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POP FLASH.



So much of our Covid-related discourse in 2020 centered on what was lost. But a precious few of us seized upon this very strange and sequestered year as an opportunity for acquiring some new part of ourselves. Was it a surprise that Taylor Swift was one of those people?

Her summer release [Folklore](#) was instantly contextualized as a quarantine project. Swift's second album of 2020, *Evermore*, was similarly presented by the singer-songwriter herself as extra run-off from an especially fruitful songwriting period. But anyone taking a wider view of her career could see albums like *Folklore* and *Evermore* on Swift's musical horizon, even before Covid. During the press cycle for her 2019 effort *Lover*, Swift was already expressing disdain for the pop machine, [likening it to *The Hunger Games*](#). That strain was also apparent on the album, in which some very good "small" Taylor Swift songs were larded with some very bad "big" would-be hits like "Me" and "I Forgot You Existed." More than ever, the gap between the songs in which Swift's heart seemed to be truly invested and the songs required for radio exposure and meme-friendly virality was incredibly stark. As our current reigning stadium rocker, Swift had made *Born In The U.S.A.*-style mega-smashes time and again. Now, it seemed, she yearned to make her *Nebraska*.

But would pop's chronic overachiever ever allow herself to make an album of strictly "small" and intimate songs? When the world shut down in 2020, the obligation to fill our stadiums and arenas with world-conquering jams suddenly became moot. And Swift — the canniest pop artist of the early 21st century — instantly recognized it. This was the perfect context for the commencement of her curse-word era, a chance to indulge in Dropboxed collaborations with admired artists who make indie records much cooler than hers. Ultimately, it was a pathway toward reimagining her career. And, like almost everything Taylor Swift does, it worked.

— Steven Hyden, *Uproxx Cultura Critic*, on [Taylor Swift's pivot away from arena pop](#).

NUMBER ONE STUNNERS



MARIAH CAREY

During most of the year, the No. 1 spot on the charts can belong to almost anyone! From BTS with their excellent K-Pop smashes, to whatever rap song is the biggest in the world at that moment, to Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion repping for female sexuality, 2020 has had it all. But during the Christmas season, there's only one person who deserves to perch on top of the chart like an angel on a tree, and that's Mariah Carey. This week, the diva's legendary holiday anthem "All I Want For Christmas Is You" made its way back up to No. 1. Even during a chaotic year full of surprising and unexpected twists and turns, nothing can keep Mariah down. Everything is as it should be.

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BUBBLING UNDER





KYLIE MINOGUE

Early last month, pop icon Kylie Minogue returned with her first new album in a few years, and *Disco* was a return to form for the Australian pop star. Though it took me a few weeks to properly get into the album, “Real Groove” has become one of my favorite pop songs of the year. It’s a sister song of Robyn’s classic “Dancing On My Own,” with Kylie assessing the woman who has replaced her on the floor, and though her former dancing partner has moved on, the real groove isn’t there. It’s a song tinged with sadness that manages to keep an upbeat outlook, because when your ex doesn’t have real chemistry with their new boo, that’s just another reason to dance.

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REMEMBER WHEN

'SPICE WORLD THE MOVIE'





Back in 1997, a very important movie was debuting late in the year. *Spice World The Movie*, which remains one of the most iconic films in the pop music cinematic canon, premiered at The Empire, Leicester Sq, London on this day 23 years ago. A quarter of a century later, the impact of the British girl group is still felt globally, and if we're lucky, the next generation of girl groups like Blackpink will consider giving us something similar very soon. Hey, a girl can dream, right?

REVISIT



LOVE LETTERS





KID CUDI

Though Taylor Swift might've taken over the cultural conversation when it comes to pop music this past week, there's no denying that the return of Kid Cudi with the final installment of his *Man On The Moon* trilogy was a huge moment, too. Even bigger? The fact that Cudi tapped indie darling Phoebe Bridgers to duet with him for a track on his new album, *The Chosen*. "Lovin' Me" is a self-love anthem that thoroughly reckons with the hell that lives inside, and chooses grace despite it all. Phoebe's signature silvery vocals sound stronger than ever inside Cudi's psychedelic universe, especially when the two are singing together. Blue sky is on the way. Listen below.

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