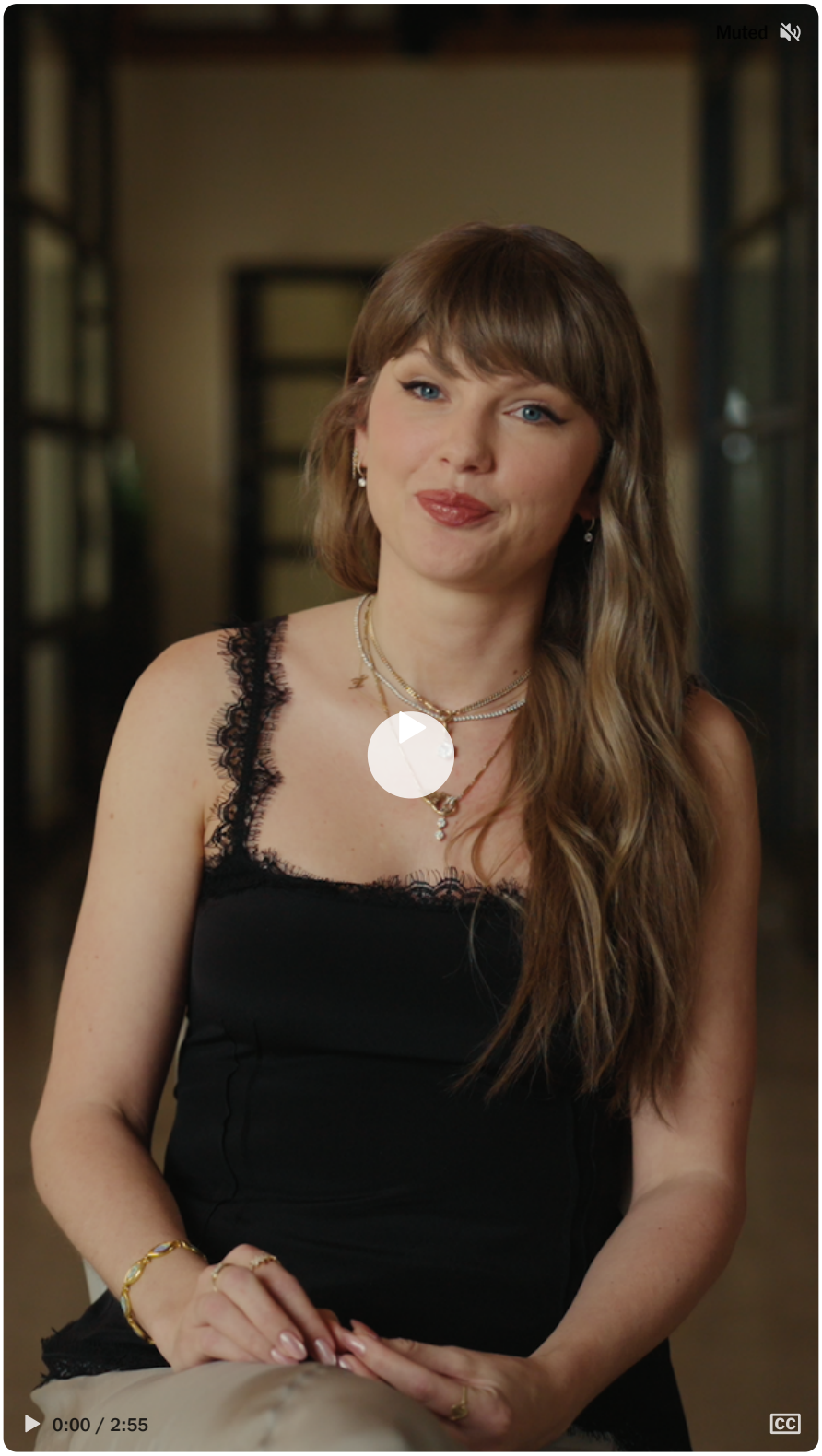
Photographs by Stefan Ruiz

TAYLOR SWIFT

First album, first song, first verse: "He said the way my blue eyes shined / Put those

Georgia stars to shame that night / I said, 'That's a lie.'"



Go to the full-length video

It was all there at the very beginning for Taylor Swift: romance, nostalgia and the occasional popping of shiny bubbles of emotion, all within the pristine economical

package of a pop-country song. She was 16.

She has never stopped chasing that initial Nashville impulse — a four-ish-minute distillation of the biggest feelings imaginable, threaded through a melody that won't leave you alone. Sometimes she brings country phrasings to electro-pop, or pop rigor to indie rock; she might let her rhymes and verses go shaggy or bring a bridge back like a chorus. Such are the perks of having mastered the form early, while amassing the cultural capital to remake pop in her image.

Pop stars are not supposed to last this long or create this much. The Beatles' entire creative output happened, essentially, in eight years. But Swift's durability — 12 studio albums and hundreds of songs over two decades — has given us an unprecedented combination of musical auteurism and commercial success.

Her later work often explores the tension between the two. She has a campy kiss-off register for tart bon mots — "Lights, camera, bitch, smile / Even when you wanna die," she chirps on the fake-bubbly "I Can Do It With a Broken Heart." But on the dream-pop opus "Mirrorball," it's all earnest reflection from the top of the mountain: "I can change everything about me to fit in."

Swift's latest run of dominance, the stretch that has given her two more Grammys for album of the year (and four in total, a record), began with that surprise pandemic one-two flutter of "Folklore" and its sister album "Evermore." Simultaneously, Swift was painstakingly recreating four of her earlier albums to own them outright. Collective fervor around the "Taylor's Version" albums sent a 10-minute director's cut rendition of a nearly decade-old breakup ballad, "All Too Well," to No. 1 on the Billboard chart in 2021, simply because so many listeners wanted to hear even more of a track that made them feel bruised, abandoned and devastated.

Swift has done as much as anyone in modern popular music history to advance the idea of the song — its construction and impact, its tensions and limitations — as an important art form. But she has also done it while foregrounding the agency and emotional lives of young women, and as a result has become probably the most pored-over writer — or at least up there with J.K. Rowling and the pope — of the 21st century in any medium. — *Joe Coscarelli*

Five Essential Songs

"Our Song"
"Fifteen"
"Love Story"
"Dear John"
"Mirrorball"

Stevie Nicks on Taylor Swift

You ask about her brilliance

I can only say ~

If only I had — written it ...

For me, this song will always live ~

In my heart

"You're on your own kid —

You always have been ... "

I feel that her song is generational. I think it's all of her relationships written into one song — a little bit of this, a little bit of that — and dropped into my lap. Over time, I have dropped in my own great loves to stand in her story, and it makes me cry for both of us — what we lost, what we learned and how we survived. That is how a great songwriter reaches into people's hearts and connects with them. All that beauty and tragedy and life's lessons have led her down this path of unstoppable creativity; she just doesn't stop, and that is what has turned her into this beautiful young woman who makes magic with everything she touches.

P.S. Yes, this is the song that reconnected Taylor and I. The title of the song is something Christine would have said to me after she passed away — and I felt it came through Taylor. It helped me a lot to let her go ~

And brought me a new friend. ... — *Stevie Nicks is a singer and songwriter. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

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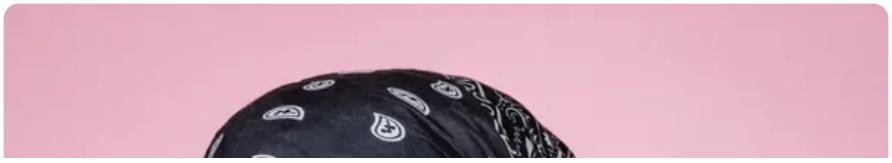


NILE RODGERS

The titles tell the story. "Good Times." "I Want Your Love." "Lost in Music." "Everybody Dance." "My Feet Keep Dancing." "Dance, Dance, Dance (Yowsah, Yowsah, Yowsah)." The songs of Nile Rodgers distill the spirit of disco's heyday: long nights, bright lights, romance, sex and, above all, the communal rapture of bodies moving in unison, following inexorable grooves to a distant plane where the laws of physics seem no longer to apply — at least until the cops show up. **Read More**

Video Interview

Go to the full-length video

Five Essential Songs

"Good Times," Chic
"Le Freak," Chic
"I Want Your Love," Chic
"He's the Greatest Dancer," Sister Sledge

"I'm Coming Out," Diana Ross

Johnny Marr on Nile Rodgers

People think of his guitar playing, this distinctive style — which, by the way, is a historic thing, along the lines of Bo Diddley or Wes Montgomery or Django Reinhart. When the man or woman in the street knows what your style is on the guitar, that's kind of a big deal. But as a songwriter, what they're not thinking about is what he does on his *other* hand, which are these chord changes and voicings that are completely romantic and symphonic and uplifting. You hear Nile's heart in his right hand and his soul in the left.

He makes the term "pop" mean something limitless. It's not just about getting you off your feet and wanting to dance. There's an idealism in it. A lot of dance music makes you feel good in the moment, but something like "Lost in Music" or "I Want Your Love" has that feeling of what the word "romantic" really means — romance between a person and their own soul, really, and life.

I was around 14, 15, and I was playing in early bands, learning to write songs. It was right after punk in the U.K. But my sister was really into disco, and I got really lucky that she got the first Chic LP. Nile was a bit of a hero to me and my pals when I was learning to play. The very first Smiths single, "Hand in Glove," started off as me trying to play like Nile. "This Night Has Opened My Eyes," that's me being inspired by Nile chord changes. "The Boy With the Thorn in His Side," another one that I was trying to ape Nile — by then, I was a little braver, so I left the Nile Rodgers guitar in from the second verse onward. I have a number of influences, but his thing really has stuck with me.

And then, of course, when I had a child, I called him Nile. So what can you do? My son's fine with it. He's really proud of it. He's a good guitar player, luckily. He's got a lot to live up to with that name. — *Johnny Marr was the guitarist for the Smiths. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

LUCINDA WILLIAMS

Whatever anybody means about a song's texture turns tactile with Lucinda Williams. Sweat salt. Ice crunch. Oyster grit. Matches. Grease (bacon, engine, hair). She must know this. She titled one masterpiece album "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road." Her half-century of music-making began on a kind of texture tour. She passed through some country and, as many a singer-songwriter has, through Black music, discovering what distinguishes affect from affinity. Williams, who hails from Lake Charles, La., started as a blues stencilist, covering Robert Johnson and Melvin "Lil' Son" Jackson. So nothing is counterfeit about, say, the zydeco that dusts her first recording of an original jewel like "I Lost It." **Read More**

Video Interview

Five Essential Songs

"I Just Wanted to See You So Bad"
"Hot Blood"
"Metal Firecracker"
"Fruits of My Labor"
"Where Is My Love?"

Mary Chapin Carpenter on Lucinda Williams

I was touring in the early '90s with Lucinda and Rosanne Cash in Australia, and we would play together every night. It was like a guitar pull, just swapping songs, and she would play "Passionate Kisses" every night. I don't think I'm exaggerating too much when I tell you we'd walk offstage and I would just tackle her and slobber all over her face and say, "Oh, I love 'Passionate Kisses' so much!" I think by the end of that tour she was like, *I can't take this anymore* — she finally said, "Oh, for God's sake, just record that song." So we cut it. All these years later, every night that I get to sing that song for three and a half minutes, I feel as if I'm inhabiting this perfect vessel of songcraft. It's a

beautiful, simple, declarative song that is both the most raise-your-fist anthem and such a deeply personal declaration of what we all deserve. I've always pretty much recorded my own songs — but that song, I just wanted to sing it every night.

"Side of the Road" is another perfect song, in terms of the simplicity or economy of its language. How do you love fully while also keeping yourself whole? It's a question for the universe. In the verse at the end, she goes, "I just wanted to go to a place where I used to always go" — as if looking back on your life, and maybe the person you were, who used to go to those places, has changed or is gone now.

She works very hard on lyrics and precision and rewrites. It's not tossed off. She invests every part of herself; she really works. A couple of years ago, I read a profile of Lucinda. She took exception to something the interviewer was trying to suggest — that as one grows older, one's powers of songwriting may be diminishing. She was so brilliant, saying, No, no, no, I'm just hitting my stride! I think about it a lot. Great painters or writers or poets, no one suggests to them that they should wrap it up. The songs that Lucinda writes now, you wouldn't have written them in your 20s. It's a lifetime of craftsmanship and learning and being human. When you get to this point in life, it's almost euphoric to be able to keep doing what you do, because you are at the height of your powers. — *Mary Chapin Carpenter is a singer and songwriter. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

No sane person begins a tribute to the greatest living bard of the human heart with the song "Part-Time Lover." Not when he's the composer of some of the most harmonically and chromatically complex music ever composed, music you probably can't fully grasp without a math degree. You can't start with "Part-Time Lover" because "Part-Time Lover" isn't "If You Really Love Me" or "Signed, Sealed, Delivered." It isn't "Happy Birthday" or "That Girl." Nor is it "Until You Come Back to Me" or "Tell Me Something Good" or "I Can't Help It" (songs he wrote that Aretha Franklin, Chaka Khan and Michael Jackson made theirs). Nor will you find it on the five-year spree of magnum opus albums that made Stevie Wonder immortal by the time he turned a flabbergasting 26 years old.
Read More

Five Essential Songs

"Girl Blue"
"Jesus Children of America"
"Heaven Is 10 Zillion Light Years Away"
"They Won't Go When I Go"
"That Girl"

Erykah Badu on Stevie Wonder

I grew up in South Dallas, Texas, in a household where there was always music being played. For the most part, it was my mom and her brothers. The common denominator between the three of them was Stevie Wonder. We could share a car ride to school, and it was Stevie Wonder. When I got dressed in the morning, it was Stevie Wonder. Sundays after church, Stevie Wonder. So it was almost as if I thought Stevie Wonder was my dad.

Stevie Wonder's music is a language; there's a chord language that he speaks. By the time I started writing songs, he was in me. My soul was kind of imprinted with that. I'm one of those millions of people who recognize the billions of memories of atoms of all the notes, words, phrases, thoughts, sentiments that Stevie Wonder shared. I belong to him, and he belongs to me. I never have to meet him in person.

What stood out for me was not just the vocals, not just the songwriting — it was the ad-libs. The ad-libs could determine whether you were soulful or not. It's where you hit the mmm-*mmm*-mmm in between the words, or the *ooh*-ooh-*ooh*. It's in the tradition of gospel music. Ad-libs determine how far you are entranced into what you are doing. And it doesn't get any better than Stevie Wonder.

There's a song called "Seems So Long." There's a particular part that he gets to: "Seems so long / Since I've touched a wanting hand / Oh, it seems so long." I found myself rewinding that one run. That moment I am rewinding, that one run over and over again, feels like slowly unfolding my childhood, and getting to the nucleus of a wound and feeling the relief of bursting it and watching it explode into glitter and love.

Stevie Wonder just makes me cry randomly. He gets on a drum kit and connects with the metronome of the universe. He gets on a harmonica and gives it a life and a voice. The harmonica has a family, a past, a favorite food and everything else — he gives the harmonica a *life*, and sometimes it sounds like a life that was fulfilled.

I don't know if, at the time, in the studio, he and the players knew exactly what they were creating. But it would be the soundtrack to a lot of our lives. That music, it's part of the homeostasis of who a lot of us are. As I was growing — I get to be a college student, and I get to be a young woman, and I'm writing "Baduizm" — there's no way that these things can't be a part of me. All of the music I was singing — we never talked about this, but it's always trying to get his attention. Like: I know you. You made me. — *Erykah Badu is a singer and songwriter. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

Even as a rookie, Jay-Z spoke with the voice of experience. He was 24 when he released his first single, in the summer of 1994; he sounded far older, wiser and worldlier. The song's title, "In My Lifetime," had a valedictory ring, and though the chorus looked forward, not back ("In my lifetime, I need to see a whole lotta dough"), it was clear the rapper wasn't wishing or hoping — he was laying out a plan. He says as much in the opening line: While others "are shootin' stupid, I'm carefully plottin.'" This was the credo of a tactician, a weigher of costs and benefits, who had no patience for child's play.
Read More

Video Interview

Go to the full-length video

Five Essential Songs

"Dead Presidents II"
"Where I'm From"
"U Don't Know"
"99 Problems"

"Public Service Announcement (Interlude)"

Pusha T on Jay-Z

There haven't been many people who can speak for a generation, and speak to the mentality of what Black youth was going through, for everyone who indulged in the allure of street culture. He gave us such a tutorial, his whole career — about street life, drug culture, luxury, the pitfalls as well as the floss. And then he took "Allure," from "The Black Album," and basically admitted, *Man, I fell victim to the game*. It is just the best representation of a rap artist speaking to his demographic, which was a lot of the kids exposed to the crack era from every angle. Everybody who was playing in that world, you know, we all had moments of clarity. Regardless of whether it was an opportunity in music, a near-death experience of a friend or yourself, a run-in with the law — everybody had this feeling and told themselves, *That's it*. And the game called them right back. That chorus and bridge really captured the feelings of anyone living that life. And the hook spoke to a level of admission of, like, *I know I'm doing wrong. I see clearly. I'm over it. I'm done.* But everybody, you know, folded and ran back, like an addict.

He's talking about a real experience, and his mission is to articulate, in the best possible way, his feelings at the time. When you draw from real experience, there's a level of passion that comes across — I've always felt like that was something he did very well. Even his more commercial records, they always still carried a heavy weight of lyricism. "Ni**as in Paris," "Hard Knock Life," "Otis" — these are all hit singles, and his verses carry the weight of mixtape verses.

One of his best performances, to me, is "Hovi Baby." Lyrically it is by far one of the best [expletive]-talking, acrobatic, philosophizing — I mean, come on. Listen: At that point I was *scared* of Jay-Z. This is another stride of lyricism, philosophy, I'm-the-best braggadocio, bravado. And he's, like, tap-dancing all over this beat. Later on in the song, he starts talking about how he's chasing the snare around — and he's actually doing it. To me, that was a Super Saiyan moment. "Hovi Baby" scared the hell out of me. — *Pusha T is one half of the rap duo Clipse. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

PAUL SIMON

They call him Rhymin' Simon. Or rather, that's the moniker he gave himself in the title of a 1973 album, winking at both the nicknames of old-time sports heroes and at his own reputation as a pointy head — a New York intellectual with an acoustic guitar, a reedy tenor voice and catalog of brainy, indelible songs. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

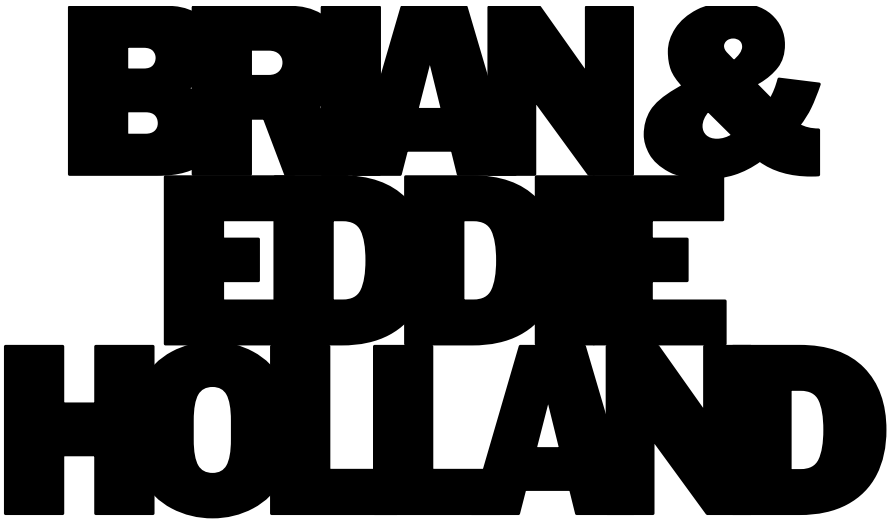
"American Tune"
"Rene and Georgette Magritte With Their Dog After the War"
"Graceland"
"Bernadette"
"The Sacred Harp"

Beth Orton on Paul Simon

One of the things that's incredible about him and makes him utterly unique is the rhythm of his language and how that defines his melodic choices — and vice versa, the rhythm of his melody and how that defines his language. When he hits gold, it pours out of him like water. Of course, he works like a [expletive] on the rest of it. But he's a master at it. He's the archetypal short-story writer in song, right? One of the best that we've ever had.

The song "Hearts and Bones" is something I've discovered more recently. It's like the precursor to "Graceland" — you hear "Hearts and Bones" and you hear someone making their way toward something. Every line in it is beautiful. You can hear how much he enjoys the melodies, how much he enjoys hitting the notes, and yet the words mean something every step of the way. I always hear the arc of a love affair, flying round and round. He'll just stop midsong and do some other melody that will suddenly appear to him, and he goes with it. This is one of the greats, who's still trying and exploring, and doing it very publicly.

He spawned singer-songwriters. There's not a songwriter out there who won't have inadvertently, unconsciously, *consciously* pulled from his work. They're classics that you take for granted, and then you sit down, and you're like, *My god, how the hell did he do that? — Beth Orton is a singer and musician. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*



What was love before Holland-Dozier-Holland? Well, there were the American songbook chestnuts: classic, classy, dreamy; notes so long they needed maids of honor to carry them; singing that was oh-so-proper, consummate and clear. The brothers Brian and Eddie Holland, along with Lamont Dozier, who died in 2022, made a crucial innovation to the songbook's tremors. They invited us to *feel* those feelings — like, in our bodies, on dozens and dozens of hits. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"(Love Is Like a) Heat Wave," Martha and the Vandellas
"Baby I Need Your Loving," the Four Tops
"You're a Wonderful One," Marvin Gaye
"My World Is Empty Without You," the Supremes
"7 Rooms of Gloom," the Four Tops

Gabriel Roth on Brian & Eddie Holland

One of the things that stands out is obviously just how prolific they were. There are a lot of people who wrote a *handful* of great songs. But they and Smokey Robinson and the Beatles and very few other people — you can sit there and name dozens and dozens and dozens of songs, and you've heard most of them: all these hits by the Supremes, Four Tops, Marvin Gaye, everybody.

They were the ones who really started creating this Motown sound. There would be a chord, a triad, then a bass note that wasn't necessarily in that chord and then a melody that also wasn't necessarily in the chord. And when you put them together — it's not quite jazzy, but it's very arranged, very sophisticated. They tend to have these verses and choruses and bridges that are almost meandering. They don't tend to be symmetrical: There are extra bars and extra beats, and they don't go where you think. If you took the choruses out of those tunes, it's almost like avant-garde jazz. They're very, very innovative writers.

It's obvious, but this was the architecture of *so* much music. All of pop and soul was changed by Motown, by these songs. Motown became basically its own genre; it doesn't sound like anything else. They talk about Motown like a factory, but it was more like a university, and you had these guys who were almost like professors — the engineers, the musicians, the songwriters, the producers. There were a lot of people at Motown doing things at very high levels. To be honest, I just think people aren't working that hard

anymore. — *Gabriel Roth is a founder of Daptone Records. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

If you want to come to terms with the songwriting greatness of Missy (Misdemeanor) Elliott, there may be no better place to start than these nine, um, words: *Ti esrever dna ti pilf, nwod gniht ym tup*. It's a lyric, or the mirror-image inversion of one: the big hook of Elliott's 2002 hit "Work It" — "Put my thing down, flip it and reverse it" — which Elliott and the producer Timbaland literally flipped and reversed, running the audio backward to create a cascade of chirps, slurps and phonemes. The trick transforms Elliott's rapping into demented scat-singing. It sounds like spirit possession, or like extraterrestrial Esperanto. Or maybe Elliott is just cracking a raunchy joke? The flipping and reversing may refer to switching up sexual positions; the backward vocal sample winks at the gibberish that lovers yelp in the throes of passion. As Elliott also puts it in "Work It": "Sex me so good, I say blah-blah-blah." **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

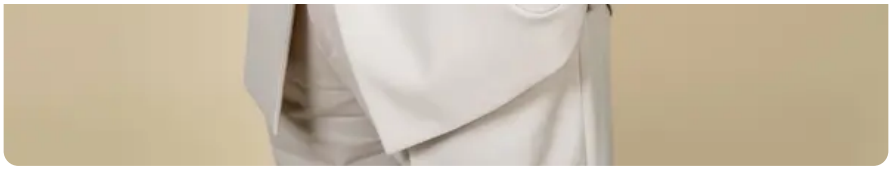
"Get Ur Freak On"
"Work It"
"Gossip Folks"
"Bomb Intro/Pass That Dutch"
"On & On"

FKA twigs on Missy Elliott

For me, it's her pocket. She just has a *crazy* pocket. She's so rhythmic. I grew up listening to her, and I was dancing a lot. Her music was like the holy grail; you couldn't take a hip-hop class and have it *not* be to Missy Elliott. I feel like probably her pocket has inspired my physical movement, inadvertently.

She was able to be so tender and so sensual — and also had this chic vulgarity to some of her lyrics. But she always had this silky delivery. I really like hooky rhythms, like the intro to "Get Ur Freak On" — you know that intro straight away — or that bit on "Work It," the "ra-ta-ta-ta." There's always these signature drumlike rhythms that feel really embodied and completely addictive. Her lyrics, as well, would really twist the way she would speak: "Don't I look like a Halle Berry post-*ahhh*." But it just seemed natural, the way she would use her mouth and use vowels and consonants to create the beat. You'd still understand what she was saying — you'd think that to say "post-*ahhh*" is normal; that's the way *you* should say it.

She took these rhythms — rhythms that felt very Afrocentric — and somehow made every single person feel like they could get involved. She took these rhythms into pop culture. It's *playful*. Her lyrics were cheeky, naughty, quite confrontational sometimes, but she delivered it so you wanted to eat it, like it's digestible, without diluting herself at *all*. She completely changed the culture by being herself. — *FKA twigs is a singer and songwriter. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*



LIONEL RICHIE

In the late 1970s through the mid-80s, there was a certain kind of hit song that sauntered up on you quietly but not sneakily. It put its hands on your shoulders, brought its forehead down into the nape of your neck. Gently swayed you to and fro as its warmth oozed through you like lava. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Easy," the Commodores
"Three Times a Lady," the Commodores
"Endless Love," Lionel Richie and Diana Ross
"Lady," Kenny Rogers
"Hello," Lionel Richie

Darius Rucker on Lionel Richie

Lionel has so many tricks as a songwriter. But one thing that was such a part of his writing is those choruses — instantly sing-alongable, instantly recognizable. He writes these verses that are so intelligent and smart, and then you get to the chorus and it all comes together.

"Stuck on You" is one of my favorites. We're in the studio, and we're doing it pretty much live, and we get to the bridge. I will never forget — it was like every cell in my body just woke up. The choruses always seem like a big *band* thing, but that bridge seems like it's just two voices, just isolated in the world. It's so Lionel, and so pure pop. He came up with these great moments, like the beginning of "Easy" — something that instantly makes you recognize it as a song crafted by Lionel Richie.

We're talking about Lionel Richie, but we could be talking about Paul McCartney or Stevie Wonder, we could be talking about Al Green, any of these people. He wrote these songs that became a part of the lexicon, part of the everyday fiber of America. He's one of those guys who can write a song that can be done in almost any genre. Look at a song like "Lady," which he wrote for Kenny Rogers: undeniably country, but also undeniably Lionel Richie. It seems so effortless, because the great ones make it look effortless.

With my songwriting, a song like "Let Her Cry" — there's so much influence from growing up with Lionel Richie and the Commodores. When I sit down and write songs, I'm always trying to be Lionel Richie. — *Darius Rucker is a solo artist and the singer for Hootie and the Blowfish. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

PARTON

Every so often, a seemingly miraculous legend about Dolly Parton goes viral: The enormously prolific songwriter and cross-generational cultural icon supposedly wrote two of her greatest songs, "Jolene" and "I Will Always Love You," on the very same night. That feat would certainly be impressive, but to anyone with a true understanding of Parton's songwriting — or perhaps of the miracle of songwriting itself — not particularly surprising. As is true for so many of the greats, songwriting is, for Parton, a kind of spiritual practice ("That's my time with God," she has said), an entrance into a flow state where time and possibility expand infinitely. Parton has cultivated a reputation for being down-to-earth while also seeming connected to some kind of higher power. "I've watched Dolly writing one song while she's singing another," Emmylou Harris, Parton's collaborator in the supergroup Trio, once marveled. "I've never seen anyone so spontaneously creative." **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Jolene"
"I Will Always Love You"
"Coat of Many Colors"
"9 to 5"
"My Tennessee Mountain Home"

Gillian Welch on Dolly Parton

I can't help it: The first song that comes to mind is "I Will Always Love You." Can you imagine the world without this song? I can't. It's a heartbroken breakup song, and yet I'm filled with love and compassion for both the "I" and the "you" every time I hear it. I think her remarkable ability to convey human frailty and human nobility is one of the most masterful aspects of her writing.

When I return to her early songs now, I'm struck by their bravery. There's some dark subject matter, and some hard-luck people on the fringes. Yet whatever the circumstances, the characters who populate her songs have an abiding and unshakable likability. I feel like I have more respect for the human spirit after listening to a Dolly record. — *Gillian Welch is a singer and songwriter. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

YOUNG THUG

Should hip-hop be melodic? Should hip-hop be structured? In its early years, the genre wasn't really sure. This uncertainty began as a tug of war between rapped verses and sung, often sampled hooks; then those things found common ground; and then eventually, in the form of Drake and his acolytes, they became effectively one and the same. By the 2010s, rap music — which for years fended off allegations that it was not, in fact, music at all — had become the flame keeper for pop melody, its tools spilling over into country, reggaeton, K-pop and everywhere else. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Stoner"
"Best Friend"

"Picacho," featuring Maceo
"Danny Glover"
"Wyclef Jean"

Mike WiLL Made-It on Young Thug

Atlanta, we always come with new styles, new lingo. I was with the young wave — I was working with the artists bringing the new stuff. And then I remember when Thug started coming on the scene. He was somebody who made me feel like: Hold on, *what*? What is he saying? Nobody sounds like this. He was one of the first artists from Atlanta to make me feel, like, disconnected from the city. I told Thug, too, one of the first times we were working with each other — like, Man, you're *next*. And I'm not even talking about time; I'm talking about how you put your songs together.

He doesn't put himself in any type of box. He always evolves and always continues to grow and push himself. The uniqueness is his metaphors. The animation of the voice and vocal control. He'll go from the deep-voice flow to the high-pitch flow. He comes with those melodies that make you want to sing along, but then he comes with those punchlines and metaphors that might have went over your head. He comes with different cadences, different flows. Staccato right here, melodic right here. He changes his flow every four bars; you don't even realize that he's rapping three 16s. It's not just street rap music — it's art, like, crazy culture clash and genre bend. I love working with him, because I know I can pull up a challenging beat, and he's up for the challenge. If he respects you as an artist, he'll get on whatever song you want.

When we thought nobody could be more out of the box than André 3000 and CeeLo Green, it's like, now we get him. I honestly don't know what's going through his head, but it's never the same, and it's always unique. — *Mike WiLL Made-It is a producer from Georgia. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

DIANE WARREN

Do yourself a favor. Take out your pocket jukebox, locate a Diane Warren playlist. (You'll have your pick. The one for Apple Music's Songwriters series has 62 songs. Spotify's "Written by Diane Warren"? Population: 581.) Now, without looking at the whole queue, just take yourself outside or simply close your eyes and allow one of the most prolific, popular and trusted tunesmiths this country has ever produced to astonish you. For one thing, there's the breadth of her clientele: Taylor Dayne *and* Taylor Swift, Patti LaBelle and Heart, Chicago but also Shanice. Then there's the power of her hooks (those could snag a shark). What you'll discover as the playlist unspools is that she wrote that song and *that* song and — OMG — *that one*? She wrote the song you couldn't get enough of and the song you couldn't escape. She has written or co-written upward of a dozen major songs in a *single year*. So there's a zero percent chance you did not hear one of her hits on a radio — from, say, 1985, when DeBarge's "Rhythm of the Night" made its way to No. 3 on Billboard's Hot 100, to, let's say, 2001, when Faith Hill took "There You'll Be" to No. 10. Warren's songs made it to the Top 10 33 times. Nine of those hit No. 1. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"I Don't Wanna Live Without Your Love," Chicago
"When I See You Smile," Bad English
"Just Like Jesse James," Cher
"Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now," by Starship
"If You Asked Me To," Patti LaBelle

Amy Allen on Diane Warren

Just a couple of years ago, I was listening to Ace of Base. For some reason, I decided to look up the credits on "Don't Turn Around" and of course saw "Diane Warren." The number of times this has happened to me in my lifetime, when I look up the credits to a classic only to see Diane's name — you would think I'd stop being surprised at this point.

"I Don't Want to Miss a Thing" by Aerosmith is one of the most perfectly written ballads of all time. Her soaring, triumphant melodies — "If I Could Turn Back Time" by Cher and "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now" by Starship are classic examples. Honest yet clever lyrics, which, for the nonsongwriters reading this, is a surprisingly hard needle to thread. Saying something heartfelt in a way that makes people feel as if they've never heard that sentiment before is almost impossible, and Diane has done that time and time again. It continues to blow my mind because of the number of genres she was writing for: bouncing between Meat Loaf, Mariah Carey, TLC, Aerosmith, Toni Braxton, Heart. She has a deep understanding of all these genres, but at the heart of it she just has the ability to tap into the human experience in such a clear, sincere way. I think that's why she's truly one of the best songwriters this world will ever know. — *Amy Allen is a songwriter and producer. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

Listen to the playlist:

Apple Music • Spotify

JOSH OSBORNE, BRANDY CLARK, SHANE MCANALLY

For some, songwriting is a waiting game. Inspiration comes when it comes; the task is to remain vigilant, scanning the skies for a flash of lightning or an incoming squadron of muses. But on Nashville's Music Row, the mecca of the country music business, they have a different theory. There, songwriting is a discipline and a day job, a gig you show up for, often several times a week, pushing out as many songs as possible in sessions with fellow writers. The practice rests on a hardheaded mathematical calculation — the more songs you write, the greater the odds you'll come up with a decent one — and on a particular ideal of creation: a belief that the best songs are team efforts, in which skilled professionals, working quickly and collaboratively, make magic by pooling their talents. **Read More**

Video Interview

Go to the full-length video

Five Essential Songs

"Merry Go 'Round," Kacey Musgraves
"Follow Your Arrow," Kacey Musgraves
"Liberty," Sam Hunt
"Maybe Love," Brandy Clark & Shane McAnally

"Drinkin' Problem," Midland

Jack O'Brien on Clark and McAnally

Country people, they really like to hang out — and there's something implicit in that spirit that transfers into the music. We were having our first session together, and we sat around a table sort of affably chatting. And finally I said, "You've got to sing an anthem about corn!"

Well, the two of them went outside to the swimming pool with a guitar and left us alone inside. I kept watching them through the window. They were very quiet. It was like watching very good friends have a conversation. And eventually — I think 20 minutes? — they came in with this divine number. It changed and evolved as we needed it to, but there it is, opening the show now.

I felt like I was watching two magpies looking for something shiny and brilliant that they could pick up and turn into gold, which is what they did. It's what they do. They find fragments of creativity that speak to them, and then they go into their little cocoon and out comes something unbelievable. This is true of almost anything of theirs I've known: They write basically an overview of what is funny or what hurts or what aches or what makes you love, and they seem to have an inexhaustible supply of information and perspective. — *Jack O'Brien directed the musical "Shucked," featuring songs by McAnally and Clark. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

FIONA APPLE

It's true that in 30 years, Fiona Apple has released only 56 original songs, on five albums, but she packs in more interpersonal danger, impassioned candor and radical tenderness than artists with triple her catalog. Whatever's lacking in quantity is exceeded in payload. "You fondle my trigger," she sings on "Limp," "then you blame my gun." **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Sleep to Dream"
"The Way Things Are"
"Every Single Night"
"Tymps (The Sick in the Head Song)"
"Heavy Balloon"

Cécile McLorin Salvant on Fiona Apple

There's an album that I really, really connected with when it came out: "The Idler Wheel." What struck me was how *direct* she is. Yes, she's a poet, and yes, she uses images. But it didn't feel esoteric and cloying. It felt as if it was just a punch straight to the gut. It never feels sentimental — it feels strong and beautiful and violent.

I don't know how old she was when she made it. Not that it necessarily matters. But it almost felt, for me, as if it mattered. Her first record, she came out of the gate blazing. It felt as if, OK, we got this thing of being an "it" girl out of the way. What's next? What art can we make now that we're really digging in? In a world where everything feels very ageist and as if your best work is your first work, it's nice to feel her get better and better with the years. I liken it to Stevie Wonder's golden period — and then he did "Secret Life of Plants," and you're like, *What?!*

"Every Single Night" — I love how driving the words are. It's hard to separate the lyrics and the melody and the production and the arrangement: The *entirety* of it is very driving. You can't say it's just a beautiful lyric or a beautiful sound. It's all one, in a way

that not every singer-songwriter does. I was also attached to those lyrics because *I* feel that way. "Every single night's a fight with my brain," and then she hits you with "I just want to feel everything." It's so vulnerable and so unashamed to be real about these complicated feelings. She's very generous to have given us that.

Or "Hot Knife." *She* is a hot knife, you know? She's a hot knife and we're butter. — *Cécile McLorin Salvant is a jazz vocalist. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

BABYFACE

History, as they say, does not repeat — but it rhymes. The career of Kenneth Edmonds, better known as Babyface, offers one of the clearest expressions of that truism: a body of

work that echoes the past even as it reshapes the present. **Read More**

Video Interview

Go to the full-length video

Five Essential Songs

"Whip Appeal"
"Superwoman," Karyn White
"I'm Your Baby Tonight," Whitney Houston
"My, My, My," Johnny Gill
"Not Gon' Cry," Mary J. Blige

Natalie Hemby on Babyface

In the country music scene, a lot of us grew up on R&B. I love me a Babyface love song. One of my favorites was "Take a Bow." He wrote it with Madonna, and what I love is that he didn't change the way he wrote songs to write for Madonna: He brought his songwriting style to her. I could tell it was a Babyface song, but Madonna also had her stamp on it. He's brilliant at not taking away from the artist, but also influencing the artist. That's a magic thing — it's not easily done.

There's one part — "There's no one here," and then, "There's no one here, there's no one in the crowd" — that chord change right there is just lovely, where it's placed. That's so Babyface, that strange little jump. It has tension in it. He has such interesting chord changes and melodies. They're not big and broad, they're so smart and concise — and that's the school I went to, the Babyface School.

The way he writes from a woman's perspective is really interesting. Most men who try to do that, it feels like mansplaining a woman. The way Mary J. Blige sang "Not Gon' Cry," you would have thought she herself had written a song about her ex-husband. Even just that line, "I should have left your ass a thousand times" — that sounds like a woman who's about to get divorced. You can even go back to Karyn White, "Superwoman": "I'm not the kind of girl that you can let down and think that everything's OK." And one more example: that Pebbles song "Girlfriend," a woman saying to her friend, "How could you let him treat you so bad?" He has an uncanny ability to tap into a woman's frustrations and also her sensuality. When I was growing up, I thought, *These women write these amazing songs* — and I look and it's like Babyface, Babyface, Babyface.

His lyrics are very simple, but I swear to God, they're like conversations. They're very sensual love songs, but they're not graphic. Your grandma and your cousin would love these songs. They're intimate and tender. I really attribute to him, you know, the population boom in the '90s — because we were all listening to Babyface back then. — *Natalie Hemby is a songwriter and singer. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

STEPHIN MERRITT

Stephin Merritt likes a writing prompt. In 2014, with his 50th birthday approaching, the singer-songwriter-bandleader behind the New York pop ensemble the Magnetic Fields and other indie groups conceived an autobiographical song cycle, with one song for each year of his life. "50 Song Memoir" (2017) was followed three years later by "Quickies," a collection of ultrashort songs, whose running times ranged from 13 seconds to a sprawling two minutes 35 seconds. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Strange Powers," the Magnetic Fields
"It's Only Time," the Magnetic Fields
"'01: "Have You Seen It in the Snow?" the Magnetic Fields
"You You You You You," the 6ths
"The Book of Love," Olivia Rodrigo

Michelle Zauner on Stephin Merritt

There's something about the tone of his lyrics, a meta quality. Hyper-self-aware, but also simultaneously sincere. He has a sense of humor about it. On "I Don't Want to Get Over You," he sounds self-aware of how maudlin and melodramatic his tone is, but there's a realness to it. There's this sick joy in being really miserable, leaning into the misery that

accompanies loss. He exaggerates things and incorporates details that feel both like a commentary on how human beings can be willfully self-destructive *and* how there's something romantic and funny about that. "Smoke clove cigarettes" and "read Camus" — in high school, that's what you were doing.

He has a real knack for finding details that you wouldn't think of being in a love song — that take you out of it for a moment and remind you who is at the helm. "Strange Powers" is so great lyrically. Only Stephin Merritt would write a line like "On a Ferris wheel, looking out on Coney Island / Under more stars than there are prostitutes in Thailand." I wonder if there's this balance of, like, if you take *out* that line, maybe he gets a little uncomfortable with how sweet and romantic that song is?

He's an ill-fated romantic. Such a New York writer, too — it feels like one of his major themes is New York, and also queer culture, romance, gothic longing, indulging in misery. In the documentary about him, he talks about going to gay bars during the daytime and writing his songs on a napkin. That's so romantic. — *Michelle Zauner is a musician and writer. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

The first true hit for Aventura, the Dominican American bachata group — boy band, if you will — was called "Obsesión," a gingerly paced 2002 ballad about desperate longing, the feverish flirtations of a panting young man. It appeared on the group's second album, "We Broke the Rules" — a declaration of war on the strictures of bachata.
Read More

Five Essential Songs

"Obsesión," Aventura, featuring Judy Santos
"Un Beso," Aventura
"Ella y Yo," Aventura, featuring Don Omar
"Propuesta Indecente," Romeo Santos
"Odio," Romeo Santos, featuring Drake

Prince Royce on Romeo Santos

My earliest encounter with Romeo songs was probably with Aventura albums. A lot of those songs had great melodies, catchy choruses with romanticism, yet cool musical rhythms within bachata. "Hermanita" talks about a protective brother who makes sure his sister doesn't get hurt. When I started hearing this type of writing, I realized that not every song had to be about falling in love or breaking up; they could be about social problems, or telling a story in third person.

Romeo really tries to push himself. His songs are not written in a traditional way. He doesn't just do verse, prechorus and chorus. He has constant changes in melodies, changes in chord progression or the key of the song. He adds a random bridge or outro in places you wouldn't traditionally go. He always pushes lyrics to have some sort of different storytelling, and even words that just aren't common vocabulary. For Romeo, there is always a new and different way to write a story. — *Prince Royce is a singer from the Bronx. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

CAROLE

To stratify the 400-song catalog of Carole King, let alone choose her shiniest song, is an exercise in foolishness. It's impossible, yet there is that pull for one tune to be the fullest, most heartbreaking, most illustrative of her totality. And the finest song of King's career may just be "Way Over Yonder." It has been described as expressing a desire for peace and homecoming, but is more truly the soundtrack to a home-going — one of the most rhapsodic descriptions of heaven's terrain in the history of American pop. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"One Fine Day," the Chiffons
"Up on the Roof," the Drifters
"Way Over Yonder"
"So Far Away"
"(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," Aretha Franklin

Brittany Howard on Carole King

"So Far Away." It's been around for as long as I've had ears. My grandma had that record; I feel like *everybody* had that record. King is famous for her first lines — as a songwriter, you're looking at that first line to really sink its teeth in, so you get people listening. "So far away / Doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore?" Even as a little girl, it was so simple to understand. As a touring musician, it's so relatable: You're so far away from your friends and your family and your animals and your garden. Some nights it just creeps in, and you're reminded what's out there for you, and what you left behind. The melody has always stuck with me. It's kind of this melancholic melody. It sits in this weird, unique place. It's matter-of-fact, but it's also kind of sad, but also: *Isn't it nice to have someone you love*?

One thing I'm always striving to do as a writer is just to say things as simply as possible. That's where the magic dust lies. There are certain things King comes back to over and over again — like love, which we all experience; nature, which we all experience; seasons; colors. That's just the human condition, right? That's what we're working with. As a vocalist, she's not showy. She's straight to the point. It's almost like hearing your friend, almost like you know her. "This is what I sound like. I'm not going for it. I'm just being honest." She doesn't have huge lines in her songs that are like, *Listen to this poetry*. Everyone understands what she's talking about. Her melodies are simple, but they feel as if they've always existed. You hear it and it's instantly recognizable — even when you're hearing the song for the first time. She's a magician at that. She's got to be one of the best to ever do it. — *Brittany Howard is a solo artist and a member of Alabama Shakes. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

OUTKAST

A world-warping career started with an assignment so undignified that it could have been sabotage: Write a Christmas song. The premise that Outkast — the duo André Benjamin (later André 3000) and Antwan Patton (Big Boi), then barely out of high school — landed on was simple enough. "Ain't no Christmas in the ghetto," as the producer Rico Wade put it. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Da Art of Storytellin' (Pt. 1)"
"Rosa Parks"
"SpottieOttieDopaliscious"
"B.O.B."
"Int'l Players Anthem (I Choose You)," UGK, featuring Outkast

Killer Mike on Outkast

"ATLiens" is one of my favorites. Big Boi wrote the hook: "Now throw your hands in the air / And wave 'em like you just don't care / And if you like fish and grits and all that pimp shit / Everybody let me hear you say 'Oh yeah-yer.'" That is so hip-hop and so Southern at the same time. That was just a perfect marriage of everything I loved about UGK and A Tribe Called Quest in one human being; I don't know if any other person or any M.C. could have put that together. Big Boi's verse: "Well it's the M-I, crooked letter, ain't no one better / And when I'm on the microphone you best to wear your sweater." And here's one of the coldest lines ever said: "'Cause I'm cooler than a polar bear's toenails." His patterns, his slick talk, his mixing of hip-hop-isms with the call and response, the Southernism of fish and grits, just amazing. And when Dré comes in, he's going to rap about, and to, girls. That's one of the masterful things he does: He gets the girls' attention. He doesn't talk about marriage, a perfect house, a perfect car — he talks about him and a woman creating a life together and raising a child. That's beautiful.

Outkast were spiritually determined to be themselves, and I thought that was absolutely amazing. So "ATLiens," when Big Boi played that for me, I realized: They're different, and I'm going to have to really sharpen my skills if I intend to be in this for real. Because these two guys that were just as regular as I was are now some of the most phenomenal artists I've ever heard. I've learned from Outkast: Stay as creative as possible. Don't stay the same. — *Killer Mike is a rapper from Atlanta. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

MARIAH CAREY

Pop, in the American sense, is democracy in melody, consensus in chorus. And Mariah Carey, having written or co-written 18 of her 19 No. 1 singles, stands at its summit, right up there with the Beatles (with 20 No. 1s), translating feeling into something lushly intimate and vast. **Read More**

Video Interview

Go to the full-length video

Five Essential Songs

"We Belong Together"
"#Beautiful," featuring Miguel
"Fantasy (Remix featuring O.D.B.)"
"Touch My Body"

"Whenever You Call"

Victoria Monét on Mariah Carey

"If you should return to me / We truly were meant to be." It's *such* a simple idea. But the way she frames it, inside the story of the song, makes it feel personal and empowering instead of clichéd. The way the chorus opens up, emotionally and melodically, when she sings "Spread your wings and prepare to fly" — it feels as if the music itself is taking flight. The metaphor of the butterfly runs through the song so gracefully; it's about growth, freedom and self-realization, but it's also about a type of love that isn't possessive. What makes Mariah so brilliant is that she can write something poetic without losing clarity.

Her songs often live in that space between vulnerability and strength. She writes melodies that move in unexpected ways but still feel natural to sing. As I became a songwriter, I started appreciating even more how intentional her work is: Every run, chord change and lyric feels like it's serving the story of the song. She mastered stacking harmonies and creating moments where the vocals almost become part of the production. And she's never afraid of using sophisticated language in pop music — words like "emancipation," "inevitably" and "rapture" still feel conversational.

Growing up, what resonated with me was how feminine and powerful her writing felt. She could be soft, romantic, vulnerable — but also confident and self-possessed. Mariah really showed so many of us that songwriting could be both technically masterful and emotionally fearless. — *Victoria Monét is a songwriter and singer. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

WILLIE NELSON

What kind of songwriter is Willie Nelson? He's a country tunesmith, of course, the crafter of some of the most beloved entries in the genre's golden songbook. He wrote Patsy Cline's signature song, "Crazy," sometime around 1959. According to legend, he wrote two more standards that same week: the barfly anthem "Night Life" and the sneaky "Funny How Time Slips Away," a breakup song that hides a switchblade in its cowboy boot. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Medley: Funny How Time Slips Away/Crazy/Night Life"
"Me and Paul"
"On the Road Again"
"Who'll Buy My Memories"
"We Don't Run"

Sheryl Crow on Willie Nelson

You dream, as a young songwriter, that you're gonna have songs that outlive you. Willie has a whole body of work that will outlive him.

The *living* that Willie has done has informed all of his word choices, all of his chords. He writes songs from the actual moment of experience; he was able to put music to his everyday thinking. I'm always struck by his inner monologue. He writes beautifully, but he always puts in things that make you go, *Oh, gosh, I say that every day.* It sounds so conversational. He builds in real-life dialogue, the kind of dialogue you hear yourself saying to whoever it is that you love or that you've disappointed.

How in the world did he write intricate chord changes — and what *sound* like beautifully simple melodies, yet they're like classic jazz lines — and then sing about, you know, how time's slipping away and we don't even realize it? It's, like, subliminal. Anyone who's ever had an emotion has experienced the loneliness of staring at your walls or your ceiling,

wondering: *What's next? How did I get here?* But the fact that he could sit down and write a song like "Hello Walls" is so novel, so Willie Nelson.

The only way you have the body of work that he has — or the body of work of the greatest painters or greatest writers — is because they were able to access something that was authentic to their experience. My dad always used to sing "Night Life." When you listen to that, you feel like you're hearing a guy who lives in late-night clubs, and he's a writer like Steinbeck. But then you go listen to Marvin Gaye's version, and it's Marvin Gaye's song. You listen to Elvis's version, and it's Elvis's song. He writes songs that people are able to literally make sound like their own.

As you get older, you start realizing: *I want to be great. How do you get to be great?* And a large part of being great is living and being unselfish. That's what Willie is. — *Sheryl Crow is a Grammy-winning musician. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

KENDRICK LAMAR

Kendrick Lamar's songs hunger to mean more than everybody else's. They're X-rays of his behavior and also yours. They're vivifications of Compton, Calif., his psychic epicenter. They do passion, sex, recrimination, uplift, letdown, guilt, pride, money's elemental contagion — with vulgarity, ruthlessness and heart. He's rapacious and voracious. The songs often have eyes bigger than their stomachs. But Lamar's velocity reflects his ambition. The rhymes hurtle out at double and triple time. The rapping matches the writing: pure spandex, sometimes with absurd leaps into anxiously higher vocal registers (try "FEEL." from "DAMN."). **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Rigamortus"
"Swimming Pools (Drank)"
"Hood Politics"
"Count Me Out"
"Euphoria"

George Clinton on Kendrick Lamar

I'll put it like this: He, along with Motown, Sly Stone, the Beatles — that kind of institution is going to last. There are a lot of slick writers out here nowadays with lyrics and things, but he writes with soul. He's a young kid, but when I met him, he sounded my age. He's like a psychiatrist on record — he talks about [expletive] that most people are afraid to talk about. He's at that point where he can move the conversation. Nobody will talk about these topics, and he talks about them so matter-of-factly that you don't even think, *You can't say that*.

Making it commercial is another thing. It's one thing to be hard-core gangster rapping so you can say things. But when you're talking about life in general and make it sound so hard, so cool — then watch the kids say, *No, he ain't all that*, then turn around the next year and change their minds? Kids today, they want their new artist; they don't want their older brother or sister's artist or their mother and father's. Kids don't like you after a few years. When you can go past that and have the next generation after that still talking about you, you're doing something.

That whole "To Pimp a Butterfly" album, it was like one song to me. It was like Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." And he's starting all over each time he puts an album out — he's like a brand-new kid. — *George Clinton is the leader of Parliament-Funkadelic. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

VALERIE

SIMPSON

To trace Valerie Simpson and Nickolas Ashford's influence is to map the genetic code of American popular songwriting. Take the lyrics and lilt of a song like "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" (1967), just one of the duo's dozens of hits: "Ain't no valley low / Ain't no river wide enough, baby / If you need me / Call me / No matter where you are / No matter how far." Their language — marked by rich, tactile detail and a colloquial urgency — has quietly shaped how generations of songwriters articulate devotion. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Ain't No Mountain High Enough," Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell
"Solid," Ashford & Simpson
"I'm Every Woman," Chaka Khan
"Is It Still Good to Ya," Ashford & Simpson
"California Soul," Marlena Shaw

Berry Gordy on Valerie Simpson

I remember when Nick and Val came to one of our legendary quality-control meetings. They had a new song that we had to vote on, and they were up against a couple of the heavyweights. They were nervous. We played it, and all I could say was, "We're not going to vote on this one — we're just going to send it out." It was that good. The song was "You're All I Need to Get By," a hit for Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell and, later, Aretha Franklin.

They were so good with words — the way they wove the lyrics, the phrases and the imagery in their songs. "I've got your picture hanging on the wall / But it can't see or come to me when I call your name." Classic! "Reach out and touch / Somebody's hand / Make this world a better place / If you can." Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson did just that. — *Berry Gordy is the founder of the Motown record label. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

BOB DYLAN

If you were to claim — as many have, and many more undoubtedly will — that Bob Dylan is the greatest songwriter of them all, a question arises: Which Bob Dylan? Is it the Greenwich Village greenhorn, wrangling folk song tropes and visionary protest poetry into generational anthems? Or the rock 'n' roll hero, armed with a Stratocaster and a sneer, howling, "*How does it feel?*" Is it the crooning back-to-the-lander of the Woodstock years, the raging minstrel of "Blood on the Tracks" or the born-again Dylan, handing down homilies from a crooked pulpit? Is it the 1980s Dylan, making peace with synthesizers and chorus-effect pedals, or the Dylan of the 21st century, a trickster in his twilight years, scavenging the archives of the American unconscious to mash-up the Titanic disaster and the Kennedy assassination, "Moby-Dick" and "A Nightmare on Elm Street"? **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Like a Rolling Stone"
"Tangled Up in Blue"
"Isis"

"Every Grain of Sand"
"Nettie Moore"

Patti Smith on Bob Dylan

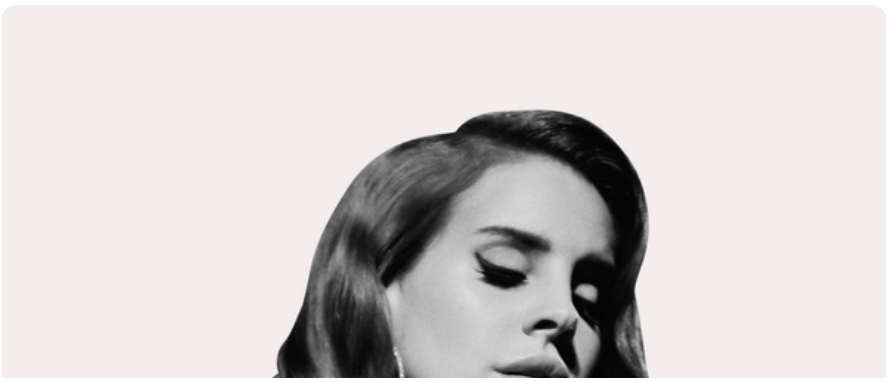
I first heard "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" when I was extremely young. The whole atmosphere of that time was very complicated for a young person. He played Town Hall in Philadelphia. I remember this song because I didn't know it, he hadn't recorded it yet. He did it slower; it seemed very mournful, a little dirge-like. What I remember most was the line "I got nothing, Ma, to live up to," which made me very sad. But the line that made me feel *understood,* and that I have held onto my whole life, was "If my thought-dreams could be seen, they'd probably put my head in a guillotine." A person like me, who had many conflicting thoughts about everything, a lot that I kept to myself: I felt like he understood.

"Bringing It All Back Home" came out in '65, and it was like a revelation because he declared on this album — just with his appearance, just with the cover — a kind of independence from everything. The recording of "It's Alright, Ma" is a little more upbeat, and it just magnified his restlessness, his self-assurance, even a very subtle arrogance. As he was singing "I got nothing, Ma, to live up to," I felt like he was giving *us* something to live up to — a whole atmosphere that spoke for how we were also feeling.

On one side, there's that desolation: "I got nothing, Ma, to live up to." But on the other side of the mirror, with "if my thought-dreams could be seen": the sort of unstoppable or infinite imagination, or infinite thoughts, or the evolution into creating something *yourself* to live up to. To me, it was just the other side of things — people seeing you as nothing, and your mind going all over the universe.

That song is filled with lines that people have quoted. President Carter quoted that song. I've heard Dylan do the song in many different decades, and when that line comes up — "Even the president of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked" — during the Nixon administration, people got up and cheered. It's apropos to the times, constantly, because it's a little piece of truth. The president of the United States is not above the law; he must be transparent.

It speaks to the brilliance of the song that people have found words that they couldn't find for themselves, that he could supply people with the right words. He's done it over and over with many, many songs, and he's given us enough words for a lifetime, when we can't find our own. But it's not just the words; it's a certain freedom, a certain attitude. He gives us intent. Energy. A sense of youthful righteousness. — *Patti Smith is a musician and writer. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*



LANA DEL REY

Here in the second quarter of the 21st century, it is easy to feel crushed under the weight of history, as though every song worth singing has already been written. The diaphanous music of Lana Del Rey, though, never sounds bogged down by the anxiety of influence. Del Rey is deeply interested in received American mythology and mass popular culture ("Tell me I'm your national anthem," she cooed like Marilyn on her 2012 major-label debut; her 2019 masterpiece is titled, superbly, "Norman Fucking Rockwell!"), but in her songs the past feels light enough to float. There it goes, downstream in an atemporal swirl, our trickling national stream of consciousness: a ripped out page of Sylvia Plath, a half-forgotten Dennis Wilson record, a vintage Sublime T-shirt, a used vape cartridge and maybe — with her characteristic flair for self-mythology — a ticket stub from a Lana Del Rey concert. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Video Games"
"Cruel World"
"The Greatest"
"Hope Is a Dangerous Thing for a Woman Like Me to Have — but I Have It"

"A&W"

Meshell Ndegeocello on Lana Del Rey

I love pop radio. If you want to talk about Sun Ra and all that, I can do that too. But when I heard "Shades of Cool," I was just so drawn into the imagery and the feel of the song. "Ultraviolence" was like the soundtrack to my life for eight months. The first line of the album — I wrote a note to myself: "Share my body and my mind with you / That's all over now." That cuts to the core for me. I felt she was this old soul, an old soul that really spoke to me.

I think she's brilliant. I need another word for "master" — she was the *mistress* of the double entendre. She made audible cinema: It sounded like it felt, and it felt like it sounded. She has that thing where the melodies are just as compelling as the lyrics; they fit together in your mouth. She really spins a tale, yet there's satisfying distance as well, which makes it art. She has a cool writer's distance. She's like the Brill Building, or Carole King, or Lou Reed. It's a craft she is building. — *Meshell Ndegeocello is a singer-songwriter and bassist. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

The job of a pop topliner — the term of art for a behind-the-scenes songwriter sketching lyrics and melody over an instrumental track — is something like an assassin who specializes in disguise: Embody another, hit your mark and then disappear. Yet Terius Gesteelde-Diamant, better known as The-Dream (and formerly Terius Nash), has pulled it off so many times that the syllabic bounce, falsetto slides and repetitive vowel work that we associate with some of this century's defining pop stars — *ella-ella, ay, ay, ay* — are actually his. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"1+1," Beyoncé
"Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)," Beyoncé
"Umbrella," Rihanna, featuring Jay-Z
"Ride," Ciara, featuring Ludacris
"My Love," featuring Mariah Carey

Starrah on The-Dream

"Nikki" is a standout for me. The storytelling, the production, the melodies, cadences — it all feels really intentional. How conversational his writing is. Hearing him basically gave me the permission to write the way I actually speak as a person. It was hella poetic. Life is already poetic as it is. He makes good hit songs, but they are also relatable songs. It's really hard to be vulnerable and honest. He's vulnerable and honest in the music that he makes.

"Umbrella" for Rihanna: It's so glittery. It has real tension, structure, repetition and a universal concept — you can apply it to anything. And at the same time, you can still hear his signature all over it, even though it was like Rihanna owned it. You hear him in it. It's not something that's easy to do when you're writing for somebody else, to put a piece of yourself in it. You hear his cadences, his tone. It's a very glittery tone that catches your ear. He feels the space in between bars. He moves in between the production. To me, that gives it away that it's him.

"1+1" for Beyoncé: That one is so fire — "If I ain't got nothing, I got you / If I ain't got something, I don't give a damn, because I got it with you."

Everybody sounds like The-Dream, whether they know it or not. Everybody's inspired by him in this day and age, in this era of music. — *Starrah is a co-writer of multiple No. 1 singles. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

To understand the chameleonic, cosmopolitan gifts of the songwriting and production duo Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, look no further than the creative arc of their most prominent muse, Janet Jackson. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Nasty," Janet Jackson
"All for You," Janet Jackson
"Saturday Love," Cherrelle and Alexander O'Neal
"Can You Stand the Rain," New Edition
"On Bended Knee," Boyz II Men

Richard Russell on Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis

"Optimistic" has this sort of prayerlike quality to it; it's a gospel song. But it's obviously doing it in the context of modern music, R&B, with a great groove and a tough beat. There's an almost paradoxical tension between the lushness of the melody and the hardness of the drums, between something very raw and something very sophisticated. Optimism is something that people are struggling to feel at the moment, or that people have always struggled to feel. There has always been a need for songs like this. It's very difficult to motivate people in this way lyrically without a big cliché. A writer has to be quite free to be able to pull that off.

I don't think it was a big hit — and they've made tons and tons of really big hits. They've worked with a lot of huge stars; everyone knows how brilliant they are. They made these big hit songs that have tremendous depth, kind of Trojan-horsing musical depth into the pop landscape. But the star power of a lot of the people they work with is a big part of those records as well. Maybe one of the reasons "Optimistic" illustrates how much I love Jam and Lewis is that it's kind of a communal project; it's not really presenting a star. It feels like, maybe, a particularly personal record for them.

That Jam and Lewis thing: The drums are always amazing. Those first records we listened to all had 808 drums. "Change of Heart," Thelma Houston's "You Used to Hold Me So Tight," Cherelle and Alexander O'Neal, all 808-based. They were the forefront, the cutting edge. The intense musicality, the great songwriting, this really deep understanding of the 808 — that was the cutting-edge sound. But by the time you get to "Optimistic," it's more like a break beat. They changed their style a lot. They became known for a signature sound, and then they changed it and got *beyond* it, which is a very, very hard thing to do.

I'm a big fan of a lot of producers who are like sonic revolutionaries, people who've done things which have changed a lot of rules and made huge leaps — from, like, Lee (Scratch) Perry to Aphex Twin, these are the people I'm deeply interested in. Jam and Lewis have sort of been like that in the middle of pop music. Who else has made music,

in the full glare of the pop spotlight, that has been incredibly experimental and cutting edge and pushing everything forward? Prince. Sly Stone. The Beatles. It's a lineage that they're part of, 100 percent. They established something there that the Neptunes and Pharrell and Timbaland then did *their* version of — which was to change the sound of everything, but to do it in the mainstream. — *Richard Russell is a producer and the owner of XL Records. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

If Bad Bunny had been just a great reggaetonero, that would be quite something. If he were simply one of the most gifted and creative Spanish-language rappers working, that would be plenty. And if he were merely an experimentalist who could fit himself seamlessly into pop-punk or corridos tumbados, that would have been ample achievement, too. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Soy Peor"
"MIA," featuring Drake
"Yo Perreo Sola"
"Callaita," featuring Tainy
"Nuevayol"

Tainy on Bad Bunny

"Estamos Bien" is a special song for us. Hurricane Maria had already happened, and it was really tough on the island. And he kind of disappeared — nobody knew what he was up to. Where's the music, what's going on? Maybe it was him self-reflecting and analyzing what he wanted to do. To see somebody at his position — the next guy up, the hottest thing out there, you can just make bangers and have a good time — and your next track is something that is for the people of Puerto Rico at that moment? To feel like, you know, we can get through this? It just made me understand that there's something special there.

The dembow movement in Dominican Republic, it's upbeat; people can vibe to that. But to see him do his first one with "Tití Me Preguntó" was kind of mind-blowing. My mom is Dominican, and I have vivid memories of going to some of my aunts' or my uncles' houses, and every time, the question is: "How many girlfriends do you have?" For him to have that thing that connects to most of us as kids, hearing that in a dembow track — you weren't expecting to have a memory connection triggered, a concept throughout the song of that little question you always get asked at every birthday party. There are so many details that he keeps putting that make it feel human, even though he's this huge mega-artist.

"Debí Tirar Más Fotos." I'm getting to that point where you're older now, your parents are older, you start to lose people, that kind of thing. So it really struck a chord, that little

thought of "I should have taken more pictures." It was not just a cool track within the album. It became the *biggest* one. People really appreciated the thought. You see how people adapted it to their lives. You see that with huge rock bands, or ballads, or pop stars that create those iconic songs — I know that's going to be one of them. And to use a really cultural sound like bomba and plena from Puerto Rico, to have it be the main sound along with what he's singing, and have it be commercially the biggest thing — there's genius in that.

You get to know him and his life through his music. That moment in the song where he says, "Bernie tiene el nene" — his brother has the boy — and "Jan, la nena" — John, his best friend, has the girl. You get to see the important stuff in life. Our kids, our fathers. Family is the important part. It tells you about him, his life, his people, his surroundings — but also that mentality of a grown-up. — *Tainy is a producer and songwriter. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

One of the most powerful moments in the vast expanse of Bruce Springsteen's songwriting is actually an expertly deployed silence. It comes right in the middle of that tattered anthem "Born in the U.S.A.," which until then has established a predictable structure — a simple repeated chorus and four taut, punchy lines per verse. But then the down-and-out narrator mentions his brother who died in the siege at Khe Sanh: "Fightin' off them Viet Cong / They're still there, he's all gone." We expect the resolution of one more rhyme, but instead Springsteen leaves the space blank, like an empty chair set at the dinner table for someone who is never coming home. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"Rosalita (Come Out Tonight)"
"Born to Run"
"Nebraska"
"Born in the U.S.A."
"American Skin (41 Shots)"

Alynda Segarra on Bruce Springsteen

Often people don't try to write an anthem because it can be really embarrassing if you do it and it doesn't change the world. It involves a kind of a naïveté or innocence — you have to really believe that your song can make an impact, and that *is* kind of crazy. But that is what I've always been drawn to about Bruce. He is best when he's going for the stars. Then he lands it, and it *does* affect something. To believe in the power of song that much — to not be beaten by the world and think, Well, songs don't mean anything — he *still* believes that a song could impact the world and change the way it's functioning.

His choruses are so good that people try to co-opt them for [expletive] he doesn't even believe in, that go against the song. It's like Bob Marley — these songs become commodified, but they're so radical, and so heartbreaking, when you shield yourself from that commodification. When I hear "Born in the U.S.A.," I always get choked up. He's so masculine in this very archetypal way, but he's also very feminine when he's writing, because he becomes a vessel. He's not a Vietnam vet, but he's using his body as a vessel for this story of all these other people. I was raised by a Vietnam vet. It's heavy to hear somebody take on this story.

"Tramps, like us, baby, we were born to run" is a crazy lyric that can become the mantra of someone's life. If you're a teenager and you hear that song, you're just like, That's my arrow. "I got debts that no honest man can pay" — he uses that in "Atlantic City" and in "Johnny 99," and that's another lyric that is very Bruce, telling the story of somebody who has done something terrible, but he's trying to explain how somebody gets there. My favorite lyrics from him are either anthemic or leading you out of nothing, out of a stuck place.

It's so obvious that Bruce is rooted in folk music. It comes through in that belief: *I have a responsibility, and I'm part of a lineage. There are people who are not getting represented, or their stories are getting erased, and I need to help keep their stories alive. — Alynda*

Segarra founded the band Hurray for the Riff Raff. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.

SMOKEY ROBINSON

Motown Records redirected American pop away from its white-centric rock 'n' roll course, and Smokey Robinson was central to that era-defining mission. The Miracles, his group, were among the label's first signees — their 1960 hit "Shop Around" became Motown's first million-seller. The infectious chorus, "My mama told me / You better shop

around" (carefully, for a bride), lands like a tossed-off but absolute autobiographical truth. **Read More**

Five Essential Songs

"My Girl," the Temptations
"The Tracks of My Tears," Smokey Robinson & the Miracles
"The Tears of a Clown," Smokey Robinson & the Miracles
"Happy (Love Theme From 'Lady Sings the Blues')"
"Being With You"

Terre Roche on Smokey Robinson

Whenever somebody says to me, "What was your favorite song?" I always say "The Tracks of My Tears." I had an almost mystical experience with that song. It came out when I was 12 years old, and when it would come on the radio, I would just stop, wherever I was, and feel something that I couldn't really understand. I never heard the lyrics of songs — people are surprised to hear me say that even to this day, it's not the first thing I hear. It was the *feeling* of that record.

A lot of it is in the arrangement. I didn't know what instruments they were, but they were almost like these spirits. And then on top of that was this voice of his that could go places that other people's voices don't necessarily go.

I listened to some interviews that he did about his songwriting. In one he talks about growing up in a household where there were lots of different kinds of music being played. I feel almost as if he's got that bank of music inside himself: It all comes out when he goes to write. He did one interview just last year, and he referred to it as a blessing when a song comes — he was talking about how, you know, they just kind of show up. I could relate to that. I've had pretty much a lifetime of writing myself. When something is right, you know it — it's like, *there it is*. That's why I loved when he described it as a blessing. You're working with your craft, trying to explore and find something. And when it's there, you know it's there. He must have had that feeling when he did that record. — *Terre Roche is a founding member of the Roches. Interview by Jenn Pelly. Text has been edited and condensed.*

CAST YOUR VOTE

Who do you think are the greatest living American songwriters? Nominate up to 10 names here.

THE CRITICS

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Joe Coscarelli is a culture reporter for The Times. He is a co-host of "Popcast," a producer of the "Song of the Week" video series and the author of "Rap Capital: An Atlanta Story."

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Danyel Smith is a contributing writer for the magazine. She is the author of "Shine Bright: A Very Personal History of Black Women in Pop" and the creator and host of the podcast "Black Girl Songbook."

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NILE RODGERS

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Interviewed by: Jody Rosen
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Gaffer: Brian Sachson
Lighting PA: Joseph Del Valle
Archival: GG's Barnum Room: Bill Bernstein; Diana Ross: Richard Corkery/NY Daily News Archive, via Getty Images; Chic: Gus Stewart/Redferns, via Getty Images; Videos: YouTube

LUCINDA WILLIAMS

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Gaffer: Suzanne Carter
Archival: Videos: YouTube

JAY-Z

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Sound Mixer: Tessa Murphy
Gaffer: Michael Tellup
Archival: Jay-Z (1988): Timothy White; Jay-Z (2008): Michael Falco for The New York Times; Videos:

YouTube

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