

Music

The Country Conundrum: Miley Cyrus And Taylor Swift’s Divergent Musical Paths

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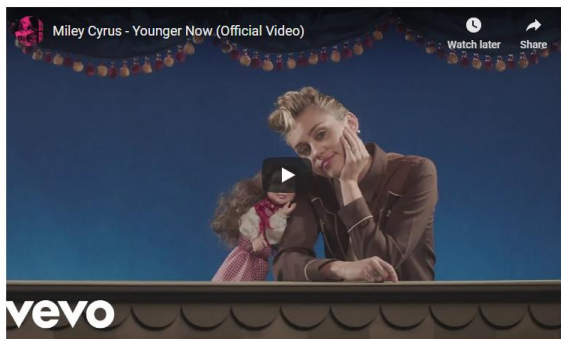
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Miley Cyrus shocked fans and critics alike when she released the provocative, hip-hop-inspired *Bangerz* in 2013 and quickly followed it up with a few unforgettable awards show appearances as well as the experimental *Miley Cyrus & Her Dead Petz* in 2015.

And in a way, she’s shocking the music world yet again. In her sixth studio album, *Younger Now*, Cyrus does something very few people thought she’d ever do—embrace her country upbringing and, by proxy, her squeaky-clean, *Hannah Montana* persona. The release of *Bangerz* was interpreted by many as Cyrus’ attempt to distance herself from the bubbly, cowboy boot-wearing girl next door who millions of teens came to know and love. So the fact that she’s now willingly inviting the *Hannah Montana* comparisons by recording a folksy, country-adjacent album and literally performing as **Dolly Parton** on national television is kind of mindboggling.

Admittedly, the move might be less surprising to those who have followed Cyrus’ post *Bangerz* career, as the former Disney star posted a series of stripped-down covers ranging from Paul Simon’s “**50 Ways to Leave Your Lover**” to Crowded House’s “**Don’t Dream It’s Over**” to her YouTube channel throughout the first half of 2015. Cyrus has clearly had songs like “Malibu,” “Younger Now,” and “Inspired,” in her all along, despite the fact that she’s just now choosing to share them with the world.



But Cyrus’ willingness to risk perceived regression to achieve musical progression is fascinating.

Numerous musicians—like Lana Del Rey and Ed Sheeran—find their niches early on and consciously choose to experiment and create new music within that niche. Others—Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Beyoncé, just to name a few—keep listeners hooked by constantly reinventing their musical stylings and public images. Cyrus certainly belongs in the second category, but unlike Beyoncé she’s putting out music that sounds more like what she recorded ten years ago than what she recorded two years ago.

And yet *Younger Now* manages to avoid sounding stale. Perhaps it’s because, as Cyrus acknowledges in the titular track, *Younger Now* is about learning to accept and love who you used to be and using that acceptance to move on rather than recapture or recreate the past. We’d be remiss if we didn’t acknowledge that fans and critics alike have slammed Cyrus for seemingly exploiting (and then abruptly rejecting) black culture for her own gain, without any immediate repercussions. And those criticisms are definitely valid. But *Younger Now* never makes the listener feel as if Cyrus is aggressively trying to appeal to people’s sense of nostalgia by reminding them about the good ‘ol days. Instead, everything about the new album—the instrumentation, the song titles, the music videos (particularly “Malibu”)—screams “laid back.”

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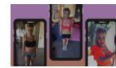
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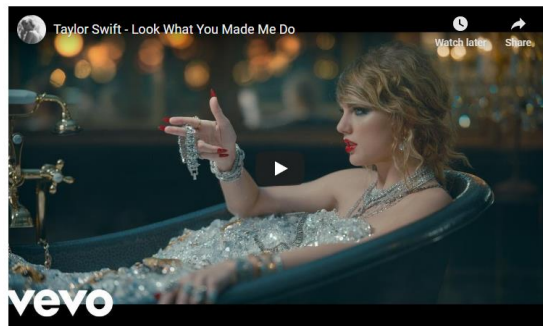


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Taylor Swift, on the other hand, seems to be doing everything in her power to remind people how *un-laidback* she is. Swift, like the Madonnas and Cyruses of the world, has successfully managed to rebrand herself every few years. First she was fairy tale-loving *Fearless* Taylor Swift, then poppy *Red* Taylor Swift, then introspective *1989* Taylor Swift.

But while Cyrus' progression from sparkly, drawly Disney icon to hip hop provocateur to hippie-dippie country-folk artist may seem erratic, Swift's evolution from guitar-strumming country artist to tough-talking pop superstar was far more straightforward and has slowly but surely taken place over the course of more than ten years. As taken aback as people may be by Swift's new emotionally tormented, "bad girl" persona, each and every album in her discography has been an unquestionable step towards the dawning of the *Reputation* "era."



And unlike Cyrus, Swift is once again choosing to further her career by presenting a version of herself her fans have never seen before. She's ramping it up instead of stripping it down, fusing her unique brand of lyric-driven pop with EDM to remain relevant in an ever-changing sonic landscape. Instead of embracing a cute, brunette doll obviously meant to resemble her tweenage self, Swift climbs up a mountain of her past selves to assert her dominance and prove to the world that the new her is the "real" her.

Even though Swift wiped her **social media accounts** clean before dropping *Reputation's* first single, "Look What You Made Me Do," however, she and Cyrus may not be as different as they may initially seem. Sure, Swift declared that the old her is "dead" while Cyrus is making it clear that the old her is very much alive. But for each of their respective sixth studio albums, Swift and Cyrus decided to make a splash by trying to give their fans something new and somewhat unexpected. Taylor Swift gets called a snake more times than she can count, so she decides to embrace the moniker and essentially build a completely new identity around it instead of "shaking it off." Cyrus outright rejected anything having to do with *Hannah Montana* and now she's singing **"The Climb"** on *Jimmy Fallon*. They're both making progress—Swift is merely approaching progression in a more traditional way while Cyrus is doing it in an unconventional way, by demonstrating that what's old can be made new again.



Reinventing yourself is hard work, especially when every move you make is scrutinized and think-pieced to death on and offline. Miley Cyrus and Taylor Swift may be metaphorical musical ships passing in the night, with one ship's course being easier to track than the other. But both courses are completely valid, and 2017 has already proven that the former country stars are more than capable of giving us new and interesting music for years to come.