

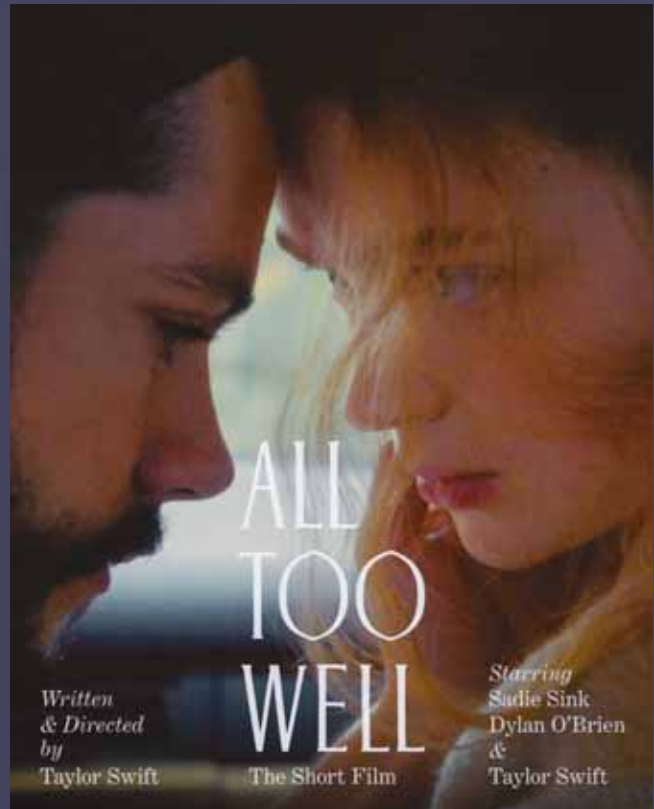
ALL TOO WELL

AN ARTIST LOST AND FOUND

Taylor Swift's re-release of her album *Red* was accompanied by a short film, *All Too Well*, written and directed by the artist herself. Matt Taylor explores what this demonstrates about Swift's ability to control her own narrative.



'Taylor's Version' of *Red* sold in record breaking numbers



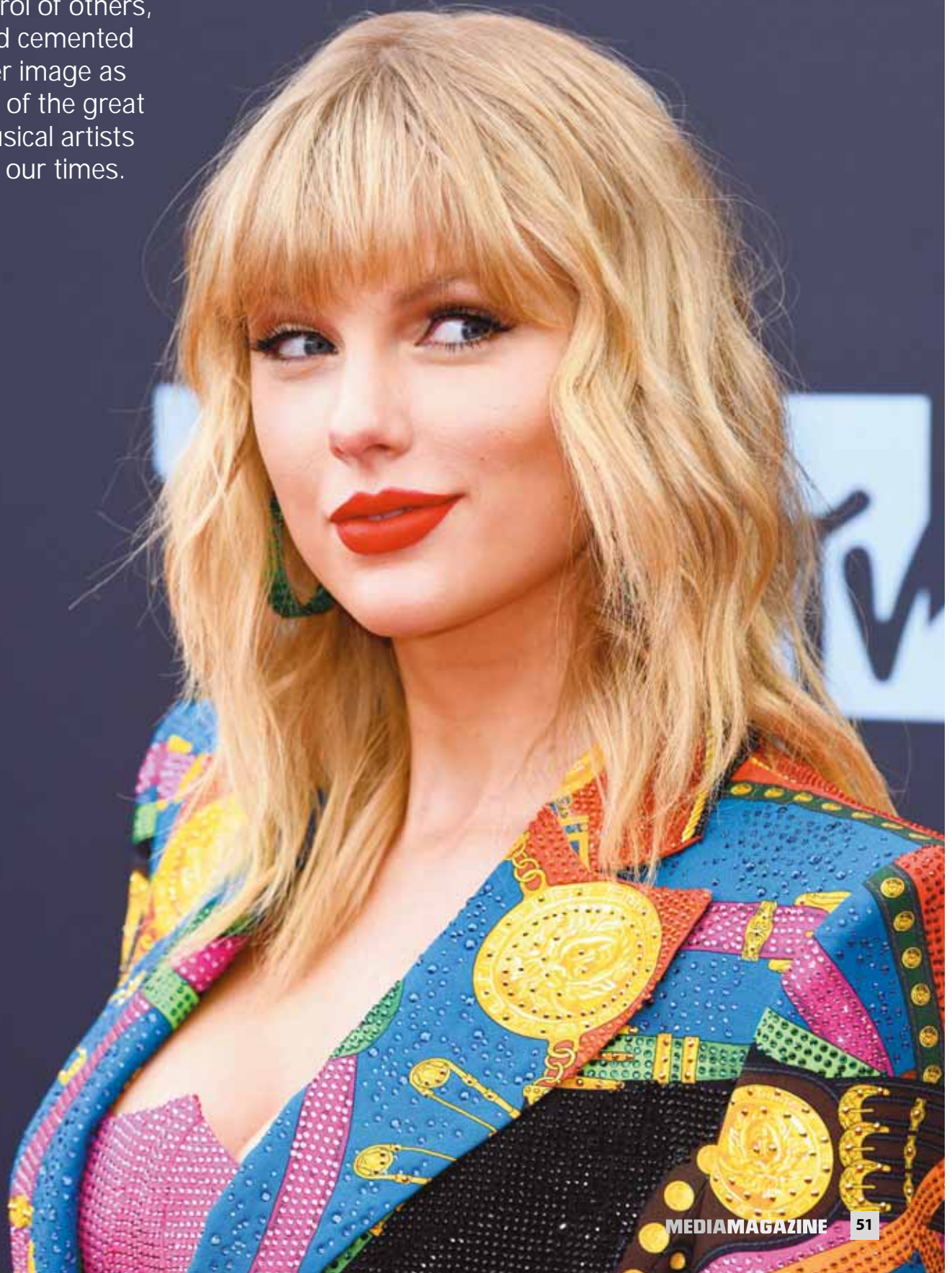
In the music industry, an artist's image is everything. Image helps dictate anything from public perception to record sales, and for many male artists is easy to control. But for women in the industry, this is usually something of an uphill struggle – and it's one that Taylor Swift has been fighting since her rise to fame with 2008's *Fearless*. Now, thirteen years on, and with the re-release of her multi-award-winning album *Red* and its accompanying short film *All Too Well*, Swift has finally, triumphantly, broken free of the control of others, and cemented her image as one of the great musical artists of our times.

For a little background on why this taking back control is necessary for Swift, we must look back at Big Machine, the singer's former record label. In 2005, aged just 15, Swift signed a record deal with the label which gave it ownership of the masters to her first six studio albums. Swift's deal with Big Machine ended in 2018 and she signed with Republic Records, but the masters remained with her former label, which was subsequently purchased by American businessman Scooter Braun for a reported \$300m – with his purchase of the label, Braun became the owner of Swift's masters, which he sold to Disney's Shamrock Holdings (a private investment firm run by the Disney family) in late 2020 on the condition that he would continue to financially profit from them.

Swift quickly announced her intentions to re-record her Big Machine albums, which would give her complete ownership of the records and nullify Braun's involvement. So far two re-recordings have been released, to both huge critical and commercial success – *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* and *Red (Taylor's Version)*. The latter album is Swift's most successful in her entire discography to date, and is a mark of her continued resurgence against those who would dictate her career.

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Fearless:
Taylor Swift





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Wind In My Hair...

All Too Well: The Short Film was released in tandem with *Red (Taylor's Version)* in November 2021. Directed by Swift herself, shot on 35mm, and starring Sadie Sink (*Stranger Things*) and Dylan O'Brien (*The Maze Runner*) as its protagonists, the film makes visual the ten-minute version of 'All Too Well', a song that aches from heartbreak and longing. In choosing to make the song into a short film, rather than just a music video, Swift has consciously chosen to push her professional creative boundaries for the sake of her art and her storytelling – and that's something we can only admire her for.

Swift has largely led a very public romantic life, and that has historically been the source of much of the criticism levelled at her: that she 'goes on too many dates', and 'can't make 'em stay'. The song, 'All Too Well' is allegedly about Swift's relationship with actor Jake Gyllenhaal, with Sink playing the role of Swift and O'Brien the role of Gyllenhaal (the age gap of eleven years between the two performers is close to the real-life age gap between Swift and Gyllenhaal). The film charts the downfall of the relationship between 'Her' and 'Him', as the characters are dubbed in the credits, due to a variety of factors that all seem to point the blame at Him.

Much of the film is dialogue-free, as Swift chooses to rely on her song to tell the story and her actors merely to sell it. The film contains only one scene of actual dialogue, acted beautifully by Sink and O'Brien, which comes in the film's second section, entitled 'The First Crack in the Glass.' The exchange is an argument between Her and Him, and in it we see what little regard he has for her emotions. A weak apology is issued and the two hug, but we see that the damage is done: the look in Her eyes tells the audience she isn't going to forget this – and she doesn't.



@taylorswift13 on Twitter

Things get worse for the couple and they eventually break up – though we only see the aftermath, not the breakup itself. Thirteen years pass and we meet Her again, this time played by Swift. She's become an author, and her debut novel is titled (you guessed it) *All Too Well*. At a signing of the book she reads an excerpt, and the film ends with a shot of Him looking through the shop window, still wearing that scarf left by Her all those years ago.

By the end of the film, Her is a deliberate mirror of Swift herself: not only is the song 'All Too Well' autobiographical, but in the world of the film Her takes control of the narrative herself – the same way that Swift does by writing the song and making the film. For both Swift and Her, art comes out of grief, and that art is not only a way of dealing with their grief, but of choosing to tell their own stories themselves, rather than waiting for other people to tell them first. This is important for both artists, because narrative dictates public image, and public image dictates all. For both women to take control of that is a powerful and understandable move – but it isn't the first time Swift has had to do it.

Down The Stairs...

Since the original release of *Red* all the way back in 2012, Swift has been forced to control virtually every aspect of her public image. Many aspects of her follow-up album *1989* (2014) were a direct response to criticisms about her private life: the entirety of 'Shake It Off' is dedicated to telling Swift's haters how little she cares for their opinions, while the video for 'Bad Blood' is yet another showcase of her filmmaking talents.

The video sees Swift create a pseudo-dystopian London and pack it with female singers and models, each playing members of various factions, with Swift and fellow singer Selena Gomez taking on the lead roles as the heads of the two groups. The video's narrative charts a feud between Swift and Gomez's characters, alleged to be based on Swift's fallout with Katy Perry. As with *All Too Well: The Short Film*, we see Swift using not only her music, but her visual output too, to tell her stories herself.

Though the settings and messages of the two are completely different ('Bad Blood' being something of a fantastical action flick, while *All Too Well* is much more of a heartbreaker), their ultimate purpose is the same: to allow Swift to tell the story in her own words, and through that maintain control of her image.

This idea of image control remained at the fore with Swift's next album, *Reputation* in 2017. Here, she divorces herself from her former personas entirely with both her musical styles and her look: around this time, she donned darker clothing and black eye shadow, which, paired with Swift's black or red lipstick, gave an impression of maturity she hadn't previously adopted. The album's lead single, 'Look What You Made Me Do,' furthered this idea with the lyric, 'I'm sorry, but the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now. Why? Cos she's dead.'

This was clearly all theatrics and experimentation by Swift, as *Lover* (2019) saw her return to the pop style of *1989*, complete with love ballads and pinks galore. Nevertheless, the core idea remains: Swift is using her music to control her image. But this is nothing new. She's been doing it for her entire career; what's different now is her motivation.

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It Was Rare...

Whereas Swift's former changes in image (which included forays into cottagecore aesthetics with *Folklore* and *Evermore*, both 2020) came from a place of artistic experimentation, the re-recording of her old albums comes from a place of necessity and artistic control. But it also raises questions about the amount of power and control people like Scooter Braun have in the music industry: why should they be allowed to profit from someone else's hard work?

Swift's answer to that question is very clear: they shouldn't be. That's why she's gone to such lengths to take back her masters: to remove control from the hands of the wealthy and powerful, and place it back in the hands of those who deserve it – and it just so happens that, in the process, she's proven herself to be not only an artist for the ages, but an incredibly prolific filmmaker to boot. All she needed was an opportunity to finally do things for herself.

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Matt Taylor is a freelance journalist who specialises in film, television and music.



from the MM vaults

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