

## Why is pop music still obsessed with madness?



Sweet but psycho: Ava Max

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By **Alim Kheraj**

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**F**or the past month, the UK Top 40 top spot has been occupied by a surprise hit called Sweet But Psycho. Sung by Ava Max, the song is an unapologetically generic piece of pop. But it boasts lyrics akin to clickbait, perjoratively using terms such as "psycho" and "crazy" to evoke a sentiment that seems starkly at odds with the recent progress the music industry has made in how mental health is discussed. On face value, Sweet But Psycho feeds into a long history of stigma over mental health in pop culture. How has it made it to Number One?

Perhaps sensing an inevitable online backlash, Max (who was born Amanda Ava Koci, and is 25), has gone on record to explain what the song actually means. "It's basically about a girl who's not afraid to show all of her sides and her dualities," she told Idolator. "She's a girl who's misunderstood in [a] relationship, and she's basically being told she's psycho and she's out of her mind when she's feeling it, but really she's an outspoken girl and she's speaking her mind."

While this interpretation might perhaps be lost to a casual listener hearing Sweet But Psycho on Radio 1, Max's song is not alone when it comes to a lack of nuance – even if we're now more sensitive about how we talk about mental illness. If anything, Max is simply the latest artist to participate in a rich tradition of pop's obsession with madness, following in the footsteps of stars from David Bowie to Bebe Rexha.

Part of music's marriage with mental instability, believes David Metzger, a music historian and professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, comes from our long-held curiosity about behaviour considered "outside the norm". Our fascination over and desire to understand abnormal behaviour has seen madness turned into spectacle for centuries, Metzger explains: "In the 19th Century there were these 'mad scenes' in Italian opera where you saw women disintegrate on stage while putting on a fabulous and dramatic show."

Pop lives and dies on its ability to evoke emotional responses, and Clifford Stumme, who runs YouTube channel [The Pop Song Professor](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFhmJZnna3LlznyBEooxTDQ) (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFhmJZnna3LlznyBEooxTDQ>), feels that madness allows for artists to be more expressive with their feelings. "Pop music doesn't focus on cognitive functions," he says. "It's more intuitive and emotional and it gives somebody an excuse to follow their instincts."

**Ava Max - Sweet but Psycho [Official Music Video]**





Nevertheless, mental health is facing a pop crossroads. Songs either flaunt madness, such as those put out by Ava Max, [Lana Del Rey](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/lana-del-rey-lust-life-review-pop-star-selfie-generation-is-real/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/lana-del-rey-lust-life-review-pop-star-selfie-generation-is-real/>), [Lady Gaga](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/lady-gaga/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/lady-gaga/>), or Bebe Rexha, or approach it with frank realism. Artists such as US hip-hop duo Twenty One Pilots, rapper Logic, RnB singer Kehlani and British newcomer Rina Sawayama have all released songs that talk candidly about mental health needing to rely on harmful stereotypes.

Yet it's perhaps too simple to assume that the latter avenue is morally superior to the other. While both Rexha and Max declined to comment for this piece, both have spoken about how their songs are attempts to subvert negative connotations about the word "crazy" or "psycho", especially when used to describe women. Rexha has been public about her own suffering with anxiety. Lana Del Rey, whose songs often refer to being crazy or mad (usually in a red party dress), told Billboard magazine in 2015 that she has undergone therapy to deal with panic attacks.

For rising London-based singer Girli, playing with such stereotypes makes for easier songwriting. "I've used the word 'crazy' in songs before, even though I would never use that word to describe my own or other people's struggles with mental health," she explains. "I totally understand the argument about them romanticising mental health issue. But, having written about my own mental health struggles, I know when I hear songs like [Sweet But Psycho], I think that's just an artist's way of expressing themselves."



David Bowie in 1973, with Twiggy CREDIT: JUSTIN DE VILLENEUVE

The balance is a tricky one to strike. "Irreverent humour can further stigmatise people deemed to be mentally ill," warns Nicola Spelman, a senior lecturer at the University of Salford and the author of the book *Popular Music and the Myths of Madness*. But those artists who "challenge common beliefs" can "even construct a very positive or heroic identity for their mad protagonist".

Take, for instance, [Elton John](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/elton-john/), Alice Cooper, [Lou Reed](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/music-obituaries/10408039/Lou-Reed.html) and [David Bowie](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/david-bowie/), who all played with the concept of madness in order to criticise the brutality of psychiatric establishments. These artists, Spelman explains, made their point with their music as well as their

lyrics. “In All The Madmen (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHAjV7npClc>), Bowie is singing about being lonely and being sent to 'mansions cold and grey' and so on,” she says. “When you get the chorus and he's singing about how he'd rather be with all the madmen, it moves from a minor key to a bright and anthemic major key as he's singing about how he's happy to be with the madmen because they're all the same as he is.”

What has shifted in recent decades is that women have started to own madness for themselves. While men defined the remits of madwomen in 19th-century opera, and male rock stars owned the trope in the Seventies, mental instability in today's pop landscape is almost exclusively executed by women. What's more, these female voices, Metzger notes, are transforming the notion of a madwoman into a “process of self-discovery and self-acceptance”.

Taking songs such as Bebe Rexha's I'm Gonna Show You Crazy – which features the lyric “Loco, maniac, sick bitch, psychopath, I'm gonna show you crazy” — and even Sweet But Psycho, they celebrate sitting beyond the norm. “The thing about this is that those artists are not 'mad', as we don't actually see any mad behaviour,” Metzger explains. “Their songs are actually about this departure from social conventions and that's what madness, in this case, boils down to: it's people saying, 'I'm a freak and here I am,' and we've had that acceptance of being a freak so much in popular culture these days.”

In her book, Spelman argues that, for a long time, "the role of the madwoman [was] too perilous a prospect for female musicians to embrace", while madness and masculinity have always enjoyed a more relaxed relationship: “In men it's linked more to deviancy and bad behaviour and bad behaviour is considered kind of cool,” she explains. “It's that idea of being a bit of a rebel.”

### Bebe Rexha - I'm Gonna Show You Crazy (Official Music Video)



Viewed from this perspective, Sweet But Psycho even becomes an unlikely feminist anthem – the song was written by Max alongside female songwriter Madison Love. Unlike the madwomen of 19th-century opera, Billie Holiday’s Crazy He Calls Me, Patsy Cline’s Crazy, Madonna’s Crazy For You or even Beyoncé’s Crazy In Love – all songs about madness being inspired by the whims of a man – female pop stars are now reclaiming the negative connotations around madness and womenhood. Or, as Metzger suggests, “protesting the expectations that have been placed upon them by flaunting that protest”.

What doesn’t seem to have changed, however, is that madness is something to gawp at. Music videos have only made this more pronounced, with Rihanna’s Disturbia or Rexha’s I’m A Mess taking the viewer into asylums, and Sweet But Psycho serving up Fatal Attraction and The Shining references. Yet, Metzger dismisses these as “concocted madness”, adding that it's all for show: “It's definitely something more for a video than real life.”

Dr Spelman agrees: “It's a pantomime; it's not making any serious comment for or against what it necessarily means to have mental health problems or be psychopathic. It's very superficial and it's pop, so it's meant to be.”

If you’re looking songs that accurately portray what it’s like to struggle with mental health, perhaps Sweet But Psycho – along with Del Rey’s Cruel World or Rexha’s oeuvre – might not be the best place to start. But they do say interesting things about the new freedoms female artists have in expressing themselves. What is certain is that audiences are still drawn to madness, whether as something to relate to or through sheer curiosity. For now, pop is still gonna show us crazy.

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