REVIEW

Lend me your ears: The Deluxe Edition epidemic

// BY CIELO GAZARD

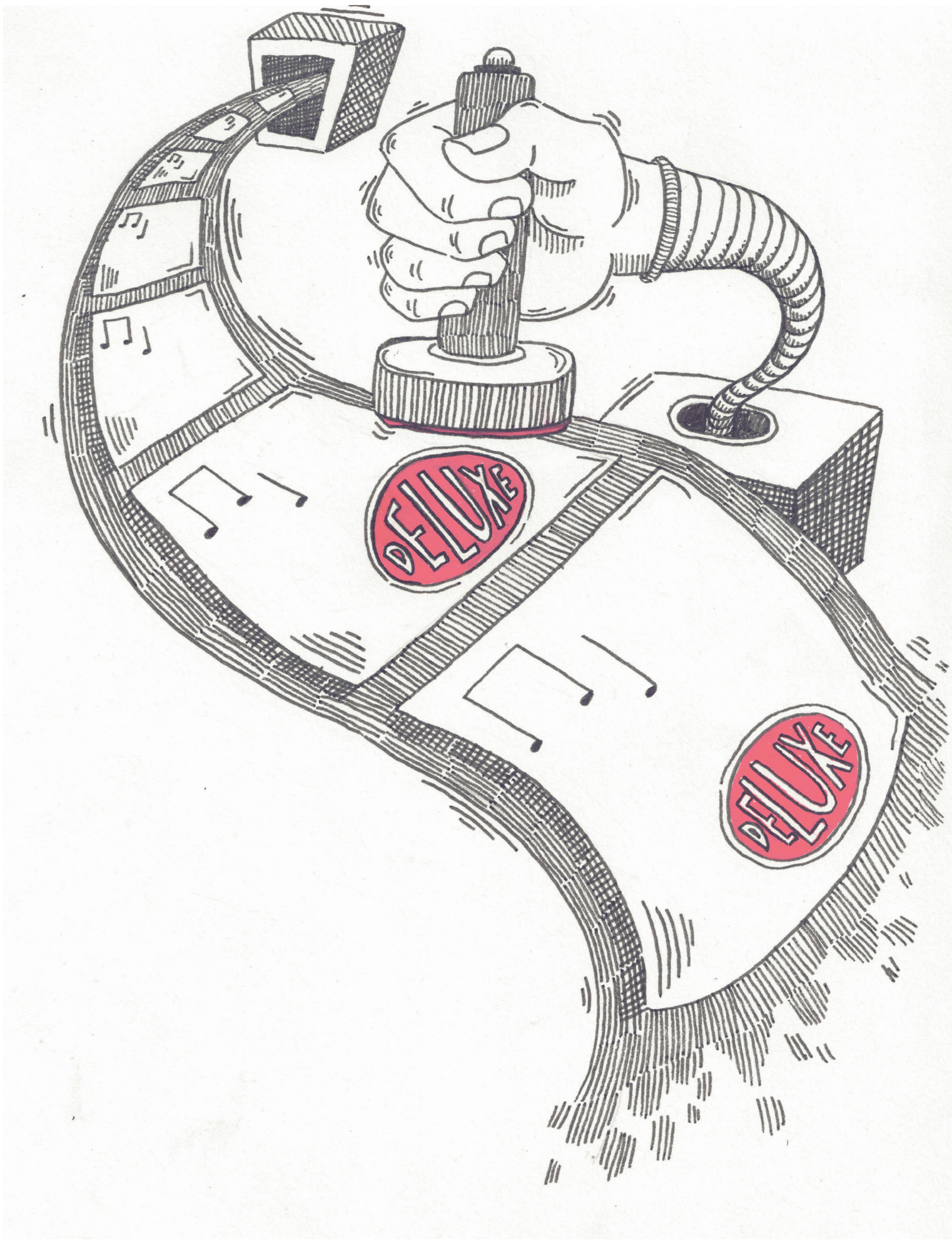


ILLUSTRATION BY BEA TRENTO

In the world of pop music, sometimes less is more. If only some of today's biggest names in music took this to heart.

Deluxe editions of newly-released albums have become inevitable in the world of pop music. If you can't seem to get enough of the latest hit record from your favorite pop singer, then you won't have to wait too long to hear everything else left off the cutting room floor! Releasing a handful of new songs a few years or a few months or less than a few weeks after an album's initial release date can be a way for artists to keep up the hype around their newest album — or make up for unsatisfactory sales.

The deluxe edition has lost its magic as a release for diehard fans who want to learn more about the creative process behind their favorite albums. Artists who have manipulated the power in the deluxe edition format recognize that a lot of their ride-or-die fans will listen to and purchase anything they release, even if it was better left shelved.

Deluxe editions of albums are not a creation of the streaming era. Special or limited releases of certain products are also not a strictly musical phenomenon — special "director's cut" editions of movies available on DVD or BluRay are widely sought by cinephiles. I don't personally have a problem with the concept of a deluxe edition of an album. I actually own a few special edition releases by some of my favorite bands. As is clear in the name, a deluxe edition includes more than a regular release. This usually consists of B-sides, alternate takes of songs, demo recordings and songs left off the official album. For music fans, these deluxe editions can be incredible releases to add to one's collection.

However, I think that a deluxe edition of an album should only be released for retrospective purposes, namely album anniversaries. On Friday, the Beatles are releasing a "special edition" of their 1965 classic "Rubber Soul." This deluxe edition will consist of four CDs — or five LPs for the vinyl collectors — that include the original mono mix of the album, a new stereo remix and a bunch of demos and early takes of the songs from the original record. For the completionist, it's an incredibly expansive — and expensive — release. But, it isn't like the Beatles, a band that has been broken up for nearly 60 years, is desperately trying to get to No. 1 on the charts with this special release.

This is my problem. The music stars of today are releasing special editions of their albums immediately to turn a bigger profit and get an inflated boost on the charts. The Billboard Charts have started to take notice of this trend. Starting in 2025, "Billboard" updated its rules so that only four digital direct-to-consumer exclusive versions "will be allowed for the life of an album." So artists can still release a deluxe version of an album, along with three other exclusive versions, which can count toward the sales of the original release, but nothing more. But there are still artists who release more than one version of an album with one or two changes from the original.

Perhaps no pop star is synonymous with the term "album variant" than Taylor Swift. Her last album, "The Life of a Showgirl," has 29 different variants, including the recently released "The Life of a Showgirl: The Encore" with four new songs, "The Life of a Showgirl: So Glamorous Cabaret Version" which includes the songwriting and voice memos of four tracks and "The Life of a Showgirl: Deluxe Dressing Room Rehearsal Version" which includes "Settled Down Acoustic" versions of two tracks.

The titles are a mouthful, the bonus four songs released last Friday are getting some of the worst reviews in Swift's entire career and the added voice memos of songs recorded on Swift's iPhone add nothing to an album that is already bloated and poorly written.

I was at a birthday party the day that "The Life of a Showgirl" was released. In my friend's common room, we sat in a circle and took turns reading the lyrics to some of the songs on "The Life of a Showgirl." None of us in the room were Swifties, and none of us were converted after I read the line "Did you girlboss too close to the sun?"

When the album got mixed to poor reviews, the billionaire popstar said to Apple Music's Zane Lowe,"The rule of show business is, if it's the first week of my album release and you are saying either my name or my album title, you're helping." The album debuted at No. 1 with around 3.4 million in pure album sales, an unprecedented figure helped a lot by Swifties buying those special editions in bulk. With the boost from the "Encore" tracks, the album could easily return to the No. 1 spot next week.

But what is the point of an encore when no one asks for it? While she openly likes and has normalized parasocial behavior from her fans over the years, it's clear from the lack of quality of her more recent songs and the lack of quality control on her records and rollouts that Swift doesn't actually think too highly of her fans.

I saw a video of a fan recording her reaction to the countdown on Swift's website revealing "The Life of a Showgirl: The Encore." The fan is hysterically screaming and crying "What is this??" but then proceeds to buy the product even though she hasn't a clue what it sounds like or what it even is! Are Swift's fans this gullible? They will lap up any amount of slop to keep the Swift train rolling, no questions asked.

In 2024, when Swift released six special editions of her album "The Tortured Poets Department," available for five hours in the UK, the move prevented Charli XCX from hitting No. 1 with "Brat." Her fans defended the move as show business. That's not show business — that's corporate greed.

More artists should allow for the dust to settle on their career before thinking of releasing deluxe editions of their albums. Not everything that was worked on during the sessions for an album needs to be released. Not everything recorded is gold, and that's a good thing! I'd rather an album have only ten tracks that are all stellar than an album with 30 tracks where 20 are skippable. It's unfortunate that the hypercapitalistic ways of the streaming era have forced artists' marketing teams to think up anything to try and keep up with other artists worth billions of dollars.

The quality of the music should matter more than the quantity. We call musicians "artists," not "businesspeople," for a reason. They should start acting like the former.

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

A SKINNY SCARF