



# OPERATION REPUTATION

**TAYLOR SWIFT** SAYS HER CHARACTER HAS BEEN ASSASSINATED. AS SHE UNLEASHES HER NEW ALBUM, *REPUTATION*, AND TAKES ON MEDIA SCRUTINY, WHERE DOES SHE GO NEXT? **BY NOLAN FEENEY @NOLANFEENEY | ILLUSTRATION BY PABLO THECUADRO**

**IN TAYLOR SWIFT'S MUSIC VIDEO** for "Look What You Made Me Do," the first single off her new album, *reputation*, a camera zooms in on a tombstone that reads "Here lies Taylor Swift's reputation." The pop star knows what people have been saying: that—thanks to unflattering headlines related to Katy, Calvin, and Kimye—her image isn't what it used to be, and certainly not what it was after 1989's blockbuster 2014 release, when it felt like everyone wanted a place in her squad. Now, with her tellingly titled sixth album finally out, Swift seems ready to fight back. But just how tattered is her rep, and is it beyond repair? Swift didn't become a megastar without being meticulous about her brand, and she's no stranger to critique. (Remember the response to her "surprise face"?) But drama with other stars has given some the impression that she's overly calculating and disingenuous. The most notorious incident? At the 2016 Grammys, she alluded to Kanye West's

"I made that bitch famous" lyric from "Famous" by calling out those who try to "take credit" for her success. At the time, West said she had approved the song; Swift claimed she'd cautioned West against releasing a track with a "misogynistic message." But a few months later, Kim Kardashian West shared old video clips of Swift apparently giving her blessing to the lyrical concept during a phone call with Kanye—prompting detractors to accuse Swift of playing the victim. (Swift said in response that she'd never heard the song or its use of the word *bitch* before its release and thus couldn't have signed off.) "She plays the game at such a high level," says Patrick Confrey, founder of publicity firm PCPR. "If you're going to manipulate—and I'm not using that in a negative context—and focus all your energy on pushing the public this way or that to benefit yourself, eventually there's going to be some sort of backlash."

Swift has lately avoided interviews, but industry pros say she could gain a lot by speaking candidly. Whatever she's feeling, "owning it would be a great thing to do," says Glenn Selig, chief strategist at the Publicity Agency. For example, he says, "if she recognized it, like, 'Boy, have I been petty'...that would endear her beautifully with fans." Opening up could also be a boon given criticism of Swift's reluctance to share opinions outside the music sphere. Some critics have noted that she championed feminism during the 1989 era but stayed largely silent during the 2016 election, when those values were especially relevant. Similarly, she donated money to Keshia's legal fight against producer Dr. Luke but never publicly commented on the case, as other stars did. "Those walls that you build to keep controversy out will eventually begin to alienate your fan base," says Liz Meade, the founder of a Nashville-based

media-management company. "She's still playing it safe personally while trying to take risks artistically, and you can't really separate the two." One big exception? Swift's powerful, fired-up court testimony this year against a radio DJ who groped her, which was widely praised on social media, even by Swift skeptics. While reviews of her recent songs have been mixed, the headlines haven't hurt her commercial viability: "Look What You Made Me Do" topped the Hot 100; "...Ready for It?" and "Gorgeous" cracked the top 20; and Swift's label said a week before the LP's release that preorders for *reputation* were already double those of 1989. Clearly, Swifties are still with her. It's whether everyone else is that remains to be seen. "Lightning doesn't strike twice," Confrey says. "You can kick the ball in a direction, but [that doesn't mean] it's going to truly connect in a 1989 way." That's not necessarily a bad thing when it comes to image. "I'm very interested to see what happens with Taylor three years from now," Confrey continues. "A brief fall from grace is going to do wonders for her. I think what she puts together after this is going to be something really special." ♦

SWIFT, FROM TOP: MERT & MARCUS, SARAH BARLOW, ANDREW ORTH (3)