

Surviving 2020 with Spotify – Nonfiction

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The year 2020 was by no means a good time, but we don't need to go into the details of why.

When my freshmen year of college ended in lockdown, I turned to old habits. I turned to the comfort of the wise, the pages of classics that had lived through hundreds of years and still managed to have an impact. Books like *Little Women*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* revealed how people struggle all the time and come out stronger.

I turned to drawing again, exploring fantasy lands in my mind and characters with unique colored hair. I tried to write, seeing as I was always an English major, but nothing seemed to inspire.

That is, until I was introduced to a “new” old habit. The entire time I was building LEGOs, reading, or drawing, I was listening to music. I would let my Spotify run wild, hardly ever skipping a song unless it was something by Kanye. I explored artists that wrote about things I could relate to, within my bubble of experiences and emotions and beyond. My number one song on Apple Music that year was “Graveyard” by Halsey, in an album released at the very beginning of the year.

It's crazy when the thing you love the most is the detriment, let that sink in. You can think again when the hand you wanna hold is a weapon and you're nothin' but skin.

I stared out my window with the view of the church parking lot, pencil tilted in hand. I waited to see any sign of movement, someone walking their dog, a basketball rolling sadly away from a kid, even a leaf falling from a tree. It was still. Looking for inspiration in anything, I sketched the flowers decorating the candle I got for my 19th birthday, it smelled like the ocean rather than lavender or rose. The music echoed throughout my small bedroom, bouncing off the endless book piles spilling off the shelf, wrapping around my childhood stuffed animals that followed me through every move. We've lived in this house for almost a year, and all I wanted was to get out.

Like most, lockdown had caused extra levels of stress and anxiety. To put it simple, I was stir-crazy. Now, I'm not an extrovert by any means, but I do enjoy the occasional trip to the mall, or the bookstore, or the movies. I missed small interactions with people, even with people who once annoyed me like those who would stare at my wheelchair. Most of all, I think my brain missed variety. Coming out of senior year of high school and freshmen year of college, my brain was at its highest peak. And all of a sudden, it felt like it was plummeting and would crash and burn at any moment.

Mom would make me tea every night, to ease my muscles into the idea of sleep. But it wasn't my body that wanted to move, it never does. My *mind* was racing at night, I had night terrors that could only be eased if I was forced awake. I wasn't scared of what was outside the safety of my

home, we took all the necessary extreme precautions – disinfected the mail and let it sit, disinfected packaged food before it entered the house, crossed the street on walks to avoid contact. My mind was scared, though, I couldn't figure out how to ease the tensions within.

Vintage tee, brand new phone, high heels on cobble stone. When you are young, they assume you know nothing. Taylor Swift caused an uproar on that late July day, announcing her eighth album would drop at midnight. It ignited an excitement in me I hadn't felt in a while. Sure, music had been released that year, but most of it was in the earlier months so they lost their novelty by the second half of the summer. Besides, this album looked *new*. The cover, a black and white photo of Taylor wandering the woods, suggested a new concept for the typical pop star.

The next morning, I locked myself up in my room with my ocean candle, turned on the soft fairy lights strung at the ceiling, and played *folklore* for the first time. The first listen of a new album is always exciting to me, it's the only time the artist can fully take me by surprise. After that, I have already established an expectation of what's to come and the songs slowly lose their affect. But this album was different. I played it non-stop, as each new listen, each shuffle or song included in a playlist, created a new world for my brain to escape and wander in. The soft flow of the guitar paired with her gentle voice soothed the parts of me that had been tensed for the past few months.

The characters from her songs inspired my pencil – the love triangle between the fictitious Betty, James, and Augustine became a focus of my sketches. My inner theatre kid came back out, as I started performing along to the songs I could sing in key. At night, if my mind started wandering quicker than the tea could soothe, I would play the album and fall asleep to the lullaby. The new album had created a sense of purpose for my bored mind and reminded me of habits that I had lost over the years.

My Apple Music Replay says I listened to 122 albums in 2020, and that I listened to Halsey's *Manic* 403 times and Taylor Swift's *folklore* 277 times. These two artists helped me rediscover myself and explore new genres, letting me expand my world of music while being comforted with familiar voices. By branching out within the known, I felt safe to explore the new genres beyond their voices and stories.

My Spotify and Apple Music tend to have different vibes – Apple Music doesn't have ads, so I use them for playing full-length albums, while my Spotify does have ads, so I use them for playlists and casual listening. While the Halsey and Taylor Swift albums occupied my Apple Music, my Spotify let me explore new worlds of music through public playlists that often inspired my own.

While reading and investing myself in the literary “classics,” I didn't necessarily want to listen to pop music, or even lyrical songs at times. In one of the many scrolls on social media, I came across an aesthetic listed as “dark academia,” described with *tangled hair, handwritten notes, old*

libraries, lipstick-stained cups, dead flowers in empty wine bottles, stacks of books. This exploration felt like discovering a new land, a place where there wasn't lockdown, but instead people chose to stay in to read or write. While the songs in these playlists often had lyrics, they felt more like soft-spoken poetry that whispered secrets while I would read.

When I was younger, I should have known better. And I can't feel no remorse, and you don't feel nothing back. I had created the perfect reading set-up – I convinced Dad to build a fire, Mom just made me a cup of tea, the dog was snoring at the perfect rhythm and volume. I set my Spotify to shuffle my latest playlist discovery, and a song by The Lumineers popped up. I recognized their name, though I couldn't name a song by them. After the first round of the chorus, I realized it was that “Ophelia” song that was trending on TikTok. I let my book rest closed and took in the rest of the song. The song is off an album released in 2016, and somehow it had wandered its way onto one of my playlists here in 2020.

Just stop your crying, it's a sign of the times. Welcome to the final show, hope you're wearing your best clothes. After a while of reading, I tuned in while this song started. I didn't know a lot about Harry Styles, just that he was from One Direction and that they were on the British X Factor, coached by Simon Cowell. I liked Simon back when he was on *American Idol*, so I trusted his taste in singers. While I wasn't a big Directioner, I thought I'd give Harry a new chance with his independent album. All the girls in my high school liked it back when it came out, I was just a bit behind the trend.

Yesterday felt like my graduation, but now some of those kids have got their own.
Been a while since I took a vacation, it's been a while since I really let go. This, I didn't recognize at all. I let myself play a little game with it, not tapping the app to see who was singing. Instead, I let most of the song play while I attempted to categorize it in what I thought was my extensive knowledge of music. By the second round of the chorus, I gave in and looked at who was singing such a beautiful song titled "Smiling When I Die." Sasha Sloan. The name didn't ring a bell, so I went to socials. Her Instagram felt like any other twenty-something's, with spam photos of her dog, and the occasional announcement of a new song release. The good news? She was dropping her first album in just a couple months, even in the middle of lockdown. Guess I'd have that to look forward to.

New artists, whether or not they had released anything recently, are always exciting discoveries for me. But if 2020 taught me anything else, it was to not be afraid to do what makes you happy, even if that means reverting to some *really* old habits and joy.

You wake up, it's raining and it's Monday. Looks like one of those rough days.
Time's up, you're late again so get out the door. While some members of my generation were baking bread or bingeing *Tiger King* or attempting the latest TikTok dance, I was doing something a little more my speed. I stumbled upon a playlist that was quite literally filled with my childhood – a playlist consisting of 316 songs all from Disney Channel and Nickelodeon in the 2000s. Hitting shuffle

immediately filled my body with nostalgia and a strange sense of adrenaline, as I was teleported back to a time when singing along and dancing were requirements when watching the hits like *High School Musical*, *Camp Rock*, or any episode of *Hannah Montana*.

While I've always been passionate about books, art, and music, the act of rediscovering them exposed me to the love all over again. It reminded me to take things slowly, and to not be embarrassed by seemingly goofy or simple things, that sometimes those joys bring you to life.