

Season 1 Episode 4:

“Billie Eilish and the Concept of the Musical Genius”

Matthew: [00:00:00] Hi listeners, welcome to *Everything But the Music*. We're a group of undergraduates and former undergraduates from the UCLA musicology program [here to] talk about, among other things, horror music, the sounds of [other] animals, modern opera, Billie Eilish conspiracy theories, protest anthems, and Disney nostalgia. Today, we'll be having a conversation with Karen about the genius of Billie Eilish. Let's bust a nut!

Karen: [00:00:22] Well, welcome to my podcast. I guess I'll just start by asking, does anybody have anything to say before I jump into it?

Matthew: [00:00:31] I'm gonna be upfront about my biases.

Karen: [00:00:34] Okay.

Matthew: [00:00:35] Which is to say that I support Billie Eilish as a person and as a woman, but I don't like her brother, and I don't support her as a musician.

Karen: [00:00:45] Do you want to elaborate on that?

Matthew: [00:00:47] No.

Karen: [00:00:48] Why?

Matthew: [00:00:50] Well, maybe I'll just, we'll elaborate on it during it. I just wanted to be like, upfront.

Liv: [00:00:54] I concur.

Karen: [00:00:55] Does anyone else have biases they want to address?

Liv: [00:00:59] Yes. I don't like her music. I'm sorry.

Karen: [00:01:02] That's fine. I honestly have never listened to it up until now. So I didn't really have an opinion prior to this.

Matthew: [00:01:10] Do we have like mega fans in here?

Karen: [00:01:13] Or strong opinions or anything?

Allison: [00:01:17] Me and my friend were talking about how, like, we really liked Billie Eilish before she got, like, super popular, and then now that she's super popular, it's just kind of like, eh, too much hype, you know? But I don't know that much about her, like, as a person, so I'm interested to see why you guys don't like her.

Matthew: [00:01:37] She's gonna listen to this and be like, "*What the hell?*" Just kidding, no one's ever going to listen to any of these.

Karen: [00:01:44] Okay, so I want to start with just like a brief background, the first bit, the myth of the genius, beginnings in classical music. So beginning with, it's in scare quotes, "classical music," it was split up into two separate things.

There was the genius composer and the virtuoso, meaning the performer, so we all know, or we all are aware of because we've taken the classes of the genius composer being Mozart, or I guess if you go all the way up until the Romantic era, you got Beethoven, you've got Vivaldi, all of those composers being geniuses, but they weren't performers. They were just the people who wrote the music.

And then you have the virtuoso, who I believe that when we studied it, it was focused mostly on singers. So I think when we talked about like Maria Callas, and stuff like that, I might be pulling names out of my butt, I could be wrong, correct me if I'm wrong, but moving into the 20th century...actually, you know, it might have started in the late 19th century. But really, in the 20th century, the two ideas of the genius composer and the virtuoso, began to merge, especially with popular music. And that's when we kind of got the idea of, I think, two different archetypes of the tortured genius, and a prodigy, which was oftentimes a young child being prolific in their talents.

So that's where I pulled in some quotes about the genius singer-songwriter in popular music with more modern 20th, 21st century. The first quote that I pulled was from, I'm probably butchering his name, but Tim Bouwhuis, who I believe is a religious studies student or he was getting his master's in that in a different country, not the US and it wasn't Canada either. It was a European country. And he was claiming that "it wasn't until the later half of the 20th century, in which the American counterculture has often been

mythologized to the extent that it has become difficult to distinguish the mythology being genius for actual history." And then he went on to argue that "Billie Eilish essentially adopted the pre-existing countercultural romanticist ideology, but adjusted and modified it in order to display contemporary socio political and religious sentiments." What do you guys think about the idea of a tortured genius? So tortured geniuses in the 20th century would be Syd Barrett, Brian Wilson, white men.

Liv: [00:04:38] Are you positing that Billie Eilish represents the tortured genius figure?

Karen: [00:04:42] I'm not, but Tim Bouwhuis does. He says, "In 'all [the good] girls go to hell,' Eilish's embodiment of Lucifer signifies a performance of expressive individualism in which the artist is tragic, and yet romantic hero of her own art." So that's the video.

Liv: [00:05:00] Yeah, right. Right. Right. So I was wondering, like, I mean, beyond that sort of momentary performative embodiment of that archetype, I was wondering if that is what you're talking about, or arguing for.

Karen: [00:05:14] Well, there's also the argument that she has Tourette's, so I don't know if...there's nobody that made the claim in any of the sources that I pulled from. But I think that there could possibly be the argument that perhaps she has certain struggles with...whatever. I don't know if Tourette's is a mental or neurological, not sure if it's psychological or neurological. But you could argue, to some extent that that would maybe contribute to the "tortured part." Neuro-developmental. Thank you.

Matthew: [00:05:53] Torrey, do you have any thoughts about the tortured genius myth?

Torrey: [00:05:58] Yes. Well, the reason I didn't answer it, because I was like, wait, what do I, I didn't know what the question was. That's my bad.

Karen: [00:06:06] Just thoughts on it. It doesn't have to be related to Billie Eilish. Just thoughts on myth making and the tortured genius.

Torrey: [00:06:12] Well, as I think everyone here knows, that was what my capstone pretty much was about, and as you mentioned, Brian Wilson. I think, like you said, Karen, it's something that comes up throughout history, and so when I was looking at Brian Wilson, it kind of, it's something that's

attributed to somebody. It's not like somebody is calling themselves a troubled genius or a genius. I mean, some people say that they're a genius, like Kanye West, but it also, it changes the work of the person and how people perceive it. It doesn't change the actual work, but how people perceive the work. So if someone is called a genius, or a troubled genius, you're going to look at what they create in a different way. And another, in another way, that the myth of the troubled genius also allows people to perceive that person in a certain way and lead to their own thoughts about that person. So like, *Oh, well, this person did drugs, so that's why they're like this. Or, oh, this mental disorder or these specific mental experiences, troubles and experiences of this person's experience, lead to this tortured genius.* And then the last thing I'll say is that, because we have heard about this through history, and it's very interesting with the whole prodigy and the whole genius thing that's like, *Oh, I can't do that.* And that helps create the myth. So I think people kind of are interested in that, and they try to find more people like that. And I think that might be why people are so interested in this with Billie Eilish, and I'm excited to hear about it being a woman. Because as you said, it's been a lot of dudes. So that was my long speech.

Matthew: [00:08:11] I would just add, so like, there's a really famous feminist art critic named Linda Nochlin, who wrote about, or who asked why there are no great artists who are women, and she points to the ways that genius is "cultivated" in ways that privilege men, right? So like, she points to really specific examples, and we can think of some probably just on our own, but like, she's looking more at art artists rather than musician artists, but like, for example, I think in, like, 17th or 18th century France, it was considered indecent for women to look at nude men. And so they weren't allowed to go to, they weren't allowed to practice, you know, like, there's like the, the room where the guy sits in the middle and he's naked, and then everyone practices drawing in the male form. So women weren't allowed to do that, because it was considered indecent. And so because of that, they weren't allowed to, like practice art in the same ways. And so they were barred from ever, you know, being recognized or becoming "geniuses," and there are a lot, that's just one example, but there are tons of these throughout history where geniuses kind of, as much as we like to think it's, like, something you're born with, even if you are born with it, it's something that's also cultivated socially and materially and in really real

ways. And then also like, gatekept, what's the, what's the past tense form of gatekeeping?

J.W.: [00:09:41] Was interesting 'cause the chapter we just talked about, in *Ugly Feelings*, the anxiety chapter is exactly that point. It's focusing on the kind of male, white male intellectual anxiety that is the hallmark of these, like, geniuses, right? Up until recently, I feel like it was a commonly accepted trait. It's like, *Oh, this, like, of course, they're like, troubled, because they're genius, right?* But then on the other hand, if you get historically, if you get like a female individual who's successful in a similar way, it's like, *Oh, they're like neurotic or insane*, like kind of stuff.

Karen: [00:10:19] So typically, this is just a generalization. I could definitely be proven wrong, but typically when it comes to the prodigy in popular music, or women being praised for their particular skills, it seems to have been young girls that have mature, developed vocal sounds. And I think Billie Eilish definitely has fallen into that. But starting in the 20th century, with like, Deanna Durbin, and Judy Garland, who were kind of considered little girl geniuses, or little girl prodigies, that became kind of a marketable stereotype, but it wasn't necessarily true. And then going into the 21st century, the same thing kind of happens with Lorde and then the New York Times, I think it was New York Times article, Coscarelli is the author on it, draws the parallels between Billie Eilish and other, you know, women who have been praised for their extremely notable strong voices. She says, I think it's a she, Coscarelli, she says, "Building on the past cut not just by Lorde, Lana Del Rey, and Halsey, but Brockhampton, Odd Future, and The Weeknd, Eilish as an artist as creative director building on her own layered universe for fans to obsess over through a unified flow of music, videos, social media and staging." And when I ask why, it kind of comes down to the voice is different for the age. You presume this is a 13 year old girl singing, but it sounds like an 18 or 19 or 20 year old and that is possibly fitting into the stereotype of Judy Garland and then Lorde, and so on. But that's kind of the female version of the genius.

Allison: [00:12:22] I noticed listening to "Ocean Eyes", like, in my opinion, she still sounded really, really young. But, like, she has like, the vocal technique of someone who would be, like, older I guess. And then as she's gotten older, even though she's still literally so young, which I didn't even realize her voice has developed, like even more. So yeah, I don't know, it

was just really interesting, like, listening to "Ocean Eyes" and then listening to her more recent music, like, being able to tell, like, how much younger she sounded, but at the same time, she does still sound like older than someone her age would, like, be able to sing.

J.W.: [00:13:06] It's an interesting use of the voice as kind of the marker for genius or technical proficiency or maturity in general. And I mean, for those of you who read Nina's recent book, she talks about that a lot. And one of the examples actually, I was thinking of this when you were talking about the, the, like, young girl prodigies. There's this, like, little girl on this, I think it was *Norway's Got Talent* or something like that. It was one of the talent shows. I think the country was Norway. And it was this little girl. I think she was like seven years old. She was like, behind the curtain or whatever and she was singing like a Billie Holiday song. I think it was "Gloomy Sunday", "Gloomy Sunday" isn't Billie Holiday's song, but it was her cover version of it. She was singing and she sounded just like Billie Holiday with, like, the same kind of, like, vocal fry and stuff like that. And then the curtain comes away and people are like, Oh my God, this seven year old, like, Norwegian girl. And, like, now she's, like, super famous because she can emulate like such a distinct [sound] . Professor Eidsheim makes a bunch of claims about it, about, like, identity and like knowing somebody, like, through their voice, like basically this girl's fame comes from like being able to conjure produce this very, very mature sounding voice, despite the fact that she's so young, which is really interesting.

Matthew: [00:14:32] If I may, one thing that springs up for me and it's something that I've been hearing the last few years that I, that, I don't know, I just I always come back to it is the idea that in a lot of ways we ask African American boys to grow up a lot faster than, than other children. By putting all the pressure of this of the conversations around police violence, like on them, like, *You need to know what to do when you're dealing with police*, rather than, you know, oh, like, the policemen, like, the actual adults need to know what to do. And so in a lot of ways, this kind of mirrors that with just a general kind of, like, sense that, oh, like, *You should be rewarded or praised for being a young girl*, and sounding like you're already a woman with kind of conversations around consent, like teenage girls can't give sexual consent for obvious and good reasons. But then like when we give them a lot of praise, like, *Oh, you sound so, oh, you sound so mature, you sound so old*. And in a lot of ways that kind of comes across as like an adultification kind of thing.

It's like, *Oh, you're supposed to sound like that*. And it's good that you sound like that, rather than letting 11, you know, 13 year old girls just sound and be like 13 year old girls in all of their immaturity and foolishness. And that's my main complaint about Billie Eilish, is like, she was not ready to be, she is not ready, but she definitely was not ready then to be a world famous pop star. And the fact that her family pushed her so hard into doing that, it feels like, and I guess I don't really actually know the circumstances, feels kind of predatory or kind of exploitative to me, for those reasons. What she's supposed to do? No, I don't want to. You know, it's like, but you have a gift you sound so, you know, this kind of thing.

Karen: [00:16:37] She's thought of as mature in more than just her vocal techniques and abilities. So, the chief executive of Interscope Records, I think this was this was a while ago, this might have been in 2015, John Janick said of Eilish that "her sense of style, how she thinks the way she talks, everything about her was just different. She had such a strong point of view, especially for being 14 years old". And then, I believe that her producer from Darkroom "envisioned her as a new breed of popstar and was unconcerned with competition from more traditional singers, like Selena Gomez and Camila Cabello." So that kind of ties into that. They just, they look at this 14 year old who should be enjoying her life, going to the beach, hanging out with her friends and they're like, *Look at how mature she is and how independent and adult she is, not just in her voice, but in how she thinks*.

Liv: [00:17:38] That's interesting. Because I think when you guys were talking about her mature voice, which I agree with and I do think it's interesting that we get maturity from this, like, very soft and very, like, fried and sort of, like, broken sounding voice that she puts on, but I was thinking that she doesn't read as mature, not I mean, not mature, that's, but like older than she is in any other way. Like to me, the way she dresses, is very young. Her whole style, the lyrics, even like the musical style that she works in, it does breed to me as created by someone her age, is that like at all a shared experience? But I, definitely, I mean, I agree about this particular sound of her voice that it sounds older.

Matthew: [00:18:30] Yeah, I mean to me, like, she is the cringy best possible manifestation of almost anything on the planet, which is, like, such a teenager thing to do, so yeah, I absolutely agree.

Allison: [00:18:44] I think something that might contribute to a view of her seeming more, like, mature than other people her age might be like, the content of her songs. I don't know. Her songs are very, they're so weird. And I think it's like, because she's in, like, the pop industry and not only singing like love songs like cringy love songs, that makes her seem kind of, like, above it all. I mean, it could be like, people see her as younger because she's not singing about love, but also like everyone's singing about love. So it's kind of like she's like past that. Yeah, I mean, that's that's what I think she could appear, like, she does seem to be very young, like in her personality, she's, she's definitely very young. But the content of her songs really is just like on a different level than other pop artists, in my opinion.

Karen: [00:19:38] So the Tim Bouwhuis article talks about how specifically with the way that she made the video, "**all [the good] girls go to hell**", she's conflating a lot of really complicated ideas, specifically, it's very clear that she's talking about climate change, because there's a hashtag on the YouTube video, #climatechange. But it's also got all these subtexts and layers of religion because she's supposedly embodying Lucifer, and maybe she's in hell. The beginning of the video is actually the end of a different music video, where she's being injected with God knows what and from those injections, her devil wings or her angel wings sprout from her and then she's dumped into what looks like the tar pits and emerges from the tar pits and the California hills are on fire. And so what he argues is that it's actually really, really complex and layered, and not something that a 17 year old would have, a regular 17 year old would have, you know, thought of I'm going to write a song and direct a music video about so that was part of his argument as to why she fit this "genius" narrative. She did write it with her brother. So, Matt, if you have any hard hitting opinions.

Matthew: [00:21:09] I mean, okay, so this, so I read that New York Times article, who was that one by?

Karen: [00:21:14] Coscarelli.

Matthew: [00:21:19] No, Mastroianni, wait, no, that's a different one.

Karen: [00:21:22] That's a different one. Yeah.

Matthew: [00:21:25] Oh, yeah, Coscarelli. And I, the whole time I was reading it, I was like, it's so weird to describe someone's talent like, *Oh, what are you talented at? It's like, Oh, I'm a 21st century music business unicorn who*

embodies all the creative and commercial promise of online youth culture. And that is a quote from the article. Like, *Yeah, that's like, that's what I'm good at.* It's like, what are you talking about? That just sounds so absolutely ridiculous to me to describe her as, like, having this vision feels so strange. I just like to do what? Like to create, like aesthetic experiences for people? Like, I watched this video and I'm like, Oh, that was cool. Now I think, what am I supposed to take away from that? I don't mean it as like it's shallow or empty or, like not good or something or not, doesn't take like talent, some level of like intelligence. It's just kind of like, what exactly is it that we're saying like she is so good at? I don't get it. Like, I mean, I like I think she's talented and this is kind of my defense of hers. She's super smart and clearly really musically gifted in a lot of ways, but it feels like that's kind of emptied out of her and turned into like, a commodity. She is no longer a person. She is Billie Eilish, the pop star which you are supposed to consume, and, like, she is so good at being consumable, and creating an image that is consumable. It's like, how is that a talent? That's so strange to me. That's just maybe the part I don't get, like, how can you be good at that? Why is that good? because it saves like record executives money, because then they don't have to put all this effort into, like, hiring directors. Yeah, it's like, Oh, we can just hire this teenage girl and make her do all the work. It's very weird.

J.W.: [00:23:11] To kind of piggyback off that, can someone explain, or Karen, I guess, since you put in the piece about her holding her hand to her face and how that makes her genius?

Karen: [00:23:23] Let's talk about that because it when I found that article, basically what I did was, I was Googling keywords "Billie Eilish" and "genius" and this one comes up and the video wouldn't load, it wasn't linked to the article anymore, so I had to go look for it. So I kind of had to do a little bit of, like, backtracking and the article who is written I'm assuming just by a blogger goes, "She's a genius," literally for her red carpet. It's a one second slo-mo video, which I think originally got posted on TikTok or Instagram of her just putting her hand on her face. This goes back into I think what Torrey was saying earlier about how people get labeled as a genius and then their perception by their consumers and by the rest of the world suddenly changes and maybe their art and maybe their music doesn't change, but because they're labeled, so this person labeled her as a genius for doing this.

Liv: [00:24:23] To me, this goes back to the content of her songs as well. 'Cause I listened to *WHEN WE [ALL] FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?* before this, and I'm looking at the lyrics right now, and like, yeah, it's, I mean, there are things to read into. Absolutely. But I don't necessarily see, like, this grand genius vision in the content that the people are talking about. She's writing like a young person. She's writing about, and there's nothing wrong with that, she's writing about boys and she's writing about being a bad girl and things like, awesome. I'm interested in why this makes her genius.

Matthew: [00:25:10] And to add to that, she grew up in Los Angeles, like, she's probably pretty wealthy. Like I don't want to make any assumptions here.

Karen: [00:25:16] Her parents are both actors.

Matthew: [00:25:18] Yeah, so like to go back to that Linda Nochlin article, like, she had the resources, which doesn't take anything away from her, like, you know, and that's kind of what Linda Nochlin was saying, it's like Picasso was still like one of the best artists that's ever lived. But like, you have to acknowledge the fact that it's more than just his inherent skill. And so it's more than just her being born some kind of superhuman thing to

Karen: [00:25:46] Well, I think it would be interesting if we did talk about why is that slow motion video, is there any "genius characteristics" in that in her, maybe the outfit that she chose to wear? It was at the Grammys, she won a bunch of Grammys that night. Is there anything genius about it? Or is it the fact that the narrative somehow got started and then it just snowballed?

Allison: [00:26:12] Honestly, I laughed so much at that video because I didn't understand why. But I mean, I guess you could make the argument that, like, going back to what Matt was saying about being consumable. Like, she knew that, like, people would just eat that up, like, if she just, like, put her hand up to her face. So yeah, I guess it's just, like, she's really presenting herself as just, like, a social media like, god, or whatever, you know, like, she has such a social media personality and that it's so good for, like, this time, so yeah, but I mean, like, in a general sense, like there's nothing really all that genius about it.

J.W.: [00:26:54] Yeah like, what else are music or celebrity news blogs gonna write about? I think it's just that it's just like, it's just vapid content all the time. And the easier it is to find somebody who actually does something, maybe the slightest bit interesting. It's just like, *Okay, let's just blow that as much out of proportion as we can just to get clicks.* And then it's just like, oh, the other websites are like, *Oh, look, they're calling her genius because she does this. Let's see if we can get some more views off that.* It's just like a commodity thing, like Matt was saying.

Torrey: [00:27:28] Just to add to that, I was thinking a long time, like, how could this make her a genius. And the two things that I thought of is like, slow motion, like when we see it in movies or something, it usually displays, like, skill or something. Like I immediately think of *The Matrix*. Like when he's dodging the bullets. It's like, *Oh my gosh, he's so cool, because he dodges bullets and slow mo,* or like people walking slow. It shows some sort of special skill. And then the other thought, this is a stretch, but because her hair is green, I feel like something about hair and green is like, genius. Like, I don't know, like a scientist. Okay, that was probably more of a stretch. I don't know. And I saw green. I was like, Oh, no, it brings attention to the head and, like, the brain is in the head. Okay, I'm going to stop.

Matthew: [00:28:21] I want everyone listening to this to know that we're all on mute, but we're all laughing.

Torrey: [00:28:28] Thank you.

Matthew: [00:28:29] I like that. I like the thought process.

Karen: [00:28:31] I've seen so many people with the top of their head dyed green. Before quarantine happened, there was a Starbucks near my house. And one of the baristas just had the exact same hair. And everybody would always, you know, when they would go through the line, they would comment on it, and she would go, "I had it before Billie Eilish." I heard her say that probably five times because I would be at that Starbucks doing work or whatever. So I just thought that would be a fun anecdote. But I like, I like Torrey's thinking of how, like, it does kind of give you, like, the mad scientist type of thought.

Torrey: [00:29:10] Thank you, Karen.

Karen: [00:29:12] What did, I don't know if anybody watched it, but what did you guys think about her *SNL* performance of "bad guy" and then I also included her talking about how she made it and why she made it.

Matthew: [00:29:25] I feel like I watched the *SNL* performance a long time ago that I don't remember it. Can you remind us?

Karen: [00:29:33] She's in a box. And the way the camera is, the box is turning. So she's always on the ground of the box, but the camera turns with it. So, it looks like she's walking on the wall and then the ceiling and then the other wall and then back on the ground. And she based it off of Fred Astaire. So she says, she says she came up with the idea. Well, I mean, obviously Fred Astaire came up with the idea, but she says that, you know, she, she used to watch the old movies and everything and she was like, *I want to do something like that*. And so she came up with everything and directed the whole process. And then she was like, *I was in a boot because I broke my ankle or whatever*. So she had to do it in a boot. I mean, I think that merits more genius than than the hand to the face.

Liv: [00:30:18] That's cute.

Karen: [00:30:20] Did you guys like it? Was it fun to watch?

J.W.: [00:30:23] It was pretty cool. I just looked at it, and it reminded me of that scene in *Inception* where they do the same exact thing.

Torrey: [00:30:30] Or in *High School Musical*, when Troy...never mind.

J.W.: [00:30:35] No I'm curious about the high- what, what did they do in *High School Musical*?

Torrey: [00:30:40] I don't know, I feel like Alexa would have a great explanation but it's right during a very intense scene and Troy's like, What do I do, and then he just starts like walking on the walls, on the lockers and stuff and it's like, wow, this is really, I feel that you feel very stressed along with him. That's all I have to say.

Matthew: [00:31:05] It points out to me that like, once again, like genius is a lot more social than we give it credit for. She's bringing it, like, yeah, she is, again like, she's not undeserving of her success, maybe or she is talented, but she brings in a lot of things. She's well read and she's very passionate about what she does, and so she goes looking for inspiration. Like the other

thing was about how she wrote "bad guy." And it was like the traffic stop, that was like, in some country, you push the button to cross the street and it goes boop, boop. And then like, that's the thing that she used.

Karen: [00:31:42] I think that was actually Finneas...

Matthew: [00:31:44] You're right.

Karen: [00:31:45] ...who connected it.

Matthew: [00:31:47] And that's the other thing that gets left out. For me. It's like, how involved he is. Because to me, it seems like he's actually, like, doing the bulk of at least the music, but well, I guess we don't know. And maybe part of their kind of strategy is like, making it unclear and just Oh, they write their songs together. They do it all. It's all fun brother and sister time they do. It's all, it's 100, it's like, perfectly split. They'd each do 50% exactly of the work. I don't know.

Karen: [00:32:16] Yeah, that goes into her public persona, right? So if you read the Coscarelli article or even just the, I think it was the BBC one where it just gave a little breakdown of her life, they really put her at the forefront and, kind of, Finneas is in the background. And you don't really get a sense of who's really doing the work or if it really is half and half, or if there is anyone pulling the strings. But the Coscarelli, The New York Times article, kind of paints at least a more clear picture of what their childhood was like and how they actually grew up in probably more tailored circumstances so that their lives would turn out the way that they have. Supposedly, Finneas was born the same year as the smash hit, "MMMBop" by Hanson and that influenced why they were homeschooled. And supposedly, this is all just from the Coscarelli article, it goes into, then it goes into the conspiracy theory that all Alana has brought up to us about they're not really the ages that they say they are. So supposedly, him being born in 1997, I think is the year that "MMMBop" came out, leading to him being homeschooled was part of an effort to make them think more independently and be more artistic in thought and have less of a structured childhood so that they would end up more the way that they have, and I guess interpreted the way that the record executives have interpreted them as very different, how she thinks, the way she talks. She had a strong point of view for being 14 years old.

Matthew: [00:34:03] And I don't want to keep harping on it. But I'm going to, like the fact that her parents were or had the kinds of jobs that allowed them to stay home and educate their kids by themselves, again, points to like, a level of privilege that allows for these kinds of genius to prosper.

Allison: [00:34:22] Do you guys actually believe that everything is true? Like, 'cause, like, I read the timeline and then I looked at Alana's conspiracy theory and then I was like, *Wait, I should be questioning everything.* And like thinking about how, like, how like, just like saying again like, this is such a social media based generation like, I mean obviously when she was born it's not like social media was that huge. It's so easy to construct yourself differently in public than you actually are in real life. So like, what if everything that they've told the media about their upbringing is, like, just all for show so that she appears to be more of, like, a genius, you know? Like, I'm just questioning everything like, I don't know. I don't know what to believe. So, yeah.

Matthew: [00:35:17] Can someone explain what Alana's conspiracy theory is? I know, like, the hazy details.

Karen: [00:35:23] Yes, I'm actually, I'm trying to pull up the picture that it's kind of based on so that I can send it to you guys. Okay, there. I hope that works. So, if you are looking at this picture, the posters in the background, when Alana showed me this picture at least, and if you were there, feel free to speak up and help me go through all of this. So the posters, I believe are from 2010, 2009, maybe even 2008. And she would have been, let's see, I think she was born in 2002. So she would have been. She was born in 2001. So she would have been seven or eight, maybe nine at most, and Alanna's saying she doesn't look eight or nine. In this picture. She looks like she's middle school aged. She looks like she would be, me and Alana at the time were probably 12, 11 or 12 when when these Justin Bieber albums came out, and then she pointed out these EOS lip balms that were on the dresser and those were really popular when I was in middle school when I was maybe 12 or 13 years old, so that would have been 2010...oh, yeah. 2010? Like trying to do the math. Oh my god, how old am I? 2012. Okay, thank you. So, does she look like she's 10 in that picture?

Torrey: [00:36:58] No.

Karen: [00:37:01] So Alana kind of was like, "There's no way that she's as young as she says she is," and her supporting, Alana's personal supporting evidence is that she grew up as a ballroom dancer, and she lied about her age. When she was 14, she was competing in, like, the 18 year old category. That was just something that they did. And when I was talking to Danielle Stein, who was the instructor for the class that I'm in, she was saying that they do that in the opera world too. They just lie about their age. Billie Eilish's parents are actors. They're in the industry. It wouldn't be a surprise if they were like, *Let's lie about their age for whatever reason*. If you look at pictures of Finneas, he's supposed to be like, 24. He looks like he's 30.

Yeah, he's only 22.

Oh, there is no way. Look at pictures of Finneas, there's no way that this guy is 22.

Matthew: [00:37:58] There's no way that I am the same age as this man.

Karen: [00:38:00] Exactly.

He's turning 23 in eight days, otherwise.

Matthew: [00:38:06] Well, happy birthday to Finneas but...

Torrey: [00:38:09] You are not 23.

Karen: [00:38:10] Like, you were not born the same year as "MMMBop." Sorry.

Torrey: [00:38:17] I saw him in real life and I tried to, like, analyze his skin like that. But I was like, *Are you actually 20?* Whatever, 22, and, yeah, maybe he has a bad skincare regimen but he does not look 22. I would just like to add, and then the other thing is, um, this is embarrassing, but I had that same, I was a Belieber, so I had that same Justin Bieber poster on the left. And I remember I got it, like right when it was released. That was like 2011, 2012. This is late Justin Bieber, this is past "Baby," and also past "Never Say Never." This is leaving past "Never Say Never." So I would even say that this is like, this could be 2011, 2012.

Karen: [00:39:09] She would have been 10. Does she look 10?

Torrey: [00:39:14] No.

Karen: [00:39:16] I mean, she could be. I've met kids that I'm like, *There's no way you're so tall, like oh, my God.* And then I've met kids where I'm like, *You're so little, like, how can you be that old?* So it goes both ways. I think Finneas is the stronger argument though, 'cause there's no way that that man is 22.

Matthew: [00:39:37] Guys, let's be honest. Forget the musicology podcast, we need to become a conspiracy podcast.

J.W.: [00:39:45] That'd be amazing.

Matthew: [00:39:46] We're killing it.

Karen: [00:39:47] The other thing that is maybe not evidence, but conspiracy is that their parents are quite old. I believe that if, if their ages are real, then their mom had Billie at 43 which is pushing it, it's not impossible.

J.W.: [00:40:12] That's not that weird.

Liv: [00:40:13] What age?

Karen: [00:40:14] 43.

J.W.: [00:40:16] I have friends who have older parents.

Karen: [00:40:18] My mom had me at 42, so like I said, that's not impossible, but it may or may not add...like I said, it's not evidence.

Allison: [00:40:30] This is kind of unrelated, but have you seen how Finneas' girlfriend looks like Billie?

Torrey: [00:40:37] I have seen that.

Allison: [00:40:38] It's kind of unsettling. Like, why is he dating someone who looks like his sister?

Torrey: [00:40:46] It is extremely disturbing. There were some theories I won't say that were like, pretty disgusting, but there were some things and I was just like, Y'all need to chill. That's how I heard about it. And that's a whole thing in itself.

Karen: [00:41:03] That is really weird. I had no idea about that.

J.W.: [00:41:05] No, wow. I'm looking at these pictures.

Karen: [00:41:09] Okay to go away from conspiracy theories, despite how enticing they are.

Matthew: [00:41:14] Thank you, Karen.

Karen: [00:41:15] So sorry. I think the last thing that I want to talk about is how she is kind of, like, pushing the boundaries on genre, which a lot of artists are doing, but specifically she's including a lot of, like, really weird aesthetics that she's kind of, you know, like, not claiming as her own. But you know, when you think about the way that they're being executed today, it's very like "Billie Eilish." This comes from the New York Times article, "veering sharply into abject American Horror Story aesthetics, invoking shock artists like Nine Inch Nails, and Marilyn Manson more than Taylor Swift or Katy Perry, crucially, Eilish has also absorbed in at times a cartoonish outlaw essence from a world of rap without actually trying to rap. Eilish cites Tyler, the Creator, Childish Gambino and the influencer Bloody Osiris as her guiding lights of self presentation and her music incorporates now ubiquitous elements of trap productions without feeling forced."

Allison: [00:42:15] Yeah, there was one quote I think it was from that article that said it like, "Her music streams like pop and sounds like hip hop." It like, doesn't actually sound like hip hop, but, like, it kind of does. And like her whole aesthetic is very, I don't know, I guess it just speaks to the fact that like, hip hop and pop culture are kind of becoming ingrained into each other now, and so I think that she uses elements of trap that really contributes to her being more, like, consumable for listeners, because, just, people, like, love beats and, like, stuff, you know, and like, drops.

Karen: [00:42:51] She isn't the first person to be doing this, but I feel like she's really popularizing it, which might add to her genius making. Feel free to disagree with me.

Matthew: [00:43:02] I mean, she reminds me of, like, Post Malone in a lot of ways. And I think it's interesting that no one on the planet would ever call Post Malone a genius, rightfully so. But like, if anything, except, yeah, and and yes, Billie Eilish does take showers, which Post Malone...it's unclear, the jury's still out on that one. But the difference being like, I mean, if anything, I think he's a lot more successful doing that. And in my personal opinion, like, better. Like, I can tolerate listening to his music, and I don't really

enjoy Billie Eilish that much, but like my point being, like, they do very similar things. And she is given the label of genius because presumably, like, she's young, which I mean, I don't know, like, it's just kind of an interesting thing, like, what separates them in terms of what they're doing, and how they're kind of appreciated or like, praised for it, which I mean, larger argument, like they probably shouldn't be, but I mean, the fact that they are, like, how they are is interesting.

Karen: [00:44:04] Which do you prefer?

Matthew: [00:44:06] Me?

Karen: [00:44:07] Yeah.

Matthew: [00:44:08] Post Malone.

Karen: [00:44:09] Okay. Just checking. You now stated that you have a bias against Billie Eilish, so I just wanted to figure out.

Matthew: [00:44:19] Yeah, I mean, like, my point is, like, they both appropriate hip hop culture, and one of them is labeled a genius for it and one of them is not and, like, they should both stop. But it's just interesting, the ways that both of them are kind of talked about.

Torrey: [00:44:39] I think you're right that with Billie there's the age aspect, and I think that's, I think that's huge. And something that I was thinking about through this whole conversation is a big part of the, like, troubled genius myth is, like, the unknown. And I think Billie does well with that. I mean, in many different ways, in her age. But even in the way she dresses, like, the big baggy clothing, also in her, the genre, it's like, you can't really tell what the genre is. Or like a lot of people are like, I don't know what genre this is. So that also and then, even in her lyrics, like there's sometimes a little bit, little mysterious, just kind of trying to figure out, you know who she is, what she's about. A lot of people can't pinpoint, like a specific thing to her. That makes sense. Like, oh, is she a hip hop artist? Is she a pop artist? Or like, what is her style? What does she like to do? Her style is so innovative, you know, even with her hair and everything that makes it really interesting to people. And I think that also adds to that kind of the seriousness and attraction too, like, Oh, like, what is this person? That's what I was just thinking about. I don't know if anyone has any thoughts on like,

the unknown related to the troubled genius or the genius in general, and Billie Eilish.

Karen: [00:46:12] Oh, well, I think that her being, I don't know where the genius label started. I wasn't able to track that part down, but ever since it started, it's proved to be really helpful for her career, but also problematic in terms of the overall, like she's adding to the mythmaking and the narrative in new contexts. And what Matt was saying, like, Why is she a genius when she's doing the exact same thing that Post Malone is doing? So she's creating problems. Yes, Matthew?

Matthew: [00:46:51] For the record, like, I'm not trying to say, like, Post Malone is a genius.

Karen: [00:46:57] No, and we're not. We're not making the argument that she's a genius, either. We're talking about the problem with calling her a genius.

Matthew: [00:47:04] Yes, just want to make the distinction.

Karen: [00:47:05] Yeah, we're not calling anyone a genius. We're saying what's the problem with the world doing that?

Torrey: [00:47:14] Well, the term can be harmful to the person. I know that in Brian Wilson's case, when he started being called a genius. He did not like the term and then he just had a lot of personal trouble or mental trouble happen right when he started being called a genius. And then it just kind of backfired. And that's when he kind of, after a few years went away from the press in the public. So I know that it can negatively affect a person, put a lot of pressure on them.

J.W.: [00:47:48] It also puts the individual on a pedestal in a way that's like potentially, I guess, inimical, if they're doing things that are, again, let me phrase, so it's like, it's giving a pass. It's like, okay, putting them above the status of person into the status of genius. The whole, like, I mean, it's the whole issue when you mythologized historical figures in the same kind of way, where you're like, there's this potential, like, sweet, problematic things under the rug, if indeed they are implicated in like, something problematic and just kind of like, I don't know, reify them. And I mean, I'd argue that reifying anybody to that degree is probably not a good call. But it also does things like I think that are beneficial, whereas, I mean, role models exist for

some, like, "moral reason," right? So it's like, there's like a give and take that I think is interesting when you're calling somebody a genius. And then there's the whole like, socio-political, like, undertones of what like genius is meaning, especially like, because you talk about the troubled genius then talk about like, they're like other kinds of genius that get tied up in like discussions of...and for the troubled genius, it's like, it's a mental thing, or like, I don't even know what kind of term I'm trying to get at. But it can also be used like, in kind of, maybe not so savory ways in like gender, race, racialized terms. That's more of a historical trend, but it still happens all the time. And then it's like a religious thing. Just think like that whole guy wrote about religious civilization, which is, it's...I won't say anything more about that.

Karen: [00:49:30] But that was his specific area of study. He wasn't coming at it from a musicological background. He was, I believe he was coming from a religious studies [background] . That's why he kept tying it back to a religious place.

Matthew: [00:49:48] Can you repeat the question, Karen?

Karen: [00:49:51] I was just kind of asking about any problems. I guess now I kind of want to go with what are the societal impacts, specifically in Billie Eilish's case, now that she's kind of paving this Gen Z sort of narrative of genius and both musical and artistic uniqueness and creativity.

Matthew: [00:50:13] It reminds me of the, I don't know who said it, but it's a really famous quote, I think it's Mark Twain, that was like, everyone in America feels like they're a disgrace, like they're about to become a millionaire or a billionaire, but they're, like ,not actually there yet, but, like, they will be. Everyone in America feels like, *Well, I could be, like, or like, I'm supposed to be.* And in kind of the same way, maybe this is just me projecting, but like everyone feels like they're smart or like they're special or like they know, like they're a genius. Again, maybe just me projecting, but it just disregards the kind of social conditions that create what appear to be geniuses, which can do that to anyone like this is I've been talking about this with my parents recently about how if you can make it through the American school system, all the way to an undergraduate degree, you are qualified, maybe not like legally qualified, but like, you are smart enough and disciplined enough to become a doctor. And so like, there's nothing inherently special about becoming a doctor. Anyone who makes it through

the American school system can just be a doctor. Like that's all it really takes. You don't need like, special knowledge and that kind of thing. So like to disregard the social conditions that produce people is to turn things into a meritocracy and say, well, anyone can be a billionaire, but the people who are billionaires deserve it because they're smarter and better than us, which is just obviously not the case. If Jeff Bezos was really smart, he would realize that at any moment, we could rise up and just kill him, and I feel no moral quandary against doing that, so watch out, Jeff.

Karen: [00:51:58] I think that's a great place to end. Does anybody have any last comments? Maybe you feel differently about anything that we talked about compared to the beginning, like maybe Matt likes Billie Eilish now? Thought not. Do we respect her?

Torrey: [00:52:24] Absolutely. I mean you should respect everyone, but I mean, I'm always pro-women in the music industry. So, or women in general, we talked about the implications of the word "genius." And I'm not, I agree that there's a lot of bad things that come with that. But in a way, I'm also a little bit down to have like a woman genius. But I feel like maybe a better word would be, I don't know, we don't even have to give her a label. But I just, I'm happy to be, or to have her be getting attention for being unique. And she does seem like a cool person. So that's, that's it.

Matthew: [00:53:09] This is what I said at the beginning, like, huge supporter of her as a person, and I think she has the potential to do a lot of great things. And I hope she does. That's all I'll say.

J.W.: [00:53:20] Is there anyone that's active right now as a musical artist who you guys think is worthy of the genius label?

Allison: [00:53:34] Tyler, the Creator. Absolutely.

Torrey: [00:53:37] Yeah.

Allison: [00:53:38] That's all I have to say.

Torrey: [00:53:42] I 100% agree. I, like, can't think of anybody else who, like, is so imaginative in so many different realms, like, not only music, but also fashion. And his ice cream flavor was really good too. So, in lots of things.

Liv: [00:54:01] Sorry, Torrey, did you, where did you get the ice cream?

Torrey: [00:54:05] Oh, okay. It's from this awesome place called Jeni's. It's, yeah, it's near Griffith Observatory. I don't know if they're still selling it. Because it was at the time a limited edition, but I know it was really popular, so maybe they'll bring it back. But it was a mint ice cream with a white chocolate like freckles, or flecks. I don't know what the right word is, but I'm so anti-white chocolate, but these, like this ice cream converted me a little bit, so...It's called "Snowflake." It's really really good.

Matthew: [00:54:38] This episode is sponsored by Tyler the Creator's special Jeni's Ice Cream flavor.

Karen: [00:54:45] And then we'll just...that's how we're going to end the podcast.

Matthew: [00:54:51] As Noname once said, "Read a book."

Liv: [00:54:56] Oh wow. Oh.