

OFF THE CHARTS

In 2021, most college students are not strangers to **unconventionality**. But in an industry where pushing the envelope is the standard, how do musical artists continue to **break barriers**? From launching a **singing career** through TikTok to making Black queer masculinity **mainstream**, these artists have shown us what it means to **take risks**.

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KANYE WEST

Predicting Ye's next career move is like trying to figure out what tomorrow's weather in Miami will be. And aside from spontaneity, West is known for spectacle.

Listening parties for his latest album, "DONDA," named in honor of his late mother, drew the attention of millions of fans—some in the Mercedes-Benz stadium audiences and some livestream viewers. That performance included all kinds of crazy displays. West lit himself on fire, emerged from a recreation of his childhood home, brought out his ex-wife Kim Kardashian in wedding dress and invited two artists fresh off of abuse allegations and homophobic comments onstage. Not to mention that He reportedly paid millions of dollars to stay

in a small room resembling a jail cell in the bottom of the stadium while writing the album—all part of his creative process.

"DONDA" is perhaps West's answer to crossing his own boundaries. Over the past 17 years, Kanye has done everything from launching a sneaker line to marrying a Kardashian to running for President. But Ye's spectacles didn't end there; in fact, it seems like they're just getting started.

OLIVIA RODRIGO

Olivia Rodrigo's fanbase ranges from melodramatic teenagers to millennials and everything in between. The "High School Musical: The Musical: The Series" star has made nostalgia her brand, with music videos featuring Y2K memorabilia and parodies of

90s/00s classic teen movies.

Earlier this fall, Rodrigo made headlines for giving Taylor Swift and Hayley Williams songwriting credits on some of her biggest hits, giving up millions in royalties. "[Artists] learn from each other and take inspiration from each other," said Julia Barger, a UM senior and campus representative for '1824, a subset of Universal Records. "So many people write songs for each other and other people will perform it, and so it's a very cool thing what Olivia Rodrigo did."

The path from Disney star to musician is certainly well-paved (hi, Miley), but Olivia swapped the bubblegum pop for edgy tracks and three MTV Music Video Awards. Good 4 her.

TAYLOR SWIFT

After a heated battle and media frenzy regarding the rights of her first six masters, Swift decided to re-record her entire catalogue in protest. She announced she would do so in 2019, and in April 2021, "Fearless (Taylor's Version)" dropped. The re-recording of "Fearless," which was her second LP from 2008, included new but slightly different songs from the original album plus unreleased songs from "the vault."

Swifties went crazy. But so did the rest of us who were sent back in time to our elementary-school selves when we heard songs like "Love Story" and "You Belong With Me" again. A re-recording of "Red," her third studio album, is set to arrive in November 2021.

"Well, I do sleep well at night knowing that I'm right," she told Vanity Fair in 2020, "and knowing that in 10 years it will have been a good thing that I spoke about artists' rights to their art, and that we bring up conversations like: 'Should record deals maybe be for a shorter term, or how are we really helping artists if we're not giving them the first right of refusal to purchase their work if they want to?'"

LIL NAS X

Lil Nas X is no stranger to shock factor. Earlier this year, his music video for

"MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)" sparked major controversy when Nas' slid into a depiction of Hell and gave Satan a lap dance.

Following the video, he released a pair of sneakers called "Satan Shoes" which allegedly included a drop of human blood. Priced at \$1,018 a pop, 665 out of the 666 shoes sold out online before Nike secured a restraining order on the sales for copyright infringement.

This megastar, who rose to fame with his first hit "Old Town Road," never shies away from a creative challenge. In his latest music video, "Industry Baby," Lil Nas and Jack Harlow break out of a prison in "Shawshank Redemption" style between naked shower scenes. Featuring a predominantly Black cast, the video is also a commentary on the United States prison system.

ABIGAIL BARLOW

TikTok put musical talent Abigail Barlow in the Internet's spotlight. The 22-year-old singer/songwriter grew a loyal following on the app after posting a series of videos of herself crooning lyrics inspired by the steamy Netflix series "Bridgerton."

Barger, the UM senior, said that TikTok has reshaped the way artists and labels approach branding. The app is so interactive, she said, that "one of the first things we go to when figuring out how to market an artist is how can we make different TikToks that go

best with their songs."

"There's two ways you can do this," said Alessia Cusamano, a recent UM Alum and current A+R Assistant at Universal Music Publishing. "You're either TikTok famous and you release music and it goes viral because you already have a platform, or you blow up because of music," she said.

Barlow successfully blurred the line between TikToker and musician—something many content creators have been criticized for even attempting. Eight months after posting snippets of her original songs for the fictional "Bridgerton" musical, the concept album composed of full-length versions of the songs on her account, hit number one on the Apple Music pop album chart the day it was released. 🎧

▼ MUSICAL ARTISTS
from left to right: Kanye
West, Olivia Rodrigo,
Taylor Swift, Lil Nas X
and Abigail Barlow.

