Culture

Taylor Swift, wearing a long blue gown, stands on a red carpet in front of a theater.

Taylor Swift attends a premiere for "Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour" in Los Angeles on Oct. 11. "1989 (Taylor's Version)," the newly rerecorded edition of her fifth studio album, was released on Oct. 27. (OSV News/Reuters/Mario Anzuoni)



by John Dougherty

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Nearly a decade ago, Taylor Swift reintroduced herself.

"1989" — originally released in 2014 — was a radical shift. She replaced acoustic chords with shimmering synths and electronic drum loops, traded the long flaxen curls and white dresses of a country star for a smart bob and pencil skirts more in keeping with her new home in Tribeca. The album's title, her birth year, announces her intentions: This is nothing less than a rebirth.

"1989 (Taylor's Version)," the newly rerecorded edition of the album, was released Oct. 27. Nine years and several subsequent rebirths later, I now recognize it as the beginning of an exciting and experimental phase of her career. While "1989" isn't my number one Swift album (currently, that's "Speak Now"), it is the album that converted me from a casual appreciator to a fan. This was the album that taught me what was really at the heart of Taylor Swift's artistic identity, more than any genre: poetic sadness, a defiant faith in love against all odds and a deep yearning for

something more.

The Swift of "1989" is sadder and wiser (even sadder and wiser than on "Red," which was already an exponential increase of sadness and wisdom from "Speak Now," etc.). She's suffered multiple heartbreaks, any fairy tale notions of love trampled by the messy reality of relationships. It's also, crucially, after her star had risen enough for her to become the target of media scrutiny, her romantic life dissected and interrogated in the public eye.

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You can't find a better example than "Out of the Woods." It's "1989" in microcosm: achingly sad over an irresistible beat. The song builds with brutal inevitability, a sense of doom hanging over even the sweet moments (after describing one, Swift’s voice twists bitterly: "Baby, like we stood a chance"). The chorus is a question, repeated with growing urgency the longer it goes unanswered. Even the shouted "good" doesn't resolve things; it's the rare Taylor Swift song that leaves you feeling uneasy.

When I first listened to "1989," I was in my late 20s, and the spiritual uncertainty of those songs really spoke to me. "Out of the Woods" was particularly powerful, expressing my deepest anxieties about my marriage, career, art, faith: the fear that I would always be waiting for the other shoe to drop, that I would never feel OK. It remains my favorite song on this album, and among the best of Swift's post-country phase.

But revisiting "1989 (Taylor’s Version)" all these years later, I found myself most moved by her enduring faith in love. It's a faith that has been trampled and tested and emerged stronger.

On "Clean," love is compared to addiction, but in the context of healing and moving on (Imogen Heap returns as producer for the new recording and again provides the raindrops-on-your-bedroom-window plinks of the mbira). "I Know Places" and the

vault track "Slut!" answer heartbreak and a leering media with fiery defiance; "Blank Space" and, of course, "Shake It Off" offer a more tongue-in-cheek refusal to surrender. Even more wistful tracks like "Wildest Dreams" or "Style" hold onto the precious moments of doomed relationships, choosing beauty over regret.

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Love isn't the initial sparks of attraction or a perfect date. It's something you settle yourself into, something that reveals itself over time. It is, as Swift sings on "You Are in Love," something you hear in the silence, and see with the lights out. When your heart has been broken again and again, love becomes a matter of faith. You have to choose to keep seeking it, to keep your heart open. "1989," and so much of Swift's music is filled with what I'm tempted to call a holy longing: a yearning for something more, something true. She believes it's out there, even when it's "a shot in the darkest dark."

All these years later, "1989 (Taylor's Version)" still carries the thrill, promise and terror of rebirth. Those themes find a quiet culmination in "This Love," with its images of baptism and resurrection, and finding peace in the ebbs and flows of life and love. "When you're young, you just run," Swift sings, "but you come back to what you need." That's the courage necessary for rebirth: to live with the sadness and the uncertainty, without losing your faith in the beauty of life. To let go, trusting that the most important things will return to you.