

CRITIC'S PICK

'Taylor Swift: Miss Americana' Review: A Star, Scathingly Alone

Self-critical, grown up and ready, perhaps, to deliver a message beyond the music.



By Wesley Morris

Taylor Swift: Miss Americana

NYT Critic's Pick

Directed by Lana Wilson

Documentary

1h 25m

“Miss Americana” is 85 minutes of translucence with Taylor Swift. There’s more in it — and more *to* it — than you usually get with these pop superstar portraits. I, at least, don’t recall loneliness being such a predominant condition for Swift’s peers as it is, here, for her. Not long after the movie doles out a deluxe rise-to-the-top montage, we hear Swift ask no one in particular, “Shouldn’t I have someone to call right now?” This from a woman who’s famous — notorious, actually — for her squad of besties. Otherwise, it’s lonely up there. Even the man she says she’s seeing is a figment in this movie, cropped from images, a hand-holding blur, a ghost.

On Grammy nomination day in the winter of 2018, a camera watches from a low angle as Swift sits in sweats alone on a sofa and hears from her publicist that her perturbed sixth album, [“Reputation,”](#) has been omitted from three of the big categories. She’s stoic. She’s almost palpably hurt. But Swift’s songwriting treats hurt as an elastic instrument, and she resolves in that moment of snubbing, “I just need to make a better record.” And the movie watches as she writes and records “Lover,” another album eventually [rejected by the string-pullers at the Grammys](#).

Along the way, Swift does a lot of ruminating and recounting, a lot of arguing and apologizing on her own behalf. She’s rueful about sitting out the 2016 presidential election and failing to mobilize her millions of fans and followers against Donald Trump’s candidacy. So “Miss Americana” is also about [an apolitical star waking up to herself as a woman](#) and a citizen. She wants to spend her “good girl” credit to decry the

scorched-earth-conservative Senate campaign that Marsha Blackburn was running in Tennessee, Swift's adopted home. Her management team deems this unwise. The team, at that symbolic point, is two slouchy, old white men who counter their client's raging passion with financial and prehistoric umbrage. *Bob Hope and Bing wouldn't let their politics dent ticket sales 50 percent.* It's part of strong stretch of the movie that argues that [Swift's own experience](#) with a handsy (and consequently litigious) radio personality helped push her off the fence — a passage that culminates with the most stressful sending of an Instagram post you're likely to see from a star. Swift's success rate as an activist is nominal; Blackburn is currently sitting through impeachment arguments with 99 other senators. But what's bracing about this film, which Lana Wilson directed, is the way it weds Swift's loneliness and her arrival at empowerment. That's at least how I'm receiving her support last summer of pro-gay legislation that culminated in [the video for her hit "You Need to Calm Down."](#) It teemed with famous queer people, and watching its partial making in this movie made me understand that she was campaigning not just for gay rights, but possibly for new friends.

Swift is revealed as being surrounded by men of different generations. Some co-create her music. Some oversee her career. Only with the producer Jack Antonoff do we catch a spark of collaborative lightning. The few meaningful connections with women involve her mother and a visiting childhood friend (Abigail, the wronged protagonist of the Swift classic "Fifteen") — and Wilson.

Her movie proceeds in a kind of *vérité* approach. It opens with an adult Swift awash in the declarations of her girlhood diaries and rarely departs from seeing the world as Swift does, and I left it with a new sympathy for a woman who polarizes people. The urge that notoriously overcame [Kanye West, in 2009, to hijack her acceptance speech](#) at the Video Music Awards stands in for a national vexation. And all she did that night was win. It's the winning, of course, that vexes. But the movie conjures up that moment and her response to the press immediately after, and you feel like you're watching a foundational trauma. Swift was 19.

At the other extreme is a different trauma, normal only for the famous: Folks who camp outside of Swift's Manhattan apartment building and shriek as she exits; who, upon seeing her backstage, tearfully come apart; who so adore her that they need her as an unwitting accessory to their surprise marriage proposal. We're supposed to call these people fans. But the ones who turn up here tend toward the most disturbing adulation. She tells the singer Brendon Urie that a man broke into her apartment and slept in her bed.

So a movie about Swift — a movie worth watching, anyway — that's seeking to provide a little intimacy should proceed aware that not everybody wants to be close. Swift has incorporated rejection and disdain into her way of being. "Miss Americana" suggests a tenuous connection between Swift's wading into her politics and the Dixie Chicks' being drowned because of theirs, although Wilson's movie doesn't have the force or clarifying intent (or material) of "Shut Up and Sing," Barbara Koppel's very good documentary about what befell the Dixies.

Yet, the most absorbing parts of “Miss Americana” involve Swift’s reckoning with the disillusionment of dislike — not simply other people’s but her own. When she’s watching footage of herself on a video set and says “I have a really slappable face,” it’s a throwaway self-deprecation. But it’s also a shocking symptom of the toll of her strange public life.

Her departure that day from her fan-barnacled building leads her to ruminate, minutes later, about the toll that level of attention has taken on her psyche. Swift confesses that, for some while, she couldn’t stand to see pictures of herself because she’d scrutinize rather than simply look; the scrutiny spurred an eating disorder. Here’s Swift personalizing the diseased nature of fame, a condition she’s considered with envy and rue in her songwriting, namely on “The Lucky One” from “Red,” a masterpiece album from 2012 that navigates stadium, dance floor and diary. (Swift philosophizes, at some late point, that stars are stuck at the age they became famous.)

A handful of scenes capture Swift rigorously refining songs for “[Lover](#).” Occasionally, she senses she’s hit the jackpot, even when the result is a piece of pyrite like the album’s first single, “Me!,” a duet with Urie. Her elation over that song left me sad to have missed the moment she perfected gems like “You Belong With Me,” “22,” “Blank Space” and “Delicate.” We don’t see her working on the “Lover” track that gives the movie its title, “Miss Americana and the Heartbreak Prince,” a midtempo number about romantic and national disillusionment.

Now, the title stands alongside her, like a guileless declaration. But it’s one capacious enough to appreciate the meaning of her music’s sometimes gnarled migration from straight country to the structural and sonic priorities of R&B to “Lover,” which is, mostly, a stable, serious, pleasurable synthesis of all of these sounds, proof that the synthesis contains traces of American music histories. Basically, Americana.

This documentary isn’t as coherent as “Truth or Dare,” the Olympic standard for pop-star portraiture. But Madonna had found a coherent *persona* by the time of that movie. Swift is still eking hers out. Along with her music, she’s evolving.

That’s a part of the documentary’s assertion — her creative and personal maturity come with a cost, obviously. But its most exhilarating disclosure is that Swift finds herself determined to pay it. Some of the new music means to amplify her politics — “The Man” achieves that with hooky, witty, pleasingly obvious pique. You can see a woman who, despite having once recorded an album called “Speak Now,” never felt it was her place to say anything. Wilson has captured Swift at a convincing turning point, ready, perhaps, to say a lot more.

Taylor Swift: Miss Americana

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 26 minutes.