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## Taylor Swift's Melodic Thumbprint

Shortly after Calvin Harris released his song, “This Is What You Came For,” (April 29, 2016) *TMZ* published an article titled “Taylor Swift Secretly Wrote ‘This Is What You Came For’ and Calvin ‘Disrespected’ Her” (July 13, 2016). Music and celebrity sites like *Pitchfork* and *People* immediately ran with the story and sources such as *Time* and *USA Today* continued to cover the controversy well into October. According to *TMZ*, Swift wrote and recorded the song while dating Harris, but the couple decided against releasing it in order to prevent news of their collaboration as a couple from overshadowing the music. Swift used a pseudonym to retain publishing rights while Harris rerecorded the song with Rihanna. However, the day he released the song, Harris told Ryan Seacrest that he could not see himself collaborating with his girlfriend. Swift took offense. The relationship quickly disintegrated, but Swift allowed Harris to keep performing the song. “This Is What You Came For” debuted at number two on the UK singles chart, number nine on the US *Billboard* Hot 100, and, by January 2017, had been certified triple-platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America.

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*Baby, this is what you came for*

I swear I’ve heard that line before. I was sitting in my class on a history of American popular music when I first heard Calvin Harris and Rihanna’s new single.

*Lightning, strikes every time she moves* 🎧

I swear I’ve heard that line before, too. Not because I’ve heard those lyrics before, but I’ve heard that same melody. It’s a very simple three-note melody. Rihanna sings a particular pitch on “*bay*,” then descends a perfect fifth to sing “*be*.” She stays on that note, singing, “*this is what you came for*,” but descends a major second to sing *the last two words*. Then, she repeats the same melody for her second line. Descend a perfect fifth, and then descend a major second. The melody is not unconventional; those three notes comprise three of the five notes present in the pentatonic scale, the basis for most ethnic folk and African American music. But I swear I have heard that *specific* melody before.

Eight months before Harris and Rihanna debuted “This Is What You Came For,” Swift released the music video for her song “Wildest Dreams” (August 30, 2015). Shortly after, websites like *NPR* and *Jezebel* accused the music video of depicting a stereotypical, racist, and very white Africa. I became engulfed in the debates and spent an entire night watching and listening to “Wildest Dreams” in order to see for myself what Swift allegedly did wrong. The controversy died out after a couple of days, but that song stayed in the back of my mind for a year. About ten minutes after I heard Rihanna sing “*Baby, this is what you came for*,” I recalled the melody to “Wildest Dreams” that I had heard so many times before. Immediately after class, I opened my laptop.

*Let's get out of this town. Drive out of the city, away from the crowds*

I reheard the opening lines of “Wildest Dreams” through my headphones.

*I thought heaven can't help me now. Nothing lasts forever, but this is going to take me down* 🎧

Rihanna was singing this same melody in class just moments before. Taylor Swift had left her melodic thumbprint in the opening seconds of both songs.

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Call it a musical cliché or call it a musical thumbprint, musicians tend to rely on a set of stock conventions. Sometimes they share these conventions with each other. A video titled “The Lick” gained notoriety on YouTube by documenting multiple jazz musicians playing the same melodic fragment, allegedly stemming from Igor Stravinsky’s *Firebird Suite*. In a 2009 performance, the Australian comedy group “Axis of Awesome” performed a sketch where they showed how many popular songs rely upon the same four chords. In a *New Yorker* (September 30, 2015) article titled, “Blank Space: What Kind of Genius is Max Martin?,” John Seabrook writes about Max Martin, the relatively unknown producer responsible for twenty-one No. 1 *Billboard* hits. In a story very similar to Swift’s, Sandberg recalls how Martin wrote “Hit Me Baby (One More Time)” for the R&B group TLC. The group did not like it, so he pitched it around, and ultimately met with Britney Spears. Martin returned home, altered the song to fit Spears’s style, and helped propel the eighteen-year-old to stardom. Most recently, the publication *Quartz* uploaded a video (August 28, 2016) that demonstrated the omnipresence of a certain overused melodic interval, which they call the “millennial whoop.” Yet, occasionally artists invoke such conventions to help provide them with a distinguishable identity: Michael Jackson becomes synonymous with the moonwalk; James Brown with his vocal interjections; Celine Dion with her nasally vocal timbre; Taylor Swift with her melodic thumbprint. Descend a perfect fifth, and then descend a major second.

Admittedly, it is hard to identify Swift’s melodic thumbprint since it only appears in four of her songs: “This Is What You Came For,” “Wildest Dreams,” “Bad Blood,” 🎧 and “Shake It Off.” 🎧 Additionally, Swift sings all of these songs in different keys. Even if you can sing the descending fifth in “This Is What You Came For,” every other song requires you to begin singing on a different note. Furthermore, Swift hides her thumbprint underneath a number of extra notes and different rhythms. For instance, while descending a perfect fifth, Swift might incorporate a vocal run that bridges the distance between her first note and the note a fifth below.

However, if you transpose the songs to the same key as “This Is What You Came For,” strip the songs of some of their extra notes, and focus on the melodic skeleton, the similarities between Rihanna’s opening melody and these three songs become noticeable. 🎧 The opening to “Wildest Dreams” sounds the most similar, 🎧 but you also hear the melodic thumbprint arise in the chorus of “Bad Blood” (“cause baby we’ve got bad blood”), 🎧 and the verse of “Shake It Off” (“and that’s what people say [mhm]”). 🎧

Coincidentally, Max Martin produced all three of these tracks on Swift's album, *1989* (October 27, 2014), which according to Swift, was her most "sonically cohesive" album ever made. As the title suggests, many of the songs share a 1980s feel. For instance, co-writer Jack Antnoff used an eighties-era Yamaha DX7 synthesizer to compose the verse to "Out Of The Woods." Yet, behind Swift's nostalgic aesthetic lies her melodic thumbprint.

The success of *1989* helps Swift stand out from other popular musicians. The album won the Grammy for Album of the Year in 2016 and "Bad Blood" won the Grammy for Best Music Video. Her notoriety extends beyond this album, though. She helped introduce an entire generation to country music. She showed resolve and poise after being interrupted by Kanye West during the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards and after being criticized on Twitter for not attending the Women's March following the inauguration of President Trump. She has received eight additional Grammys, eight Academy of Country Music Awards, and appeared in *Time's* 100 most influential people list (2010 and 2015). However, I personally cannot listen to her without looking out for her melodic thumbprint. Descend a perfect fifth, and then descend a major second.