

A NIGHT OF STORYTELLING: A REVIEW OF TAYLOR SWIFT'S MUSICAL EVOLUTION THROUGH THE ERAS TOUR

Pravina Manoharan^{1*}

¹School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800, Penang, MALAYSIA

pravina@usm.my *

Received: 14 Oct 2023 / Revised: 05 Nov 2024
Accepted: 14 Nov 2024 / Published: 20 Dec 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51200/ga.vi.5746>

ABSTRACT

This article is a review of Taylor Swift's *Eras Tour* concert at Wembley Stadium on 16 August 2024. It presents information triangulated from first hand data gathered through interviews from concert goers, observation sessions along with review of digital material posted by Taylor Swift herself, Swifties and news portals regarding the tour. This review will provide insights into Swift's three-hour and fifteen-minute show encapsulating her musical evolution that took audiences through a fast forward journey of her life that spans 10 albums and 46 songs. The findings will show how the Eras Tour fittingly documented her evolution through numerous musical genres from Country, Synth-Pop, Indie Folk and Pop Rock to name a few and how her gift as a prolific writer served as the crux of the entire performance as she leveraged on her storytelling skills to weave together a cohesive story of her musical career.

Keywords: Taylor Swift, The Eras Tour, live concert, Wembley Stadium, musical evolution

INTRODUCTION

Who is Taylor Swift? A name that has become synonymous with the popular music industry, Taylor Swift is more than just a musician; she is a trailblazer who has redefined what it means to be an artist in the 21st century. As of 2023, she was Spotify's most-streamed artist and had sold 114 million units worldwide (Lloyd, 2024), a testament to her enduring relevance in a fast-paced digital age and popular music world. Her approach to challenging industry norms, such as advocating for artists' rights and taking control of her own music, has rightfully earned her a place as one of the most prominent and influential artists of the decade (NBC News, 2024).

More recently, she has been making headlines for her *The Eras Tour* concert that has broken multiple records worldwide. For example, in December 2023, Guinness World Records reported that just eight months into her 149th show tour, *The Eras Tour* officially became the very first music tour to surpass \$1 billion dollars in revenue (Atwal, 2023). Then, while still on tour, she released *Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour*, a documentary musical on Disney Plus and Netflix which quickly became the highest grossing concert film of all time, in addition to being the first ever to be nominated for a Golden Globe (Barnes, 2024). At the end of her European leg which ended in August 2024, Swift broke another record, this time

at Wembley Stadium in London when she became the first solo artist to perform eight times in a single tour at the venue, a record previously held by Michael Jackson in 1988 (Gordon 2024).

On 1 November 2022, less than 2 weeks after the release of her *Midnights* album, the singer took to her personal Instagram page to announce the dates for the first leg of her Eras Tour, describing it as "a journey through the musical eras of my career (past and present!)" (Swift, 2022)). *The Eras Tour* is more than just a series of concerts across 5 continents. It is a carefully crafted journey over 10 'eras' each signifying one of her albums, spanning her 17-year-long career. Her gift for storytelling makes this a hugely biographical piece of work. Taylor performs a total of 46 songs during her 3 hours and 15 minutes performance, and each "era" represents a chapter within the larger narrative of her 17-year career, with the set design, costumes, and song choices carefully curated to reflect the themes and lyrical brilliance of her different albums (Dimitrova, 2023). The tour which commenced on 17 March 2023 in Glendale, Arizona took its final bow on 8 December 2024 in Vancouver, Canada (NBC News, 2024).

This article is a review of *The Eras Tour* based on first-hand experience from attending the concert at Wembley Stadium, London on 16 August 2024. I was fortunate enough to be among 92,000 Swifties who travelled from within the UK and beyond to experience a night one fan described as a 'once in a lifetime experience' (Fan 1, personal communication, August 16, 2024). As the night unfolded, fans fondly known as Swifties were transported through a nostalgic journey that celebrated Taylor's evolution not just as an artist but a trailblazer who boldly stretched the creative boundaries of the music industry to continuously reinvent herself, all while staying true to the values that ground her as a person.

The paper will explore how *The Eras Tour* encapsulates the various stages of Swift's musical journey, from her early country roots to her dominance in the pop world and beyond. By analysing the tour's setlist, performance style, stage design and lyrics, this study seeks to understand how Swift's transformation as an artist is represented and communicated through her three hour and fifteen minute live performance. Moreover, this paper examines the broader cultural and industry implications of Swift's vast genre-spanning career, considering how her ability to transcend musical boundaries has solidified her status as one of the most formative artists of her generation. The following section of the paper will review the different eras as they were presented throughout the night to ensure a coherent flow in the discussion.

OPENING ACTS

The concert opened at 5.10pm with an electrifying performance by rising star Holly Humberstone, who performed six songs for the crowd. Known for her song writing skills (West, 2024), Holly captivated the audience with her indie pop and folk inspired tunes. This was then followed by the iconic pop punk band Paramore. As the official opening act for the European leg of Taylor Swift's Eras Tour, Paramore delivered a powerhouse set that had the crowd cheering from the very first note. Lead singer Hayley Williams, known for her dynamic stage presence and powerful vocals, took the stage and kept the audience engaged throughout the performance. The band opened with "Hard Times" and continued to play nine songs for 45 minutes. They had the crowd on their feet screaming the lyrics to their hit numbers "Misery Business" and "The Only Exception". They finished their set at 7.15pm, and the stage went dark, as Paramore's sound equipment is wheeled off and Taylor's equipment is set up, all within just 15 minutes. A timer appears on the big screen counting down from 2 minutes and 30 seconds. At 00.00 seconds the clock disappears and the line "*It's been a long time coming*", the seventh track from her 2019 *Lover* album "Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince", is heard in a haunting echoey tone, marking the start of the *Lover Era*.

Love Era

The concert commenced with her dancers walking onto stage carrying huge purple and pink coloured props that resemble fans or flower petals, colours representative of this album's theme. They walk the length of the stage and then cover the centre to immediately reveal Taylor as she appears in her custom Versace pink and purple bodysuit, again matching the theme of that album. She continued to sing “*It’s been a long time coming*” on a platform that slowly elevated her to 92,000 fans screaming the lyrics back to her at the top of their lungs. The lyrics are a fitting opening and symbolic, as it acknowledges a moment both fans and Swift herself had been eagerly anticipating after her *Love Fest* concert cancellation in 2021 due to the pandemic. In her own words Taylor describes this album as ‘a really romantic album but it’s also an album that celebrates love in all its complexities’ offering her fans both moments of introspection and pure celebration (*Taylor Swift Answers Questions From Fans From Love’s Lounge Live*, 2019).

Taylor played five songs from her *Love Era*; “Miss Americana and The Heartbreak Prince”, (shortened) “Cruel Summer”, “The Man”, “You Need to Calm Down” (shortened) and ending with “Love”. The *Love* album spans a few musical genres like synth-pop, electropop, and indie pop, but it is primarily rooted in pop. Songs like “Love” embody a nostalgic, softer sound, while tracks like “The Man” deliver pop anthems with feminist undertones as Swift sang about the sexism she faced throughout her career. Her choice of songs as the opening album of the 3 ½ hour concert reflect the mood she wants to portray which is a celebration of love for her fans and a sense of empowerment which is evident throughout the concert.



Photograph taken by author

Fearless Era

In a seamless transition to the next era, Taylor performed “Fearless”, “You Belong With Me” and “Love Story”, 3 of her most iconic songs from her *Fearless* album. This next era had a very distinctive country-pop charm and catchy melodies which carried a universal theme of love and heartbreak. During the *Fearless Era*, there was a golden glow on the stage created by projection mapping and lighting while Taylor appeared in a shimmery gold dress that allowed her to move freely and “*dance in a storm in my best dress*” (a line from the song “Fearless”). While the three songs revolve around the narrative of love, the lyrics addressed different facets of it. For example, the song “Fearless” is about how love can be both liberating and exciting when you fall in love with the right person which ultimately makes you feel “fearless”. “You Belong With Me” is the story of hope and how even though you feel overlooked, true love will eventually prevail if you are just patient. Finally, “Love Story” continues the narrative of love, as it also revolves around the theme of love conquest despite all obstacles. The common thread tying all three songs together is how love is an emotional journey that requires courage, trust and faith.

Red Era

This next era shifted gears as the *Red* album was one of the first albums where Taylor started to move away from country music sounds and experiment with more pop and rock influences in her music (Tomlinson, 2023). While the themes of love and the emotions that come with falling in love continued in this third era, Taylor’s choice of songs covered the various emotional stages that come from experiencing a breakup which are heartbreak, resilience, and personal reflection. The performance of “I Knew You Were Trouble,” for instance, incorporated heavier drum beats and more prominent bass lines with the visuals accompanying this auditory intensity. The lyrics in “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together”, “I Knew You Were Trouble” and “All Too Well (10 Minute Version)” all carry an undercurrent message of reflection, learning from past mistakes and doing better.

The stage design costumes and projections were more striking with bold colours like red, deep purple and black, in a way symbolising the mixed emotions of love and heartbreak which are the themes of this album. Even the wristbands worn by the fans all flashed red as the entire stadium of 92,000 screaming fans held their hands up blanketing the entire stadium in a hue of amber red. Her dances were all clad in red costumes while Taylor was in a sequined red and black bodysuit.

A fan-favourite moment during this era was the iconic 22 hat giveaway during the song "22." One lucky audience member is selected each night to receive the iconic black hat from the pop star. The significance of that moment has many online interpretations (Dimitrova 2023; Tomlinson 2023; West 2024), however, watching from the audience, her gesture of passing on the hat to a younger fan signified the passage of time indicating the act of passing on the exuberance and the youthful joy that comes from being young and carefree. Regardless of the intent, it is a special moment in the tour as it represents the deep connection Taylor has with her fans and in this instance, it is with the younger generation.

Speak Now Era

The night then progressed to the *Speak Now Era* where she performed two songs namely; “Speak Now” and “Enchanted”. Performed right after the *Fearless Era*, *Speak Now* added an emotional complexity to the performance narrative as this album emerged following the 2009 Kanye West incident at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) where he interrupted Taylor’s acceptance speech for Best Female Video, causing widespread controversy and outrage from her fans (McLaughlin, 2024). So 2010, in a move to take control of her music and assert her legitimacy as an artist, Taylor came out with *Speak Now*, an entirely self-written album that bridged country and pop-rock genres (Aniftos, 2023). When talking about creating this album, Taylor says “I wanted to get better, to challenge myself, and to build on my skills as a writer, an artist, and

a performer,” (Aniftos, 2023) all elements that were evident in the two songs she performed. The stage was transformed into a wonderland of lights and fairy-tale imagery as she enchants her fans with “Enchanted”, a song she regards as “wistfully romantic” (Aniftos, 2023). Her female dances and her are dressed in light lavender-coloured gowns which further accentuate the fairy tale theme of the song.

Reputation Era

This era was a complete shift in all her previous albums as it was the album where she reclaimed her *Reputation*, as she was tired of being taken advantage of and misunderstood (Tomlinson, 2023). The entire performance saw a shift in mood, costumes, stage set up and music as it addressed the negative reputation she had earned from the press. After the public humiliation by Kanye West and Scooter Braun incident of acquiring rights to her music, Swift wanted to prove she could stand up for herself and was unafraid to speak up (Tomlinson, 2023). She brought back the snake theme from her 2018 "*Reputation Tour*" by wearing a black and red high-leg, asymmetrical jumpsuit covered in a snake that wrapped around her leg, representing all the fake people who've betrayed her throughout her career (Tomlinson, 2023).

She performed four songs from the era namely, “Ready for It?”, “Delicate”, “Don’t Blame Me” and finished this era with the lead single "Look What You Made Me Do,". This was a clever choice to end the era with as the lines “the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now, Why? Oh, 'cause she's dead”, was a probable indication that she had shed her former image and was no longer bound by harsh judgements and past controversies. The mood and feel of this era were dark and had more electro pop with EDM instrumentation and sounds.

Folkmore Era

Due to the inclusion of *The Tortured Poets Department* into the tour setlist in the Europe leg of her tour, Taylor decided to combine *Folklore* and *Evermore* and call it *Folkmore*. The two albums that were released in 2020 in the midst of the global pandemic, marked a new chapter in her illustrious career, as she explored more fictional narratives and delved deeper into her lyrical skills. For example, the line from the song “Illicit Affairs”, ‘Look at this godforsaken mess that you made me, you showed me colours you know I can't see with anyone else’ indicating how secrets and betrayal can take a toll on someone’s sense of self.

As a musical genre, the albums explored more alternative rock and indie folk elements. Songs like “Cardigan”, “Willow” and “Betty” had very distinctive indie folk elements like straight forward melodies and uncomplicated instrumentation. “Champagne Problems” and “Illicit Affairs” were performed with little instrumental arrangements, which allowed for the lyrics to take center stage. She performed eight songs from this merged album which took on a sombre and more mellow tone. The stage was transformed into a woodland scene with imagery like trees, fog, moss and earthy tones dominating the visuals aimed to create the illusion of a forest. In the combined set, trees circle the singer as visual projections on the screens behind her while she sits behind a moss-covered piano and performs (McLaughlin, 2024).

1989 Era

Next came her 1989 era, an album titled after the year she was born. Coming right after the introspective era of *Folkmore*, this era marked a shift in the mood, song choices, themes and set design. The album’s production is slick, with more synthesised sounds and electronic beats reminiscent of late 80s pop. Songs like “Style”, “Shake It Off,” “Blank Space,” and “Bad Blood” are a clear departure from the folk-inspired mood of the previous era and clearly establishes Taylor as a pop icon in this era. The change in mood was instantly apparent as the familiar electric guitar riff of ‘Style’ opened this era with bold neon lights and Taylor’s outfit complementing the era’s bold and glamorous aesthetic, reflective in her sparkling sequins,

sleek bodysuit. Fans were all excited to see what her outfit combination would be for the night, as one fan said ‘this is my favourite part as it’s always a different combination (referring to the colours Taylor chooses to wear)’ (Fan 2, personal communication, August 16, 2024). For this night she came out in a yellow top and green skirt.

The songs in this era still carry the themes from the previous eras which are love, the exploration of identity, personal transformation and empowerment. While performing “Blank Space” the raised portion displayed a Shelby Cobra, which Swift and backup dancers “hit” with light-up golf clubs which was a re-enactment of an iconic scene from the song’s music video (McLaughlin, 2024). This is a song of self-empowerment that narrates the story of her love life under the scrutiny of the public eye and the judgements thrown at her while she reclaims her identity through her narrative genius. Her iconic line from this song ‘Darling, I’m a nightmare dressed like a daydream’ is a direct acknowledgement of the duality of how she is viewed by her critics and her fans. However, rather than being pulled down by the scrutiny, she asserts control over her image showing that she is in control over her public image by turning criticism into something positive.

The Tortured Poets Department (TTPD) Era

From its first debut during the Paris leg of the Tour on August 9, this era has been a much anticipated era, as it features songs from her TTPD album that was released mid tour on 19 April 2024 (McLaughlin, 2024). The colour, theme and stage design for this era was black and white and Taylor even had projections that included a UFO ship with spotlights shining on Taylor as she sang. The TTPD’s set also included the addition of a new stage piece, an elevated box that mirrors the floor projections, giving the appearance that she was levitating around the stage (McLaughlin, 2024).

Given its latest inclusion into the Eras Tour set list, Taylor chose to perform seven songs from this era. Namely; “But Daddy I Love Him”, “So High School”, “Who’s Afraid Of Little Old Me?”, “Down Bad”, “Fortnight”, “The Smallest Man That’s Ever Lived”, and closed with “I Can Do It With A Broken Heart”. As with all the other eras, this era also explored familiar themes of love, heartbreak and vulnerability. However, it was evident that she had risen above the challenges she faced as a teen icon and as a young adult, as her narrative skills were presented in a more mature perspective. She opened with “But Daddy I Love Him”, a track filled with emotional intensity, that has been speculated by many to reference her fanbase’s past criticism of her romantic choices (Capital FM, 2024). The line ‘I’ll tell you something about my good name, it’s mine alone to disgrace’, indicates how her choices in life are hers to make and her image is something she is responsible for and no one else. This is a fitting example of how the star has matured from the dreamy eyed teenage country musician days, who in the past strived to maintain her good girl image. She then ended the era with “I Can Do It With A Broken Heart”, a song that has become an anthem of resilience on how life must go on, despite a person’s emotional trauma or heartbreak.

Acoustic Section/Surprise songs

This section of the night is often a stark contrast to the other pre-determined eras. It is a moment of choreographed spontaneity where Taylor performs two to three songs acoustically for her fans. When talking about this section of the tour, one fan said ‘my girlfriends and I are always having theories on what song Taylor is going to play and whoever wins has to buy everyone else drinks’ (Fan 3, personal communication, August 16, 2024). While another quipped in and yelled ‘it’s like a moment that is only shared live with her fans on that night’ (Fan 4, personal communication, August 16, 2024), alluding to the fact that Taylor rarely performs the same song twice in this set of her tour, making it a special performance for her fans on different nights.

On the night of 16 August 2024, Taylor decided to perform ‘London Boy’ as her surprise song and a medley of ‘Dear John’ and ‘Sad, Beautiful Tragic’, which left the crowd going wild. She started by saying “the whole night I have been thinking....God I LOVE THE ENGLISH” and starts strumming the chords to

“London Boy” on her guitar. She then moved on to the piano to perform “Dear John” and seamlessly plays a chord progression that moves into “Sad Beautiful Tragic” from her *Red* album. The atmosphere is surreal as it is just her on stage with her instrument as she serenades a stadium of 92,000 people serenading her lyrics back to her.

Midnights Era

Diamonds, navy blues, dark purples and stars are just a few of the ways to recognize this era as Taylor’s whimsical pop side returned with this album. The original sequins and glitter aesthetics were also brought back with this album, which made Swifties happy (Tomlinson, 2023). Taylor debuted a new *Midnights* body suit for the night on the 16th. She came out in a Zuhair Murad body suit that was covered with a constellation of silver stars and a crescent moon which had all her fans screaming ‘OH My God it’s a new suit!!’

For the final era of the night, Taylor opened with “Lavender Haze” with the entire Wembley stadium painted with purple projections and everyone’s wristbands going purple as she sings “Starin’ at the ceilin’ with you”. She then performed “Anti-Hero”, “Midnight Rain”, “Vigilante Shit”, “Bejewelled”, “Mastermind” and finally closed with “Karma”. Musically, this era has more electronic and synth-pop sounds. While “Anti-Hero” and “Bejeweled” have similar musical themes, the lyrics of both songs have slightly different connotations. In “Anti-Hero”. Taylor sings about the feeling of being inadequate and the line "It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me" portrays a sense of vulnerability as she acknowledges her shortcomings. Then in “Bejeweled”, the metaphor of being "bejeweled" represents a sense of reclaiming self-worth and revealing how she can still dazzle and command attention on her own terms. Songs like “Vigilante Shit” and “Karma” have darker sounds, given their lyrical connotation of retribution, justice, and empowerment. Despite the darker tone of the *Midnights Era*, the theme in this era also portrayed similar narratives of love, heartbreak and self-empowerment. Taylor finally ends the entire night with “Karma” with multi coloured fireworks bursting from the grounds and confetti raining down on the audience.

CONCLUSION

From the opening of *Lover* all the way to the *Midnights Era*, Taylor showcased her versatility as a musician through her immaculate narrative skills. She revealed a steady progression in her musical genius as she strived to offer Swifties a night they will never forget. During the 3 hour and 15 min concert, she produced music that not only catered to her growing fanbase but more importantly challenged her artistic genius as a singer songwriter. Given the storyteller that she is, she planned the tour based on the mood and theme she wanted to portray and this was evident throughout the concert. She chose storytelling over chronology to capture the emotional highs and lows of her different albums. Her ever-evolving musical palate was deeply intertwined with her own life experiences, public persona, and the cultural contexts within which she chooses to engage with. However, despite her continued shift in music style and image, Taylor reminded us that she is a master storyteller and her ability to transcend musical boundaries has not only kept her at the forefront of the music industry but as also solidified her status as one of the most formative artists of her generation.

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