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## How Taylor Swift's Eras Tour Surprise Songs Are Inspiring a Whole New Level of Fan Fervor

Swifties nationwide discuss how they're obsessively tracking the one unknown variable in the pop star's otherwise carefully choreographed tour

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**G**racie White didn't believe in manifestation until she saw Taylor Swift perform two of her favorite songs. In April, ahead of three Atlanta dates on the star's ongoing Eras Tour, White, a 23-year-old Swiftie, had posted several TikToks predicting which surprise songs Swift would tack onto her set list that night.

"I got one right for each night," she told *The Messenger*. "Like, that's creepy. When 'Coney Island' played, it felt like the best night of my life."

Her TikTok flooded with comments from incredulous fellow fans: "How did you do that?!" The next night, the same thing happened, and again on the third night.

"I kept getting notifications right as the songs were playing," White recalled. She said that when Swift began to perform "How You Get the Girl," a deep cut from 2014's *1989*, "I swear my brain just, like, lagged. I froze. As soon as it clicked in my head, I screamed at the top of my lungs."

To celebrate her Atlanta wins, White posted a TikTok, mostly joking, "taking requests" for surprise-song manifestations around the next tour stop in Nashville. The Swifties took her seriously. White dutifully shared videos manifesting two of the most-requested singles, "Teardrops on My Guitar" and "Fifteen," both of which ended up on Swift's Nashville set lists.

"Every time I say something, it ends up happening," she said. "I didn't used to, but I think I definitely believe in manifesting now."

White is far from alone in placing an almost spiritual emphasis on the surprise

songs. There's a language developing around Eras, and a series of cultural touch points recognized by the fan community and beyond: The time Taylor Swift swallowed a bug onstage; the time she yelled at a security guard during the chorus of "Bad Blood"; the fan who allegedly bottled and sold the rainwater that fell at Swift's Foxborough show. Swifties are beading and trading friendship bracelets, nodding to a line in "You're on Your Own, Kid." They scream "1, 2, 3, let's go, bitch" when she performs "Delicate." But nothing has gripped the fandom quite like the surprise songs.

## **Surprise, surprise**

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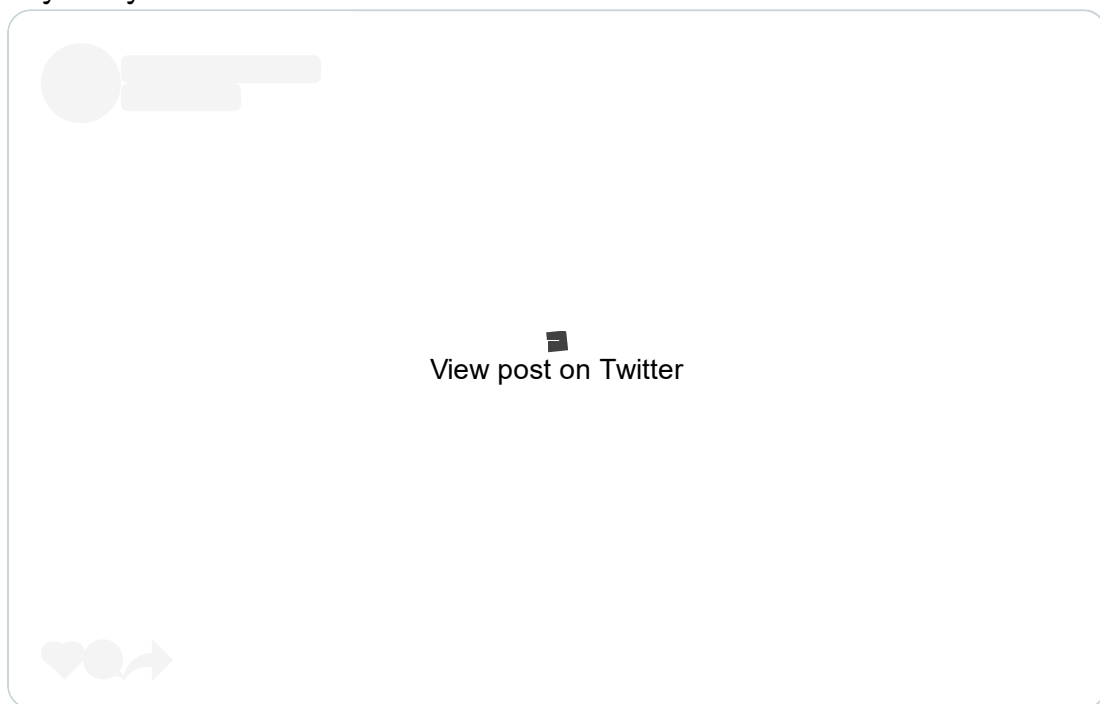
At the beginning of the Eras Tour, Taylor Swift made a modest announcement: Each night, in the midst of an otherwise carefully choreographed three-hour-plus set spanning her sizable discography, she would perform two bonus surprise songs, running through deep cuts, B sides and older singles that fans thought they might never hear live.

While the surprise songs, which come near the end of the set list, in between segments devoted to 1989 and the show's final era, 2022's *Midnights*, take up only about 10 minutes of running time, they're receiving a disproportionate amount of attention. Fans like White have been methodically tracking every surprise song in real time as it's revealed via social media by fellow show-going Swifties, calculating the odds of which selections they'll have a chance to hear at their hometown concerts. They've crafted detailed spreadsheets, pie charts and jumbo poster boards covered with Sharpie annotations. There are Instagram and Twitter accounts dedicated to surprise song updates, Reddit threads theorizing how Swift chooses songs, Spotify playlists edited weekly to feature tracks she hasn't played yet, and videos of fans praying for their dream songs. TikTok user @mrsworldwide.305dale appears in one post surrounded by candles with the

text, "manifesting Taylor performs 'Haunted' as the surprise song at my show." A user with the handle @tarzac2020 repeats this practice with crystals and a glass of wine; he's manifesting "Death by a Thousand Cuts" for Swift's upcoming Cincinnati tour stops.

"I've been made aware that there are actually people keeping track of the songs," Swift mused to tens of thousands of fans, seated at her piano in Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium on April 29. "It's almost like it's sports or something ... people are charting and betting. ... It's probably like 12 people who are doing this, but the fact that it's happening at all makes me really excited."

Her informants clearly underestimated the extent of fans' dedication to the sole mystery of the Eras tour.



### **'It's like a game'**

Taylor Swift has always been keen on the element of surprise. For her *1989* tour, she welcomed guest artists at each show whose identity wasn't announced in advance, from Mick Jagger to Wiz Khalifa. She's performed bonus songs in the past, but never with the sort of strict guidelines she's set for Eras: two acoustic surprises per show (one on guitar and one on piano), played around 10:30 p.m. local time, with every track she's ever recorded being fair game and no (well, very few) repeats. The entire Eras set has been well-documented across social media, so most Swifties know exactly what they're about to see when they get to their seats. But the surprise songs offer new mysteries every weekend and have extended the experience beyond the stadiums, feeding the star's thriving online fandom and helping to make this her biggest tour yet.

Kayla Waronker, a 27-year-old Swiftie living in Scottsdale, Arizona, has attended every Taylor Swift tour, counting 30 concerts total, including sets where she wasn't even the headlining act. She has attended nine Eras shows so far, and

speaking with The Messenger, she noted that the public response has been unlike anything she's seen in the 14 years she's been following Swift.

"It's been fun to follow," Waronker said of the surprise-songs plotline. "It's like a game. That's why so many people want to go to so many shows. They don't want to miss a song they've been dying to see their whole life."

The surprise songs also give fans a unique opportunity to see a more spontaneous side of the famously calculated artist. "She messes up sometimes, and that makes it even more exciting," Waronker continued.

The surprise-song countdown is a team effort, and it starts with the boots-on-the-ground Swifties. Each night of the tour, fans at the show will broadcast the reveal on Instagram Live. From there, fans at home spread the word in text threads, message boards and social-media posts. Waronker is involved in several Swiftie group chats and fan communities on Twitter, Instagram and Reddit, where she's made her best friends.

"We're definitely keeping track. We'll all be at dinner on our phones waiting for it. It's a huge part of our weekend," she said. "The fans at the show know how important it is to us too, so everybody is trying to help." Swifties post to "mark themselves as safe" on nights when Swift plays surprise songs that aren't on their wishlists.

"They say they're marked safe when they can be like, 'I love that song, but I didn't need to hear it,'" Waronker explained. "I personally could never be 'marked safe' because I love all of these songs so much."

### **Spreadsheets, song blankets and more**

A quick survey of posts on the Taylor Swift subreddit:

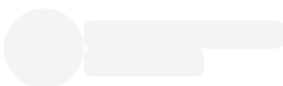
"What songs do you think Taylor WON'T sing as surprise songs on the Eras tour?"


"Surprise song of a show you didn't attend that you were most envious of?"

"How do you think the surprise songs are decided?"

"Why does everyone think Taylor messing up the lyrics to some surprise songs is planned?"

Fans contemplate Swift's song-choice process, dream up ideal two-song combos, and share wish lists. While reporting this story, I felt compelled to create my own; I had plans to travel for Swift's third night in Chicago, and I already knew I wanted to hear "Hits Different," a bonus track from the "Til Dawn Edition" of *Midnights*, and "The Very First Night," included on *Red (Taylor's Version)* — part of the star's popular ongoing series of re-recorded, generously expanded albums — issued in 2021.



  
[View post on Twitter](#)

Many are making "surprise song blankets," stitching rows for every surprise song using colors corresponding with each respective "era." (For example, red yarn represents singles from *Red*, while black signifies *Reputation* tracks.) Liz Frattallone, a 31-year-old Orlando-based Swiftie, started knitting her blanket after watching other fans share theirs on TikTok.

"It's less about eliminating songs and more about how her choices translate into a visual representation of what's happened on the tour," Frattallone said. "It's cool to see the different patterns. Like, she's done mostly songs from *Red* followed by *Fearless*, probably because they're her most recent re-recordings so she has a lot of tracks from the vault, which mathematically results in more songs to choose from." She also incorporates different stitches to denote nights when Swift brought out special guests.

Frattallone dedicates about 10 or 12 hours per week to streaming the concerts, tracking the surprise songs in a spreadsheet, knitting the blanket and posting about it on TikTok. "Watching the livestreams every night is like being in a community," she said. "This is not something I thought I'd ever do: spend my weekends doing this. But now, it's the thing I look forward to when I'm at work on a Friday, going home to watch the livestream and work on my blanket and think about which songs she might perform."

  
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For every surprise-song blanket, there are countless surprise-song spreadsheets circulating on social media. Julia Preston, or @Bowtotoecrafts, posts on TikTok every weekend with live updates to her color-coded Eras Google Sheet. In one tab, she records the city and date, the surprise songs and their albums, whether they were played on piano or guitar and any additional notes. In another, she categorizes every Taylor Swift track by album and highlights the song titles when Swift plays them. She sets reminders on her phone around 10 p.m. local time, based on the time zone of each evening's show, watches the livestream and tracks the data into her spreadsheet.

"Most of the time I don't even need a reminder, because I know when she's gonna play," Preston said. "I have a whole system now." Recently, fans have been asking her to note the color of Swift's dress, guest appearances, mess-ups and intro speeches. There are usually at least 100 Swifties lurking in the spreadsheet, waiting for her updates each weekend.

Preston is part of a wider Swiftie spreadsheet movement. Sydney Roberts, 25, has the star's entire discography entered into a spreadsheet, divided by album with the standard Eras set-list songs highlighted in green. Every week, Roberts adds red highlights to surprise songs.

"It's like a solidarity thing, since not everyone can be at every show. I've turned it into a guessing game with my friends. We have a whole points system. It's like men with sports," she laughed. "It's fun to look at the odds and see what she might play. Some of my friends and I will stop what we're doing at parties to tune into the livestream." (When I mentioned I was at the third Chicago show, she immediately knew which surprise songs I heard.)

Meanwhile, before the tour, Gracie White wrote down every Taylor Swift song on a large sheet of paper and affixed it to her bedroom door. She returns to the sheet after each tour stop to cross out surprise songs and note which cities were lucky enough to hear them. She sets aside time to watch Eras sets every weekend, plus time during the week to research hints about upcoming tour stops. "It's a good amount of energy," she said. "The surprise songs are hanging over my head constantly."

White monitors social media to find clues, like which celebrities or friends of Swift are in each city. Keith Urban attended a Philadelphia show, so the Swifties surmised she'd play "That's When," a track from the *Taylor's Version* revamp of 2008's *Fearless* that featured the New Zealand-born country star. (She didn't.) When Swift's collaborator and The National band member Aaron Dessner came out in Tampa, White said she and the fandom "knew [they] were gonna lose some big ones."

## 'She's turned her whole tour into this water-cooler phenomenon'

Swifties are familiar with various kinds of mental math, from cracking codes in her album liner notes to spotting easter eggs in her music videos. Kaitlyn Tiffany, author of last year's *Everything I Need I Get from You: How Fangirls Created the Internet as We Know It* (and, full disclosure, a friend of this writer) isn't surprised by this behavior — and doubts that Swift is either. "Doing a tour at age 33, where the theme is 'We're reflecting on everything I've accomplished thus far,' and introducing the possibility that she could play any song from her body of work that's like hundreds of songs, I'm guessing she knew fans would start spreadsheeting and doing algorithmic math to figure out which songs are next," Tiffany said. "Her fandom strategizes on her behalf." (Back in 2019, Swift told *Entertainment Weekly* that she's "trained" her fans to look out for these kinds of clues and cryptic messages.)

Missy Perez, a 30-year-old Swiftie from Philadelphia, posts weekly TikToks predicting which songs Swift will play in each upcoming city. Perez analyzes potentially relevant lyrics; she correctly matched "The Lakes" to Chicago, while "Welcome to New York" was a gimme for her New Jersey show. Other connections are more tenuous; she incorrectly guessed "Innocent" for Chicago since the song is supposedly about Chicago native Kanye West. She tried "Daylight" for Foxborough, because the song is based on Ethel and Bobby Kennedy, the latter of whom was born 37 minutes away from Massachusetts' Gillette Stadium. (That one was also a miss.)

Perez provides a disclaimer at the beginning of her videos: She's only gotten seven out of 24 guesses right, so viewers shouldn't take her word as gospel. Still, the Swifties continue to demand more predictions. "I wasn't going to do any of them outside of Philly, but a bunch of people were asking for it," she said. "It's become a speculative thing ... I like the conspiracy theories."

Tiffany said that, for Swift, cultivating this air of mystery only adds to the tour's allure. "A lot of modern social media-based fandom is numerology and close reading. You get the vibe that all of these people have been told to pay attention to themes in literature and now they apply it to pop stars," Tiffany said. "What's unique to Taylor Swift fandom is that she explicitly encourages and rewards it, and recognizes that creating these elaborate puzzles for fans is helping them collaboratively build her lore. By doing a different secret surprise song at every show, she's creating that suspense. She's turned her whole tour into this water-cooler phenomenon."

Jordyn Kruse, 22, runs several Taylor Swift fan accounts, including a Tumblr called "Parks and *Reputation*." She's been to eight Eras shows and is just now getting her voice back after shout-singing all night at New Jersey's MetLife Stadium.

"TikTok has taken hold of this tour in a way that hasn't been seen in our specific community. It's been more exciting to keep up because almost anything is possible," Kruse said. "But people are demanding a lot of her in this 10-minute span where she performs the two songs. I've seen videos of people upset about their show if they didn't get a surprise song that they wanted, as if she hasn't been onstage for a full three hours and 15 minutes performing 40 other songs."

Gracie White agreed that for some people, the whole show hinges on those 10 minutes: "They're only going for the surprise songs," she said, "and just for bragging rights. It's become like a contest."

### **'How could she play one of my favorite songs without me?'**

On a whim, White and a friend decided to drive to Nashville, one week after seeing Swift in Atlanta and one night after her sister's wedding, hoping to score day-of tickets. They arrived at their hotel, dropped their bags and spent the entire afternoon refreshing ticket sites to no avail. "We threw our stuff down and immediately opened Ticketmaster. We didn't even change our clothes." That evening, holed up in the hotel room, she found out that Swift played one of her dream songs: "Mine," the opening track from 2010's *Speak Now*.

"It was one of the most devastating feelings in the world. I felt a blow to my chest," White said. "The worst was being right across the street. You could see the stadium from our window. How could she play one of my favorite songs without me? I didn't cry, but I wanted to."

I don't consider myself a Swiftie, but I *did* fly from Brooklyn to Chicago to see Taylor Swift. And when she strummed the opening chords of her first surprise song, the live debut of "Hits Different," I *did* shriek with joy. At that moment, I thought of White and felt sorry for her. If Swift had saved my song for a different night, I might've been on the verge of tears too.

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TAYLOR SWIFT

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