Songs of Myself: An Exploration of Identity Through Composition

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SONGS OF MYSELF: AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY THROUGH COMPOSITION

by

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ABSTRACT

*Songs of Myself* is an Extended Play (EP) of original music that I recorded entirely on my own, depicting my personal exploration of identity. Inspired by Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”, a poem that describes the importance of all beings and explores the idea of identity and self-worth, the EP is comprised of seven songs: “Sunrise”; “Dawn”; “Autumn”; “Overcast”; “Storm”; “Dusk”; and “Sunset”, each of which describes a different aspect of my life and identity. “Sunrise” begins the EP, establishing the main theme that returns throughout the rest of the tracks. “Dawn” depicts the important of my family and my home, Mount Desert Island, Maine. My love of and passion for music is shown through the third track, “Autumn”, tying in ideas from songs I played during my high school career. Things start to take a turn in “Overcast”, as the key turns to minor, and an internal struggle begins within me. Things come to a climax in “Storm” as the theme introduced in “Sunrise” is inverted, the chords are played out of sync, and everything falls into a cacophonic mess. “Dusk” is the aftermath of “Storm” – the melody is wandering, with few recognizable themes or motives, searching for a resolution but never quite finding one. “Sunset” is that resolution, bringing back the main Sunrise theme, now fully harmonized with several instruments, concluding the album showing that I have found myself once more.
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INTRODUCTION

When thinking about what I wanted to do for my honors thesis, a few ideas came to mind. I could do an extended research project, probably on music education; I could put together a lecture recital, fulfilling both my thesis and performance capstone requirements; I could compose a piece for a larger ensemble - Symphonic Band, maybe, or University Singers? However, even with all of these ideas floating around, there wasn’t really anything that genuinely excited me.

My family and I are originally from the United Kingdom and, in November 2019, we went back to visit family, a trip we try to take every few years or so. The day that we flew, Coldplay, a UK band that my parents listened to often while I was growing up, released what many have regarded as their most “experimental” album, *Everyday Life*. It is the longest album they’ve released to date, comprising sixteen songs, split equally in two parts, a “sunrise” and “sunset”. When asked what theme the album had been intended to convey, Chris Martin, lead vocalist, explained that they had just attempted to describe “being human”, partly through personal experiences, and partly through the empathy they felt towards others.

It was while listening to that album, flying over the Atlantic Ocean, drifting somewhere between 10:00pm EST and 3:00am GMT, that I knew what I wanted to do for my honors thesis. I wanted to record an album of music that reflected who I was, how I’d grown, and who I wanted to become. I planned to record all of the music on my own, using my abilities on a variety of different instruments to cover all parts of the songs, and the knowledge I had about multitrack recording to “produce” it, so to speak, myself.
I’d done something similar in high school. Though the premise was slightly different, I took a class for which the final project was an album with thirty minutes of music on it. I was only sixteen at the time, and it was the first I’d ever experimented with writing music of any kind. Some kids created mashups using garageband, some created rap songs, but I multitrack recorded about ten songs that were entirely instrumental. The more I wrote, the better I was able to create melodies, find chords that worked together, and add different instruments into the mix. The earlier tracks are pretty bare bones but, as I learned more about the process and my own style, my compositions began to develop into more mature pieces of music. I didn’t know anything about music theory, about the function different notes and chords served, about mixing different tracks together, I just knew what sounded nice, and what I did and didn’t like.

For my thesis, I wanted to build on the foundation I was able to create in high school. Now that I’ve completed almost four years of music courses, I know so much more than I did in high school. I learned about chord progressions and functions through theory classes, about different forms and how they developed through history classes, about arranging through my orchestration class, and about different forms of technology and how to play several different instruments through my education classes. It was the perfect opportunity to elaborate on a hobby that I already had an interest in.

However, when May 2020 rolled around and I sat down to meet with my thesis advisor, I panicked. I said I wanted to do a research project about music education during a pandemic. I submitted a project proposal, and spent the summer looking for inspiration. I knew that writing music was still something that I wanted to explore, and played around with simple melodies here and there, recording them on my phone when I found
something I liked. If anything, I was more disappointed knowing that they would never be used, but it was nice to be creating again.

In September I started my senior year, enrolled in the first of two thesis courses, and again felt dissatisfied with my decision to do a research project. By then I, along with the rest of the world, had spent the better part of a year living in the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was eating up my life. All of my energy had been focused on how I could do the things I loved and still stay safe. The thought of spending another two semesters putting together a pandemic specific curriculum was, to be blunt, depressing. I wanted an escape, a way to make music without having to think about it. I reached out to my thesis advisor and we sat down and made a plan: I would scrap the research and record an album. I resubmitted my project proposal, put together a new committee, and began to write.

Once I’d settled on creating an album, I had to choose a subject. For Honors 211, I read Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”. This is probably my favorite poem of all time, not only because I enjoy Whitman’s writing style and character, but because of the subject matter. “Song of Myself” explores the idea that we are all part of something greater than ourselves, that we all play an important role in the universe, no matter how big or small we seem to be. Whitman talks about all of the things that make him who he is and how he carries them with him as he continues to grow. Whitman says, “I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars” (Whitman, 1892). Everything is here for a reason, everything plays a role in the universe, and without it all, things would have turned out differently.
This was the basic idea that I wanted to explore through my music, but on a smaller scale. I have grown so much in my time at the University of Maine, and have learned so much not only about the world around me, but about myself as well. Through my classes, and through the honors college especially, I have had the incredible opportunity to explore who I am, where I’ve come from, and who I want to be. All of the experiences I’ve had, good and bad, are important parts of who I am. The big things, like moving to the US, and the small things like breaking my leg when I was seven, and the things I thought were small things that turned out to be big things, like learning to play the flute, have all shaped me into who I am today. This was the story I wanted to tell.

There are several artists that inspire me, and the listener can usually see this reflected in my music. Perhaps one of my biggest influences is Andrew Bird. I was first introduced to him by my high school music teacher, Michael Remy, at a time when I was just beginning to explore music that was different from what my parents listened to. A classically trained violinist who disliked reading music, Bird creates songs using loops he writes in his head, and recorded most of his earlier works wherever he could find a space - like a friend’s apartment or his parents’ old farmhouse. If the acoustics were right, he set up his equipment and fiddled away (pun intended) for hours on end.

The first of his albums that I was exposed to was actually an EP: *I Want To See Pulaski At Night*. Entirely instrumental, the EP is centered around the track “Pulaski At Night”, a song that Bird wrote but wanted to release sooner than he would have a completed album to release it within. I loved the themes Bird played with, and how few instruments he needed to make each song effective. As I experimented with my earlier compositions in high school, his ideas were ones I tried to emulate. I took great
inspiration from Andrew Bird, while enjoying growing into my own musical taste for the first time.

Pitchfork reviewer Stephen M. Deusner describes *I Want To See Pulaski At Night* quite nicely: “[He] composed a handful of instrumentals to form lengthy prologues and epilogues to “Pulaski”, comparing it to sound tracking a film. So think of the EP as the director’s cut of the main song. Or an extended mix. Or a short suite” (Deusner 2013).

Now that I was sitting down to write my thesis “album”, this was an idea that really interested me. I knew about symphonies, concertos, and other larger works that contained multiple movements, but those words never really fit what I was intending to do. I knew that I wanted a collection of songs that could stand alone but were also part of a whole that would be incomplete without each song present (a more literal nod to Whitman’s idea that we’re all integral parts of a greater whole). I also knew that I wanted my music to play with different musical themes that appeared and transformed through each song. Choosing a main idea (like Bird did with “Pulaski at Night”) and working around it intrigued me, and this gave me a direction as I began to put together an outline for my album.

Another artist that I have always enjoyed is dodie (the lowercase ‘d’ being her trademark). It is because of her that I learned to play the ukulele, and found a style of music that fit my singing voice. Though I knew that my album would be completely instrumental, I’ve always loved the way that she wrote, her lyrics speaking to me on a level that I’d never experienced before. Though I’ve never met her, what she sings about feels so personal, and so specific to my own life. Dodie got her start recording YouTube videos first from her family home in Essex, and later from her apartment in London.
Eventually she grew enough of a fanbase that she was able to release three EPs, and is about to release her first full-length album, *Build a Problem*, in May of 2021.

Now that she’s an established artist, she performs and records with a full band, complete with a guitarist, bassist, drummer, violinist, and cellist but, when she was first starting out, she recorded everything on her own. She used the piano or the ukulele to lay out the chords for her songs, recorded melodies and harmonies over the top, and even added in recorder and clarinet here and there. In her early videos, you can see her playing each instrument herself, and she even walks you through her recording process at times. It was fascinating to watch, and I loved the idea that you could create this kind of music on your own. Though the music on my album isn’t necessarily in the same style as dodie’s, my process was similar to her earlier works. She’s been such a huge inspiration for me, both as a musician and a human being, and is definitely an artist that I will follow for years to come.

Though I’ve enjoyed finding my own artists, I will always love going back to my roots. A major one, that I’ve already mentioned briefly, is Coldplay. Based in London, England, Coldplay formed in 1996, and consists of Chris Martin, Guy Berryman, Phil Harvey, Will Champion, and Jonny Buckland. As I said earlier, my family is originally from the UK. My sister and I were born in Cambridge, England, in 2001 and 1999 respectively. In 2002 we moved to Maine for my dad’s job, in 2004 my brother was born and, shortly after, we moved back to the UK as my dad’s job had finished. We stayed for nine months, realized we missed Maine too much, and finally settled on Mount Desert Island, Maine, in 2005.
When I was young, and still moving back and forth between England and America, my parents listened to a few different artists frequently, but the music that I remember them playing the most often was that of Coldplay. Their voices, their arrangements, were one of the only constants in my ever-changing world. New homes, new towns, new schools, new everything, but what stayed the same was my family and our music. Because of that, I can easily connect the two, often listening to Coldplay if I find myself missing my family or my home.

Though I love their older music, it is their newer tracks that make their way into my album. *Everyday Life* opens with the track “Sunrise”, a concept that I really liked. I especially enjoyed that it was completely instrumental as you don’t see that often in popular music. I took a few ideas from their “Sunrise” for the first piece on my album. The possibilities that each new day brings, that come with each sunrise, this was an idea that I wanted to reflect when introducing the main theme for my album.

I’ve spent the last four years at the University of Maine working towards degrees in music education and flute performance. In my time here I’ve taken theory, history, and ear training courses, as well as brass, woodwind, percussion, and vocal methods courses. I was also exposed to arranging, recording, and music notation software through orchestration and education courses. I have performed music in many different styles as well, ranging from choral music with University Singers, to a cappella music with UMaine Renaissance, to classical and romantic music with small chamber groups and the University Orchestra, to jazz music with different combos, to wind band pieces with the Symphonic Band. While earning my music degrees, I have developed as a musician, a student, and a teacher, discovering my own musical preferences and style, in both the
classical and the more “popular” music worlds, and everything else in between. When sitting down to write and record this album, I was more than capable of creating a full score, planning it all out on staff paper, analyzing each chord and what it meant, and strategically placing instruments and entrances throughout the final project.

However, that’s exactly what I didn’t want to do. I’ve spent four years looking at music from a technical angle and, while I’ve so enjoyed my time here and wouldn’t trade it for the world, I wanted to do something different. I wanted to take the risk that came with sitting down at the keyboard, playing something by ear, and figuring out what I wanted to do next without feeling tied to a score.

Of course, in order to be fully successful, I needed to go into it with a plan. I had been playing with some different musical ideas over the summer but, once I made the official decision to create an album in September, I sat down and created an outline. I knew that I wanted the album to show who I am, so I made a list of all of the biggest things in my life. It saw many drafts, and many different things made and then didn’t make the list, but I eventually landed on the following:

- My family, here in the US and back in the UK
- The outdoors and the ocean, specifically Acadia National Park
- Music
- My anxiety

I then split the list up into different sections, figuring out what could go into different songs, what I already had music for, and what I still needed to come up with.
My process in the beginning was quite casual: I would noodle around on the keyboard until I created a solid musical idea, and then I’d record it on my phone to come back to later on. Most often, I started with a basic accompaniment on piano or ukulele and then improvised melodies over the top until I found one I liked. One of the first themes I came up with was actually what ended up being the main motive through the entire album and, interestingly enough, I wrote it over the summer when I didn’t even have a project to put it with.

Once I had a short melody and an accompaniment, I assigned it to a piece of the storyline, and then built the rest of the song around it. Pretty consistently, the accompaniment tracks would be played on the piano (or, in the case of one track, the ukulele), the harmonies and long tones would be on strings or clarinet, and the melodies were played on the flute. Because the story was about me and my life, I always recorded the melody on the flute so as to keep that “character” consistent and easy for the listener to recognize. Using this process, I was able to record and piece together the entire album.
ANALYSIS

Sunrise

The first song on the album is called “Sunrise”, a nod to the inspiration I drew from Coldplay. It begins on a Bb drone, the significance being that Bb was the first note I learned to play on the flute - that was my beginning. From there I establish the musical theme that represents me, what I refer to as the “Sunrise theme”. This version depicts the beginning of my life: me with no influence from the outside world. It returns throughout the rest of the album, altered to reflect the changes in my life but for now, in “Sunrise”, we hear it in its simplest form, overflowing with the possibility of what life may bring.

Fig 1. Sunrise theme

Dawn

From “Sunrise”, we move into “Dawn” which represents my early life. It’s a direct continuation of “Sunrise”, starting again with a Bb octave. Here, the octave Bbs represent my parents. They are my foundation, and the biggest source of stability in my life. Next the listener hears one flute play, then one layer of harmony, then another. These three flute parts are my siblings and I: I am the first; my sister, Cadi, is the second; and my brother, Ieuan, is the third. By the end of the intro, my whole family has been established.
From there, I have two themes. The first, played on the piano, represents my family’s life in the UK - simple, with thirty-second notes similar to those in the Sunrise theme.

After the UK theme, we hear the flute return with yet another theme, representing our life in the US. Again, simple, with thirty-seconds notes, keeping the Sunrise theme in mind, but not copying it exactly.
My family moved across the Atlantic three times before finally settling in Maine. The two themes playing together in harmony show the peace we found once we finally settled here in Maine, holding on to our English background while embracing our new life in America. Living on Mount Desert Island, I finally felt a stability that I hadn’t been able to find before.

“Dawn” tackles the first two of the things I chose that are important to me: my family and the island. When I started out, I intended them to be two separate songs, but eventually they evolved into the same piece, fitting together in a way that was rather symbolic. With a few tweaks, I was able to present them as the UK and US themes.
which, when it comes down to it, are simplified ways of defining my family and my home.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a very close-knit family. My parents have always been incredibly supportive of my endeavors, telling me I can be anyone I want to be, and helping me discover who that is when I lose my way. As for Cadi and Ieuan, they are my partners in crime, arch nemeses, biggest fans and best friends, all rolled into one. I look back fondly at the times we played “bus station” on the staircase with our baby dolls, or the hours Cadi and I have spent at the piano, plunking out duets, or the first time we realized Ieuan was growing taller than me.

When I think of home, I think immediately of the island, and our little white house set in the middle of the woods. In Autumn, the trees turn bright shades of red and yellow, and the forest trails smell of rain. I learned to ride my bike on the carriage roads, learned to swim in the ocean, learned to drive in the shadows of Cadillac Mountain. My family and the island are such important parts of my life, and I know I definitely wouldn’t be the same without them.

Autumn

The third piece on the album is entitled “Autumn.” I wrote the basic ideas of this piece in the Fall of 2020, before I had a real direction for the album as a whole. Now that it’s part of the album, this song is designed to show my discovery of music. I’ve been involved in music since I was very young, starting first on the piano when I was five, the violin when I was seven, and the flute when I was nine. However, even though I was heavily involved in my schools’ music programs, it wasn’t until late in my second year of
high school that I discovered an emotional attachment to it all. I realized that music was more than just a technical endeavor and began to see my hobby as something that brought me genuine joy - and something that I wanted to do forever.

The chord progression and initial melodies in “Autumn” are played mostly on the ukulele, as this was the first instrument that I taught myself to play completely on my own, and completely for fun. Everything else I played at the time I’d been taught in school and learned through method books and playing assignments. The ukulele was an instrument on which I had complete freedom and felt no pressure to have to perform in a certain way. I played it because I like the sound, and it brought me joy. That was all, and that was enough for me.

Just the same as “Dawn”, we don’t see much of the Sunrise theme in “Autumn”, but you do hear the flute play, which is a more general representation of me. Within “Autumn”, I do, however, quote a few pieces that were important to me during my years in high school. Like I said, it was with my high school that I found a true passion for music, and it was one of the first places I felt I truly belonged. I was so stable, with people I cared for, and who cared for me as well. It was a safe place for me to learn and grow as both a student and a musician and, because of that, it became a huge part of my identity.

My high school pep band is famous for its rendition of “Jesus Christ Superstar” (though, our version is just called “Superstar”). We play it as the football and basketball players run out onto the field or court during home games. For generations it has been something that the crowd looks forward to at the start of each game, and I bet that every alumni of Mount Desert Island High School could hum the first few bars for you. The
energy from the community plays such a huge role in the popularity of this song, and the strength of this tradition. Their enthusiasm as the drums beat, our director counts us off, and finally the trumpets and trombones blare their horns with everything they’ve got and the players rush the field. The clapping, the stomping, the cheering, the blasting of instruments, the thunderous sounds that fill that stadium can be heard throughout most of the tiny island that we call home. We are such a tight-knit community, and a big part of what brings us together is our band program. The other piece we’re known for is our “Alma Mater” fight song. Every student knows every word, and can sing it at the drop of a hat. While there were many songs that were important to me during my time at Mount Desert Island High School (MDI HS), these have the strongest emotional ties, as we played them the most consistently throughout my time there.

Both pieces are quoted during “Autumn”, demonstrating the importance and the impact that MDI HS had on my life, and my identity.

![Fig 6. Original theme for “Superstar”](image)

![Fig 7. Original theme for “Alma Mater”](image)
“Autumn” wraps up tying the Superstar/Alma Mater motive into the original melody I had on the ukulele. Overall, the piece is meant to be fun and carefree, because that’s what my life was like then. I was young, didn’t have much to worry about besides the odd homework assignment, and I was genuinely enjoying myself. It was during this time of my life that I decided I needed to be making music forever, in whatever capacity I could find, and it’s because of the MDI HS music program that I was able to come to that decision.

Overcast

“Overcast” is the first time we hear the Sunrise theme return since “Sunrise” itself but, in this piece, it has changed. While none of the notes are different, it is now played over a minor key, G minor, rather than the Bb major that it was in before.
After harmonizing the Sunrise theme in G minor, I changed the time signature from 4/4 (simple) to 12/8 (compound) and wrote an eighth note arpeggiated accompaniment to create some movement. My goal was to add variety to the album, minimizing repetition so as to keep the listener engaged.
Research shows that, though non-musicians are less likely to be able to tell the difference between music in major or minor modes, they can easily distinguish between “happy” (major) and “sad” (minor) sounding music. Though the listener may be unable to analyze and define what is going on within the piece of music, technically speaking, most are able to determine the mood that the composer is attempting to convey through their writing. “Overcast” is the first time through the album that I’ve moved into a minor key, thus displaying a problem within the storyline.

Growing up, I always knew that I was a sensitive kid but, during my junior year of high school, everything that came along with that began to escalate. Things that used to be easy became so hard, and I no longer felt in control of my own body. After about three months of not wanting to go to school, being unable to sleep, and barely eating a full meal each day, I was officially diagnosed and treated for anxiety. I worked with my doctor to put together what we call a "toolbox" of things that I could use when I found myself starting to feel anxious. Some were short term (taking a walk, taking a few deep breaths,) and some were long term (medication, counseling). I waited for these new feelings to go away, waited to be cured, but they never did, and I never was.

I finished high school and started college, looking forward to beginning my studies in music. Though I’d learned to control my emotions, they spiked again while starting university, as was to be expected. “Overcast” depicts this build up. As I struggled
to find a sense of belonging at school, I once again was working to find a place of rest within my thoughts. I was reaching a breaking point and didn’t know how to feel normal anymore.

Storm

“Storm” is that breaking point. Back in simple time with a sixteenth note alberti bass style accompaniment, my goal was for it to feel agitated, unsettled. After a short introduction, the Sunrise theme comes back, now fully minor. Unlike in “Overcast” when the Sunrise theme was unchanged but played over a minor chord, in “Storm” I transpose it into a completely different mode, lowering the third, sixth, and seventh notes of the scale. While we’ve stayed close to the key of Bb major for most of the album, the key for “Storm” is E minor, a tritone away from Bb, so as to further demonstrate the transformation I (represented by the Sunrise theme) am undergoing.

To get my minor Sunrise theme, I first transposed the original from Bb major to E major.

![Sunrise theme in Bb Major](image12.png)

![Sunrise theme in E Major](image13.png)
From there, I was able to transpose it to E minor, the parallel minor of E major, by simply changing the key signature.

There are three different kinds of minor scales in music: natural minor, harmonic minor, and melodic minor. A natural minor scale is the naturally occurring diatonic scale with no altered scale degrees. In harmonic minor, the seventh degree is raised when going both up and down the scale. In melodic minor, the sixth and the seventh scale degrees are raised when going up the scale and lowered to their natural state when going down the scale. I chose to write “Storm” in E harmonic minor, using a raised seventh degree (in this case, changing the D to a D#).

![Fig 14. Sunrise theme in E minor](image)

In order to make this new melody fit the piano accompaniment, I had to change the rhythm around slightly, doubling the duration of each note and moving the first note of the theme down from the third to the tonic.
After the minor Sunrise theme has repeated a few times, the listener begins to hear yet another version layered over the top of it: this is the melodic inversion of the minor Sunrise theme. Picture what happens when flipping a line on a graph over the x-axis. Where it used to go up, it now goes down, and where it used to go down, it now goes up, by the same amount in each case. Melodic inversion is a similar concept: beginning on the same note, move by the same interval each time, but in the opposite direction to the original phrase.

In “Storm”, instead of doing an exact inversion, I chose to keep the key signature intact and created a diatonic inversion of the Sunrise theme, moving only in regards to scale degree. The original begins on the third of the scale, moves down a degree to the second, and up two degrees to the fourth. Therefore, the inverted begins on the third, but
then moves up a degree to the fourth and down two degrees to the second. It continues in this manner until the entire Sunrise theme has been inverted.

![Fig 16. Original Sunrise theme in E minor](image)

![Fig 17. Inverted Sunrise theme in E minor](image)

From there, I made the same rhythmic alterations I made to the minor Sunrise theme to make it fit in the context of “Storm” and transposed it up an octave so I could record it on the flute, as this theme was the new representation of my character. Illustrated below are the two themes played together, with the accompaniment.
Eventually, the original Sunrise theme cuts out completely and you hear the inverted Sunrise theme played alone on the flute with just a few of the background layers. Those background layers soon begin to lose time, all of them moving completely out of sync with one another.

The idea behind “Storm” is that the Sunrise theme becomes changed beyond recognition, the harmonies no longer have meaning, and it deteriorates into a cacophonous mess. In real time, I can no longer recognize who I am, the things that used to bring me
joy lose meaning, and I fall apart completely. Before my anxiety, I was happy all the
time. Anything could bring me joy, I was entertained by the smallest things, and I was the
one people turned to for help. I wasn’t invincible, I knew my weaknesses, but until then I
hadn’t found anything I couldn’t overcome.

The piece comes to a close with the flute cutting through the disjunct chords on an
ascending E minor scale, ending on an echoing E6 at the top of the scale with the rest of
the harmonies having cut out. This is my cry for help. I knew that I couldn’t go on the
way I was and that, if I didn’t make a change, I would lose the version of Megan we met
in “Sunrise” forever. The Megan who laughed at anything. The Megan who loved music,
and could play the flute for hours on end without losing interest. The Megan who loved
to run, to swim, to see her friends, to go to school. I knew that she was still in there
somewhere; I just had to find her.

Dusk

Picture waking up the morning after a heavy windstorm. You could hear the wind
howling through the night, but couldn’t be sure of the damage it had done until the
morning came. You walk outside to find your front lawn covered in debris, tree branches
strewn throughout the road, maybe even a few power lines down. There’s a light breeze,
but nothing compared to the gale that took place before. Instead, there is a sense of peace
as you feel the cold air in your lungs, and breathe the smell of the trees. None of the
damage is irreversible, and you slowly begin to clear everything up, twig by twig, branch
by branch.
This was what I aimed to convey in “Dusk”. There is no true melody, the flute wandering aimlessly with no real direction. Instead of piano, I used a synthesizer plugin for the accompanying chords which, like the flute, have no real pattern or direction. This is meant to illustrate the confusion, the uncertainty that comes when you know you have a problem, but don’t know where to find the solution.

Though I’d made the decision to turn things around, I hadn’t a clue where to start. I felt lost, but not hopeless, which is an important distinction. Though the melody is uncertain, I do, intentionally, give “Dusk” a key, D natural minor, ending with a cadence that finally grounds and orients the listener. It took some wandering but, eventually, the switch flipped.

Sunset

“Sunset” begins with the Sunrise theme, presented exactly as it was in the original “Sunrise” with a Bb drone beneath it. From there, it repeats, now fully harmonized and fleshed out with several different instruments. The Sunrise theme repeats twice with all of the instruments and then once more with just the piano, ending on a single Bb, just as the album began.

For so long, I had been trying to find a cure for anxiety, working against it in my efforts to get rid of it altogether. What I didn’t realize was that it was such an important part of who I am, and trying to get rid of it was only causing me to move further away from the version of myself I was working to rediscover.

Like I said, I’d always been very sensitive - it’s something that my mom can trace back as far as my first words. As a child I was a picky eater, I cried easily, and many
things frightened me. When I started school, I was anxious to succeed, never broke the rules for fear of getting in trouble, and set ridiculously high standards for myself. As I got older, all of these things evolved into something that I could no longer get a handle of, but they were still important parts of my personality. My anxiety isn’t something to get rid of, but instead something to manage and accept. It makes me loyal. It makes me empathetic. It makes me a good listener, perceptive, self-aware. My anxiety makes me strong, and I wouldn’t be me without it.

In the context of “Sunset”, this realization is represented by the reappearance of the Sunrise theme. Once I accept that this is something that has always been with me, the rest of the instruments enter, creating a piece of music that is fully harmonized, fully realized, and finally whole. All of the instruments now playing together are all of the different parts of me (my family, the island, the importance of music, and my anxiety) working together in harmony, creating something beautiful.
CONCLUSION

Though I referred to it generically as an album throughout the recording process, the entire work rounded out to approximately twenty minutes, defining it technically as an “Extended Play”, or EP. Once it is fully revised, I will publish my music on several streaming platforms, including SoundCloud, Apple Music, and Spotify. That process should be rather straightforward as these streaming services all aim to provide an accessible space for creators and artists to share their work.

When publishing my EP, I needed something to go on the cover. My close friend Claire Schaffer reached out in September (before I had even started to think about publishing my work) to see if she could create my album art for me. I, of course, said yes and sent her a few photos for inspiration, wanting it to be the view from a mountain peak on the island, with a trail sign to represent that I was exploring and discovering my identity. I expected a simple watercolor, but she went above and beyond, presenting me with an acrylic painting on a fifteen inch by fifteen inch canvas. I created a scan to use for my album, adding the title text digitally, but will cherish the painting itself forever.
Though the themes and motives throughout mean specific things to me, I aimed to write it all with a basic enough story structure (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution) that the listener could easily find a point of entry and relate any story to what they heard. I do, however, hope that they are able to make the connections between the different motives, hearing the Sunrise theme return at critical points in the story arc, and can recognize the resolution that comes at the end of the entire work.
I have learned so much throughout this past year - about the creative process, about composition and songwriting, about mixing different tracks together and, of course, about myself. I thought I knew everything there was to know about me, but I’ve realized that I will never stop discovering new things about who I am.

Completing a creative project was a huge undertaking, and felt like such a risk. I was constantly comparing myself to others, worrying that my project would be labeled as “not good enough” and I as “not smart enough”. When connecting with my peers, my thesis felt so different from everyone else’s. In early April (the month of my defense), I was so close to scrapping the entire thing. I had legitimate plans to put off my defense for another year and switch back to a research topic that felt like it fit with what everyone else was doing.

It took a long time for me to be brave enough to share this story with the world. While I will always be an ally for others who may be struggling, my own mental illness isn’t something I mention often. There’s a stigma that comes with it - that you’re weak, that you need to be helped, or protected at all times - and I’ve spent years working to escape my friends’ assumptions that I needed to be looked after, even before my official diagnosis. Adding a name to it just makes it worse. I couldn’t ask for a more supportive family, but I don’t talk about it with them if I don’t need to because I don’t want them to worry. I’m embarrassed after each flare, feeling knocked down for letting it take control once more. I mentioned my anxiety in my Reading List, which I wrote in February, and closed that section saying “I don’t think I’m ready to be proud, or even speak of it publicly”. Though I had initially written the music with my mental health journey in
mind, I wondered if I should flip the story to be about something else, something that I felt more comfortable sharing.

Eventually I realized that such an idea went completely against what I had spent months writing about. By avoiding the true subject of the music, I was ignoring everything I’d worked on for the last year. The biggest thing I had discovered about myself was how every part of me was integral to making me who I am, demons included. “And of these one and all I weave the song of myself” (Whitman, 1892). I had been so inspired by Walt Whitman’s ideas that everything played an important role in the universe, and this journey was about just that. Only, instead of the universe, it was me.

As I begin the next chapter of my life, I will carry with me everything this project has taught me. I know that I will never stop growing, but I also know that, though my identity may evolve, I will always be the same Megan I have known since the beginning. Harmonies will be added, and the melody may change, but the true meaning will always be there, just waiting to be rediscovered.


Megan Howell was born on August 28, 1999, in Cambridge, England, and raised on Mount Desert Island, Maine. A double major in Music Education and Flute Performance, she has been playing the flute for more than ten years, and also enjoys playing the piano, the clarinet, the violin, and the saxophone. Megan is involved with many ensembles at the university, including the Symphonic Band, the University Orchestra, University Singers and UMaine Renaissance. She also performs in the orchestra for the Bagaduce Chorale and is a member of the Bar Harbor Town Band. Megan looks forward to completing her studies at the University of Maine and hopes to one day pursue a master's degree in flute performance.