



SEEKING

red

COUNTRY-POP PRINCESS TAYLOR SWIFT WON'T TALK ABOUT HER LOVE-LIFE, BUT SHE'S HAPPY TO SING ABOUT IT.
BY TIFFANY BAKKER

Taylor Swift recently had the rare opportunity to act her age. Instead of worrying about album sales, tour dates and business decisions people twice her age would find daunting, the 22-year-old spent her summer doing what 22-year-olds are supposed to do – she hung out at the beach (granted it was in the exclusive US holiday hot spot of Cape Cod) with her mates (most notably her new boyfriend Conor Kennedy, he of American political royalty).

"I just had a good time hanging out with my friends," giggles the singer-songwriter who, while declining to speak of Kennedy, describes the time as "the best summer ever".

"It made me realise how much I rely on my friends, how much I need them," she adds. "It's a crazy age, and most of them are still figuring out what they want to do with their lives. It was good for me to be around people who are just figuring things out – just being, you know, 22."

It's been 10 years since Swift discovered a love of music. At 12, she wrote her first song after a repairman who was fixing her computer taught her three chords. Then she wrote a song a day.

Music took her away from the problems she faced at school, which was a miserable affair. "The academic side was fine, but the social aspect was difficult," she says. "You're always questioning if who you are is who you're supposed to be, and what makes some girls popular and guys like them instead of you. It's a constant test; what makes you unique and different in the real world is what makes you uncool and shut out in high school."

At 14, her parents moved the family (she has a younger brother, Austin) from their home in Pennsylvania to Nashville, where Swift could concentrate on her music. She went to a school where many of the students had parents in the music industry, and who didn't view her as a "freak" for wanting to pursue such a career. She attended songwriting workshops and honed her craft until she was eventually signed to Big Machine Records at the age of 16.

Swift has experienced a meteoric rise as a country-pop star ever since. Her first three albums, *Taylor Swift*, *Fearless* and *Speak Now*, sold about 22 million copies, while her digital singles have topped a staggering 50 million downloads.

Of the countless awards she's won, Swift is most proud of her six Grammys, something she finds "very hard to wrap my mind around", and which are dispersed throughout her homes in Nashville and LA (she also gave a couple to her mum).

Despite the many benefits of fame and fortune (according to *Forbes*, she's raked in \$57 million over the past year), Swift is very aware of the weight on her shoulders.

"You do feel the pressure, because you're the one who has to come up with all the ideas," she explains. "You're the one who has to write the songs that determine the next two years of everyone's life. Everyone on your crew, in your band, at your record label – they all depend on the songs you bring to the table. If you don't bring an album's worth of songs that can sustain two years, or that fans can relate to, that's on you. It's a big responsibility."

When it came to recording her latest album, *Red*, Swift decided it was time to share the load. Having written her previous three albums alone, this time she called in some artists she'd long admired, including Brit singer (and YouTube sensation) Ed Sheeran and Gary Lightbody (lead singer of Snow Patrol).

"I thought, I've done this alone for a while, and there's no one to call when you receive good news. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it was more of a team effort, if I could have a group of people who would be excited for this album coming out because we all came together and collaborated?"

Swift is a master at understanding teenage emotion and conveying it through song. It's why she called the album *Red*. To her, it's a colour that signifies love, obsession, passion, infatuation, anger, jealousy, and the confusion of being let down and of missing someone.

"Those emotions kind of burn red. It started with a song called 'Red'. I wrote it about this really toxic, fast-paced relationship that was very bad for me but, at the same time, thrilling and unforgettable," she recalls. "The album became *Red* as soon as I wrote that song

because, in dealing with all my feelings from the past two years, a lot of them fell under emotions I'd define as being 'red'. It was a difficult time for me."

Of course, such statements give rise to a global guessing game of 'Who is Taylor Swift singing about?' Over the years, the media and fans alike have tried to figure it out. Could 'Forever and Always' be about popstar Joe Jonas of the Jonas Brothers, her first serious boyfriend, who Swift says broke up with her in a 27-second phone call? Does 'Back To December' contain a hint of *Twilight* hottie Taylor Lautner, who she dated for a few months in late 2009? Surely 'Dear John' refers to musician John Mayer (the certified odd coupling supposedly dated after they recorded the duet 'Half of My Heart' in 2009) – although she calls his statement that he was "humiliated" by the song "presumptuous".

Then there's Jake Gyllenhaal, who Swift dated on and off for four months in late 2010 and who even hired a private jet to whisk her to London so they could have a date night while he was there on a promotional tour. He, of course, is the supposed antagonist in her latest hit, 'We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together'. She won't confirm it, but it doesn't help that the unshaven, too-cool-for-school guy in the music video looks just like the actor.

The singer says she finds the public speculation both annoying and amusing. "On one hand, I totally get that people have seen my life play out in public, so they wonder what these people who have been in my life – and what those relationships – were like," she says. "Everybody likes to have characters they can visualise when they're hearing a song but, on the other hand, a lot of time, the guesses are completely wrong. I'm not going to correct them, because the little fragment of power that I have in this whole situation is not revealing who the songs are about. People can guess and be so sure who they're about, but they don't know."

In the meantime, there's been huge interest in her relationship with 18-year-old Conor Kennedy (son of Robert F Kennedy Jnr and the late Mary Richardson Kennedy, who committed suicide in May). The couple were first spotted together in July at the Kennedy compound at Cape Cod, in Massachusetts, and have been a regular fixture since. >

"THE LITTLE POWER I HAVE IS NOT REVEALING WHO THE SONGS ARE ABOUT. PEOPLE GUESS, BUT THEY DON'T KNOW"



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CELEBRITY



(from left) Swift with boyfriend Conor Kennedy; onstage in Las Vegas.

Apparently his grandmother and Kennedy matriarch, Ethel, “loves” Swift, but there are also reports the pair were asked to leave a Kennedy family wedding after turning up unannounced, as the bride’s mother worried the star would steal the limelight from her daughter.

Because of such rumours and innuendo, Swift avoids the internet. She says it stresses her when something is reported incorrectly or when people are just plain – to quote one of her hits – “mean”.

She tries to “do the right thing” to set a good example for her fans (“I’ve thought about all the people it would affect if I was to make a big mistake or let everyone down”) and her future grandkids, who will be able to look her up online in 60 years. “They’re going to go on the internet and see what I did today, what I wore, what I said in an interview and what was rumoured about me in 2007.

“I’m not thick-skinned at all, which I’m happy about because there’s a certain level of being jaded that comes with that,” she adds. “I still enjoy feeling everything that comes with the good things in life. So I try to shield myself from the things I know will hurt me because I care what people think – a lot.”

In person, Swift comes across as someone who doesn’t care a jot what anyone thinks. She’s confident, direct and resembles something of a lithe gazelle. She’s tall (180cm) and graceful. In her blue-and-red striped jumper, black three-quarter pants and ballet flats, she has a cute indie-girl look that makes you feel she could be your friend. And to her millions of largely teenage female fans, that’s part of her appeal.

Swift connects to her fans because she talks to her audience – she doesn’t feel unreachable to them, even if she is. Her songs of love gone wrong, not compromising because you think you’re supposed to and standing up for yourself have hit many a raw teenage nerve.

“My fans pay attention to the lyrics. Because they’re songs I wrote based on my experiences, it makes everyone realise these are things we’ve all been through, and that’s what connects us,” she explains. “I feel as if they have my back. They feel the same way about me because we’re sharing these really personal experiences.”

Swift describes herself as “a romantic”. “At one point or another, everybody comes around to realising they want someone to share their lives with,” she says. “It’s that great pursuit for the one or the one for right now; who you’re getting over; who you’re moving on from; who you’re getting back together with. One of the top five questions I ask myself at any given moment always has to do with love. I love being in love – as long as it’s with the right person.” ■

Red (Big Machine Records) is in stores tomorrow. Taylor Swift is performing at the ARIA Awards on November 29.