

# THERE'S NOTHING LIKE THIS

THE  
STRATEGIC  
GENIUS OF  
TAYLOR  
SWIFT



**KEVIN EVERS**

Harvard Business Review Press  
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*To my very own superfans: Julie, Maisie, and Willie*

*“A man does something, it’s ‘strategic’; a woman does the same thing, it’s ‘calculated.’”*

—Taylor Swift, interview with Tracy Smith,  
*CBS News Sunday Morning*, August 25, 2019

# CONTENTS

*Preface xi*

## **THE VISION**

*Taylor Swift, 2006*

1. Alpha Type 3
2. Ready to Fly 11
3. Industry Disruptors 21
4. Never Trust It If It Rises Fast 31

## **THE CROSSOVER**

*Fearless, 2008*

5. Chasing That Fame 37
6. Clowns to the West 49
7. Dancing in a Storm 59

## **THE EXPERIENCE**

*Speak Now, 2010*

8. Wonderstruck 69
9. The Story of Us 79

## **THE FLIRTATION**

*Red, 2012*

10. Treacherous 93
11. These Things Will Change 101
12. All Too Well 115

## THE REINVENTION

1989, 2014

- 13. New Soundtrack 123
- 14. The Lights Are So Bright 131
- 15. It's Gonna Be Alright 139
- 16. In the Clear 149

## THE FALL

*Reputation*, 2017

- 17. Castles Crumbled 157
- 18. Rising from the Ashes 167

## THE FIGHT

*Lover*, 2019

- 19. The Great Escape 175
- 20. Stolen Lullabies 185

## THE PIVOT

*Folklore and Evermore*, 2020

- 21. We Were Something, Don't You Think So? 201
- 22. Saying Yes Instead of No 209

## THE ERAS

*Midnights*, 2022

- 23. Still Bejeweled 221
- 24. None of It Was Accidental 231

*Epilogue* 239

*The Tortured Poets Department*, 2024

*Notes* 245

*Acknowledgments* 277

*About the Author* 279

## PREFACE

A popular meme pops up in my social media feed whenever Taylor Swift breaks a record or surpasses another milestone.

There are multiple versions but my favorite includes a picture of twelve-year-old Swift as she grips a microphone with both hands, singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at a 2002 Philadelphia 76ers game.<sup>1</sup> Despite the grand setting of an arena, she looks like any ordinary girl. The caption reads, “Someone tell her she’s about to have the highest grossing tour of all time.”

In one image and fourteen words the meme expresses the mystique of superstardom. How does a mere mortal—in this case, an average American girl in a stars-and-stripes dress and a red cardigan—transform into a Beatles-esque global phenomenon, an unprecedented person and a career in music that it’s hard to imagine will ever be matched?

A big question like that is why the ancient Greeks invented gods: to explain the inexplicable, to bring order and logic to the wonderous sprawl of the universe. Grecians would have looked to Pheme’s whispers or Tyche’s goodwill to explain Swift’s astronomical success.

These days, we create memes.

And I wrote a book.

You may have noticed—how could you not—that the Eras Tour shifted the conversation around Swift, transforming her from pop superstar to cultural phenomenon. A phenomenon that is now the grist for countless think pieces on the industry of Swift, college courses on her lyrics, a Little Golden children’s book, even profiles of her homes in *Architectural Digest*.

I found myself craving something more, something that did more than capture the magic and grandeur of her career to date, something that helped explain it.

For more than two years now—starting in April 2022—I’ve dived deep into Swift’s music, decisions, and strategies to find out how and why she keeps winning. I did this with the same respect and framing I’d put to any great innovator, or creative force, or marketing genius, or strategy guru. I saw no reason to treat Taylor Swift’s success any differently than that of any business icon—Jobs or Branson or Bezos or Musk.

And the more I tried to find the explanations for Swift’s seemingly uncanny ability to continually win, the more my fascination and enthusiasm with her career and business grew.

As an editor at Harvard Business Review Press, I’ve gained knowledge about many subjects that I relied on extensively for this project. In tracing Swift’s career arc from teen prodigy to cultural icon, I drew on insights from diverse fields including art, high performance, creativity, strategy, innovation, leadership, psychology, and more. To be sure, Taylor Swift probably isn’t tucking into *Harvard Business Review* for marketing strategy prior to dropping an album or reading the latest innovation literature coming out of B-schools. “I never a single time woke up in the morning and thought, ‘You know what I’m going to do today? I’m going to go innovate some stuff,’” Swift said while accepting the Innovator Award at the 2023 iHeartRadio Music Awards. “What I did do was try to make the right decisions for me. . . . People want an example of something working before, but I think the coolest ideas or moves or choices are the new ones, the ones that set a new precedent.”<sup>2</sup> Swift might not wake up with innovation on the brain, but she’s instinctually and preternaturally good at doing the things that HBR, and business classes, and leadership coaches, and so many more, teach. This is an engrossing and illuminating way to view the phenomenon.

The approach I’ve taken made Swift’s decisions more high-stakes and painstaking, her missteps more dramatic, and her achievements so much more impressive. Her career’s narrative, with all its intrigue and drama, became more human and nuanced.

My aim is to take you on a journey akin to my own. As I see it, I’m like a Parisian tour guide. The City of Light is ubiquitous. Everyone’s seen the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame and the cafés and the Seine. A good tour guide does the research so that they can take you beyond what you know and help you see the familiar sights in a new way. They take you on surprising and delightful detours. They heighten your experience.

By taking a chronological romp through Swift's career and using fascinating research and fresh perspectives to guide our path, I hope to enhance your understanding and appreciation for how Swift has managed to find success, sustain it, and scale it multiple times to the absurd heights it's reached today. To give more shape to that feeling so many fans and admirers have about her—that there really is nothing like this.

# THE VISION

TAYLOR SWIFT, 2006

## CHAPTER 1

# ALPHA TYPE

Sometime in 2003, Nashville songwriter Robert Ellis Orrall received a panicked call from his friend Angelo Petraglia, who was stressing out about an upcoming cowriting session with an unproven artist.

“Dude, you gotta come over and help me,” Orrall recalled Petraglia saying. “I’ve got this thirteen-year-old girl coming over and what are we going to write about!? You know what you’re doing! Your daughter’s thirteen and you guys are working on songs together. I can’t—”<sup>1</sup>

“What’s her name?” Orrall asked.

“Taylor Swift.”

Orrall recognized the name. Swift had been popping up at cowriting sessions all over Nashville since she had landed a development deal with RCA Records—a kind of prospecting not used as much anymore in which a label would pay for demos and hook an artist up with producers for a set length of time before deciding if they’d offer a record contract. It was an RCA artist scout who had asked Orrall to write with the middle schooler, and now Petraglia’s panicked call was speeding up the process.

“Okay! I’m coming. I’ll be over,” Orrall said.

Orrall and Petraglia, who were almost fifty, were going to get together for a songwriting session with a teenage girl, which had to be a first for them.

## 4 The Vision

Swift was aware that any cowriters might have had doubts. “I knew they were twice if not three times my age”—they were nearly four times her age—“and I knew they were going to have serious doubts about walking in and working with a 13-year-old,” she later told American Songwriter.<sup>2</sup> To prove she meant business, Swift came to every session armed with fifteen or twenty almost-finished song ideas. She wanted her more accomplished collaborators to know she was serious about this.

Whatever reservations or uncertainties Orrall may have had, he said they were erased in the first ten minutes of meeting her. “She was incredibly ready to go. She was really upbeat and very professional.”<sup>3</sup>

At their first session, Swift said she wanted to write a song that combined Avril Lavigne’s pop-punk energy with a country vibe. They began working on that.

The song had some pop-punk influences, but it was still innocent in a way that was fitting for her age. Orrall recalls that at one point, Petraglia threw out a couple of lyrics, and Swift said, “I don’t know. That’s kind of trite.”

“Huh,” Petraglia replied.

“I’m not sure my demographic would say something like that,” Swift explained.

“Huh,” he said again.

Orrall loved her spunk. He playfully shot Petraglia down with finger guns and high-fived Swift. He was totally impressed. “I’ve never seen anyone with the determination and confidence at such a young age,” he said. “You just knew this girl was going places.”

He wasn’t embellishing. In fact, at the time, he had shared his effusive praise with others.

“I remember I met her dad after the first day of songwriting with her. And I said, you know your daughter is going to sell three million copies of her first record.”<sup>4</sup>

# # #

Taylor Swift’s path to stardom was paved with both privilege and talent.

Born into a family with show-business ties—her maternal grandmother, Marjorie, was an opera singer—Swift benefited from her parents’ unwav-

ering support. They connected her with Britney Spears's former manager, who helped Swift secure the RCA development deal, and they moved the entire family to Nashville, where Swift could collaborate with top-notch writers and producers.

But a lot of people have talent, and supportive parents, and the benefits of a secure upbringing. None of them does what Taylor Swift has done because few display the broad collection of qualities that Swift has, ones Orrall noticed that hinted at her extraordinary potential. Her skills, spunk, confidence, and determination—attributes that align pretty closely with what scientific research says are the markers of high potential: ability, intelligence, and drive.<sup>5</sup>

Swift's emotional intelligence shone through as she navigated collaborations with Nashville's seasoned professionals and pushed for her ideas. Her drive, characterized by a relentless quest for excellence and a refusal to settle, propelled her to insist on songs that would resonate with a teenage audience.

Her drive was evident in the fact that a thirteen-year-old was coming to the studio with fifteen or twenty songs, a drive that contributed to her exceptional songwriting ability and rapid advancement, which underscored her potential. Orrall observed a significant improvement in her songwriting in just two years, stating, "When she was [thirteen] one out of ten [songs] were amazing and the other ones, not so much. Then, not two years later, nine out of ten were amazing. She had it in her."<sup>6</sup>

Liz Rose, a professional songwriter, wrote songs with Swift early on, after Swift heard a sample of her work and wanted to write with her. She echoed Orrall's impression: "I thought of myself as this lyricist, you know. And I thought, wow, I don't really know what I'm doing here. She kind of didn't need me. It's kind of embarrassing," Rose recalled.<sup>7</sup>

Swift's writing showed so much promise that Sony/ATV, a music publisher that manages and promotes the work of songwriters, signed Swift to a publishing deal when she was fourteen. She was the youngest artist ever to achieve this distinction.

Swift also demonstrated strategic thinking, a skill encompassing vision, imagination, and entrepreneurial instincts. Her clear vision of writing her own songs about her personal experiences and emotions was particularly

striking. Typically in Nashville, especially for unproven talent, professional songwriters do that work and the artist does the singing.

“I didn’t want to just be another girl singer,” Swift professed. “I wanted there to be something that set me apart. And I knew that had to be my writing,” she later told *Entertainment Weekly*.<sup>8</sup>

She aimed to write songs that filled a gap in the music she heard coming out of the Nashville country scene at the time. “All the songs I heard on the radio were about marriage and kids and settling down. I just couldn’t relate to that,” she recalled. “I felt there was no reason why country music shouldn’t relate to someone my age if someone my age was writing it.”<sup>9</sup>

Swift’s clarity of vision impressed many in the industry, including songwriter Jim Beavers, who also had a cowriting session with Swift. “She knew exactly who she was, she knew exactly what she wanted to say, she knew exactly where she was going,” he said. “And, to me . . . now, that’s the number one thing I look for in somebody. It’s not even what their voice sounds like, it’s not what they look like. If they have a vision, and a focus of who they are, that blows everything else away.”<sup>10</sup>

Steve Lunt, then the head of artists and repertoire at Jive Records, who helped launch Britney Spears, remembered meeting with Swift and walking away with the same feeling.

“The thing about this is, it was all down to Taylor saying, I know what I want, please give me the chance to do it. . . . She had a total belief in her own gut instinct to speak to her own audience in the same way that Britney did, to her own peers her own age.”<sup>11</sup>

For pros like Orrall, Beavers, and Lunt, who had witnessed a multitude of aspiring artists come and go, Swift’s clarity of vision must have been refreshing if a bit shocking. How many other thirteen-year-olds told a Nashville pro his lyrics were trite?

Often, young artists grapple with defining and articulating their vision, leading to a lack of cohesion in their work. Their sound might come across as a rough mix of their influences, their style may not align with their music, or, in a critical misstep, they might fail to understand their target audience.

Swift had a cohesive vision. She understood her audience. And she knew it.

Referring to her aspirations, she said, “I’d lie awake at night and think about the roaring crowd and walking out onstage and that light hitting me for the first time. But I was always very calculated about it. I would think about exactly how I was going to *get* there, not just how it would feel to *be* there.”<sup>12</sup>

# # #

Swift’s vision was crucial for another reason, too. Since her critics would soon outnumber her champions, her vision served as a North Star, preventing her from veering off course.

Psychologist Michael Gervais, who has worked with elite athletes and CEOs, highlighted the pivotal role of clarity in facilitating high performance. “Because of their clarity, [high performers] are more willing to push themselves, learn more, and embrace discomfort,” he wrote in an article on the topic. “They can shut out the noise and opinions of fans and media and listen to their own well-calibrated, internal compass.”<sup>13</sup>

She’d need that compass, because for all her clarity of vision, Swift was up against it. She was trying to do something that hadn’t been accomplished before, at least the way she wanted to do it. And there were challenges she’d have to overcome.

Her gender was one of those challenges. After a female renaissance in the 1990s, which included Faith Hill, LeAnn Rimes, Shania Twain, and the Chicks—all artists Swift grew up listening to—the industry had drifted back to a more male-centric market, according to journalist Marissa Moss in her book *Her Country*.<sup>14</sup>

The radio market consolidated; a small number of national companies owned a large percentage of local stations. In turn, programming decisions, which were increasingly data driven, were centralized, leading to a more homogenous selection of songs and performers. Country music, therefore, became dominated by male artists in Stetson hats and trucker caps, making it particularly challenging for female singers like Swift to break through.

The situation has worsened, though streaming has aided nontraditional artists like Kacey Musgraves in finding an audience that might have

otherwise been impossible because of radio's hold on country fans. But Swift didn't have that option in 2003. She needed to rely on radio.

Age was another challenge. As rare as a breakout woman star was at the time, it was rarer still for someone so young to make it. Besides LeAnn Rimes, who released her highly successful debut album *Blue* at thirteen, other teenagers, even ones older than Rimes, had struggled to take hold. This was partly an audience problem. Reflecting on her initial efforts to secure a record deal, Swift recalled, "[Something that was] said to me early on was, 'Teenagers don't listen to country music. That's not the audience. The audience is a 35-year-old housewife. . . . How are you going to relate to those women when you're 16 years old? . . . And I kept thinking, 'But I love country music, and I'm a teenager!' There have to be more kids out there like me."<sup>15</sup>

Swift was trying to write songs for an audience that, according to data, didn't exist. It wasn't pop, where former child stars like Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Justin Timberlake had thrived after their stints as Mouseketeers. Country music tended to attract an older and more conservative fan base. So most in the industry doubted that the audience would embrace a teenage girl's musings about boys and breakups.

Data's imperfect and Swift was headstrong. She remained committed to her vision of writing her own songs and connecting with her peers. This resolve held firm even when RCA suggested extending her development deal for more time instead of offering her a record deal immediately. Many teens might defer to the authority figure here. They've been doing this for a long time. They know the business. But Swift thought it signaled a lack of commitment.

"They wanted to shelf me. Keep me in development till I was probably about 18," Swift later told NBC News.<sup>16</sup> "I didn't want to be somewhere where they were sure that they kind of wanted me maybe," she recalled to *Rolling Stone*.<sup>17</sup> She also feared that RCA would pressure her into recording songs penned by others, and that was not part of her plan.

So she walked away from one of Nashville's largest labels, ending her development deal with RCA.

"I genuinely felt that I was running out of time," she recalled later of those heady middle school days. "I'd written all these songs and I wanted to capture these years of my life on an album while they still represented what I was going through."<sup>18</sup>

The RCA reps might not have liked it. But they had to respect it. As Marissa Moss argued, the history of country music is replete with rebellious women who challenged traditions and defied expectations. Loretta Lynn sang about birth control, Dolly Parton wrote a song about suicide, and Natalie Maines, the lead singer of the Chicks, called out President George W. Bush for America's invasion of Iraq.

Swift wasn't trying to shake up country's establishment or enter the fray on politics back then, but her choice was still bold. She was committed to navigating her own path. She chose her own vision over the security of the Nashville system and, even then, was determined to silence her critics.

"Anytime someone tells me that I can't do something," she recalled with characteristic defiance, "I want to do it more."<sup>19</sup>

## CHAPTER 2

# READY TO FLY

As Swift walked away from RCA, the Nashville music scene was in flux. As the *Chicago Tribune* noted in February 2004, the upheaval caused by the rise of the internet and online music downloads forced reorganizations and layoffs across the business. The number of Nashville record labels dwindled from nearly thirty to about twelve.<sup>1</sup>

It might seem like that would have been a time to explore new avenues to growth, but the consensus among executives from major labels like RCA and Capitol on young female artists seemed unshakable. They weren't commercially viable. Business strategists W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne have argued that over time, competitors in the same industry begin to think and act like each other and adhere to the same conventional wisdom, which can be hard to change.<sup>2</sup>

Nashville was a case in point. The major labels were all scrambling to sign the same artists. They operated from the same set of assumptions, used similar data, vied for the same radio spots, and competed for the same set of listeners. To them, it made sense to avoid teenage female artists. It was Nashville conventional wisdom. It was accepted as gospel. They'd tried that, failed, and possessed anecdotal evidence to back up their claims. LeAnn Rimes and Jessica Andrews both had achieved success as teenagers (performing other people's songs—another hallmark of the industry's presumptions) but struggled to sustain it. Why try again?

Industries don't settle into consensus ignorantly. It does offer some advantages—such as reducing errors and enhancing efficiency. It's just that, as Kim and Mauborgne caution, it also can lead to blind spots.

Swift was banking on the idea that Nashville had a blind spot— young women who write their own songs for young women—and that she was in it.

# # #

With RCA out of the picture in the fall of 2004, Swift, age fourteen, went looking for a record deal.

She started by sending promotional packages around town in anticipation of a showcase she'd scheduled at the Bluebird Cafe, a historic haunt in a strip mall a few miles from Music Row that was renowned for launching many careers, including Faith Hill's and Garth Brooks's. If the showcase went well, she could secure a coveted record contract.<sup>3</sup>

Along with her demos, the promotional package included press clippings and a headshot from a fashion shoot she had done for the Abercrombie clothing brand, and, to top things off, Swift included a handmade nameplate adorned with swooping silver hearts and misshapen stars.

Among those who got one of the packages was Scott Borchetta, a maverick figure in the industry known for his promotional prowess, who'd propelled artists like Toby Keith to stardom.<sup>4</sup>

Industry legend James Stroud, Borchetta's former boss at DreamWorks Records, attested to Borchetta's reputation as a creative force. "He's one of those rare guys who could put together a radio promotion plan along with a marketing plan and marry them in a way that made the artist a little bit larger than any of his competition," Stroud told the *Nashville Post*. "I knew that when we put a record out, it was going to have the best shot of anybody in town."<sup>5</sup>

Borchetta was with Universal Music at the time, and Swift was already on his radar. Frank Bell, a Pittsburgh radio exec and Swift family acquaintance, had played Swift's demos for Borchetta's wife, Sandi, who was impressed and said so to her husband. That piqued his interest. "The fact Sandi was raising her hand on this was a big deal because she is a staunch critic," Borchetta said.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike his colleagues at big labels, Borchetta was less afraid to buck conventional wisdom. He had been looking for a teen artist to sign. While at DreamWorks in the late 1990s, Borchetta worked with Jessica Andrews, who had released her debut album, *Heart Shaped World*, at the age of fifteen. When Andrews performed at high schools, Borchetta said the response from the audience was infectious. He believed that country music could reach this audience.

“I felt a huge opportunity for a young female artist to break through,” he later told *Variety*.<sup>7</sup>

But it didn’t happen with Andrews, who failed to rise high on the country charts. One reason may well have been that she didn’t write her own songs; she performed songs written by the Nashville system, which was made up of adult songwriters who were disconnected from the audience she was trying to reach. These songwriters, who were used to penning songs with mature themes, were unaware when they wrote lyrics that, to teens, sounded *trite*.

Regarding Andrew’s debut album, a *Country Standard Time* reviewer noted, “Andrews has skipped a few squares, singing at an emotional level at odds with her actual age. And though this formula has worked before (notably for LeAnn Rimes), one hopes her life experience will catch up with her talent.”<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, Andrews wasn’t given much of a chance to grow into her talent, which Borchetta blamed on her lack of clarity. “Jessica didn’t have a great vision for what she wanted to be—she kind of wavered back and forth between wanting to be a pop artist and a country artist—and, ultimately and unfortunately, she just didn’t have the vision to be a great solo artist.”<sup>9</sup>

Swift, with her youthful exuberance and songwriting skills, intrigued Borchetta. “If these songs on this CD were really written by her and she really is all this, I can’t wait to meet her,” he recalled later of his reaction to her promo package.<sup>10</sup>

On November 2, 2004, the same night President George W. Bush won a second term with a victory over John Kerry, Swift met Borchetta in his Universal office and played him songs on an acoustic guitar.

Among the songs she performed was “Picture to Burn,” a hard-strumming track filled with harsh put-downs and sassy asides. It’s a

heartbreak-turned-revenge country song with Swift taking on the role of the vengeful ex.

There's a YouTube video of Swift performing a stripped-down version of "Picture to Burn" that allows us to see something probably near what Borchetta saw in his office that day as he looked for sparks of specialness.<sup>11</sup> The video is just Swift and her koa wood guitar against a black backdrop with an old-school microphone under the gaze of two cameras. There's no audience. The performance is raw. It lacks much from a dynamic standpoint, alternating between loud verses and louder choruses buffered by solid, heavy strumming. The song challenges her vocal range. Executives are used to this kind of roughness in a performance.

But for all the lack of polish, there's a magnetism to her presence. She looks at the camera knowingly, even cocks an eyebrow at one point. Her heavy strumming is confident. She radiates control that belies her age. At the same time, her gangly limbs and sassiness sidestep the soulless sheen of professionalism often seen in other showbiz youth. She seems like a genuine teenager.

Most of all, Swift's emotional clarity is striking. She sings from the perspective of someone who has experienced a tough time but has lived to tell the tale, blending innocence and wisdom. "That's what a good artist does," argued Nathan Chapman, who would go on to produce Swift's debut. "They do something to catch you just a little bit off-guard, but the execution of their idea is so perfect, that it's undeniable."<sup>12</sup>

After Swift played "Picture to Burn" for Borchetta, he said, "That's a hit song."<sup>13</sup> Swift was taken aback. "I had played that song around town and for other labels and nobody had ever said they thought it was a hit before," she recalled to the *Nashville Post*. "I remember thinking that he was really listening to my songs."<sup>14</sup>

Two days after Swift went to his office, Borchetta attended Swift's showcase at the Bluebird Cafe, a show in which Swift would share the stage with other songwriters. Cover charge: eight dollars.<sup>15</sup> "I was just blown away by her songs," he remembered. "And she could hang, you know? She had no problem hanging with these seasoned songwriters. She's so competitive, and in that moment, she wasn't going to let anybody upstage her."<sup>16</sup>

Following her performance, he expressed his desire to offer her a record deal. "I want you to write your own songs," Swift recalled Borchetta

telling her. “And I never want you to be pitched anyone else’s songs. I don’t want you to ever feel like there would be any pressure on you to record anyone else’s music. You need to be writing your own music. That’s what you want to do. That’s what I want, too.”<sup>17</sup>

Swift was pumped. “That was the most amazing offer that somebody could give to an eighth-grader at Hendersonville High School.”<sup>18</sup>

Swift had found an executive who seemed to understand her and her vision, who encouraged her to write her own songs, and who saw her youth as an asset. Remarkably, this support was coming from a figure within Universal, one of the most prestigious labels in the world.

Though it didn’t exactly come from within Universal. There was an unexpected catch. Having grown tired of major-label life, Borchetta planned to leave Universal and start his own independent label.<sup>19</sup> “Here’s the deal,” he explained to Swift weeks later. “If you’d like to be signed to the Universal Music Group, I can introduce you to the executives and try to help you get signed. But you need to know that I’m leaving in a year to start my own label.”

He admitted to not having a name for his label, or investors, or a distribution plan. But he promised Swift a record deal if she waited.

Swift and her parents “looked at me like I was crazy,” Borchetta recalled, smiling at the memory.<sup>20</sup>

# # #

Much like she had when departing from RCA’s development deal, Swift had to consider the opportunities and risks of her next move, this time whether to join Borchetta’s vague notion of a new business.

The advantages were clear: Borchetta’s vision and goals aligned closely with Swift’s. “I knew Scott wanted me to make an album of songs that I had written; that was critical to me,” Swift told the *Nashville Post*.<sup>21</sup>

But the challenges were formidable. Founding a startup is inherently risky—two-thirds fail—and Borchetta was attempting to create a new venture in the worst market the industry had seen, possibly ever, during what some have called music’s lost decade, which further diminished his chances.

The internet was a disruptive steamroller, transforming access to music and reshaping listening habits, flattening album sales in the process and

forcing many of Nashville's Music Row labels to shrink or disappear. In this tough economic climate, Borchetta had to secure funding, which could take months or years, or not happen, and put together a team that could sign artists and promote their music in a market dominated by deeper-pocketed major-label giants.

These obstacles could hinder Swift's chances of releasing a major album, the odds of which were already low. By some estimates, fewer than 10 percent of signed artists end up achieving commercial success.<sup>22</sup> Many don't even get a chance to release music. If Borchetta's label failed to gain purchase, or if it had to endure periods of early-development chaos or manage strategic pivots, as most startups do, Swift could miss her best chance to realize her vision.

But Swift had also experienced what life was like at a major label, RCA, and it wasn't all that appealing. Even if she were to decide against Borchetta, the likelihood remained slim that another label would allow her to write her own songs and release music before she was eighteen.

So, once again, despite the risks, Swift used her artistic vision to guide her decision, citing Borchetta's reputation as a hard charger as an important factor in potentially helping her achieve her goals. "He's so passionate about this project," Swift wrote about Borchetta in her journal.<sup>23</sup> "I want to surround myself with passionate people."

Swift's remarks about Borchetta's passion, which echoed Orrall's views about her confidence, might seem offhand. However, Paul Graham, the cofounder of Y Combinator—the Silicon Valley accelerator that helped scale Airbnb, Reddit, and Twitch, among other legendary startups—would argue it's anything but trivial. "If we've learned one thing from funding so many startups, it's that they succeed or fail based on the qualities of the founders," Graham observed. "The economy has some effect, certainly, but as a predictor of success it's a rounding error compared to the founders."<sup>24</sup>

To find success, Swift needed to make a bunch of great songs, yes, but she also needed someone in her corner who would let her do that, who could hustle on her behalf and charm the country music establishment, someone who could leverage their creativity to navigate the new, uncertain, and rapidly changing landscape of the music industry.

Being a startup founder—and an emerging artist—is often romanticized, but it's grueling and exhausting work. "The reality of it is," venture

capitalist Marc Andreessen revealed on the *Lex Fridman Podcast*, “most of what happens is people telling you ‘no’ and then they usually follow that with ‘you’re stupid.’ . . . And so a huge amount of what people have to do is just get used to just getting punched.”<sup>25</sup>

Borchetta, sharing Swift’s vision and norm-busting attitude, seemed like the man who could take a few jabs and uppercuts.

About ten days after his offer, Swift reached out to Borchetta.

“Hey Scott. It’s Taylor,” Borchetta recalled her saying. “Hey, I just want you know that I’ve made up my mind and I’m waiting for you.”

# # #

“That was a giant leap of faith, wasn’t it?” *Dateline*’s Hoda Kotb asked Swift about her decision to go with Borchetta.<sup>26</sup>

“There were a million ways it could have gone wrong, yeah,” Swift laughed.

Their success was improbable but not impossible. With Swift trusting her instincts and Borchetta relying on his experience, they were both attempting to reach a teen audience. By doing so, they aimed to tap into an uncontested market space—what Kim and Mauborgne called a *blue ocean*. Meanwhile, other artists and executives would be duking it out for a greater share of the existing market—called a *red ocean*, known for its cutthroat competition.

Marvel had done something similar in the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> At the time, its main competitor, DC Comics, was focused on churning out its more mythical brand of comic books for children. But DC’s storylines had grown stale. To set Marvel apart, and to avoid the ruthless competition of a red ocean, editor-in-chief Stan Lee and creators Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko began creating content with more human and flawed superheroes—the Fantastic Four, Hulk, Iron Man, Black Panther—that they marketed to college students, an audience the industry had ignored.

Marvel’s strategy had two components. The first was aimed at *noncustomers*, college students and young adults who had grown up reading comic books but who had aged out of them. These readers represented an untapped and uncontested market. A blue ocean. DC wasn’t playing in this space, so it was wide open. Second, Marvel tailored its characters and plots to its audience, making them more realistic and relatable.

Peter Cuneo, who served as Marvel Entertainment's CEO when the brand established its film business, argued in the INSEAD Blue Ocean Strategy Institute's case study on the topic that this represented a big leap forward that contributed to the brand's rapid growth in the 1960s and its future success in the 2000s.

"[Marvel's creators] spawned characters that readers could identify with and therefore be emotionally connected to. The X-Men are mutants, and, as mutants, they have special abilities, but they're also alienated. At some time in life, we all think we are mutants. For example, every kid in high school, unless you're incredibly confident for that age group, thinks they're a mutant. Marvel's success is because people who read the comics or see the movies get so connected to these characters."<sup>28</sup>

Marvel's strategy led to an explosion of growth. By 1967, Marvel was selling six million comic books per month.<sup>29</sup>

Swift and Borchetta's strategy was very close to Marvel's. They, too, were going after noncustomers—teens, in their case—that their industry had ignored. And they, too, aimed to create content that was authentic and compelling to that audience—songs written by a teen, not a veteran Nashville songwriter.

Their plan didn't guarantee success, but it did give them an advantage. The big labels were slow to adapt to new ways of doing business during a time when new ways of doing business were being forced on the music industry. If the labels had been more open, they may have seen the same signals Borchetta had seen with Jessica Andrews. They may have noticed right about this time the immense success of *American Idol*'s fourth season, won by twenty-one-year-old Carrie Underwood, which suggested that younger female artists could resonate with traditional country fans and catch the attention of a teenage audience.

Swift and Borchetta were open, willing, even eager to try new ways to make, distribute, and market hits. Just like Marvel had been.

And there were some emerging trends that suggested Swift and Borchetta were on to something. Teen girls represented a unique and substantial consumer segment that marketers had started to covet. "They are unique in virtually every aspect of their consumption behavior," public relations executive Marian Salzman argued. "From the way they watch ads to the way they purchase products to the way—most critically—they

discuss the products they purchase, they buy and spend in an almost ritualistic manner,” she continued. “And because their generation is perhaps the first fully ‘wired’ one, their habits will determine how relevant markets develop today and in the future.”<sup>30</sup>

Others saw deeply risky challenges. Swift and Borchetta saw unfettered opportunities. And they had the sense of urgency to seize them. “If you think back to the beginning of the label,” Borchetta told *Billboard* magazine, “we knew we had to strike quickly and aggressively and go for the brass ring.”<sup>31</sup>