A Blank Space Where You Write Your Name: Taylor Swift’s Early Late Voice

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Introduction: Late Voice

Pop musicians offer a privileged site for the witnessing and analysis of ageing. In my recent work, I use the concept of ‘late voice’ as a way of articulating this and I’ve been exploring issues of time, memory, innocence and experience in modern popular song, with an emphasis on singers and songwriters. Lateness, as I’ve used it, refers to five primary issues: chronology (the stage in an artist’s career); the vocal act (the ability to convincingly portray experience); afterlife (the posthumous careers made possible by recorded sound); retrospection (how voices ‘look back’ or anticipate looking back); and the writing of age, experience, lateness and loss into song texts. As part of this work I use the idea of ‘sounded experience’, a term intended to describe how music reflects upon and helps to mediate life experience over extended periods of time (indeed, over lifetimes).

Early Late Voice

While my initial thoughts about the late voice concept were mainly connected to older singers and the work they produced in the later parts of their careers, I became interested in the possibility of lateness recognised at earlier stages in the life course. In other words, while there’s often a good fit between chronologically late work and
themes of time, age and experience, there’s nothing to exclude such a connection with artists at much earlier stages in their lives.

To take a favourite example of mine, Sandy Denny’s song ‘Who Knows Where the Time Goes’ is the work of someone who sounds much older than her years. Denny composed the song when she was nineteen or twenty and introduced it into her repertoire not long afterwards. As a consideration of time lost, time to come and time passing, ‘Who Knows Where the Time Goes’ can be heard to represent a moment of transition. To place the song in its author’s biography is to speculate on the thoughts of a young woman leaving behind the friends and familiares of her youth as she embarks on the rest of her life. Other such songs may spring to mind: ‘Bob Dylan’s Dream’, Richard Thompson’s ‘Meet on the Ledge’, Neil Young’s ‘Sugar Mountain’, Joni Mitchell’s ‘The Circle Game’ and also her ‘Both Sides, Now’.

Thinking about the late voice, I found myself constantly drawn back to the notion of early lateness and a more pervasive use of popular song to record experience gained or anticipated regardless of age. In 2012, during the early stages of preparing my book on the late voice, I heard Taylor Swift’s album Red and I was struck by the relevance of Swift’s work to my project. Not only was Swift singing about age and experience, she was doing so while still young and with a remarkable sense of self awareness. Even more impressive was the fact that she’d already been doing this for a number of years (her debut album was released in 2006 when she was sixteen. Prior to age-referencing songs like Red’s ‘22’, she had hymned youthful experience to great effect, either through explicit references in songs such as ‘Fifteen’, ‘Dear John’ and ‘Place in This World’, or via more general depictions of girlishness, school, first loves, summer vacations and parents. She’d also moved from identification with country music—a genre which has traditionally placed great emphasis on time, age, experience and nostalgia—towards a more clearly pop-centred approach aimed at a teen audience and focussed on the transitory pleasures and pains of youth. What
struck me then, and still does now, is Swift’s ability to offer messages relevant to people at many different life stages, a reminder that reflection on the passing of time is something with which we’re always engaged. There’s a mixture of escapism and realism in her work that inhabits a place we all need to go to at various points in our life. This is no doubt one of the reasons that work has found praise among a number of music critics and veteran songwriters.²

In the end I didn’t have space to write extensively about Swift in my book, nor other younger singers such as Amy Winehouse and Adele. What I offer here is a partial development of where I might go if I decide to explore these artists’ work.

Singer-Songwriter’s Voice

I want to first think about Swift’s work in relation to the singer-songwriter’s voice and to ask us to consider how the figure of the singer-songwriter brings at least two important aspects of voice together: the writing voice and the singing voice. This is an obvious but important point to remember, because the tension between words as written, words as sung and voice as supported by other musical layers (instrumentation, production, genre, etc.) is a crucial element in the way listeners respond to and evaluate songs.

It’s also worth thinking about how singer-songwriters take on different voices, both authorial and timbral. There are writing grammars and vocal styles associated with particular genres and singer-songwriters appropriate these in different ways. In Swift’s case, we hear more references to rural settings in her earlier work and her lines are delivered with aspects of country grain – accent, stress, and so on. Topics and vocal styles shift as we move through her discography – this trajectory is often discussed by critics in terms of lyrical preoccupations and instrumental style, but it’s
important to note that it’s there in the singing voice too, which gets less accented and less regional over the years.

Accompanying this are the markers, in both writing and singing, of a confessional voice, and this remains even with the move to pop diva-hood. This voice (both writing and singing) is of a type associated with earlier singer-songwriters. Swift has sometimes been compared to Joni Mitchell in her preoccupation with picking apart romantic relationships, but I think figures such as Carole King and Janis Ian might be nearer the mark, with a touch perhaps of James Taylor, who Swift namechecked in her song ‘Begin Again’.

The shifts in Swift’s style have been noted in the critical response to her work, though often in ways that elide discussion of her singing voice (there’s plenty of online comment fodder along the lines of ‘she can’t sing for toffee’ but I’m referring here to more nuanced commentary). A reader comment following the review of Swift’s album 1989 on the Spin website notes ‘I guess you can say that the attention to detail has shifted from the lyrics to the acoustics’, but the acoustics referred to here, as in may reviews of the album, are those of the instrumentation and production of the overall tracks rather than the voice. When voice is mentioned in reviews and online comments, it’s often as an absence, with commenters suggesting that the voice (and hence the words) can’t be heard above the production gloss.

This commentary retrospectively highlights the equal lack of discussion around Swift’s singing voice in earlier commentary on her work but there are exceptions to this rule. The two reviewers who’ve covered Swift’s albums for AllMusic – Jeff Tamarkin and Stephen Thomas Erlewine – have consistently emphasised the fact that Swift’s ability to write with a seeming wisdom beyond her years has often lain in tension with a vocal girliness. Travis Stimeling’s recently published essay on Swift’s so-called ‘pitch problem’ places her singing voice at the centre of its analysis, making a case for the singer’s imperfect vocals as a potential marker of authenticity for her young fans.
And, while ‘amateur’ internet comment around Swift’s music tends to focus on her star image, her lifestyle and her lyrics, the sheer range of discussion topics available online means that we can find posts specifically about her singing voice. The informative and well-resourced website Diva Devotee has an entry on Swift from November 2010, with over 300 reader comments attached to it.⁶

So Swift’s voice does get attended to but not always at the same time as her writing and I want to note here an ongoing tension between writing and singing voice (and musical style), one that goes back as long as people have been discussing singer-songwriters (think of the acoustic vs electric Dylan, or the Joni Mitchell of Clouds against the Joni Mitchell of Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter.

The gendering of styles and voices

In his perceptive essay on Swift’s voice, Travis Stimeling writes:

Swift’s persistent problems with pitch control have often been depicted as a symptom of a troubling trend within the broader popular music industry: the “manufacture” of pop stars. Implicit in this argument is a familiar belief that pop stars – typically, but not exclusively, young women – lack the musical talent necessary for a music career but, through the mediating effects of modern recording technology and the media, can convince audiences of their musical prowess.⁷

The discourse Stimeling identifies is both gendered and rockist, a common conflation in popular music culture. In my book The Late Voice I include some critical commentary on the broken vocals to be found on Neil Young’s 1975 album Tonight’s the Night. Here’s one of them, from Allan Jones in Uncut magazine: ‘Young’s voice cracks and strains, breaks, is often tuneless, off-key and by any technical terms an embarrassment. It’s hard, however, to think of many vocal performances this sincerely moving’.⁸

Jones is far from alone in equating the breaking down of Young’s voice to authentic sincere, serious rock music. In such readings, inadequately tuned male rock voices are heard as markers of authenticity, while inadequately tuned female or feminised pop voices are heard as inauthentic, markers of inability, of both technical and artistic failure.

Here’s Jessica Hopper writing about Taylor Swift, Lana Del Ray and Grimes:

When it comes to music, image is believed to be the teen girls’ area of fascination and special expertise; young women’s arduous fandom is often taken as the very proof of a performer’s artlessness. the perception being that girls are so rapt with an artist’s surface image that it supersedes any sort of real connection with or understanding of the music itself.⁹
I want to turn to Swift’s album *1989* now. The first thing to note is that the album has been received well by critics on the whole, both in the reviews when it came out in 2014 and then in review by proxy when Ryan Adams released his cover version of the entire album late last year. If one looks at the reviews collected on Metacritic.com, one finds a very positive set of comments from the selected reviews and an overall score of 76%.¹⁰

I mention this because Stimeling’s recently published essay on Swift might make people think that the critical consensus was against her, whereas I’m not so sure. That doesn’t invalidate any of the insightful observations he makes about Swift’s voice and the gendered discourse around it. Furthermore, it depends where you look – the critics whose appraisals are collected on Metacritic represent, to an extent, a hierarchy or canon of criticism and Stimeling seems to have looked to other, less canonical sources.

Where we do find a lot more criticism is in amateur, often anonymous postings on the internet, especially those written in response to favourable reviews. An example of this can be found with Amy Pettifer’s review for *The Quietus*.¹¹ She gives a positive review, even if she qualifies it somewhat in her opening salvo, where she asserts that ‘Taylor Swift is not—as yet—pushing sonic boundaries or changing pop music. If anything, she is doll perfect and upbeat … her voice is clear and bright, but not extraordinary.’

Later, and more usefully in my opinion, she revisits the voice question by saying: ‘OK, perhaps you might not be able to pick her out of a vocal line up, but I like that the fact that it’s her writerly, rather than her physical voice which sets her apart. Swift
broadcasts her enthusiasms and messy, emotional humanness to such a volume
that no amount of drum machines or slick production can drown her out.\textsuperscript{12}

Generally the review is favourable. However, with a few exceptions, the *Quietus*
commentariat are not at all happy and waste no time in lambasting Pettiver, Swift
and commercial pop music. For the most part this takes the tone of 'why review this
corporate bullshit on a site like *The Quietus*', therefore assuming a sense of
distinction and cultural capital for those who use the site. One commenter even goes
as far as to say: 'This review smacks of smugness, a sort of click-baity "aren't I really
edgy for endorsing this corporate product" attitude, as if it's some sort of act of cool
rebellion.'\textsuperscript{13}

This is a pattern found elsewhere. Alex Petridis's positive review for *The Guardian* is
accompanied by a few hundred comments, mostly belittling his opinion, accusing
him of being on the industry payroll and/or rubbing and objectifying Swift (a
lengthy discussion about legs is about as deep as it gets for a while in the
comments). By contrast, the comments following Kitty Empire's positive review in the
*Observer* are far more positive and in agreement with the author.\textsuperscript{14}

Unlike the *Quietus* review, most responses don't deal with Swift's singing voice; nor
are they explicit about their focus on the writerly voice - this remains implicit as lyrics
are trotted out for particular focus. One critic who does focus extensively on the
singing voice is Jon Caramanica for the *New York Times*. Like Jessica Hopper,
Caramanica picks up on Swift's strategic use of \textit{naiveté} and suggests that it surfaces
on \textit{1989} as displacement, Swift's physical move from Nashville to New York and her
musical transition from country twang to cosmopolitan pop.\textsuperscript{15} The voice of the waif
adrift in the new city is also the voice of the excited discoverer of the city's potential
for reinvention and renewal, rather like that found in Jonathan Raban's 1974 book
*Soft City*. That reinvention, of course, has often been connected to a certain level of
privilege (and access to capital), a point David Harvey made in response to Raban's
novel and Stephen Thomas Erlewine has made in response to Swift's album.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Ryan Adams}

What’s notable about a lot of the reviews of Adams’s 1989 are the numerous
real/artificial binaries to be found. These typically take the form of contrasting roots
rock with pop, the organic with the machinic, lo-fi with high gloss, the mellow with the
frenetic, the melancholy with the exuberant, restraint with abandon.

Pretty much every review I've read of Adams's album uses the word 'stripped' or a
close equivalent.\textsuperscript{17} Stripped, stripped down, stripped back: these terms signify
authenticity in pop/rock culture, rather as they do in contemporary interior design. As
with design, this may be a faux authenticity, born of a retromaniac imagination, but
it's still about trying to signify the real. Stripping back exposes frameworks,
skeletons, ghosts and it's no surprise to find all these words appearing in the reviews
of Adams's album as contrasts to the gloss/ frills/ fullness of Swift's original. In our
cultural imaginary, we value skeletons and ghosts above fleshy bodies.
These tendencies aside, I’ve become more aware, while developing this paper, of the actually quite strong critical support for both Swift and Adams. I’ve been encouraged by the amount of critics who have seen the Swift/Adams relationship as dialogic rather than competitive – in other words, highlighting the ways that each version of 1989 changes how we hear the other version.

Blank Space

By way of conclusion, I want to riff on the concept of the blank space. ‘Blank Space’ was, of course, one of the hit singles released by Swift from 1989. The lyric plays on media portrayals of Swift as a serial dater, with the blank space reserved for the name of her next victim. But, for me, the blank space is also a suggestive metaphor. As in the game of Scrabble, the blank space can stand in for many things, making it simultaneously valuable and worthless.

The blank space is the possibility of anonymity and flexibility, but also represents the substitute, the less than ideal, the compromise. It can be a new start, as when we go back to the drawing board to begin again, to make good the plans and possibilities that failed in previous experience. It could also serve as a metaphor for celebrity: the blank spaces created by the culture industry, the latest gap to be filled, the latest in a long line of mass products. As Janis Ian once noted in her song ‘Stars’, stars ‘come and go … like the last light of the sun all in a blaze.’ Swift imagines a situation where ‘it’s gonna be forever, or it’s gonna go down in flames’.18

In the light of this paper and this conference, we might also speak of the blank space of the voice, which can be substituted by other voices as Swift’s was by Adams. And the blank space of all voices. All voices which are reminders of voids, of unlocatable
sources and unfinished spaces. Where do they begin and end? From what does voice emerge, in what does it disperse and dissolve?

Or if the voice is something real, something much more tangible, able to ‘fill’ the void? Is the song the blank space on which voice goes to work, to which voice gives body? Here, in a late musical example, let me briefly touch on the voice in the songwriting process:

[AUDIO EXAMPLE: Taylor Swift, ‘Blank Space (Songwriting Memo)’, available on Deluxe Editions of 1989.]

The song starts with an idea, or a set of ideas accompanied by inevitable blank spaces that subsequently get filled in. In the collaborative process to which Swift is working, these spaces get filled by a variety of other voices. I said earlier that I was thinking of two voices, that of the songwriter and that of the singer, but in reality these voices are merged, and not just within the one person (as when we talk of the singer-songwriter) but in the combinatory processes of performative songwriting and writerly performance.

Finally, from the perspective of an artist communicating with her fans, the blank spaces of Swift’s songs offer sites and identities to be occupied by her most avid listeners, who doubtless find far more profound meanings in them than I have been able to suggest here.

2 The well-researched and informative Wikipedia entry on Swift cites a number of veteran musicians who have praised her work, including Neil Young, Stephen Stills, James Taylor, Kris Kristofferson,


4 See the reviews available linked to from http://www.allmusic.com/artist/taylor-swift-mn0000472102/discography.


7 Stimeling, ‘Taylor Swift’s “Pitch Problem”’, 84-5.

8 Allan Jones, ‘The Edge of Darkness’, Uncut no. 16 (September 1998), 61-64.


12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., comments section.


