5Pm_o)

Director: Petra Collins



## The Singer

Olivia Isabel Rodrigo was born in Murrieta, California, on 20 February 2003. She grew up in Temecula, also in California, with her father Chris and her mother Jennifer, who from a young age introduced her to alternative rock. Olivia's passion for music was obvious from an early age; indeed, she started singing lessons and participated in various contests aged only five. Rodrigo also started learning how to play piano at the age of nine; despite disliking it at first, she realized that playing the piano helped her in the process of writing songs. Those were mainly focused on heartbreak, though during an interview with *People* in 2021 she granted that "(I) literally wrote breakup songs before I ever held a boy's hand" (in Mier).

Rodrigo shared another passion with music: acting. When she was six, she took her first acting classes and starred in school productions, but she did not want to stop there. Her first professional job was a leading role in *An American Girl: Grace Stirs Up Success* in 2015, when she was just ten years old. Two years later, her role as Paige Olvera in Disney's show *Bizaardvark* (2016-19) gave her more recognition. In 2019 she was cast in the role of Nini Salazar-Roberts in *High School Musical: The Series* (2019-present). This role would be the one to launch her music career, since Rodrigo kept writing her own songs and shared them on the social media platform Instagram, her account made popular by the show. When the showrunners asked her in 2020 to compose a song for her character Nini, the hit "All I Want" charted on the Billboard Hot 100.

Multiple record labels expressed an interest in Rodrigo after this successful hit and she finally signed with Geffen Records. This was an important decision, since most artists who also started their careers on Disney, like Miley Cyrus, first signed with

Disney's Hollywood Records; Rodrigo, however, did not want to follow that path. In January 2021 she recorded "Drivers License" with producer's Dan Nigro help; the single debuted at number one on Billboard Hot 100, making Rodrigo the youngest performer to accomplish this feat at only seventeen. The song quickly trended on platforms such as Spotify or YouTube as well as the social media platform TikTok, where users lip-synched and covered the song in countless videos. In May of that same year, Rodrigo released her debut album *Sour*, welcomes as "a nimble and lightly chaotic collection of breakup tunes filled with melancholy and mischief" (Horn).

### The Song

"good 4 u" (stylized in lower case) is the sixth track on Olivia Rodrigo's album *Sour* (2021). The song narrates the feelings and emotions that are experienced after a breakup. The rhythm of the song, as well as its character, also contrast in the sense that the lyrics are quite sorrowful and unhappy, but the song follows an upbeat rhythm throughout the 2 minutes and 58 seconds of the song. Many believe that the song is about Rodrigo's relationship with *Bizaardvark* co-star Joshua Bennet. In the first verse, the singer could be referring indeed to the alleged relationship between Bennet and Sabrina Carpenter, which started only weeks after he and Rodrigo broke up. "Well, good for you, I guess you moved on really easily / You found a new girl, and it only took a couple weeks", Rodrigo bitterly sings and later "Now you can be a better man for your brand-new girl". The song would be in this reading about the singer feeling upset by Bennet having moved on so quickly without her. In addition, in the second verse Rodrigo sings "You bought a new car and your career's really taking off", which could be a nod to Bennet's music video for his song "Lie, Lie, Lie" where he appears driving a similar car to the one Rodrigo drives on the video for "Drivers License". Obviously, the name of Joshua's song could also be an answer to Rodrigo's version of their story. In an article for *New York Post*, Andrew Court states that "Teens turned on Bassett, believing he has broken Rodrigo's heart—but the young star is now hitting back in his own new songs, attempting to correct the record". For example, a line in his song "Crisis" reads "Half the s\*\*t you're saying's only half true / Messing with my life as a career move / I can't help but wonder why you won't make it end". Fans have made a connection between these lyrics and Olivia's from most of her songs and agree that this is a clear response to everything she has narrated about their relationship.

The chorus in "good 4 u" is quite bitter since it is obvious that Olivia Rodrigo is not happy for him at all; she speaks sarcastically about how her former boyfriend appears to be doing greatly without her and how she is not feeling the same way: "Well, good for you, you look happy and healthy / Not me, if you ever cared to ask / Good for you, you're doing great out there without me, baby / God, I wish that I could do that". Rodrigo also sings about how she has lost her mind and has not stopped crying "But you're so unaffected, I really don't get it". In the bridge we see how she changes tack and accepts her media persona, saying that maybe she is "too emotional" and blames herself for what happened between the two Disney stars. Finally, Rodrigo's emotions explode, and she ends up connecting her ex-lover's reaction after the breakup to the emotions of a sociopath, since, once again, he has not showed any empathy or sign of sorrow.

## The Video

In the music video, Olivia Rodrigo plays a cheerleader who is trying to get revenge on her ex-boyfriend. She represents the stereotypical self-obsessed cheerleader that the mainstream media has created, and there are different scenes in the video in which she is admiring herself in the mirror or even putting on makeup while she is in a room surrounded by fire. The video starts with close-up shots of Rodrigo putting on makeup and with scenes that anticipate what will happen in the video. Once the music starts, the opening scene resembles the 1999 Japanese film *Audition*, there are two men sitting and observing a single woman on a chair, just like in the film. Another element these productions have in common is that both female protagonists wear black leather gloves while torturing their lovers.

Next, Rodrigo's first appearance with her cheerleader uniform happens when the chorus of the song starts. The upbeat tune along with the backup dancers give a positive and happy impression, but Rodrigo's body language and facial expressions say otherwise; while everyone else is clapping and smiling, she is very static and barely moves, and the moment she smiles, it is obvious that it is done quite sarcastically. It is important to mention that the uniform shown in the video is the exact same one that appears in the 2001 Disney film *The Princess Diaries*. Many fans have speculated, as it was previously mentioned, that this is also linked to Bennet and Rodrigo's romantic relationship:

Olivia's cheer uniform is literally identical to what cheerleader Lana Thomas wears in the iconic Anne Hathaway movie. (...) Lana's ex-boyfriend in the movie is called Josh Bryant and Josh, as *Princess Diaries* fans will remember, is a total fuckboy. Despite being an attractive "Backstreet Boy clone", he is self-obsessed and uses Mia for publicity. Given that Josh is short for Joshua, fans think the link is purposeful and Olivia is comparing Joshua to Josh. (Prance)

When Rodrigo puts on her black leather gloves, she goes to a supermarket and buys gasoline and a bag of chips. From this point on, different scenes of the cheerleaders, close-ups of Rodrigo and a room filled with gasoline are combined all throughout the chorus. When she sings the bridge, she is staring at the camera and caressing it, as well as going around the bedroom which is now starting to burn. In the final verses, Rodrigo is standing in the bedroom, which can be understood to be her ex-boyfriend's, and the background is all on fire. The final scene of the video shows her walking into the woods and swimming into a lake. This scene echoes one of the most famous moments from *Jennifer's Body* (2009), when the main character goes for a swim in a lake after committing her first on-screen murder; both characters' eyes turn red, so this is clearly an allusion to the film. With Olivia Rodrigo being a huge fan of Taylor Swift, we could say that the video also resembles Swift's "Picture to Burn", a video in which she burns her ex-boyfriend's house after finding out he is with another girl. As Ahlgrim notes, "Both videos make use of fire to symbolize revenge and starting over".

## The Song and the Video

The song and the music video are strongly connected, and both complement each other in order to fully understand the story behind the lyrics, though with some differences. First of all, the character portrayed by Olivia Rodrigo fully embodies the image of the crazy ex, which helps give the lyrics a less melancholic, more sarcastic tone. It is also important to note that Rodrigo's acting abilities make the video interesting, since all her facial expressions (especially during the close-up shots) match well the image of the crazy ex. Secondly, the song has an upbeat rhythm that recalls early 2000s pop, and so does the music video with all the references to films from the same era. As noted, the song is the sixth track on the album, and the representation of the number is also present in the music video, from the six mobile phones that appear on the first scene, to the six backup dancers that Rodrigo has during the cheerleading scenes. In short, the imagery of the music video cannot be separated from the emotions that the song transmits, since the whole gives a better understanding of the true message that Rodrigo wanted to show and, most importantly, the feelings that come with putting an end to a relationship with great acrimony.

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## Shirley Manson, 'The Men Who Rule the World': The Feminist Rockstar

Sara Martín

Released: 11 June 2021

Album: *No Gods no Masters* (by Garbage)

Label: Stunvolume

Genre: Industrial rock

Length: 4:27

Songwriters: Shirley Manson, Duke Erikson, Steve Marker, and Butch Vig

Producers: Garbage and Billy Bush

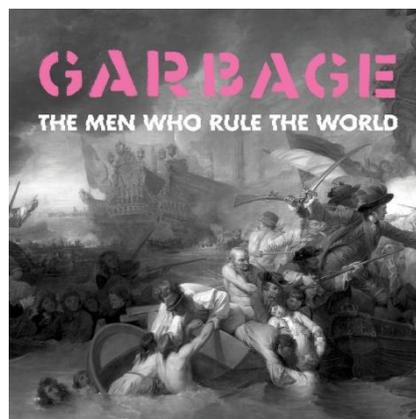
Lyrics:

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/garbage/themenwhoruletheworld.html>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0laRnEgzIA>

Director: Javiera Garcia-Huidobro (Javi Mi Amor)



### The Singer

Shirley Ann Manson, born on 26 August 1966 in Edinburgh, is a Scottish singer, songwriter, musician, and actor. She is the lead singer of alternative rock band Garbage, formed in 1993 in Madison, Wisconsin, by experienced musicians Duke Erikson, Steve Marker and Butch Vig (the producer, among others, of Nirvana). Garbage has sold over seventeen million albums worldwide and is considered one of the best rock bands currently active.

Manson is the daughter of Muriel Flora (née MacKay), a big band singer, and John Mitchell Manson, a university lecturer with connections in the world of jazz. She had a typical middle-class upbringing, with her education partially shaped by the Church of Scotland (her father was her own Sunday School teacher). As a young child, Manson received training in diverse musical instruments and in ballet, attending the City of Edinburgh Music School, where she also became interested in acting. During secondary school Manson endured episodes of bullying, which resulted in depression and self-harm, and in her completely altering her behavior once she befriended a group of rebel teens like herself. Rejected by the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD), Manson, worked at a variety of jobs while she made herself known in Edinburgh's music scene thanks to her original looks and vocal talent.

Manson's career began in her teens with her boyfriend's band Goodbye Mr Mackenzie, which she joined to provide backing vocals. Soon, however, the record labels saw her potential and the band was reformed as Angelfish with Manson as its frontwoman. The music video for their rock song "Suffocate Me", played on MTV, called Garbage's attention; they were then looking for a singer and Manson was called for an audition. Allegedly, she did not pass due to the communication problems between her

and the American members of the band caused by Manson's thick Scottish accent, though she was recruited in a second audition. In 1995, Garbage released an eponymous debut album which was very well received. Next came *Version 2.0* (1998), *Beautiful Garbage* (2001), *Bleed Like Me* (2003) and *Absolute Garbage* (2007), after which Garbage disbanded. When Manson's projected solo album (planned for 2006) did not materialize out of a disagreement with Geffen Records, she prepared to abandon the world of music for acting. In 2008, she played liquid metal T-1001 Terminator Catherine Weaver in the second season of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. Eventually, Garbage reunited and recorded a series of new albums: *Not Your Kind of People* (2012), *Strange Little Birds* (2016), *Version 2.0: 20th Anniversary* (2018), and *No Gods no Masters* (2021).

Manson's reputation as a tough woman and a diva comes both from her Scottish background (see Martín) as from the attitude she had to adopt within the bands she has been involved with. Apparently, her Garbage bandmates saw her initially as little more than a cute sexy singer they could use to establish their brand while Manson saw them, rather, as her own ticket to fame. Their disputes earned her the reputation for toughness but also benefited the band, as many fans appreciated Manson's no-nonsense style and her magnetic stage presence. When playing and in the audiovisual material associated with the band, the petite Manson comes across as the band's leader, her strong, attractive femininity dominating the older, unglamorous masculinity of her bandmates. Manson has always been, besides, a fully participative member of the band's songwriting; in fact, most of their lyrics are hers.

Speaking in 2017 about Garbage's tour with Blondie, Manson commented that Blondie's frontwoman, Debbie Harry, and she herself "are some of the few women left who do what we do in the way that we do it. We're getting rarer and rarer. I think people understand that this breed is dying (...) Literally dying" (in Evans). As she added, she and Harry are songwriters who "aren't chasing pop success" (in Evans) but given that the two of them, Patti Smith, Chrissie Hynde, or Courtney Love are well past fifty, there seems to be no replacement for women in rock. Manson in fact makes a controversial distinction between pop and rock, noting that "Rihanna is the closest thing we have in the pop world to a rockstar (...) If Rihanna wanted to make rock music, I'm sure she could. But unless you're playing rock music, you're not a rockstar" (in Evans). Although Manson claims to enjoy pop, she clearly sees rock as a superior musical category, and the rockstar above the popstar.

This, in any case, has nothing to do with belittling the music of other women. Manson is known to be a staunch feminist and she is just asking to bear in mind the efforts she and others have made to conquer rock, a genre which traditionally has always been in men's hands. As for herself, Manson has modestly declared that

"I haven't achieved anything in my life, not of much importance. I don't know if that will ever be my destiny and I don't care. I'm happy to just be in my seat in my particular corner trying to do my best. I don't give a fuck about fame, I don't give a fuck about legacy, I don't give a fuck about any of that bullshit. I think it's ludicrous and laughable. I'm just not going to waste my time with it." (in Trendell 2019)

## The Song

“The Men Who Rule The World” is the first single from Garbage’s 2021 album *No Gods no Masters*, which Manson has described in a press statement as “our way of trying to make sense of how fucking nuts the world is and the astounding chaos we find ourselves in. It’s the record we felt that we had to make at this time” (in Trendell 2021). The album itself and the song have been both well received, with reviewers often commenting on the freshness and energy that Garbage still transmit after more than twenty-five years together, and with the oldest band member (Erikson) now past seventy.

The lyrics of this overtly political song, by Manson herself, are a direct attack against patriarchy—“The men who rule the world / Have made a fucking mess”—based on outing “The history of power / The worship of success” as the root of all evil. In fact, patriarchy and capitalism are presented as practically the same concern throughout History—“The king is in the counting house / He’s chairman of the board”—with women “All accused of being whores” bearing the brunt of their excesses. Money, “Stuck inside my head / All the fucking time” controls the world, while “The fleecing of the people”, a “crime” capitalism calls “self-preservation”, fills the streets with the homeless. Not only humans but also the animals are victims of this capitalist-patriarchal complex, and so Manson calls for a “mothership” to “save all of the animals” but also “the elders and the kids” and the “great works of genius”. Forcefully, Manson asks “And make it a crime to tell a lie again / And watch those haters bleed”.

In the chorus she sings again and again “The violator, hate the violator / The violator, destroy the violator” making sex crimes and capitalism both offences perpetrated by “the men who rule the world”. Calling for hate and destruction might not be a politically correct action but, then, this is part of Manson’s rockstar radicalism, and we may have respected the patriarchs on the whole too much and for too long.

## The Video

The music video for “The Men Who Rule the World” is an animated film by Chilean director Javiera García-Huidobro (known as Javi Mi Amor). Manson and García-Huidobro met in Chile during the shooting of the latter’s documentary *They Dance Alone* (2021) for the series *Peace, Peace, Now, Now* dealing with women in conflict. Manson conducted the episode, focused on the women who resisted Pinochet’s dictatorship. She made the decision to commission the video, which Javiera shot in a two-week period in constant conversation with Manson. Javiera used her own cut-out collage artwork, filming it analogically as in traditional animation (see Diethelm).

The video is a direct illustration of the song’s lyrics, made in a rather punk style which makes Manson’s vocals sound even more rebellious. She appears transmuted into Fritz Lang’s robotic Maria from *Metropolis* bringing destruction to patriarchy, with an alien touch. The edition of the animation follows very closely the syncopated rhythm of Garbage’s industrial rock, mimicking its beat. In a way, the video is both post-postmodern in its 21<sup>st</sup> century artistic approach to recycling other artwork but also very 1970s in its allusions to street art and graffiti often linked with post-1968 political protest. Perhaps, García-Huidobro’s phallic imagery is too overt, but there is also a touch of humor in the

tentacled, pulpish alien mothership which makes a point of saving Maria/Manson's pet dog. Incidentally, Trump can be spotted among the violators that should be hated and destroyed, as a reminder perhaps that he is still around as a major patriarchal threat.

### The Song and the Video

There are arguably grounds to claim that "The Men Who Rule the World" is the most interesting video released by Garbage, and the song among their best. Although Garbage have a long list of great hits, they are not known particularly for the interest of their videos, which are usually recordings of performances in which, one way or another, Shirley Manson's sex appeal is showcased. The exception to this rule is the truly weird music video for "Push It", which won a high number of MTV awards back in 1998. "The Men Who Rule the World" is, perhaps, even weirder, taking besides into account that the band members are not even seen, and Manson herself appears fragmented, her mouth and eyes superimposed on those of *Metropolis*'s Maria.

Although ageing is no obstacle for women singers to appear in music videos, as the videos by Celine Dion, Jennifer Lopez, and many other women now past-fifty show, and although Manson looks as fascinatingly rebellious now as in her early Garbage period, there is something refreshing in her absence from the video for "The Men Who Rule the World". To begin with, as noted, she made the choice concerning the director and the contents, which indicates that no ageist issues are involved in her absence from the video. In the second place, music videos are stuck in rather repetitive filmic strategies that need a renewal. In that sense, it is important to value Javiera García-Huidobro's contribution not only because she is a woman but also because, as a Chilean artist, she breaks the rules of a music and film industry ruled by men, mainly of Anglo-American origin. If the song is radically feminist, so is Javiera's video. The collaboration between her and Manson turns out to be, then, an example to follow for other women aspiring to feminist rock stardom in art and in music.

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## Doja Cat, 'Woman': The Power of Femininity

Andrea Hernández Flores

Released: 25 June 2021

Album: *Planet Her*

Label: Kemosabe & RCA

Genre: Afropop, afrobeats, pop-rap, R&B, reggae

Length: 2:52

Songwriters: Amala Zandile Dlamini, Jidenna

Mobisson, Lydia Asrat, David Sprecher, Linden Jay,

Aaron Horn, and Ainsley Jones

Producers: Yeti Beats, Linden Jay, Aynzli Jones, and  
Crate Classics

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Doja-cat-woman-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxW5yuzVi8w>

Director: Janelle Monáe and childartiste



### The Singer

Doja Cat, whose full name is Amala Ratna Zandile Dlamini, was born on 21 October 1995, in Tarzana, California, though she moved to the Bronx right away, where she lived with her mother for five years. She has stated that both California and the Bronx hold a special place in her heart. Amala was raised by her mother, who is an American-Jewish painter, but was estranged from her father, an actor and film producer. Amala has mixed South-African, American and Jewish heritage. She chose the name Doja as her artistic nickname from her favorite strain of cannabis, as she said she “used to be heavily addicted to weed and weed culture” (in Stone), and thought that Doja sounded like a girl’s name. As Doja she chose Cat as her surname simply because cats are her favorite animals.

Doja Cat is a singer, rapper and songwriter and has been active since 2012. Her music is influenced by a great variety of artists like Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Beyoncé, or Prince. She feels that her music is “a sponge soaking water” as she told Valentine in an interview for *Paper Magazine* in 2018. Like other artists such as Kehlani or Billie Eilish, Doja also started posting her songs on Soundcloud. However, she did not get recognition until her single “So High” (*Purrr!*, 2014) caught the attention of producers and she signed her first record deal, aged only seventeen. Doja Cat is known for her out-of-the-box music style. In fact, her career actually started after the release of her single “Mooo!” in which she fantasized about being a cow; no wonder this song became a viral meme song. In 2018 her debut studio album, *Amala*, was released but this album was unsuccessful and mostly ignored by the critics. It was not until her single “Juicy” featuring Tyga came out that her album debuted for the first time on the Billboard 200 album chart.

Doja Cat’s second album, *Hot Pink*, came out in November 2019. It had some good reviews and debuted at number nine on Billboard’s 200 album chart. Doja Cat

participated at the beginning of 2020 in the soundtrack for the film *Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey*, with her song “Boss Bitch”, which was elected as one of the best songs of 2020. She was supposed to go on tour during 2020 but the tour was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2021 *Planet Her*, her latest album so far, was released, featuring collaborations with artists such as Ariana Grande or Saweetie among others.

Doja Cat has an unapologetic energy that not everyone likes. She is widely known for the absurd humor she uses in her social media accounts—Twitter, TikTok, or Instagram—and for her eccentric personality. Doja Cat has become viral on TikTok multiple times, and her songs—such as “Woman”, “Need to Know” or “Say So”—have been danced there thousands of times. As the *Billboard* staff write, “Doja’s star power is a unique one; she is the pop star that best understands how to blend and bend the rules of the old school and new school, handling the ever-evolving ecosystem of TikTok trends with the same dexterity that she handles traditional blockbuster awards show performances and radio singles”. She has been involved in a few controversies, though (see Haylock). Doja Cat was accused of plagiarism. Also, of being homophobic after using the word “faggot” on Twitter, a problem she solved tweeting that “gay is ok”. She was also attacked in 2020 after she was caught saying that COVID-19 was only a flu and she was not scared of it. Doja Cat was also heavily criticized after one of her earlier songs resurfaced; it was called “Dindu Nuffin”, a term ridiculing Black victims of police brutality. She apologized and claimed that even though she wanted to flip the meaning of the word, the title was a horrible choice.

### The Song

“Woman”, an empowering and fun song, is Doja Cat’s first track and second single from her third album *Planet Her*. This song in which Doja Cat honors her femininity is steeped in afrobeats, the *uptempo* makes it a lively anthem. The song is an ode to the transcendent feminine in which, she argues, the different parts which women, including herself, can play in a society coalesce. She admires how women are so accomplished and the way they adapt easily to different situations in life. However, Doja Cat also exposes the broken perception of women and women’s own weaknesses. The song starts expressing everything Doja Cat can give as a woman to her male partner and ends up praising all women and what they are capable of despite all the misogynistic backlash. “Woman” appears to be a feminist song; however, the singer declared that it is not a feminist song *per se*. Some even may consider it to be quite the opposite, especially taking into account the chorus repeated throughout the whole song in which Doja Cat asks a man “Let me be your woman”, only wanting protection in return.

Doja starts off by mentioning everything she has to offer as a woman, such as a family; as she sings a woman “can grow right from her womb a family”. Throughout the song Doja celebrates herself as a woman and assures she can do great things. As she proclaims, she can be a commander: “I mean I could be the leader / head of all the states”. Next, she even mentions a couple of powerful and famous women in the process. She sings “I could be the CEO, just look at Robyn Fenty”, referring to Robyn Rihanna Fenty, professionally known as Rihanna; Doja Cat praises how powerful she is as a CEO of her own make-up and beauty industry, setting Rihanna as an example of influential

womanhood. Later in the song, Doja Cat mentions Regina George the main character of *Mean Girls* to protest against how men put women up against each other just to see successful women fail. In this movie the two female main characters are rivals whose rivalry leads to the end of their life as they knew it. Doja Cat sings “They wanna pit us against each other / When we succeedin’ for no reasons / They wanna see us end up like we Regina on *Mean Girls*”. At the end of the song, she praises the feminine divinities and, so, herself: “Mother Earth, Mother Mary rise to the top / Divine feminine, I’m feminine”.

### The Video

The video for “Woman”, directed by Janelle Monáe and H.E.R.’s childartist, came out on 3 December 2021, around six months after the release of the song, expanding Doja Cat’s *Planet Her* cinematic universe. The film shows Doja Cat as a mythical creature who helps an intergalactic queen keep her throne against what appears to be a budding anti-matriarchal rebellion by the men. The role of the queen is portrayed by the singer-songwriter Teyana Taylor. The video follows a science-fictional futuristic theme that Doja wants to engage in with the songs of this album, with which she wants to represent different women that inhabit her own *Planet Her*. She leaves behind the green alien that she played in her last video of the same album, “Need to Know”, and turns into a magical and mystical creature.

In the video for “Woman” we can see Doja Cat showing off her dancing skills in different locations, by herself or surrounded by women, which shows the power of sorority she is trying to demonstrate with the video. The video ends with Doja turning into a tree after accomplishing her mission. In the video, we can also see an example of blatant product placement, with the earphone Beats by Dre highlighted in one of her ears. Apart from this Doja Cat partnered with Girls Who Code a nonprofit organization on a mission to close the gender gap on coding and programming and created an interactive video for “Woman” which is the first ever ‘codable video’. Anyone can code the video and change colors and textures at will. This is an amazing opportunity for girls that want to work in technology.

### The Song and the Video

It is unknown to what extent Doja Cat decided what she wanted to do for this video, which brings up the debatable topic of the sexualization of women. All in all, there is no way to know if the artist is expressing her powerful femininity in whatever way she wants to do it or if her good looks are being exploited. Audiences may always wonder whether Doja Cat had chosen to dance sensually as she does in this video, or wear the revealing outfits she wears as a way of empowering herself, or if she was sexualizing the role of all women. In any case, most likely the video would have far less successful if the song had not gone viral on social media apps such as TikTok. In fact, the video was possibly made a few months after the song’s release precisely to bank on the song’s popularity on TikTok. This also happened to other artists such as Lizzo, whose song “Good as Hell” became viral on social media a few years after being released, and ended up having not one but two official videos. To sum up, Doja showed with this empowering song and its sensual

video that she is the future of the hip-hop music industry, especially one of the artists to keep an eye on when it comes to attractive music videos.

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## Arlo Parks 'Too Good': A Colorful Collapse

Arnau Badía Muñoz

Released: 28 July 2021

Album: *Collapsed in Sunbeams*

Label: Transgressive

Genre: Indie pop

Length: 3:41

Songwriters: Arlo Parks and Paul Epworth

Producer: Paul Epworth

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Arlo-parks-too-good-lyrics>

Music Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFCd5CE4bg>

Director: Bedroom



### The Singer

Few young artists manage to succeed by being open and genuine in today's music landscape, and Arlo Parks is a rare exception to this norm. Born Anais Oluwatoyin Estelle Marinho, Arlo Parks has already forged her path as one of the most exciting voices of the new generation of British indie artists, all while still savoring her breakthrough moment at just twenty-one years old.

Parks was born in Hammersmith, West London, in the year 2000. She is half Nigerian, quarter Chadian and quarter French. Parks is also openly bisexual. She was educated at Latymer Upper School in Hammersmith, and later attended Ashbourne College until 2019, when she drifted towards a career in music. Parks' musical interest was initially sparked not by music itself, but by her love for poetry. In high school, an "attentive teacher" noticed her interest in poetry and gifted her *Ariel*, the poetry collection by Sylvia Plath (in Yu). Reading it, Parks became obsessed with poetry, trying to find and read as many new writers as she could, all while beginning to compose her own poems. About these early artistic endeavors the young artist states that "poetry was always something that fascinated me. I started off writing when I was around six, and then it felt like that way of expression was always the one that I was most familiar with" (in Robertson). Eventually those poems would turn into songs, which teen Parks would gradually begin uploading onto the BBC Music Introducing portal, a website to which aspiring musicians can upload demos and be granted an opportunity to get their music played on BBC Radio (see Dhillon).

Precisely, Parks' music quickly grabbed the attention of several UK radio stations, granting the young star the opportunity to sign a deal with Transgressive Records, and to release her first single "Cola" in 2018. Parks performed her first-ever gig at The Great Escape in Brighton in May 2019, and she went on her first European tour in early 2020, a tour that was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. The pandemic, nevertheless, signified a period of artistic growth for Parks, who through the release of a

number of singles (“Eugene”, “Black Dog”) and the livestreaming of musical performances and poetry readings amassed a solid number of new fans and listeners.

In January of 2021 Parks’ debut album *Collapsed in Sunbeams* saw the light. The album explores a wide variety of genres and styles through the lenses of Parks’ poetically-inspired writing style, which by now is an absolute trademark in her music. About *Collapsed in Sunbeams* Parks has stated that she “wanted it to feel like a journal, I wanted it to document the key moments that punctuated my adolescence and my coming-of-age story” (in Pejcha). The brutal honesty that paints the subtones of the album, where topics like sex, youthful emotions and depression are discussed, is one more proof of Parks lyrical wisdom, a feature which renders her as being often described as an old soul in a young body (Williams).

Parks is not only praised for her music, but also for her clear, outspoken approach to LGBTQI+ and social issues. As a step in her journey advocating for a more open conversation around mental health, she is currently an ambassador of CALM, a charity platform that offers web chat services, advice, and information to anyone who is struggling or in crisis. Through this platform, Parks offers virtual shows and shares her experience of managing her own mental health issues through music and writing. As Jenessa Williams wrote for *NME*, “she is proof that Gen Z are so much more than TikTok memes and ‘OK boomer’ eye-rolls, and the generosity with which she shares her thoughts is testament to her age group’s desire to do things better than their predecessors”.

### The Song

“Too Good” was released as part of Arlo Parks’ debut album *Collapsed in Sunbeams* in January of 2021. The song serves as track number three of the album and it has a runtime of three minutes and forty-one seconds. “Too Good” explores a painful dimension in a romantic relationship; Parks describes a romance in which one of the two lovers is too vain to show affection for her partner, and how that causes the songstress to fall into a pit of over-thinking and self-doubt. Parks recorded the song with the help of producer and songwriter Paul Epworth (known for his work for Adele, Coldplay, or Lana del Rey). About the process of creating the song Parks describes how “Paul [Epworth] started playing this drumbeat, and then I was just running around for ages singing into mics and going off to do stuff on the guitar. I love some of the little details, like the bump on someone’s wrist and getting to name-drop Thom Yorke. It truly feels like me” (in Newton).

“Too Good” is especially vibrant in its instrumental parts and vocal delivery, which serve as the foundation for the extremely sober and sincere lyrics, creating a beautiful contrast of moods and sounds. The song opens with a straightforward yet poignant question “Why do we make the simplest things so hard?” If we were to summarize the lyrical narrative of “Too Good” in just one line, this one would be the adequate one. This line is repeated throughout the song in hopes of an answer that never quite arrives, giving the whole lyrical body of the song a sense of despair upon the stale state of the relationship. Parks moves on to describe the nonchalant demeanor of her partner (“You’re too proud to tell me that you care”, “Never use your words to show you care”), and concludes that he is “Too cool to show it” and “too good to be true”, two lines which

serve as the main chorus of the song. The lyrics feature almost every element that is characteristic of Parks' signature style; the spoken-word delivery, the usage of highly descriptive lyrics and mentions to UK cultural icons such as Thom Yorke, the lead singer of Radiohead.

### The Video

The music video for "Too Good" was released in July 2021, six months after the release of *Collapsed in Sunbeams*. The film, directed by music video directing duo Bedroom (Soren Harrison and Amir Hossain), serves as a striking, fun visual companion for the track. The video stars Park herself and a young man who plays the part of the love interest that she dedicates the song to. The initial scene of the video shows Parks inserting a vinyl record into a record player, and this is followed by a fading black curtain. This shows the video's narrative concept to be meta art: Parks is about to tell us a story through a song, and the way she chooses to do so is through dancing and singing to music. Another remarkable detail of the music video is its bright color palette. It is quite ironic that a song about a failing relationship is accompanied by such a colorful, bubbly music video, but this, I believe, is just another proof of Parks' genius use of artistic contrasts. The pretty visuals of the music video are to the painful themes of "Too Good" what the fun, funky instrumental arrangement of the song is to its lyrics, a clash of contrasting elements that makes the narrative of the song feel fresh and innovative and far from the sorrowful, self-pitying clichés which are far overused in countless pop breakup anthems.

Several interesting analogies are displayed all throughout the music video. Parks spends most of the video cooking and serving the food to his apathetic boyfriend. Food, and its preparation, therefore, stands for all the caring that Parks offers her boyfriend out of love, and that they go by unreturned. Food can also be interpreted as a physical extrapolation of Parks' feelings; initially her food is cooked with care and poise, but towards the end of the video her food is spoiled and messy; the video even features a graphic scene of what appears to be an animal heart being stabbed, as in an actual literal heartbreak. After the couple breaks up, there is a scene in which pictures of her now ex-partner flood the screen of a computer. This is a fun way to represent a phenomenon that is quite common in modern relationships. Parks has just broken up with this man, but distressingly, when she logs onto the internet she cannot avoid encountering pictures of her ex-lover. Lighting and camera work also play a major narrative role in this music video. Warm colors like red and orange predominate throughout the whole film, only changing to a cold blue tone during the scene in which Parks is having a breakdown. The dynamic camera work gives the sense of time passing by, giving viewers a glimpse of a full period of the relationship.

A few similarities have been found between Park's "Too Good" music video and the music video for the song "Venus as a Boy" by Icelandic artist Björk. In the "Venus as a Boy" video, which stars Björk herself, she is shown dancing and cooking in a colorful kitchen, just as Parks does in the "Too Good" Music Video. This similarity has not been addressed by any of the two artists, implying that it might just be Park's tribute to the legendary Icelandic singer.

## The Song and the Video

An important narrative difference between the song itself and its music video for “Two Good” needs to be highlighted. In the video we get a different conclusion of the relationship. After spending time together, the couple are unable to settle their differences and end up having an argument which leads to a breakup, and a posterior moment of peaceful solitude which serves as its climax. After Parks has gone through the breakup, she is shown peacefully sitting on her couch, while enjoying the apple pie she initially meant to prepare for her boyfriend. This ending gives the music video a better sense of closure. In contrast, this narrative plot is not featured in the lyrics of the song itself. The lyrics of the song do not describe the breakup, and they emphasize the cyclical nature of the couple’s problems by repeating the aforementioned “Why do we make the simplest things so hard?” as the closing lines of the song. This aspect, then, separates the experience of listening to the song by itself from listening to it while watching its music video.

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## Halsey, 'I Am not a Woman, I'm a God': Questioning the Madonna-Whore Complex

Mireia Morera Masa

Released: 27 August 2021

Album: *If I Can't Have Love, I Want Power*

Label: Capitol Records

Genre: Alternative, alternative pop, alternative rock, pop-punk, rock

Length: 3:27

Songwriters: Halsey, John Cunningham, Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross

Producers: Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross

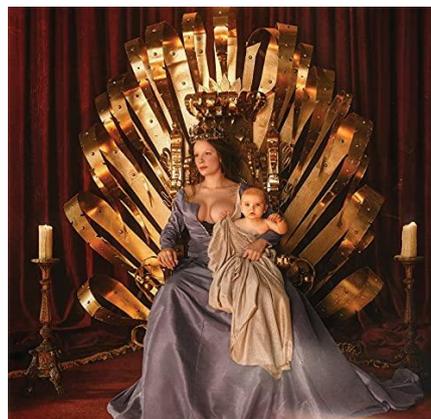
Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Halsey-i-am-not-a-woman-im-a-god-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Azv0G85lh8>

Director: Colin Tilley



### The Singer

Ashley Nicolette Frangipane, known as Halsey, was born on 29 September 1994, in Edison (New Jersey). The artist defines herself with the pronouns *she* and *they*, which I will use interchangeably throughout this essay. Although her mother is of Hungarian and Italian descent and her father has African-American and Irish ancestry, Halsey is recognized as an American singer and songwriter. On the personal front, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, after attempting suicide at the age of seventeen, a condition which has influenced her music deeply. During this time, Frangipane became romantically involved with a man who resided in Halsey Street in New York, from where she took her professional name.

Halsey started writing music when she was seventeen, after she had tried to take her own life, uploading videos onto YouTube and Tumblr. She released her debut album *Badlands* in 2015, which was certified Double Platinum by the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America). In 2016 she was featured in the single "Closer" with the duo Chainsmokers, which topped the charts of over ten countries. A year later, Halsey released her third album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, and in 2020 she published her third album *Manic* which became her best-selling album worldwide, while its lead single "Without Me" turned into her most successful single. In 2021 she released her fourth album, *If I Can't Have Love, I Want Power*, which includes the song that I will be analyzing "I Am Not a Woman, I Am a God".

The singer is recognized for her distinctive voice and known as a multifaceted pop, electropop, alternative pop, R&B and indie-pop artist. Besides, Halsey has won many different awards, which include, among others, four Billboard Music Awards and

two Grammy Awards. She has also been involved in suicide prevention awareness, sexual assault victim advocacy, and racial justice protests. Despite all this, Halsey drew criticism in her early career for supposedly calling herself “tri-bi” in an interview for *Rolling Stone* in 2018 due to her being biracial, bipolar and bisexual (see Hiatt). Halsey stated that although she passes as white, she “identifies strongly as a black woman, even if she doesn’t look like the typical black girl” (in Blay), which is a controversial statement if we take it into account that her African-American heritage is minimal. She also triggered controversy in 2016 after her interactions with some admirers, some involving the artist kissing underage fans. Therefore, it is safe to say that we are dealing with a multitalented but polemical artist who is difficult to encapsulate as a mere female pop singer. Halsey, who does not identify as a woman, has even called herself “the anti-pop star” on her Twitter account, stating that she has always seen herself as an alternative artist. She is only interested in people connecting with her music and does not care about the genre labels that the music industry may use to classify or even entrap her.

## The Song

Halsey released their fourth studio album, *If I Can’t Have Love I Want Power*, without any pre-released singles, which is an unconventional choice for a big pop project these days. Hence, the first taste that the public got was on release day, when they could see that this project differed deeply from the previous albums of the artist, mainly because it moved towards a darker industrial sound. Despite the lack of any pre-released singles, the artist did upload a trailer to their YouTube channel so that the audience could focus on the story that the video tells as well as on the music. As Stefanee Wang states:

Halsey (...) crafts a compelling concept album about love, sex and pregnancy, while complicating the portrait of womanhood in the process. Written in the throes of being pregnant with their child, the album is about her journey to becoming a mother, and all the social baggage that comes with it. Nowhere is that messaging and their point more clear than in the lyrics of “I Am not a Woman, I’m a God”, the album’s lead single and thematic core.

The artist, as Wang notes, wrote the album while being pregnant, and the influence of the process on the album is very clear. In *If I Can’t Have Love, I Want Power*, we find songs that remind us of lullabies, such as “Darling”, and powerful anthems like the song that I am analyzing. The artist is very much aware that being pregnant in the public eye is arduous since, as a performer, part of their job is to be sexually desirable. Furthermore, in the end, what they are doing is to sell a product, and the industry is only interested in the evolution of an artist if they can benefit from it.

Halsey wrote “I Am not a Woman, I Am a God” with the help of three men: John Cunningham, Trent Reznor, and Atticus Ross. As Wang asserts, the song focuses on the topic of pregnancy and describes “the fraught relationship between godliness and womanhood—and, really, anybody with the ability to give birth”. At the beginning of the song and repeatedly throughout the chorus, Halsey refers to terms that have been historically used to depict women: “I am not a woman, I’m a god / I am not a martyr, I’m a problem / I am not a legend, I’m a fraud”. By doing so, the artist is referring to the Madonna-Whore complex, a concept coined by Freud by which women are seen “as

either 'good', chaste, and pure Madonnas or as 'bad', promiscuous, and seductive whores" (Bareket *et al.* 519). Thus, Halsey transmits the idea that women have been reduced to two categories and that a woman cannot be sexually desirable and suitable for motherhood at the same time. Transcending this dichotomy, she announces that she is no longer a woman, but a god.

### The Video

As the trailer released before the album suggests, the music video is as important as the actual song in the case of "I Am Not a Woman, I Am a God". The film, directed by Colin Tilley, presents Halsey at both ends of the spectrum, "as a nude, bathing godlike figure and a powerful, cold-hearted ruler, and the banished, tattered white dress wearing-pregnant woman who may or may not get burned at the stake" (Wang) as a witch. Hence, Halsey presents a video that could perfectly be a trailer of an actual movie about an aristocratic woman, a cold-hearted ruler or a pregnant person who falls out of grace and meets a harsh end. Through the video, the artist depicts superbly what she is trying to convey with the lyrics: an urge to break away from the topics that have limited women and to show the anger that she feels at this.

We cannot forget that the artist wrote the album and filmed the video clip while being pregnant, an image by no means common in women's music videos and for which she needs to be credited. In the same way that we see this Madonna-Whore distinction, we also perceive through the video the ups and downs of pregnancy. As the artist declared in an interview, pregnancy brought joy but also horrors and fears due to the social expectations that come with it, and the pressures by the outsider spectators present throughout the whole process due to her being a public figure. As I have stated previously, the singer is very aware of what it means to be a celebrity and has everything that she does received as some kind of statement. She stated, however, that she "wasn't trying to make a political record" (in McDonald) with the album but that she was just writing how she felt about being pregnant. Although the album, and more specifically the music video, show the dark side of pregnancy as a consequence of the fears that the ongoing process and a previous miscarriage meant for the singer, the cover also suggests that the singer ends up embracing the experience of having a baby and transforming the fear into power. This is illustrated in the cover art, showing her crowned on a throne, one breast bare, with her baby sitting on her lap.

Following this line, we could ask ourselves, or perhaps the singer, why Halsey proclaimed herself a God and not a Goddess. Perhaps she did so to highlight the fact that she does not identify herself as a woman even though she is now a mother, or maybe to highlight the power that she has obtained due to pregnancy. A God is in her vocabulary a non-binary divinity, not the patriarch we usually think of, just as 'hero' has become a noun used by all persons, not just men.

### The Song and the Video

In the case of "I Am Not A Woman, I Am A God", it is clear that both song and video go hand in hand, in the sense that one coexists with the other as a coherent whole. The lyrics are the stream of consciousness of the artist during her pregnancy, and the video is the realization of all these dreads and expectations that affect motherhood but are

hardly ever discussed. Besides, the artist started questioning her gender identity during her pregnancy, so the fact that she is now challenging traditional assumptions about women, and the stereotypes that have been attributed to them can also be related to her gender interrogation. In a scene of the video, we see an angry Halsey breaking a collar chain, which could be interpreted as a metaphor regarding the gender stereotypes that strangle her and which she can finally shatter. As Halsey stated very clearly in her interview with Zane Lowe:

“It’s not a girl power album. From the jump, I’m like, ‘I’m not a woman.’ I’m not saying any of that. There’s no girl power in this album. Being pregnant, writing this album, people are expecting girlishness, you know what I mean? And any time where I ever talk about womanhood, motherhood, femininity, I’m usually talking about it with a taste in my mouth. Like, go be a big girl, a girl is a gun, all I can taste is the blood in my mouth”.

What we can take from this is that, although the singer seems to suggest that she is craving some kind of power, as we see in the title of the album, and some of the scenes of the music video, Halsey is not seeking the type of power that we would find in a ‘girl power album’, hence, the strength that she is seeking is different. From the lyrics and the music video scenes, we can argue that what the singer wants is to have the power to define herself/themselves as she/they want, breaking with gender stereotypes and with the assumption that a woman is either a sexually active whore or an angelic, puritan mother.

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## Charli XCX, 'Good Ones': Letting the Good Ones Go

Marina Esteban Rubio

Released: 2 September 2021

Album: *Crash*

Label: Atlantic Records

Genre: Synth-pop

Length: 2:17

Songwriters: Charlotte Aitchison, Noonie Bao, Caroline Ailin, Mattias Larsson, Oscar Holter, and Robin Fredriksson

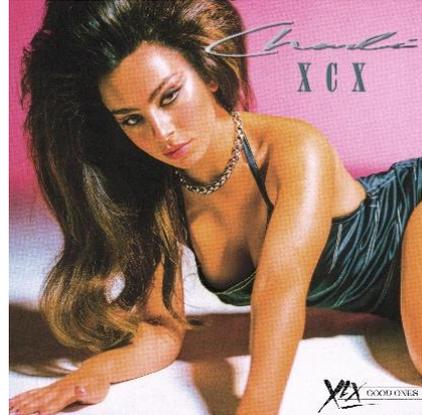
Producer: Oscar Holter

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Charli-xcx-good-ones-lyrics>

Music video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjAuUXdSFaM>

Director: Hannah Lux Davis



### The Singer

Born Charlotte Emma Aitchison in 1992 in Cambridge, Charli XCX is an English singer and songwriter. Her mother is a nurse of Indian Gujarati origins, born and raised in Uganda, and her father is a Scottish businessman. Charli XCX's family is not musical at all; her musicality was spontaneous and she has loved music since early childhood. Aitchison's musical career began in high school, at fourteen, when she convinced her parents to fund an album with the songs she had been writing. Two years later, she began to post these songs in her Myspace profile, Charli XCX. This was, essentially, the start of her music career, though she still trained in the Fine Arts towards a degree. A producer and party promoter from London noticed her and invited Charli to sing in raves, in the warehouses of the underground system of London. She did that for two years, which made her popular, particularly in LGBTBIQ+ circles.

Aitchison took a two-year break to be able to focus on her university studies, but she eventually dropped out because she developed a clearer vision of what she wanted to do as a singer. As she was living in London and had already made connections with some producers and music industry staff, it was relatively easy for her to begin to publish her works. She signed to Asylum records in 2010 and began to release singles, which culminated in her firsts two EPs, released in 2012. She has released so far four studio albums, with a fifth one set to be released in 2022 and five mixtapes/EPs. Charli XCX has also toured extensively, both as an opening act for other artists as well as in her own more low-scale tours. Furthermore, she has written a lot of song hits like Iona Pop's "I Love It", or Camila Cabello and Shawn Mendez's "Señorita". She has also written for Twice, Rihanna and Gwen Stefani among others and collaborated in recordings by many other artists.

Charli XCX has stated that she loves pop in all its sub-genres in an interview with Spanish Queer Magazine *Shangay*. In the same interview, she declared that a reason of her close relationship with the LGTBIQ+ Community is because they are the only ones taking pop seriously. She has experimented with dance-pop, electro-pop, avant-pop, and she is one of the main representatives of hyper-pop. There was a shift in her career, in 2015, when she met music producer Sophie, a DJ and music producer focused on PC (or computer) music. They forged a friendship and released together in 2016 the EP and single “Vroom Vroom”, a turning point in Charli XCX’s career. After it, she started to explore in more depth what she could do with her music instead of sticking to a dance-pop, investigating in particular the more experimental hyper-pop (see *Wikipedia*). A self-referential genre, hyper-pop exploits pop’s fun side. Charli XCX makes the most of it, celebrating pop as it deserves. In an interview with *Document Journal* discussing her music and style, Charli XCX she has stated on being experimental that “For me, it’s about not falling into a pattern, not repeating what’s expected of me” (in Sojit). This part of her career, however, seems to be over. On her current style, she has explained that she now wants to go back to more traditional pop as her phase of experimenting has ended. Her love for pop is still strong, though, and she is very clear about what she wants to do with her music: “I love pop music. I’ve never wanted to reject it, apart from when I feel scared or threatened, but that’s become less as I’ve gotten older” (in Sojitl).

As mentioned earlier, Charlie XCX has a very tight relationship with the LGTBIQ+ community (see Rosa). This is important because a large segment of her fanbase is part of the community, even though she is a straight woman. When she started singing in raves, Charli XCX realized that many people at the parties were part of the community; it was the first time she had ever felt welcomed and accepted for what she was. Ever since then, she has been very vocal about her support of all causes regarding LGTBIQ+ individuals and uses her platforms to call attention to many issues that tend to be ignored (like the violence against transgender POC women). In a heartfelt letter during Pride Month, she wrote

“The LGBTQ community has shaped who I am as an artist today. I will continue to be inspired by LGBTQ people and culture until the day I die. This community is a beautiful, fun, exciting, and safe place, which will always be strong, powerful, and loving in the face of any danger or negativity. I am thankful every day for my friends, fans, and collaborators, who belong to this very special community. Without you, I’d be nothing”. (in *Billboard*)

## The Song

“Good Ones” is the lead single for Charli XCX’s oncoming fifth studio album *Crash* to be published in March 2022. Written by Charli XCX herself, Noonie Bao, Caroline Ailin, Mattias Larsson, Oscar Holter, and Robin Fredriksson and produced by the latter, the song was set to be released in 2020 along with her fourth studio album. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she cancelled its release and recorded instead the album, based on the current situation. *Crash* is a new project part of a new era for Charli XCX, what she calls her ‘bad girl’ era; she wants to explore darker concepts and the image of a ‘baddie’. This is important because it means that both the lyrics and the video for “Good

Ones” correspond to these artistic choices. Sometimes, we as the public tend to find deeper meaning and biographical significance in an artist’s works and while I believe the personality and situation of the artist are reflected in everything they do, they sometimes just experiment with no autobiographical intentions. In this case, Charli XCX just wanted to show a rougher side of herself and wanted to play with the idea of dark and toxic themes. This song and video are made exclusively to play with a chosen theme she wants to investigate. In a recent interview with *Document Journal*, Charli XCX has revealed that she didn’t write much of “Good Ones”, despite her being the first author credited: “I essentially took it as a pitch song, because I wanted to be a stereotypical, classic, major-label pop star. It was fun to play that game, but probably only fun because I know I can write a huge pop song” (in Sojit). This statement is very arrogant and cynical, but it also shows how the song for her has no deeper meaning than being a hit.

The lyrics of the song express a woman’s urge to let go of the good men and search for more toxic, dangerous partners. Charli XCX has explained that the song is indeed “about when you move away from somebody who is caring supportive, stable, and safe, and decide instead you’re gonna run towards a really dangerous, toxic person. I feel like we’ve all done that in some kind of way, whether it be with a relationship or other things. It is about wanting danger” (in Bowenbank). Along the lyrics she focuses on how she does not want love or affection, or to be loved: she wants rough touches, even perhaps physical violence (“Hooked on the touches that leave me weaker”), though this is quite ambiguous, and she has not commented anything specific about this line.

The singer emphasizes all along that the ‘good’ lover has not done anything wrong, it is all her fault that the relationship is over and her choice to seek worse partners: “you could not have loved me any better”, she sings, and “when I walk away it is not your fault”. I find these lyrics to accurately reflect a toxic personal behavior, not from a male partner, but from a woman. Although what you have with a male partner may be good and healthy, you still fall for toxic behaviors because it is what women are used to in men and maybe what they themselves follow. She also sings about how rejecting the good men she has been with is all she has ever done; this is also a very common trait of toxic people.

This is a dangerous message to be throwing but there are several points to consider. Firstly, Charli XCX’s public is not a very young one, her listeners are able to listen critically to her songs and disagree on the message. Secondly, songs are not intended to be educational, they don’t need to be a lesson. Some songs just exist for the sake of having a good ring to it and to be played on the radio or the streaming platforms. Lastly, this may seem a call for attention, but Charli has always been very vocal and unapologetically clear about her intentions with music. All in all, taking the message of the song literally will lead to the wrong path and the responsibility lands in part on the person singing the lyrics; but we as listeners should be able to critically listen to a song. In this regard, Charli could be writing as catchy songs as this one with a totally different message but, once again, it is not her responsibility to lecture people.

From a feminist point of view, the song lacks any type of message, either good or bad. The lyrics and the video focus on two men and those are the center of the plot. Obviously, this is a very poor message. Charli talks about how she is leaving a good man for a worse one, and there is no instance in the lyrics of a moment where she centers on

herself and on her own feelings. It is not feminist, either, to be preaching about toxic relationships, but as stated in the paragraph above, she is just doing music for the sake of releasing hit songs.

### The Video

The video reflects well the message of the song or, rather, its lacking a message. It is very simple in the sense that all the scenes revolve around the same concept: Charli XCX appears, wearing scanty black clothes, dancing at the funeral of her ex-lover, supposedly the 'good one' she has rejected (perhaps even killed?). Although in the lyrics death is not mentioned, the video takes the metaphor literally: she has abandoned and buried the good things in life. She also appears to be provocative and sexual in the video, dancing in lingerie in the funeral and later on the grave. At the beginning she appears going to the funeral with a Bible set on fire. I believe this is very eye-catching and provocative and adds to the religious theme of the video which differs in this regard from the song. As the video takes the leaving of the ex-lover literally, for he has died, there is a religious context to the whole of it. Along with the Bible burning, Charli is dancing in his funeral, later while they are burying him and then on her own grave.

In the video there is also straightforward product placement of the new Samsung earbuds. It is not indicated anywhere that the video contains publicity, but it is very obvious as there are lots of zoom-ins of Charli's ear. I believe this is poorly done, as the earphones have nothing to do with the song nor the video, so it takes the spectator out of it, and deteriorates the whole experience. She is commercializing her music video and her song by doing so, but nearly every music video nowadays is subjected to advertising. However, it could be done in a classier way. This publicity comes from a long-time collaboration that Charli XCX has with Samsung. They had been working together for months on the new earbuds and she is the face of them, so she displayed them in her music video (via Samsung News). Singers also depend on brand collaborations to sustain themselves, so it is understandable that Charli collaborates with Samsung. Putting a brand directly on a video is far more controversial, because then the song and the video are forever linked to a certain company. This is a very dangerous move, the video is now forever marked and compromised, and the choice may come back to her in the future.

### The Song and the Video

The video and the song go hand in hand and depict the same message. Although the song does not mention death and only talks about breakups, in the video we see how the phrase "let go" is quite literal, as he is dead. The video also portrays a sensual dance and Charli XCX dancing in her own grave. This symbolizes the death of the old Charli XCX and how her new era is starting. On a personal level, the video, the choreography, and the whole concept made me think of Lady Gaga's "Judas". Although the songs and videos are completely different, they made me think of it the first time I saw them. This is mainly because of the dance and the theme of religion. There is no information on whether Charli XCX took inspiration from Lady Gaga.

All in all, Charli XCX provides a pure pop hit that has all the ingredients to take the charts by storm, which is ultimately what she wants. The song, co-written by her, opens a new era for her which has been described as “Soulless Illuminati Major Label Puppet Era” (Stern). She is embracing the evil persona she is performing. The song and the video are no doubt open to criticism and lack some aspects that maybe a woman artist should be considering, but Charli XCX just wants to make good pop songs. This is a very valid standpoint to be in and to me there is value in being clear about that. However, there are also a lot of reasons to make her accountable for her actions. As stated before, the message of the song is terrible if taken literally as well as her attitude in the video. It is difficult to balance out where the responsibility falls and what should be accounted for. Doing songs for the sake of getting number ones is what Charli does best and loves to do. This is also part of the art of women in 21<sup>st</sup> century music.

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