

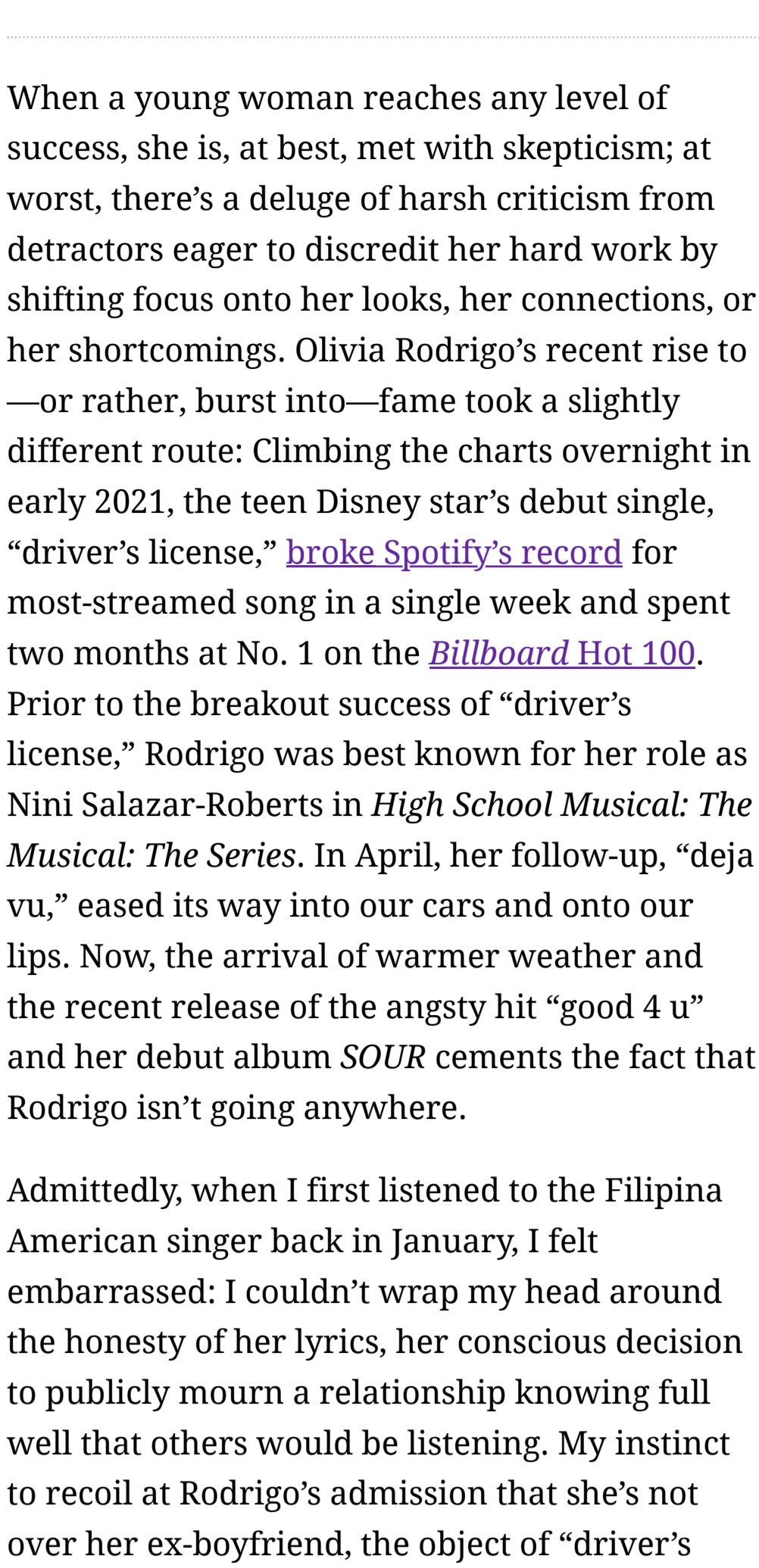
CULTURE MUSIC POP TEENS

License to Feel

“SOUR” Highlights the Unique Wisdom of Teen Girls

by [Rodlyn-mae Banting](#)

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Olivia Rodrigo on the cover of *SOOR* (Photo credit: Geffen Records)

When a young woman reaches any level of success, she is, at best, met with skepticism; at worst, there’s a deluge of harsh criticism from detractors eager to discredit her hard work by shifting focus onto her looks, her connections, or her shortcomings. Olivia Rodrigo’s recent rise to—or rather, burst into—fame took a slightly different route: Climbing the charts overnight in early 2021, the teen Disney star’s debut single, “driver’s license,” [broke Spotify’s record](#) for most-streamed song in a single week and spent two months at No. 1 on the [Billboard Hot 100](#). Prior to the breakout success of “driver’s license,” Rodrigo was best known for her role as Nini Salazar-Roberts in *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*. In April, her follow-up, “deja vu,” eased its way into our cars and onto our lips. Now, the arrival of warmer weather and the recent release of the angsty hit “good 4 u” and her debut album *SOOR* cements the fact that Rodrigo isn’t going anywhere.

Admittedly, when I first listened to the Filipina American singer back in January, I felt embarrassed: I couldn’t wrap my head around the honesty of her lyrics, her conscious decision to publicly mourn a relationship knowing full well that others would be listening. My instinct to recoil at Rodrigo’s admission that she’s not over her ex-boyfriend, the object of “driver’s license,” is a learned response to teen girlhood; it is a reflection of how society treats teenage girls and their emotions as silly, superfluous, and not to be taken seriously. Too many of us still understand girlhood as a phase to be tolerated, rather than a bottomless basin of emotional wealth and unique wisdom. And the scrutiny of young women songwriters is especially intense when their music revolves around the needlessly gendered subjects of love and heartbreak. Taylor Swift, whom Rodrigo cites as [one of her biggest musical inspirations](#) and even credits in “1 step forward, 3 steps back,” is no stranger to this. Also known for her confessional, autobiographical songwriting, Swift has spent the entirety of her career swimming against a heavy current of [sexist criticism](#) that targeted the queen of pop for the very thing that makes her art irresistible. For more than a decade, Swift has found herself in a catch-22: The more of herself she reveals to the world, the more she is scrutinized by the general public for oversharing.

Currently seated at the top of [streaming charts globally](#) and scoring [the biggest album debut of 2021 so far](#), Rodrigo’s *SOOR* fleshes out the story of one particular heartbreak, each track walking us through her relationship insecurities (“enough for you”) and regrets (“1 step forward, 3 steps back”), all while serving up a healthy dose of spite (“traitor”). Listeners might pity her if it weren’t for the fact that we, too, have likely all felt this way at least once in our lives—the difference is that most of us would be terrified to broadcast it to the entire world. In “deja vu” and “good 4 u” alike, Rodrigo’s grudge against her ex is out on full display, whether backed up by twinkly synth or electric guitar. She makes little effort to wrap her words in the mild-mannered niceties expected of teen girls. Striking the perfect balance between legibility and specificity, Rodrigo makes it clear that she will do everything—even if it involves dropping the occasional f-bomb—to get her point across, Disney’s family-friendly sensibilities be damned.

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Rather than scoff at her strong emotions and youthful perspective, fans are devouring her music like candy. Dubbed the “[new Avril](#)” on Twitter and by *SNL* as [a newborn “superstar,”](#) Rodrigo’s music feels like a sort of cure for our current agonies, as well as our unhealed wounds of the past. The gravity with which Rodrigo treats her heartbreak manifests as a sort of justice, granting us permission to tend to our own heartache just as carefully and lovingly. In an interview with Philippine pop culture magazine [Wonder Mag](#), the Disney star explains that the album is an exploration of “all the sadness, anger, jealousy and insecurity” she experienced as a 17-year-old. What makes Rodrigo’s music that much more intriguing is that it doesn’t try to be anything it is not. The mundanities she refers to in her lyrics—not being able to legally drink, finally passing her driver’s test, and the fantasies versus reality of being a teenager—forgo any gimmick to make her seem more mature or older than she actually is.

While this runs the risk of alienating potential listeners, her honesty does just the opposite: Instead, *SOOR* allows us to tap back into the fatalistic mentality of youth, when every little thing felt like the end of the world. But we are gentle with Rodrigo’s dramatics, perhaps in an attempt to be gentle with our past selves. Awash with nostalgia, I can’t help but wish I was 17 again—to once again be young enough to think that I could claim ownership over an icon like Billy Joel or that any one love can be fully replaced by another. By zeroing in on experiences that have been buried so deep in our adult psyches—but not so deep that one spin on a jukebox won’t send grown men into an emotional spiral over a game of pool, as posited by this recent [SNL skit](#)—Rodrigo argues for the importance of what we once thought of as mere rites of passage. There is a wisdom to both these melodic confessionals and the way she speaks about them in retrospect during interviews; she knows that these feelings, too, shall pass, but understands that their ephemerality is no reason not to feel them in their entirety, to build a house out of them and crawl into its safe corners.

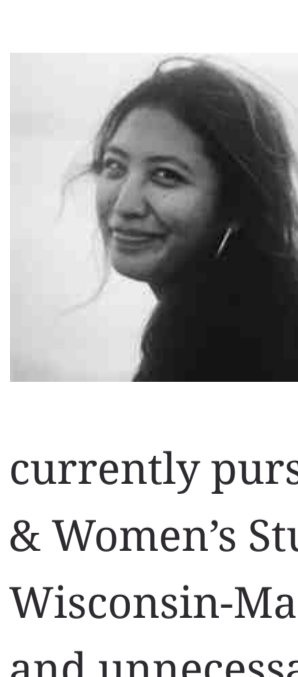
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The [grind of capitalism](#), the façade of social media, and a culture of [toxic positivity](#) have all forced us to hide from our younger selves, which incidentally often reflect our truest selves. Hinting at the evils of comparison and laying out her insecurities in the opening track “brutal,” Rodrigo sings about the psychological impact of having to live up to others’ expectations, crafting performance after performance just to fit a script. In many ways, Rodrigo’s practice of sitting intently with her messy emotions—whether on her bathroom floor or in her car—seems like a metaphor for the recent seasons of quarantine. The ways that the COVID-19 pandemic slowed our worlds down has left cracks in our social armor, demanding that we confront our inner turmoil in ways we never did in the brisk daily tempos of our pre-pandemic lives. Rodrigo’s music, as a result, seems like a field guide of how we each might truly reconnect with our inner selves, the ones that were previously drowned out by all of the outside noise.

Rather than feigning being okay—or worse, repressing her emotions into oblivion—Rodrigo makes something beautiful out of her pain. In her artistry lies a lesson: When faced with the seemingly insurmountable, go within. When you feel as though you’ve hit bottom, dig deeper. *SOOR* ends on a slightly different note than the rest of the album, with “hope ur ok” centering the stories of two of Rodrigo’s childhood friends whose early lives were marked by abuse and bigotry. Taking a step back from her own narrative of loss, Rodrigo urges us toward a truth that many of us turn away from as we grow older: The stories of our younger days matter, and when we nurture them with care and intention, we transform into more whole versions of ourselves. Rather than giving power to everything that she is not, Rodrigo offers us the mismatched, sharp-edged pieces of her bitterness, grief, and growing pains on the off chance that they’re a salve for our own broken parts.

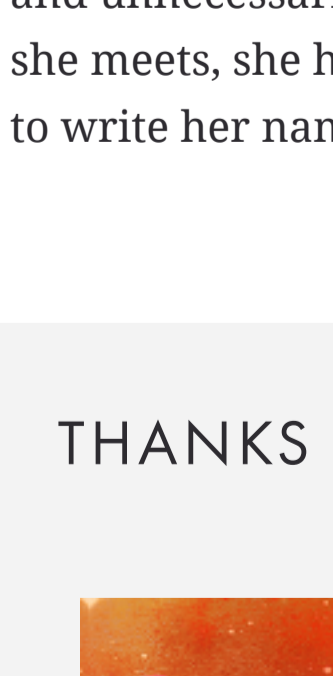
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by DeAsia Paige

April 29, 2021

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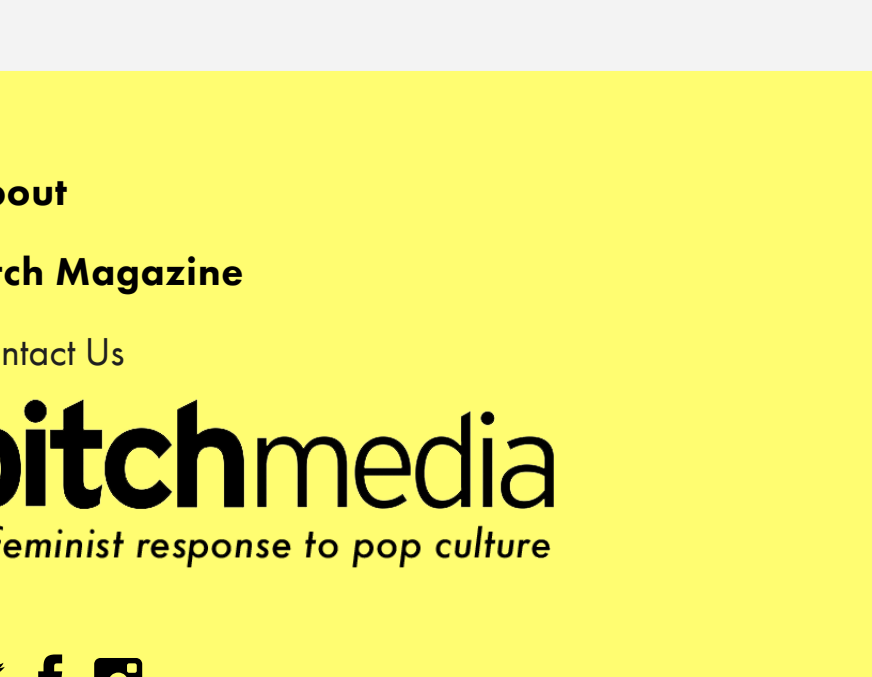


BY RODLYN-MAE BANTING

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Rodlyn-mae Banting is a Filipina-American poet, essayist, and educator currently pursuing a master’s degree in Gender & Women’s Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A lover of cats, astrology, and unnecessarily bearing her soul to everyone she meets, she hopes to one day be cool enough to write her name exclusively in the lower case.

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