

“Brought Together by Music”

By Max Salters

No one knows the full truth about me. Everyone in my life has seen bits and pieces of my worldly experience, but no one other than myself can put together the pieces to truly tell the story of my life. Many others relate to this isolating circumstance and opt to use music to express their vulnerabilities. This brings together groups of people who would have otherwise never met and creates communities that understand each other's experiences. Even artists write songs about topics they cannot communicate with the people in their lives. Music gives an outlet to share stories to an audience that relates and empathizes, thus building communities people could not find in the social world.

Taylor Swift released a song titled “Would’ve Could’ve Should’ve” October 2022. Since its release, it has been one of my most listened-to songs. In this work, she sings from the perspective of a person who regrets a relationship they had in their youth due to how emotionally damaging it was. The moral stance that Swift takes is on abuse of power in relationships, especially where one individual is still developing as a person and the other is a fully matured adult. This is completely justifiable because a relationship like this can be traumatizing.

The title echoes throughout the verses and pre-choruses to elucidate how much she regrets the relationship. Years after it ended, she still asks herself rhetorical questions to try to cope. “And if I was some paint did I splatter / on a promising grown man? / And if I was a child, did it matter, / if you got to wash your hands?” In this specific example, Swift makes a spin on the phrase “promising young man,” which is used to silence people who speak out against those who have harassed, assaulted, or otherwise abused their power, since they are “ruining a future.”

BRADFORD WRITES!
Fall 2024

In the *People v Brock* case in 2015, Brock Turner was arrested on account of three felonies. Turner was 19 when he was found intoxicated while assaulting an unconscious woman, and 20 years old when he was arrested for six months. (He actually only spent three months in jail due to “good behavior”). Many people would say that 19 is old enough to know not to assault unconscious bodies; however, his father disagrees. “His life will never be the one that he dreamed about and worked so hard to achieve. That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20-plus years of life” is what he wrote in his letter to the judge. But in “Would’ve Could’ve Should’ve,” Swift exchanges the phrase “promising young man” for “promising grown man,” reminding the audience that the person she is singing about is a capable adult, who can make his own actions and therefore having the ability to reap the consequences of them. We should not take accountability away from abusers no matter how much “potential” they might have at any point in their life.

This song has a strong emotional effect on me. It makes me feel understood, and it resonates with a part of me that I do not have the opportunity to be vulnerable with publicly. It has also connected me to other people who unfortunately relate to this song. This has made the experience less unfortunate, at least for me. I imagine that someone who does not relate to this song may also have an emotional reaction, but in most cases, it will not be as strong as someone who has experienced the type of relationship Swift describes. This leads me to believe that her actual intention while writing this was to not only bring awareness to this issue but to write something esoteric. The feeling of being in a relationship like this is selective, but still far too likely. The way Swift describes the pain as haunting is far too relatable for me, and others, to not find comfort in this song.

BRADFORD WRITES!
Fall 2024

Rina Sawayama's song "XS" also shares a view on abuse of power. While Swift's work is on emotional abuse and exploitation, Sawayama does the same concerning the topic of labor exploitation and systemic abuse. Sawayama addresses an audience of consumers, which is everyone to a certain extent. She presents the message satirically by wrapping it in a hoax of a lively pop song. She sings, "Flex when all that's left is immaterial. / And the price we've paid is unbelievable. / And I'm taking in as much as I can hold." This lyric, like the rest of this piece, has a double meaning. On one hand, she says 'We paid a lot of money for these really expensive things and both my arms are full of shopping bags from all the stores we went to.' But on the other hand, she's saying, 'There will be nothing to be proud of after our world reaps the consequences of our consumerism, which is the ultimate price. The world is taking in as much as it can hold, and we still indulge ourselves with things we don't need.' Even in her bridge, she alludes to the breaking down of our ecosystems by saying, "When all this time, heaven was in our eyes. / So, say goodnight, forget about it 'til the end of time'." Our world was once full of flora and fauna, resembling a paradise. But our dishonor has turned the only place we can call home (as far as we are aware) into hell. Sawayama herself made commentary on this lyric. "Basically, the earth is this beautiful place, yet we choose to pursue material things. We don't think about it too much as there is seemingly no way out. So, we go to sleep and forget about it indefinitely" (Genius, Bridge). I find it interesting that Sawayama says that the reason we ignore this enduring issue is that there is no way out. However, I believe that even more people ignore our seemingly impending doom because of their ignorance. Not everyone is aware of how their spending habits are affecting the environment, but some people frankly don't care.

This work doesn't have an emotional effect on me. If I'm just listening casually to the song, the beat and rhythm motivate me, considering that it's an upbeat song. It lyrically sounds

BRADFORD WRITES!

Fall 2024

like any other pop song about having millions of dollars and driving fancy cars, which does not drive me emotionally. However, when I analyze the lyrics of this work and their meaning, I become more logically connected. I do not have the luxury to afford “Cartier’s and Tesla X’s.” I feel like those who do experience the lifestyle that Sawayama is mocking would have a different experience of the song than I do. They would be less likely to realize the satirical commentary Sawayama is making and assume that it is just another pop song about affording luxury goods that others cannot. The majority of people cannot afford these luxuries; however, some people find entertainment in over-consumption. It is currently trendy to have “shopping hauls” and spending sprees, but this only encourages the actions Sawayama is denouncing.

I feel that her music video for this song especially creates a feeling of community because the message she develops recognizes not only those who are unable to afford luxurious lifestyles but also those who have to work in terrible conditions to support said lifestyles. In the music video, Sawayama plays two distinct characters. Many of the scenes star an opulent saleswoman, flaunting her “Rina Water” on television (which is supposedly 99% 24 karat gold and 1% plasma) (XS Official Video, 0:53). This character represents overindulgence in the pursuit of luxury and “excess”. While most of the video is centered around this caricature, I believe that the entity Sawayama portrays in the end surpasses any expectations set on this work. In one of the final scenes, Sawayama is appeared in a costume that represents a monster, which has a syringe injected into its neck. This is when it is revealed that the product being sold as a luxury drink is harvested from captive creatures. I believe that this creature can either represent those who are forced to work in poor labor conditions to fulfill consumers' wants, or it can be a representation of the earth. In both interpretations things are being harvested (like labor or natural resources) but the supplier has to suffer the consequences. Sawayama speaks on the

BRADFORD WRITES!
Fall 2024

behalf of those who are not privileged enough to do so themselves, which creates her main audience for “XS.” While I’m sure that many listen to this song without a true understanding of the stance Sawayama is making, those who do understand can relate to being exploited in several ways by our capitalist society.

Lorde also has a satirical take on a modern-day issue in her song titled “Mood Ring,” hers being performative spiritualism. A mood ring is a ring that changes color based on the temperature of the wearer. Even though its origin confirms that it was supposed to be a resource to confront anxieties, a mood ring is rarely ever indicative of that person's actual emotions, but people still believe in their absolute accuracy (Was The Mood Ring A Gateway Drug To An Era Of Self-Obsession? para 3). Lorde uses this fallacy as a metaphor for how those who try to find well-being in our chaotic world look for meaning where there is none. This is a fallacy that Carl Sagan covers in his book *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*. We want to confirm beliefs that we already have, so people typically use any “evidence”, no matter how illogical or unsound, to prove something they want to be correct.

Lorde takes on a character who is sad and uptight and wants to “look to elements of wellness culture to try and feel good.” (Lorde “Mood Ring” Official Lyrics and Meaning, 3:39). This character is a reflection of the actions that Lorde is mocking, such as getting high only when the wind blows a certain direction (1:13) and letting a mood ring tell you how you're feeling (1:27) when you are numb and directionless. Lorde’s intended audience consists of people who use “spirituality” as a means for popularity or as a “quick fix” for deep seeded issues. This mainly affects the newer generations of spiritualists, or at least those who claim to be. This song reminds me of myself. I take an interest in spirituality but I am almost always preoccupied with something else that doesn’t aid my spiritual growth. Some might say that I am a part of Lorde’s

BRADFORD WRITES!
Fall 2024

target audience and conclude that I am hypocritical for relating myself to the term “spiritual” whilst also being aware of the falsehoods within it and not devoting myself. However, I believe that is the opposite of Lorde’s argument, especially since she admits to believing in astrology and crystals herself. Lorde is saying that there are beings who devote themselves to practicing forms of “wellness culture” to seek validation that they are healing and happy, even if they know they are not changing as a person. Instead, I would say that I choose not to devote myself to spiritual practices to not cloud my judgment of myself by avoiding my responsibilities. While I am the type of person who would like to meditate all day and only eat greens that I grow from my garden, I know I can learn a lot more and improve as a person by incorporating those practices on a smaller scale, while still focusing on my academics, personal relationships, and physical health.

Another emotional connection I have to this song is its reflection of cultural appropriation. I’m unaware of if Lorde does this on purpose, but throughout her song she acknowledges spiritual practices from many different cultures but sums them up as “wellness culture”. I think that that is a perfect representation of how closed practices and culture become mainstream, they get whitewashed and the majority of people who use them end up not understanding the true history or intentions of them. This then leads to performative spiritualism, because people are practicing certain parts of cultures they do not belong to, nor have the knowledge they should be practicing. And as things get more mainstream, trends become something to do for clout, not for personal well-being. It is saddening how many times I have seen my own culture be used by ignorant people looking for followers and likes. I am highly aware of this phenomenon as a black queer person in America, but some people have the privilege of not having their culture ridiculed, watered down, then misused. Those people are

BRADFORD WRITES!
Fall 2024

less likely to understand the message Lorde is trying to make, because they have never had a reason to be aware of cultural appropriation before, so it is a more unfamiliar topic. Like Sawayama's piece, privileged individuals would need more time to grasp the satire that these women are presenting, whereas the minorities in this context are already familiar with these struggles. The use of satire binds those with understanding together because this section of the audience is mutually aware of one another's struggles.

It is evident that people not only find community through the stories they listen to, but are also connected through the genre. Nick Stockton, a science writer and editor for Wired, wrote about this occurrence. "People express their identity through music. In one study, from 2007, researchers had strangers meet in a chat room with the only instruction being to learn about one another. After analyzing the transcripts, the researchers found the most common topic, by far, was musical preferences" (Wired, para 3). Music is one of the most accessible art forms, and that leads to strong convictions being made. In my experience, these convictions can bring about biases or bring together like-minded people, and when talking to people with similar music tastes as you, I believe you are more likely to find the latter. Like many others, music has helped me find people in the loneliest stages of my life. I have related to many songs about heartache and oppression and love and acceptance, and by doing so I have related to many people who have listened along with me. And while it is most likely true that I will never get to meet these individuals in person, I know we are always connected by not only the stories we have lived, but the stories we have listened to.