

Taylor Swift – Folklore (2020)

Written by bluelover (Bogdan Marszałkowski)

Saturday, 10 April 2021 08:39 - Last Updated Saturday, 10 April 2021 08:47

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1 *The 1* 3:30 2 *Cardigan* 3:59 3 *The Last Great American Dynasty* 3:50 4 *Exile* 4:45 5 *My Tears Ricochet* 4:15 6 *Mirrorball* 3:28 7 *Seven* 3:28 8 *August* 4:21 9 *This Is Me Trying* 3:15 10 *Illicit Affairs* 3:10 11 *Invisible String* 4:12 12 *Mad Woman* 3:57 13 *Epiphany* 4:49 14 *Betty* 4:54 15 *Peace* 3:54 16 *Hoax* 3:40 + 17 *The Lakes* 3:32 Accordion, Saxophone, Electric Guitar, Keyboards, Backing Vocals – Evan Smith Bass [Synth Bass] – Jonathan Low Cello – Clarice Jensen Drums, Percussion, Bass, Guitars, Electric Organ, Mellotron – Jack Antonoff Harmonica, Electric Guitar, Lap Steel Guitar – Josh Kaufman Organ [B3] – Jack Antonoff Percussion – Jason Treuting Piano, Guitars, Drum Programming, Mellotron, Synthesizer [OP1], Bass – Aaron Dessner Strings – Bobby Hawk Synthesizer [OP1] – Thomas Bartlett Synth [Modular] – Benjamin Lanz Trombone – Dave Nelson Trumpet – Kyle Resnick Viola, Violin – Yuki Numata Resnick Vocals, Performer - Taylor Swift

“Folklore” came as Taylor Swift’s biggest surprise yet. Announced merely hours ahead of its arrival, with co-writer credits from The National’s Aaron Dessner, fans had little time to speculate on what this new era of Swift could mean – but they still took to Twitter to analyze every single hint she dropped. Would it be another pop record? A folk-rock or dream pop record? Maybe a return to country?

The moment it dropped, expectations were thrown out the window. With a lack of catchy singles or hooks, “Folklore” serves as a concept album where Swift explores her talent for storytelling without the autobiographical pressures that defined her previous records, which garnered a lot of criticism for her portrayals of heartbreak. Heavily inspired by the melancholy alternative rock of The National and Bon Iver, “Folklore” is Swift’s most mature album yet, lyrically and musically, ushering in a new era of artistry for the 30-year-old.

The record opens with a serene, upbeat blend of piano and acoustic guitar. Swift immediately

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tears down her radio-friendly past persona with the first swear she's ever sang on a record, opening the song "the 1" with the lyrics, "I'm doing good, I'm on some new shit." Though not as literal as her proclamation on "Reputation" that the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now because she's dead, Swift still fights back against her persona of overly emotional innocence. No song encapsulates this better than the tense "mad woman." She sounds almost unhinged, proclaiming herself as a woman pushed to the brink of insanity by those who have mistreated her in the music industry, namely Scooter Braun and Kanye West. Swift turns her rage into freedom by attacking the cycle in which women are angered further by the label of "mad woman." By leaning into modern-day frustrations, she humanizes herself more than ever.

"cardigan" begins the story of a teenage love triangle, continued in "august" and "betty." By telling a fictional young love story, her creativity shines with the ever-present theme of lost innocence and heartbreak while feeling almost referential to her early work when she was a teenager in love. The three-part story of a relationship doomed from the start is cleverly scattered throughout the record, with the emotions just as real as ever despite its fictional nature. The nostalgia is heavy as she slips into new identities, creating strong visuals of summers in Pennsylvania and young, dumb love over folk-pop-inspired instrumentals. These summers of youth coincide with allusions to her own time as a young songwriter, including an emphasis on color in "invisible string" that feels reminiscent of her Red era.

The combination of nostalgia and poignant, present-day emotions create a beautiful blend of lyrical storytelling, perhaps strongest on her utterly heartbreaking "illicit affairs." She tackles the topic of infidelity, which is previously addressed in her earlier work as a blanket condemnation and here, becomes something far more nuanced. She tells the story from the perspective of the mistress this time, conveying the greatly-ignored pain and sense of invisibility felt on the other side. Her pungent wisdom as she tackles the mundane realities of cheating and the deep emotional implications creates one of the best songs about cheating yet, growing into a powerful cry amplified by exquisitely textured guitar, bass and percussion.

Amid all the praise, "Folklore" suffers from an unfortunately long runtime. The similarities between tracks create a beautiful flow; however, the length makes these similarities feel redundant at times. At moments, it almost seems like a carbon copy of The National's most recent record "I Am Easy To Find," lost in melancholic instrumentals that lack a major sense of originality. The inspirations from frequent collaborator Jack Antonoff also feel a bit too on-the-nose, with the albeit enjoyable "mirrorball" straying from the musical themes of the record as an almost stereotypically Antonoff indie-pop sound. Especially toward the end of the record, the exhaustion starts to kick in as each song sounds more like the last. "hoax" is a beautiful finish, yet it seems to lack the power of the record's stronger moments, ending on a serene yet ultimately forgettable note.

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“Folklore” is a far cry from Swift’s more recent pop-driven records, but the callback to her country roots combined with an affinity for modern indie rock feels like a breath of fresh air. After Swift was dubbed a superficial pop artist throughout the past few years, hearing her explore a less radio-friendly sound feels like an “I told you so” moment directed toward her critics. Producer Aaron Dessner plays a large role in this, with many of the songs feeling directly inspired by his work with The National, yet there is still a distinctly Taylor Swift sound that keeps “Folklore” from sounding like a rip-off of her inspirations. This isn’t a record solely dedicated to her fans – it’s one that branches away from her previous characterization and begs her harshest critics to finally take her seriously as a singer-songwriter. ---Ingrid Angulo, huntnewsnu.com

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