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She wears short skirts, I wear t-shirts

Dressing up at Taylor Swift shows is about more than fashion

BY SIERRA RILEY

I'M ENGULFED IN A MASSIVE CROWD AT SEATTLE'S Lumen Field under an open blue sky. The stadium is abuzz with 72,000 Swifties running between aisles, exchanging friendship bracelets at a frenetic pace. A stranger slips one on my wrist with beads that read "CALM DOWN," but of course I can't—neither can they. The stranger reveals they flew in from Dallas. I tell them I drove from Vancouver. At the border, I saw a hitchhiker decked out in *Lover* merch. We all went to great lengths to be here on this hot July night; our pilgrimage was imperative. A giant three-minute countdown occupies several mega-high-def screens. Miss Americana is about to make her entrance. We hold our collective breath until the timer hits zero. A chorus of screams fills the summer air, broken up only

by these words: "It's you and me, that's my whole world."

An immersive experience beyond the conventions of its form, Taylor Swift's Eras Tour transports its audience through space and time, across the glittery landscape of the artist's discography. The set evolves into a dollhouse, then a forest, then a living chessboard. With each song, an intricate new scene reveals itself onstage. The euphoric crowd—a lit-up sea of sequins, cowboy boots and stilettos—sings along to every lyric.

"The things I have seen in this crowd tonight are so...next level," the superstar laughs, sitting at a moss-covered piano. "You are actively performing as hard if not harder than we are." I take a look at myself, jumping up and down like a kid.

I was introduced to Taylor Swift when I was 10 by the

satellite radio in my childhood bedroom. The then-teenaged songwriter sang “Teardrops On My Guitar” in a country drawl on the now-defunct Radio Disney. As I lay there under my baby-pink quilt, I felt my soul stir. Swift’s music has been stitched into the fabric of my existence ever since. Each of her albums, ushering in its own unique set of aesthetics, marked a new chapter of my life, whether it was a fresh school year, a burgeoning crush or a world-shattering heartbreak.

“I’d give all I have, honey / if you could stay like that,” she sings in the recently rerecorded “Never Grow Up,” and suddenly I’m in middle school again, clutching my iPod on the bus ride home.

I attended my first T-Swift concert in Toronto with my mom in 2011, equipped with a neon sign and a scrapbook made just for Swift. We had front-row seats. I chatted excitedly with the kids next to me until the intro guitar riff to “Sparks Fly” began and my soul somersaulted once again. Then, like a purple frosted Pop-Tart, she burst out onto the stage. I wiped tears from my eyes. It was her: the girl who had been my pal through all the grade-nine drama, the girl who sang about everything I felt and wished for, the girl I modelled myself after. She was real.

Now in Seattle, a 27-year-old denizen of the digital community known as Taylor Swift Stan Twitter, I feel almost exactly as I did back then (and at a few of her concerts in between). I watch enraptured while my longtime idol puts on another fantastical show. There are fireworks, flames and enough dancing concertgoers to cause seismic activity. For us, this event—a journey through Swift’s career—doubles as an intimate, three-hour escape into our own personal histories. Safely separated from real life by stadium walls, we aren’t grownups with bills to pay and futures to figure out; we’re fans playing dress up to the soundtrack of our youth.

I’m wearing a Halloween-themed bandana top and a ballcap onto which I’ve stitched my Twitter handle (“urhouseishaunt,” a reference to the song “seven”). This outfit could be described as subtle in comparison to those around me: there are matching PJ sets, tassel dresses, custom-printed father-son t-shirts, and at least three renditions of Swift’s 2018 AMAs red carpet disco-ball ensemble by Balmain. Each of these getups likely took hours, if not days, to perfect. I didn’t always dress up for her shows—at my first one, I wore a plain tee and shorts—but by my second, I got the memo and arrived decked out in a gown shaped like a pastry.

A long-held Swiftie tradition, concert costumes usually signal the desire to be picked for a meet-and-greet with the star, but at this tour—Swift’s first since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—there will be no T-Party, Club Red, Loft ’89 or rep room. Why, then, are fans still meticulously designing recreations of Swift’s outfits? It’s for more than the pure joy of crafting; to slip on a purple chiffon dress or a homemade Junior Jewels tee is to reopen a closed chapter of one’s life as defined

by the global superstar. Part nostalgia, part escapism, this DIY subculture connects the fandom, and, in a way, connects fans to past versions of themselves.

Swift’s performance of her deep, diaristic catalogue converts Lumen Field into some sort of time machine, a hyperchamber for radical introspection. *What should I wear to the concert?* isn’t an entirely separate question from *Who am I?* Acting as a symbol of their special relationships with Swift’s work, Eras Tour costumes double as a medium through which fans honour the parts of themselves that may have faded over time—more specifically, the parts that believe in fairytales. Together, the audience is invited to step outside of reality and into a utopic dreamscape.

Though Swifties are hesitant to wake from this reverie, the tour is scheduled to conclude next year in Canada. This would be a full-circle moment for me...if only I’d managed to get tickets. General Ticketmaster fuckery, dynamic pricing and Swift’s widespread popularity have rendered front-row seats a pipe dream, or in Stan Twitter terms, “delulu.” Much has changed since my “Sparks Fly” experience at the Air Canada Centre. Back then, my idol had a smaller fanbase, predominantly composed of young girls who were perceived as unsophisticated, or worse, “basic.” Swift herself was similarly mocked for her countless breakup songs. In 2023, by contrast, those songs (rerecorded, rereleased) are gaining

millions of streams per week from a multi-generational, gender-diverse listenership. Reductive, sexist criticisms are fewer and further between. Public battles—like the one with Big Machine Records over Swift’s ownership of her masters recordings—are, at long last, in the icon’s rearview mirror. With persistence and several successful

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rebrands, Swift has reclaimed her artistic autonomy and reputation; the Eras Tour is currently projected to be the highest-grossing tour in history and the concert film broke an AMC record with \$26 million in presale tickets.

Though I’m careful not to conflate capitalism with feminism, the singer has set conditions in which women and girls can imagine, create and play freely. The economic boost is a happy side effect, but that’s not what I talk about when I talk about Taylor Swift. What I am getting at here is something closer to magic: finding pieces of yourself in someone’s art, shedding inhibitions in a technicoloured sea of strangers, experiencing a cosmic shift under a baby-pink quilt. I’m talking about the invisible string that ties us all together.

Despite Swift’s Peter Pan wishes for her fans in “Never Grow Up,” I’m an adult now. Still, I cry at concerts. Still, I trade friendship bracelets in a football stadium-turned-playground.

At the show, the twilight sky has faded to black. The star has taken her bow, and the stadium is illuminated by fluorescent lights overhead. People gather confetti off the floor. We shuffle out of the venue in a daze, back into the real world. I glance down at my beaded wrist: “DONT U LET IT GO.”